



## The Modern Language Lab and Foreign Language Proficiency Acquisition: A Case Study

Author: Linda F. Ausiello, Bishop Feehan High School <sup>1</sup>

### Abstract:

During a two year study of national exam results of the world language students of Bishop Feehan High School, it is evident that there is a statistically significant correlation between the consistent use of language lab activities and assessments and an increase in achievement and proficiency on national exams by students enrolled in world language classes. The increase in the percentage of students deciding to enter the competitions is notable. This denotes a certain level students' confidence in their language skills. There is also a clear indication of a correlation between these activities and assessments and listening and speaking skills acquisition of the world language students of Bishop Feehan High School. Finally, the World Language Department at Bishop Feehan High School has been able to offer online language study in conjunction with the language lab, in particular for the study of critical languages as defined the U.S. Government such as Arabic and Mandarin Chinese.

Bishop Feehan High School installed the Sanako Digital Language Laboratory System in the summer of 2006, through Sanako's local supplier, EBI Electronics. Teachers received a week of training in the use of the major functions of the language lab. There has been frequent, ongoing training for all world language teachers since the installation of the language lab. Sanako's supplier, Ron Rehbein of EBI Electronics provides thorough and timely service and is highly responsive to all needs and concerns.

In the fall of 2006, all world language students were introduced to the language lab. All world language classes, Levels I, II and III were scheduled to use the language laboratory during at least one period of a seven day cycle. All world language classes levels IV, V and AP Language, were scheduled twice during a seven day cycle. Teachers were required to introduce at least four functions of the language lab to their students: authentic listening activities listen and respond recording tasks, pair dialoguing and interactive web site activities. Several teachers incorporated other functions such as chat, model student, video and audio interactive activities as the year progressed. Additional listening and speaking activities were also used in class. All teachers administered graded assessments a minimum of once every other cycle in the language lab to their students. In addition, all students were tested on listening as part of quizzes and tests in the classroom on a regular basis. As part of midterm and final exams, all students completed listening and speaking assessments in the language lab.

### The National Spanish Exam

Participation in the National Spanish Exam has increased steadily since the installation of the Sanako Digital Language Laboratory System. Previous to the year 2008, fewer than 40 students participated in the contest in any given year from 1996-2007, with some years lacking any participation at all.

Table 1 illustrates the 2008 and 2009 National Spanish Exam Scores and Statistics:

**Table 1 National Spanish Exam Scores 2008 and 2009**

	2008	2009
Number of Students	89	135
Gold Medals	1	3
Silver Medals	8	15
Bronze Medals	12	14
Honorable Mention	30	41
MA State score (mean)gold medal	98	99.3
MA State score (mean) silver medal	90	89
MA State score (mean) bronze medal	73.4	80.1
MA State Score (mean) honorable mention	63	64

The 51 % increase in participants is an indicator of student confidence in their preparation for the exam and their ability to score well. Additionally, students had access to previous National Spanish Exams online and were able to practice taking the exam in the language lab. All students of various academic levels were encouraged to take the exam. It should be noted that the student who won the gold medal in 2008 Exam was also awarded one of only 7 National Junior Travel Scholarships to Peru for the summer of 2009. His classmate, a silver medal winner in the 2008 Exam, was awarded a 2 Week Summer Study Scholarship at the Concordia Language Villages in Minnesota. In this year's contest, 2009, there is a gold medal winner who placed first in the State of Massachusetts, Bilingual division, Level 5, which also awards a scholarship.

#### The National French Contest – Le Grand Concours

Participation in the National French Contest has increased dramatically since the installation of the Sanako Digital Language Laboratory System. Previous to the year 2008, fewer than 10 students participated in the contest in any given year from 1996-2007, with several years lacking any participation at all. It is notable that this year, 2009, the two bronze medal winners were ranked in the Eastern Massachusetts Chapter: Level 3, 6<sup>th</sup> and Level 2 6<sup>th</sup>. They also ranked Nationally: Level 3, ranked 6<sup>th</sup> and Level 2 ranked 7<sup>th</sup>. Table 2 illustrates the 2008 and 2009 National French Contest Scores and Statistics.

**Table 2 Grand Concours Exam Scores 2008 and 2009 and Statistics**

	2008	2009
Number of Students	3	29
Gold Medals	-	-
Silver Medals	-	-
Bronze Medals	-	2
Honorable Mention	1	12
E MA Score (mean) bronze medal	N/A	95
E MA Score (mean) honorable mention	63	74
National Ranking bronze medal (mean)	N/A	6.5
National Ranking honorable mention (mean)	19	21

The 90 % increase in students taking the National French Contest (Le Grand Concours) represents a considerable and notable increase in participation. Once again, this is an indicator of student confidence in their preparation for the exam and their ability to score well. While students had only limited access to previous National French Exams which were not available online, they were given the content specifications for each level and were able to practice grammar and listening in the language lab from free online sites such as Tex’s French Grammar for the University of Texas at Austin (<http://www.laits.utexas.edu/tex/>). All students of various academic levels were encouraged to take the exam.

AP Spanish Language Exam

Participation in the AP Spanish Language Exam varies from year to year due to fluctuations in previous world language preparation of the student body of Bishop Feehan High School. Bishop Feehan Students are accepted from over 35 communities. Some years there are several students who enter Spanish level 2 or level 3 as freshmen and progress to AP Spanish Language as seniors, other years, there are fewer students based on demographic changes in curriculum and preparation. Table 3 illustrates that 100% of the students received a score of 3 or above in 2007 and that 75 % of the students received a score of 3 or above in 2008. It should be noted that the AP Spanish Language Exam was completely revised for the 2008 exam and that this report identifies a global population of students who have studied Spanish not differentiating for outside experience, extensive years of study or bilingual students.

**Table 3 AP Spanish Language Scores 2007 and 2008 – From the College Board Instructional Planning Reports 2007 and 2008**

	2007					2008				
AP Grade	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Group # Students	0	0	2	1	5	0	2	3	2	1
Group % Students	0.0	0.0	25.0	12.5	62.5	0.0	25.0	37.5	25.0	12.5
Global %	17.6	17.7	19.3	25.1	20.4	15.7	15.4	18.4	25.8	24.8

Table 4 illustrates Performance Scores (means). It is significant that Listening and Speaking scores are higher in the group mean than the Global mean in all categories except 1. It is also significant that the section summaries for both categories of 75 items each section indicate that Bishop Feehan Students scored well above the Global mean for both years.

**Table 4 Spanish Language Performance Scores (Means) 2007 and 2008**

Performance on Multiple Choice(1-34):	2007 Global Mean	2007 Group Mean	2008Global Mean	2008 Group Mean
Listening	18.1	24.2	13.0	18.3
Reading Comprehension (35-70)	21.6	28.7	17.1	23.3
Section Summary	39.6	52.9	32.8	45.3
Performance on Free Response:				
Speaking: Interpersonal (5)	3.8	3.6	2.8	4.0
Speaking: Presentational (5)	3.1	3.4	3.2	3.8
Writing: Paragraph, Comp. Fill-Ins(20)	11.8	14.1	11.1	14.0
Writing: Interpersonal (5)	3.2	4.0	3.0	4.0
Writing: Presentational (5)	2.8	3.6	2.9	3.4
Section Summary:	46.9	56.3	43.8	55.1

Students:

Enrollment at Bishop Feehan High School for the school year 2009-2010 is 1,048 students. There is a three year requirement for all students in the study of a modern world language. 804 students are required to study a world language. There are a total of 40 enrolled language courses with the total number of requests at 1,053 students. Of the 244 seniors in the school who are not required to continue their study of a world language, 210 students have elected to study French or Spanish. This indicates that 86% of all seniors have decided to continue their world language study. 22 students have elected to study Latin. In addition, 4 students have opted to study Arabic or Mandarin Chinese and 2 have selected American Sign Language. Even though there is some overlap with some senior students electing to study two or more languages, over 92% of the senior class is actively engaged in the study of a world language. This figure points

to student confidence and satisfaction with the program and its components. It also demonstrates overall satisfaction with the teaching methods and strategies employed including the use of the language lab for language skills practice, acquisition and enhancement.

### Student Surveys

Every year students are asked to evaluate their courses and their teachers. Some student comments from teacher evaluation surveys, which were administered in May of 2009, follow. These and similar comments appeared numerous times in the survey results. The comments have been directly imported from the surveys with spelling corrections only.

In response to the questions:

#### **1. “*What did you like most about this class?*”**

##### **Spanish Classes:**

AP Spanish Language: that I have improved my speaking ability; pod casts and charlas; This class really helped me to improve my Spanish tremendously.

Spanish IV: I feel much more knowledgeable about Spanish and am able to pick out more words when overhearing a conversation in Spanish; listening activities;

Spanish III: The varied approaches to the Spanish language. I like how we do all types of activities including listening, writing, and speaking.

Spanish II: Learning a new language that can help me communicate with all different kinds of people; language lab

Spanish I: I liked going to the language lab; The thing I liked most about this class was going to the lab because the videos from the online book really helped me understand what I was learning.

##### **French Classes:**

French V: I liked the fact that we used the lab a lot and that we had a lot of fun assignments rather than just doing book work. ; I like French, so I like speaking and doing group activities/presentations - like the plays/video project. I also like the persona that this class has taken on -student/teacher dynamic, very relaxed and approachable.

French IV: Better speaking and listening ability; my conversational French has greatly improved

French III: I am a better listener of French; Learning and speaking French better than last year, so when I do sometime go to France, the people would understand me better.

French II: Going to the language lab and If we could go to the language lab more!; Because of this class, I have gained the ability to speak French and learned about my love for language.

French I: Going to the language lab; learning another language and the videos on the lessons.

*2. As a result of this class, what skills have you gained?*

**Spanish Classes:**

AP Spanish Language: better speaking, listening and reading skills in Spanish and a much broader vocabulary in Spanish; great ability to speak, read, and listen to Spanish and a better understanding of the subject in general; I am now able to speak, understand, and write Spanish very well.

Spanish IV: being able to comprehend, speak, read, and write the Spanish language: I have gained more confidence as a Spanish speaker and feel comfortable identifying myself as one who speaks Spanish.

Spanish III: I have learned how to speak better in Spanish, and also how to listen better in Spanish; I liked listening to the Spanish songs; How to communicate better Spanish and use proper grammar.

Spanish II: A confident ability to speak Spanish (to a degree); I have gained the skills of being able to speak Spanish more fluently. ; I have learned how to speak Spanish very clearly and what things mean in Spanish.

Spanish I: Better Spanish speaking skills able to say sentences; I have learned how to say many different things and how to write different things. I have also learned how to conjugate all the verbs and when to conjugate them and the different ways to conjugate them

**French Classes:**

French V: Better writing, listening, and speaking abilities; understanding and speaking French at a higher level; I feel like this year I am able to understand a lot more French than in previous years and I am getting better with pronunciation.

French IV: Listening to French radio; Discussion atmosphere allows us to work on our language in the context of a conversation

French III: Further improving my ability to both speak and write in French; I've gained the knowledge to communicate many more things in French.

French II: The skills to hold a basic conversation in French; I have gained a much better understanding of the French language and culture

French I: Speaking and understanding French; I learned a lot of French and I have excelled at listening and speaking more than I intended to!

### Teachers

The eleven teachers of the Bishop Feehan High School World Language Department have found the language lab to be a tremendous tool for enhancement of their teaching strategies. In her article, Language Lab Lives, in the *Times Educational Supplement*, Lesley Marwood states that in the modern language lab, "...teachers can put together a set of multimedia experiences which brings together all four language skills. Teachers can incorporate resources from the internet, Word and more. Listening, speaking, reading and eventually writing can therefore all be brought together ...and pupils can multitask in much the same way as they do at home." The world language teachers at Bishop Feehan High School have embraced these capabilities.

### Teacher Surveys

A Language Skills Acquisition Survey was conducted in May of 2009 with the current teachers of the World Language Department of Bishop Feehan High School. There were six teachers who had taught world language in the school for at least five years before the language lab was installed five members who have taught at the school for less than five years.

The survey consisted of 16 questions: 10 based a five point Likert scale and 6 free response questions. The results of the survey indicate:

1. 100% of the teachers usually use their regularly scheduled language lab time, with 64% indicating always.
2. 100% of the teachers complete oral assessments for each Unit in the language lab with 55% indicating always.
3. 81 % of the teachers generally complete reading and writing assessments in the language lab, with 27% indicating always and 9 % stating never.
4. 100% of the teachers indicate that their students have improved in listening skills considerably (23%) or noticeably (73%).
5. 100 % of the teachers state that there has been an improvement in speaking skills, with 62 % indicating noticeable, 23 % considerable and 15 % indicating slight.
6. 92% of the teachers indicated that reading and writing skills have improved, with 77% indicating noticeable.

The following comments have been directly imported from the survey results in response to items:

**1. Please list the activities that you use most often in the lab.**

AP Speaking, dialogues, messages, listening comp

I use the listening and speaking portions every other cycle. Other times, I use the lab to show them various resources on the internet that can help them study.

listening, response record, classzone, Tex, web activities, oral assessments, pair work, worksheets, chat

Listening, speaking, writing and reading.

pair/small group activities either randomly assigned by the computer or specifically selected; DVD; launching websites; recorded dialogues; individual recorded interviews; textbook and workbook speaking activities; reading out loud individually, in pairs, or small groups; telephone activity; pronunciation - listen, repeat, record, and students are able to play back the recording of their voice and the speaker on the CD

Pairs activities, video

random pair speaking

response - record, partners, video launch, listening activities, classzone, web site launch

response record, pairs, classzone, conjuguemos

response recordings, listening comprehension, listening and writing activities

Speaking

***If you have been teaching in this school for more than five years, please list improvements that you have noticed in student performance that you attribute to the language lab.***

Students are more comfortable when speaking Spanish.

Students now have dramatically improved their listening comprehension. Their speaking has also improved a great deal. Students have become more proficient in navigating language websites and at home practice.



Students seem to have better listening comprehension skills and speaking skills have improved

The improvement in speaking has been most noticeable

Vastly improved listening and speaking skills

***If you have been teaching at this school for less than 5 years, please indicate the benefits in using the language lab that you have observed.***

Speaking and grammar practice

students are more confident in their skills, less anxious about speaking since they aren't always in front of the entire class and are more aware of their pronunciation

students focus on listening, students willing to converse

students understand me speaking Spanish with little translation needed

The focus on listening/speaking has been particularly helpful

The students take speaking and listening much more seriously. By changing environments, they come in with a different attitude. And with everyone talking at once, they don't feel put on the spot or that they are talking directly to me which might make them more hesitant.

It allows for me to check the progress of each student through their speaking abilities and listening skills.

***What do you like best about the language lab?***

convenience user friendly and my students enjoy it as well

ease of use

Emphasizing speaking and listening helps students

develop some of the skills they need to really communicate in the languages we teach

Gives me a chance to really take the time to listen to student's work and give them a grade they deserve.

I am happy that my students are enjoying using their Spanish.

It is so conducive to replicating an immersion situation regarding listening and speaking

listening and speaking practice and focus

Listening focus of my students

The ability to effectively assess speaking

The engagement of the students.

Versatility

***Is there anything that you do not like about using the language lab?***

Anything that is confusing just takes practice - no real problems

I wish I had more time!

No

No.

Not really

Nothing

***Please add any comments that you would like to make concerning the language lab.***

I am very happy with the ancillary materials that I can use in the lab.

I think it has made a tremendous difference in my students' overall skills, but especially listening and

speaking.

It has made a great difference  
in my AP scores

It's fantastic. I would like to  
know if there is a way to get  
students to listen to their own  
recording so that they can learn  
to self-correct/evaluate.

The lab has truly enhanced the focus on  
listening, speaking, reading and writing for  
students - especially listening and  
carrying on a conversation.

The language lab is now an  
invaluable component of the  
world languages department. In  
addition to the improvement of  
students' speaking and listening  
skills, it contributes to their  
development of self confidence  
in the target language.

This has been such a great tool.  
Students can understand much  
more quickly now.

#### Conclusion:

It is clear that the decision to install the Sanako Digital Language Laboratory System at Bishop Feehan High School has made a tremendous impact on the language study of Bishop Feehan High School Students. Through the regular use of language lab activities and assessments, students have not only acquired listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, but they have improved them, in many cases noticeably or significantly. In addition, they have improved their focus on language skills and most significantly, their confidence in their skills has developed considerably. These enhancements are evident in the number of students studying a world language for their entire high school career, the number of students who opt to study two or more additional languages and in the significant increase in students entering national competitions and their increasingly improved scores.

There are some limitations to the generalizability of this study. This study was conducted at Bishop Feehan High School, in Attleboro, Massachusetts which is a regional, co-educational, catholic, college preparatory high school. The teachers are well-trained in the use of the

language lab and are highly motivated to use it. They have detailed curriculum guidelines which they wrote in collaboration from 2007 to 2009 and have tailored the use of their ancillary materials for use in the language lab and in the classroom. The language lab is kept in very good repair and is accessible to all students. The effectiveness of the language lab is clearly evident in this school. These conditions could be replicated with a trained staff, under similar conditions. Further studies should explore the continued effectiveness of regular language lab use and the relationship to language skills acquisition and improvement and student confidence in these skills.

<sup>1</sup> Teacher of French and Spanish, World Language Department Chair

### References

College Board AP, 2007 Instructional Report (Bishop Feehan High School)

College Board AP, 2008 Instructional Report (Bishop Feehan High School)

<http://www.bishopfeehan.com/>

<http://www.ebisys.com/Sanako.htm?clid=CKD37uOP6poCFQSPFQodxxKsBg>

[http://frenchteachers.org/concours/gc\\_stats.html](http://frenchteachers.org/concours/gc_stats.html)

<http://www.nationalspanishexam.org/pdf/2009avg.pdf>

<http://www.quia.com/sv/307012.html> (Language Skills Acquisition Survey)

<http://www.sanako.com/Home.iw3>

Marwood, L. (2005). Language Lab Lives. *The Times Educational Supplement*, May 6, (Online supp) p. 21.