

www.ijonSES.net

Providing the Best Possible Learning Environment for K-8 English Learners in Social Studies Content

Ji Young Kim 
Fayetteville State University, USA

Matthew John Wynne 
Cumberland County Schools, USA

To cite this article:

Kim, J. Y. & Wynne, M. J. (2021). Providing the best possible learning environment for K-8 English learners in social studies content. *International Journal on Social and Education Sciences (IJonSES)*, 3(3), 429-438. <https://doi.org/10.46328/ijonSES.165>

International Journal on Social and Education Sciences (IJonSES) is a peer-reviewed scholarly online journal. This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Authors alone are responsible for the contents of their articles. The journal owns the copyright of the articles. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of the research material. All authors are requested to disclose any actual or potential conflict of interest including any financial, personal or other relationships with other people or organizations regarding the submitted work.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.



International Journal on Social and Education Sciences (IJonSES) is affiliated with
[International Society for Technology, Education, and Science \(ISTES\): www.istes.org](http://www.istes.org)

Providing the Best Possible Learning Environment for K-8 English Learners in Social Studies Content

Ji Young Kim, Matthew John Wynne

Article Info

Article History

Received:

11 January 2021

Accepted:

16 May 2021

Keywords

K-8 social studies

English learners

Content learning

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to provide the best possible learning environment for K-8 English Learners (ELs) in social studies content suggested by ESL teachers and school administrators in North Carolina. ESL teachers and school administrators share their perceptions of best practices and strategies that have been effective in addressing the needs of ELs in the K-8 social studies classroom. Authors propose multifaceted approaches to meeting the needs of ELs in the social studies classrooms: First, effective professional development activities train social studies content teachers to acquire research-based effective instructional models for ELs. Second, literacy strategies provide social studies teachers the necessary information to make pedagogical modifications. Third, collaboration among content teachers, ESL teachers, and school administrators creates open communication to take initiative in sharing effective strategies that can be easily implemented and challenges that can be addressed.

Introduction

English Learners (ELs) are one of the fastest-growing and lowest-performing student subgroups in the United States of America. The National Center for Education Statistics (2020) indicates that an estimated five million public school students are English Learners. Moreover, the National Education Association published (2020) projects that nearly 25 percent of students in the US will be English Learners by 2025. As more English Learners enroll in public schools, content teachers who have not had appropriate professional training to teach linguistically and culturally diverse learners need systematic support.

English Learners have significant achievement gaps in both math and reading across the nation, elementary and middle school (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2019). Only 30 percent of ELs performed at or above basic levels in reading in 2007, compared to 69 percent of their non-EL peers. Evidently, English Learners are performing much lower academically than their Black, Hispanic, and White peers (Whittenberg, 2011). Unfortunately, the achievement gap widens further as students grow older as no more than 29 percent of assessed ELs in the 8th grade reached or surpassed basic reading levels, compared to 75 percent of non-ELs. These disappointing statistics show that ELs in mainstream classrooms experience unique challenges.

Thousands of immigrants have moved to North Carolina to contribute to the state's rich, economy and culture.

Accordingly, the total number of ELs in North Carolina has almost doubled in the past seven years, rising from 59,849 in 2002 to 113,823 in 2009 (National Center of Education Statistics, 2020). In North Carolina, most ELs are the children of Hispanic immigrants. North Carolina is among a budding number of “new” Hispanic states, which have witnessed a 200 percent total growth in their Hispanic populations. There was an increase of at least 200,000 Hispanic residents from 1980 to 2000 in North Carolina and is projected to continue to multiply (Fry & Gabriel, 2008; Heafner & Plaisance, 2016). However, many of them are unable to speak the English language at their school or even at home.

Besides, there has also been a significant increase of migrant students who originate from other nations within the continents of Africa and Asia (Sugarman & Geary, 2018). Many of these children are classified as English Learners and struggle in North Carolina’s public schools. Moreover, the number of ELs in grade levels 3 through 8 alone has increased at a surprising rate of 12.4 percent per year. This is more than doubling from 22,869 in 2002 to 50,372 in 2010 (Whittenberg, 2011). Not surprisingly, this rapid growth of ELs in North Carolina accentuates the major issue of widening the achievement gap in public schools. The US content teachers are experiencing challenges providing instruction for students who are in the process of acquiring English as a Second Language (Weisman & Hansen, 2007).

These children have the potential to be vital members of the state’s workforce and civic engagement. Social studies is a critical subject, which prepares them for active participation in a global society (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). Given the responsibilities educators have to assist linguistically and culturally diverse ELs succeed in the classroom and beyond, social studies teachers must be prepared to meet their unique needs in K-8 public school settings (Yoder, Kibler, & van Hover, 2016). However, North Carolina schools have not successfully equipped them with the skills needed to compete in a 21st- century economy, especially in the area of social studies content (Heafner & Plaisance, 2016).

Challenges of Social Studies Teaching for ELs

Literacy skills establish a foundation for success in all academic content. Social studies as a content area is more challenging for ELs. Likewise, Cho and Gabriel’s research (2008) indicates that literacy is a major roadblock in achievement for ELs in social studies. In the general classroom environment, most ELs struggle to grasp historical concepts and academic vocabulary. Other ELs may have familiarity with the topic, but they do not fully comprehend English words and phrases that are content-specific. Their limited reading comprehension skills negatively affect their understanding of social studies. Therefore, they are unable to understand what is being taught. The development of academic English is a complex process that involves more than building vocabulary and grammar. ELs need semantic and syntactic knowledge with language function to analyze diverse perspectives within the content of social studies (Wynne, 2020).

Social studies' distinctive purpose is to shape well-informed, active, and engaged citizens who are well versed in content-specific literacies, academic language, and methods to discern. Even those with strong educational backgrounds may never have studied United States History or Government from our national cultural lens.

Often social studies curriculum in the pull-out classroom varied substantially from the content taught in the general education classroom. Consequently, separating language and literacy instruction limits exposure to social studies and diminishes the overall quality of social studies instruction. Therefore, ELs often lack “a conceptual framework and understanding of American culture that may serve as a schema for new social learning” (Cruz & Thornton, 2013, p. 3).

Pull-out instructional services were provided almost entirely during the already limited social studies instructional time. A case study conducted by (Heafner & Plaisance, 2016) emphasizes ELs’ opportunity to learn social studies and claims ELs did not have the same opportunity to learn social studies. Far too often ELs are not given an equitable opportunity to learn social studies in public schools.

Also, there often exists a lack of communication between the ESL teachers and classroom teachers resulting in separating language and content learning. ELs need an equitable opportunity to learn social studies content to be prepared in the 21st century (Heafner & Plaisance, 2016). The marginalization of social studies is especially challenging and problematic for ELs in the American Education system.

There is a lack of quality social studies instruction aligned with the needs of a growing EL population. This poses grave concerns in light of research examining the relationship between social studies instructional and political behaviors because all consist of matters such as electoral engagement and civic participation (Callahan, Muller, & Schiller, 2008, 2010). Similarly, there is a lack of emphasis and support for ESL teachers, administrators, and ELs within the context of social studies education in the American public education system, which is problematic (Heafner and Plaisance, 2016). There is a dire need for more effective training, professional development, and support given to ESL teachers, administrators, and social studies teachers to ensure that they are enabled to support ELs’ linguistic and cultural needs in the social studies classroom.

The purpose of this study is to provide the best possible learning environment for K-8 ELs in social studies content. This research incorporates effective strategies and the best possible teaching practices to ensure the academic growth of ELs in social studies in the classroom environment. We will highlight and discuss the research method in detail so that others interested in meeting the needs of ELs may follow.

Method

Participants

This research project incorporated qualitative data that was initially collected by Dr. Wynne (2020), who conducted field research in 2019. A total of 24 full-time teachers and school administrators participated in the original study. Out of 24 participants, 12 were ESL teachers, and seven were school administrators including two elementary administrators, three middle school administrators, two district EL instructor facilitators, and two ESL Directors or Coordinators.

Their average years in education is 16.6 years ranging from 3-28 years. Only four ESL teachers have fewer than

10 years of experience in education. All of them were employed by rural and suburban areas including Cumberland, Hoke, Harnett, and Lee counties in North Carolina. Choosing ESL teachers, ESL coordinators, and Directors, and school administrators as participants is an attempt to gather information from diverse perspectives and to represent all levels and expertise. The researcher interviewed for 15-20 minutes at the sites either face-to-face, by phone, or videoconferencing.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected for this research project came from the original interview transcription conducted by Dr. Wynne (2020). The participants responded to the following prompt: Describe what best practices or strategies have been effective in addressing the needs of ELs in K-8 social studies content. All recorded and written field notes were transcribed and reviewed thoroughly. The researchers engaged in a focused reading and examination of all transcribed data collected and categorized findings.

This research involves context analysis and qualitative analysis of verbal data. Because of language complexity, the framework of analytic tasks will be included: segmentation, and full context of data by code. Segmentations of the language for coding were practiced to make a measurable comparison. To achieve reliability, two coders checked the intercoder agreement and used the results to revise the coding scheme until an adequate level of agreement had been reached. From these responses, the researchers identified relevant topics and interpretations which guided the following results and discussion.

Results

This study explored the best possible learning environment for K-8 ELs in social studies content. They were divided into four groups including school administrators, district EL instructional facilitators, ESL directors/coordinators, and ESL teachers. Participants responded to prompts concerning their perceptions of best practices and strategies that have been effective in addressing the needs of ELs in the K-8 social studies classroom.

Most ESL teachers' and district EL instructional facilitators' responses were pedagogical in nature. Their main responses revealed that specific teacher training, literacy-enhanced activities, and additional resources for social studies content were suggested. Responses from each group are summarized below (see Table 1).

School administrators emphasized building a positive relationship between content teachers and ESL teachers to have open lines of communication. One of them responded, "We have a good relationship with the ESL teacher because she's gonna be the person that you need to run to.... If you make those connections with them right from the beginning, you're going to have success." ESL teachers and school administrators expressed a common desire to collaborate for the purpose of creating a culturally responsive and inclusive curriculum to find relevant connections among ELs in K-8 social studies. ESL teachers and district EL instructional facilitators suggested professional development opportunities for content teachers to better serve the K-8 ELs.

Table 1. Responses from Each Participant Group

Participant Groups	Responses
School Administrators	SIOP Training Building a community of learners/ make a connection with ELs Collaborating with content area teachers Teacher and leadership collaboration Small group instruction Real-world connection Best resources Confidence building activities Fishbowl conversation and Socratic seminar to facilitate ELs.
District EL Instructional Facilitators	ExC-ELL training Visuals Collaborative work with peers Topical Study Storytelling Focus on reading and writing Hands-on activities
ESL Directors/ Coordinators	Using cognates Dual language use (English and Spanish) Real-life connection Cooperative learning activities Vocabulary building activities such as word bank
ESL Teachers	SIOP training ExC-ELL training Content teacher collaboration ESL focused textbook development and outside resources Scaffolding Building background knowledge Reading comprehension activities Small group activities Pair grouping/ partner work Academic language use Visuals Graphic organizers Chunking texts Summarizing stories Activating prior knowledge

District EL instructional facilitators suggested an ongoing professional development for all content teachers,

“Our goal is to make sure that ELs can become active learners. . . . All content teachers should get ExC-ELL Method, Expediting Content and Comprehension, and SIOP training to better serve ELs.... .” They said these two teaching models can be instrumental in both promoting content teachers' discussion and providing pedagogical resources concerning ELs' success. Several ESL teachers recommended various teaching practices and strategies for content teachers with ELs. For example, she said, “...You teach vocabulary, um, making sure that you are building background knowledge, using visuals, and giving students ample time and multiple opportunities to see the lesson and information delivered.”

Another ESL teacher emphasized small group activities with an ESL specialist. She said, “Small group with an ESL specialist where we can- where they can discuss social studies concept or ask questions without fear of being embarrassed by saying the wrong thing or asking a question that other kids already know the answers.” Other ESL teachers relied on visuals to improve students' understanding of social studies content. He said, “To further engage my ELs in their text, I have adopted visuals for social studies graphic work.”

Discussion

As the number of ELs in our schools continues to grow rapidly, the question is how to help these students gain equitable access to the curriculum. Putting the viewpoint of Odden and Achibald (2001), “the consensus seems to be that professional development to improve the quality and effectiveness of instruction for the disadvantaged and minority students should focus primarily on the subject matter and how students from various backgrounds struggle to learn and succeed in learning the content and how to teach the content to a diverse range of learners.” To better serve the ELs, the professional development of teachers should give greater emphasis to improving teachers' knowledge and skills in working with children from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

ESL teachers and school administrators in North Carolina address three key priorities of improving instruction for ELs in social studies: professional development, evidence-based intervention, integrated teaching strategies, and collaborative curriculum. These findings, which are strikingly consistent with the broader conclusions from the research on professional development summarized above, propose the best possible learning environment:

1. We suggest providing research-based and robust professional development training opportunities for social studies teachers to develop content-specific pedagogy and become highly knowledgeable in effectively developing ELs' literacy skills needed for social studies learning.
 - Provide effective professional development training of social studies through current best practices to offer literacy strategies beneficial to ELs including ExC-ELL and SIOP. Expediting Reading Comprehension for English Language Learners (ExC-ELL) is a recently developed professional development program that facilitates educators' development of skills, confidence, and efficacy in teaching knowledge as well as literacy skills to ELs and all students (Calderón et.al, 2016). The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) Model is a long-standing, state-adopted model for ELs in North Carolina. SIOP is a research-based and validated instructional model that has proven effective in addressing the academic needs of ELs in North Carolina (Kim et.al, 2012).

2. We suggest equipping social studies teachers with evidence-based interventions that foster EL students' literacy-reading, and writing - and academic progress, and integrated teaching strategies for social studies teachers to be prepared for building resources, and conducting effective lessons.
 - Create lesson plans that integrate grade and content-specific skills with EL-focused teaching resources.
 - Suggest actively engaging literacy-based strategies in vocabulary, reading, writing, summarizing, and storytelling.
 - Encourage social studies teachers to incorporate the following methods and best practices: scaffolding, hands-on activities, graphic organizers, and visuals to establish real-world connections for ELs to make social studies content more comprehensible. (Weiseman & Hansen, 2007).

3. We suggest forming a collaborative team. This would allow content teachers and ESL teachers to share their ideas, concerns, and successes relative to social studies education, collaborating with school administrators and the community to openly connect civic engagement, social, and cultural activities (Youniss, 2009; Hansen, 2011). This would in turn help them become better equipped to work effectively with ELs. Thus, creating a culturally inclusive atmosphere supports literacy, which will ultimately impact EL students' academic success.
 - Share engaging teaching strategies for ELs with diverse cultural and linguistic activities. This encompasses building a positive relationship with ELs and focusing on EL literacy development.

There is a consensus amongst public school administrators and ESL teachers that there is a need to provide more support for ELs in K-8 social studies content. The support to meet their linguistic and cultural needs must be met through more research-based professional development opportunities for school administrators and ESL teachers to effectively assess and align K-8 social studies content. ESL teachers and administrators are needed to be provided with more instructional resources and time to address the needs of ELs. Lastly, ESL teachers and administrators need to collaborate with specialists in the area of social studies in developing quality lesson plans that facilitate culturally inclusive classroom environments.

Conclusion

Content teachers in public schools are not trained in teaching ELs. As the national and state governments are expecting ELs to demonstrate growth and proficiency on assessments, educators are facing challenges in discovering ways to provide support for ELs to learn social studies content. Social studies maybe the most difficult subject for ELs due to the linguistic demands of social studies content.

Subsequently, ELs struggle academically in content learning. This is because unlike mathematics or the sciences, comprehending social studies concepts depends to a large extent on advanced literacy skills. Thus, poor academic performance in social studies is directly related to ineffective pedagogy.

This research seeks to benefit teachers and administrators in providing information, strategies, and methods to

better address the needs of ELs in the content area of social studies through the application of three key areas. First, effective professional development activities train social studies content teachers to acquire research-based effective instructional models for ELs. Second, literacy strategies provide social studies teachers the necessary information to make pedagogical modifications. Third, collaboration among content teachers, ESL teachers, and school administrators creates open communication to take initiative in sharing effective strategies that can be easily applied and challenges that can be addressed.

Every teacher should know how to serve English Learners because nearly all teachers today have or will have ELs in their classrooms. Thompson (2002) suggests content-based ESL instruction, that is “continued language instruction is tailored specifically to the demands of the curriculum rather than consisting of generic instruction in English vocabulary, grammar, conversational skills, and the like” (p. 27). Moreover, collaborative endeavors for educators to share knowledge and experiential opportunities are needed to develop an upgraded curriculum including instructional content, materials, resources, and assessment. For the purposes of EL instruction, however, information specifically about how to help teachers adopt and implement effective teaching strategies for ELs would be useful, meaning every content teacher should know how to serve ELs.

Recommendations

This study results in recommendations, which foster understanding and promote support for ESL teachers and administrators to provide equitable learning environments for ELs. Based on the results of this study there is a need to develop pedagogical applications and effective strategies for social sciences teachers. This study provided evidence that there is a dire need to implement up-to-date research-based professional activities, build resources as well as greater collaboration among content-area teachers, ESL teachers, and school administrators.

This study will potentially lead to the implementation of needed research-based professional development, shared effective teaching strategies, and collaboration for content teachers, ESL teachers, and school administrators. School districts, state, and national policymakers will be enabled to make updated decisions in providing important resources to meet the needs of ELs in social studies content. Ideally, ESL teachers, administrators, and social studies content teachers must work in tandem; Social studies content teachers must be prepared to “provide the best possible learning environment” for ELs, and ESL teachers and school administrators must be willing to collaborate in order to provide effective resources and meaningful professional development opportunities.

Acknowledgments

This article and the research would not have been possible without the exceptional support of my colleague, Dr. Wynne for a wonderful collaboration. Dr. Wynne shared his transcriptions and invaluable information about his dissertation project. The generosity and expertise of ESL teachers and school administrators who participated in the original study improved the ESL studies.


References

- Calderón, M. E., Carreón, A., Slakk, S. & Peyton, J. (2016). *Expediting comprehension for English language learners (ExC-ELL) foundations manual*. New Rochelle, NY: Benchmark Education Co.
- Callahan, R. M., Muller, C., & Schiller, K. S. (2008). Preparing for Citizenship: Immigrant high school students' curriculum and socialization. *Theory and research in social education*, 36(2), 6–31. <http://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2008.10473365>
- Callahan, R., Muller, C., & Schiller, K. (2010). Preparing the Next Generation for Electoral Engagement: Social Studies and the School Context. *American Journal of Education* (Chicago, Ill.). 116. 525-556. 10.1086/653627.
- Cho, S, and Gabriel, A.R. (2008). *New Immigrants, New Challenges: High School Social Studies Teacher and English Language Instruction*. Washington, DC. *The Social Studies: Heldref Publications*.
- Cruz, B.C. & Thornton, S.J. (2013). *Teaching social studies to English language learners*. New York: Routledge.
- Fry, R., & Gonzales, F (2008). *One- in- Five and Growing Fast: A profile of Hispanic public school students*. Washington, DC: PEW Hispanic Center.
- Hansen, M. (2011). *Flunking Civics: Why America's Kids Know So Little*. Retrieved March 31, 2016, from <http://www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/civics>
- Heafner, T. L.; Plaisance, M. (2016). *Exploring How Institutional Structures and practices Influence English Learners' Opportunity to Learn Social Studies*. *Teachers College Record*, v118 n8
- Kim, J., Walker, C. and Manarino-Leggett (2012). *Equipping Classroom Teachers for English Language Learners*. *Tesol Journal*, v. 3(4), 722-734. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.40>
- National Assessment of Educational Progress. (2019). *Average reading scale scores of 4th graders in public schools and percent performing at or above selected achievement levels by English Language Learner status and state*, North Carolina.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2020). *The Condition of Education 2020* (2020-144), English Language Learners in Public Schools. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=96>
- National Council for the Social Studies (2013), *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013).
- National Education Association (2020) <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/english-language-learners>
- Odden, A. & Archibald (2001) *Reallocating resources: How to boost student achievement without asking for more*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press.
- Sugarman, J., & Geary, C. (2018). *English learners in New York State: Demographics, outcomes, and state accountability policies*. Migration Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/english-learners-demographics-outcomes-state-accountability-policies>
- Thompson, C. (2002). *Research-based review of reports on closing the achievement gaps: Report to the Education Cabinet and the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee*.
- Weisman, E. M., and Hansen, L. E. (2007). *Strategies for Teaching Social Studies to Elementary Level ELLS*.

- Washington, DC. Heldref Publications.
- Whittenberg (2011). *Language Barriers: Overcoming Obstacles in English Language Learners in North Carolina, NC Law Justice Center: Education Project*.
- Wynne, M. (2020). *ESL Teachers and School Leaders Perspectives on K-8 Social Studies* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Fayetteville State University.
- Yoder, P. J., Kibler, A., & van Hover, S. (2016). *Instruction for English language learners in the social studies classroom: A meta-synthesis*. *Social Studies Research and Practice*, 11(1), 20-39.
- Youniss, J. (2009). *Why we need to learn more about youth civic engagement*. *Social Forces*, 88(2), 971-975. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/229856294?accountid=10813>

Author Information

Ji Young Kim

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8748-6263>

Fayetteville State University


1200 Murchison Road

Fayetteville, NC 28314

USA

Contact e-mail: jkim@uncfsu.edu

Matthew John Wynne

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6728-8075>

Cumberland County Schools

2465 Gillespie Street

Fayetteville, NC 28306

USA