

**Interview with Edith Paillat,
Language Technology
Specialist,
Victoria University of
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Why did you choose the Sony Language Learning technology offered by SANS Oceania?

At the Language Learning Centre, Victoria University of Wellington, we are supporting the teaching and learning of 12 languages.

For the past 15 years we have provided two language labs containing 20 seats and a teacher console to support language learning and teaching and self-access units for independent learning. One of the labs is also used for New Zealand Sign Language tutorials.

As the lifespan of our old lab equipment was coming to an end, we looked at several lab software propositions and descriptions and made contact with other language teaching institutions to determine what would best work for us within our budget.

We selected the Sony Virtuoso™ and Sony Soloist® software suite because it not only reproduces tools our language teaching staff are used to, but also offers a simple interface for both teachers and students to use.

Teachers had requested the ability to open files for a whole class, and monitor their work and voice recording.

I also had to take into account the system's compatibility with the university's wider IT network to ensure we complied with the existing infrastructure, and consultation with our IT experts reinforced our decision to select the Sony software presented by our local SANS representative.

Last but not least, technical support for the digital system in New Zealand was an essential

element to us, as we wanted to ensure a smooth transition for both users and our support team.

What is your opinion of having a controlled language lab environment vs. an open class environment with regard to student learning?

At the university level the need to control students so that they remain on task is generally not required. However, the positive aspect of "control" from the teacher's workstation is that it offers more flexibility to both teachers and students. Time is maximized when a teacher can open a file for all of the students simultaneously. Students get on task as soon as the file is on their desktop and everyone starts at the same time.

Also, in a class of mixed abilities, the group function enables the teacher to send different tasks at the appropriate level. The monitor and intercom functionality offer more private exchanges between individual students and their teacher during the session. A safe and non-threatening environment is established which is particularly useful for shy and insecure students.

You have had the Sony language lab software for some time. How well has everyone embraced the software?

99% of students have had no problem with adapting to the new system. The 1% remaining are, in general, mature students, who have never touched a mouse before.

The difficulty revolves around confidence in using a computer as a whole, not this software

specifically. For first-time users, we briefly introduce the software (showing them how to open/close files and save recordings).

Once they have overcome their apprehension of the comparative recording functionality, most of them choose to extend the use of the Sony Soloist software outside class time for independent learning. There were some teething moments in the early days for teachers who hadn't taught in a computer room before. Their confidence level was low at the start but they quickly realized they could keep on doing what they have always done with the added opportunity to try something new.

One of the most liked and most used functions is the ability to record student pair work. The saved "pairs" recordings can be reviewed by students and teachers at any time.

So would you say that the support is the crucial element to the success of the lab?

Yes! The simple idea that there is someone in the background able to assist them has reduced the apprehension to use the computer labs by almost 70%. During the transition period, immediate assistance in the room has been crucial even for the most basic applications. Most of the support now revolves around more complex operations for the experienced user; however there is a constant rotation of new staff and basic support is therefore often required.

What features are most popular and why?

One of the most popular features of the Sony software is the monitoring functionality. All teachers are using the ability to listen to students without disturbing them and being able to review their progress with students at the end of the class or during individual interviews.

As stated previously, the recording of pair work has been quite a ground-breaking functionality adopted by a lot of staff to help students with their conversational skills. Dealing with digital files stored on a server rather than audio tapes also facilitates course preparation and eases access to material. Teachers can access material on their staff machines in their office and students sometimes choose to review material they have used in class during their independent learning time.

Another innovation, thanks to the SANS development team, is digital video playback and recording. No more fiddling around with bulky video tapes and analog equipment.

The labs are now more versatile than ever with just software enabling the teaching and learning of both Sign Language and spoken languages.

Are new materials being developed for use in the lab?

Definitely and all the time. The tutor of Sign Language is now recording videos prior to, or sometimes during, the class while his students are busy on another task. Another teacher of German has also used the Sony Soloist software to add oral comments to student recordings.

For more advanced materials, teachers typically record their audio material in their office and may send files to me if more complex editing work, like special audio effect insertions and compression formats need to be added.

With more flexible opportunities offered with the combination of media, more teachers are now starting to explore new ventures ranging from drill quizzes to wikis involving audio, video and text.



How has the lab helped to evaluate and assess students?

We use the lab regularly to evaluate students. The portability of the digital files makes it easy to give an exam in the lab and then review and evaluate the work outside of the lab on staff PCs. We have been using the lab for assessment for our first year Japanese course as well as Samoan, Sign Language, and German.

Do you feel that the lab makes it easier to motivate your students?

Yes it does. It has the potential of offering more varied activities during and outside class time especially when teachers decide to include the listening and speaking component as a compulsory element to their course content.

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The comparative recording is an essential tool for both audio and video recording in our classes. Students are now getting used to



recording and listening to themselves and we can hear the positive result in their fluency.

With this new technology available what is the future of the Language Learning Centre at Victoria University?

We certainly hope to remain central to the VUW student language learning experience and we will work toward facilitating their learning process as best as we can. The use of LLC equipment and software by students is very high. Departments outside of languages, like the Music Department, have expressed an interest in utilizing our facilities as well.