

# **Reflections on Teaching Social Studies to ESL Students**

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## **Abstract**

The study of social studies is an important subject especially if ESL students' are to understand the world around them. To study social studies effectively students often need to read texts which are most often at a level only written for native speakers which can be daunting at times and this can often turn into a tedious task but also that they often have to be prepared to read text in more detail to that of other subjects. They need to develop schema to prepare them for reading, together with associated vocabulary, grammar & study questions which are related to these texts. The purpose of this paper was to show that with some thought and imagination some subjects even in the social studies can be enhanced to make learning for students into a more practical experience and it introduces a more student centered approach to an otherwise lecturing style of lesson. The paper offers certain tips and ideas for teaching theoretical aspects of history in-particular the aspect of exploitation of Africa's natural resources and effective study skills in the proper use of highlighting when reading texts in ESL study. It also gives ideas in modifying texts to suit the levels of students English. Finally it shows the effectiveness of mind mapping and the fun students can have when done correctly.

But ESL social studies, at times often take second place to that of science, biology and other subjects. This is because social offers fewer opportunities for practical work apart from looking around a globe looking for their own country and places they would like to visit. Social studies offers more subjects that are of an abstract nature and if the lessons are content based then this involves students having to participate in discussions, writing, grammar syntax and other activities which creates and develops their critical thinking. Students in southern Thailand studying colonialism may have no previous knowledge of why there is such a British influence on certain African and other countries. But if one puts their mind to it there are some things you can do to enhance the lesson to make it more interesting. To help them study it can be better sometimes to ask them to read up about the subject in their own language first. This schema idea makes it far easier for them to understand it in English when it's your turn to teach it. By having an understanding of the subject they get the general idea and when you are teaching it, they can develop a sense of anticipation that you can exploit by asking them to answer your questions from what they have read and this breeds excitement and gives the teacher an opportunity to praise them for making the effort to speak.

Recently I was teaching a 9th grade class about the scramble for Africa and why it has been so poor and underdeveloped. In-particular I was making references to the exploitation of its natural resources. I printed out a map of Africa and stapled candies around the edge of the map and gave each candy a name. One was diamonds, one was gold, one was natural resources, one was slavery, one was wood and a few more just for effect. The students were grouped with each group representing a European country. With the map on a table in the centre of the room and the word "GO" they had to scramble to the table and take as much of the natural resources as they wanted, of course the scramble was quite effective. After they finished it was an ideal opportunity to teach them the word scramble and exploitation at the same time.

Of course the map was torn to shreds and the candies dispersed to "all parts of Europe" which was entirely expected and made the point quite strongly, in that many European countries have exploited African resources for far too long and today Africa is still having to cope with the legacy of exploitation.

At times, ESL teachers should modify complex texts to fit in with the student's level of English, which is also an important part of teaching social studies to ESL students. Providing proper referencing is included when doing this it's important that the teacher retains the interesting facts and the concepts contained within the story to keep the students interested. At the same time the teacher could leave out important words and put in blank spaces which the students have to work out what is an appropriate word for the space, this is an excellent opportunity for scaffolding key words. The other side of this is that it creates more lesson planning work for the teacher, and rewriting texts takes time even when it's copied from websites as it may have to completely re-written in some cases. But when it's done once it doesn't have to get done again and after all it's really worth the effort.

Teaching certain critical thinking skills like cause and effect can also be enhanced by using conceptual mind maps. On teaching the development of western culture recently, students' loved designing, drawing and coloring mind maps that had links to each which showed the effects of certain inventions' during the Industrial Revolution. Demonstrating that as one object was invented, it created certain "after effects", some good & some bad and the effects of certain things had wider reaching consequences for people and the environment. Mind maps are a great way to teach a lot of information on in one lesson.

Reading texts can also be helpful if we teach them to underline or use a highlighter correctly. Many students underline too much, so it's vital that students are taught to think before they underline anything and have a specific reason for doing so. Students highlight different words and whole phrases for different reasons it may be for information they already know already, but it's sometimes better to teach students to underline the most important sentence or words in the paragraph usually these are new words or phrases because deciding what is the most important requires a higher level of processing. Highlighting is also good at looking for helping words in the text. Students could work together and compare highlights and talk about why they have highlighted each word or phrase. They could talk about to the class or a group discussion. This also helps to develop self questioning and learning from others.