

A Review of “Teaching Social Studies to English Language Learners”

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“Fair is not everyone getting the same thing. Fair is everyone getting what they need.” -- Anonymous

Yuan, 19 years old, is an ELL (English language learner) student from China, and has already graduated from high school in her home country. She made a commitment to attend high school for an additional two years at a private all-girls school in Honolulu, in order to better her English speaking ability and eventually attend college in the United States. Yuan is an ELL student that needs significant accommodations. Most of the time, entire assignments are not just adjusted but also completely changed, and changing assignments around so that she gets the same information and basic ideas as the rest of the class is not always easy to do. *Teaching Social Studies to English Language Learners* came into my hands via an Internet search. This is a miracle book for all things pertaining to ELL students in a social studies classroom. It is exactly what social studies teachers need to help them better understand how to teach effectively for students like Yuan.

The authors of this book are experts in the field. Barbara C. Cruz is a professor of social science education at the University of South Florida, and Stephen J. Thornton is a professor and chair of the Department of Secondary Education at the University of South Florida. Part of the series *Teaching English Language Learners Across the Curriculum*, which guides readers in teaching ELL students in different content areas, the book is a very fast read. A manageable 220 pages allows even a busy teacher to read it in a few days.

Teaching Social Studies to English Language Learners is well laid out and starts with an introduction to the series as a whole and then goes into a more specific introduction about teachers and ELL students. The introduction also mentions who would benefit most from this book (e.g. pre-service social studies teachers, practicing social studies teachers, ESOL aides and support staff) as well as how to best use the information in the book. Following the introduction, the chapters are divided into three parts, all of which flow cohesively together. Part I introduces the reader to teaching ELLs in general, which includes: what to expect, different ELL programs, and the individual differences of ELLs. Part II explains teaching and learning for an ELL student in a social studies classroom, which includes research on teaching social studies to ELL students and how to implement a social studies curriculum for ELL students. Finally, Part III offers ideas and strategies for teaching specific social studies content areas, such as U.S. History, to an ELL student. In addition, the book contains a resource section for teachers of ELL students, which is probably the most helpful feature of all. There is a glossary that explains unfamiliar terms and a comprehensive index.

As a whole, this is a great book for beginning social studies teachers or social studies teachers who are new to working with ELL students. The authors assume that the audience may include those with little prior



knowledge of the topics, which is actually helpful because it means that this book will be beneficial to a variety of people. The book is organized in a way so that teachers who are not new to teaching ELL students can easily skip to their preferred parts. Finally, it does an excellent job of providing specific lesson plans for nine different social studies content courses: Geography, U.S. History, World History, Government and Civics, Economics, Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, and Current Issues. These lesson plans can be easily implemented and adjusted to fit any teacher's needs.

While the overall book is extremely helpful for social studies teachers new to working with ELL students, Chapter 2.4 "Enacting the Social Studies Curriculum," Chapter 3.3 "U.S. History," and Chapter 3.5 "Government and Civics" were particularly helpful. Part II: Principles of Social Studies Teaching and Learning surveys the basics for teaching social studies to ELL students. Chapter 2.4 "Enacting the Social Studies Curriculum" proved to be the most useful part of the entire section because it discusses the specifics of teaching ELL learners. This chapter starts by going over how to use the primary social studies textbook along with supplemental resources such as trade books, Internet resources, atlases, historical fiction books, newspapers, and videos. While it is not a revolutionary concept to use supplemental resources along with the textbook, the chapter does an excellent job of explaining the how and the why. This chapter explains how to help ELL students make sense of the information they are receiving from the textbook and supplemental resources. Graphic organizers, vocabulary overviews, sectioned readings, and note-taking practices are among the list of suggestions this chapter offers, and while these are all excellent, the idea that stands out the most was the prediction guide. A prediction guide helps students to predict what a chapter will be about by using clues such as pictures and headings, which, when incorporated with a

pre-reading discussion, is an excellent way to start off a lesson.

In addition to explaining how to use supplemental materials along with the standard textbook and how to help ELL students make sense of the information from the readings, the chapter also gives some practical ideas on how a teacher can better explain the content. Using demonstrations, implementing role-playing and simulations, and creating lessons rich with visual resources are among the suggestions. In particular, simulations are a great way to get students to gain a deeper understanding of differing points of view.

Finally, this chapter is particularly helpful when it comes to explaining the implementation of assessment for ELL students. While assessing students is a necessary part of the learning process, ELL students will require modifications in this area. Modifying a test meant for native English speakers is the most basic way to assess ELL students fairly. The chapter does a great job of offering suggestions for alternative methods of assessment, some of which could work for both an ELL student as well as native English speaking students. The best ideas presented and explained in this chapter were portfolios/journals and performance-based-assessment because they call for assessing a student's work throughout a unit, and not simply testing their ability to regurgitate material.

Part III "Teaching Social Studies" is the section of this book that most social studies teachers will probably skip right ahead to because it details how to teach specific social studies content courses to ELL students. Chapter 3.3 "U.S. History" and Chapter 3.5 "Government and Civics" are of particular interest to this reviewer, being a U.S. History and U.S. Government teacher. In Chapter 3.3 "U.S. History," the authors first explain why U.S. History could be exceptionally hard for ELL students. Most native English speaking students grew up here in the United States, learning about the history of country through their lives in a variety of classes, family travels,

holidays, etc. ELL students are often times at a disadvantage when it comes to background information on the subject and having nothing to draw from makes simple concepts much harder. The chapter offers suggestions as to how to deal with this issue. The suggestion that stands out the most is teaching around important concepts or ideas, essential questions if you will, as opposed to just historical facts. Teaching around ideas allows ELL students to relate to the information in their own ways. For example, if you were teaching a unit about WWII, some of the “big ideas” or “essential questions” you might pose include: “do people have a responsibility to respond to injustice?”, “what does it mean to be a U.S. citizen?”, or “what cost is worth the price of victory?” All of these questions look at the bigger picture and can be answered by anyone, from anywhere. The idea of teaching around “big ideas” is not a new one; however, the significance of this idea for ELL learners is important to note, and can be read about in other ELL strategy books such as Freeman (2007).

In addition to addressing the issue of a lack of background information, the chapter also offers examples of lessons plans designed around the suggestions mentioned in Chapter 2.4, which was discussed earlier in this review. What is particularly useful about these lessons is that they show teachers exactly what to do and how to go about doing it. Some of the lesson plan ideas include: using visual aids and stratified questioning, creating dioramas, cooperative learning and peer teaching, bar graphs and historical photograph analysis, timelines, modified texts, and learning through music. Each one of these ideas is explained with an example of a lesson plan from a U.S. History course, covering content from the Lewis and Clark Expedition through

WWII. Finally, this chapter concludes with an extensive list of resources for U.S. History teachers.

Chapter 3.5 “Government and Civics” is written in the same format as Chapter 3.3. The chapter does a good job of stressing the same strategies mentioned in Chapter 3.3 and described earlier in this review as a means of helping ELL students to better understand the content. This chapter presents government-specific lesson plans for these strategies. Unlike Chapter 3.3, this chapter provides an example of an assessment instrument within a lesson plan, which is a bonus, as it allows readers to learn how to implement an assessment instrument that would be more beneficial to ELL students. As with Chapter 3.3, this chapter ends with a list of resources, albeit much smaller, for teachers to refer to.

While this book provides little to complain about, the one thing the authors could have done better was provide specific detailed information throughout the lesson plans. There are a few places where the authors would refer back to a previous section to avoid writing in or “repeating” details. While this is normally an acceptable practice, the problem that emerged was that, when looking back, the references sometimes do not quite match up or provide enough detail in the referred section, which in turn causes a lot of unnecessary back-and-forth page turning. While the book in general followed a good format, this was the one drawback.

Teaching Social Studies to English Language Learners provides a variety of tips for social studies teachers that will benefit not only ELL students but also, native-English speaking students in general. It has provided many suggestions that were used to help Yuan, the ELL student introduced in the beginning of this review, and students like her.

Reference

Freeman, D., & Freeman, Y. (2007). *English language learners: The essential guide*. New York, NY: Scholastic.