

## Content Concepts Appropriate for Age and Educational Background

SIOP® teachers must carefully consider the content concepts they wish to teach and use district curriculum guidelines and grade-level content standards as guides. In SIOP® classrooms, this entails ensuring that although materials may be adapted to meet the needs of English learners, the content is not diminished. When planning lessons around content concepts, consider the following: (1) the students' first language (L1) literacy, (2) their second language (L2) proficiency, (3) their reading ability, (4) the cultural and age appropriateness of the L2 materials, and (5) the difficulty level of the material to be read (Gunderson, 1991, p. 21).

In some cases, students with major gaps in their educational backgrounds may be placed in newcomer programs or specialized classes that pull objectives and content concepts from earlier grades in order to provide the foundational knowledge the students need to perform grade-level work successfully and catch up to their classmates (Short & Boyson, 2004). In general, it is inappropriate to use the curriculum materials and books from much earlier grades. Students in high school who are developing literacy for the first time should not be reading about "doggies and birdies," for example. Other materials should be found, and if necessary, the teacher should provide the scaffolding needed to understand the content concepts. Ideally, specialized courses would be developed to accelerate their learning, such as FAST Math developed by Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools (Helman & Buchanan, 1993), which can help students gain several years' worth of mathematics instruction in one subject area in six months to one year.

Additionally, reflect on the amount of background experience needed to learn and apply the content concepts and include ways to activate students' prior knowledge related to them. For example, fourth-grade students typically learn about magnetism, yet some ELs may not have the requisite background knowledge to understand this concept. Rather than diminish the content, use what prior knowledge students do have, perhaps about attraction, and then explicitly build background information as a foundation for their understanding of magnetism.

Providing adequate background requires teachers to perform a *task analysis*—a process in which you carefully analyze the requisite knowledge a student must possess in order to understand what is being taught. The purpose is to lessen the gap between what a student knows and what he or she must learn. This can be accomplished by modifying the lesson to include substantial background building, or through a small group minilesson that precedes the regular whole class lesson (Vogt, 2000). This minilesson provides a "jump start" by reviewing key background concepts, introducing vocabulary, leading a picture or text "walk" through the reading material, engaging in simulations or role-plays, or hands-on experiential activities. The jump-start minilesson develops context and gives access to children who may lack appropriate background knowledge or experience with the grade-level content concepts. In heterogeneous classes in which ELs study with native English speakers, peer tutors can be used to teach some of the requisite background information as well.

You are the one to decide when to modify content concepts by providing extensive background building for the whole class, or by teaching a brief jump-start lesson to a small group. If you have a large number of English learners who are in the early stages of language development, you may need to include extensive background building. If you have a small group of ELs who have intermediate language proficiency, the jump-start minilesson may provide sufficient scaffolding and access to the content concepts. Alternately, in situations in which an ESL and content teacher work collaboratively with the same group of students, the ESL teacher can offer lessons that build background and vocabulary before the ELs study the topic in their regular or sheltered content class.