

Brookfield CT High School opens world language lab

By Julia Perkins, Danbury CT Newstimes

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BROOKFIELD — A class of 19 juniors and seniors sit in front of computers, listening through headsets to their AP® Spanish teacher as she asks them questions about the documentary they had just watched on Cuba.

The teacher, Sarah Bengtson, divides the students into pairs to discuss a photo displayed on their screens. There is a chorus of “Holas” as the students greet their partners.

But they don’t have to get out of their seats to do so. Instead, they speak and students can hear their partner’s voice through the headsets and even record their conversations using the software in the lab.



The high school opened this world language lab this fall for students learning a foreign language and non-native speakers learning English. **Each of the 30 computers has software called Soloist® that allows students to converse with one or more peers, respond to their teacher, record their voices and more.**

Teachers and students said the lab helps kids improve their accents and language development, while getting them used to speaking spontaneously.

“I feel a lot more comfortable speaking when it’s one-on-one with someone across the room,” said senior **Alex Heckmann**, who is taking Advanced Placement Spanish. “Despite not having the face-to-face connection, you still feel like you’re talking right to them.”

Students visit the lab about once a week.

The software is critical in preparing students for the AP exam, as well as a test called the Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency in Languages. Students must pass these tests to earn the state Seal of Biliteracy, an indication on their transcripts and diplomas that they are proficient in English and another language.

Previously students practiced for the AP exam in a regular computer lab using software that was not as reliable, Bengtson said

“This has taken our abilities to the next level,” she said.

Students said the software is easy to use and the ability to listen to their voices is helpful.

“You catch mistakes that you wouldn't normally hear yourself say,” Heckmann said. “Because when you're speaking, you're not playing back everything you said. But then hearing it back, you're able to pick it up, like ‘Oh that's not the right form. I need to fix that before the AP test.’”



The lab also serves the district's English language learners, or ELL students, a group that has grown from 43 students in 2013-14 to 96 students this year, said Kemen Holley, department chair for world language/English language learners

Holley was an ELL student herself. She said she often hesitated to speak English because she felt she said certain words “weird.” But the lab provides a “safe forum” for ELL students to talk without worrying about their accents, she said.

“It gives them a forum to just be kids, to have a conversation about their weekends,” Holley said. “You feel protected, like you can express yourself.”

Even though their teacher is standing in front of them, the students listen to the instructor's voice through the headset, providing for a more personalized learning experience, Holley said.

“You're getting that individualized support,” she said.

Teachers can listen to pairs without their knowing and jump in if they hear a mistake — without calling out the student in front of the other kids. Teachers can also send individual students or a whole class a note of advice or praise.

The technology is particularly beneficial for students who are nervous speaking in front of others.

“It helps for the shy students because they don't feel as if they're on the spot,” Bengtson said.

Holley said the district is considering bringing the software to the middle school, as well as adding a digital portfolio function that would store students' work from when they start Spanish in kindergarten until they graduate.

“That would be great to have a digital program where you can see your growth as a language learner,” Holley said.