

First-grader Braden Bohlman tells classmate Desiree Mendosa-Johnson about foods and sports he prefers in response to questions she posed. At Ventura Park Elementary, teachers have masterful ways to get students to practice new English skills a lot.



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Over the past six years, Oregon schools have become dramatically more successful at helping students from other language backgrounds master English within five or six years.

As a result, English as a second language courses have become sparse in middle and high schools, with elementary students accounting for more than 75 percent of those who get daily help acquiring English.

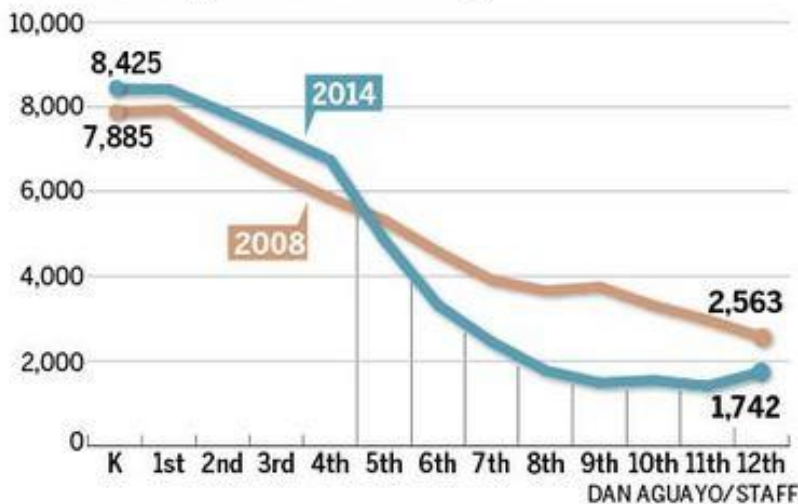
As recently as 2008, it was much more rare for Oregon schools to complete the job of teaching English to non-native speakers by the end of elementary school. Instead, middle and high school students made up 40 percent of students still learning English.

Several factors have driven the change: **New standards for what to teach**, better teaching materials, introduction of **a single test to judge English proficiency across Oregon**, more

accountability for schools' results with English learners and loads of training in teaching methods that work better than the old ones.

Students master English sooner

The number of ESL students needing English language learner classes in each grade level, 2008 versus 2014, shows students taking less time to learn English.



The bottom line is that, in most districts, educators charged with teaching English to children who speak Spanish or Somali or Russian or Vietnamese at home are proving so effective that the job is substantially accomplished by the time the students get to sixth grade.

Michelle Thelander, a California-based expert who has helped **schools in 10 states including Oregon** improve their teaching of limited English students, said she finds Oregon's progress "reassuring" - and uncommon.

"From the data nationally, I don't see this as a trend nationally," Thelander said.

Many states still have staggering numbers of what experts call "**L-TELS**" - long-term English learners, who have been taught English as a second language for at least seven years without mastering academic English, says **Susana Dutro, co-founder** with Thelander of the **training firm E.L. Achieve**.

Oregon's director of English learner programs, Kim Miller, says the state's improved results stem from closer monitoring and better instruction. A significant amount of that success, Miller says, can be chalked up to Dutro and her firm, which has led massive amounts of training for superintendents, principals and teachers in many Oregon school districts going back as far as 2006.

"We're seeing highly effective teaching happening at our elementary grades," Miller says. "They're doing great work."

Oregon still has students who don't master English in seven years, Miller acknowledges, and more needs to be known about their challenges and the solutions, she says.

Nearly half those students have special education needs, primarily learning disabilities, in addition to learning English as a second language, she says.

Many of the rest came to the United States late in elementary school or even later. Others have moved frequently from district to district or attended school sporadically, causing gaps in their learning, Miller says.

But some students who haven't mastered English quickly, says Dutro, have been failed by schools that offer English learners low-quality, poorly coordinated English instruction.

"We create L-TELEs by not having a coherent and clearly articulated program and not serving them well in our schools," Dutro says.

Among Oregon districts with at least 300 English learners, only three had more than one-third of those students in middle and high school: **Nyssa**, **Jefferson County** and **North Clackamas**.

State officials are giving Jefferson County educators extra help to improve their effectiveness, while North Clackamas schools already have improved how fast they help young students learn English, according to **David Bautista**, **Oregon's assistant superintendent for educational equity**.

Nyssa, where most students are Latino, is working to create **a Spanish-English dual language program like the one that is working so well in Woodburn** for students whose parents want them to be bilingual, he said. Nyssa, which has a four-day school week, also provides English learners extra help on Fridays, an off day for most students, he said.



First-graders Lilyanna Baker, left, and Meegan Squally interview each other about their preferences: Turkey or ham? Watermelon or blueberries?

The David Douglas School District, where nearly 40 percent of students arrive at school needing English as a second language instruction, is considered one of Oregon's stellar performers. Last year,

more than three-fourths of its English language learners had gained proficiency by sixth grade, with many of them getting there by the end of grade four.

That happens because its elementary schools have switched to teaching all students, including native English speakers, a daily English language class geared to their level -- and the teachers and the language acquisition specialists who coach them have received lots of training and practice in how to build English skills.

Among the techniques: Use hand motions or gestures to help students understand new terms and remember them more easily. Use advanced language such as "prefer" and "scrumptious" rather than "like" and "good" with even the youngest learners. Explicitly teach the forms and patterns of academic English, such as how to compare and contrast and how to support an opinion with a rationale and details. Insist that students spend at least 40 percent of their language development classes not listening to the teacher or looking at the board but writing and talking, talking, talking.

Walk into Julie Sanford's kindergarten classroom of at **Ventura Park Elementary**, and it looks at first blush like a 5-year-old version of speed dating. The students are a mix of native English speakers and students new to English. Some sit at their desks. Some stand. Others circulate. But all are taking part in short one-on-one conversations in English. The babble of little voices is quiet, but constant. A lot of them seem to be saying something about a pocket.

Turns out the class had read aloud together **the children's story, "A Pocket for Corduroy," about a girl's beloved stuffed bear** who gets lost while seeking a pocket for his overalls.

Then Sanford told them it was time for "busy bees," a structured oral language exercise in which half the students (the bees) buzz around and hold short conversations with students who stay in place (the flowers). It guarantees half the students are talking at any given time as the class practices a particular language technique or structure.

Today's lesson: Using terms such as first, then, next and after to convey the order in which actions occur.

"Give me a thumbs up if you are using your sequencing language," Sanford says to her bees and flowers.

In a first-grade classroom nearby, students interview each other, reading questions they have written and recording the answers. Lilyanna Baker asks Meagan Squally a tough one: Do you prefer blueberries or watermelon?

David Douglas teachers cover new English skills in a carefully planned sequence. Teachers first model new techniques for students, then lead them in group practice, then tee them up to practice independently with another student. Busy bee conversations, peer interviews and other familiar

routines help ensure that all students get a lot of practice using that week's vocabulary and techniques.

Every Friday, teachers measure to see how well students perform.

"We're always looking at data," says **Kelly Devlin**, the **district's ESL and equity director**. If students aren't progressing, it's addressed promptly, she says.

Old-school English as a second language classes typically pulled students out of their regular classes to learn English in a way that focused too much on the basics and didn't necessarily jibe with the rest of their day, Devlin says: Learning colors, the language of telling time, how to convert verbs to the past tense.

Smart English development classes, says Ventura Park **language development specialist Shane Burchell**, focus on teaching students the structures of language they need to use in reading and science and history: How to make and defend an argument, discuss cause and effect, use sequencing, stake a claim and marshal evidence.

Teachers can't just expose English learners to passages that do those things, Devlin says. They must explicitly teach students the language building blocks and techniques that expert English speakers and writers use.

With lots of in-depth training for teachers, "Our awareness of what our English learners need has gotten better and our instruction has gotten better," Devlin says. "When you look at our data, it shows that we are making progress."

Many of the changes that have help spur more intensive and more effective teaching of English to young Oregonians who speak other languages were rooted in the 2001 **No Child Left Behind law**, Miller says.

Until then, individual schools and districts had widely varying curricula and standards for teaching English learners, different tests and standards for determining how much progress students were making and virtually no accountability for that progress.

In 2006-07, Oregon schools switched from using a hodgepodge of commercial tests to giving **the English Language Proficiency Assessment, or ELPA**, to every English learner every year.

When schools first made the switch, the results were dismal. In 2008, only 20 percent of Oregon's English learners who had spent five years in English as a second language classes had mastered English.

It took time for teachers to get up to speed on the new standards and for districts to buy new instructional materials that matched the new demands, Miller says.

Dutro and her firm provided training to teams of administrators and teachers in most Oregon districts, giving practical advice on how to take what researchers learned about English acquisition and turn it into practical actions in the classroom.

"She gave us a lot of tools," Miller says. "She gave us ways to make what we teach comprehensible to English learners and to help them structure their language growth."

Teaching that way doesn't necessarily take more time than in the old ways, Miller says. "The one thing I have seen is a more focused attention to monitoring the progress of students and making sure students are making gains. When I talk with districts now, they truly know where their students are and where they need to go."

-- Betsy Hammond