CREATE Brief

December 2010 www.cal.org/create

Effective Social Studies Instruction to Promote Knowledge Acquisition and Vocabulary Learning of English Language Learners in the Middle Grades

Colleen Klein Reutebuch, The University of Texas at Austin

Many students learning English as a second language in the United States must study and be tested on grade-level curricula in a language that they are still learning. This is especially taxing for English language learners who are entering U.S. schools at the secondary level, because they have less time to meet accountability standards than do the English language learners entering the school system at the elementary level. Adolescent English language learners may struggle with academic text, lack of content area knowledge, and underdeveloped oral language and vocabulary levels that can hamper their academic achievement and place them at risk of educational failure in content area classes (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006). If the literacy and language development of struggling adolescent English language learners were targeted and supported by all content area teachers, there would be a greater hope for overall academic success.

Research Focused on Middle School English Language Learners

The research base on effective instruction for adolescent English language learners' literacy development is limited (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Fortunately, however, more than 30 years of research on reading has identified effective instructional practices that serve as the foundation for teaching all learners (i.e., strategy instruction; direct, explicit teaching of vocabulary and comprehension; use of graphic organizers; active engagement; multiple practice opportunities with corrective feedback; peer pairing) (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Francis et al., 2006; National Reading Panel, 2000; RAND Reading Group, 2002). Research on literacy in monolingual adolescents does not fully generalize to English language learners, but it is relevant. Some monolingual, English-speaking adolescents also struggle with literacy and weaknesses in academic language and vocabulary, just as English language learners do (Torgesen et al., 2007). Still lacking, however, is valid and reliable research on effective instructional practices regarding vocabulary development and reading comprehension related to adolescent English learners' content knowledge, as well as effective methods for delivering instructions to English language learners in content area classes.

Recent efforts to improve the academic achievement of English language learners in Grades 4–8 address the limited knowledge base (Foorman & Hedges, 2009). One such effort includes ongoing research and refinement of a multicomponent intervention by the Center for Research on the Education and Teaching of English Learners (CREATE) to enhance social studies instruction in the middle grades by incorporating literacy instruction.

CREATE Enhanced Social Studies Lessons

The instructional practices in the CREATE enhanced social studies lessons were designed to improve students' understanding of social studies content and expository text by giving all students opportunities to learn and use the vocabulary, concepts, big ideas, and issues associated with social studies units.

Lessons revolve around one or two central ideas that serve as organizing concepts to help the teacher focus the events and ideas in each unit. Every lesson is organized

similarly to encourage teachers to establish and adhere to instructional routines in order to eliminate the confusion that varying lesson structure and teacher directions can cause. Lesson plans identify the core subject matter and the main ideas that students need to learn and provide guidance to teachers on the use of specific instructional practices to convey the subject matter.

Units of study consist of 5 individual lessons designed to be delivered 1 per day during a 45- to 50-minute period over 5 days, with the 5th day designated for unit review, reteaching as necessary, and progress monitoring. Lessons 1–4 consist of the following elements:

- Presentation and review of content and language objectives
- Brief overview of the "big idea"
- Explicit vocabulary instruction that integrates paired students' discussion of the words' meanings both in context and in more relevant ways to students' lives
- Discussion built around a 2- to 4-minute video clip that complements the daily reading
- Assigned reading (teacher-led or conducted in pairs) followed by students' generating and answering questions in order to target comprehension
- Wrap-up activity in the form of a graphic organizer or writing exercise that serves to review and assess student learning

The fifth lesson in each unit prepares students for an end-of-the-week assessment. The teacher reviews the concepts and vocabulary that were covered during the week through a *Jeopardy*-style format in which the class is divided into teams that work cooperatively to answer questions. Students have time to revisit and review their notes from the past week, ask clarifying questions, participate in a whole-class review, and individually complete a short quiz consisting of ten vocabulary-matching items and five short-answer comprehension questions.

All of the lessons in the intervention include instructions to incorporate paired reading, paired writing, and paired vocabulary discussion. Pairing students to read and work cooperatively provides an interactive and motivating structure for peer-assisted learning, which fosters active engagement and provides many opportunities for students to give and receive immediate feedback. To pair students, the teacher ranks English monolingual students and English learners separately and according to reading and language ability. The teacher then assigns each student a partner: the highest ranked English learner is paired with the highest ranked monolingual student, then the next highest ranked students from each group are paired, and so on, until all students have a partner. If executed with accommodations for individual student needs in mind, this arrangement ensures that English learners are adequately supported as they work on activities and discuss ideas.

Presentation and Review of Content and Language Objectives

In keeping with best practices prescribed in the SIOP Model for teaching English language learners (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2010), each lesson in the intervention includes measurable content and language objectives. Content objectives outline what students will learn and be able to do regarding the social studies topic. Language objectives address the aspects of academic language that will be developed or strengthened. Both content and language objectives are conveyed in language that students can understand. Teachers are directed to begin a lesson by reading the objectives aloud and posting them in class (Figure 1). Teachers should also review the objectives at the conclusion of a lesson to involve students in determining whether or not they were met.

Overview of Main Idea and Vocabulary Instruction

Following the presentation of the objectives, teachers present an overview of the day's lesson and connect it with information that has been taught previously. For example, a teacher may begin the overview in the following way:

The Texas Revolution, Part 1 *Big idea: What were the people involved in the Texas Revolution fighting for? Was their cause just?*	**Lesson 2**
Objectives	**Key vocabulary**
CONTENT—Students will: • Learn about the importance of the two battles in propelling the Texas Revolution. LANGUAGE—Students will: • Use key vocabulary in reading, writing, listening and speaking throughout the lesson. • Listen to and/or read the lesson passage, and write question responses in their notebooks. • In the review/assessment activity, discuss and write how the actions of the people involved in the war pushed forward the revolution.	artillery conflict reinforcements siege

Figure 1. Content and language objectives.

As we have discussed, the Texas Revolution was looming as Texans, both Anglo and Mexican, refused to accept the governmental changes made by Santa Anna and the Mexican national government.

Today we will review some of the governmental changes and how they contributed to the beginning of the Texas Revolution. Later in the week, we will talk about specific battles of the Revolution and the people who were involved.

We should keep in mind who was fighting in this war and what they were fighting for. However, today we will focus on the events that led up to the Revolution.

Next, teachers explicitly teach three or four new, preselected vocabulary words that are drawn from readings, video clips, and a district- or state-level scope and sequence. These are words that are necessary to teach because of their potential for greater impact on students' reading comprehension (i.e., words that are rare or not very familiar). Teachers display each vocabulary word together with a picture that demonstrates the word (Figure 2) and directly teaches each of the vocabulary terms by adhering to the sequence of steps below:

1. Display concept/vocabulary transparency.
2. Pronounce the word, and give the cognate or translation in the first language of the English learners.
3. Provide a definition of the word that students are likely to understand.
4. Ask or tell students how the illustration or visual in the transparency is representative of the word.
5. Provide an example of the word in two sentences—one showing a historical context and the other in a context that is more relevant to students' experiences.
6. Use turn-and-talk prompts to help students make connections between the unit of study and what they know.
7. Give students opportunities to encounter and use the word repeatedly throughout instruction.

Strategic Use of Video

A teacher can use a brief video segment to accompany a reading in order to help students develop their understanding of the lesson's big idea, as well as to provide English language learners with background knowledge on an unfamiliar topic (Gersten, Baker, Johnson, Dimino, & Peterson, 2006). The purposeful use of media serves to anchor instruction in context and to help students become engaged. The use of video also helps generate discussion, which in turn supports students' active

conflict
(conflicto)

A serious, long-lasting disagreement or argument

Synonyms: disagreement, dispute

The **conflict** between the Texas settlers and the Mexican government caused several wars.

A **conflict** between our football team and the players at a neighboring school led to a fight.

Turn and Talk

- What might have caused the conflict between the two football teams?
- How is a conflict different from or similar to a revolt?

Figure 2. Vocabulary transparency.

Source. Image by Sgt. Mike Pryor, 2007. Photo courtesy of U.S. Army (www.army/mil/images).

involvement in learning the content. Steps for incorporating media include the following:

1. Introduce the video clip either before students have read a textbook passage or before they have begun the supplemental reading that supports (i.e., explains, describes, reiterates) the big idea of the lesson. For instance, the teacher may say, "Now you're going to watch a video about the Battle of the Alamo, the most well-known battle of the Texas Revolution. Later we will read about it. The Texans could have surrendered when the siege began, but instead, they were inspired by their loss to continue to fight against Santa Anna and his Mexican forces."
2. Preview the video and set the purpose for viewing. For example, the teacher may say, "In this

clip, you will watch the Texans surrounded inside the Alamo as they discuss whether to surrender, attempt to escape, or stay and fight. Watch and listen in order to answer the question, 'What led to the Mexican Army's victory over the Texans at the Alamo?'"

3. Play the video clip and direct the students to record answers to the video question in their notes. Once students have recorded individual responses, they may compare and discuss their answers in pairs.
4. Conduct a brief discussion about the video. Here the teacher can summarize the clip and highlight the question posed by sharing a few responses from the students. For example, the teacher might say, "From today's clip we see that the Mexican soldiers had encircled the Alamo. Let's talk about the factors leading to the Mexican's Army's victory over the Texans. Group 1 recorded that the Mexican Army had surprised the Texans while they were sleeping. Group 3 indicated that the Mexican Army had surrounded the Alamo with a trench and cannons. Do you agree that those were contributing factors?"

Teacher-Led or Paired Student Reading

The next step in every lesson involves a reading activity. The lesson design alternates so that on some days the teacher does a whole-group read-aloud and on others students work in pairs to read aloud from carefully selected text. Before every reading, the teacher asks the students to think about two or three questions that typically require that they focus on the most important ideas of the lesson. Students are responsible for answering those focus questions after reading the assigned text.

In teacher-led reading, the teacher uses scaffolding techniques to foster English language learners' understanding of academic content and to support their language and literacy development (August & Shanahan, 2008). When the teacher reads aloud, he or she models fluent reading while clarifying vocabulary and periodically checking for students' comprehension. In doing so, the teacher demonstrates think-alouds as a strategy for engaging in and making sense of text. The steps for teacher implementation are the following:

1. Preview the reading by asking questions to help activate background knowledge and guide students' thinking about what they will learn (e.g., "Who are the people living in Texas in 1835, right before the Texas Revolution begins?"). Read the questions that students will focus on during the reading.
2. Model thinking aloud as you read aloud in order to make sense of text (e.g., "The title of today's reading, *The Siege of the Alamo*, tells me I am going to learn about how the Texan soldiers were surrounded at the Battle of the Alamo. I know *siege* means 'to surround' and that the Texans lost the fight at the Alamo.").
3. Demonstrate how to generate different types of questions with varying levels of difficulty, allowing students to respond to these questions (e.g., "What does *lay siege* mean?" "How is a captive different from a hostage?").

Paired student reading provides opportunities for students to work cooperatively to use strategies to improve their comprehension of the vocabulary and text. When pairs read aloud, they take turns reading the same text, with the more proficient student going first. One student reads while the partner follows along and gives corrective feedback (e.g., "You skipped a word," or "That word is…") as needed. After completing the reading, pairs work on answering the assigned comprehension questions. Students are also encouraged to generate and answer their own questions to identify the most important ideas and to check their own understanding of the text. Once the reading activity is completed, teachers discuss students' answers to the questions with the whole class.

Wrap-Up Activity Using Graphic Organizers

Teachers bring closure to a lesson by asking students to complete a graphic organizer or some other brief activity that connects reading to writing through description, explanation, comparison, or summarization of important information covered in the lesson (Figure 3).

Steps for conducting the writing activity include the following:

1. Introduce the activity.
2. Display the graphic organizer and provide explicit procedures for completing it.
3. Remind students that graphic organizers and other activities are used to display the most important information (i.e., main ideas) from the lesson.

How did people feel about the Texas Revolution? What were they fighting for? Was their cause just?

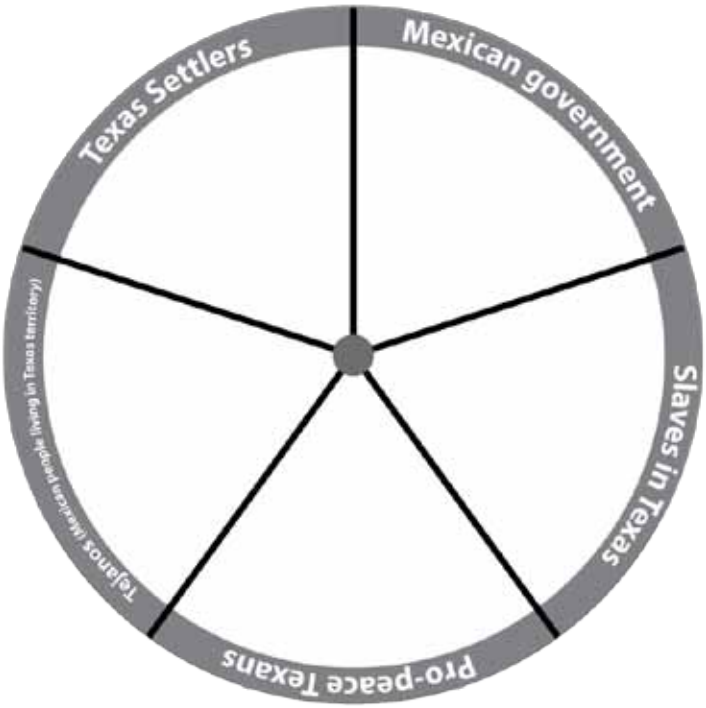

Figure 3. Graphic organizer–review/assessment activity.

4. Direct students to identify the essential information to include in the writing task with their assigned partner.
5. Allow time after collaboration for students to work independently to complete the writing task.
6. Review students' responses and provide feedback to the whole group.
7. Tie the conclusion of the lesson back to the content and language objectives presented at the beginning of the lesson.

Conclusion

The unique learning needs of adolescent English language learners demand that effective second language instruction be embedded in content area classes. This, in turn, requires building secondary educators' knowledge base and capacity to deliver instruction that supports literacy and content learning. Research findings from CREATE thus far indicate that it is possible to improve the quality of social studies instruction to better meet the needs of English language learners and to improve their performance without delaying learning for English-speaking monolingual students, who are often in the same content area courses. Considering the number of readers in upper elementary and middle school classrooms who struggle with academic language and grade-level textbooks, these recommended social studies practices can and should be incorporated into content area teaching. Providing instructional supports that target both content and English language learning objectives in English-only settings makes effective strategy instruction accessible to *all* students. Class-wide interventions may serve to supplement the skills of many, while possibly preventing the difficulties that arise for some older second language learners and others prone to struggling with content area text and academic and content-specific vocabulary.

References

August, D. L., & Shanahan, T. (2008). *Developing reading and writing in second-language learners*. NY: Routledge.

Biancarosa, G., & Snow, C. E. (2006). *Reading next—a vision for action and research in middle and high school literacy: A report from the Carnegie Corporation of New York* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellence in Education.

Echevarría, J., Vogt, M., & Short, D. (2010). *Making content comprehensible for secondary English learners: The SIOP® Model*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Francis, D., Rivera, M., Lesaux, N., Kieffer, M., & Rivera, H. (2006). *Practical guidelines for the education of English language learners: Research-based recommendations for instruction and academic interventions* (under cooperative agreement grant S283B050034 for U.S. Department of Education). Portsmouth, NH: RMC Corporation, Center on Instruction. Available at http://www.centeroninstruction.org/files/ELL1-interventions.pdf

Foorman, B. R., & Hedges, L. V. (Eds.). (2009). Effective practices for English language learners in the middle grades [Special issue]. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, 2*(4).

Gersten, R., Baker, S. K., Smith-Johnson, J., Dimino, J., & Peterson, A. (2006). Eye on the prize: Teaching complex historical content to middle school students with learning disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, *72*(3), 264-280.

National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction* (NIH Publication No. 00-4769). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute of Health and Human Development.

RAND Reading Study Group. (2002). *Reading for understanding: Toward a research and development program in reading comprehension.* Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

Short, D., & Fitzsimmons, S. (2007). *Double the work: Challenges and solutions to acquiring language and academic literacy for adolescent English language learners—A report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York.* Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.

Torgesen, J. K., Houston, D. D., Rissman, L. M., Decker, S. M., Roberts, G., Vaughn, S.,Wexler, J.,…Lesaux, N. (2007). *Academic literacy instruction for adolescents: A guidance document from the Center on Instruction.* Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research Corporation.

About CREATE

CREATE, the Center for Research on the Educational Achievement and Teaching of English Language Learners, is conducting a program of research designed to address the critical challenge of improving educational outcomes for English language learners in the middle grades by

- Enhancing the empirical research base for readers in Grades 4–8
- Using both narrative and expository text to develop and test effective interventions that promote content knowledge and language and literacy development
- Investigating the features of instruction and text modifications that facilitate learning for English learners (e.g., traditional instruction vs. ESL-enhanced instruction, teacher-guided instruction vs. group work, traditional text vs. modified text)
- Designing, testing, and delivering professional development that ensures that teachers implement effective classroom practices to help English learners achieve high standards

For more information, visit the CREATE Web site

www.cal.org/create

CREATE
Center for Research on the Educational Achievement and Teaching of English Language Learners

The Center for Research on the Educational Achievement and Teaching of English Language Learners (CREATE) conducts a program of research designed to address specific challenges in the education of English language learners in Grades 4-8. CREATE is a partnership of researchers from six institutions:

- Texas Institute for Measurement, Evaluation, and Statistics, University of Houston
- California State University, Long Beach
- Center for Applied Linguistics
- Harvard University
- University of California-Berkeley
- Vaughn Gross Center, University of Texas at Austin

This brief was produced by CREATE with funding from the U.S. Department of Education (ED), Institute of Education Sciences, under Contract No. ED-R305A05056. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of ED.