Teach the Text Backwards:
A Practical Framework Which Helps ESOL Students Understand Textbooks

The last issue of From Theory To Practice presented three principles which facilitate language learning in content classrooms and gave an example of how these principles could be put into effect in an adapted lesson. This issue suggest a simple, practical framework for applying these principles to student learning from textbooks.

The Three Principles, identified from current theory and approaches are: increase comprehensibility (e.g., Krashen), increase interaction (e.g., Swain, Long and Porter), and increase thinking and study skills (e.g., Cummins, Chamot, and O'Malley).

How can content teachers implement these principles in mainstream classrooms, especially in upper elementary, middle, and high school grades where much of the learning occurs through the textbook and other reading and writing activities? One way is to use a sequence of presenting new textbook-based material that I call Teach the Text Backwards. The traditional teaching sequence is:
1. Read the text
2. Answer the study questions at the end of the chapter
3. Discuss the material in class
4. Do selected applications based on the material

This sequence is very difficult for many Limited English Proficient (LEP) students who read English with difficulty and who may not have cultural or background knowledge similar to the mainstream, US students that the text was written for. I suggest that teachers Teach the Text Backwards:
1. Do selected applications based on the material
2. Discuss the material in class
3. Answer the study questions at the end of the chapter
4. Read the text

1st: Start by doing something that applies the material to be learned in a concrete, real-life way. The "applications and extensions" at the end of the chapter or in the teacher's guide are a good source of ideas. For LEP students, this hands-on application
puts the new material in content and increases comprehensibility. For example, in science, take a field trip to the planetarium early in the unit, not at the end; in social studies, interview families about what countries their ancestors came from before starting units on geography or immigration; in math read opposing articles citing similar statistics before studying formulas; in computer literacy, struggle with preparing a simple document before learning terminology or practice keyboarding skills.

2nd. Discuss the application and the related concepts in class. Ask students what happened, why, what would happen if... etc. Use the key vocabulary in the discussion, pointing to objects or demonstrating relationships to connect the new words and sentences to their meaning. Oral language is usually easier than textbook language for LEP students to understand and the discussion of a concrete activity teaches key vocabulary and concepts, activates prior knowledge, provides schema (the "big picture"), models thinking skills, and applies all three principles.

3rd. Ask students to review the study questions at the end of the chapter to identify main ideas and to set a purpose for reading. Preview the chapter by looking at pictures and diagrams. Read the subheadings to show students how the chapter is organized and where they can expect to find specific information. These strategies increase comprehensibility and teach thinking and study skills.

4th. Lastly, have students read the text to find the answers to the most important study questions. Teachers can divide or jigsaw the chapter to reduce the amount of text each student reads and to increase understanding for key sections and model study skills; graphic organizers and visuals can demonstrate key relationships in the content and increase comprehensibility and thinking skills.

The Teach the Text Backwards sequence incorporates the three principles which aid LEP students in learning language through content and it also aids other students who are less skilled readers or who learn best through less traditional learning styles. It is a practical, consistent framework for teaching and learning into which additional ESOL strategies can be integrated.

For more information on Teaching the Text Backwards, please call: 800-756-9003.

Judy Jameson, Center for Applied Linguistics
Region XIV Comprehensive Center

Center for Applied Linguistics
http://www.cal.org/cc14/ttp5.html
3/10/98