Living a Language
High-tech language labs inspire innovative teaching

Conjugating verbs and mastering vocabulary are still central to learning a foreign language, but in the last several years technology has dramatically altered the experience.

Students who want to practice their German pronunciation, for instance, but don’t want to get dressed, can simply log on to Blackboard, Smith’s internal Web-based course-management system. There they can check homework assignments and class announcements, chat virtually with their classmates or professor, access online tutorials or relevant external links, even view the latest audiovisuais, all from the comfort of their own room.

The technology is being managed by the Center for Foreign Languages and Culture, which, as a branch of the college’s Information Technology Services, has been providing resources for language students and faculty since 1989. In recent years, the center has seen its function expand exponentially as technology has advanced. “Our space here in Wright Hall hasn’t changed much, but the way we use it has,” said Joanne CannonCarlson, CFLAC’s multimedia program analyst. “We’re less dependent on the physical space. For example, students used to have to come here to check out videos and view audiovisuals. Today, most of them just access our resources through their computers.”

CFLAC maintains an electronic classroom in Wright Hall that has individual student workstations connected to local network servers and the Internet. It features audio and video equipment, multiregional DVD players, and tri-standard VCRs that allow students to play otherwise incompitable foreign-language videos from around the world.

All of this technology has inspired some innovative approaches to language classes. This semester, for example, Candace Walton is teaching her “Cultural Connections” course in conjunction with a class at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure de Telecommunications (“The MIT of France,” says Walton) in Paris. The course focuses on cultural differences and similarities through discussion of the language itself. Using tiny cameras mounted on computers in the language lab, students this semester will be conversing in real time with students in France. “It’s a little tricky with the time difference, but we’ll be able to work around it,” Walton said.

For one assignment, students will be writing free-association responses to various cultural symbols: a police officer, say, or a suburb, in their native language. Then they will discuss their responses both in English and in French. These conversations can lead to some surprising discoveries about culture. “For example, in America, in connection with ‘suburbs,’ we’d probably write ‘boring’ or ‘comfortable,’” Walton explained. “But in France, suburbs are at the edges of cities. They can be gang-ridden, dangerous, and depressing. So a French student would give a very different response. As students compare these differences, they’ll begin to analyze and understand the culture of the foreign country in an entirely new way.”

Downstairs in CFLAC’s language lab, students can scan texts and images, digitize audio and video clips, and create mixed-media presentations. Students can watch different versions of a foreign film, stopping when they want to compare scenes or language. At the same time, they can access on-site references, vocabulary, critiques of actors and scenes, as well as the original literary text. Walton’s class, for example, will be comparing Cousin/Cousine and its English remake, Cousins, with Ted Danson and Isabella Rossellini. “So much can get lost in translation,” Walton said. “Language encapsulates culture, expresses it. This is an exciting time to be learning because we have the opportunity to live the language and culture without actually being in the target country. Technology allows us to bring culture into the classroom.”—Jenny Hall AC’04