



BRENT WOJAHN/THE OREGONIAN

Fourth-graders Elisa Nguyen (left) and Alma Vega play a word game as part of their English language lessons at Harold Oliver Intermediate School in outer east Portland. The Centennial School District won strong marks from the state for its success in getting students to speak and write English with proficiency.

0365-1

English as a proficient language

Schools | More non-native students in Oregon are succeeding after the state goes to a new teaching style

By **BETSY HAMMOND**
THE OREGONIAN

Oregon schools have dramatically changed the way they teach English to non-native speakers over the past two years, and the new methods are paying off with more students reaching proficiency, new state figures show.

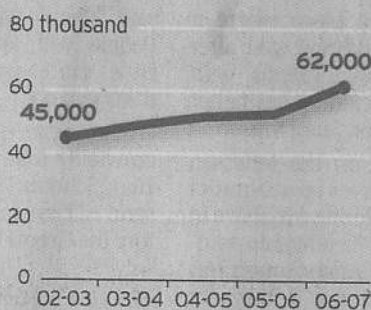
Across the state, nearly 9,000 students passed the state English exam in 2006-07, demonstrating they had reached fluency in reading, writing and speaking English, the new report shows. Fewer than 4,000 students reached full proficiency the year before, according to state figures.

More than 62,000 students in Oregon are learning English as a second language, up from 45,000 five years ago.

The state report, released Wednes-

Growth of English learners

The number of Oregon students learning English as a second language is rising.



Source: Oregon Department of Education

Top languages

Breakdown of the main non-English languages spoken by students.



MICHAEL MODE/THE OREGONIAN



To check on the progress of Oregon school districts in teaching English to students with limited proficiency, go to blog.oregonlive.com/schoolsguide

day, shows that more than half of students who were taught English as a second language for at least a full year advanced one point or more on the state's five-point English proficiency scale. The

state had expected 35 percent of students would progress that much.

Educators chalk up the improved results to a new way of teaching that has

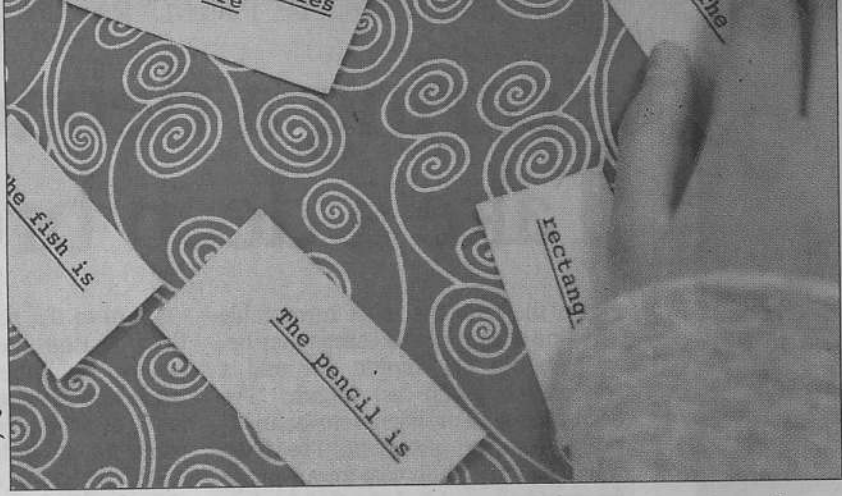
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Students pick pieces of paper with English phrases to make sentences as part of their lessons at Harold Oliver Intermediate school in the Centennial district.

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BRENT WOJAHN
THE OREGONIAN



English: Explicit state standards are part of change

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swept Oregon ESL classrooms in the past couple of years.

Schools have begun explicitly teaching the grammar, rules and structure of English. And they are doing it in a carefully ordered way, making sure that students don't miss any of the building blocks of how English verbs are conjugated, words are ordered, conversations are expected to proceed and sentences are constructed.

"For a long time, we just read to them and exposed them to English and figured they would pick it up just like native speakers do," said Danelle Heikkila, who directs the English Language Learner program for Gresham-Barlow schools.

"But the state has asked us to ... make sure that we teach them about English, about the rules and forms and structures of English."

One example helps illuminate the new approach, said Carmen West, head of English as a Second Language programs in Oregon. All students learn that an adjective is a describing word, but teachers don't necessarily tell them to place the adjective before, rather than after, the noun.

But in most romance languages, including Spanish, adjectives follow nouns. So, West said, English as a Second Language teachers now make sure they teach the rules of placing adjectives in English — along with how to conjugate tricky verb tenses, how to compare

and contrast, how English uses adverbs and other rules.

Along with training in the new methods, schools also received new teaching materials, explicit state standards and tests to measure student progress, West said.

The new approach means teachers can't just choose their own lessons but must adhere to a scope and sequence of skills to be taught and are held more accountable for results, West said.

"I haven't heard complaints. It's more like a sigh of relief: 'Now I know what I need to do.'"

The 2007 results mean that 39 percent of students who had been enrolled in ESL classes for five years reached full proficiency and were able to exit from supported English classes — a time frame the state says is long enough for most students, when well-taught, to master English.

In the past, some students graduated without ever reaching proficiency.

"To get students to where they can read, write and speak English and go to a regular classroom to finish school is really what an English Language Learner program is all about," said Gene Evans, spokesman for the Oregon Department of Education.

The state's goal is for 50 percent of students to master English fully in five years — something 21 large Oregon school districts accomplished in 2007. They included Hillsboro, Gresham and Centennial schools, all of which have embraced the new approach to teaching English as a second language.

The Woodburn School District, with one of the state's largest immigrant populations, had the worst results by far on the state report. Only 40 percent of students moved up one proficiency level, and only 13 percent of students who had been learning English for five years reached full proficiency. Woodburn offi-

cials said no one was available to comment on the results.

In their classroom at Centennial's Harold Oliver Intermediate School, students who speak Romanian, Spanish, Ukrainian and Vietnamese at home played a game Wednesday to help them use rich descriptive language in their schoolwork.

They drew nouns and adjectives from a pile and tried to form a sentence that would pass muster with their classmates. Hungry to earn points, some students tried to push their luck.

"The french fries are furry and fat," said fourth-grader Daniela Castro, trying to get her classmates to approve. They didn't.

"The orange is useful" — another students' attempt — didn't pass muster, either.

But Elisa Nguyen managed to convince her classmates that "The notebook is brown and sharp" was OK, pointing out that the corners of a notebook and the edges of the paper are, in fact, sharp.

Their teachers, Allison Schefers and Meagan Kimball, said the new approach has helped their students make big gains. Their school district saw 63 percent of its students move up at least one proficiency level last year.

Despite the structure, walking into their class is not like walking into an old-fashioned grammar class, with long lists of verbs to conjugate or sentences to diagram.

The rules and forms of English are taught in the context of using words to do common jobs — explain, summarize, describe.

"We make sure it is structured in a way that makes sense," Schefers said, "and we check in with each student daily to make sure it's making sense."

Betsy Hammond: 503-294-7623;
betsyhammond@
news.oregonian.com