ABSTRACT. Reading in content areas is generally difficult for English-language learners (ELLs), but reading in social studies is particularly challenging for ELLs for several reasons. First, ELLs often lack background information that textbook authors assume readers have. Second, ELLs in the process of learning a new language do not have grade-level-appropriate vocabulary that is required for content learning; social studies vocabulary can be highly technical and abstract. Third, the discourse style of social studies texts can be cumbersome for ELLs. Together, these challenges slow ELLs’ comprehension. In this article, the author illustrates the difficult nature of social studies texts and suggests concrete strategies to make social studies texts more comprehensible for ELLs.

Keywords: content reading, English-language learners (ELLs), social studies texts, vocabulary

Social studies texts are difficult even for native speakers of English (Chamot and O’Malley 1994), partly because of the nature of the texts. Literacy experts describe content-area textbooks as having a decontextualized discourse style. This means that the narrative style of the social studies texts is characterized by complex syntax, technical vocabulary, and a lack of helpful context. For students who are not native English speakers, the decontextualized nature of social studies texts poses frustrating difficulties. These students, known as English-language learners (ELLs), find it extremely challenging to read and comprehend the complex subject-matter texts as they acquire a new language. Social studies texts are more difficult for ELLs than for native English speakers because ELLs have not fully developed their English skills.

To learn social studies effectively, students must gain a conceptual understanding of historical events, geographical places, and social positions as the context of textbook reading assignments. However, it is difficult for ELLs to have a conceptual understanding of events and their impact on or consequences in contemporary society. This understanding is closely connected to the comprehension of social studies textbooks. The challenge of understanding social studies textbooks does not receive sufficient attention.

The number of ELLs in U.S. public schools is growing rapidly every year. Between 1991 and 2001, the ELL enrollment in public schools in the United States increased by 95 percent, whereas the general student population increased only by 12 percent (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs 2005). Georgia reports that ELLs in public schools increased by 650 percent during the same period (Batt, Kim, and Sunderman 2005). Clearly, public school teachers throughout the nation will face a greater influx of immigrant children. In an ideal world, ELLs would have the benefit of bilingual programs that help them gradually build the competence needed to read complex texts in their native language. However, this scenario is rare, and responsibility usually falls on social studies teachers. How prepared are public school teachers, and social studies teachers in particular, to provide adequate instruction for ELLs?

Social studies teachers can use a set of concrete actions to help ELLs make sense of what they read. In the beginning, students may understand little; however, they can improve their comprehension if they are provided with scaffolding and accommodation (Peregoy and Owen...
1990). ELLs can learn to understand much of the content presented in social studies texts when the language barrier is reduced. Social studies teachers do not need to wait until ELLs complete the long and arduous task of fully acquiring academic English.

In this article, I illustrate the difficult nature of social studies reading through examples and suggest that social studies teachers can help make demanding texts more comprehensible for ELLs. I offer specific strategies for social studies teachers to use in assisting ELLs’s reading comprehension and thereby improve their learning of content.

Academic English

The acquisition of conversational or social English, or the English used for daily conversation, is rapidly acquired by ELLs; the acquisition process generally takes only two to three years (Cummins 1996). However, acquiring academic English, or the language of content in school, takes considerably longer. It generally takes five to seven years for ELLs to reach grade level in academic language (Cummins). In other words, being able to handle the language most prevalent in academic learning is a long and difficult process. When linguistic features used in texts are decontextualized and entirely expository in nature, reading becomes difficult for ELLs. Some of the challenges ELLs face in reading social studies texts include:

- Decontextualized written discourse cannot provide facial features, intonation, or gestures.
- Instantaneous clarification or feedback is not possible as they are in face-to-face communication; readers must figure out what they are reading alone. The only recourse readers have are prior knowledge and knowledge of the language and writing conventions.
- There are few graphic cues.
- There is a less predictable sequence as compared with narratives. Thus, it is harder to predict what will happen next.

- Expository texts assume that readers have the necessary background knowledge to understand the text, and the texts do not fill the gaps when readers lack relevant background information.
- Some readers’ prior knowledge may be mismatched and could interfere with comprehension of the text.
- Vocabulary in social studies can be highly technical and abstract.

This list is not exhaustive. Nevertheless, these barriers add up, and it is easy to see why reading in social studies can frustrate ELLs.

Challenges in Reading Social Studies Texts

Adequately addressing ELLs’ needs in reading social studies texts requires teachers to recognize the degree and scope of the struggle ELLs encounter. I illustrate some examples of the complexities and difficulties of social studies texts below (American Westward Expansion 2006). I chose excerpts as examples that highlight the complexities of the language used in social studies. Numerous roadblocks exist when ELLs read the following texts, related to western expansion, in a fifth-grade social studies class (see Brown 2007 for a similar discussion).

Background Knowledge

Runaway horses, stampeded cattle, prairie fire, blizzards, heat, sunstroke, Indians, lice, snakes and the pure loneliness of the open plains—all of these and more faced the western pioneers of the 1800s. Certainly there were those who gave up, moving back to the security of the East, but many more stayed and helped build and shape the West one sod shack at a time, one small farm at a time and eventually one town at a time. They traveled forth on horseback, in Conestoga wagons...some even walked. For them it wasn’t a question of how long it would take, only that it had to be done. And they did it. (American Westward Expansion 2006, para. 9)

ELLs who are reading the text above may not have prior knowledge of western expansion. In contrast, mainstream students have normally heard or read about it since their childhood. Because background knowledge facilitates reading comprehension (Dochy, Segers, and Buehl 1999), ELLs who do not know much about western expansion before reading such a text will have a hard time understanding it.

Vocabulary

Jefferson’s message was secret because France owned the territory in question and such an expedition would surely be considered trespassing. (American Westward Expansion 2006, para. 2)

The government was shrewd enough to realize that by mandating that the land could not lay idle, they could easily avoid one problem and immediately solve another. (American Westward Expansion 2006, para. 8)

Today is not so different from 1888 in that land remains one commodity that can’t be created by mass production or any other method. (American Westward Expansion 2006, para. 7)

As shown here, the amount of unfamiliar vocabulary in social studies text can overwhelm ELLs. The italicized words such as expedition, trespassing, mandating, and commodity, which are used in crucial places, can result in an overwhelming burden and misunderstanding of the text, even for native speakers of English. The burden for ELLs is even greater.

Syntax

Certainly there were those who gave up, moving back to the security of the East, but many more stayed and helped build and shape the West one sod shack at a time, one small farm at a time and eventually one town at a time. (American Westward Expansion 2006, para. 9)

The discourse structure of these kinds of texts is complex, often written with dependent clauses or multiple clauses that connect a series of facts, ideas, and concepts in one long sentence, as in the preceding excerpt. ELLs could easily get lost and be unable to differentiate the topic sentence from supporting details.

In history texts, sentences are often written in the passive voice when describing events or explaining cause and effect. This can be troubling for ELLs because the passive voice is not
used often in daily conversation. The unfamiliar style of communication can add more roadblocks:

The stories that were related to them by explorers and missionaries, just back from the track West, and were filled with images of vast, open landscapes, abundant game and pristine rivers and lakes [sic]. (American Westward Expansion 2006, para. 7)

Densely Packed Ideas

Mexico to the south harbored small gangs of Bandidos who, regardless of the 1848 treaty, still coveted parts of Texas and California and saw the areas as morally belonging to the Mexican government. (American Westward Expansion 2006, para. 8)

Ideas are often densely expressed in one sentence that is connected with relative clauses, inserted adverbial clauses and phrases, or appositive phrases. When a series of ideas or facts is presented in a convoluted manner, it slows ELLs’ comprehension and distracts students from the main idea.

Timelines

Traditionally, when one thinks of the expansion of the American West, the event most likely to come to mind is the California Gold Rush of 1849. While that profitable discovery did boost California’s population by 80,000 eager prospectors, there remained an awful lot of land between the Pacific Coast and, say, St. Louis, Missouri. “Why mention St. Louis?” you might be asking. Because in actuality the young United States started exploring the vast land mass to the west from that very point and almost fifty years before those gold nuggets started hitting the pan in California. (American Westward Expansion 2006, para. 1)

In social studies, both historical facts and their sequential timeline are important for comprehending the text. However, historical event timelines differ from the plots of stories because, in historical events, numerous facts are intricately related and cause-and-effect relationships of events can be complex. Thus, conceptual understanding is more difficult.

The excerpts above are appropriate for students in the fifth grade, and the written discourse is complex. For ELLs, comprehending content-area texts can be overwhelming, if not impossible. As ELLs are developing their reading ability and competence in academic English, social studies teachers can help them access social studies content.

Recommendation One: Content Maps

After the teacher introduces the content that students are about to read, to fill gaps in prior knowledge related to the topic, a helpful step is to provide a content map of the material covered in the text. Content maps help make content transparent by showing how parts of the text are related. This can be done in various ways depending on the cognitive maturity of ELLs, but graphic organizers that illustrate the hierarchical relationship of facts can be most effective. Because the discourse structure is complex, teachers can point out the part of the sentence that carries the main idea and draw students’ attention to it.

The content map shown in figure 1 illustrates the way teachers can introduce key points of the content in simple language. This activity will scaffold ELLs’ reading comprehension, making the text more comprehensible. As the teacher and students read the text, the teacher can stop and point out relevant facts from the content map. In this way, ELLs will not be lost in the densely written text as they read, and they will comprehend what they are reading because of their teacher’s explanations and the visual aid of the content map. ELLs may not understand every word of the text, but they will be able to follow the main ideas regarding western expansion. Details can come later, but getting the gist is of immediate importance for their academic language development and learning social studies content. Each box of the content map can be made simpler or more detailed depending on the level of the students’ English.

Recommendation Two: Outlines of a Unit

Social studies teachers can present students with an outline of the text in advance so ELLs have extra time to preview the texts. The outline can be a road map for ELLs. In this way, ELLs can follow the entire book based on the outline. Another advantage of outlines is that they give ELLs a chance to look up or ask about unfamiliar vocabulary before reading.

Social studies teachers also need to work closely with English as a second language (ESL) teachers. If social studies teachers provide the textbook outlines ahead of time to ESL teachers, ESL teachers can incorporate concepts and vocabulary in their ESL instruction. Having background knowledge will greatly help ELLs with social studies reading.
Recommendation Three: Guiding Questions

To make social studies reading more manageable, teachers should present ELLs with a set of guiding questions before they read. This helps ELLs pay selective attention to parts of the text that contain the pertinent information, and it prevents them from getting mired in minute details. They may feel less overwhelmed knowing they are not responsible for understanding every detail in the text and feel confident when they are able to answer the questions. Here are some sample guiding questions for the “Runaway horses . . .” excerpt presented on page 186:

• What caused the pioneers to move west?
• How did the federal government help people claim a piece of land?
• What kind of life conditions did the pioneers face?

Recommendation Four: Read a Simpler Version

Teachers can allow ELLs to read a text written in simpler language on the same topic (e.g., a social studies textbook written for a lower grade). This practice is acceptable because the content is similar: Descriptions of the Western Expansion written for fifth graders are not significantly different in content from the descriptions written for eighth graders.

If ELLs can handle the language of the lower grade-level textbooks, the knowledge they gain will help them access the same content in texts written for their own grade level. In addition, extensive reading of comprehensible texts will help ELLs acquire the academic language they need in addition to filling in their knowledge gaps (Krashen 2004).

Social Studies Teaching and Reading

Social studies teachers must provide support for ELLs to make the demanding texts of social studies more comprehensible to students with limited English proficiency. An added dividend is that activities designed to accommodate ELLs often benefit English-proficient students whose reading skills are below grade level.

Social studies teachers should not remain passive until ELLs gain full proficiency in English; they can use the concrete strategies outlined in this article. As social studies teachers provide ELLs with comprehensible reading materials that stimulate their intellectual interests and help them develop competence in academic reading, they can assist these students in meeting the challenges they face in their coursework while they are learning English.

REFERENCES

American Westward expansion. 2006.