

## Focus on Social Studies

**Outcome:** In this segment, we will discuss ideas for making the Social Studies curriculum more accessible to English language learners.

A good example of how content standards can incorporate what is known about exemplary instruction for English language learners comes from the national English Language Arts (ELA) standards. Social Studies content is often presented through complex text-based materials, so these guidelines encourage teachers to adopt instructional approaches that help make literary material more comprehensible to their ELL students. They also include strategies that show students how to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate a range of texts.

Demonstrating the use of graphic organizers, for example, helps students visualize and classify content, characters, ideas, plot or theme. Word clusters, semantic maps and webs, storyboards, Venn Diagrams, and similar graphic organizers also allow students to express difficult ideas by expressing abstract information in concrete form. Moreover, teaching and modeling reading strategies encourages students to focus on the ways they get meaning from a text.

### **Give Students Adequate Time to Learn Social Studies Content**

Along with a multicultural, thematic perspective, an effective social studies curriculum would allow students the time to achieve a thorough understanding of key concepts. The ELL student does not have the background knowledge to build on and will not be successful studying a curriculum that covers many concepts in a superficial manner. Less topics studied to a deeper level makes a lasting linguistic and content impact.

### **Link Social Studies Concepts to Prior Knowledge**

Since English language learners may have little prior knowledge about the history and culture of the United States, an alternative approach is to use basic, familiar concepts to gradually develop related ideas that lead into broader social studies topics.

For example, prior to beginning study of the American Civil War, class discussion may center on students' personal experiences and problems with being different. This can be expanded to the notion that differences can lead to conflict.

The logical next step is to expand this understanding into social, political, and economic differences among groups of people, and specifically

between the North and South prior to the Civil War. Finally, the Civil War itself can be introduced within a context made rich by personal stories and broad-based content knowledge. In this way, teachers can utilize students' experiential knowledge by relating it to important social studies concepts and events.

Oral history projects also help students understand that history is composed of stories in which they and their families have participated. Moreover, in working with data obtained from oral histories, students will be engaging in many of the historical thinking skills outlined in the U.S. History standards, such as chronological thinking, describing the past through the perspectives of those who were there, and historical analysis and interpretation.

In addition, interviewing and presenting information to classmates can improve oral proficiency, while translating and transcribing oral interviews into English develops literacy. Using an oral history approach also promotes parental involvement in student learning, native language use in meeting instructional goals, validation of the student's culture and enhancement of self esteem—all critical factors in the academic achievement of English language learners.

### **Accommodate a Variety of Learning Styles**

Another important strategy for social studies teachers working with English language learners is the use of visuals and *realia* that support individual learning styles. Picture sets relating to specific themes are useful for conveying information and inducing critical thinking. Historical artifacts can be used to assess prior knowledge and encourage questions, both of which are integral to the inquiry process. Bringing in artifacts from home also motivates students to use higher order thinking skills to make sense of data, and to generalize about a particular historical period. Once students view history from a more personal perspective, and as a subject relevant to their own lives, they can begin to build concepts of what a particular era means.

### **Use Cooperative Learning Strategies**

Interactive, cooperative learning in social studies instruction offers ELLs the opportunity to communicate their ideas in a supportive setting and to receive instruction from their peers that is adjusted to their language ability. Working in cooperative learning groups also increases the variety of ways information can be presented and related to what is already known. It is important, though, to prevent cooperative learning from degenerating into groups where the best students do all the work, and ELLs are observers rather than participants.

Role-playing is one form of engaging students in cooperative learning. Students might be asked to assume certain historical perspectives and to problem solve from those perspectives. As with more structured cooperative learning activities, role-plays allow students the opportunity to practice a variety of communication skills, such as reporting a group decision or presenting findings to the class.

### **Linking Instruction to Assessment**

Standardized, multiple-choice tests have their own complex structure and vocabulary that create barriers for ELLs. Authentic and meaningful assessment for ELLs will have students performing academic tasks similar to those originally used to teach the material, such as the oral history projects, team tasks and role plays described earlier. .

Along with authenticity, a good assessment plan for ELL students has all or most of the following attributes:

- Assesses both content knowledge and language proficiency
- Uses a variety of measures, e.g., portfolios, observations, anecdotal records, interviews, checklists, and criterion-referenced tests, to measure content knowledge and skills;
- Ensures teacher awareness of the purpose of the assessment, e.g., whether the test is intended to measure verbal or writing skills, language proficiency or content knowledge;
- Takes into account students' backgrounds
- Adds context with visual prompts, questions for small group discussion and individual writing; and activities that mirror learning processes with which students are familiar; and
- Allows extra time to complete or respond to assessment tasks

In summary, appropriate instruction of ELLs in social studies will address these key concepts:

- Cover a few key concepts in depth and give adequate time for understanding
- Link social studies concepts to prior knowledge using students' personal experiences and native language
- Accommodate a variety of learning styles by providing instructor through a range of modalities, such as visual, aural and kinesthetic
- Use cooperative learning strategies to enhance student interaction and peer-instruction
- Link assessment to authentic instruction

Reflection:

Consider a social studies unit you have recently taught or read about. Think about the content. How would you adapt it to make it more accessible for ELLs, using the key messages presented here.