

Making Social Studies Meaningful for ELL Students: Content and Pedagogy in Mainstream Secondary School Classrooms

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Abstract

Content-area instruction for English language learners (ELL) represents a growing area of instructional need in high schools across the United States. This article focuses on the challenges and successes in developing an effective instructional environment for teaching secondary-level social studies curriculum to a sheltered population of ELLs. In the present study, grant funding was provided for a school-university partnership to support content-area teachers' efforts to increase ELL students' comprehension skills. The authors of this paper propose a multi-tiered approach to meeting the needs of English language learners in the mainstream social studies classroom – providing social and cultural supports during the process of acculturation, providing explicit instruction in academic strategies necessary for successful comprehension of in-depth content, and making social studies curriculum more accessible through a range of strategies for reducing cognitive load without reducing content.

Introduction

Content-area instruction for learners of English as a second language represents a growing area of instructional need across the United States (August, 2002; Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix, & Clewell, 2000). Previously, teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) was largely focused in metropolitan regions with high concentrations of immigrant populations. Increasingly, the need for TESOL instruction has become evident in suburban and rural regions as well (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs, 2005).

This article focuses on the challenges in developing an effective instructional environment for teaching secondary-level social studies curriculum to a sheltered population of students who speak English as a second language, in a suburban New York high school. Indeed, social studies instruction for English-language learner (ELL) students presents a second, uniquely embedded challenge – not only are the ELL students learning a new language and culture while in the classroom, they must learn a different interpretation of historical events, develop a different conception of government, and learn a different philosophy of citizenship.

Introduction/Background

Research has repeatedly shown that bilingual education – language and content-area instruction that is conducted in a balanced form in two languages over time – holds the most promise for ELL students (Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2002). Bilingual education allows students to strengthen literacy skills in their native language, and promotes successful transfer of those skills to their second language (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2002; Montecel & Cortez, 2002). However, many school districts are unable or unwilling to develop bilingual education programs, given the need for separate scheduling of classes, adequate instructional space and materials, and most pressing, need for and expense of identifying and maintaining a trained corps of bilingual teachers across all subject areas.

Many school districts today with high ELL student populations instead provide full or partial sheltered-English, content-area instruction across the disciplines (Spaulding, Carolino, & Amen, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Sheltered-English classrooms contain all or predominantly ELL students, often of widely varying language abilities, taking a specific content-area course. In theory, the course is team-taught by a content-area specialist and a TESOL instructor, or the content-area teacher has specific professional training in making content accessible for ELL learners. In practice, however, many content-area teachers are assigned to sheltered-English classrooms with little or no professional development training on how to meet these students' needs (Escort, 2001).

In some cases, ELL students may not have the support of sheltered-English classrooms, and are integrated into mainstream content-area courses with no explicit ELL focus. These students still receive TESOL instruction as part of their regular curriculum, but it is most often divorced from the content-area classes and focuses on general language development and grammar practice. TESOL instructors may be expected to support students' work in the content-area classrooms, but with little professional knowledge of the content in that particular domain.

Challenges for ELL Students in the Mainstream Social Studies Classrooms

The ELL population in mainstream secondary social studies classrooms encounters a number of critical barriers which may impede their citizenship education. Specifically, some of those barriers include the ELL students' lack of prior exposure to elementary-school social studies curriculum, a rudimentary understanding of the cultural context in which social studies knowledge is constructed, and more importantly, their lack of English literacy skills which are vital not only for comprehending social studies material but also for acculturation and socialization in the dominant culture (Haynes, 2005). Teaching ELL students in mainstream high school social studies classrooms poses a challenge to the social studies teachers who derive their content from history, political science, sociology, geography, and economics, each one of which contains its own specialized jargon and concepts rooted in the American culture. ELL students are required to master curriculum

with a high cognitive load, with low-frequency vocabulary terms such as Gutenberg and printing press for ninth grade Global History and Geography and Constitutional Congress for tenth grade U.S. History and Government.

Cultural literacy poses a unique challenge for both teacher and student in the ELL social studies classroom. Teachers may or may not be familiar with the cultures students bring with them to the classroom, and students are often unfamiliar with both the content knowledge and the rituals of their newly adopted culture. Moreover, social studies curriculum is inherently culture specific. In the mainstream social studies courses, ELL students are expected to learn about the society, history, economy, and political system of their newly adopted country. Although it would be erroneous to assume that ELL students have no prior knowledge about the United States, it is apt to think that their experiences with American culture are limited and/or potentially skewed according to the views of their home culture and home educational system.

In addition, learning social studies lessons requires proficiency in reading and writing in English language. Deborah J. Short (1994) suggests that “Social studies is closely bound to literacy skills” (p. 36). Literacy skills for social studies includes reading, writing, speaking, researching, and organizing information in English. The current social studies curriculum, including the New York State Department of Education Standards and the New York State Regents exams, assumes proficiency in English language skills (Short, 1994). But the ELL students are disadvantaged in this essential category. Hence, in the mainstream classrooms they struggle to learn both social studies content as well as English language. They may passively memorize names and facts for the purpose of passing a test, but rote learning contributes little to their intellectual and social growth.

Historically, the goals of social studies have included the teaching and learning of problem solving skills. Such skills presuppose students’ critical and independent thinking. It is possible that the prior educational experiences of ELL students or the cultures of their native countries may not have prepared them for questioning authority, speaking in the classroom without fear of reprisal, and asserting their point of view on controversial issues. Therefore, for cultural reasons or due to lack of verbal skills in English language, they may not express themselves openly or may consider it disrespectful to disagree with authority figures such as school teachers.

Learning abstract concepts in social studies is another challenge for ELL students. The high school social studies curriculum includes political science, American history, geography, global history, and economics (Thornton, 2005, p. 14). Similarly, the National Council for the Social Studies suggests that the social studies draws its content knowledge from the social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities, specifically identifying at least a dozen academic disciplines (NCSS, 1994, p. 3). Each one of these academic disciplines has its own specialized concepts and terminology that students must learn to understand content knowledge. Therefore, high school social studies courses can be intellectually challenging even for English-speaking students. For example, a school course on American government is essentially an introductory course in political science, addressing themes such as the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the structure and functions of government, the

Congress, the Presidency, the Judiciary, federalism, how a bill becomes law, public policy, economic policy, foreign policy, political parties, voting and elections, and the role of the media. Children growing up in American society, in some form, learn about these topics either in the classroom or at home from parents and television. Whether or not American-born children take an interest in learning about government, their early socialization into the civic life of American society give them an advantage over ELL students. In contrast, ELL students entering the U.S. educational system in high school begin to learn the basic facts about American government in their teen years. An additional challenge for ELL students is the fact that they belong to immigrant families that are just beginning to make an entry into the new civic life and culture and may not yet be prepared to provide intellectual support their children need in their social studies assignments.

Finally, social studies teachers with little preparation to teach ELL learners also face unique pedagogical challenges in the classroom. On the one hand, social studies teachers must follow the official curriculum to prepare all students for standardized state tests and to ensure students meet performance expectations. On the other hand, the social studies curriculum for grades 9-12 draws content knowledge from American and global history, political science, sociology, geography, and economics. Each of these specialized disciplines contains abstract concepts which the teacher must explain through a variety of strategies so that ELL students can learn along with their native English-speaking peers. A major challenge for teachers involves the question of balancing two variables: a) time constraint; and b) teaching the scope and sequence in a given time. Having students of varying language abilities in the classroom means that while some students will learn quickly, others will require individualized attention. To facilitate the needs of ELL students in the classroom, it becomes necessary for teachers to create strategies that are democratic, equitable, but are also effective for students with different learning styles and needs.

In view of the above discussion, the authors of this paper propose a multi-tiered approach to meeting the needs of English Language learners in the mainstream social studies classroom – providing social and cultural supports during the process of acculturation, providing explicit instruction in academic strategies necessary for successful comprehension of in-depth content, and making social studies curriculum more accessible through a range of strategies for reducing cognitive load without reducing content. Each of these approaches will be discussed below, along with specific “best practices” used by teachers in this study.

Context for the Study

In the present study, grant funding was provided for a school-university partnership in a suburban metropolis outside of the New York City region, focused on the needs of ELL students in social studies classes. The grant funded faculty working with high school teachers across English literature, mathematics, social studies, and science. This article focuses on the faculty’s work with the social studies teachers. The overall goals of the grant were to support content-area teachers in their efforts to increase ELL students’ skills to comprehend course content and achieve competency in school subjects, through discussions of current research theory and practice, knowledge of content-area teaching

strategies effective for ELL students, and curriculum implementation and/or modification of classroom materials.

The school-university partnership was founded based on the principles of Comer Project (Comer, 2001; Coulter, 1993), in which stakeholders have a direct contribution to the planning and implementation of the curriculum and the professional development of faculty. In understanding the outcomes of the professional development for the social studies teachers in this study, it is important to recognize that the Comer focus of the grant meant that the university professors and high school teachers were expected to work with one another, developing materials and using coaching or modeling strategies in the classroom to bring about effective instructional change. Professional development in this context was not to be considered top-down or imposed by administration.

The philosophical approach to English-language instruction taken in this study stems from the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) – “an instructional model that fosters the school achievement of students who are learning through the medium of a second language” (Chamot, 1995, p. 379). The CALLA model for teaching content to students who speak English as a second language relies on the explicit instruction of learning strategies, alongside content instruction. Students actively construct meaning, through the guidance of the teacher. For instance, social studies students learn how to complete questions for the Regents exams, beginning with a brief lesson on identifying key words in the question itself. In another example, students may learn how to use a glossary at the same time that they are looking up key terms associated with the First Continental Congress.

The school in this study is located in an “urban suburbia,” serving students who come from a low socio-economic status community. Some of the students within this ELL population have experienced interruptions in their formal schooling background in their home countries. Some of these students will represent the first generation in their families to complete a high school degree. These students often lack adult role models in their homes. While the parents of these students seek to be involved in their children’s education, many of them lack English language skills and struggle with multiple full-time jobs in their newly adopted country. They may have little formal academic schooling themselves, and are often unavailable to provide homework support after school hours. These challenges are reflected in the school’s graduation rates and Regents performance data.

The population of students who speak English as a second language has doubled in this region in the past decade. The school district regularly advertises for content-area teachers who speak the native languages of their student population, including Haitian Creole and Spanish, but the competition for such teachers remains high. In this study, two university faculty with expertise in social studies education and TESOL worked with five social studies teachers, across grades ninth through twelfth. One teacher was fluent in Spanish, another teacher was fluent in Haitian Creole, and the remaining teachers had limited to zero knowledge of these languages. One of the five teachers had formal training

in working with students who speak English as a second language, but the remaining teachers had only content-area expertise.

Because the school serves ELL students from multiple language backgrounds, and given scheduling constraints, students were not able to be placed in mono-lingual groups where they could take full advantage of certain teachers' abilities to teach in the students' native languages. Instead, those teachers who had knowledge of one of the students' home languages were able to incorporate brief explanations or provide limited translations of words and phrases. In general, instruction was conducted in English, since most of the social studies classrooms contained ELL students from two or three different language backgrounds.

The initial phases of the grant implementation involved three months of classroom observations, discussions with teachers about their perceptions of ELL students and their knowledge of curriculum modifications and pedagogic strategies for working with ELL students, a review of materials and textbooks used, analysis of the New York State Regents tests (content and format), and a review of student grades and overall academic performance. In addition, the university faculty participated in Social Studies Department meetings, led professional development sessions for the social studies teachers and associated TESOL instructors, and worked one-on-one with the five social studies teachers mentioned above.

In the classroom context, the university faculty and social studies teachers organized field trips for the ELL students and made curricular and pedagogic adaptations which are described in more detail below. Adhering to the principles of the Comer Project, university faculty took care to begin with teachers' current practices and to make suggestions for modifications, all within the framework of respecting the teachers' autonomy in the classroom. The faculty compiled a list of "best practices" observed from teachers in the Social Studies Department; the list was then shared with the Department during a professional development workshop, with the goal of expanding these practices to other teachers' classrooms.

Best Practices in the Sheltered-English, High School Social Studies Classrooms

Best practices for students who speak English as second language can also benefit all students in the mainstream classroom, including those who may have lower reading abilities, learning disabilities, attention-deficit disorders, or other challenges which may affect their comprehension and/or production capabilities in the classroom. The university faculty in this study focused on four broad areas of best practices: the application of the New York State Education Department Social Studies curriculum guidelines and the National Council of Social Studies standards; the development of socially supportive classroom environments; the explicit teaching of academic skills under the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA); and approaches for reducing cognitive load in curriculum materials, combined with strategies for increasing the accessibility of complex content. The classroom application of the NYSED curriculum guidelines and the

NCSS standards will be addressed in a separate paper. The remaining three areas are discussed here; examples of best practices from the teachers' classrooms are also presented.

The Development of Socially Supportive Classroom Environment

Creating a "socially supportive" classroom for ELL learners refers to the development of a learning space in which students can feel comfortable learning both English and social studies content, and can feel comfortable making mistakes in the learning of both. Research shows that recognition of students' home language and home cultures can facilitate students' feelings of connection to the content and sense of belonging to the school community (Crawford, 1999; Ovando & Collier 1998; Torrey, 1983). For individuals coming from diverse backgrounds, this can assist in overcoming the culture shock of entering an environment that may be vastly different from the schools in their home country.

The process of language learning is also a process of learning appropriate cultural values, norms, and beliefs (TESOL, 1997, p. 7). When teachers incorporate aspects of students' home languages and cultures in the classroom, this can ease the transition toward learning the language and culture of the new, adopted culture. For example, one teacher in our study, while she did not speak Spanish, asked students to teach her the correct pronunciation of their names in their native languages. She also learned basic classroom phrases, such as greetings and directives, in Spanish. Another teacher spoke Spanish and English fluently, but also worked with Haitian Creole-speaking students in his classes. This teacher learned basic phrases in Haitian Creole, and often asked students to translate a single key noun or verb in a passage they were reading.

Research has recognized that allowing students to use multiple languages when making sense of new content allows them to strengthen their overall cognitive abilities, as well as their language knowledge and content-specific academic skills (Crawford, 1999). Teachers in our study regularly used cooperative learning groups to support understanding of new content. One teacher created monolingual language groups to allow students to use their native languages, if desired. The end product, a newsprint sheet outlining major cultural shifts during the Renaissance Period, had to be completed in English, but students could use Spanish or Haitian Creole as needed to create the list or to refine it.

The following list summarizes both the suggestions outlined above, as well as additional suggestions for creating a classroom environment that supports students' social learning needs in the ELL context:

- Learn students' given/ethnic names and how to pronounce them correctly
- Learn basic greetings, polite phrases, and important classroom commands in their native language
- Learn as much as possible about their culture, their family history, home life, and socioeconomic status

- Explicitly voice high expectations for all students, and demonstrate willingness to help students overcome language, cultural, socioeconomic, and other barriers to high academic achievement
- Specifically invite students to add comments based on their own cultural background
- Establish cross-cultural groups for specific activities which require the different sub-groups to help each other to see an issue from different cultural perspectives
- Establish monolingual groups which are given specific permission to talk in whatever language they prefer, even though their final work will be in English
- Ask for input from each student; track who has responded to ensure all students have an opportunity.

ELL students must learn “to use English in socially and culturally appropriate ways” in order to be successful in school and in the workplace (TESOL, 1997, p. 9). Creating an environment in the classroom that accepts and utilizes students’ home languages and cultures eases some of the affective tension in learning new norms and new vocabulary. It also fosters greater acceptance of diversity on the part of all students, and can reduce the stigma associated with being a newcomer in the school community.

The Explicit Teaching of Academic Skills under the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA)

As described earlier in the review of the philosophical approach taken in this study toward English-language instruction, CALLA or the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach includes the explicit teaching of academic skills alongside content knowledge. It is often assumed for mainstream, native-English speaking students that they have learned skills such as skimming and scanning, keeping an organized three-ring binder of handouts, or breaking down a task into its constituent parts. It can be helpful to all students if the teacher takes a few extra moments in the lesson to explain the necessary academic strategies appropriate for completing a particular assignment.

For content area teachers not familiar with the CALLA approach, this initially may require teachers to carefully examine the underlying assumptions of each of their lesson plans, in order to identify key learning strategies that students are expected to use. Nearly all teachers in this study used the decoding of words as an explicit strategy for teaching new vocabulary. For ELL students, new vocabulary often included not only content words such as feudalism or patriarchs, but also foundational words such as population, citizenship, or democracy. In order to introduce the term *patriarchs*, one teacher guided students to remove the –s ending and then look for the root word, *patr-*. The teacher asked students to think of other words – in any of the languages they knew – that used this root. Students identified *padre* (father) in Spanish, and were able to make the connection between the cultural generalization of father as leader of the household and the definition of patriarchal as it was being used in the textbook.

Other ideas for teaching academic skills in the mainstream content classroom include the following:

- Give explicit instruction in literacy skills, such as alphabetizing, use of context clues, sentence structure, and vocabulary development
- Teach how to decode new terms – break the word into parts, sound it out, look for root meanings, analyze prefixes/suffixes, consider synonyms and translations, use the word in a sentence, practice the word 3-5 times over next several classes
- Teach how to skim and scan – read titles and subtitles, look for key words in each sentence (how to identify what is a key word), etc.
- Use higher-order thinking questions, e.g., what would happen if...?
- Explicitly teach study skills and test-taking skills.

Once teachers become familiar with identifying the skills they expect students to have, it becomes easier to incorporate mini-lessons in strategies along with content knowledge. This approach supports not only students who speak English as a second language, but also students who come from low-income backgrounds, students who may not have strong academic support in the home, and students who have learning disabilities.

Approaches for Reducing Cognitive Load and Increasing the Accessibility of Complex Content Knowledge

The concept of “reducing cognitive load” often becomes confused with “simplifying material.” The goal of this set of strategies is not to reduce content knowledge to some basic form that leaves out its richness and the nuances of a particular period of time or a series of events; rather, the goal involves identifying the key aspects of that time period/event, and describing the information in the simplest terms possible. The language shifts, but the content does not.

As New York State has transitioned into requiring all students to pass Regents proficiency exams in order to graduate, textbook companies have begun to provide more and more options for assisting students in their preparation for Regents. Princeton Review provides an excellent example of this process of “reducing cognitive load.” They distill the key points of each major theme into a few short pages, with outlines, bulleted points, and lists of key vocabulary (see *Roadmap to the Regents: Global History & Geography*, 2003, or *Roadmap to the Regents: U.S. History & Government*, 2003). Several teachers in our study used similar “study guide” texts as a supplement to the main classroom text, or in lieu of the regular text.

In a similar approach, one teacher used a World History workbook targeted for upper elementary grades in his secondary school classes. This approach provided a similar results in terms of distilling particular history topics down to their key components, and using more basic vocabulary to describe the same phenomena presented in the regular grade-level textbook.

While the major social studies textbook publishers in the United States (American Textbook Council, 2005) have begun to provide supplemental notes or materials with

suggestions for “modifying instruction to help less proficient readers, English language learners, and special needs students” (Prentice Hall, 2004), they have not yet produced a textbook series specifically targeted to the needs of English Language learners. McDougal Littell offers a supplementary “Reading Toolkit for Social Studies” targeted to struggling readers (2005), and McGraw-Hill Glencoe provides a reading supplement for students which “provides concise content of the Student Edition written at a lower grade level, making it perfect for struggling readers and ELL students” (2005).

Unfortunately many under-resourced schools do not have the finances to provide sufficient current textbooks for all students, and do not have the resources in their budgets to purchase supplementary materials. In addition, assigning additional reading, beyond the assigned reading in the main textbook, can place an undue burden on ELL readers. Given these circumstances, Social Studies teachers still need to make their own curricular adaptations. Some of the approaches teachers in this study have used to reduce cognitive load include the following:

- Translate key words in the English instructions of Document-Based Questions (DBQs) from Regents exams
- Develop (or find online) trilingual glossaries of key terms for each grade level
- Utilize visual supports, i.e. – overhead transparencies, wall maps, posters of New York state standards, period-related art work, etc.
- Incorporate primary source materials or realia (a copy of the Constitution, a model of Columbus’ ships, etc.)
- Find, where possible, ELL-appropriate texts corresponding to regular grade-level textbooks
- Start each lecture with an active review and end with a summary and looking forward
- Provide adequate 'wait-time', allowing students a period of silence in which to understand a teacher’s question and to formulate a response
- If a student does not understand, try rephrasing in shorter sentences and simpler syntax
- Check often for understanding, but do not ask "Do you understand?" Instead, have students demonstrate their learning in order to show comprehension
- Try to avoid colloquialisms, idioms, and slang, or explain their meaning as they arise in context
- Use a student’s native language to increase comprehensibility – get translations ahead of time (internet, dictionaries), encourage students to provide translations in class or in small groups, develop a vocabulary list over time
- Reduce high-level content to key information – bulleted lists, highlighted text; use internet to find the same topic in Spanish, Haitian Creole, or simply in reduced-cognitive-load language
- Use graphic organizers whenever possible – never say anything important that is not written down for students – on the board, handouts, in the text, in assignments
- Create hands-on learning opportunities – i.e., ask students to list ways to increase participation in school elections

- Give demonstrations – how does the printing press work (use stamps and ink pad); how does the system of checks and balances work in US government (create the same system in the classroom and debate an issue)
- Establish cooperative learning groups or peer tutoring – give each group member a role, have a timekeeper, have groups report out on newsprint or on the board, and hold the whole group accountable for its work.

As noted above, many of these strategies support learning for all students, particularly students who face challenges in their school readiness or in terms of disability.

Challenges to Implementation

In the present study, each teacher had incorporated a few strategies from each of the above-mentioned areas into their teaching. In keeping with the principles of the Comer Project, this approach respected the individual styles and philosophies of each teacher. Over the course of the school year, the researchers were able to observe teachers on an ongoing basis and to suggest new strategies to add to their repertoires. Specific lesson plans and unit plans were revised to incorporate the goals of reduced cognitive load and to incorporate principles of cooperative learning and the use of multiple languages for understanding content knowledge. The school district is supporting the compilation of a list of “best practices” to disseminate to the Social Studies Department as part of ongoing professional development efforts, as well as the development of a packet of lessons for new teachers of ELL students. These curriculum materials will be presented in a separate paper.

Through lobbying on the part of the university faculty and the Social Studies Department Chair at the high school, the social studies teachers will have the opportunity to apply to receive reimbursement for professional development activities undertaken outside of the regular school day. This will allow for greater investment of time into curriculum development across all of the ELL Social Studies classes. Previously, teachers were expected to make time during their regular school day, during limited preparation periods or during lunches. Collaborations between university faculty and high school teachers were also limited by these time constraints. It is expected that the district-supported professional development time will bring greater changes in both pedagogy and curriculum, as teachers will have more opportunities to examine and enhance their current practices.

Looking Ahead

The school-age population will continue to diversify in terms of language backgrounds, cultural differences, and socioeconomic status. It is incumbent upon teachers, school administrators, and university schools of education to collaborate in meeting the needs of this diverse population. Effective methods of instruction for English Language learners are available, but the challenges to implementation in the classroom are many. Teachers often do not have the time in the school day necessary for planning, collaborating with colleagues, and re-writing curricular materials. School administrators and teachers often do not understand how best to reach out to parents and community members, across potential differences in language, culture, or social class, to build strong home-school

connections. Teacher educators need to integrate ELL pedagogy and curriculum into their ongoing teacher-education programs, in addition to serving as consultants to in-service teachers.

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) describes the primary purpose of social studies as “help[ing] young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world (1994, p.3).” Until concerted efforts are made across schools and universities to meet the needs of ELL students, we will continue to do a disservice to the next generation of American citizens. The social studies classroom has the potential to demonstrate civic duty in action, as teachers and schools come together with families to help new immigrants participate actively in the social, political, and economic life of the United States.

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