

# Teaching Tips

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## Using Area Studies as a Course Theme

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Area studies are ideal as introductory content-based ESL classes. They are flexible, so they can incorporate varied content areas. Students with a range of planned majors can find something that relates to their areas of interest. For secondary students, such a course could serve as an introduction for those not yet ready to try more specialized content-based courses. For all students, especially those new to a region, an area studies course helps them to understand and connect with their new home.

I took advantage of Oregon's sesquicentennial to offer an area studies class called Oregon 150. I focused on a few content areas: history, environment, economics, and society and cultures of Oregon. The final unit, biographies of famous Oregonians, included more fields such as science, politics, and literature.

Choosing appropriate reading material is aided by the fact that there are many area-based textbook series for native speakers at a range of reading levels. My students were mostly lower intermediate in English proficiency, so I chose a text for upper elementary to middle school native speakers. In mixed proficiency classes, supplementary texts and websites are easily available. For example, a wealth of historical material on Lewis and Clark and the Oregon Trail is available.

Class activities can also easily be created for regional and content themes. I had students plan a business venture between their country and Oregon for economics. They did independent research and reports on famous Oregonians for the final project, covering a variety of fields.

Simulations such as Oregon Trail may also be effective.

An area studies theme can also take advantage of local institutions and events for class outings. I took my class to the state capitol building in Salem for the introductory unit (it would also work for a unit on government), to Silver Falls State Park for the unit on the environment, to Mission Mill Museum for history, berry picking at a local farm for economics, and to the World Beat Festival for society and cultures.

One challenge in planning the course was that while it was easy to find factual materials, getting appropriate sources that explored issues and encouraged students to think and give their opinions were harder to find. I often had to adapt material. As an example, for the environment unit I had students look at Oregon's bottle and beach bills, as well as the debate between those who wish to protect forests and logging interests. For history and society, we examined the treatment of Native Americans here.

The advantages of using area studies as a theme are that several content areas can be included; the content subjects drive language that students are likely to need elsewhere in their studies; and students are motivated by the application of the class themes to their majors, interests, and lives outside school.

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