

**A Study of Academic Exercises Used for
Teaching Social Studies in English
At Saint Joseph Bangna School Thailand**

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to highlight the problems ESL students faced when studying social studies at Saint Joseph Bangna School. In particular, what improvements could be made to the kinds of academic exercises contained within the books & websites as teaching materials. It was designed around three research questions relating to what problems students faced when studying social studies. What kinds of academic exercises do their social studies books and websites contain. And finally in what ways can these books and websites be improved. The researcher carried out a broad, shallow & qualitative approach using three phases starting with a student survey of the books. The second phase was a more in-depth study of 50 books from Saint Joseph School Bangna library & Saint Gabriel's library & a random sample of 25 websites. The research findings were recorded on data tables and it was shown that many of the books used for ESL social studies had few quality academic exercises for students to study the necessary grammar and other items to prepare them for studying. As a result, the researcher completed the research by designing new style academic exercises that focused on these vital study areas of vocabulary and related grammar related to the texts.

Key words: content based instruction; social studies; advanced organisers; vocabulary and grammar exercises; academic exercises.

With the unprecedented growth of the English language in Asia it has resulted in a similar growth in academic studies that has affected people's lives around the globe. Prominent among the powerful forces of change and development in education are the rise of powerful media like the Internet, environmental changes, and the widening gaps between rich and poor. English is fast becoming the second language of academia, which requires students to be proficient enough to be able to read and understand texts in English in all subjects to understand what is going on around the world. Learning social studies at school is a vital basic step towards understanding this mass of information as they grow and develop in to adults who will ultimately contribute in their own way to their society. It also allows the opportunity for teachers to teach some real facts about the world in history and geography lessons.

The research in this thesis was based on a broad and analytical study, which studied a large collection of learning materials namely, books and websites that are used to teach a variety of subjects in an ESL social studies class. The research was particularly focused on recording and analyzing those academic exercises that place emphasis on allowing students opportunities to interact more academically and is further concerned with the learning of and the recycling of essential vocabulary, grammar & questioning skills essential for students to become engaged with during study and to fully understand the texts in their own way.

The researcher has been teaching English as a second language ESL and social studies in Thailand for five years. During daily instruction close observation by the researcher showed how students reacted with the social studies lessons and materials and how they would struggle with important concepts by being unable to understand key words and phrases from their course books. So this research was also about utilizing the experience of the researcher who had grown to develop a strong awareness of certain difficulties that teachers and students had when teaching and studying social studies.

Many teachers who teach social studies will find that there are many commercially available academic exercises available to students whose first language is not English and for teachers who teach other subjects like business studies for example. But teachers will have much greater difficulty in finding academic exercises for other subjects which are level appropriate, for example economics and political science (Brooks and Sandkamp 2006).

The problem

Learning materials and academic exercises which are an important part of instruction, they reinforce what the teacher has taught & they also help teachers scaffold their instruction to students. Over time the researcher had come to realize that there may be few published materials that relate directly to the specialist needs of ESL students who study social studies in English. But also students' can become less involved with the study, because the teacher has had to resort to more of a lecturing style of teaching because of the lack of tangible teaching materials.

Brinton states "typically content texts contain a density of information which is difficult for the non native speaker to process" (Brinton, 2003 P95). It is common practice when teaching English to a class whose first language is not English, for the teacher to prepare students before study can begin, support students while studying, and concept check their understanding after studying in far greater detail and at a slower pace than in non ESL class. Shang also states that content based instruction should use English at a comprehensible level so as to increase students' understanding of the subject matter & also build language skills simultaneously (Shang 2006, paragraph 7).

Research

The research was conducted over three phases, phase one started when students completed a survey of the books used in social studies. Phase two was a major research project on selected further books & websites & designed data tables to record academic exercises. Phase three completed the research when the findings were compiled and the researcher designed academic exercises which were validated by other expert teachers. The following research questions were studied in this research. What are the problems students faced, when studying social studies at Saint Joseph School Bangna in English? Second what kinds of academic exercises do these learning materials contain, in order for students to engage more actively with their ESL social studies?

And thirdly what improvements can be made to the academic exercises? To this the objectives of the research were to investigate the problems students faced when studying, then to record and analyze academic exercises. Thirdly it was to construct academic exercises for validation by expert teachers.

The significance of this study is widespread, and has potential to help not only those teachers who use content based instruction in the classroom but in the design of materials for other subjects like biology, chemistry and other content based subjects. It may also be of interest to those who design ESL curriculum with a content based subject. The academic exercises may also benefit students as they may be able to engage more with the texts and materials in a more pro-active & collaborative way. Because to answer the questions and complete the academic exercises the main reading text will have to read more than once.

This means that students have to engage with the materials in a more personal way. According to Dewey (Wiles & Bondi) Academic exercise sheets also help to create a "learning by doing" aspect to social studies and encourages students to self study. It is also important to encourage students to study more and to become better independent learners who can think for themselves and utilize their analytical skills by offering study materials that are well thought out and are content specific. If the social studies materials were designed with academic exercises, it also allows opportunities for administrators to integrate units; for example a history unit could be combined with a unit on local geography for a complete study on the locality or even a whole country.

Using academic exercises are also important for student evaluation as the teacher can see at a glance how the student is progressing through reviewing their completed academic exercises. If students are working with academic exercises in sets and units, the completion of these units could also contribute to the students own personal sense of achievement.

Two major theories were considered throughout the research that of advanced organiser and the other was that of content based instruction. The first was the theory of advanced organizer and is related to the vital area of preparations by the teacher. This preparation is mainly concerned with the teacher preparing the students for the forthcoming study by activating schema, and any aspects of prior learning. For social studies this means pre-teaching the essential vocabulary, grammar structures, idioms and other aspects of the text that are important when they are actually reading it.

Joyce, Weil & Calhoun quote Ausubel that advanced organizers are designed to strengthen student's cognitive structures and their knowledge of a particular subject at any given time and how well organized, clear and stable that knowledge is.

For this study the use of the theory of advance organizer is the idea of the teacher preparing those essential learning materials that can range from the pre-teaching of academic skills like essential vocabulary, reviewing grammar structures, idioms etc... To more 3 dimensional objects such as pictures & photographs, graphs, copies of the American declaration of independence, or even a pair of Nike training shoes.

Brinton also suggests that for teachers to prepare for their content based classes there needs to be a phase of preparation which involves using materials that have been either adapted from other language classes or the teacher develops their own. But further to this she states that "in the simplest sense of the word, teachers may individualize materials to more closely correspond to the needs and types of students enrolled in a given class" (Brinton et al 2003, page 93).

Further to this however it seems that there is no real consensus about what makes good academic reading exercises, whether it should be adapted or un-adapted texts. Un-adapted texts offer a real life situation to the readers and to some extent offer a reality check, to what is the true nature and depth of English native language and one in which the students have to cope by applying some strategy to survive through the learning process.

To some, this can be a daunting experience, faced with paragraph after paragraph of complex native language texts with few helping indicators. Adapted texts on the other hand may only offer a certain percentage of the original text and in turn this offers learners less of a real life experience. However there is the principle that adapting texts too much renders them no longer authentic in the formal sense of the word. The term authentic is not a formal term and is one in which applies to those materials which are distinguished between those not originally written for language teaching purposes.

The second theme is concerned with the actual teaching and contact time in the ESL classroom between teacher and students. This is particularly related to that of a content based instruction (CBI) approach to learning the English language and a specific subject in a content specific lesson. It is at this stage that the importance of how well the students have been prepared by using advance organizers becomes effective.

Content-based instruction is the teaching of a specific subject, but also using students' second language skills in this case English. Brinton states "the integration of a particular content (e.g., social studies) along with second language aims. It refers to the concurrent teaching of academic subject matter & second language skills" (Brinton et.al. 2003, page 2). Shang also states that content based instruction should use English at a comprehensible level so as to increase students' understanding of the subject matter and also build language skills simultaneously (Shang 2006, paragraph 7). Reilly sees content based instruction as a teaching method which has been used for many years for adult, professional and university classes, however at the elementary and secondary school levels it is a relatively new idea.

Teachers can use language classes as a means of expanding social studies knowledge as well as using social studies content to enhance language development (Reilly 1988, page 3).

Regarding the use of learning materials Brinton again suggests that a certain amount of needs analysis be conducted by the teacher in any planning stages. This again is defined as either formal or informal as to the contents of the materials. A formal approach should be to analyze the linguistic features of the texts so as to make it easier for the students to understand it. An informal approach would be for teachers to devise exercises that help to expand students writing skills which are in a way connected to that of the formal language structures. But also the informational content must be chosen carefully or adapted carefully so as to preserve some aspect of reality and lessen the density which is often a characteristic of native language texts. Further to this Brinton continues to state that adaptation should concentrate on developing exercises to help students utilize schemata, and the full use of scaffolding techniques (Brinton 2003, page 95). Chapple and Curtis state that it is clear that learning materials in a content - based lesson will largely depend on the following factors:

- ❖ the choices the teacher makes
- ❖ the abilities of the students
- ❖ the demands of the curriculum
- ❖ the choice and the content of the lesson

(Chapple and Curtis 2000, page 419-433).

The findings for this research stem from the three original questions which were what were the problems students faced when studying social studies at Saint Joseph School Bangna in English? Second what kinds of academic exercises do these learning materials contain, in order for students to engage more actively with their ESL social studies? And thirdly what improvements can be made to the academic exercises? To this the objectives of the research were to investigate the problems students faced when studying, then to record and analyze academic exercises. Thirdly it was to construct academic exercises for validation by expert teachers. The findings related to research question one were, mainly related to the contents of the books, their design and their levels. The findings related to the question are that many of the books used in the survey carried out by the students were indeed too big, expensive and overloaded with vast amounts of native language texts. This relates to what Teresa Nave was stating in her research, where she stated that materials for studying social studies are a developing aspect of content based instruction. The books and websites used for study are emphasized in this report as important aspects of what Ausubel describes as advanced organisers in preparation for learning. The findings showed that 73% of the students thought that the books were too big; 82% stated that the amount of reading texts were too much; 73% stated that the reading texts were too difficult; 73% stated that the grammar was too difficult; 83% stated that the vocabulary was too difficult; 83% stated that there were no academic exercises in the books at all and 68% stated that they didn't want to study the books at all. These figures were the basis for the researcher to carry out further research across a wider area of books as a basis for question two.

Research question two was what kinds of academic exercises did these learning materials contain, in order for students to engage more actively with their social studies in English? The findings for this question clearly show that no such opportunities for advanced organisers were found. To this, Brinton stated the importance of the integration of a particular content (e.g., math, science, social studies) along with second language aims. Shang also stated a similar idea in that content based instruction should use English at a comprehensible level so as to increase students' understanding of the subject matter and also build language skills simultaneously. No such adequate integration or exercise to increase students understanding of subject matter was found. The findings for research question two relate to the contents of a selection of social studies books & websites. The books were selected from two locations Saint Joseph School Bangna library & Saint Gabriel's library at Assumption University. In short the research tables show a distinct lack of academic exercises. In total, 10 tables were used which showed that only 16% contained vocabulary exercises, 8% contained grammar exercises; and 20% contained study questions. Research question two was what improvements can be made to the academic exercises? Again Brinton and Shaw's comments were used as a theoretical model as well as what I was stating for understanding what materials needed improvement in ESL teaching of content based subjects, in particular social studies.

The findings for question three, was the idea of a new and improved set of progressive academic exercises aimed at a social studies curriculum. The researcher designed a set of exercises contained within 3 booklets and had 3 expert teachers to validate each one as items for study.

The author designed the units so that there were adequate opportunities for students' and teachers to study vital vocabulary words as a prerequisite to reading and teaching the important facts from the story. Each expert teacher was asked to review the contents of each book and to offer any improvements to them.

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