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FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Everyone's Role in Academic English

Los Angeles, CA • April 2007

Topic: Teaching Literacy in English to K-5 English Learners

Practice: Develop Academic English

Highlights

- The principal tracks student performance with data and highlights successful teacher practices
- The reading and math coaches guide teachers in addressing standards, conduct vertical planning, and facilitate use of assessment data to improve instruction
- Teachers use a variety of instructional strategies to model grammatically correct English and give students opportunities to practice
- All share a deep sense of responsibility for preparing students to succeed in school and in life

About the Site

Cahuenga Elementary School (K-5)
Los Angeles, CA

Demographics

64% Hispanic, 35% Asian
70% English Language Learners
81% Free or reduced-price lunch

Cahuenga provides bilingual instruction in Spanish-English and Korean-English in a four-track, year-round school. Distinctive features of the school include:

- Strong core reading program; also arts, music
- Regular formative assessment; database support
- Emphasis on standards; ongoing cross-grade teacher collaboration
- Teaching writing, with use of rubrics, starting in kindergarten
- Multiple forms of peer interaction
- Stable leadership; strong learning community

Full Transcript

Welcome to Cahuenga Elementary, located in sunny Hollywood, California.

Rosemary Heim, literacy coach: Standards play a significant role. Obviously, all of our textbooks are standards-based. All of our professional development is standards-based. Everything is standards-based.

Rene Alvarez, math coach: We revisit the standards a lot to make sure that teachers understand the standards that they need to teach for the specific grade level that they are teaching. Teachers change from year to year in what grade level they want to teach; there is a lot of change every year, in some cases. Those teachers need to learn the new standards that we're teaching the following year. So, the year for us begins with, "Let's revisit the standards. What are the standards that we need to cover for the first quarter or the first unit?" That's how we begin the year, looking at standards.

Heim: In professional development—let's take, for example, writing—we'll focus on a specific aspect of language arts, and we'll look at the writing standards for each grade level. We've also done vertical planning, using the California state standards, in which the grade levels will come together: K & one, and then one & two, and then two & three, and then three & four, and then four & five. Teachers will compare the standards. They'll have a conversation about the standards. Upper grades will share with the lower grade teachers what they would like the lower grade teachers to focus on in relation to the specific standards they are looking at, to better prepare them for the next grade level. Then, the lower grade teachers have a real insight into what needs to be taught in order to prepare their students for the next grade level.

Heim: Wouldn't you agree?

Alvarez: Yes, I would agree with you.

Heim: Thank you.

Alvarez: It gives a lot of validity to the work they do in the classroom. If I know that I'm working on a concept or a lesson, and that the students need to learn the skill in order to be successful in the next grade level, I'm going to put some effort into teaching that because I know that if I don't, those students will be deficient when they get to the next grade level. The planning that we do, we do at the beginning of the year, and that's going to be one of my PDs again at the end of the year. We are going to look at the standards, and the fourth grade teacher is going to tell the third grade teacher, "Please make sure that the students know and understand this concept before they come to fourth grade."

Heim: And then, when we do data analysis, teachers get a really good sense of which standards the students are weak in. So, they might revisit those standards to better prepare them for the next grade level.

Alvarez: If we identify the standard, that it's weak throughout—in my case, I look throughout the grade level—all of this grade level has this standard, and they need to work because every class seems to be that deficient here. So, I'm going to focus on that standard. I look at the standard and see how significant that standard is for the next grade level and for the CST. I'll look at that data, take that into consideration, see how much I'll bring and how much resources I want to pour into that. If it's not a significant standard, then I can overlook it because there are other things that are very important. We're going to look at those questions, one by one, look at the assessment, look at the report, and look at what was difficult about this standard. Why was this question difficult for the student? How can we make it accessible for the students? What changes do we need to make in our instruction to make these students understand these standards? And then we look again at the next assessment and see how it is now. Is it any better? We do that after every assessment: we'll have professional development where we look at that data, the standards, and the questions, and see what's challenging and how we can improve.

Heim: We'll also present graphs in which all of the teachers' test scores are visible. Of course, we don't name the teachers: it's T1, T2, T3, to respect their privacy. So, the teachers get an idea of how the students in the entire grade level are doing. And that seems to be very effective because one teacher will say, "Wow, Ms. So-and-so's students did so well in reading comprehension, and my students didn't. I'm going to ask her what she's doing." So, it stimulates conversation among the teachers, and it's challenging.

Megan Ward, teacher, fourth grade: There is a book that we use every day called the *Daily Language Review*, and it has helped tremendously, both with their speaking and their writing grammar. Every day there are two questions within the five sample questions that they do, and they are written grammatically incorrect. Some of them are just missing quotation marks, missing periods, but some of them have the wrong tense of the word, or they'll have a subject-verb that don't agree. In the beginning of the year, a lot of the students spoke that way. They didn't speak grammatically correctly, and when they would read the sentence, they didn't see anything wrong with it, but as we went through and they would hear the correct way of saying it, now when they do these two sentences, almost every day everyone gets them correct. It's just the practice of hearing them

incorrectly and then hearing them the correct way. They are able to correct themselves now, and when they speak, they speak grammatically correct sentences.

In the morning, the first thing we do is that Daily Language Review, and a math problem of the day. Both of those require the students to write complete answers, complete sentences, and use the math vocabulary that they've learned, maybe a week ago, a month ago, six months ago. The questions change every day. It could be something we learned the first week of school, or it could be something we learned yesterday.

In the upper grades of fourth and fifth grade, there are so many vocabulary words that they need to know, and it builds. It just keeps building on from what they learned in the beginning, so those words become part of their conversation. I mean, they get used to using those words.

There are really so many things that they get to do here that I don't know if they would ever have the chance to experience at other schools. My students this year are involved in drama classes; they're involved in music classes, visual arts classes; they've got artists from the museum coming to teach them about art history. They take dance classes, they're in the orchestra. There is so much that they do throughout the day; they are engulfed in so much.

All of these different activities really help their English because they are using different forms of the English language. Sometimes they are using artistic words. Sometimes they are using dramatic words that sometimes kids don't hear until college or until they are taking some sort of drama class when they are adults. They are using musical words. My class got a chance to go and see the philharmonic play, and some of them who are in the orchestra were able to teach the other students about the different instruments, the conductor, what a composer is. So these are all different things that not only the instructors and teachers are able to help the kids with, but something that kids are able to teach each other.

Dora Soto, kindergarten teacher: We start school the very first day of kindergarten. They are put to write. I give them a writing task. So at the very beginning of school, I have some writing tasks for them already, and I sit and I model for them a couple of sentences. We talk about them, how to form a sentence. We talk about how the sentence begins with an uppercase letter, or in Spanish, in *letra mayúscula*. I introduce immediately on the first day of school about ending a sentence with a period. We talk about it; I write it for them; I model it. And, although they are not reading in the first day of school, but together, as I'm writing each word, I'm forming each word, I'm sounding out each letter, each syllable together, I tell them, "You see what I'm doing? I'm writing a sentence, and you're going to learn to write this pretty soon." It makes them excited. It's almost as if they don't believe that they are really going to learn. "You're really going to learn this and much more." So from day one I communicate what I expect from them. What we do, from the very beginning of school—with English, although as I said they are not able to read the first day of school—I introduce, for English language development, the alphabet. We talk about the English alphabet, and each child has their own card, and on the back I have a list of higher-frequency words. Yes, they cannot read, but they are going to learn to read this pretty soon. So, we talk about the alphabet, and we talk about the sound of each alphabet; we talk about each letter having its own sound. From the first day I introduce a

sound system to them. It's from part of a phonics sound. They learn the sound, and this is from day one: English language development. We talk about this; we flip over the card. For Spanish, to flip over, I use "*tortilla*." In English, I say "*pancake*," and we flip it over. We talk about columns. "How many columns do you see?" So, I ask a lot of questions, and I expect them to answer in complete sentences. I begin with, "Do you see the tree?" and they have to answer, "Yes, I do." Everyone. "Do you see the tree?" "Yes, I do." I expect three words, and then I say, "How many trees do you see?" and they have to answer, "I see one tree." "Do you see two trees?" Now, we have to answer, "No, I don't." With this, they practice "Yes, I do," and "No, I don't." This is throughout every single page. There is a lot of repetition, and this is for everyone.

We talk about position words: *on*, *next to*, *under*, *above*. I write those words on the chalkboard, and we read the words; we talk about the words. We look at this picture, and there is a lot of discussion about the girl is *next to*, the cat is *under*. We talk about objects in the classroom. My hand is *under*, the book is *under*, so-and-so is *next to*.

Lloyd Houske, principal: When I came here, I wasn't particularly anxious to come to the school. I was happy at another school, but I realized it was time for a change. It was an exciting journey that I'd been on. When I came here, I did what most principals do; I went on a balcony walk. A balcony walk is where you visit classrooms, and you see what children are doing and to try to get a feeling for where the school is. I was so impressed with how hard the teachers were working, but how ineffectual things were, that they were working hard, but not getting the results that they should have for the work they were putting in. I didn't know exactly what to do, because it was a school made up of two-thirds Spanish-speaking children, who come to school not speaking a word of English, and the other third were Korean, and they didn't speak English either, but they were very successful. So, when I talked to the teachers about it, they all seemed to think, "Well, if I had the Asian children, I could do the same thing, too. But these are Hispanic kids, and they are different." I said, "I don't think their brains are different." But it was hard for them to handle the thought that maybe they needed to make a change.

I also was really concerned because no one was reading at grade level. Then, I had a brand-new teacher in kindergarten who didn't really know that children weren't supposed to be able to read, and she taught them to read, so I took these children, and I went to every other kindergarten room, and I showed off what this wonderful teacher had done, and you know what happened the next year? All the other kindergarten teachers were having children read, too. That was where we started in, and those children were at the level of first grade. Now, we many times complete the first grade materials in kindergarten. It's constantly looking at the assessments and the results that you get.

I also do something different here at school, in that we keep our children together in cohort groups. So I was able to track the success of children and classes so much easier, because I was comparing the same kids each year. Before that, the teacher would say, well, this is a different group of kids, and she was right: you really couldn't compare what they'd done the year before. That made much more accountability, and it made it much easier for us to know what's working with the children.

Alvarez: If you want them to have academic success, they will need to master the academic language. They won't go too far without it. When you see the difference between math books between the second grade and the third grade, it's a big difference between the language that is used. We can protect them here—and provide instruction and do everything that we can by scaffolding—but once you get to middle school, those schools may not have that. So, it is important for us to develop the academic language here in the elementary level so that they can succeed in middle school.

Heim: Most of the students here are immigrants, or their parents are immigrants, and their parents brought them here for a better life. We hear that over and over and over again. So, we feel a deep sense of responsibility to really prepare our children to be successful in America. The way we have to do that, or one of the ways, is to really make sure that they are strong in their academic language.