

PRACTICE BRIEF

Supporting Emergent Bilingual Students in Middle School Social Studies:

Use Formative Assessment to Inform Instruction

What is it?

Brief formative assessments embedded throughout a unit provide opportunities for students to process and summarize what they are learning. Formative assessment, a common practice used across subject areas and grades, provides a window into student learning, guiding teachers' instructional decisions to maximize student progress. In social studies, formative assessments are often simple checks for understanding, including checking in with small groups, engaging students in a question-and-answer session, or conducting a brief quiz. Another common example of a formative assessment is an "exit ticket," or brief writing prompt given at the end of a lesson to see how students grasped the content so that teachers can make adjustments to the next lesson. The WorldGen curriculum includes these aspects, but additionally includes formative writing assessments throughout a unit. The writing prompts, called a Thoughtbook, are similar to a journal that students keep to record their thinking throughout the unit. The teacher emphasizes that there are no right or wrong answers; the Thoughtbook is simply a way to express students' thinking at each time point. Thoughtbook prompts ask students to write about key concepts, essential vocabulary, and how the content relates to their own lives.

How do I use this in my classroom?

1. In planning a unit, identify key concepts and vocabulary that are essential to master the unit content. As you design formative assessment writing tasks, ensure that these words and concepts will be the focus for formative assessments throughout the unit.
2. Create writing prompts to be completed individually and that require students to summarize, synthesize and explain key concepts, intentionally integrating the use of key vocabulary.
3. Direct students to complete writing prompts at the end of lessons throughout the unit. Optionally, precede the writing task with a peer discussion to aid ELs in preparing their thoughts.
4. Design writing prompts so that key concepts build throughout the unit. Start with simple tasks such as summarizing or explaining an event or process and gradually build to more complex tasks, such as

connecting concepts, analyzing cause and effect relationships, identifying arguments or synthesizing content.

- At the culmination of the unit, prepare a writing prompt for students to answer individually or within their peer group that requires students to generalize to a current situation or their own lives.

Curriculum Example:

from *Pharaohs Session 1*, TE page 16

This Thoughtbook example shows a graphic organizer asking students to connect their thoughts about the central question, “Were the Egyptian pharaohs wise investors or wasteful spenders?” with text and video evidence that supports the two arguments across three sources.

THOUGHTBOOK
(10 minutes)

 **Solo Work**

Direct Students to Respond to Thoughtbook Prompt

After discussion, students will go to their Thoughtbook and fill in evidence for either claim: wise investors AND wasteful spenders! You can hint that there might only be evidence to support that they were wise.

From your reading, was there any evidence for the pharaohs being wise or wasteful? Do you have any new information for either side? (Tip: use the focus words **monumental** and **architecture** when you begin to fill in your table.)

Work on the following in your **THOUGHTBOOK**.

	The pharaohs were...	
	Wise Investors	Wasteful Spenders
VIDEO	Explain why this makes them wise in your own words...	
READING #1	Evidence from the text in your own words...	Evidence from the text in your own words...
READING #2		



Why is Formative Instruction Effective?

Formative assessment is widely used in social studies as a way for teachers to keep track of students' learning. Studies show that when teachers adjust instruction or re-teach concepts that might not be fully understood, students improve their content learning (Black & Williams, 2009; Heritage & Heritage, 2013).

- Formative assessment has been identified as a high-leverage practice for effective teaching (Black & William, 2009). Teachers use formative assessment to know how to better support students. In response to students' assessment responses, teachers are able to clarify misconceptions and make instructional adjustments (Hogan, et al., 2024). Assessment tasks that ask students to write about key ideas support their content learning because they involve summarizing key ideas, making logical connections and explaining processes or arguments (Graham & Heibert, 2010).
- Frequent formative assessments benefit all students but are particularly important for ELs. Writing tasks designed to engage students in using disciplinary language patterns and using key vocabulary

from the unit enhance ELs opportunities to navigate literacy, language and the content. Such opportunities for authentic use of the language of social studies is critical for improving content learning for ELs (Cheuk, et al., 2018; Hogan et al., 2024).

- Formative assessments reinforce the disciplinary literacy practice of using text evidence to support claims and assertions. Writing prompts that ask students to synthesize text information and put it into their own words is a powerful tool for deepening content understanding (Hogan, et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2016).

References:

Black, P., & William, D. (2009). Developing the theory of formative assessment. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21, 5–31.

Cheuk, T., Daro, P., & Daro, V. (2018). Summative assessments: Mathematics and English learners. In A. L. Bailey, Maher, C. A. & Wilkinson, L. C. (Eds.), *Language, literacy and learning in the STEM disciplines: How language counts for English learners*. (pp. 1–5). Routledge.

Graham, S., & Hebert, M. (2010). Writing to read: Evidence for how writing can improve reading: A report from Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Heritage, M., & Heritage, J. (2013). Teacher questioning: The epicenter of instruction and assessment. *Applied Measurement in Education*, 26(3), 176–190.

Hogan, E., Fishstrom, S., Andress, T. T., Martinez, L., & Vaughn, S. (2024). Instructional practices for secondary social studies teachers: Describing a curricular program designed to improve language, content knowledge and literacy outcomes for emergent bilinguals. *TESOL Journal*, 15(4), 1–20.

Lee, O., Llosa, L., Jiang, F., Haas, A., O'Connor, C. O., & Van Booven, C. D. (2016). Elementary teachers' science knowledge and instructional practices: Impact of an intervention focused on English language learners. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 53(4), 579–597.

Martinez, L. R., Fishstrom, S., Vaughn, S., Capin, P., Carlson, C. D., Andress, T. T., & Francis, D. J. (2024). Supporting knowledge and language acquisition of secondary emergent bilinguals through social studies instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 59(3), 349–370.