

If you can't take DLIFLC to Israel, bring Israel to DLIFLC

By Brian Lamar, Strategic Communications



*A Hebrew language student demonstrates videos she made to simulate a virtual immersion environment in the classroom.
Photo by Brian Lamar*

MONTEREY, Calif. - One of the most attractive aspects of learning a language at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center's (DLIFLCs) basic course is the possibility to travel to a country for up to six weeks to participate in an immersion program.

But not all basic course language departments are able to send students on an immersion trip, either due to security restrictions or the small size of the language program, which precludes travel abroad.

In the case of one Hebrew class, not having the opportunity to travel to Israel was not a final blow to their motivation.

"When we got the news that our class would not get a chance to have an immersion, I met with the class and we decided to use tools on the internet to create a virtual immersion for our class," said Hebrew instructor Yaniv Oded.

Students developed their own web sites that resemble super-charged MySpace pages and also set up accounts on sites like Hebrew www.facebook.com and www.Jdate.com, so they could interact on a personal level with real Israelis on a daily basis.

"The types of conversations that we can have on these sites are very different from what we would normally read in text books," said Seaman Jacqueline Wright, a student participating in the "virtual immersion."

To maintain anonymity, the students make accounts with information that would not jeopardize their future as intelligence operators in the military. With invented names, the students are mindful to stay away from topics that are touchy and stick to exchanging information that pertains to their hobbies and interests such as music, film, sports, etc.

"Sometimes we get a couple of pages of text in a response to our posts and it is like a huge homework assignment, but it is okay and fun to read because it is all about you," said Seaman Mary Wilson.

Not all of the "virtual immersion" curriculum is based on socializing. The students also work on projects that have added cultural value. One particular project was to take analytical looks at important documents that make up the very foundation of Israel and the United States.

"I came up with the idea to take a copy of the U.S. Declaration of Independence and a copy of the Israeli Declaration of Independence and compare them," said Seaman Zachary Cose, the Hebrew class leader.

Projects like the declaration translation and comparison showed

the differences and similarities of the beginning origins of both countries.

The students also ran scenarios via teleconference with friends and family members back home and acted as translators. According to the class, this translation exercises were extremely difficult, but helped strengthen their desire to develop their motivation for learning Hebrew.

The students also connected with Israeli culture by translating poems and song lyrics that are popular in Israeli culture.

"I think it's good when we are able to choose songs and stories and poems we like and what we can connect to, so we can study their culture and present it back to the class in a way that we can appreciate personally," said Wright.

The class also wanted to leave a small cultural footprint in the virtual world by writing about their hometown or a town they previously lived in for the Hebrew Wikipedia.

"I got a chance to write about my little "po-dunk" town of Greenville, South Carolina. Now anyone in Israel can read about my little hometown," said Wilson.

According to the students, these exercises online have helped them gain enough confidence to chat in real time to Israelis and has also stirred a desire in them to go to the Holy Land to discover a real world behind the virtual one they have been exposed to in class.

"Someday, I will go to Israel and see all the things I have been learning about for months. I am so interested in their culture," said Wilson.