Preparing an Engaging Social Studies Lesson for English Language Learners

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This article will describe some strategies for planning social studies lessons with ELLs in mind, with a particular emphasis on building background knowledge.

Video bonus: See Kristina's colleague Amber Prentice discuss considerations for planning a Social Studies lesson for ELLs (/article/preparing-engaging-social-studies-lesson-english-language-learners#video).

Instruction begins when you, the teacher, learn from the learner; put yourself in his place so that you may understand...what he learns and the way he understands it.
— Soren Kierkegaard

Consider the following scenario:

A fifth-grade teacher was preparing her class to learn about the American Revolution. She enlisted the students' help in acting out the events that led to the Revolution with elaborate props and exercises. When the class ended, the students were told they would read more about the Revolution the following day. As they left the room, an ESL student stopped and asked urgently, "But who won?"

This situation highlights some of the challenges that teachers face when helping English language learners, or ELLs, master social studies content:

- **Background knowledge**
  ELLs may not have the same background knowledge that their peers have or that textbook authors take for granted, as explained in [this video clip](/article/35950#video) with ELL teacher Amber Prentice.
● **Different perspectives**  
ELLs bring their own valuable and important experiences to the classroom. Often those experiences can be connected to the content in meaningful ways; however, if different points of view or ideas aren't expressed or identified, students may miss key concepts and ideas in the lesson.

● **Academic language and vocabulary**  
ELLs must learn the academic language and vocabulary needed to comprehend and produce new content — all while learning the new content and concepts at the same time!

For content-area teachers with limited experience working with ELLs, planning a lesson that engages them and helps them learn new material may seem daunting. The good news is that there are a number of ways to engage ELLs with social studies content and draw on their own unique background knowledge and perspectives. This article will describe some strategies for planning social studies lessons with ELLs in mind.

In addition, I recommend taking a look at the following resources:

**Note:** [Lesson Planning to Ensure Optimal Engagement of ELLs](http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/109032/chapters/Lesson_Planning_to_E) (Chapter 2 of Teaching English Language Learners Across the Content Areas), is available online and provides a number of helpful resources, including a checklist for modifying lesson plans for ELLs. In addition, Appendix Two of the book (not available online) provides a lesson modification worksheet.

### Lesson Planning Strategies

#### Identify key concepts necessary for understanding the lesson

When choosing your key concepts, keep in mind the following:

- **Background knowledge**  
  ELLs with limited or interrupted schooling may not have that same level of knowledge as their peers, especially when it comes to historical or cultural topics. When starting a new lesson, look for references or concepts that may need to be explicitly explained.

- **Language proficiency**  
  Students may already possess content knowledge that they cannot yet demonstrate in English. Look for opportunities to make associations between students' experiences and new content. ([article/connect-students-background-knowledge-content-ell-classroom](http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/109032/chapters/Lesson_Planning_to_E)).

- **Perspective**  
  Students may have a different perspective on the content than their peers. These differences provide an important opportunity for class discussion and learning as long as they are handled in a sensitive and respectful ways.
In addition, plan to find out what students know about the topic you are teaching before getting started. This will help you fill in gaps and build on prior knowledge. A great tool for this activity is a Circle Map (https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/circle-maps-nea), in which you place the main topic in a small circle and add student ideas in a bigger circle around the topic. You may wish to allow ELLs to use their native language with peers for a quick brainstorm before presenting their ideas to the whole class.

**Identify content and language objectives**

These objectives are a great way to focus on the most important information and language structures you want your students to master. **Content objectives** focus on the material while **language objectives** focus on vocabulary or language structures that students should be able to use throughout the lesson (Haynes and Zacarian, 28).

Think about how you are going to:

- introduce these concepts using simple language,
- break the concepts down into the most basic elements,
- keep the objectives visible to students during the unit (i.e., post them on the board or provide a simple outline to keep in binders).

**Identify key vocabulary and academic vocabulary**

Identify key terms, words, idioms and phrases — TWIPS, according to Dr. Zacarian (19). Choose the vocabulary (/article/selecting-vocabulary-words-teach-english-language-learners) that your students need to know in order to support their reading development and content-area learning, in addition to key content vocabulary. Remember to prepare student-friendly definitions for TWIPS ahead of time. It may be helpful to look at other social studies vocabulary lists as well.

In addition:

- **Look for problem areas**
  Clarify potential areas of confusion, such as homonyms or words with more than one meaning.

- **Include signal and directional words**
  Remember that students may also need explicit instruction in signal or directional words ("because" and "explain"), especially those words that are likely to appear frequently in the content materials or activities.

- **Don’t overlook the basic words**
  There may be many words used through a lesson that native English-speaking students will understand but that ELLs don't know. Keep an eye out for these words, no matter how basic, and make a list of words that your students have questions about so that you can refer back to it when teaching the lesson in the future.

- **Use visuals and manipulatives when possible**
  Having a visual reference for new words is particularly helpful for ELLs.
• Keep words visible and accessible to students
  Post words on a word wall, or try using a "portable word wall" chart that students can put in their binder. The chart might include categories such as new words, old words, people, everyday words, words to review, etc. (Haynes and Zacarian, 59-60).

• Remember to include lots of student practice
  For students to really know a word, they must use it — or they will lose it. Use new words in class discussions or outside of class in other contexts if appropriate, such as on field trips. Give the students as many opportunities to use and master the new vocabulary as possible. You may find this [six-step process](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept09/vol67/num01/Six-Steps-to-Better-Vocabulary-Instruction.aspx) for teaching academic vocabulary from Dr. Robert Marzano helpful.

Prepare to preview the text

One strategy is a "chapter walk" ([classroom-video/chapter-walk-me](/classroom-video/chapter-walk-me)), where students predict what the chapter will be about based on pictures and highlighted features of the textbook.

An activity like this may take some time at first because it's time-consuming to teach. If you use it with regularity, however, it will become easier and quicker, and students will be able to do this on their own at the beginning of a new chapter.
You can also use the ["BIG FOX" strategy](http://www.helpforlearning.org/C/Expository/BIG_FOX_graphic_organizer.pdf), published by McGraw-Hill. This graphic organizer helps students pick out important terms and pieces of information before reading. I recommend practicing this strategy with some simple readings about familiar topics before jumping in with the textbook. The students will understand the strategy better if they start out with concepts that they understand.

Prepare multimedia, visuals, and related readings

These resources can be used to build background knowledge and provide context for ELLs, especially when students are learning new concepts and words. Ideas include:

• Using photos from books, magazines, or the Internet to supplement textbooks.
• Showing brief, focused video clips of history or social studies programs.
• Listening to a short podcast or radio clip of an interview or speech.
• Discussing additional readings such as related articles, poems, letters, and graphic novels.

Enlist native language support when possible

These strategies can help students identify content they already know, or master new concepts before transferring those ideas and learning how to express them in English:
• Collaborate with a bilingual paraprofessional and identify areas where bilingual language support will be most helpful.

• Look for related content materials in the students' native language from publishers like Scholastic (http://classroommagazines.scholastic.com/category/subject/spanish) or National Geographic/Cengage (http://ngl.cengage.com/).

• Plan group work in which students can use their native language with peers to discuss main ideas or vocabulary words.

Plan to include group work throughout the unit

Peer learning activities such as Reciprocal Teaching (http://www.readingquest.org/strat/rt.html) and Think-Pair-Share (/article/increase-student-interaction-think-pair-shares-and-circle-chats) can be powerful tools for engaging ELLs with content learning. Make sure students understand their role in group work, the objective of the activity, and any key vocabulary or phrases they should be using in their discussion.

Here are some other tips on group work for ELLs from Haynes and Zacarian:

• Assign students group roles that match their language ability (37).
• Promote students to new roles as their language skills improve (42).
• Make sure that mainstream students understand that they will be working in diverse groups, and that everyone's contributions are important (41).
• Keep an eye on the balance of student participation; if some students are speaking more than others, ask them to think of some ways to even participation out (42).
• Ask students to reflect on their group work after they have finished an activity. Haynes and Zacarian include a chart in their book with some guiding statements for student reflection (48).

Plan plenty of opportunities for students to interact with the content

Give students lots of opportunities to engage with and review the material in different ways:

• **Graphic organizers**
  Use graphic organizers (/article/13354) (/article/using-graphic-organizers-ells) to review key concepts and vocabulary words.

• **Flash cards**
  Have students make their own flash cards with pictures, definitions, key facts, etc.

• **Working with the text**
  Teach students to underline, highlight, and make notes. You may also find that sticky notes, Wikki Stix, and highlighting tape are a big hit with students (68). According to Haynes, some school districts order extra textbooks for their ELL classes so that teachers can keep a highlighted copy on hand as a student reference.

• **Use acting**
Have the students write skits about the material they are learning, or create an activity in which students provide a physical representation of a particular event or vocabulary word.

**Be creative and flexible with writing assignments**

Writing can be an important way for students to show what they've learned:

- **Be creative and flexible**
  When choosing writing activities for students, be creative and open to different ways for students to express their new knowledge. I have seen students successfully convey what they learned by writing letters, poems, news articles and mosaics with vocabulary key points. Writing an essay may be more difficult for ELLs, and although they need to learn how to write a good essay eventually, they should be allowed to demonstrate their learning through a variety of writing activities.

- **Look for writing exercises that relate to the topic at hand**
  This may include a biography or autobiography, a letter from the point of view of a historical figure, or a short news article about a famous event.

- **Provide models**
  Give ELLs explicit structures and sentence frames (http://ezinearticles.com/?Building-Background---Benefits-of-Using-Sentence-Frames-to-Build-Background-Knowledge&id=881703) to follow. Frames may vary in complexity and specificity, but they will help students to model correct structures and usage from the beginning.

**Plan to adapt homework and assessment as needed**

While it's important to have high expectations of ELLs, it is also important to have realistic expectations of the amount of work they can do. Haynes and Zacarian note, "The teacher's goal should be to making learning accessible and meaningful for every student without lowering expectations or sacrificing rigor" (104-105).

They continue in Chapter 7 of their book to provide a number of helpful rubrics and step-by-step procedures for evaluating your homework and assessment activities with ELLs in mind. In Twenty-Five Quick Tips for Classroom Teachers (http://www.everythings esl.net/inservices/twenty_five_quick_tips_classro_70733). Haynes suggests that teachers "adjust homework assignment to your ELLs' English language proficiency (and) modify assessment so that your ELLs have an opportunity to show what they have learned."

As you look for ways to help your students learn this new content, remember that you aren't just teaching them required social studies standards — you are helping your students adjust to a new life and country. That preparation has a potentially significant ripple effect because your students may be helping their own parents navigate this new country as well, and they may need to prepare for a U.S. Citizenship exam one day in the future.

Through social studies lessons, you also can prepare your students to be engaged and well-informed participants in our society and democracy, an opportunity they might not have had
in their own country due to their religion, gender, or ethnicity. When you think about it that way, teaching ELLs to master new social studies content is so much more than adapting a lesson plan — it's a chance to prepare a new generation of young people to lead us into the future.

Amber Prentice: How To Build Social Studies Background Knowledge

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