

# Are students really learning languages?

*Two reporters offer their perspective on foreign language classes, and the effectiveness of various teaching methods.*



Learning a foreign language is a valuable skill that can take you to other countries, get you interesting jobs and allow you to experience a wealth of different cultures and new people. A firm foundation in a foreign language allows students to study abroad or do community service in other countries. Many students here at Grant take a second language for more than just the credit on their transcript. They feel like it's a skill they can easily incorporate into their lives. Whether it's Spanish, French, Japanese, Latin or German, any language will prove useful and enriching throughout high school and ultimately, throughout life.

For most, language learning starts in high school. If taught correctly, students can grow in their abilities to speak and understand a foreign tongue. It's the job of any good language teacher to ensure that this is the case with his or her students.

Junior Emma Morrison-Cohen, a Spanish and Latin student says, "Throughout high school I've had very different experiences in language classes. Unfortunately, some have been better than others." Morrison-Cohen, a lover of language, is frustrated with this inconsistency. "Some language courses have been fantastic, making me eager and enthused to learn the language, I only wish this was always the case." This unfortunate problem is common for many students at Grant and presumably elsewhere.

Unfortunately, we feel language teaching methods at Grant vary drastically in effectiveness. Granted, we aren't teachers and don't intend to insult or denounce anyone. However, we have experienced three years of language learning here at Grant and elsewhere, and, as students, are the most critical and valuable judges of what does and does not work in these classrooms. We offer only constructive criticism and positive tips on how teachers might make the most of the limited time they have with their students.



Spanish teacher Michelle Stemler instructs students using her unique and effective teaching methods. Photo by John Mitchell.

## Our top ten strategies for teaching languages

1. If the comprehension level of students allows, conduct the class fully in the language being taught.
2. Move the class at a quick, but steady pace, catering to the feeling and the ability of each individual class. Unfortunately, unsupervised students working on countless worksheets and "projects" will just sit and talk in English. Lecturing for days at a time, allowing students to sleep on their desks, is equally ineffective.
3. Emphasize class participation. This should also contribute significantly to students' letter grades. After all, filling in endless worksheets and memorizing countless role-plays isn't going to increase foreign language fluency.
4. Infuse new grammar and verb tenses into the lesson frequently; it's helpful in blending new skills with old ones. Don't give up on teaching a new skill if students don't catch on immediately. Both learning and teaching new material takes time and patience.
5. Drill this new information constantly to the students, so no one is left behind and everybody is fully comfortable with each new skill. This includes testing only after students have had time to assimilate new information.
6. Engage the students for the full 45 minutes, forcing them to read, write and speak in the given language. Students can't teach themselves a language—they need your constant

help and guidance.

7. Include in your class a variety of activities such as oral practice, games, group activities, writing and reading assignments, and projects. However, these must all be somehow worthwhile to the students. Students will fall behind in their speaking abilities if regular speech isn't a constant requirement.
8. Place an emphasis on review as well as more advanced learning. However, the review shouldn't outweigh new material.
9. Ensure that by the end of the school year, every student has grown in their speaking and writing abilities. Students who actively participate in the class should feel like it was well worth their time and effort. They should now be much more competent in the language than when the class began.
10. Most importantly, try to make learning a language both informative and fun. For hundreds of students, the only exposure they are ever going to get to a new language and culture is at Grant High School for 45 minutes a day. Only a few students will have the opportunity to use their foreign language outside of the classroom. Whatever the case, there is an obligation to make every language class at every level worthwhile to every student.