

# Social Studies for All: ESOL Strategies for the Elementary Classroom

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It happened to be Earth Day, and the kindergarten teacher led the students in an integrated lesson about the environment and recycling, all the while reinforcing concepts in physical and human geography. One child in the class, Roberto, had recently arrived from Puerto Rico and spoke no English. We were interested to see how this master teacher, Ivonne Blank, might make the content comprehensible to Roberto and enable him to contribute to the class' learning. It turned out that we were about to observe a model lesson in ESOL instruction.

## A Model Lesson

The lesson began with music—a song about Earth. With the music softly playing in the background and the teacher and children seated on a carpet in a circle, a globe was passed around and each child was asked to find a place on Earth, point to it, and say its name. The children were encouraged to find places that were their families' places of origin, whereupon India, Lebanon, and China were identified. Other children pointed to New York, Miami, and Boston. By the time the globe reached Roberto, he knew what to do given that his teacher had served as a model and he had observed his classmates. He pointed out Puerto Rico and shyly, but confidently, pronounced the name of his homeland for all to hear.

After this opening activity, the teacher segued to an animated reading of *The Great Kapok Tree*. In this brilliantly illustrated book, before a man is able to chop down a great kapok tree in the Amazon rain forest, the possible effects of that action are explored from the perspectives of the many creatures that live there (snakes, bees, monkeys, birds, frogs, a jaguar, and a human). In addition to being expressive with voice, using facial expressions, and incorporating gestures, the teacher pointed frequently to the pictures, making the connection between the spoken word and the illustrations.

At the conclusion of the story, the teacher asked students to consider: "If the tree frogs in the Amazon rain forest could talk, what would they say?" After a pause, she gave each student paper with this very question written on it, as well as a drawing of a tree and a tree frog. She then brightly said, "Since it's Earth

Day, let's write outside!" and escorted the class to the school's courtyard to complete the activity, pausing briefly at the "community garden" on the way.

As the children sat down on the grass to write, the teacher reiterated the assignment to Roberto in English (although she speaks Spanish). Since Roberto has not yet learned to write in either English or Spanish, she asked him to draw his thoughts about the assignment. After most of the students had finished (mostly one or two sentences), they read their reflections to the whole class, to great praise from the teacher. Upon seeing Roberto's drawing, another child, Charlie, asked Roberto to create a drawing on his (Charlie's) sheet, to illustrate his work. Roberto beamed and obliged.

## Engaging the Learner

The 40-minute classroom activity described above illustrates what can be done by a classroom teacher to help make social studies content comprehensible for English language learners (ELLs), while facilitating—and in fact, enhancing—learning for all of the students present. Using a globe, a picture book, music, gestures, and expressive voice—these are alternative ways of communicating to speaking, listening, and reading "in English." Moreover, permitting Roberto to respond to the learning task by drawing allows him to become authentically engaged with the objectives of the lesson, rather than merely giving him "busy work." Perhaps most of all, the teacher's manner of affirming all cultures and treating Roberto as belonging to the group affects not only him, but all the children in the class.

Roberto also needs to learn how to write short sentences in English, of course. Today's activity was not a substitute for writing, but it was a step toward that goal, given his linguistic abilities on this day. Rather than being isolated from his peers, Roberto learned along with them, and they learned about him. The activity advanced his content knowledge and boosted his confidence.



## ELLs in Elementary Grades

In U.S. schools, ELLs are typically mainstreamed into regular classrooms. Consequently most elementary teachers will likely encounter at least a few ELL students at some time in their careers. Teachers in schools in refugee relocation cities or in urban areas with high concentrations of immigrants will likely encounter ELLs every year they teach.

The daily challenge of providing comprehensible instruction to English language learners can be daunting. Many teachers report having had a mediocre preparation with ESOL methods in their teacher education program. A survey in 2004 found that less than one percent of the space in popular pre-service teacher education textbooks is devoted to teaching of ELL students.<sup>1</sup> Estimates range from 13 percent to 30 percent of teachers having received ELL training, although almost half of teachers report having had English language learners in their classrooms.<sup>2</sup> Less than 3 percent of teachers have earned a degree in ESL.<sup>3</sup>

As the number of ELL students continues to grow in absolute terms as well as a proportion of the total student population in the U.S, the lack of training and information for teachers is becoming an ever more pressing issue. Overall the general school population nationally grew 12 percent between the 1990-1991 school year and the 2000-2001 school year; however, the ELL population grew 105 percent.<sup>4</sup> And while today 1 in 9 public school students (K-12 ) is an ELL, it is estimated that the figure might be 1 in 4 in 20 years.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1. Stages of Language Development**

Level	Preproduction	Early Production
<b>Description</b>	ELLs are able to comprehend more English than they can produce; focus is on developing everyday “survival” English	ELLs are taking more risks with English, often resulting in grammar and pronunciation errors; important to create a safe, low-anxiety classroom environment
<b>Linguistic Ability</b>	“Silent” period Point with finger Respond with movement Follow command Receptive vocabulary: up to 500 words	One- or two-word responses Labeling Listing Receptive vocabulary: up to 1,000 words Expressive vocabulary: 100-500 words
<b>Teaching Strategies</b>	Yes/No questions Simplified speech Gestures Visuals Picture books Word walls KWL charts Simple Cloze activities Realia TPR	Questions that require: Yes/No; Either/Or; Two-word response Lists of words Definitions Describing Reader’s Theater Drama Graphic organizers

## Facing the Challenge

There are ways that teachers can assist ELL students to learn. Teacher's knowledge of their students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds is an asset. In a study exploring the interactions between Latino students and teachers, it was found that educators' knowledge of students' cultures, communities, primary languages, and familiar interaction styles contributed to meeting students' academic needs.<sup>6</sup>

Teacher modeling and attitudes also matter. For example, teachers can present positive alternatives to "deficit" models of English (wherein instruction for ELLs is centered on what they lack relative to their English-speaking peers). Instead, ELLs' participation in learning activities enriches the curriculum for the entire class through language and cultural diversity. Significantly, according to a recent study, it appears "that non-ELLs followed the teacher's model in interacting with ELLs".<sup>7</sup>

## Stages of Language Acquisition

Teachers are sometimes perplexed when a student is English-fluent in social situations (talking with friends, in the cafeteria, on the playground, etc.), but has language difficulty with classroom activities and assignments. Communication used in social settings places fewer cognitive demands on the learner than formal language used in academic settings.

Educators and linguists have argued that language development occurs in predictable stages, "in a predetermined psychological order of complexity."<sup>8</sup> According to the "Natural Approach," there are four levels: Preproduction, Early Production, Speech Emergence, and Intermediate Fluency (Figure 1: "Stages of

Language Development").<sup>9</sup>

You can go online to view and hear the different stages of English language development at our University of South Florida website (as listed in Figure 2: "Selected Resources for Teachers"). This online collection includes speaking, reading, and writing samples of ELLs from different cultures, of various ages, and organized by grade level. Case studies are also provided.

## Visual Cues

Understanding how students acquire language helps teachers select effective teaching methods.<sup>10</sup> For example, for students in the beginning stages of learning English, teachers should use pictures, graphics, maps, and other visuals to provide context and cognitive support so that ELLs can find meaning and decode the new language.

Some teachers are aware that modifying their own communication—speaking slowly, enunciating clearly, using simplified language, and providing language clues through gestures—can be helpful to ELLs.

General instructional modifications that are deemed effective by experts include using text with content that is familiar to students, building English vocabulary, and utilizing the primary language for support.

As students' receptive and expressive vocabularies increase, teachers can use more traditional instructional and assessment strategies often with just slight modification.

ELLs are likely to have a spotty knowledge base of American culture and customs that often serve as schema for new learning. Thus, especially with newly arrived immigrants, educators must

### Speech Emergence

ELLs typically have 1-3 years exposure to English; awareness of English language structure is growing; may have a receptive understanding of academic English

Short phrases and sentences  
Comparing and contrasting  
Descriptions  
Receptive vocabulary: up to 7,000 words  
Expressive vocabulary: 2,000 words

How and why questions  
Modeling  
Demonstrating  
Cooperative learning  
Comprehension checks  
Alternative assessments  
Simulations

### Intermediate Fluency

ELLs exhibit almost native-like fluency in everyday social English, but not in academic English; still difficult to understand and verbalize cognitively demanding, abstract concepts

Dialogue  
Reading academic texts  
Writing  
Receptive vocabulary: up to 12,000 words  
Expressive vocabulary: 4,000 words

Brainstorming  
Journal writing  
Literary analysis  
Problem solving  
Role playing  
Monologues  
Story telling  
Oral reports  
Interviewing and applications

## Figure 2. Selected Resources for Teachers

### BOOKS

Bailey, Judith. *From the Beginning: A First Reader in American History*. McHenry, IL: Delta, 1990. The major issues, themes, and controversies in each era are summarized and presented in simple language.

Kauffman, D. and Apple, G. *Oxford Picture Dictionary for the Content Areas*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. Over 1,500 vocabulary words from various subjects are defined using color illustrations. Also, student workbook, wall charts, and sound recordings.

Cruz, Bárbara C., Nutta, Joyce, O'Brien, Jason L., Feyten, Carine M., and Govoni, Jane. *Passport to Learning: Teaching Social Studies to ESL Students*. Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2003. Discussion of ESL instructional strategies and samples of K-12 learning activities.

Cruz, Bárbara C. and Thornton, Stephen J. *Teaching Social Studies to English Language Learners*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Although specifically targeted for grades 6-12, many of the activities can be modified for elementary grades as well.

Dale, Paulette and Poms, Lillian. *English Pronunciation Made Simple*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2004. Book and 2 CDs to help students with English pronunciation.

Einhorn, Kama. *Easy and Engaging ESL Activities and Mini-Books for Every Classroom*. New York: Scholastic, 2001. Provides advice for preparing for a new student, assessing needs and abilities, and communicating with a student's family, as well as classroom strategies.

Haynes, Judie. *Getting Started with English Language Learners: How Educators Can Meet the Challenge*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2007. Language acquisition stages, matching instruction to ELL learning styles, and how to differentiate instruction effectively.

Josel, Carol A. *Ready-To-Use ESL Activities for Every Month of the School Year*. Baltimore, MD: Center for Applied Research in Education, 2002. Ideas to build vocabulary, improve pronunciation, and develop academic skills.

Zehler, Annette. *Working with English Language Learners: Strategies for Elementary and Middle School Teachers*. NCBE Program Information Guide Series, 19. 1994, ([www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/pigs/pig19.htm](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/pigs/pig19.htm)).

Claire, Elizabeth and Clavarella, E. G. *ELS Teacher's Activity Kit*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1998. Easy-to-use language-generating activities; spiral bound. Designed to increase motivation and participation in mainstream classes.

### WEBSITES

Elementary School EFL ESL Games. [www.genkienglish.net/games.htm](http://www.genkienglish.net/games.htm)  
Warm-up games, interactive flash cards, and other forms of entertaining ways to help students learn English.

The ESL Area: Tips for Teachers  
[members.aol.com/adrmoser/tips/tips.html](http://members.aol.com/adrmoser/tips/tips.html)  
Internet links, professional articles, and other materials.

ESLflow.com.  
[www.eslflow.com/esllessonplans.html](http://www.eslflow.com/esllessonplans.html)  
Handouts, exercises, and other resources for teaching elementary-level ELL students.

ProTeacher Directory. ESL/LEP Lesson Plans  
[www.proteacher.com/070063.shtml](http://www.proteacher.com/070063.shtml)  
Dozens of free resources and links to assist elementary school teachers with ELL instruction.

Resources for Educators of ELLs: An Annotated Bibliography. National Writing Project, [www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2476](http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2476).  
Diverse perspectives in the field of teaching ELLs. Cultural identity, family literacy, high-stakes testing. Judith Rance-Roney, and Lynn Jacobs. (2007).

University of South Florida. The Language of ELLs.  
[esol.coedu.usf.edu/elementary/](http://esol.coedu.usf.edu/elementary/)  
Language samples, case studies, and ideas for assessment.

EFL/ESOL/ESL Songs and activities.  
[www.songsforteaching.com/esleflesol.htm](http://www.songsforteaching.com/esleflesol.htm)  
Song lyrics and sound clips help students learn vocabulary for things such as colors, shapes, and food, etc.

ESL Connect.  
[www.eslconnect.com/links.html](http://www.eslconnect.com/links.html)  
Student visitors to this gateway site can access links to Homework Help, Crosswords and Puzzles, and other activities that support English language learning.

Grammar Safari.  
[www.iei.uiuc.edu/student\\_grammarsafari.html](http://www.iei.uiuc.edu/student_grammarsafari.html)  
In this "safari," students "hunt" and "collect" common, specific words as they are used in documents accessible on the Internet.

Internet Picture Dictionary  
[www.pdictionary.com](http://www.pdictionary.com)  
In addition to visuals identifying common objects, there are interactive activities, flash cards, and games to help build vocabulary and language skills.



### Figure 3. Key Methods for Teaching Social Studies to ELL Students (and All Students)

**GRAPHICS, MAPS, AND PHOTOGRAPHS:** Images or all sorts can serve as scaffolds for students at all levels of language development and can enhance learning for all students in the class.

**WORD WALLS:** If the class maintains a Word Wall, students can be asked to assist the teacher in writing the words, finding the definitions, and attaching identifying visuals to each.

**PICTURE BOOKS:** Students have more cues (both images and words) to aid in comprehension. When teachers read the books aloud, they also assist in language development. The combination of evocative text and graphic images is particularly valuable when discussing difficult or emotionally charged topics such as racism and prejudice.<sup>a</sup>

**REALIA:** Having concrete, tangible objects can help students place information in a comprehensible context. In the social studies, realia can be found for content areas

such as history, geography, and economics.

**DIORAMAS:** Creating dioramas has both hands-on and visual features. By first identifying specific features and then creating replicas of them, students can comprehend and internalize concepts more easily. Although all students can be engaged learners in such a project, ELL students will particularly benefit from the concrete nature of the learning experience.

**KINESTHETIC LEARNING:** Having students interact through movement has been shown to be effective in language development. Total Physical Response (TPR) integrates both verbal and physical communication.<sup>b</sup> It is especially effective with beginning language students, for vocabulary building, and with those students who are primarily kinesthetic learners.

**ROLE PLAYING:** Teachers and students can bring historical characters to life, drama-

tize conflicts and resolutions, and generally stimulate interest in historical events.<sup>c</sup>

**COOPERATIVE LEARNING:** Many bilingual education specialists believe that cooperative learning is an important component of successful bilingual education programs.<sup>d</sup> Verbal interaction with peers is a crucial way for students to develop thinking skills, language skills, and social skills.

#### Notes

- a. Karen H. Wilkins, C. C. Sheffield, M. B. Ford, and B. 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): 178-181.
- b. James J. Asher, *Learning Another Language through Actions* (Los Gatos, CA: Sky Oaks Productions, 1982).
- c. Deborah J. Short, "Social Studies Instruction and Assessment: Meeting the Needs of Students Learning English," in S.H. Fradd and O. Lee, eds., *Creating Florida's Multilingual Global Work Force: Educational Policies and Practices for Students Learning English as a New Language* (Tallahassee, FL: Florida Department of Education, 1998).
- d. Maria Robledo Montecel and Josie Danini Cortez, "Successful Bilingual Education Programs," *Bilingual Research Journal* 26 (2002): 1-22.

be careful to provide lots of context and visual cues. While the challenge to provide meaningful instruction is always greater at the lower levels of English proficiency, students at all levels can profit from aptly designed social studies instruction.

### Modifying Our Lessons

More than the other three main subject areas of language arts, mathematics, and science, social studies instruction features a preponderance of "traditional methods such as the teacher providing whole group instruction and students reading the textbook in class and answering questions."<sup>11</sup> Heavy reliance on these methods has severe limitations for ELLs. For example, social studies vocabulary in textbooks is often complex and abstract and requires background knowledge of U. S. culture. Our most highly recommended methods to help orient social studies instruction to the needs of ELLs—and of other types of learners with special needs—are listed in Figure 3: "Key Methods for Teaching Social Studies to ELL Students."

### Thematic Examples

We would like to suggest some activities that—while specific in topic—demonstrate more generally how ESOL methodology can be employed (Figure 4). When planning a unit of study, teachers should apply several of the thematic strands to the topic

at hand.<sup>12</sup> For example, maps Columbus might have used tell us not only about geographic knowledge in 1492, but also about the beliefs and values of mapmakers of the time.<sup>13</sup> (See strands **I CULTURE**, **III PEOPLE, PLACES AND ENVIRONMENTS**, and **IX GLOBAL CONNECTIONS**). Similarly, a historical study of the thirteen English colonies is enriched by geographic questions such as how the length of growing season in various regions of the continent (moving north to south or coast to mountains) influenced how and where people lived. (See strands **II TIME, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE**, **III PEOPLE, PLACES AND ENVIRONMENTS**, and **VII PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION AND CONSUMPTION**).<sup>14</sup>

Finally, there's no doubt that mainstreaming ELLs offers challenges if all our students are to be engaged in meaningful social study. This article has been intended as a way to conceptualize how teachers of young learners not only may address these challenges, but also enrich the social studies curriculum for all. 🌐

#### Notes

1. Sandy Watson, Ted L. Miller, Jennifer Driver, Valerie Rutledge, and Deborah McAllister, "English Language Learner Representation in Teacher Education Textbooks: A Null Curriculum," *Education* 126, no. 1 (2005): 11-19.
2. Kate Menken and Beth Antunez, *An Overview of the Preparation and Certification of Teachers Working with Limited English Proficient (LEP) Students* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs, 2001); National Center for Education Statistics, *1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey: Overview of the Data for Public, Private, Public Charter and Bureau of Indian Affairs Elementary and Secondary Schools* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department

**Figure 4. Suggested Activities for Social Studies and Language Learning**

Curriculum Standards Strand	Social Studies Topic	ELL Strategies	Teaching Ideas
<b>I CULTURE</b>	Language and Communication Around the World	Picture Books, Collages, Visuals, Cooperative Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>► Use a picture book showing diverse immigrants arriving in the U. S.</li> <li>► In groups, build collages illustrating ways people communicate</li> </ul>
<b>II TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE</b>	The Medieval European Village	Visuals, Picture Books, Dioramas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>► Share with students picture books on medieval life</li> <li>► Have students create dioramas and label images</li> <li>► Walking Gallery: have students share their dioramas by having half the students stand by their displays while the other half visits each display and listens to the creator's description</li> </ul>
<b>III PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS</b>	Physical Geography of Latin America	Collages, Kinesthetic Learning, Maps, Word Walls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>► Share various types of maps of Latin America</li> <li>► Have students create collages of Latin American landscapes</li> <li>► Create a Word Wall of key concepts and terminology</li> </ul>
<b>IV INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY</b>	Childhood in Different Nations	Collages, Picture Books, Guest speakers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>► Create collages of children from different cultures</li> <li>► Share picture books of children growing up in different countries</li> <li>► Guest speakers tell their stories of growing up in diverse cultures</li> </ul>
<b>V INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS</b>	Local Institutions	Word Wall, Realia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>► Build a word wall of all of the institutions in the local community</li> <li>► Share realia representing the functions and purposes of local institutions</li> </ul>
<b>VI POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE</b>	Forms of Government	Cartoons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>► Find and discuss cartoons about authority figures</li> <li>► Examine political cartoons from around the world (<a href="http://www.ecola.com">www.ecola.com</a> provides online access to newspapers worldwide)</li> </ul>
<b>VII PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND CONSUMPTION</b>	Universal Needs, Different Responses	Visuals, Cooperative Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>► Take students on a virtual field trip of museum artifacts showing how all people have universal needs (e.g., shelter, food, clothing) but meet these needs in different ways</li> <li>► Have students draw how those needs are met in their families and share with classmates</li> </ul>
<b>VIII GLOBAL CONNECTIONS</b>	Universal Needs, Different Responses	Visuals, Cooperative Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>► Take students on a virtual field trip of museum artifacts showing how all people have universal needs (e.g., shelter, food, clothing) but meet these needs in different ways</li> <li>► Have students draw how those needs are met in their families and compare with families in other cultures</li> </ul>
<b>IX SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND SOCIETY</b>	Benefits of Technology; Science and Society	Realia, Maps, and Cooperative Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>► Ask students to find technology-related items from their home that makes life easier</li> <li>► Have them share those objects with classmates</li> <li>► Have them locate the places of origin of the objects on a wall map and measure the distance with string on a globe</li> </ul>
<b>X CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES</b>	Political Campaigning and the Voting Process	Role Playing, Cooperative Learning, Visuals and Realia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>► Create ballot on issue of importance to class</li> <li>► Have representatives of each position "sell" their point of view</li> <li>► Collect and tally votes</li> <li>► Have students analyze campaign strategies</li> </ul>

- of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2002).
- University of Michigan. "ELL in Elementary School: ELL Teachers" (2008), [www.sitemaker.umich.edu/356.hunemorder/ell\\_teachers](http://www.sitemaker.umich.edu/356.hunemorder/ell_teachers).
  - Anneka L. Kindler, *Survey of the States' Limited English Proficient Students and Available Educational Programs and Services: 2000-2001 Summary Report* (Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2002).
  - Claude Goldenberg, "Teaching English Language Learners: What the Research Does—and Does Not—Say," *American Educator* 32, no. 2 (2008): 10.
  - Lilia D. Monzó and Robert S. Rueda, *Sociocultural Factors in Social Relationships*. (Baltimore, MD: Center for Applied Linguistics, 2001).
  - Bogum Yoon, "Uninvited Guests: The Influence of Teachers' Roles and Pedagogies on the Positioning of English Language Learners in the Regular Classroom," *American Educational Research Journal* 45, no. 2 (2008): 495-522, p. 517.
  - Tony Erben, "Your English Language Learner," in B. Cruz and S. Thornton, *Teaching Social Studies to English Language Learners*. (New York: Routledge, 2008: 11).
  - Stephen D. Krashen and Tracy D. Terrell, *The Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom*. (Hayward, CA: The Alemany Press, 1983).
  - Bárbara C. Cruz, Joyce Nutta, Jason L. O'Brien, Carine M. Feyten, and Jane Govoni, *Passport to Learning: Teaching Social Studies to ESL Students*. (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2003).
  - June R. Chapin, *A Practical Guide to Middle and Secondary Social Studies* (Boston, MA: Pearson Education, 2003: 56.)
  - National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994).
  - See, for example, Avner Segall, "Maps as Stories about the World," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 16, no. 1 (2003): 21-25.
  - See, for example, Stephen J. Thornton, "Geography in American History Courses," *Phi Delta Kappan* 88, no. 7 (2007): 535-538.

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