

# Learning Languages

# Creates Caring Cultures

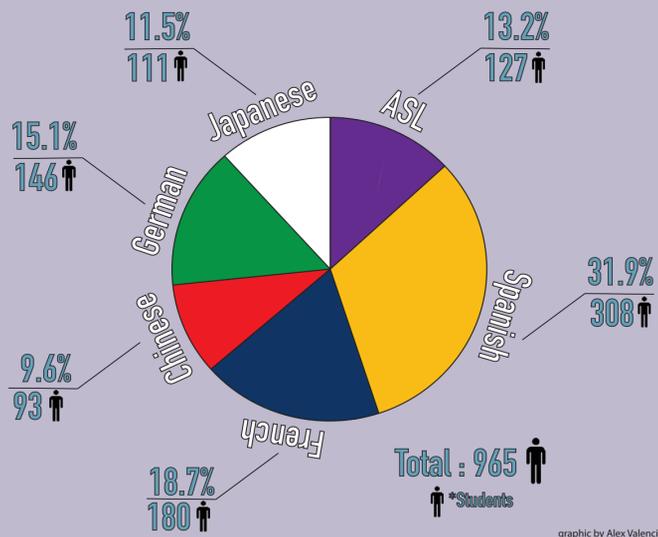


## LOTE at LASA:

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Throughout the school year, LASA students in language classes learn about a variety of holidays and cultural celebrations as ways to connect with the people and culture they are learning to communicate with through language. The following in-depth focuses on Spanish, American Sign Language, Chinese, and German as four examples of languages at LASA. Each of these classes celebrate culture in different ways, whether through research projects, food, or art displays. However, those four classes are by no means the only language classes with cultural celebrations at LASA, and this is not meant to be an exhaustive list.

LASA students have six options for languages other than English (LOTE) classes. This infographic represents the number of students in each language class at LASA. The data for this infographic was provided by Shannon Cardona, one of LASA's academic counselors.



## American Sign Language

Just like the other languages offered at LASA, the American Sign Language (ASL) department incorporates its culture and traditions into the classroom. Deaf culture is the behaviors, norms, and language utilized by the majority of deaf people in the United States. According to ASL teacher Eric Breland, not all people who have hearing loss are part of Deaf culture.

"Deaf culture has a lot of different cultural norms," Breland said. "Like to get a whole room's attention, you don't clear your throat or do anything like that, you flash lights on and off... Visual things are very important to Deaf culture because that's the main mode of communication."

Breland tries to replicate some things common in Deaf culture within his classroom. According to Breland, this helps students get a better understanding of Deaf culture and practices.

"I incorporate using the lights to get the entire class's attention," Breland said. "I incorporate lots of interactive games and the room is normally set up in a gigantic U, so everyone can see each other, so we can see each other sign. That's how most

classrooms at a deaf school at the deaf universities are set up and established."

Breland incorporates holidays such as Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Hanukkah in his lessons through themed word searches, teaching specific vocabulary, and other interactive projects. He also discusses the unique ways Deaf people experience the holidays in class.

"To learn a language, you've got to learn about culture," Breland said. "A lot of language things relate to the culture, like why you do something, or why something is explained a certain way, or why a particular habit is offensive or not offensive, or why they [Deaf culture] shares more information than hearing culture does. It's really difficult to teach a language without teaching the culture and the cultural norms."

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Breland believes language and culture are intertwined, so it's especially important for ASL learners to be cognizant of Deaf norms. When they are using their ASL in the real world, these cultural lessons will also come into play.

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## German

Gingerbread houses, colorful posters, photos, and trophies upon trophies don the walls and shelves of the German classroom at LASA. These decorations are the culminating result of years of attending Sprachfest, the Texas German competition students prepare for during December and attend in February. The contest has opportunities for students to engage with German culture

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- Christopher Parks, German teacher

"A big part of the holiday season for LASA that isn't really a German tradition is getting ready for Sprachfest starting in mid-November, so that's leading into St. Nicholas Day, and those Germanic holidays that are celebrated in the winter," Parks said. "There's a lot more of a recreational approach to classes because everybody's working on a project or a piece of art or a dramatic event."

Parks incorporates teaching German history as a part of celebrating German traditions, as he says that the two are deeply intertwined. On days of particular significance to German history, Parks carves out time during classes to discuss them.

"Other than the more traditional holiday season holidays, early on in fall we celebrate the German Unity Day, which is on October 3, and then the day of the Berlin Wall falling on November 9," Parks said. "And really that's the diving board into more holidays that are culturally relevant, holidays that have persisted over long periods of time as opposed to the day of the wall falling which was just two decades ago."

Some of these traditional German holidays include Krampus Night, which is the night before St. Nicholas Day on Dec. 6. In German lore, St. Nicholas rewards good children by leaving them presents, while Krampus comes to punish bad children.

"St. Nicholas Day is where in America we get a lot of our traditions for having your stocking stuffed with little treats or coal, and getting bad presents if you misbehave, and the whole legend of Krampus," Parks said. "Then, three weeks later is when you have the actual Christmas Eve, so they're two different things in Germany as opposed to combining them into Christmas night."

Parks grew up around some of these German traditions because his grandmother was German. He enjoys sharing these

traditions with his students, as he believes culture is an important part of learning a language.

"Culture just adds that layer of tangibility and emotional connection that you can have with the language because it's related to people and their habits and what they do, and you can take part in that," Parks said. "I also like discussing holidays from all cultures, like we did a lesson on Diwali in German. I just think it's a shame if you're able to start speaking a language with people, but you can't really speak to their heart because you don't know much about who they are and where they're from."



OCTOBERFEST CELEBRATION LASA students participate in cultural celebrations related to their languages outside of class as well. Pictured above is an Oktoberfest celebration attended by LASA senior, Zachary Suri, photo by Zachary Suri

through participating in events ranging from poetry declamation to crafts to musical ensembles. According to the German teacher Christopher Parks, preparing for the Sprachfest competition is part of how the department celebrates the holidays.

## Chinese

The Chinese department hosts several events throughout the year to celebrate Chinese holidays and culture – everything ranging from the school-wide Mid-Autumn Festival to a ramen social hosted by the Chinese Club. The Mid-Autumn Festival is traditionally a celebration of harvest, which LASA celebrates



MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL Students line up to collect traditional Chinese foods. This celebration was organized by students to celebrate part of the Mid-Autumn festival. photo by JC Ramirez

through hosting a fair during lunch open to the whole school. Another major Chinese holiday is Chinese New Year, which is also referred to as Spring Festival by the department, and celebrates the beginning of the new year on the lunar Chinese calendar (usually in late January). These celebrations are largely student-driven, according to Chinese teacher Valerie Zhong.

"Especially before the pandemic, we did a lot [for the Chinese New Year's celebration]," Zhong said. "All of the Chinese students would participate and perform on stage. We use it as a part of culture-based learning...the whole class would brainstorm ideas for what they want to do, for example skits, or singing, or musical instruments, or games. It's a student-centered activity where almost everything comes from their own ideas, and they decide how to do it, and I'm more of a facilitator, helping them and guiding them."

The Chinese New Year's celebration at LASA usually takes place on the day of the Lantern Festival, which is on the fifteenth day of the first month in the lunar Chinese calendar, as it's the last day of New Year's celebration in China. The celebration is generally open to students outside of the department, parents, and staff, according to Zhong.

"It's really fun," Zhong said. "At the celebration event, we also invite guest speakers, which are sometimes parents coming to talk about learning Chinese and Chinese culture. Besides the

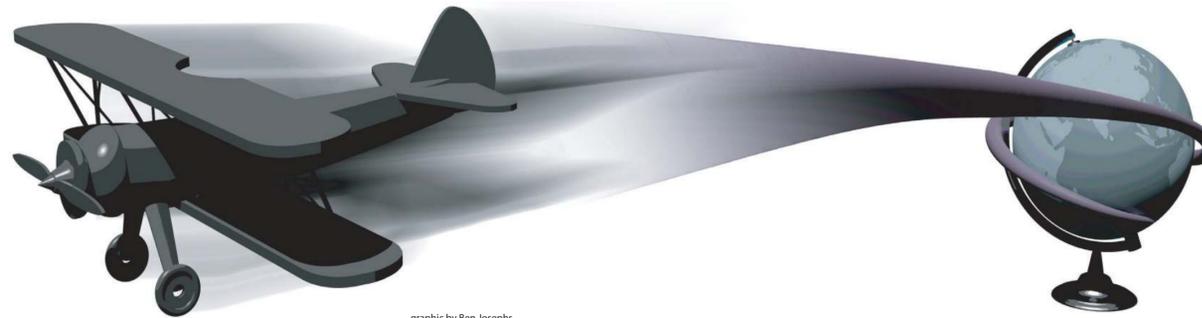
performances, we display student work, and students bring food for a potluck."

Similarly, the department hosted a celebration for the Mid-Autumn Festival on Sept. 8. Throughout the halls and classrooms, students put on plays, held demonstrations of Chinese Yo-Yo, and a variety of other activities the student body could participate in.

"For the Mid-Autumn Festival, we also have a celebration fair open to the whole school during lunch time," Zhong said. "We teach students how to make moon cakes and display calligraphy, and lots of different kinds of activities."

Zhong feels that it's important to not only expose her own students to Chinese culture, but also to promote cultural appreciation across the student body. She believes that fostering this understanding is important for students later on in life as well.

"We hope for students to become global citizens," Zhong said, "so once they learn the culture, they have a better understanding of people coming from different cultures all over the world, and so they can also better understand themselves through the comparison and contrast of different cultures."



graphic by Ben Josephs

## Spanish

The Spanish department is LASA's biggest language department with six levels of Spanish, three teachers, and over 300 students. The department celebrates holidays and learns about traditions from a variety of Spanish-speaking countries, though one of the main holidays celebrated is Día de los Muertos which is a celebratory holiday to remember the dead on Nov. 1 and 2. La Catrina, an elegantly dressed skeleton, is a prominent symbol of the holiday, which was a subject of classroom discussion in Spanish teacher Luis Ramirez's classes.

"We compared how Catrina is a fictional character that was created to really enhance the narrative, and we compare that to how Santa Claus was also a character that was invented to create this narrative about Christmas," Ramirez said. "And so we've looked at different ways people celebrate Día de los Muertos, but we've also looked into the deeper details, so that's definitely

Teaching the culture in addition to the language helps people view the humanity within a language and how impactful the culture has been.

- Luis Ramirez, Spanish teacher

one of the things that we really focus on in November."

Outside of classroom discussions, students in different levels of Spanish engaged with Día de los Muertos in a variety of different ways. For example, Spanish One did a project on alebrijes, which are colorful imaginary creatures from Mexican Folk Art as a part of a unit on body parts.

"In Spanish Three, students did individual research papers on Hispanics who have passed away, and they created their own mini altars," Ramirez said. "In Spanish Six, they created the huge altar that we saw in the library, so designing that and creating something that was traditional to the size and scope of an actual ofrenda was pretty wonderful. So with each level,

it's a more intense look at the holiday, and really getting more involved in the whole process."

Higher levels of the language are more project-based, and there's more of a focus on the cultural elements of the language. Students who have a better understanding of the language they are learning are able to dive deeper into Spanish literature and media.

"In my Spanish Six class, we've done a segment where the kids actually had to prepare their own dishes, present them in class, talk about the history of those dishes, and really take us on a step by step [process] and then we're actually able to eat the food in class," Ramirez said. "In previous classes we've also had students actually open up their own restaurants and design a menu."

According to Ramirez, it's difficult to teach about all of the different Spanish-speaking countries, but he tries to ensure that class content covers different countries, and not just Mexico or just Spain. Spanish VI student Kyra Kleiman has participated in activities that cover multiple countries.

"We've painted tiles, which was one of our first projects, and they were about ourselves," Kleiman said. "But then he [Ramirez] also was talking about la talavera de Puebla and la talavera de la Reina, which are like two different types of tile. One of them's from Spain, and one of them's from Mexico." Kleiman has spent time in Nicaragua, and it's helped shape her understanding of the cultures of Spanish-speaking countries. According to her, learning Spanish has been a gateway into her learning about those cultures.

"I think that there's a lot more to Spanish than just the language," Kleiman said, "and I think that once you're able to speak it, I think it's really important to start learning the culture and the more important themes...the more you learn the language, the better you can understand the culture."

Ramirez also believes teaching culture and traditions goes hand-in-hand with teaching a language. According to Ramirez, looking at these traditions through a modern cross-cultural lens is also important for students.

"Teaching the culture in addition to the language helps people view the humanity within a language and how impactful the culture has been not just within their culture but here in American culture, like how we see Día de los Muertos is really crossing over into the American mainstream in terms of what

we celebrate here in the US," Ramirez said. "...So that way, they have this global competence of the language and not just conjugating verbs."



DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS Spanish VI students worked together to create an altar as part of their Día de los Muertos celebration. Altars are a traditional part of the way the dead are honored during Día de los Muertos. photo by JC Ramirez



ALTARS OF ALL SIZES Lower Spanish levels also created altars. The altars pictured above are smaller and were featured in the library during the fall.