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ABSTRACT

A creative reading comprehension activity developed for multi-grade (6-8) English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) social studies classes is described. The activity was developed as part of a project integrating language and culture in social studies instruction. Researchers worked with an ESL teacher and a social studies teacher to create a series of units on cross-cultural conflicts and their resolutions in world history. The units contained information on the cultures studied and the geography of four regions (Peru; Germany and Italy; Japan; Ethiopia). Lessons were designed to expose students to the roots of conflict and encourage consideration of alternative resolutions through the choices made by individuals at different stages in history. Readings were adapted to the students' language ability, graphic organizers were provided, and multiple forms of student expression (poems, artwork, role plays) were encouraged. The activity described here was a competitive mini-drama occurring during a unit on the Incan civilization's encounter with Spanish conquistadors in the early sixteenth century. Objectives, procedures, and outcomes are discussed. Contains 11 references. (MSE)

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# Bringing a Reading Passage to Life: A Creative Comprehension Activity

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## Bringing a Reading Passage to Life: A Creative Comprehension Activity

This article highlights a creative reading comprehension activity developed during a research project with multi-grade (6-8) ESL social studies classes. This project, "Integrating Language and Culture in the Social Studies," has been examining a materials development process whereby language skills are integrated with social studies objectives in a multicultural framework. The on-going research project is sponsored by the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning and is being implemented by researchers at the Center for Applied Linguistics in collaboration with middle school teachers in the Washington, D. C. area, New York, Florida and California. (See Short, 1993 for more information.)

As part of the process, researchers worked with an ESL teacher and a social studies teacher in the summer of 1993 to create a series of World Studies units, *Conflicts in World History*. The units were written around the theme of cross-cultural conflict and resolution and contain information about the different cultural groups who interacted, the geography of the four regions studied (Peru, Germany and Italy, Japan, Ethiopia), and the general context in which the significant historical events took place (i.e., the conquest of the Incas by the Spaniards, the Reformation, the opening of trade with Japan, the fight to maintain independence in Ethiopia). The lessons were designed to expose students to the roots of conflict and to encourage consideration of alternative resolutions based on choices made by different people in different situations throughout history. In writing these lessons, the project staff accounted for the particular needs of ESL students. Readings were adapted to the students' language ability; graphic organizers such as flow charts, maps, and Venn diagrams were provided; and multiple forms of student expression, such as poems, art work, and role plays, were encouraged (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Crandall, 1987; Mohan, 1990; Short, 1991).

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The reading comprehension activity occurred during the unit on the Incan civilization's encounter with the Spanish conquistadors in the early 16th Century. In the first two lessons, students locate the Incan Empire on a map, identify the major land forms of the area, and familiarize themselves with the organization of Incan society before the arrival of the Spaniards. The focus of the third lesson, where the reading activity took place, is the first encounter between the two cultures and their perceptions of one another. Throughout this lesson, the students are challenged to recognize how perceptions are formed and how they can change when their experiential knowledge evolves. In the fourth and final lesson of this unit students identify ways in which the Incas reacted to Spanish acts of aggression, using a graphic organizer to categorize the actions and reactions as violent or non-violent.

### **Creating a Competitive Mini-Drama Activity**

The reading activity we will describe here was the result of a teacher's modification of the third lesson in this series. In the sheltered social studies class we observed, all students were of intermediate ESL proficiency and their grades ranged from 6th to 8th. The teacher was an ESL specialist with some training in social studies.

The teacher began the lesson as designed with the motivational activity in which the students were asked to solve a word problem that forced them to extend their thoughts beyond their usual bounds of perception. In this instance, the students were presented with the problem of two girls having played five games of Nintendo and both girls having won three games. To solve the problem, it was necessary to transcend the normal assumption that the two girls played each other. Once this occurred, the students perceived the problem differently and resolved it easily. After this, the students read an adapted story of the Inca Legend that recounted how the Incas were visited early in their history by white bearded men who taught them how to plant

crops, build dwellings, and raise livestock. The Incas believed that these white bearded men would one day return to their land. This belief shaped their perceptions of the Spaniards when they arrived in the Incan Empire.

The lesson next called on students to read a passage entitled "The Arrival of the Spaniards." At this stage, the teacher realized that her students would find it very difficult to read the one and a half pages of text individually. She therefore decided to have the class act out the story in pantomime. To prepare for this, the teacher first read the entire story to the students, who paid close attention, knowing they would act it out the next day. Occasionally during her reading, the teacher asked a few students to role play scenarios from the story to make them clearer to the class. Next, the teacher divided the class into five teams of four and selected 10 sentences from the story to write on sentence strips. She then gave two sentence strips to each group to read and rehearse.

At the beginning of the next day's class the groups were given five minutes to prepare. During this time a flurry of activity ensued, revealing the students' enthusiasm for the task. Some students read their sentences while others rehearsed. Some raced to the back of the room and began crafting paper hats and swords out of construction paper. One student taped pencils together to fashion a riding crop for another student who would be acting as a Spaniard on horseback. Another offered his belt for reins and fastened it around the forehead of his classmate who would pretend to be a horse. One student came to class wearing an Indian feathered headdress and an Incan vest that he made from a paper shopping bag, while another brought in a death mask to wear.

The mini-drama was not simply an exercise in acting, however. It was also a competition. The rules established that each group would be polite while the others were pantomiming their sentences. After watching a scenario, each group was to find and underline the sentence in the reading that it thought had just been represented. The teacher then chose one student randomly from each group to go to the board and write

out the sentence that their group had selected. The teacher awarded a group either two points if it was the exact sentence from the reading or one point if it was a sentence that could also have been possible (given the quality of the acting). While the other groups were writing sentences, the group that had acted out its sentence was busily engaged in a dictionary activity requiring each student in the group to find and write out the definition of an unknown word from the reading. Extra points were awarded to each group based on the number of words they had been able to define. This procedure continued until each group had acted out its two sentences. Throughout this activity the students maintained a high degree of enthusiasm and attention to the various tasks of preparation, performance, and strategic reading. The teacher, on the other hand, restricted her role to that of orchestra conductor—ensuring that the players understood what to do at each stage and guiding the transitions from one movement of the symphony to the next.

### **Attention, Motivation, and Learning**

The competitive nature of this activity combined with the integration of language skills presented many educational benefits. Similar benefits have been described in literature on applied linguistics, reading theory, communicative language teaching, cross-cultural communication, and alternative assessment procedures. (See, for example, Brumfit & Johnson, 1979; Goodman, 1986; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; O'Malley & Pierce, 1992; Samovar & Porter, 1972; Stevick, 1976.)

- **The students practiced their skills for a specific purpose.** The competition created a need and consequently an interest in using language skills. The teacher crafted an atmosphere that focused the students' attention on the tasks at hand better

than if they only had to read the passage themselves and answer comprehension questions.

•**The students focused on meaning.** By having to identify the exact sentence from the text in order to receive more points, students took more time to read carefully in order to identify subtleties in meaning. For example, two sentences in the first paragraph discussed animals and the emotions of the Incas: *On that trip, the Indians were amazed by the Spanish ships, which looked like floating palaces, and by the horses, which they had never seen before. The Indians thought the Spaniards were like gods and offered them gifts of food and animals.* Students in the audience had to watch the silent mini-dramas very carefully to determine which students were Incas, which were Spaniards, which were the four-legged animals and what relationships and action among all parties developed.

•**The activity divided the reading passage up into manageable chunks.** The teacher focused on three or four essential sentences from each paragraph and informed the students from which paragraph the sentence being presented came. In that way, the students were able to concentrate better on that paragraph's sentences alone. Further, seeing multiple scenes performed from the same paragraph forced the students to read over the sentences in that paragraph several times, thereby reinforcing their knowledge and strengthening their reading skills.

•**The students interacted with the reading material in a way that enhanced their retention.** Acting out the information in the reading passage addressed learning style differences and gave the students a visual and kinesthetic representation of the facts to tie to their mental comprehension, thus making the knowledge more memorable. Moreover, since classmates would have to guess which sentence a group was pantomiming, each group had to portray the information clearly, to limit

misunderstandings. So, for a sentence like, *[T]he Indians were amazed by the Spanish ships...*, the students needed to understand which emotion was meant by the word *amazed* in order to represent it accurately. Understanding and participating in the emotions of the event not only aided in retention, but also, in this lesson, served as a foundation for a subsequent application activity, writing a Diamante poem about the Incas and Spaniards. This poetic style requires the use of nouns, adjectives, adverbs and present participles to describe the two groups and their perceptions and emotions at the time.

- **The activity provided a means of alternative assessment.** By incorporating drama and writing into the activity, the teacher was presented with opportunities to assess the students' abilities in reading comprehension through observation of their actions and written work. The teacher was also able to determine the students' skills in cooperative learning situations.

- **The activity raised the students' awareness of how culture can affect perceptions.** Previous motivational exercises requiring students to look at optical illusions and ponder brain teasers along with a reading passage on the Incan legend about white men who had visited the Incas earlier in history served to focus the students' attention on how expectations of a people can affect their perceptions. The reading passage in the activity described here demonstrated this point vividly. Additionally, it served as background for the next lesson's readings on how the Incas' perception of the Spaniards changed once the latter revealed their aggression and greed, providing insight into why and how cultural perceptions are sometimes modified.



## Conclusion

This unit on conflict between Incas and Spanish conquistadors provided a wealth of activities for developing language skills and meeting social studies objectives. Students practiced map skills, reading comprehension, creative writing, and critical thinking. In addition, students from South America acted as multicultural informants during the lessons. Some students pointed out where major rivers were during a discussion of land forms; others shared information about Incan history; still others contributed by bringing in authentic dress and props.

The particular activity described in this article is an example of effective integration of language and content. Students entered the learning environment with a need to use their language skills and motivation to perform a variety of language functions. The teacher created a comfortable atmosphere for learning by presenting a text adapted to the class' linguistic ability level and by dividing the material into portions appropriate for the class' attention level. The teacher provided an equitable learning exercise by giving everyone the chance to read, rehearse, perform, and write. Students also had the opportunity to interact with, interpret, and express the material on an individual and group basis. Finally, the activity benefited students by making culture and its ability to shape perceptions and events more tangible.

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