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Sandra Sanneh (right) is shown at the Center for Language Study with the students in her Zulu language class. The students -- and their Zulu names -- are (clockwise from top left): Chehani Ekaratne (Thandi Khwela), Andrew Garde Joia (Mculomoya Qwabe), Kristin Gilmore (Nomcebo Vilakazi) and Michael Yarbrough (Mangoba Mthethwa).

In Focus: Center for Language Study

Facility offers high-tech approach to learning new tongues

For years, Sandra Sanneh lugged a heavy boom box to her Zulu language classes at Yale and made weekly arrangements with Yale's Audio Visual Center to bring a TV and VCR into her classroom so she could show Zulu being spoken in various contexts.

The inconvenience was well worth the effort, says Sanneh, a senior lecturer and director of the Program in African Languages and African Studies. Zulu -- one of three African languages formally taught at Yale -- is a "tricky" language to learn because the clicking sounds that are part of the sound repertoire are very foreign to native English speakers, she explains, and a multimedia approach can help students learn the language's intricacies.

Today, Sanneh's classes are both easier on her and more beneficial for her students, thanks to the state-of-the-art multimedia classrooms in Yale's Center for Language Study (CLS).

"While I once taught using Xeroxed pages of things I found online, now I can go online right in the classroom showing the material to my students via overhead projector, and I can easily play audio and videotapes without ever having to make special arrangements ahead of time," says Sanneh, who now holds as many of her classes as possible at the CLS. "And I never walk around with my big boom box anymore."

Enhancing and supporting the teaching and learning of foreign languages on campus is the mission of the CLS, which was established five years ago with a \$1.3 million grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Designed to be a resource for all Yale foreign-language faculty members, the center has helped draw them together across departmental lines while at the same time coordinating and integrating the resources and services they rely on for their teaching, according to CLS director Nina Garrett.

Although the University has long been renowned for its large number of language offerings -- more than 50 foreign tongues are available on campus in any given year -- language instruction at Yale was more "Balkanized" prior to the founding of the center, Garrett says. The faculty members who teach Yoruba and Spanish were unlikely to cross paths or share ideas about their work, and were even less likely to converse about the incorporation of new technologies in their classrooms, she notes.

Today, these language faculty often gather together for the professional development workshops or seminars offered by the CLS. They share insights and information about new pedagogical methods, and even collaborate on the creation of new teaching tools, curricula, materials and technologies with funding from Instructional Innovation Grants awarded yearly by the CLS for the development of new foreign-language teaching projects.

In fact, for Sanneh and other Yale foreign-language instructors, the CLS has become a "second home" -- their individual departments being their first, says Garrett. The center supports foreign-language instruction in eight different language departments, as well as the various area studies councils under the auspices of the Yale Center for International and Area Studies, the University's graduate and professional schools, and English-as-a-Second-Language programs.

"As recently as 10 years ago, few college campuses had a central place that coordinated and supported foreign-language teaching campus-wide," notes Garrett, who is also the University's director of language study. "Universities, including Yale, basically had a language laboratory where students went to listen to dialogues on audiotape, and teachers were pretty much on their own when it came to the development of new classroom materials and technologies. A lot has changed since those days."

When the Mellon Foundation made its award to the University to establish the CLS, President Richard C. Levin commented that the increasing globalization of the multilingual world has made students' study of languages even more critical.

"The command of foreign languages is essential for many fields of study, and, indeed, for full citizenship in the modern world," he said at the time.

Yale students -- and college students across the nation -- are studying languages in record numbers, says Garrett. A recent study released by the Modern Language Association found that 1.4 million American college students are enrolled in foreign language study -- the highest number since the association conducted its first survey in 1958.

"Yale prides itself on an unusually international curriculum for undergraduate, graduate and professional students," says Garrett. "But we are facing new demands: Like many comparable institutions, we are facing a proliferation of the languages that students wish to learn and of the reasons they wish to learn them, as well as a broadening and deepening of the curricular contexts into which language is integrated."

Garrett notes that language study has also become increasingly popular among graduate and professional students. Students at the School of Medicine, for example, need Spanish language classes so they can communicate easily with the growing Spanish-speaking population, while professional students in the Schools of Law, Management, Forestry and Environmental Studies and others need to learn languages that will benefit them as they confront global issues in their careers.

In addition to Yale's regular language classes, the University also offers opportunities for students to study less commonly taught languages through the CLS's Directed Independent Language Study program. Through this non-credit program, students can learn such tongues as Nepali, Haitian Creole, Tibetan, Dinka, Twi, Ukrainian and Khmer/Cambodian, among others. Students work independently but are paired with a native-speaker language partner for twice-weekly sessions.

To enhance language teaching, the CLS's headquarters at 370 Temple St. was renovated to accommodate state-of-the-art classrooms and labs. The center houses two multimedia classroom/labs that are fully equipped with the latest technology and include computers at student desks. Six other "smart" classrooms are also equipped for multimedia work (with network access, VCR, DVD, CD, laserdisc, etc.). A Faculty Development Laboratory is available to teachers who are creating technology-based materials for their classes, and there is a multimedia lab for students to use for their special projects.

"Increasingly, foreign-language teachers are asking students to create multimedia projects instead of writing term papers," says Garrett.

The center also houses a digital recording studio, in which faculty members can make and edit digital or audio recordings for testing, instruction and Web presentations, among other applications. Faculty can also show television programs from around the world to their students via the CLS's satellite dishes; this programming is available on more than 50 channels in over a dozen languages.

The CLS maintains hundreds of videos for classroom use, and students can use videos that have been placed "on reserve" by faculty members for specific assignments. Books and periodicals on language instruction and acquisition are available in the CLS library.

The CLS's 12-member staff includes multimedia technicians and language technology specialists who assist faculty with the development of new technology-based materials. Individual coaching sessions are offered to faculty members on such topics as digitizing audio or burning CDs, creating Web pages, scanning text and images and using PowerPoint, among others.

A more recent project of CLS staff and foreign-language faculty is the development of software "templates" that can be customized by Yale faculty members for their particular languages, and will also be useful to language teachers beyond the University, says Garrett. ([See related story.](#))

Sanneh, in collaboration with University of Pennsylvania language teacher Nonhlanhla Mbeje, has worked with the CLS manager of technical projects Vincent Cangiano to develop an online Zulu course, now used by other teachers of the language across the nation. She plans to use the course she developed in the spring, when she will teach Zulu to students from the School of Medicine and its Department of Epidemiology and Public Health. "I've created about 24 units online that will be used in this not-for-credit course," she says. "We'll be doing the bulk of the course online because medical students and others can't come to class five times a week." She anticipates that her online course will later be requested by many other Zulu instructors across the country.

"There are not that many multimedia materials available for the teaching of Zulu and other African languages, so those of us who teach African languages cooperate with each other on a national scale, sharing all kinds of ideas and materials," says Sanneh.

Ling Mu, a senior lecturer in Chinese, says that the CLS's state-of-the-art classrooms

and technology have been invaluable.

"In the old days, we only had textbooks, but now I can use PowerPoint to easily show my students Chinese characters. In Chinese, because each character is a picture, recognizing that picture is very important. Now, I can play a recording so they can hear the language being spoken, while looking at the characters I show using PowerPoint.

"The change in how quickly the students learn is very dramatic," adds Mu. "Three or four years ago, my classes used to be held every day for two hours; with the new technology and our ability to use these multimedia classrooms, I only have to meet with students for five one-hour classes each week. And yet, we can do twice as much as we did in the longer classes."

With an Instructional Innovation Grant from the CLS, Mu is putting together an online textbook in Chinese, and now administers all the tests for his classes on computer. Using earphones, students can hear the language being taught, and then are asked to answer questions. Their spoken answers are recorded into the computer and later transferred onto CDs, where they can be listened to and graded.

The transformation Mu has seen in language teaching at Yale since the establishment of the CLS is so dramatic, he says, that he can't imagine how he managed to teach Chinese before.

"If you gave me another class at another university that didn't have these resources, I don't think I would be able to teach," exclaims Mu. "Between the financial support and technical assistance given for projects, the ability to use all kinds of electronic media in the teaching of the language, and the ease with which students can take tests and do assignments on computer -- these have been so helpful that to do without them would be like going back to the typewriter after having a computer. It would seem impossible."

-- By Susan Gonzalez

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