Adapting a Social Studies Lesson to Include English Language Learners

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If you were to search for classroom strategies for English Language Learners (ELLs), it would not take much time to find many different types of activities that are all useful with ELLs. Additionally, if you were to search for social studies strategies to use with native English speakers, you would have little difficulty in finding a variety of innovative and clever approaches. However, if you were to search for strategies that would be effective for both ELLs and native English speakers in the same classroom, you would be hard pressed to find a good integration of theory and classroom strategy that would result in quality learning for both groups. Yet this challenge is exactly the dilemma faced by thousands of primary education teachers as they implement the typical social studies curriculum.

We believe that ELLs bring an invaluable diversity to our classrooms, yet it is difficult and often frustrating to adapt lessons that meet their needs and are appropriate for native English speaking students, too. Furthermore, the concept that “good teaching” will do the trick is not only outdated but also ineffective. Many good teachers are baffled when faced with a child who obviously brings skills to the classroom but has difficulty demonstrating them due to language differences.

This article brings theory into practice and demonstrates how to apply commonly accepted language acquisition theories to lesson plans designed for native speakers of English. In this process, readers will learn not only how to apply theory to lessons, but more importantly, why to apply certain theories to certain types of lessons, moving beyond the limitations of just plain “good teaching.” Using an everyday social studies lesson designed for primary grade classrooms, we will reveal how to adapt objectives for ELLs and how to analyze lessons in order to modify the language demands of each lesson. Key points in this process involve adapting objectives to fit the English level and skills of ELLs, analyzing the linguistic/cultural demands of the lesson and adapting classroom activities to increase interaction between native English speakers and ELLs.

Basic Concepts in Second Language Acquisition

As a point of departure, all general education teachers must realize that language learning (both first and second) is a process that is sequential, systematic, and cognitive. Children do not learn language through imitation but rather through authentic interaction and scaffolded learning opportunities. As children move through the various stages of language acquisition, they experiment with language and develop cognitive skills as they use English. Interaction tends to help this process along; hence, the more meaningful interaction a teacher can provide, the more opportunities the ELL has to progress, both cognitively and linguistically.

Additionally, children from diverse language backgrounds...
will bring different skills into the classroom. Children are expected to learn certain language skills at home and bring them into the classroom. These skills include using language to describe and label, recount and retell, follow directions from a variety of sources, sustain and maintain appropriate social interactions, obtain information from non-intimates, and account for one’s own unique experiences. Yet, from an American perspective, ELLs coming into our schools are not often linguistically or culturally fluent in these different types of tasks. Hence, teachers must be aware that their responsibilities to make language adaptations go beyond simple translations of concepts. Especially with younger learners, adults often assume that they will acquire English quickly and without difficulty. However, adults in the educational setting must always be cognizant that English acquisition is not merely the grammar of the language, but also the sociocultural aspects that native English speaking children have been learning since birth.

Finally, ELLs must be held to the same high standard as all students in the classroom. Research has shown that students who are asked higher-level questions perform well, but that teachers do not often pose higher-level questions to ELLs. Thus, some observers of the classroom have posited a “benevolent conspiracy” in which teachers intend to save ELLs from embarrassment, but this avoidance deprives ELLs of learning opportunities. In general education classrooms, concepts must be simplified by the teacher, but not made simplistic.

**Steps in Adapting Lessons: Working with Objectives**

As with any lesson plan, the teacher must begin with objectives. Objectives are exactly what it is that students will take away from this lesson. General social studies objectives must almost always be rewritten taking each ELL’s level of English acquisition into account.

ELLs with different levels of English proficiency will demand different types of objectives. Students who are at a beginning level will need objectives that are more concrete and allow for non-verbal demonstrations, role-plays, and sentence completion. While interaction is a key element for any ELL, those at the beginning levels should be given the opportunity to participate in very small groups and pairs so that they do not feel overwhelmed with input.

ELLs at intermediate levels who have developed some social English can make good use of cooperative learning activities and small group discussions. Finally, students at the high intermediate levels who are beginning to work well with academic English can work with objectives that still include detailed scaffolding and contextual support. At this level, when students are already socially proficient, teachers need to focus on developing academic language.

**Analyzing Language Demands and Creating Language Objectives**

A common step in lesson plan adaptation that many teachers tend to rush through is analyzing the language demands of their lessons. In other words, given the accommodated objectives, what does my ELL student need to be able to do with language in order to accomplish the objective? Is there essential vocabulary that needs explanation? Teachers need to analyze the level of vocabulary needed and language functions required (i.e. compare and contrast, retelling, describing). Some vocabulary adds to the lesson but is not necessarily essential. On the other hand, other vocabulary must be understood in order for a student to understand the content. For example, a primary teacher teaching social studies can teach the concept of evaluating a trade economy without really having students learn the term “evaluate.” This vocabulary is nice to know, but not absolutely necessary for demonstration of understanding the concept. However, it is difficult to teach about the U.S. system of government if students do not understand terminology such as “democracy” and “constitution.” Teachers must decide what concepts are essential and which are optional.

Once decisions about language complexity have been made, teachers can decide how to support concepts. Concepts that are context-embedded are scaffolded and well supported with other non-linguistic methods such as pictures, demonstrations, visuals, graphs, and advanced organizers. Concepts that are context-reduced are not as well supported by such conventions.

Teachers must also decide if the objectives are academically demanding or academically undemanding. Objectives that are academically or cognitively demanding should definitely be context-embedded. However, objectives that are cognitively undemanding, perhaps related to material that the student is already familiar with, can be opportunities to use language that is context reduced. However, ELLs should never be faced with material or objectives that are cognitively demanding and context-reduced. Figure 1 describes the relationship between context embedding and difficulty of material. Ideally, students would be working primarily in quadrant B.

If students are working with concepts that are cognitively demanding, there should be many instances of context embedding (such as Venn diagrams, T graphs, labeling pictures, word wall, hands-on activities, or further explanations found in the text) so that ELLs receive the same message in a variety of ways and are better able to understand the concepts presented. On the other hand, if the class lesson is a review that is not cognitively demanding, teachers can use this as an opportunity for ELLs to flex their English language “muscles” and experiment with English structures that they are not so comfortable with.
Ideally, ELLs should have both social studies objectives and language objectives. The social studies objectives help teachers to prioritize content learning for their ELLs. The language objectives not only help teachers decide the English demands of the lesson, but they also help the ELLs continue to develop their English skills in the content classroom.

Adapting Texts and Other Input Materials
For many ELLs, the most difficult part of a lesson is reading. Even for those ELLs who bring literacy skills to transfer from one language to the other, reading is often difficult and time-consuming, especially if the concepts contained in the text are abstract. In these cases, teachers can adapt texts and other materials to fit the needs of the ELLs. For some students, this adaptation will take the form of highlighting concrete concepts that include the main ideas behind the objectives. For other, less proficient ELLs, this adaptation will involve highlighting key words and rewriting sentences that encapsulate the lesson. In these cases, native English speakers can generate shorter, simpler sentences as they summarize the lesson. These adapted sentences can, in turn, be used by ELLs in the classroom.

Markets and Exchanges: An Adapted Lesson for the Primary Social Studies Curriculum

Standards
- Florida Sunshine State Standard—Social Studies Standard 2: The student understands the characteristics of different economic systems and institutions.
- SS.D.2.1.2: understands the basic concepts of markets and exchanges.

Objectives for Native English Speakers
The following objectives are intended for Native English Speakers, but would need to be adapted for any ELLs in the class according to their level of English proficiency.
1. The student will be able to evaluate the need for an item (to state whether it is necessary, merely desirable, or not needed at all by the group).
2. The student will be able to participate in a trade economy with the use of verbal communication.
3. The student will be able to describe a trade economy.

Trade Economy Activity
The teacher divides the students into trade groups. Group 1: farmers, Group 2: candy makers, Group 3: toy makers, Group 4: clothing makers. The farmers will be trading carrots, potatoes, cow feed, and steaks; the candy makers will be trading lollipops, licorice, and chewing gum; the toy makers, dolls, spin tops, yo-yos, and sling shots; and the clothing makers, t-shirts, socks, ties, and pants.

The teacher introduces the activity by describing a possible trade. The students will be told that they need to trade enough items to live comfortably for two days. In the groups, the students will take inventory of current possessions and decide what they need to keep and what they want at acquire from the other groups.

Maria’s group will begin to work with her on her graphic organizer. The teacher continues by modeling the trade process, pretending she is in one group and taking an item to another group to trade. While modeling the trade, the teacher is very specific through her actions and language. Each group then sends two children to another group with tradable items. They report back to their group with the results of their exchange. This process continues for several trades.

As the teacher monitors the class activity, she will ask the following questions:
- What are some things that your group traded for?
- Why did your group choose this item?
- Did your group trade for an item because it was necessary to your group or because your group just wanted it? Why?

Adapting Objectives for ELLs
Teachers should analyze the language demands for this lesson, then list, in the lesson plan, examples of what student competence would look like for students at various levels of English proficiency. Below are several questions specific to the objectives of this lesson about trade, followed by examples of competent behavior for students of different language abilities.

Evaluate: What characteristics should children use for their evaluation? What sets of criteria have been provided to the children—is there a rubric or a model?

Verbal communication: Is the point to have one child expressing an opinion, or to have one child negotiating meaning with another?

Necessity: This is a culturally mediated term. The value of an item depends on a person’s prior experience and needs. Students who come from different cultures may see some items as more necessary than others. Will students have a chance to explain why they categorize a specific item as a necessity?

Describe: How will students display competence? Are the children drawing a diagram of a trade economy, telling the teacher what the term means to them, or repeating a definition provided by the teacher? Will this be done in a small group or the entire class?

The following objectives have been adapted for ELLs at different levels of English proficiency. “Maria” is a fictional ELL at the novice level. She speaks some social English, but has not developed academic English yet. Her literacy skills are very limited. “Carlos” is another fictional ELL at the intermediate level. He has acquired social English skills, but still struggles with academic English. His literacy skills are progressing, but still well behind his native English speaking peers.

Content Objective 1
- Maria will be able to evaluate the necessity of obtaining certain objects and goods by correctly placing words or pictures on her graphic organizer.
- Carlos will participate in the trade activity with the help of his partner, evaluating the value or necessity of objects and goods.
The teacher should pull relevant vocabulary from Maria’s Picture Dictionary (Oxford) and prepare a picture/word vocabulary list and have Maria go over the words with a helpful student. Maria’s group needs to be carefully orchestrated to include students who will/can work with her using her graphic organizer. This vocabulary will also be placed on the class Word Wall.

Evaluation
The teacher will informally assess all students during the group activity with special attention paid to Maria and Carlos to ensure that they are on track in achieving their objectives. In the case that Maria or Carlos is not making adequate progress, the teacher would reinforce the concepts through the use of a bilingual dictionary, picture dictionary, or other graphic representation. Carlos’ group should be using academic language so the teacher will monitor this progress as she is interacting with his group.

After the teacher stops the group activity, the students will evaluate their items, answering the following questions in their group.

▶ Have we met our needs?
▶ Do we have the items we said we wanted?
▶ Did we make good trades or bad trades? Why or why not?
▶ What items do we still need?
▶ What items do we still want?

Following this small group discussion, the teacher brings the class back together and asks several evaluative and extension questions about a trade economy. During this time, the teacher is careful to emphasize key words that have been introduced to both Maria and Carlos, reinforcing important aspects of the discussion. This portion of the lesson is recorded so that Maria and Carlos can review it later if necessary. Additionally, different cultures can be included in the extension. The teacher may be able to do some research and find out what farmers, toy makers, candy makers and tailors typically produce in other countries, such as the native countries of Maria and Carlos. Students could then make predictions about the necessity of some of those items in an American context.

▶ What do you think trade is?
▶ Are there things you trade for in your everyday life?
▶ What other kinds of things do people trade for?

Conclusion
As can be seen from this lesson, adapting objectives and activities for ELLs in mainstream classrooms is not easy. In fact, it demands that teachers not only be skilled within their specialty but also be cognizant of language acquisition concepts and levels that are often not taught within teacher preparation programs. However, we believe that when the needs of ELLs are taken into consideration, learning for all students increases. Native English speaking students who may slip through the cracks in a general education classroom have more opportunity to learn through the context-embedded and altered objectives that are developed for ELLs. Additionally, the interaction that takes place in order to help ELLs increase their English skills can aid all students in the classroom through peer tutoring and opportunities for self-assessment. Furthermore, by developing lessons that integrate native English speakers and ELLs, teachers are able to maximize their instructional time, thus dispelling the myth that teachers must create separate lessons for ELLs.

Notes
5. Cummins.
6. Figure 1 is based on an image in Cummins, p. 68.