

Foreign Currencies as Materials to Teach Language and Culture

by [Jeanne Beck](#)

Audience: Grades 3–8+

Money, like food or clothing, is universal. Students are drawn to similarities and differences between their country's money and foreign currencies. Beyond using money for counting practice, teachers can introduce students to other cultures, including their own! If you don't have a foreign currency readily available, don't worry! A simple web search will bring up the images and cultural information you need.

Here are six topics you can explore with money, along with questions to ask and some interesting facts to share:

1. Images of Famous People

Questions to ask: Who are these people? Why are they important?

Facts

- South Korea's currency depicts famous 15th–16th century scholars, writers, and royalty.
- The King of Thailand is the only person depicted on the front of Thailand's currency, the baht.

You can also look at the clothing the people are wearing.

2. Other Images

Questions to ask: What kind of images are on the money? Buildings? Monuments? Natural resources? What do you think they represent, and what do they say about the country?

Facts

- Taiwan's 1,000NTD banknote has children studying a globe.
- Ghana's 5 cedi banknote depicts the University of Ghana's library.

Some European countries just have one image for all of their Euro coins, whereas other countries highlight various people or landmarks.

3. Language

Questions to ask: How many languages can you find? Why do you think they used this/these language(s)?

Facts

- The USA's Hawaii 25 cent coin is the only U.S. coin that contains a language other than English.
- Jordanian dinars, like many currencies, have their home language and English on their banknotes.
- Indian banknotes have their values written in 17 languages!

4. Numbers

Questions to ask: Can you find Arabic numerals? Chinese numerals? Is it easy to find a number you can understand?"

Facts

- The Japanese 5 yen coin doesn't have any Arabic numerals, only Chinese numerals.
- Some U.S. coins don't have numerals. (The 5 cent coin reads "five cents," and the 10 cent coin reads "one dime.")

5. Shape and Size

Questions to ask: What shape are the coins? Round? Pentagonal? Hexagonal? What about the banknotes? Are the pieces of currency different sizes—and how might the sizes affect their use?

Facts

- Japanese 5 and 50 yen coins have holes in the center.
- Israeli new shekel banknotes are all the same size.

6. Colors

Questions to ask: Are the banknotes different colors, or the same? What about the coins?

Facts

- Venezuelan bolivars are very colorful banknotes, with famous people on the obverse (printed vertically, not horizontally!), and animals on reverse.
- Canada made the world's first and second colored coins.

Activities

Here are a few activities I've done with U.S. 25 cent coins (quarters), which depict the 50 states. You could do similar activities with any country's money.

1. Look at coins and guess what the state is famous for, and then find out if their predictions are correct by using the educator's section of the [U.S. Mint](#) website. This has worked especially well with kids in the USA.
 - Some coins to use for young learners for vocabulary building include:
 - Tennessee: guitar, trumpet, violin
 - Wisconsin: cow, corn, cheese
 - Alaska: bear, fish, river, trees

Check the students' background knowledge by asking which images they know, and introduce the new vocabulary through word or picture cards. Follow up by asking students if the images on their own state quarter is fitting; if you're teaching EFL, ask students about the images on their local currency.

- Intermediate level learners might enjoy learning about monuments or famous places:
 - Arizona: Grand Canyon

- New York: Statue of Liberty
- Missouri: Gateway Arch

Students could learn about these places through discovery learning, or present about them to other students in a jigsaw activity.

2. When teaching internationally, after students learn about U.S. coins, have them imagine that their country is going to mint a coin for their city, province, or region, and that they have been assigned to design it. Students can design the coin individually or in small groups and explain, in writing or aloud, what pictures they drew and why. It a great way for the students to better appreciate their local culture, and for teachers from outside the region to learn about it. This could work for American students too!

Some notes for teaching about U.S. coins outside of the United States:

- Kids will ask if you can only spend the coin in that state; let them know you can find them and spend them anywhere!
- Famous people on U.S. coins may not be well known internationally; (i.e. Helen Keller, Alabama; King Kamehameha, Hawaii) this could be a good opportunity for students to learn about them.
- 25 cents is not a common currency denomination. When you first introduce American money, have the students guess the amount and encourage them by saying “higher!” or “lower!”

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