

Words to live by

Luther Burbank High's program to teach English targets not only students but their entire families

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The Yang family is among those learning English with the help of a school-provided computer. Above, the Yang children from left, Yengcher, 11; Touyia, 15; Maitong Gee, 7; Touchia, 5; Chongka, 8; Sorchia, 13; and Pade, 18 follow a grammar program on the screen. Hector Amezcua / hamezcua@sacbee.com

Huddled in a corner of their south Sacramento house, their faces awash in the blue glow of the computer screen, the Yang family is learning the intricacies of English grammar.

Seven siblings – ages 5 through 18 – read in chorus the sentence on the screen: "Magnetic storms create cool, dark patches on the Sun's surface. They are sunspots." Then the children fight over the mouse, eager to show their grammatical knowledge by clicking on nouns and verbs.

For these Hmong children, in the United States just three years this month, this is a slow yet steady lesson in a new language they must master to succeed. It is a lesson they can practice to perfection in the comfort of their own home, learning in unison with squirmy siblings and without the pressure of the regular classroom.

These immigrant students' journey to learn English no longer stops when the school day ends, thanks to an innovative program designed by Luther Burbank High School teacher Larry Ferlazzo. Ferlazzo has provided home computers to these children in hopes that the lessons will reach family members as well.

"It's like another school for them at home," the children's mother, Mai Chao Vang, said through a translator. "I'm extremely excited and thankful for the computer. I think it's a very big opportunity, not just for me, but for the entire family."

The Yang family was one of the first to pilot a project crafted by Ferlazzo a year and a half ago. The program has since expanded, with computers now in the homes of almost 50 families – including more than 80 Burbank students and nearly 150 students within the Sacramento City Unified School District.

The project also provides high-speed Internet access for the families, allowing them to visit a Web site Ferlazzo has created. The site includes more than 8,000 links to pages that have games, audiobooks and exercises – some broken down by themes and literacy levels – designed for nonnative speakers of all ages.

Ferlazzo, a former community organizer who has been teaching English-language learners at Burbank for four years, came up with the idea as he struggled to find ways to reach his many immigrant students.

Located in south Sacramento, Burbank High boasts the largest immigrant population of Sacramento City Unified's comprehensive high schools. More than 200 students have been in the country less than three years, according to Ferlazzo; most are Hmong refugees with little to no previous schooling.

Ferlazzo first set up before- and after-school computer labs for students seeking extra help. But families – some of whom had difficulty getting their children to and from those labs – told Ferlazzo of their desire to have a computer at home. It would assist their children, they said, as well as the adults struggling to learn English.

The idea made sense to Ferlazzo. Research shows family literacy boosts a child's academic success; helping families learn English likely would benefit not only current Burbank students, but also many of their siblings – future Burbank students.

Ferlazzo – a self-proclaimed skeptic of the use of technology in education – said he saw another added benefit. While varying levels of English literacy can create tension within immigrant families, the computer, he hoped, would bring families together.

"If we're serious with the long-term success of students, we've got to be serious with the long-term success of families," Ferlazzo said. "Burbank's only as strong as the community in which we're located."

School administrators gave Ferlazzo some spare computers that otherwise would have been thrown away. He sat down with families and developed an accountability system that requires 80 percent of the family to use the computer at least one hour a day.

Some of the Web sites Ferlazzo recommends require users to log in and out, allowing one way for Ferlazzo to verify the amount of use. Otherwise, he requires families to keep logs. They also must accept responsibility for damage done to any of the computers.

Several students didn't want to fulfill their end of the bargain and returned the computers. All have since had a change of heart.

"English is the language of power in our society, and it's the language of success," Ferlazzo said. "People want that."

Initial results appear to show progress. Ferlazzo has tested students who have computers at home and compared the results to control groups of non-native speakers without computers. The students have shown growth in comprehension, grammar and reading fluency - sometimes exhibiting three times the growth of the control group, even when Ferlazzo gave the students tougher tests.

Ferlazzo's work has gained him worldwide recognition. He tracks visits to his Web site and sees daily visitors from around the globe. One such regular is Peter Graney, a middle school teacher in Rotorua, New Zealand.

Contacted via e-mail, Graney said he uses Ferlazzo's Web site daily in teaching his immigrant students. He described Ferlazzo as his "right-hand man."

"Larry Ferlazzo has a passion for helping students learn using technology," Graney wrote. "I often think of Larry and how his great effort has made my life easier. Doesn't seem fair in some ways."

The work also has won Ferlazzo some professional acclaim. Among other awards, the home computer project was named the grand prize winner of the International Reading Association Presidential Award for Reading and Technology last spring.

Some of the rewards, however, are intangible. Families tell Ferlazzo the computers have provided immeasurable benefit. Students say they are more confident in their English - so much so that some attempt interviews without the help of translators.

"We're in America and we have to speak English," said 15-year-old Atotak Atti, who moved from the Marshall Islands to get a better education in the United States. "If I take the exit exam (to graduate from high school), I have to know how to write English." Atti and others spoke - in English - of big aspirations: getting a diploma, going to college, getting a job and functioning in American society. A few students have hopes for their families, too.

Kenia Sandoval, whose family immigrated from Honduras, taught her father how to access Ferlazzo's Web site. He can speak English, Sandoval said, but needs to learn to read and write so he can fulfill his goal of starting his own pool construction business. "I really like that his dream come true," Sandoval said.

She and two of her friends recently recalled how difficult their first few days were in the United States, without the words to navigate life in their new home. Today, they say they are grateful for the opportunities Ferlazzo has given them inside and outside the classroom.

"He's amazing," Sandoval said, as her friends nodded. "He always has helped us. Every single day."