

Hello again and welcome back. This is As It Is, from VOA Learning English. I'm June Simms.

Millions of people around the world want to learn American English. In recent years, more and more people have set out to learn not just the standard language of the United States, but its informal speech as well. Today, we hear about slang and "street talk" coming up later in the show.

But first, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development released its latest report on the state of education around the world. Faith Lapidus has the story.

Asian Countries Top International School Test

The Program for International Student Assessment tested students in 65 countries on three subjects: mathematics, reading and science.

Asian countries outperformed the rest of the world in math. The United States had below average test scores, with no change from earlier tests.

In fact, the 15-year-olds from Shanghai rated at a level of two and one-half years of schooling above the top students in the United States.

The highest math scores were in Shanghai, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taipei, and South Korea. The next five were Macao, Japan, Liechtenstein, Belgium and Switzerland. Organizers say the higher scores resulted from parental involvement, better teachers and higher expectations.

Jenny Jung has attended schools in South Korea and the United States. She says her classes in South Korea lasted from 8 o'clock in the morning until 10 at night. Then she often met with a teacher for a private lesson.

"It's very competitive there because it's a relative grading system. So instead of like here, it's an absolute grading system, where if you get over a 90, you get an A. If you get over an 80, you get a B. But in Korea, only like the top percentages can get an A."

In the new report, the U.S. rated below average in math, and close to average in reading and science.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan says he wants to increase early childhood education and get more high quality teachers.

"Virtually every one of the high performing nations attracts their teachers from the top 30 percent of the college graduating class and many only from the top 10 percent."

Mr. Duncan has called on policy makers to make the right choices.

“We know intellectually what the right thing is to do. What we have lacked is the political will and the sense of urgency to take education to the next level.”

But the study shows money might not be the only answer. The US spends about \$115,000 to educate each child. That is more than most countries. The Slovak Republic spends less than half that amount, but it and the US had similar test scores.

Angel Gurría is the secretary general of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. He warns the United States of what might happen if the scores do not rise.

“It shows that we have a lot of homework. It shows that somebody else is doing much better than us and if this continues, over the years, they are going to take away our cheese. Because this translates into productivity, it translates into competitiveness, it translates into exports, it translates into jobs, it translates into well-being. So this is not about just comparing the grades of students.”

Some observers have criticized the study for comparing small areas of the world to large countries. They also say the test lacks an examination of creative or critical thinking.

The one area in which U.S. students rated highest was confidence in their math abilities. The job now for educators is to make those feelings carry over into test scores. I'm Faith Lapidus.

And I'm June Simms. You are listening to As It Is from VOA Learning English.

Demand Grows for Classes in English Slang

Many people who learn English as a second language think they have a good understanding of it, that is, until they watch an American TV show or speak to someone from the United States. Then they realize there is a lot they do not understand. Some are coming to the United States to learn American slang, which is rarely taught in textbooks back home.

Most people come to Venice Beach in California seeking sun and entertainment. But, for Hussain al Shahri of Saudi Arabia and his classmates, the beach is a classroom. Their teachers are strangers they meet on the beach.

"I have an assignment to talk with people, native speakers like you, to know and to learn how the people in public or on the street talk. So I want to ask you about a couple of words, if you do not have a problem to answer me what does it mean in slang."

Al Shahri is taking a class on American “street talk” and slang at the University of California Los Angeles. Field trips like this one, combined with classroom discussions, make up most of his learning experience.

“If you want to know this culture, you have to communicate with people and socialize. So slang language is the only way to communicate and socialize with people.”

Knowing the culture also means learning from American media, says “Street Talk” instructor Ryan Finnegan.

“American movies are global and American music. So they hear these words, and they hear them used a lot, and they see maybe people laughing at those words, and they want to understand what’s funny about that.”

Ryan Finnegan uses TV shows to teach his students slang. Student Zhang Jiu Hua says the English she learned in China was very different.

“It makes my English style more academic and formal and a little bit stiff. I don’t want to be that way.”

Zhang says she is now able to speak more casually and use humor with American slang and idioms. She is also learning about differences between Chinese and American culture.

“There is a slang I love: ‘drop dead gorgeous.’ In my culture, I still remember when I was a child my parents told me ‘don’t use dead. It’s very rude and unlucky.’ And when I say that word ‘drop dead gorgeous,’ I’m curious. Can I use that? Actually I love that word.”

Finnegan says there are some issues to teaching slang.

“Slang is extremely regional and extremely dynamic. So the slang from even one year ago is different from the slang of right now.”

Judy Tanka develops learning plans at UCLA Extension’s American Language Center. She says instructional materials need to improve as demand for slang and idiom classes grows.

“A lot of materials get outdated very quickly and it’s very expensive to republish books frequently with updates, and this is why online materials will be very popular.”

With a working knowledge of American slang, Zhang Jiu Hua will return to China and use what she has learned in her career. Hussain al Shahri will be better able to fit into American life as he continues his education in the United States.

That is As It Is. I’m June Simms.



Have a question or comment about this show? We would love to hear from you. Email us at learningenglish@voanews.com.

VOA world news is coming up at the beginning of the hour, Universal Time.