

Winter 2012

Bringing Language to Life

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Recommended Citation

Davis, Laura (2012) "Bringing Language to Life," *Linfield Magazine*: Vol. 8 : No. 3 , Article 13.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine/vol8/iss3/13

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Bringing language to life



Four distinct accents amount to one strong voice for the Linfield College language program.

This year, students are learning from native speakers in each of the languages which offer majors: German, French, Spanish and Japanese.

While French and German language assistants have been the norm, Spanish and Japanese were added this year.

Noelia Alfaro Fernandez of Costa Rica, Esse Dabla of France, Manuela Faschang of Austria and Nao Okumura of Japan take part in classes, lead conversations and share their cultures with Linfield students.

"These four young women truly embody the linguistic and cultural diversity that we treasure at Linfield," said Chris Keaveney, professor of Japanese. "Young native speakers bring an excitement to the program that is hard for us to replicate."

Equally important is what they do outside the classroom. They participate in language clubs and plan activities from their cultures. All multilingual, the four share a common interest in languages. They cook together, share an office and sign up for campus activities galore. Three of the four are roommates.

They are cultural ambassadors as well.

"The professors here know more about grammar than we do," Faschang, a Fulbright scholar, said. "But coming from Austria, I have a different accent than the Linfield professors, which gives another dimension to the German triangle."

Dabla, from France and also a Fulbright scholar, said they provide cultural relevance as well, relating news and first-hand observations about their countries. She has African origins and students often aren't aware of the large African community in France.

"I talk about student life back home more than grammar," added Dabla,

who also incorporates games into class. Recently, she gave students a song with the verbs erased and asked them to insert their own.

Working with a native speaker is a critical aspect of learning the language, Alfaro of Costa Rica, said. "You learn to imitate an accent by listening to it," and she is doing the same with her English studies. She has been most surprised by the hectic American lifestyle, something she'd heard about but didn't quite believe.

"People are really busy here, all the time," she said. "It's very different in Costa Rica. There we have a philosophy, pura vida, which literally means pure life. We use it a lot, to say hello, thank you, goodbye, I'm good. It's a way to take life easy, with no rush."

As they go about their days on campus, the four are often mistaken for students, which is a plus. "We are close in age to many students so maybe they feel comfortable talking with us," added Okumura of Japan, a degree-seeking student who will be assisting at Linfield for two years.

The four assistants underscore Linfield's dedication to multicultural awareness and engagement, according to Peter Richardson, professor of German and modern languages co-chair.

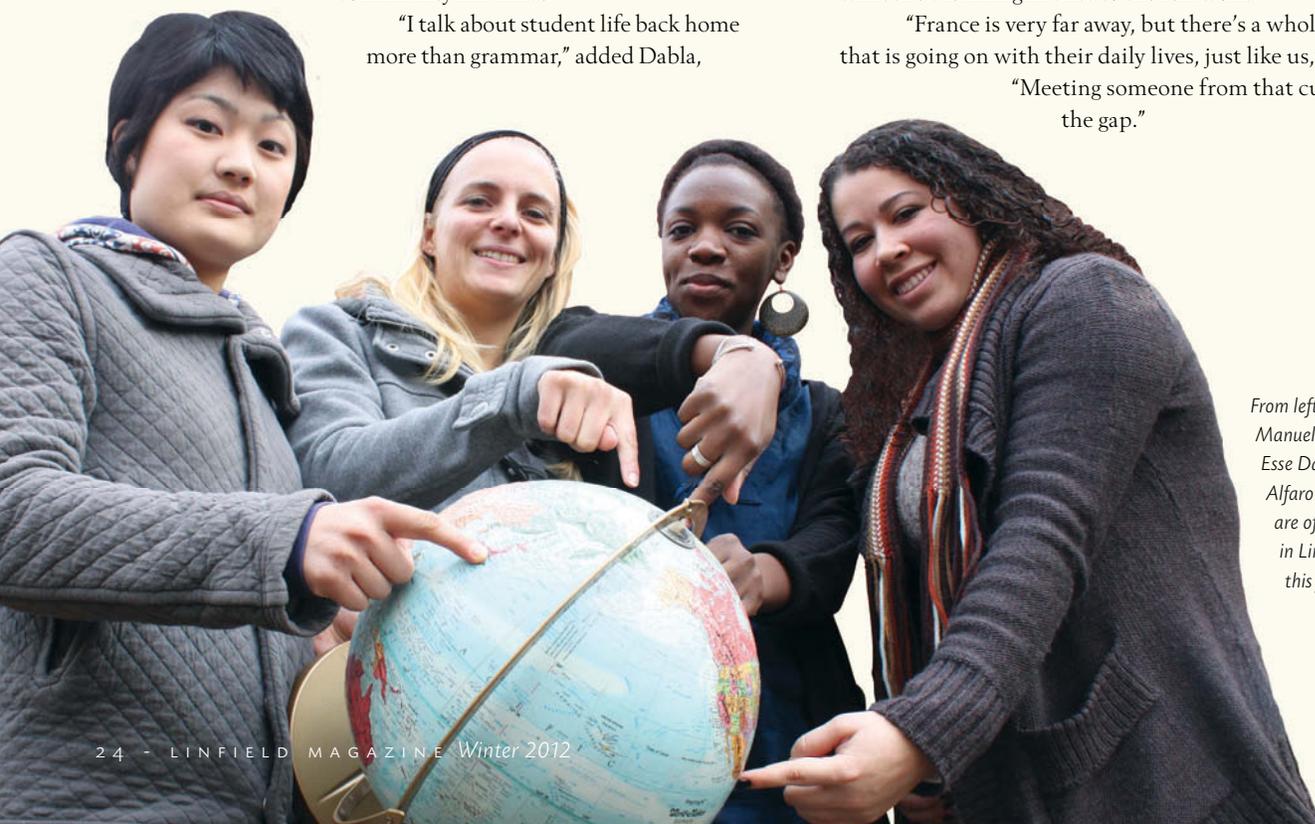
"They audit Linfield courses while they're here, bringing international perspectives and mature voices to bear on a wide range of topics," Richardson said. "Our students have much to gain from learning more about faraway cultures from someone roughly their age."

Katherine Thomas '14, president of the Linfield French Club, digs deeper into French culture through personal conversations with Dabla. The double major in French and International Relations plans to spend next year in Marseille through Linfield's study abroad program, and said native speakers help to connect what she's learning in class to the real world.

"France is very far away, but there's a whole culture there that is going on with their daily lives, just like us," she said.

"Meeting someone from that culture bridges the gap."

— Laura Davis



From left, Nao Okumura of Japan, Manuela Faschang of Austria, Esse Dabla of France and Noelia Alfaro Fernandez of Costa Rica are offering a native voice in Linfield language classes this year.