Many ESL students study social studies it’s a vital subject because it teaches them to appreciate the increasingly complex world around them as they grow up. But ESL social studies at times often takes second place to that of science, biology and other subjects. This is because social offers fewer opportunities for practical work apart from looking  around a globe looking for their own country and places they would like to visit.

Social studies offers more subjects that are of an abstract nature and if the lessons are content based then this involves students having to participate in discussions, writing, grammar syntax and other activities which creates and develops their critical thinking. Students in southern Thailand studying colonialism, may have no previous knowledge of why there is such a British influence on certain African and other countries. But if one puts their mind to it there are some things you can do to enhance the lesson to make it more interesting.

To help them study better ask them to read up about the subject in their own language first. This schema idea makes it far more easier for them to understand it in English when its your turn to teach it. By having an understanding of the subject they get the general idea and when you are teaching it, they can develop a sense of anticipation that you can exploit by asking them to answer your questions from what they have read and this breeds excitement and gives the teacher an opportunity to praise them for making the effort to speak.

Recently I was teaching a 9th grade class about the scramble for Africa and why it has been so poor and underdeveloped. In-particular I was making references to the exploitation of its natural resources. I printed out a map of Africa and stapled candies around the edge of the map. I gave each candy a name. One was diamonds, one was gold, one was natural resources, one was slavery, one was wood and a few more just for effect. The students were grouped with each group representing a European country. With the map on a table in the centre of the room and the word ‘’GO’’ they had to scramble to the table and take as much of the natural resources as they wanted, of course the scramble was quite effective. It was a good way to teach them the word scramble and exploitation at the same time.

Of course the map was torn to shreds and the candies dispersed to ‘all parts of Europe’ which was entirely expected and made the point I was  trying to teach, in that many European countries have exploited African resources for far too long and today Africa is still having to cope with the legacy of colonialism.

At times, the ESL teacher has to modify complex text to fit in with the students level of English, which is also an important part of teaching social science to ESL students. But its important that the teacher retains the interesting facts and the concepts contained within the story to keep the students interested. The other side of this is that it creates more lesson planning work for the teacher, as it may have to completely re-written in some cases. But when it’s done once it doesn’t have to get done again and after all its really worth the effort.

Teaching certain critical thinking skills like cause and effect can also be enhanced by using conceptual mind maps. On teaching the development of western culture recently, students loved drawing and coloring mind maps that showed the effects of certain inventions during the Industrial Revolution. Demonstrating that as one object was invented it created certain ‘’after effects’’, some good & some bad and the effects of certain things had wider reaching consequences for people and the environment.

Reading text can also be helpful if we teach them to underline or use a highlighter correctly. Many students underline too much, so it’s vital that students think before they underline and have a specific reason for doing so. Students highlight for different reasons it may be for information they already know already, but it’s sometimes better to teach students to underline the most important sentence or words in the paragraph usually these are new words or phrases because deciding what is the most important requires a higher level of processing. Highlighting is also good at looking for helping words in the text. Students could work together and compare highlights and talk about why they have highlighted each word or phrase. They could talk about to the class or a group discussion. This also helps to develop self questioning and learning from others.