
PRACTICE BRIEF

Supporting Emergent Bilingual Students in Middle School Social Studies:

Provide Access to Challenging Text

What is it?

Social studies texts are challenging for most students, but especially for ELs, because academic texts are packed with complex sentences, abstract ideas, and difficult vocabulary. However, research shows that ELs and struggling readers benefit from engaging with text with appropriate supports for comprehension. Supporting students in reading challenging text involves connecting the text to the unit's big ideas, including visuals to aid in understanding key ideas, accommodating a range of reading levels, and including prompts that engage students in peer discourse. Two text-reading strategies are illustrated here: Foregrounding Content and Paired Reading.

In foregrounding, effective teachers intentionally structure reading tasks that lead students to make connections with the unit's big ideas, with built-in scaffolds to support varied reading levels. In paired reading activities, students read text with partners in manageable chunks, engaging in peer discussion of text evidence to complete an oral or written task.

How do I use this in my classroom?

There are two options for providing access to challenging text: foregrounding content and paired reading.

A. Foregrounding Content: Comprehension Canopy

Effective teachers create ways to make connections between what students are reading and the unit's big ideas, while also making the reading process engaging for a range of students. In the WorldGen curriculum, foregrounding content activates and builds background knowledge prior to reading to maximize student success in text reading. Foregrounding content occurs in a routine developed through extensive research called The Comprehension Canopy. This routine explicitly connects new concepts to prior learning. At the start of each unit, the Comprehension Canopy highlights important background information, establishing a clear purpose for reading and enhances motivation.

1. Create a central comprehension question that will guide students as they read and discuss the text. Find a short video or create a collection of interesting images to display when introducing the topic.
2. Introduce the reading and activate prior knowledge. Briefly explain the topic of the reading and why it is important. Ask a few guiding questions to gauge students' background knowledge.

3. Present the video or photo collection to deepen students' background knowledge in preparation for reading. These visual images provide a backdrop for reading about the topic in more detail. Pose a question that enables students to make a personal connection with the topic and direct students to Turn and Talk with a partner for a brief discussion.
4. Pose a critical question that will guide students' thinking as they read. Explain that they use this question as a guide for the oral or written activity that will follow the reading.

Comprehension Canopy Lesson Example:

from *Pharaohs TE*, page 3

COMPREHENSION CANOPY
Unit Introduction (15 minutes)

Whole Class Activity
Materials: [InstaEgypt](#), [Timeline](#)

Discuss Prior Knowledge
What do you already know about Egypt and Ancient Egypt? What's a pharaoh? Where's Egypt? What's a pyramid? Are you familiar with other pyramids or have you ever seen one? What questions do you have about Pharaohs, Egypt, and/or Pyramids?

Introduce Topic
In this unit, you will learn about the pyramids and temples of ancient Egypt. Thousands of peasants, craftsmen, and **architects** worked for years to build just one pyramid. Then workers filled it with gold, beautiful furniture, jewelry, and other resources. The building of the pyramids and temples used much of the **surplus** wealth the Egyptians produced, for more than what it took to feed and clothe all of the people.

Introduce Springboard
Introduce the InstaEgypt page and provide a purpose for viewing. Students should discuss what they see and think with a partner or with their squad. Next, students should write their responses. Tell students that some of the images have links underneath them, if they are curious and want to read a bit more. Show students the timeline. Point out that the pyramids are still there today to help them understand that they have endured the test of time.
As you look at the images and what people wrote about their visit to Egypt, think about two things: (1) What are some of the reasons an ancient culture might build pyramids, tombs, and temples? (2) What might it be like to visit Egypt and see these pyramids, tombs, and temples?

Pose Unit Question
State the comprehension question that will guide students' learning throughout the unit: Were the Egyptian pharaohs wise investors or wasteful spenders? Instruct students to repeat the unit question.
At the end of the unit, we will have a class debate and half of you will argue that the Egyptian Pharaohs were wise and the other half will argue that they were wasteful with their **surplus**. The skills that you will be learning are applied by real historians when debating a topic. You will be working on the following items:

- How effectively you state your opinion (claim) and support it with strong arguments.
- How effectively you state counter arguments to the arguments presented by the other side.
- How effectively you respond to the other side's counter arguments.
- How effectively you use the focus words (we will review them today and many times before the debate).

The Egyptian Pharaohs: Wise Investors or Wasteful Spenders?
→ Session 1

Session 1: The Context & The Question
Unit Introduction




Questions to consider when looking at [InstaEgypt](#) and [The Enduring Pyramids Timeline](#):

What do you see?
What do you wonder?
Would you want to go there?

Directions: Write about the following two questions:

1. What are some of the reasons an ancient culture might build pyramids, tombs, and temples?
2. What might it be like to visit Egypt and see these pyramids, tombs, and temples?

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B. Paired Reading Routine

Paired reading has been used effectively by teachers across ages and subject areas. This evidence-based strategy pairs a stronger reader with a less proficient reader to take turns reading aloud, encouraging each other, and engaging in an oral or written activity. In the WorldGen curriculum, paired reading activities occur as a follow-up to a whole-class reading of a difficult passage. In this way, as students read with a partner, they are familiar with the topic and vocabulary, making the accompanying knowledge application activity

easier. The focus of rereading a passage with a partner is to further engage ELs in using key ideas and words in oral and written, text-focused follow-up activities. Teachers present a question or written activity that is accomplished by rereading a passage of text and finding pieces of text evidence to support arguments. By engaging with a supportive peer, ELs are more comfortable in using oral and written language to demonstrate their understanding.

An important aim for teachers is teaching students to find relevant text evidence and apply it to deepening understanding of content. Activities that accompany a paired reading should involve identifying and analyzing text evidence. Relevant peer reading knowledge-application activities include such tasks as identifying evidence and rank ordering it in terms of relevance to an argument and making lists of pros and cons that support or refute an argument. Graphic organizers are another means of requiring students to apply text evidence to answering a question or solving a dilemma.

Paired Reading Steps

1. Establish reading partners. If possible, pair less competent readers with more competent students to foster peer support. As you monitor pairs over time, it may be necessary to regroup any pairs that are not supportive or productive.
2. Explicitly teach a paired reading routine. It may be helpful to post guidelines in the classroom.
3. Select a manageable chunk of text that can be read aloud in 5-10 minutes. This activity should entail rereading content that has already been covered in whole-class instruction. Make sure the passage is content-rich, focuses on a key concept, and includes essential vocabulary words that are highlighted in the unit or lesson.
4. Briefly explain the oral or written activity that will follow the read-aloud. Teachers may write a focus question on the board for an oral discussion or provide a graphic organizer or prompt for a written response. The format for the activity should be read and talk; read and write; or read, talk and write. Point out any key vocabulary terms they will encounter.
5. Direct students to read the passage aloud, taking turns reading aloud by paragraph. Students take turns in the roles of Reader and Listener. When the designated reader reads, the listener provides support by providing positive feedback (e.g., "You read that smoothly.") and offering corrections of any missed words. Then partners switch roles.
6. Following the reading, students summarize what they read before completing the activity.

Paired Reading Lesson Example

From *Pharaohs TE page 20*

SOCIAL STUDIES KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION
Striking Workers: Deir el-Medina (15 minutes)

 **Whole Class Activity or Partner Work**

Read

1. Begin by reading the first paragraph as a class.
2. Check for understanding by facilitating the first Turn, Talk, and Write.
3. Provide corrective feedback if students misunderstand the material.

Prompt Students to Work in Pairs to Read, Talk, and Write

If you feel your students are ready, they can continue reading in pairs and answer the questions that follow. If not, continue reading as a class.

Discuss Student Responses as a Whole Group

If time allows, review the responses as a class. You can also invite students to share their sign ideas.

The Egyptian Pharaohs: Wise Inventors or Wasteful Spenders?
→ Session 4

Striking Workers: Deir el-Medina

As we read, think about the upcoming debate and the power the pharaohs had and why the artisans wanted to strike.

This picture shows the recently excavated remains of the ancient village Set Maat (now called Deir el-Medina), home to the laborers and artisans working on the nearby tombs. We know a lot about how the inhabitants of Set Maat lived from papyrus documents and inscribed pottery shards found in the ruins – these include receipts, prescriptions, magic spells, and even love songs! About 70 workers and their families lived in the village, in 3–5 room mud brick homes. Though these houses are simpler than Egypt's temples, tombs, and other **monumental** forms of **architecture**, the people who lived there were not peasants. They were skilled artisans – potters, carpenters, coppersmiths, sculptors, jewelers, and **architects**.



**Turn, Talk and Write:**

What kinds of information would receipts, prescriptions, magic spells, and love songs provide to archeologists? What would archeologists find from today's day and age?

These workers helped design the tombs, carved sculptures, and made furniture and other beautiful objects to place in the tombs. Many were able to read and write. They were somewhere in the middle of Egypt's social **hierarchy**, well below the pharaoh and his officials, priests, and scribes, but much better off than the peasants.

**Turn, Talk and Write:**

What did the artisans do? Describe how the power was organized and where the artisans were in the power structure.

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Why is supporting access to challenging text effective?

There is ample evidence that reading and writing enhances social studies content knowledge as well as disciplinary literacy skills. However, rigorous social studies texts, especially primary source documents, pose particular challenges for ELs who may struggle with the language of a historical period, complex sentence structures and vocabulary in these texts. ELs face the dual challenge of learning academic content in English while also developing language proficiency. Social studies teachers often avoid the use of texts so that ELs do not experience frustration. However, this practice fails to nurture essential disciplinary literacy and language competency. Instead, it is important to teach students how to successfully engage with academic texts by creating scaffolded ways for students to delve deeply into selected chunks of content-rich text.

Why connecting language and text reading improves content learning:

- Strong evidence supports making explicit connections between language development and literacy in tandem with content-rich instruction. Providing systematic instruction in conceptual and discipline-specific vocabulary and connecting it to content area text solidifies content learning (Baker et al., 2013; Capin et al., 2026; Hall et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2023).
- Using content-rich text in a discourse-rich environment with heterogeneous grouping of students enables students to use oral and written language to build academic language and communicate about discipline-specific ideas. (Martinez et al., 2025; Snow & Ucelli, 2009; Valdés, 2015)
- The comprehension canopy activates and builds background knowledge and pre-teaches key vocabulary prior to reading the text. The foregrounding activities, including posing a central question to be answered by the text, lead students to read with purpose. (Vaughn, et al., 2015; Vaughn & Wanzek, 2024)
- Foregrounding content, including vocabulary and discourse opportunities, reduces linguistic barriers for ELs. (Hogan et al., August,et al., 2014)

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