

LOCAL

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Daily Record B2
Lotteries B2
Weather B6

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Language students immerse themselves without leaving campus



Photos by LEAH L. JONES - State Journal

ABOVE: Stephanie Celoni, far right, a UW-Madison Japanese major, unlocks the door to her dorm room in the Japanese House, part of the UW-Madison International Learning Community. Celoni and fellow students of Japanese in ILC speak only Japanese when possible. The sign to the left translates to Nihongo Hausu, or Japanese House. **BELOW:** Translations adorn the women's bathroom door on the Adams Hall floor housing UW-Madison students who have agreed to immerse themselves in a foreign language as part of UW-Madison's International Learning Community.

Going native at UW

By **DANYA HOOKER**
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In some UW-Madison dorms, speaking English might get you a talking to or a blank stare.

In the past, students learning German, Spanish, Italian or Japanese have had the chance to live in dorms where their second language is spoken most of the time.

And now, the university hopes students will learn Arabic the same way.

This fall UW-Madison will expand its International Learning Community program, adding space for students who agree to speak nothing but Arabic to become more fluent in that language. The program works like this:

For one year, students live surrounded by others learning the same language. The students are expected to avoid speaking English to each other in all common areas.

With the help of a live-in native speaker, students learn how to prepare



Medina

traditional meals, discuss current social issues affecting their culture of study and have fun organizing social or educational events.

"It's a very strange place," said Nobuyoshi Asaoka, the language resident for Nihongo Hausu, or the Japanese House. "You have people, Americans, speaking Japanese to each other, in America."

The ILC started in the fall of 2002 when the German department wanted to model a program after the popular UW-Madison French House, an immersion-living house dating back to 1918.

With the addition of Arabic, students will have the chance to immerse themselves in six languages on campus.

Most students choose to live on the immersion floors to prepare for a study



Please see **NATIVE**, Page B2

Native

Continued from Page B1

abroad program or to maintain their skills after going abroad.

Indeed, the ultimate goal of the ILC immersion program is to help create linguistically and culturally fluent students who will feel comfortable and well-prepared studying abroad.

"The language program allows (the students) to have more speaking practice outside of the classroom," said Ruben Medina, ILC faculty director. "The immersion environment helps them develop a more international perspective."

To help foster that cross-cultural perspective, students are required to take a one-credit course each semester where faculty advisers discuss cultural aspects of the various societies. In a sense, these students never stop studying.

For many students keeping up with the intensity isn't always easy.

"Later at night (we speak) more English just due to the exhaustion factor," said Collin Stecker, 20, who lived in Nihongo Hausu.

Nonetheless, students in Nihongo Hausu say they spoke Japanese 50 percent of the time.

An impressive feat, according to Charo D'Echeverry, the group's faculty adviser, considering some students only had one semester of Japanese, as well as the difficulty of the language.

Many students, especially those planning on studying abroad soon, said the cultural learning is just as beneficial as the chance to speak the language constantly.

"Living here you get more an idea of the culture and the cultural differences so it'll be less of a shock," said Stecker, who is studying abroad next year. "I've also gotten to try more of the cuisine. And I'm a picky eater so it's good for me to be able to test the waters."

D'Echeverry described the attitude of Nihongo Hausu as "hard working and let's work together," which reminded her of Japanese culture.



"Living here you get more an idea of the culture and the cultural differences so it'll be less of a shock."

COLLIN STECKER
Japanese major who is studying abroad next year, on the International Learning Community immersion program

"Cultures reproduce themselves," D'Echeverry said. "It's a good way for students who have not lived in Japan to experience the culture."

And program organizers hope this formula works for students of Arabic, too.

"Arabic is such an important language in the world nowadays. Just look at what's going on in the world," Medina said. "The need to have people who know Arabic is very important."

Having a native speaker directing the students is especially important to help ease students into the culture and

language, according to Dustin Cowell, the faculty adviser for the new Arabic program.

"They can ask them questions about traditional practices, learn about different methods of courtesy, what is acceptable and what is common," Cowell said.

With that chance, Cowell said students will be better prepared to understand the complexity of issues in the Arab world.

"Without a background of cultural understanding," Cowell said, "it's hard to interpret these events."