

Social Studies for English Language Learners: Teaching Social Studies that Matters

Bárbara C. Cruz and Stephen J. Thornton

In recent years the number of school-age English language learners (ELLs) in the United States has grown rapidly and by some counts the total is now approaching 15 million. Generally, ELLs are mainstreamed in classes with their English-speaking peers, social studies often being one of the first classes into which they are placed. Although fragments of help have begun to appear in recent years, such as a page or two in the class text's teacher's guide, most social studies teachers have been ill-prepared to teach students who are not proficient in English.

This problem can be exacerbated since guidance to teachers has often been centered on the comprehension of factual knowledge. While teachers want their students to comprehend facts, learning objectives certainly don't end there. So, in addition to the instructional challenges posed by mainstreaming ELLs, we need to be watchful that suggested methods include complex subject matter.

This article outlines selected findings on English language learning and their implications for teaching social studies that matters. Although the body of potentially relevant research on teaching ELLs has grown in recent years, its application to social studies instruction has not kept pace.

Language Learning Relevant to Social Studies

There is no one way to think about language learning applicable to social studies. But we have found four aspects of it especially relevant to secondary school social studies.

Vocabulary and Language Skills Development

Opportunities for language use are critical for ELLs. Social studies teachers, however, generally prioritize imparting content rather than opening up opportunities to explore content through language use.¹ ELLs particularly profit from “comprehensible input” that is just beyond their current level of competence and from opportunities to provide “output” for meaningful purposes.² This suggests that instruction for ELLs requires attention to learning through language; this should not be regarded as a distraction but rather as a necessary element of teaching social studies.

Using language improves ELLs' language acquisition and content mastery. Content-relevant language should be emphasized. While this may sound a truism, ELLs receive few opportunities for extended language use in many classrooms.³ Limited opportunities to engage in student-talk can be the result of teachers wanting to protect their ELL

students from embarrassment, refraining from asking them difficult questions or even completing the students' answers for them.⁴ But by shielding ELLs from potentially awkward situations, teachers inadvertently create impediments to both language development and the acquisition of content knowledge.

Effective instruction also entails using multiple cues and tangible ways of presenting subject matter.⁵ For example, teachers should make special efforts to link written and oral language, create opportunities for student-talk, establish listening centers, and engage in descriptive storytelling.⁶ Classroom instruction can be further enhanced by a variety of graphics, objects, and demonstrations (see “Making Text in English more Comprehensible,” below).

Promoting Interactive Learning between ELLs and English-speaking Students

Student interaction, whether via class discussion, small groups, learning, peer teaching, or group projects, can improve academic achievement. In addition, it can be an important way to include ELLs as full participants—rather than as passive observers—in classroom activities.⁷ As with other young people, a sense of belonging is significant to ELLs.

Making Text in English more

Comprehensible

Social studies resources specially developed with an eye for language development are helpful for ELLs. They should include pre-reading activities, modified reading passages, and visual representations of social studies content. Brown outlines further strategies for making standard social studies texts more comprehensible for ELLs, including content maps, outlines, and using guiding questions.⁸

Graphs, realia, tables, maps, globes, flow charts, timelines, and Venn diagrams can all be used to help students situate information in a comprehensible context. The use of historical photographs holds great potential for developing ELLs' historical thinking with low demand on language skills.⁹ The same holds true, we believe, for demonstrations and hands-on materials such as realia.¹⁰

Accommodating a Variety of Learning Styles

Just as with English-speaking students, the learning styles of ELLs differ in the preferred form of representation through which they learn and come to express what they know. For example, visual and auditory learners might utilize media such as music, recorded speeches, and historical photographs. Photographs may be particularly effective partly because the individual learner can take as much time as needed for the learning task. Moreover, photographs and illustrations can be used in a number of ways such as bases for discussion, writing, and comparative analysis.¹¹ Listening to recorded speeches has the same virtue as looking at photographs: the student can do it at his or her own preferred pace, and repeat the process as many times as desired. Many speeches will be in sophisticated language so, as with passages from the textbook, teachers can record versions that retain the concepts but simplify the English.

When taken *in toto*, these four aspects point toward a sheltered instruction approach to teaching the social stud-

ies.¹² This holistic strategy entails making the grade-level academic content and instruction in English accessible to ELLs by using comprehensible language, input, scaffolding, and other contextual support.¹³ We believe that emphasis should be placed on “comprehensible input,” that is, creating structured learning environments in which material is presented and supported by contextual clues along with language and curricular modifications (e.g., using shorter sentences, simplified language when appropriate, specialized resources).¹⁴

Applying ELL Learning Principles to Social Studies Instruction

To provide a concrete vision of how the four principles outlined above can be specifically applied to the social studies, we offer here some ideas for teaching NCSS themes. Intriguingly, we have found that planning for ELL instruction made us analyze more deeply what we really wanted students to learn. In turn, this analysis seems to have spontaneously led us to learning objectives that cross thematic boundaries. This should be evident in the activities that follow which demonstrate, for example, rich connections between the theme of **TIME, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE** ① and the theme of **PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS** ③.¹⁵ Modifications would need to be made to these activities depending on the level of language proficiency of the ELLs in your classroom. These suggestions are meant as jumping-off points for the teacher wishing to explore ways of effectively teaching social studies to all learners.

Comparing Native American Cultures (grades 4-10)

Working in dyads and using both pictures and text (simplified for ELLs), have students construct a data retrieval chart comparing two or more Native American groups (e.g., the Plains Indians and the Southwestern Indians of the Great Basin, c. 1800). The chart should con-

tain categories such as food sources, water sources, shelter, transport, artistic expression, and women's roles. Students can access information and images by visiting online encyclopedias (e.g., www.britannica.com; www.encyclopedia.com; www.worldbookonline.com) in addition to consulting classroom resources.

Expansion of the United States (grades 4-10)

Provide students with colored pencils and an outline map of the area covered by the U.S. today. By using their class textbook, an atlas, or other resource, have students divide their map into the parts by which it was acquired (i.e., the U.S. at the time of the Treaty of Paris, 1783; the Louisiana Purchase, 1803; and so forth through to the annexation of Hawaii). Students should develop a key to identify each region. Working in small groups, students should also construct a timeline that includes the territorial issues at stake and which foreign power was involved with each new region (e.g., 1783, peace treaty with Britain following the Revolution). One possibility is to have students pictorially use flags to represent the countries under study. Have ELLs work in pairs with their English-speaking counterparts and provide scaffolding as needed.

Identity and Coming of Age (grades 6-12)

In all cultures, children set out on a path to adulthood. Although this process is universal, the ways in which it occurs varies across cultures; when adulthood commences is also culture-bound. The teacher will begin this exercise by showing images of a child, an adolescent, an adult, and a senior citizen from the local area. Then students will be asked to locate images of infants, children, adolescents, adults, and elders in three diverse cultures in different parts of the globe. They will compare and contrast images to see what can be learned from dress, demeanor, physical setting, relationships to others, and the like that is

revealing of what changes as individuals in particular cultures come of age. The students will be asked to cut and paste these images into one document, study the images, and form generalizations about each culture, noting similarities and differences across cultures.

Note: If you have access to computer technology, students can locate images using a search engine such as Google Images. If computer technology is not available, however, many teachers can lead successful lessons using back issues of National Geographic magazine or similar print journals.

Farm Security Administration Camp for Migratory Workers (grades 6-10)

During the Great Depression hundreds of thousands fled the Dustbowl on the Great Plains. Sometimes called “Okies” because so many of them came from Oklahoma, they generally headed west, with California being the main destination.

Using images of the Dustbowl, have students consider how many people ended up as migratory workers in the West.¹⁶ After placing them in small groups (mixing ELLs and English-speaking students), ask students to point out and name what they can tell about migratory workers from the photographs. This visual analysis can also be extended with learning activities such as a timeline, maps, and the construction of a word wall. For “pre-verbal” ELL students, teachers should label the photos with simple terms, dates, and locations, thus building vocabulary and aiding comprehension.

Global Airline Routes (grades 9-12)

This small group activity is best done with a decent-sized globe but could also be done with a software program. Students also need to have available for reference a Mercator projection map of the world. Provide the students with commercial airline route maps for at least three major international airlines, which can be found on airline websites (e.g., United, British Airways, Japan Airlines). Have students hypothesize which city-to-city destinations might be among the most traveled

Establishment of rural rehabilitation camps for migrants in California. March 15, 1935. (Photographer Dorothea Lange).

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

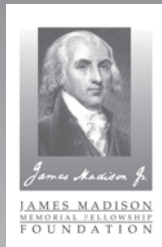


long-haul routes in the world from a U.S. origin (e.g., New York to Tokyo). Have students compare the distances between cities using both the globe and the map. Encourage small group discussion of how map projections might distort our conceptions of travel routes and distances as well as the relative sizes of world regions. Extension activities can also be devised from the imagery and maps located on Google Earth (<http://earth.google.com>).

Inventions and Their Impact on Society (grades 5-10)

Have available print materials that can be cut apart by students (e.g., magazines, catalogs, or brochures). Instruct students to look through the print resources and cut out three or more machines, technologies, or medical advances that they can find represented by images. (You may

wish to explain the activity by demonstrating with items you found previously, e.g., automobiles, aspirin, computer, or radio.) Direct them to glue these onto a sheet of paper or poster board and consider some of these questions, simplifying for ELLs as necessary: How is your daily life connected with the inventions? How have the technologies changed over time? How have humans used certain technologies to modify our physical environment? Can you think of ways that inventions have changed the course of history? Allow students to view other classmates’ work and lead a whole-class discussion on the impact of science and technology on society. As an extension activity, allow students to select an invention of personal interest to them, have them conduct research on it, allow them to create poster presentations on the



JAMES MADISON
GRADUATE FELLOWSHIPS
AVAILABLE UP TO
\$24,000

Available to secondary school teachers of American history, American government or social studies to undertake a master's degree program emphasizing the roots, principles, framing and development of the U.S. Constitution.

Fellowships pay the actual cost of tuition, fees, books, and room and board.

For information and to download an application, visit

www.jamesmadison.gov

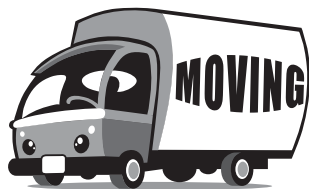
General inquiries can be sent to madison@act.org, or call, 1-800-525-6928

James Madison Memorial Fellowship Foundation

MOVING? Take NCSS With You!

Be sure to notify us in advance so we can be sure your publications follow you! Send us your change of address to NCSS Membership, 8555 Sixteenth Street, Suite 500, Silver Spring, MD 20910.

Or e-mail us with your name, member number, and new address at membership@ncss.org.



historical development of the invention, and consider the future of their selected invention. The posters can then be set up in a walking gallery so the students can learn from one another.

Being a "Good" Citizen (grades 3-12)

To prepare for this lesson, teachers need to cull images of citizens engaged in their communities (local, national, and world). Suggestions include clubs adopting a stretch of road to clean and maintain, citizens testifying at a county commission meeting, a peaceful demonstration in front of the White House, or concerned citizens beseeching their governments in a number of countries. Project the images so that students can consider each one, ascertaining the civic work each image represents. Ask students to consider what being a "good" citizen entails (suggested questions: What responsibilities do all citizens have? What does a citizen's role entail as a member of the local community? The nation? The world community? What happens when citizens do not honor their responsibilities? How do citizens' responsibilities balance with the rights all citizens should have?). As a follow-up activity, have students research youth civic groups or projects in their communities.

Conclusion

Teaching social studies that matters to English language learners is an achievable goal. While we have no illusions of having presented a pat solution to the challenge, we do hope that this piece can serve as a springboard for educators to consider ways of meeting the unique linguistic needs of ELLs while promoting a social studies education that is of worth and value for the next generation of citizens. 🌐

Notes

1. Deborah J. Short, "Language Learning in Sheltered Social Studies Classes," *TESOL Journal* 11, no. 1 (2002): 18-24.
2. Tamara Lucas, Ana María Villegas, Margaret Freedson-Gonzalez, "Linguistically Responsive Teacher Education: Preparing Classroom Teachers to Teach English Language Learners," *Journal of Teacher Education* 59, no. 4 (2008): 361-373.

3. Diane Truscott and Susan Watts-Taffe, "Literacy Instruction for Second-Language Learners: A Study of Best Practices," *National Reading Conference Yearbook* 47 (1998): 242-252.
4. Lorrie Stoops Verplaetse, "How Content Teachers Interact with English Language Learners," *TESOL Journal* 7, no. 1 (1998): 24-28.
5. Truscott and Watts-Taffe, "Using What We Know about Language and Literacy Development for ESL Students in the Mainstream Classroom," *Language Arts* 77, no. 3 (2000): 258-265.
6. Bárbara C. Cruz and Stephen J. Thornton, *Teaching Social Studies to English Language Learners* (New York: Routledge Publishers, 2009).
7. Cruz and Thornton, "Social Studies for All: ESOL Strategies for the Elementary Classroom," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 21, no. 2 (Nov/Dec 2008): 11-16.
8. C.L. Brown, "Specific Strategies for Making Social Studies Texts More Comprehensible for English Language Learners," *The Social Studies* 98, no. 5 (2007): 185-188.
9. For example, see Cinthia Salinas, María E. Fránquiz, and Steve Guberman, "Introducing Historical Thinking to Second Language Learners: Exploring What Students Know and What They Want to Know," *The Social Studies* 97, no. 5 (2006), 203-207.
10. Short, "Language Learning in Sheltered Social Studies Classes."
11. Karen H. Wilkins, Caroline C. Sheffield, Martha B. Ford, and Bárbara C. Cruz, "Images of Struggle and Triumph: Using Picture Books to Teach about the Civil Rights Movement in the Secondary Classroom," *Social Education* 72, no. 4 (2008): 177-180.
12. Evelyn Marino Weisman and Laurie E. Hansen, "Strategies for Teaching Social Studies to English Language Learners at the Elementary Level," *The Social Studies* 98, no. 5 (2007): 180-184.
13. Jana Echevarria, MaryEllen Vogt, and Deborah J. Short, *Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP Model* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000).
14. Stephen D. Krashen, *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Laredo Publishing Company, 1985).
15. See Thornton, "Geography in American History Courses," *Phi Delta Kappan* 88, no. 7 (2007): 535-538.
16. The Library of Congress has a collection of 79 photographic prints that are useful for this exercise. Taken in Shafter, California, between 1935 and 1940 by Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein, they chronicle life in a Farm Security Administration camp for migratory workers. In addition to views of the tent camp, clinic, and utility buildings, images include a nursery school, bulletin boards, a baseball game, a Halloween party, and a playground.

To access these images, go to the Prints & Photographs Online searchable catalog <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pp/lsaquery.html> and enter "Shafter, California" in the search field.

BÁRBARA C. CRUZ is professor of social science education at the University of South Florida in Tampa. She can be reached at cruz@tempest.coedu.usf.edu. **STEPHEN J. THORNTON** is professor and chair of the Department of Secondary Education at the University of South Florida. He can be reached at thornton@coedu.usf.edu.