Teaching social studies is as much about teaching new ideas and skills as it is about teaching language—new vocabulary, new terms, and new text structures abound in each year of social studies learning. Yet more teachers than ever before are working with students whose first language is not English. Students enter today’s classrooms from diverse backgrounds, and educators are sometimes overwhelmed by the challenge of meeting every student’s needs.

Teachers of students who are English language learners will find that best teaching practices for those students are often the same as best teaching practices for all students. However, there are critical understandings that a teacher must possess, about language proficiency and about the foundations of teaching language, in order to successfully support English language learners on their journey.

**Understanding Language Proficiency**

In order to understand how English learners develop second-language literacy and reading comprehension, we must distinguish among three different aspects of language proficiency.

**Conversational fluency** This dimension of proficiency represents the ability to carry on a conversation in face-to-face situations. Most native speakers of English have developed conversational fluency by age 5. This fluency involves the use of high-frequency words and simple grammatical constructions. English learners generally develop fluency in conversational English within a year or two of intensive exposure to the language in school or in their neighborhood environments.

**Discrete language skills** These skills reflect specific phonological, literacy, and grammatical knowledge that students can acquire in two ways—through direct instruction or through immersion in a literacy-rich and language-rich environment in home or in school. The discrete language skills acquired early include

- knowledge of the letters of the alphabet
- knowledge of the sounds represented by individual letters and combinations of letters
- the ability to decode written words

Children can learn these specific language skills concurrently with their development of basic English vocabulary and conversational fluency.
Academic language proficiency This dimension of proficiency includes knowledge of the less-frequent vocabulary of English as well as the ability to interpret and produce increasingly complex written language. As students progress through the grades, they encounter
• far more low-frequency words, primarily from Greek and Latin sources
• complex syntax (for example, sentences in passive voice)
• abstract expressions

Acquiring academic language is challenging. Schools spend at least 12 years trying to teach all students the complex language associated with academic success.

It is hardly surprising that research has repeatedly shown that English language learners, on average, require at least 5 years of exposure to academic English to catch up to native-speaker norms.

Effective instruction for English language learners is built on three fundamental pillars.

Activate Prior Knowledge and Build Background
No learner is a blank slate. Each person’s prior experience provides the foundation for interpreting new information. In reading, we construct meaning by bringing our prior knowledge of language and of the world to the text. The more we already know about the topic in the text, the more of the text we can understand. Our prior knowledge enables us to make inferences about the meaning of words and expressions that we may not have come across before.

Furthermore, the more of the text we understand, the more new knowledge we can acquire. This expands our knowledge base (what cognitive psychologists call schemata, or underlying patterns of concepts). Such comprehension, in turn, enables us to understand even more concepts and vocabulary.

It is more important to activate students’ prior knowledge because students may not realize what they know about a particular topic or issue. Their knowledge may not facilitate learning unless that knowledge is brought to consciousness. Teachers can use a variety of strategies to activate students’ prior knowledge:
• Brainstorming
• Discussion
• Direct experience
• Dramatization
• Visual stimuli
• Student writing
• Drawing

When students don’t already have knowledge about a topic, it is important to help them acquire that knowledge. For example, in order to comprehend text such as “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere,” students need to have background in United States history.

“It is hardly surprising that research has repeatedly shown that English language learners, on average, require at least 5 years of exposure to academic English to catch up to native-speaker norms.”
Access Content

How can teachers make complex academic English comprehensible for students who are still in the process of learning English? We can scaffold students’ learning by modifying the input itself. Here are a variety of ways of modifying the presentation of the academic content to students so that they can more effectively gain access to the meaning.

Using visuals Visuals enable students to “see” the basic concepts we are trying to teach much more effectively than if we rely only on words. Among the visuals we can use are
- pictures, diagrams, and maps
- real objects
- vocabulary cards
- graphic organizers

Dramatization and acting out For beginning English learners, Total Physical Response, in which they follow commands such as “Turn around,” can be highly effective. The meanings of words can be demonstrated through gestures and pantomime.

Language clarification This category of teaching methods includes language-oriented activities that clarify the meaning of new words and concepts. Use of dictionaries, either bilingual or English-only, is still the most direct method of getting access to meaning.

Making personal and cultural connections We should constantly search for ways to link academic content with what students already know that is familiar to them from their family or cultural experiences. This not only validates children’s sense of identity, but it also makes the learning more meaningful.

Extend Language

A systematic exploration of language is essential if students are to develop a curiosity about language and deepen their understanding of how words work. Students should become language detectives who investigate the mysteries of language and how it has been used throughout history to shape and change society.

When students know rules or conventions of how words are formed, it gives them an edge in extending vocabulary. It helps them figure out the meaning of words and how to form different parts of speech from words. The exploration of language can focus on meaning, form, or use.

Focus on meaning Categories that can be explored within a focus on meaning include
- native language equivalents or cognates
- synonyms, antonyms, and homonyms
- meaning of prefixes, roots, or suffixes

Focus on form Categories that can be explored within a focus on form include
- word families
- words with the same prefixes, roots, or suffixes
- grammatical patterns

Focus on use Categories that can be explored within a focus on use include
- general uses
- metaphorical use
- advertisements
- idioms
- proverbs
- puns and jokes

The Three Pillars

Establish a solid structure for the effective instruction of English language learners with the Three Pillars of English Language Learning:
- Activate Prior Knowledge and Build Background
- Access Content
- Extend Language