



THE HERALD-SUN | MARY CATHERINE PENN

Chir Htoo follows along during an English as a Second Language lecture on Pinocchio at Carrboro High School on Monday.

LEARNING THE LANGUAGE

Newcomer Center gets students ready for regular school

BY LAUREN RATCLIFFE
chh@heraldsun.com, 918-1035

CHAPEL HILL — English as a Second Language classrooms in the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools system are seeing the impact of the Newcomer Center, which opened last year.

The center, a two-trailer classroom at Chapel Hill High School, teaches students with interrupted formal education

who have resided in the United States less than two years. Its teachers devote themselves to teaching the basics of reading and structured education, and they prepare students to enter a more traditional setting.

The 35 students, mostly Burmese refugees, who went through the center last year are now dispersed among the district's middle and high schools and enrolled in ESL courses. Most students will only spend one year in the center to prepare for the regular classroom.

This year's enrollment is

HOW TO HELP

If you would like to help all the center's students and their families with donations of school supplies, clothing or other goods, contact Gloria Sanchez-Lane, school social worker, at (919) 929-2106, ext. 1278.

down from last year. After all preliminary testing is completed, 25 students or so are expected to be receiving instruction in the center.

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ENGLISH

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Laura Campagna, an ESL teacher at Carrboro High School, worked with 25 refugee students in 2007. Having the Newcomer Center open in September 2008 to teach the second wave of refugee students, she said, was invaluable.

"I don't know how it would have worked had 30 more [students] come into our school not ready to read," Campagna said.

Teaching the newest students is a challenge because each comes with

his or her own strengths, weaknesses and educational lapses.

"Making up for six, seven, eight years of missing education in one year is impossible," said Mimi Collins, ESL Newcomer Center Middle School teacher, "but we're trying to get them closer to where they can go back to a school and succeed with support of the ESL teachers."

Collins works creatively to catch her students up by giving them cultural experiences to help them understand the things they read. Last year, she organized

many activities such as trips to the planetarium, pumpkin patches with hayrides, Thanksgiving dinner and an American birthday party.

"That's how you become successful at reading," she said. "You have to know the cultural connections."

As for her students, Collins said, "they know it in their bones."

Collins recalled a volunteer who read a story about Clifford, the big red dog, going to a birthday party. She excitedly said that the student knew pin the tail on the donkey, because of the birthday

party experience.

The students, too, remember and are thankful for the extra effort.

Chir Htoo, 16, spent last year in the Newcomer Center. It was his first in the United States. This year, he sits in Campagna's ESL class and actively participates. He smiles as he chats with friends in Burmese and grows excited when he finishes an assignment. While he still struggles with his English, he constantly improves.

"Last year I didn't speak any English," he said. "This year I speak a little bit."

The Newcomer Center does far more than just teach culture and English. It teaches social norms, gives goods like clothing and supplies to students and helps them get caught up on immunizations and vaccinations.

Jose Nambo, ESL/Dual Language Coordinator for CHCCS, has high hopes for the future of the center.

"One of the things that we've talked about is greater integration in the school setting," he said, "to make sure that these students are included in more activities."