

# Teacher gets help from a few characters

## Vox Proxy makes lessons memorable

By Stephanie Barrett  
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Denbigh High School German teacher Chuck Walsh turns his students' attention to the television in the corner of his classroom. He's about to introduce the next unit - well he's not, but some funny-looking characters are.

A man named Chuck with a slight resemblance to David Letterman appears on the center of the screen with a bright red background. Speaking in German, he tells the class he's a friend of Walsh's.

"What is that?" a student asks.

The cartoon character turns his attention to two students in Walsh's class and calls out their names. He asks whether they're sleeping.

The class bursts with laughter.

The class is focused on the screen and about to learn a German lesson on ordering in a restaurant.

Earlier this month, Walsh sought help to introduce this lesson from characters in a software program called Vox Proxy. It's an add-in to Microsoft's PowerPoint that involves talking animated 3D characters and is produced by Colorado-based Right Seat Software.

Once it loads into PowerPoint, Vox Proxy becomes a part of the tool bar. The program basically walks a user through selecting characters, what they'll do and how they'll move. The characters perform various animations and speak in multiple languages by using a computerized voice or actual recorded voices. They respond to voice commands and can carry on conversations.

Right Seat Software introduced the product in September 2001, and now schools and businesses across the nation and in many countries are using the software. In Virginia, just a few schools have begun using it.

At Denbigh High, Walsh knew of only one other teacher working with it.

If schools are teaching PowerPoint to students, using Vox Proxy gets the kids more engaged, Right Seat Software President Tom Atkins said. "It adds a dimension of interest they don't otherwise have if they are dealing with texts and pictures."

Also, some teachers simply use it to present their students with materials "to add an impact to the message to make people remember it," Atkins said.

That's what Walsh said he's been doing.

Just a few months ago, Walsh's supervisor introduced him to the software, knowing he often incorporates technology into his lessons.

And Walsh is glad.

"It's a lot of fun," he said. "It's one more way of getting and holding the attention of students. ... It's more exciting to have characters come on to explain a grammar point or explain an assignment for the day."

After 3D Chuck makes the class laugh, a bear named Milton appears on a unicycle. He, too, speaks in German - with an automated voice. He tells the class that he wants them to go to a restaurant.

"This is how you order auf Deutsch," he continues. And he gives them a quick lesson on phrasing.

While the students listen, they also read along with the text that often appears in a bubble over a character's head.

Milton introduces his friend Peedy the parrot. The parrot raises a wing to say hello. But then scratches his head and rolls his eyes - complete with a sound effect - saying he needs help to order in German.

Then an older-looking cartoon character appears and tells two students to repeat some German phrases after him. The students say nothing. "You two want me to change you into frogs," he says, and directs them to repeat after him.

The class again erupts in laughter. The two students do as he said. Marge, a blue creature posing as a telephone operator, and Plany the Plane also lead them through some lessons, and the PowerPoint slides without animated assistance take over from there.

All of this, Walsh said, was easy to do by using a computer function called a wizard that takes a user through each step. Though it's entertaining for him and the students, Walsh said, there is educational value for students as well.

"The more exposure they have, the less fear they have or less hesitancy they have," with computers, he said. "When they go to a job, there's not going to be a job available that doesn't have some access to computers or some technology related to computers."

At least one student didn't see that far ahead but saw some merit in the software.

"It was different," 15-year-old sophomore Sean Bland said smiling. "At least you hear the information or see it in a different way. It helps you remember more if you add it to the teaching methods."

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