

PRACTICE BRIEF

Supporting Emergent Bilingual Students in Middle School Social Studies:

Sequence Lessons to Build Understanding of Language and Content

What is it?

This is a unit-level approach to creating a progressive series of lessons that build essential disciplinary language and literacy skills while teaching content. Throughout the unit lessons, students practice disciplinary skills such as identifying perspectives, stating claims, and identifying supporting text evidence while they also use key vocabulary and language in oral and written activities. In small-group and partner activities, students read, discuss and write about concepts to build depth of understanding. Active engagement and discussion are central to simultaneously building language competence and content knowledge.

How do I use this in my classroom?

1. Establish a primary, overarching goal for the unit that represents the “big picture” of the unit content, or the key idea that you want students to learn. Use this goal to generate a guiding question that will be a focal point of unit lessons (see “Organize the unit around a guiding question”).
2. Outline a reasonable sequence of key ideas that lead up to a full understanding of the overarching goal and unit content.
3. Build the unit around a sequence of daily text-based and oral discussion activities derived from your sequence of key ideas.
4. Build in checkpoints along the way to monitor student learning of academic vocabulary and content. Circle back to any gaps in knowledge to meet the unit goal (See Formative Assessment).

Curriculum Example:

from Pharaohs unit, Lessons 1, 3 and 4

Notice how the lessons progress in teaching students the language and content related to ancient Egypt. In Lesson 1, the lesson engages students in a Readers Theater script that parallels what happened in ancient Egypt with a modern-day example that students can relate to. Lesson 2 extends the Readers Theater with a peer discussion activity to identify

different perspectives and develop arguments. In Lesson 3, the focus moves to reading about ancient Egypt. The lesson begins with a review of focus words (monument and architecture), a short video about how the pyramids were built, and a Turn and Talk activity, all aimed at enhancing comprehension. Notice the highlighted focus words in the written text. In Lesson 4, text reading and oral discussion continue to build language and content knowledge with discussion prompts and writing tasks. In Lesson 5, students continue using disciplinary literacy skills to read, engage in oral discussions, find text evidence, and write about their learning.

Reader's Theater (25 minutes)

Group Activity
During the Reader's Theater students will work with their squad (groups of four that you assign).

We're going to read about an example of spending that some consider an investment and others consider wasteful.

Introduce Focus Words

See the focus word chart in the unit overview. These words are introduced in the Reader's Theater and will be revisited in later sessions as we read about ancient Egypt. Introduce the following two words before students read the script.

Before you read, we will go over two of our focus words for this unit.

*The first word is, "**hierarchy**." Say, "**hierarchy**." A **hierarchy** is a system of organization in which people or things have higher and lower ranks. In this reading you will learn about how athletes, who are high in the school **hierarchy**, will benefit from a new swimming pool the most.*

Turn and Talk: Ask students to discuss this question, "What is the typical **hierarchy** in a family?" Circulate and monitor as students talk. Model and provide feedback, as needed.

*Another word we will use is "**infrastructure**." Say, "**infrastructure**." **Infrastructure** is the basic facilities that serve an organization, city, country, etc. For example, Egyptians built a huge agricultural **infrastructure**, which included a system of canals, catch basins, and other devices to control the Nile's waters.*

Turn and Talk: Ask students to discuss this question, "What kind of **infrastructure** does a school need to run efficiently?" Circulate and monitor as students talk. Model and provide feedback, as needed.

Also, as you read, think of yourself as a word detective. When you encounter the words in bold or any words you would bold because they are difficult, consider ways to detect their meaning: Read around the word (what do you learn about what it means?) and read within the word (what do you learn about what it means?).

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

Reader's Theater

Amazing Investment or Money Down the Drain?



You are going to read about an example of spending that some consider an investment and others consider wasteful. We are going to go over a couple of focus words for this unit.

Hierarchy: a system of organization in which people or things have higher and lower ranks

Turn and Talk:
What is the typical **hierarchy** in a family?

Infrastructure: the basic facilities that serve an organization, city, country, etc.

Turn and Talk:
What kind of **infrastructure** does a school need to run efficiently?

Before you begin reading:

Discuss with a partner a time when you (or your family) spent money wisely. Next, tell about a time when you wasted money.

Also, you can think of yourself as a word detective—when you encounter the words that are difficult, consider ways to detect their meaning. Some of these words are in bold and some you may identify.

Script

Setting: The school bell just rang at Horace Mann Middle School, and two seventh-grade boys are waiting outside for their friends who took a detour to the restroom. The friends finally arrive.

Lian: The restrooms in this school are disgusting. The sinks are always clogged, there's graffiti everywhere, and some of the toilets don't even flush. The locks on the stalls are all broken. You have to be a gymnast to go to the bathroom and hold the door closed. But now our school is going to build a new swimming pool because they found some extra money? They've got a problem with priorities. They should ask us students how to spend this **surplus**!

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Not Just the Pyramids (10 minutes)



Partner Work and Whole Class Activity

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

Have students continue to work in pairs to read 'Not Just the Pyramids', then talk and write.

After students finish reading, ask them to discuss with their partner and write what they can infer from the text about ancient Egyptian ideas about the afterlife.

Discuss with Whole Group

Discuss what your students can infer from the text about ancient Egyptian ideas about the afterlife.

Possible Inferences:

- The afterlife was similar to life on earth since many of the same objects could be used (furniture, paintings, jewelry).
- The quality of the afterlife depended on how much wealth was placed in his tomb.
- The afterlife was eternal (at least for the pharaoh), since the pharaoh could continue watching over his people after he died.
- It was a difficult journey to arrive at the afterlife, since the pharaoh needed instructions and advice about how to get there.

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.

The Egyptian Pharaohs: Wise Investors or Wasteful Spenders?

→ Session 3

Not Just the Pyramids



Ancient Egypt lasted for about 3,000 years. During that long time, the Egyptians built many pyramids. They also built many other **monumental** structures. These structures included temples, enormous statues, and a great series of tombs carved right into the rock of a large mountain. Many of these structures are in a region of Egypt called the Valley of the Kings. The tombs held important objects that were thought to be necessary for pharaohs to live well after their earthly lives were over. These tombs were filled with beautiful furniture, statues, wall paintings, precious jewelry, and gold. Each tomb also contained writings with advice for the pharaoh to help guide him or her along the journey to the afterlife. These offerings honored the gods and were thought to enable the pharaohs to continue to watch over Egypt.



Turn & Talk:
What can you infer from the text about ancient Egyptian ideas about the afterlife?



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		



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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 Investors 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 Sequencing Lessons to Build Understanding of Language and Content Effective?

- Teachers set an overarching unit goal and then include daily text-based activities that build students' vocabulary and content knowledge. By engaging students in daily opportunities to read, discuss, and write about how the activities relate to the overarching goal, students systematically build their knowledge and skills (Duhaylongsod, et al., 2015; Hogan, et al., 2024)
- Instructional units promote knowledge development for ELs by progressively deepening subject matter knowledge and sensemaking through carefully sequenced activities designed to build content knowledge and language (Capin, et al., 2026; Martinez, et al., 2024; Stewart, et al., 2022)
- There is a positive, reciprocal relationship between knowledge building and text comprehension. As students gain content knowledge through text-based and oral discussion activities, their content knowledge and literacy skills accelerate simultaneously (Capin, et al, 2026; Duke, et al., 2011; Vaughn, et al., 2017).

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