

PRACTICE BRIEF

Supporting Emergent Bilingual Students in Middle School Social Studies:

Structured Peer Discussion

What is it?

Structured Peer Discussion engages diverse groups of students in dialogue about essential vocabulary and key concepts related to the instructional content. Teachers establish peer discussion norms and routines to maximize opportunities for students to use academic language. Ensuring that every student engages in oral discussion enhances learning for all students, but for emergent bilingual students, structured peer discussion builds peer support for language and content learning. Use Turn and Talk Routines for a quick and easy way to get students talking about key vocabulary and big ideas in the lesson. Use Heterogeneous Team Discussions for longer discussions focused on the overarching unit goal. Read more below.

How do I use this in my classroom?

A. Turn and Talk Routine

This paired peer discussion routine requires students to make language connections with what they are learning, while the teacher takes a brief pause in teacher-led discussion, minimizing disruption to the flow of teaching. The discussion prompt focuses on a key concept or vocabulary word.

Turn and Talk Steps

1. Assign partners. Teachers often assign “table partners” or “seat partners,” so that students can quickly turn to a nearby peer. In this strategy, teachers pair EL students with a partner who can provide encouragement and language support as they engage in the task.
2. Explicitly teach a Turn and Talk routine by setting an expectation for each partner to orally explain their own response to a prompt. Establish a time limit, about 1 minute, and establish a signal for pulling the class back to the lesson.
3. Within a lesson, mark a few places to pause the lesson for a Turn and Talk. For each Turn and Talk, create a prompt that requires students to discuss a key concept, use essential vocabulary, and/or apply it to their own lives

Turn and Talk Lesson Example:

from from Athens Sparta TE page 49

Session Introduction (5 minutes)



Whole Class Activity and Partner Work

Feedback Based on Class Check from Session 1

See instructions above

State Purpose for the Session

Today we will be reviewing the Reader's Theater script to analyze the characters' arguments and the evidence they provide. We will be practicing skills that real historians use when they debate a topic. Historians prepare for debate by identifying pro- and con- claims and the evidence that supports them.

Instruct students to refer to the Reader's Theater in forming an opinion about which high school is better. Direct students to take a position, make claims about it, and present evidence to support it. Then, prompt students to identify a counter argument to their position and present evidence against it.

Introduce and Review Focus Words

Remind students that the focus words will be in bold throughout the unit. Start by reviewing the words "**compete**" and "**elitist**." Explain that these words are very important to the unit because the Greek city-states **competed** against each other and they had **elitist** attitudes.

Before you read, we will discuss our focus words for this unit. Let's review the two words we have already learned. What does **compete** mean? Turn to your partner and give a definition.

Now, let's focus on "**elitist**." If we describe someone as **elitist**, what do we mean?

A new word is, "**democratic**." Say, "**democratic**." **Democratic** is relating to a form of government in which citizens can vote, meaning that there is social or political equality. If everyone can vote on something, they have an equal voice. A **democracy** is a government based on voting.

Turn and Talk: Ask students to discuss this question, "How would a class president be elected in a **democracy**?"

Distinguish between a **democracy** and an oligarchy. Tell students:

In a **democracy**, all citizens have the right to vote and participate in decision-making, so there is political equality. In an oligarchy, only the **elite** group of rich, powerful people can make decisions.

Turn and Talk: Is a **democracy** or an oligarchy more fair?

Another new word is "**individualism**." Say, "**individualism**." This is the belief that the interests of the individual are of greatest importance. When people believe in **individualism**, they encourage people to follow their own interests or talent. In many Greek city-states, the people believed in **individualism**, so people excelled in their own ways.

Turn and Talk: Ask students to discuss this question, "Do you think your school values **individualism**? Why or why not?"

Was it better to be an Athenian or a Spartan?
→ Session 2

Session 2: Arguments, Claims, and Evidence

Session Introduction

One thing that historians do to prepare for debate is identify claims and the evidence that supports them (both pro and con). You are going to form an opinion about which high school is better. You will need to include all the parts of a good argument. This means presenting a claim, the evidence, and an explanation of why the evidence supports the claim. Then, you will identify a counter argument and present evidence against the counter argument.

Warm-up:

Let's first discuss a couple focus words:

Democratic: relating to a form of government in which citizens can vote.



Turn and Talk: How would a class president be elected in a **democracy**?



Individualism: This is the belief that the interests of the individual are of greatest importance. When people believe in **individualism**, they encourage people to follow their own interests or talent.



Turn and Talk: Do you think your school values **individualism**? Provide evidence that supports your view. Also, think about evidence that does not support your view and consider how to address it.



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49

B. Heterogeneous Team Discussion

This structured peer discussion routine presents a specific task requiring students to orally discuss a key concept and apply their collective knowledge in an oral or written response. The aim is for every student to have a role in the discussion.

Heterogeneous Team Discussion Steps

1. Establish heterogeneous groups of about four students. Teams will work together through an entire unit to prepare for a culminating activity. In WorldGen, teams engage in weekly activities leading up to a final unit debate.
2. Throughout the unit, create weekly knowledge-application tasks, often guided by a graphic organizer, that lead up to a culminating activity.
3. For each team discussion, assign each student a role that contributes to the task. For example, if the prompt is to prepare an argument or take a position on a question related to the current lesson, roles

might be to a) prepare an opening statement, b) compile supporting evidence, c) prepare a counter argument, and d) prepare a closing summary.

4. Allot time for each part of the activity: discussing the prompt, sharing ideas and evidence, and practicing arguments to present to the class. Set a timer for each phase.
5. Set clear expectations for participation and accountability. Provide extra support to any students having difficulty and encourage group support. It is helpful to include reflection on the group process during follow-up discussion.

Heterogeneous Team Discussion Lesson Example

Taken from Athens Sparta TE page 49

DISCIPLINARY LITERACY

Writing Debate Statements (35 minutes)



Working in Teams

Model Activity

1. Introduce the debate question: Was it better to be an Athenian or a Spartan?
2. In the student teams, assign perspectives or let groups choose the perspective that they will support in the debate. Make sure that students are physically together with their teams.
3. Guide students through this process of preparing for the debate, showing them where to include each fact (piece of evidence), and how to support it in the Opening Statement section.
4. Direct students to the bottom of the page and explain that they must guess how an opposing team might challenge their argument, and then think about how to respond to that challenge, or counter argument. Remind students to use information from Sessions 3, 4, and 5 to support their arguments.

Prompt Students to Prepare Debate Statements

After reviewing the organizer, direct students to go through the four rounds of the debate and complete the graphic organizer with their squads. The organizer will help them prepare their debate statements and counterarguments. Once students have completed the document as a squad, they will decide who will represent their team for each round.

As students work in groups on their debate statements, circulate among the groups. First listen to their discussion and use the following prompts as needed to guide their thinking forward.

- ☞ How well do your opening statements support your position?
- ☞ What focus words/language/ phrases might you use to make your arguments stronger and more convincing? What textual evidence could you use to strengthen your arguments?
- ☞ What arguments might the other team present? Do the counter arguments you prepared directly address their arguments?
- ☞ What focus words/language/phrases might you use to make your counter argument stronger and more convincing? What textual evidence could you use to strengthen your arguments?
- ☞ How well does your response to the other team's counter argument directly address their counter argument?
- ☞ How well can you deliver your argument/counter argument/response to counter argument using appropriate and convincing tone of voice, gestures, enthusiasm?

Was it better to be an Athenian or a Spartan?
→ Session 6

Writing Debate Statements

You will be preparing for the debate as a team and work together in thinking through all of your team members' statements even though ultimately you will only represent your team for one round.

In the debate there will be four rounds:

Round 1: One person from your team will share an **opening statement**.

Round 2: A new representative from your team will respond with a **counter argument to the other team's opening statement/argument**. (In other words: **clarify, challenge, and respond**. Ask clarifying questions or challenge another group's claim or supporting evidence)

Round 3: A new representative from your team will present a **defense** against another team's counter argument. (In other words: **clarify, challenge, and respond**.)

Round 4: The last representative will share **closing remarks**

Which side is your team arguing?

We think that it was better to be an **ATHENIAN.** We think that it was better to be a **SPARTAN.**

Preparing for Round 1 OPENING STATEMENT

Write the facts your group chose from the readings and explain how each fact supports your perspective. Use as many facts as needed to make your argument.

→ Fact:		because	
→ Fact:		because	
→ Fact:		because	
→ Fact:		because	
→ Fact:		because	

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Why is structured peer discussion effective?

Structured Peer Discussion provides opportunities for emergent bilingual students to fully participate in grade-level content instruction with strategic peer support. Research shows that this practice integrates language and literacy instruction into content learning, providing opportunities for emergent bilingual students to simultaneously develop language proficiency and subject-specific knowledge. The integration of

academic literacy and literacy skills into a content-rich curriculum enhances learning for emergent bilingual and English proficient students. Studies show positive effects for content knowledge, vocabulary and disciplinary literacy for all students. Though studies show strong, positive effects for explicitly taught vocabulary, there is also evidence that students acquire more vocabulary words that are incidentally taught.

Why structured peer discussion improves literacy:

- Domain-specific background knowledge is often the strongest predictor of reading comprehension for readers in the middle school grades and beyond.
- Instruction that intentionally combines language, literacy and academic content enhances academic learning for emergent bilingual students.
- Effective social studies instruction for emergent bilingual students provides ongoing opportunities for extended writing, oral interaction, and collaborative academic discussions because these activities scaffold comprehension.

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