

Shelby County students get early start mastering English as everyday language

By Sherri Drake Silence (Contact), Memphis Commercial Appeal Friday, June 26, 2009

Five-year-old Lina Pham barely spoke any English last year when she started kindergarten at Chimneyrock Elementary School.

Her family speaks mostly Vietnamese.

The school placed her in English as a Second Language classes and little Lina caught on fast. Educators say the younger the student, the quicker she learns.

"Now when she talks to her sisters and brothers, it's English only," said mother Linh Pham.

About 200 Shelby County Schools students, including Lina, have been enhancing their English skills over the past two weeks during the district's ESL summer camp at Chimneyrock, Bailey Station Elementary and Millington Elementary.

The camp, for students in grades K-5, started three years ago with about 100 students. It has twice won the suburban district an "Excellence in Education" award by the Tennessee School Boards Association.

This year's camp theme is "Around the World in 10 Days." Students learn about continents and culture and focus on words including "latitude" and "longitude."

On a recent day, Lina's class at Chimneyrock learned about European architecture and made "stained-glass windows" with paper cutouts and colorful tissue.

ESL teacher Cindy Ashe, based at Woodstock Middle, shared with the students many items from her travels to Germany and France.

"I like the cuckoo clock," said 7-year-old Nicholas Yang. "Cuckoo. Cuckoo."

The camp helps the kids to be "exposed to different cultures and to realize we may be different, but we're alike in a lot of ways," said ESL teacher Debra Frantz, based at Bon Lin Elementary.

Since 2000, ESL students in Shelby schools have increased from 230 to 1,385.

About 150 students have enrolled in the district's ESL program every year for the past few years, said Todd Goforth, ESL specialist.

The district, which currently has 23 ESL teachers, will hire five more for the fall. The state recently lowered the state maximum of 50 students per ESL teacher to 45 students per teacher.

Goforth said the program no longer focuses on teaching kids vocabulary like "eye," "nose" and "face." "That's the old way of doing things."

Now, on the first day of school, elementary ESL students may learn the words "compass" or "south."

"Our main goal is to increase the academic language," Goforth said. "That's what's going to be on the (Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program) ... These kids are held to the same standards as the others."

The Commercial Appeal, June 26, 2009