

# “Now, What Should I Do for English Language Learners?” Reconceptualizing Social Studies Curriculum Design for ELLs

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## Introduction

One of the main professional-development challenges social studies teachers face involves adjusting content and instruction to accommodate the surging population of English Language Learners (ELLs). Between the 1993–1994 and 2004–2005 school years, ELL school populations increased 68 percent to more than 5.1 million, compared to a 7.8 percent increase among non-ELL students (NCELA 2008). Because most ELLs are “mainstreamed” into content-area classrooms, the burgeoning population of non-native speakers makes instructional adaptation legally and morally imperative to provide all students with meaningful learning experiences.

Providing such learning experiences is still very much an issue, even when an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program is available to students. For example, in *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) the U.S. Supreme Court called for providing *meaningful* participation in a public education program, regardless of a student’s first language: not doing so, the Court concluded, would violate the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Some teachers might still assume that these rules need not apply to ELLs who are illegal immigrants; in *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), however, the Court made it clear that illegal aliens and their children, though not citizens, are entitled to all the protections of the Fourteenth Amendment. Those two cases make the legal obligation of ELL-responsive curriculum adjustments clear. Social studies teachers also have a moral obligation to prepare future citizens, and that obligation includes providing meaningful civic experiences for students of all language backgrounds.

A short taxonomy can articulate what social studies teachers actually need to accomplish—some precise guidance on what we should be doing for ELLs, easily juxtaposed with content standards, instructional strategies, key skill domains, and dispositional objectives when crafting unit and lesson plans. This article focuses on a particular example of reconceptualizing social studies curricula through reverse-chronological history instruction, an exercise applicable to secondary ELL pullout classes and mainstream social studies classrooms alike.

### An ELL Taxonomy for Social Studies

One challenge social studies teachers face is consciously and deliberately marshaling the specific techniques and instructional strategies needed to teach ELLs. That challenge is not the fault of the teacher or the ESOL trainer, but rather is the result of the strategies themselves, often expressed as inchoate platitudes or simply the elements of good teaching. Writ large, social studies educators should respond to four main areas of concern within an ESOL context: 1) building empathy for the difficulties associated with learning a language; 2) understanding how second languages are acquired; 3) adapting curricula to students' language needs; and 4) employing literacy skills in the disciplines (Dong 2004). For the sake of both simplicity and development of something tangible, this article focuses on the third area of concern—adapting the curriculum. To this end, we have organized this taxonomy into three sections: content, instruction, and pedagogy (table 1). In this sense, content is the planned subject matter for the learning experience; instruction is the planned instructional enactment of the content; and pedagogy refers to the actual enacted content and instruction, as well as to the unique characteristics of the teacher in conjunction with the students and their milieu (Hlebowitsh 2005).



TAXONOMY OF ELL STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION		
CONTENT ORGANIZATION	INSTRUCTION	PEDAGOGY
Outlining both language and content objectives (Dong 2004).	Collaborative and cooperative learning (Cruz et al. 2003; Roessingh 2004).	Consistent verbal interaction with students (Verplaetse 1998).
Employing thematic unit design in social studies classes (Cruz et al. 2003; Custodio and Sutton 1998; Roessingh 2004).	Explicit instruction of language objectives (Roessingh 2004).	Checking for understanding, spending time with root words, attending to differences in cultural knowledge among students (Dong 2004).
Use primary source materials (Szpara and Ahmad 2007). Integrate other supplementary readings (Cruz et al. 2003).	Graphic organizers, writing on board that which is said, beginning classes with active review, translating key words, hands-on learning, role play and dramatization for concepts (Szpara and Ahmad 2007).  Brainstorming, journal writing, literary analysis, problem solving, role playing, monologues, storytelling, oral reports, interviewing and applications (Cruz and Thornton 2008).	Use higher-level questioning (Roessingh 2004).  How and why questions; modeling, demonstrating, and comprehension checks (Cruz and Thornton 2008).
Do not change the content, but change the form of presentation "[S]ocial studies teachers need to adapt their own curriculum" (Szpara and Ahmad 2007, 193).	Scaffolding; SQ4R model (Survey, Question, Read, Reflect, Recite, and Review); VIPS (Voice Intonation, Pausing, Speed); personalize information (Cruz et al. 2003).	Rephrase in shorter sentences, wait time; learning about students' home life, family history, SES, etc. (Szpara and Ahmad 2007).
Read simpler versions and attend textbook problems including timelines, issues with background knowledge, vocabulary, syntax, and statements packed with numerous ideas and concepts (Brown 2007).	Content maps (concept maps); outlines of a unit; guiding questions (Brown 2007).  KWL  (Cruz et al. 2003; Urdanivia-English 2007).	Modify language, paraphrase ideas, repeat essential points, frequent checks of understanding (Cruz et al. 2003).

Table 1

At this point the reader might note correctly that we have merely collected and rearranged axiomatic ESOL suggestions. In a sense, that is true, but we have done so with an eye toward planning lessons and units, as well as providing a tool to guide the implementation of the techniques in curriculum design.

Although teachers may attribute an ELL student's struggles with schoolwork to cognitive ability, the problem may actually be related to background knowledge rather than intellectual ability or curiosity (Short and Echevarria 2005). After all, social studies teachers are consistently

asked to develop support, conveyance, and construction of meaning (Weisman and Hansen 2007). Meaning, in the sense Dewey (1933) proposed, pertains to ideas as grasped or apprehended in relation to other ideas. Because topics relevant to the lives of ELLs (or any students) help engage them (Cruz and Thornton 2008), a social studies curriculum should begin with students' current life experiences and progress to antecedent knowledge and experiences that explain why things are the way they are. That approach to content, which focuses on connections and relations of ideas to other ideas, lies at the heart of social studies education.

### Teaching History in Reverse

Before reconceptualizing the social studies curriculum in ways responsive to ELLs, we first need to return to larger aims and goals. Settling on commonly accepted social studies content standards has long been complicated by competing emphases on civics, history, contemporary problems, and other focuses (Grossman and Schoenfeld 2005). For example, history or geography education versus social studies education is really a question of ends versus means. For social studies classes, even ostensible "history" classes, the end concerns civic efficacy. All content is marshaled toward that end, rather than focused on mastery within the particular discipline. In short, this distinction means that we educate citizens rather than nascent historians.

The reverse-chronological approach to teaching history is consonant with social studies purposes and aims (Misco and Patterson 2009). It involves what Simpson (1983) called "chaining" the past, present, and future, whereby any perceived barriers between those inseparable temporal constructs can be removed. One concern here might be developing "hindsight thinking," but that is where social studies education differs from history education. If we choose to *use* history as material for making reasoned judgments, expanding our view of humanity and developing visions of the common good (Barton and Levstik 2004), then the benefit of hindsight seems more palatable, given our primary aim of developing citizens who can make informed and reasoned decisions *today*. Typically, this approach unfolds with a prominent, engaging, and relevant contemporary point upon which inquiry can be based (Pfannkuche 1971). From there, it is not a strict progression into the immediate past by year or era; rather, teachers and students select a period that best explains the contemporary issue or idea of study.

Once the first of multiple epochs is selected—which can, in varying forms, be addressed in reverse—each topic within an epoch can progress chronologically (Davis and Laushey 1972). Reverse chronology is therefore thematic, as ELL literature frequently suggests (Cruz et al. 2003; Custodio and Sutton 1998; Roessingh 2004). The process also naturally facilitates

using primary sources (Szpara and Ahmad 2007), supplementary readings (Cruz et al. 2003), and cooperative inquiry (Cruz et al. 2003; Roessingh 2004), while it avoids many problems found in textbooks (Brown 2007).

### *Examples for Practice*

One point of departure for teachers might involve contrasting the nuanced contemporary regulations concerning prayer in school with the religious influences of early American education. The pivotal court cases of the 1960s might then suggest close investigation of the First Amendment and the subtle balance the jurists sought between establishment and the free exercise clauses. This line of inquiry might further call for investigating the influences of deism and Christianity on the formation of American government and in turn lead to exploring sovereignty issues between state and church. From that point, there are innumerable epochs and turning points to which one might attend (Misco and Patterson 2009).

### *Beginning with the Familiar*

Reverse chronology aligns with ELL guidelines primarily by beginning with the familiar and reaching outward (Pfannkuche 1971). Drawing on the educational psychology theories of associationism and connectionism, we can reasonably posit that all students learn more when the topic of study relates to their life experiences, where lessons draw upon the known and progress to the unknown (Misco and Patterson 2009). As a result, the reverse-chronological approach has a natural logic for students (Simpson 1983) that can lead to cognitive gains in content (Khazzaka 1997).

Beginning with a springboard from familiar territory, teachers can harness the current life interests, experiences, and imaginations of ELLs and build upon them through active inquiry into the antecedents, causes, and explanations of the present. Because some students' life experiences and interests may derive from other cultures, the teacher should help students establish their connections to other individuals, groups, and institutions in the larger and broader society. This kind of curricular organization can help to improve student attitudes about historical content (Khazzaka 1997), and it also offers benefits for students with learning disabilities (Sebba and Clarke 1993).

### *Making Meaning of Content*

Ideas unconnected to other ideas, interests, or experiences not only lack utility; they also undermine meaningful learning. Dewey's (1933) articulation of the role of meaning in thinking further underscores the promise of reverse chronology for ELLs, not only as a way to organize learning experiences, but also to help teachers and students decide what content most deserves inclusion. As indicated earlier, nothing has meaning

without a relationship to other things. Dewey (1916) argued that no real thinking occurs when topics and ideas are isolated from experience. Although both content knowledge and meaning are critical features of powerful social studies teaching, honoring content over meaning renders making connections and contextualizing content knowledge more difficult for students. Therefore, this is precisely the way in which reverse chronology helps create meaning: this reconceptualization will not permit studying content without drawing a relationship to current experiences in the students' society. By starting today with current and perennial issues affecting students and their communities and working backward, more meaning is built and the chasm between the past and the present is gradually narrowed (Polos 1980).

All curricula require criteria by which we select content (Thornton 2005), and the reverse-chronological approach is no different. This approach helps students understand where they are going (Simpson 1983), and there is tangible utility in content relevant to their reverse-historical inquiry. Numerous and shifting perspectives, including those of the students, are essential elements of reverse chronology, and they ultimately lead to deeper learning (Doppen 2000; Misco and Patterson 2009).

### *Making Curricular Decisions*

The reverse-chronological approach also helps answer the generational question of what knowledge has the most worth. Social studies teachers often observe that they are unable to complete the required content, and as a result their students may not learn about the Cold War, Vietnam, or other topics of the recent past. Altering the normal curricula can give such often-marginalized contemporary topics new prominence, emphasizing their relevance to the present. In the reverse-chronological approach, teachers act as more-empowered curricular gatekeepers, exercising increased discretion to modify, discard, and include content. This approach, although it complicates pre-formed curricula and encourages teacher-created lessons and units, often sparks some of the best teaching (Thornton 2005). Reverse chronology removes the perceived burdens of irrelevant lessons by subjecting all content to the test of present-day applicability. Focusing on content that has meaning—connections to current issues and student interests—adds resilience and durability to students' understandings of content (Pfannkuche 1971).

Reverse chronology encourages the use of instructional strategies enumerated in our taxonomy (table 1). Because much of the process involves a group inquiry into the past, teachers will naturally employ current content maps and guiding questions (Brown 2007) to explicate the journey into historical epochs and preceding phenomena. The points of departure into the past are personalized for the student group

(Cruz et al. 2003), which is fertile terrain for employing the KWL (what I know, what I want to learn, what I have learned) and SQ4R models (survey, question, read, reflect, recite, and review) (Cruz et al. 2003) as well as higher-level questioning and exploration (Roessingh 2004). Graphic organizers assist students in making causal relationships explicit (Szpara and Ahmad 2007), and the inquiry format will encourage consistent verbal interaction (Verplaetse 1998). Finally, because the teacher is a fellow inquirer in this curricular design, wait time, learning about students' lives, and checking for understanding (Cruz et al. 2003; Szpara and Ahmad 2007) are natural instructional tools.

## Conclusion

Given the recent and dramatic increase in the number of ELLs in classrooms, social studies educators should be prepared to respond to changing student demographics while they maintain their focus on preparing active democratic citizens. The often-elusive suggestions offered by ESOL professional-development programs do not so much infringe on instructional autonomy as remind us of good practice that mingles with ESOL-focused approaches. Infusing these suggestions within curricular design, alongside content standards, instructional strategies, and dispositional objectives, is a revitalizing undertaking, one that encourages innovation and reconceptualization.

Reverse-chronological history instruction is one of many paths to accomplishing the goals of social studies education. It fosters inquiry-oriented teaching strategies and unifies the normally schismatic past, present, and future. Departing into the past from meaningful and contemporary points, rather than mastering unrelated content minutiae, we meet a number of the recommendations articulated in the taxonomy presented here. Ultimately, reverse-chronological history instruction infused with ESOL approaches can help students of all backgrounds make informed and reasoned decisions and access rich content in meaningful, active, and challenging ways (NCSS 1994).

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