

Behind the Mask: Social Studies Concepts and English Language Learners

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I climbed onto the airplane a competent and articulate adult. I climbed off the plane with the language skills of a two year old. Despite classes and tutoring, tapes and books, I couldn't understand what people said to me. Whenever I opened my mouth, the looks I got suggested I was from another planet.

As I write, I am an immigrant of sorts. More exactly, I'm a foreigner, nearing the end of a six-month sabbatical in France trying to understand the meaning of the civic concepts that dominate here. In other words, I'm trying to form social studies concepts in a situation where I must rely heavily on a language I have yet to master. I've engaged in a self study, observing myself closely in this situation and am surprised at how I am coping and at what I am learning and not learning.¹ I am surprised at how rarely the evaluations others make of me match my reality. This process has caused me to think more deeply about the challenges faced by English language learners (ELLs) and their teachers when difficult social studies concepts are being addressed.

I write of my own experience being very aware that I'm hardly typical of the many ELLs occupying social studies classrooms across the United States. I also know that the experience of English language learners varies dramatically. I don't mean to suggest that my experience can stand for that of our students. My purpose is to provoke thought by suggesting that ELLs face particular challenges and that our attempts to assist them can benefit the conceptual understanding of English-only students as well.

Social studies educators are con-

stantly teaching concepts. From culturally universal concepts in the early grades to highly contested concepts such as "democracy" in later grades, good social studies instruction often centers on helping students form key concepts.² And as anyone who has spent time in twenty-first century social studies classrooms knows, immigrant and English language learners struggle mightily with learning these concepts. If forming key concepts such as civil rights, liberty, and representative government, is critical to social justice and to assisting all Americans in becoming full citizens (and I believe it is), then we must attend to the particular challenges immigrant and English language learners face.

In this article, I begin with the challenges I face as someone foreign to a country and a language when trying to learn particular civics concepts. I then note strategies I found myself using to mask my general lack of comprehension, followed by suggestions for what educators might do in their classrooms.

Challenges

The language. The most obvious impediment I experience in learning French civic concepts is the language. As I gain skill and expertise in understanding and speaking French, these issues diminish,

but they do not go away. If I am rested and calm, the speaker doesn't speak too quickly, and avoids pronouns, idioms, and contractions (French equivalents of "gonna"), I can follow and understand a lot. If the speaker writes key words or uses gestures, my comprehension increases dramatically. While I can speak fluently at times, I don't yet think in French. I quickly translate in my head. If the words fly past too quickly, I am unable to translate the first idea before the second idea appears. I get lost, not because I am not paying attention, but because my language skills do not allow me to keep up. The less I understand, the more anxious I become. The more anxious I am, the more difficulty I have concentrating and the less I understand.

Vocabulary and word order are especially difficult for me. Context clues help me with vocabulary, but if I don't know the word, the context often suggests more than one meaning. One key word that I don't know can change the meaning completely (e.g., "therefore" versus "in contrast"). Word order changes meaning as well. For example, English speakers say, "I'll call you" and that has a very different meaning from "You call me." The words are almost identical—the order of the words makes all the difference.

I'm fortunate because French shares many words with English.³ However, there are often *faux amis* (false friends) between French and English. The word can sound the same and have a completely different meaning. A simple example is the



Westside High School teacher Susie Karnik instructs English Language Learners (clockwise from left) Trang Hoang, Tuyen Le, Thong Le, Korolis Zalanskas and Luning Ni, in Omaha, Nebraska, August 14, 2003. (AP Photo/Nati Harnik)

verb “attend.” In English, “to attend” is “to go to” or “to pay attention.” In French, the verb “attendre” primarily means “to wait.” I can hear the word, know its meaning, and still be confused when my automatic English kicks in.

The context. Not understanding the social or historical milieu leaves me at a serious disadvantage when it comes to understanding French concepts. When civic concepts are discussed, events in a larger social story are often referenced. This gets in my way in at least two ways. First, terms and references to historical or current events are made that I have little knowledge about. When talking about key civic concepts, the French write and talk about events such as the Debré affair, the law of 1905, and the Restoration. The reference is intended to aid with civic understanding—to help me see where the concept came from and what it means. But as a person who does not share this historical or cultural knowledge, it does little more than add to my confusion. I am again trying to catch up, attempting to understand both the reference and the concept under consideration.

Second, even when I’m familiar with parts of French history, I can miss the meaning attributed to it. I might understand an event during the French Revolution for example, but miss the

larger meanings that the French people assign to it. I don’t know, for example, the “historical narrative” that dominates in France—the larger story.⁴ The historical narrative, as outlined by Terry Epstein, is the big idea of a nation’s history. In the case of the United States, the dominant historical narrative is one of continually expanding democracy. The contrasting narrative, according to Epstein, is “racial inequality”—i.e., a history of dominant groups working to maintain their privileged status. When we consider a given event (such as *Brown v. Board of Education*), Americans generally place that event within either the dominant narrative of “expanding democracy” or the contrasting narrative of “racial inequality.” Explanations that make sense to someone raised in France, therefore, are not as helpful to me because I don’t know the big picture and where within that picture I might fit different events and ideas.

When I’m unsure of the French context, I tend to inappropriately apply my own context and understanding. For example, having been socialized in a country that stresses “freedom from the state,” how do I form ideas like, “freedom through the state?” “Freedom through the state” disrupts my concept of freedom and my concept of state. When thinking about

state intervention, I continually apply my American understandings to French concepts.

Being a Novice. As a newcomer to the language and the society, I struggle with typical novice issues.⁵ That is, there is simply too much to attend to and I lack the expert’s ability to know what is important. On the language level, it takes time to know which words are key to my comprehension. On the conceptual level, I have trouble seeing what is critical or defining about the concept and what is peripheral. Paying attention to everything is inefficient and I tend to learn more slowly here.

Self-worth. Not long after my arrival in France, I had a nightmare. An invasion was happening and I wanted to escape by blending into the crowd and finding my way out. But when I opened my mouth to speak, a machine (it was a dream after all) took everything I said and did something to it so that it was impossible for me to be anonymous. I believe the dream illustrates what I was experiencing at the time. Try as I might, I couldn’t hide my foreignness. Every time I opened my mouth, I identified myself not only as someone different, but also as someone who lacked important, highly valued skills (e.g., the ability to communicate in French). Daily interactions continually chipped away at my sense of self-worth as people stared at me, or dismissed me as unintelligent when I didn’t understand. Trying to maintain a sense of self-worth is often behind my attempts to mask my lack of comprehension, the subject of the next section.

Masking Incomprehension

Knowing what another person understands is important to good concept teaching and intensely difficult (some would say impossible).⁶ As an observer of my own behavior, I was amazed at how easy it can be to mask my incomprehension. Here, I describe the masking techniques I use to protect myself from undue embarrassment.

When I first arrived, hiding my lack of comprehension was impossible—whenever anyone spoke to me, my eyes got wide and my body tensed. Such responses usually caused those who had spoken to me to

be nervous as well. I gradually learned to control my body language and facial expressions. Thus, the most potent weapon I use to hide my lack of understanding is to pretend that I understand, because most people assume understanding and don't look for evidence that might undermine that assumption.

I am unable to understand every word in every sentence. I listen for key verbs and nouns to get a general understanding of what is being communicated. One day a plumber wanted to borrow some scissors. The only word I understood in his request was "scissors." I guessed at the rest and brought him his scissors, masking what I didn't understand with what I did understand.

I watch body language and facial expressions. It is quite possible to laugh in the right places without understanding a word the other person says. As people work up to the punch line, they begin to get more animated and they laugh a bit themselves. By mirroring the body language and facial expressions of the speaker, I can respond appropriately without understanding a word.

I throw in simple words or phrases that make it seem like I know what is going on. Handy phrases like "voilà" (there it is), "c'est vrai" (it's true), or "bien sûr" (of course) give the impression that I'm following even when my understanding is limited.

I have taken several language courses while in France. When working on assignments, I search for examples whose structure I can "borrow" to write well-formed French sentences without actually having to create them myself. I go to extreme lengths to avoid the use of conditional sentences and pronouns, and I parrot back key phrases I have heard from the teacher in the hopes that she won't ask for more.

I'm a highly motivated, well-educated student. I know I learn more when I expose what I don't understand. But risking such exposure requires that I feel safe from the judgment of both the teacher and other students. I don't ask questions in situations that feel unsafe. Asking questions reveals both my lack of language skill and what I may have missed from the preceding

instruction.⁷ When I feel unsafe, I rely on visual cues by watching carefully what others are doing. I muddle through, hoping for the best.

How Have Teachers Helped?

I've had several excellent teachers (not all of them in schools) while in France, and I have watched them closely, noting what they do that helps me learn. In this section, I draw on both my very recent experiences as a second-language student and upon my knowledge of learning theory.

The best teachers respect my intelligence while expecting that I will often be confused and lost. They reassure me (both privately and publicly) that what I'm experiencing is normal and that learning takes time. They acknowledge the courage involved in what I am trying to do. They view my errors as feedback on their instruction, not as a measure of my innate abilities.

The best teachers speak clearly, slowly, and with expression. They gesture and write down important ideas. They are creative in their attempts to help me understand, and they don't leave the total responsibility with me. Expressions and gestures help me intuit the context of teacher talk more quickly so that I can attend more closely to the words. A simple gesture (e.g., holding up two fingers when the teachers means "two" instead of "to" or "too") makes a difference. Writing key words and phrases forces the teacher to slow down, and I have one more way of verifying what I think I'm hearing.⁸ In contrast, when a teacher refuses to write public notes, I find myself continually behind and frustrated.

The best teachers provide multiple examples and non-examples of the concepts under consideration. This is simply good concept teaching, but it is especially critical outside of my cultural context. Relying on a single example always causes me to look to my own cultural context, resulting inevitably in my misunderstanding.

I am working harder than native speaking students because I'm not only trying to learn the concepts, I'm learning the language as well. Sometimes I understand

every word I have read, but I have no idea what the sentence means. It is important that my teachers attend both to the civic concept and also to my language skills. For example, when reading I need help with both the gist of the piece and specific vocabulary. Teachers who "set up" my reading by talking about the purpose of the text, the audience, and what the author is writing about, dramatically improve my comprehension. Providing me with a safe place to ask the meaning of specific words and sentences is critical.

The best teachers give me structured opportunities to collaborate (rather than compete) with my peers. I learn a lot from talking and listening to other people speaking French. I'm more willing to expose what I don't know to accepting classmates than to the teacher.

The best teachers care more about my learning than my correct response. An example here may help clarify my meaning. During one class, the assignment was to write a letter. Most wrote the letter doing their best to make it interesting and correct. One classmate "borrowed" lines directly from examples provided by the teacher and the textbook, changing the occasional word to create a cohesive whole. My classmate was publicly praised for a paper that was without errors. Even when she stated what she had done, the teacher continued his praise. The teacher's focus on perfection in fact distracted from our learning. In the mistakes of those who took some risks were clues to what we didn't know. Valuing our errors as much as our perfection would have resulted in much more learning for the entire group, even for the student who managed a "perfect" paper.

What's a Teacher to Do?

If I were in your social studies class, I would need the following. I have organized this section by general teaching requests and requests specific to concept learning in the social studies.

General Techniques: As a second language student I have a high need for safety and clarity. Do everything possible to create a safe classroom climate for non-native speakers. This includes stating

publicly and explicitly your sensitivity to the difficulty of operating in a second language and the courage it takes to do so. Treat me as an intelligent and competent human being who has something important to offer and demand that native speakers in the class do the same.

Remember that I hide my understanding to protect a sense of self-worth that is constantly under attack. Hold me to high standards while assuming I will need additional support, regardless of how confident I appear or how correctly I do assignments.

Listen to me carefully, taking my errors as feedback on your instruction. When I seem unable to understand something today that I seemed to get so easily yesterday, remember that comprehension ebbs and flows. Be patient. Try explaining it another way tomorrow.

Provide well-designed peer collaboration.⁹ Working with peers benefits both my language acquisition and proficiency, and my ability to form concepts. Peer collaboration requires me to explain and justify my thinking and listen to the language and thinking of others.

Social Studies Planning: As a novice, I have trouble knowing what to focus on in class. Thorough planning on your part can help. When planning instruction, focus on key concepts that will help me understand other concepts. For example, when studying the civil rights movement, “civil disobedience” is more likely to increase my understanding than a focus on “diversity.” Take time to be clear in your own mind about what the concept is and its critical attributes.¹⁰ In other words, know what is important so you can help me focus on what is important.

Remember that I will draw on my own context to understand social studies concepts. Help me by selecting examples and non-examples from a broad range of possibilities. Even when addressing U.S. history, consider examples of the concept that aren’t exclusively based in the United States.

Social Studies Teaching: I lack a larger narrative to understand historical events. Make the competing historical narratives at play in the United States explicit. Help

me see how a historical event might be seen as a part of continually expanding democratic experiment and also as a part of on-going racial inequality in the United States. I can handle more than one narrative when both are presented to me explicitly.

I need help remembering key events and their relationship to the concept you are teaching. Provide “public text”—visual reminders left up around the classroom, such as timelines, or lists of key Supreme Court cases, what they address and what they mean.¹¹ Write important points prominently to help me follow class discussions and lectures.

Improving Social Studies Content Instruction: Anticipating how students from different countries and cultures will understand a U.S. concept is an overwhelming task. Go easy on yourself, taking a long view. Whenever possible place yourself in the position of foreign learner and notice how your own conceptual understanding differs from what you are trying to learn.¹² In your classroom, observe English language learners carefully and note where they have trouble and the kind of trouble they have. Write down your observations and share them with others.¹³

There is little doubt that the presence of English language learners in a classroom adds burdens to overworked teachers. However, the modifications and adjustments necessary are not impossible nor are many of them overly time consuming. Ultimately, an ELL-friendly classroom environment benefits all students. English language students are a gift to teachers and to the English-only students in the room. The diverse understanding and perspectives ELLs bring can help teachers hone our instructional skills, making for increased learning for everyone. 🌍

Notes

1. Virginia Richardson, “Conducting Research on Practice,” *Educational Researcher* 23, no. 5 (1994): 5-10; Gordon Wells, “Introduction: Teacher Research and Educational Change,” in *Changing Schools from Within: Creating Communities of Inquiry*, ed. G. Wells (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1994), 1-36.

2. Jere Brophy and Janet Alleman, “Primary Grade Students’ Knowledge and Thinking about Transportation,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 33, no. 21 (2005): 218-43; Brophy and Alleman, “Primary-Grade Students’ Knowledge and Thinking about Families,” *Journal of Social Studies Research* 29, no. 1 (2005): 18-22; Walter C. Parker, “Teaching an Idea,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 3, no. 3 (1991): 11-13; Walter C. Parker and Samuel A. Perez, “Beyond the Rattle of Empty Wagons,” *Social Education* 51, no. 3 (1987): 164-66; Hilda Taba, *A Teacher’s Handbook to Elementary Social Studies: An Introductory Approach*. Revised ed. (Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley Publishing Company, 1971).
3. I’m amazed by my friends learning French from Asian countries because, for them, the overlap is non-existent. Their task is much more complex.
4. Terry Epstein, “Adolescents’ Perspectives on Racial Diversity in U.S. History: Case Studies from an Urban Classroom,” *American Educational Research Journal* 37, no. 1 (2000): 185-214.
5. Jerome T. Bruer, “The Mind’s Journey from Novice to Expert,” *American Educator* (1993): 6-46.
6. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998); Harry F. Wolcott, *Transforming Qualitative Data: Description, Analysis, and Interpretation* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 1994).
7. James T. Dillon, “A Norm Against Student Questions,” *The Clearing House* 55 (1981): 136-39; Terence A. Beck, “Are There Any Questions?: One Teacher’s View of Students and Their Questions in a Fourth Grade Classroom,” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 14, no. 8 (1998): 871-86.
8. On many levels, this is simply good teaching. While ELL students may need such help more, all students benefit when teachers do these things.
9. An excellent source for designing collaborative experiences is Elizabeth G. Cohen, *Designing Groupwork: Strategies for the Heterogeneous Classroom*, 2nd ed (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994).
10. An excellent description of this process can be found in Parker and Perez, “Beyond the Rattle of Empty Wagons,” *Social Education* 51, no. 3 (1987): 164-66.
11. L.R. Herrenkohl, A.S. Palinscar, L.S. DeWater, and K. Kawasaki, “Developing Scientific Communities in Classrooms: A Sociocognitive Approach,” *The Journal of the Learning Sciences* 8, nos. 3&4 (1999): 451-93; Herrenkohl and M.R. Guerra, “Participant Structures, Scientific Discourse, and Student Engagement in Fourth Grade,” *Cognition and Instruction* 16, no. 4 (1998): 431-73.
12. Travel, read foreign authors, watch foreign films. If possible, live for a while in another country and force yourself to interact with those who live there.
13. I welcome (and will respond to) any and all descriptions of English language learners’ confusions with social studies concepts.

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