

An impossible dream?

Level: Intermediate–advanced

Timing: 90 minutes plus

Summary: A lesson about the American Dream and life in the USA these days. In this lesson, students will:

1. study a text about the American Dream;
2. study language from the text in depth, including abbreviations and expressions;
3. discuss whether they would consider moving to the US to pursue the American Dream;
4. complete a fact file about the US and write one for their own country.

Material needed: One copy of the worksheet per student; one copy of the vocabulary record per student

Group size: Any

Overview

This lesson plan is for both pre-experience and in-work business students based on a shortened version of the original article first published in Business Spotlight Issue 6/2014.

Warmer

Hand out the worksheet to students. The warmer gives students the chance to say what they know, or think they know, about the American Dream. You could read out the statement below to give them more information after they have answered the question.

Key:

The American Dream

James Truslow Adams (1878–1949), an American historian, popularized this term in his book Epic of America, published in 1931. He wrote that the American Dream has attracted tens of millions of people from all nations to the US, but that it was much more than just a dream of making money: 'It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in the older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class. And that dream has been realized more fully in actual life here than anywhere else.'

Key words

Students read the definitions and match them to words from the article. The definitions are listed in the order that the words and phrases appear in the article.

This task can be divided up between students, one half doing words 1 to 10, the other half doing 11 to 20. After they have found the words, they should then share their answers with each other.

Key:

paragraphs 1–10

1. achievement; 2. wunderkind; 3. rallying cries;
4. egalitarianism; 5. baby boomer; 6. stagnating; 7. policy;
8. benefit; 9. glass ceiling; 10. social mobility

paragraphs 11–15

11. fundamental; 12. diversity; 13. federal; 14. mayors;
15. task force; 16. initiative; 17. boom; 18. boost;
19. trade deficit; 20. fracture

Abbreviations

Students find four abbreviations in the article and write them out in full, using dictionaries where necessary to find the words and understand their meanings.

Key:

1. US; United States
2. GDP; Gross domestic product
3. OECD; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
4. DC; District of Columbia

Understanding the article

Students read and discuss their answers to the questions, without referring to the article, where possible – but, of course, they may look back when they need to. The questions are in the order that the information appears in the article.

Key:

1. His parents are both immigrants and, at only 17, he was accepted by all eight top US universities. He is likely to become a doctor and earn more than his parents, who are both nurses, thus overtaking them on the socio-economic scale.
2. America has a "can-do" culture and this electoral cry was meant to show citizens that they can achieve anything they want, even if the path ahead is difficult, which chimes perfectly

An impossible dream?

with the ideals associated with the American Dream.

3. China

4. She does not expect to earn more than her parents. She doesn't even think she will reach their socio-economic status. She talks about the fact that young people are unable to save any money and that they are financially unstable.

5. Even though the GDP is expected to grow and unemployment has been falling, real wages have not risen since the 1970s and the US ranks very low on scales of equality.

6. They are less positive. Only 32% thought the US was the greatest country in the world, compared to 48% of the general population.

7. Whites enjoy greater social mobility. Only 17% of black children from middle-income families earn more than their parents (as adults), compared to 37% of comparable whites.

8. ambition, self-promotion, success and beating the odds

9. Positive: It brings jobs and economic growth.; It boosts development in the region; It improves US energy independence.

Negative: It makes people sick and puts their health at risk.; It causes serious environmental damage and it is insufficiently regulated.

10. No. It is still 'alive', it is just not as strong and healthy as it once was.

Expressions

Students look back at the article again to find expressions that match the definitions and explanations given.

Key:

1. Ivy League universities;
2. against all odds;
3. taken knocks;
4. star rises;
5. in decline;
6. sense of self;
7. do one's best;
8. beating the odds;
9. sums up;
10. raising their voices

Teaching and learning strategy: can-do statements

President Obama is not the only one to use *can* in powerful and positive statements.

The Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR) also uses can-do statements to enable students (and their teachers) to judge their level of spoken and written English, as well as their ability to read, listen and understand in English.

http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre1_en.asp

A student's level of English can be said to be A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 or even C2 depending on what they can do in English.

Although this is a *European* framework, it is being used more and more in other parts of the world to set international standards.

The can-do statements can be accessed here in Appendix D: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework_en.pdf.

See also Adrian Tennant's article for onestopenglish on the CEFR can-do statements and how you can get your students to use can-do statements to assess their own abilities in English, increasing self-awareness and learner autonomy: <http://www.onestopenglish.com/exams/assessment-matters/cefr-can-do-statements/#comments>.

Discussion

Allow lower level students time to make notes before the discussion starts. Then, have students discuss the question in open class or small groups, if you prefer. They should relate their answers to the American Dream and the points raised in the article.

Alternatively, you can turn this question into a debate, with one half of the group defending the continuing existence of the American Dream, while the other half argues that it no longer exists, that it is 'an impossible dream'.

Webquest

Students search for the missing information to complete the fast fact file.

Note: these figures are subject to change and should be monitored / adapted.

Key:

United States: fast facts

1. Washington, DC;
2. Barack Obama;
3. 318.9 million (July 2014 estimate);
4. 6.2% (July 2014 estimate);
5. 2.1% (June 2014 estimate);
6. Germany;
7. Hispanic;
8. Asian (July 2007 estimate);
9. Protestant;
10. Roman Catholic (2007 estimate)

Extension

Get students to make a similar fast fact file for their own country or another country.

An impossible dream?

Vocabulary record

Here, students should be encouraged to record all of the new and useful vocabulary they have learnt during the lesson, not only in the form presented in the article but also in related forms.

Related topics on onestopenglish

The following Business Spotlight lesson plan, also about the US, looks at whether Americans work too much.

<http://www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/pdf-content/business-spotlight-do-americans-work-too-much-lesson-plan/551925.article>

An impossible dream?

1 Warmer

Most of us have heard or read the term *the American Dream*, but what does it actually mean? In your own words, explain what you think the *American Dream* is.

2 Key words

Read the definitions and find the matching words in the article.

paragraphs 1–10

1. a particular thing that you have succeeded in doing, usually after a lot of effort
2. a young person who is extremely good at something
3. particular words or phrases that you use to refer to an issue or situation to make people want to take action
4. a social system in which everyone has equal status and the same money and opportunities
5. someone who was born during the time immediately after the Second World War
6. staying the same without growing or developing
7. a set of plans or actions agreed on by a government
8. money or other help that the government gives people who need financial help, for example because they do not have a job
9. an unfair system that prevents some people from reaching the most senior positions in a company or organization
10. the ability to move easily from a lower social class to a higher one

paragraphs 11–15

11. relating to the basic nature or character of something
12. the fact that very different people or things exist within a group or place
13. connected with the national government of a country rather than with the government of one of its member states
14. the most important elected officials in different towns or cities
15. a group of people chosen to deal with a particular problem or situation
16. an important action that is intended to solve a problem
17. an increase in the activity of a particular industry or part of a country's economy
18. help something to increase, improve or become more successful
19. a situation in which a country is buying more things from other countries than it is selling to them
20. break or crack something

3 Abbreviations

Find four abbreviations in the article. Find out what the letters stand for and write them out in full.

	abbreviation	full form
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		

An impossible dream?

An impossible dream?

by Vicki Sussens



Have economic problems brought an end to the American Dream? Not according to President Obama's slogan "Yes, we can!" As Vicki Sussens found out, the American Dream is still very much alive.

- 1 In April 2014, Kwasi Enin became a media star. The 17 year old, whose parents had emigrated from Ghana to the US in the 1980s, applied to all eight of the country's exclusive Ivy League universities and was accepted by each one – an extraordinary achievement.
- 2 The media presented the good-looking young man as an example of the American Dream, the idea that anyone can be successful, no matter what their education or birth. Enin's parents, both nurses, taught him to aim high. Now, nothing can stop the Long Island wunderkind from following his dream of becoming a doctor.
- 3 America has a "can-do" culture, in which achievement against all odds is the highest cultural value and rallying cries such as President Obama's "Yes, we can!" are typical.
- 4 In the past decade, however, Americans have begun to wonder whether they "still can". Both the American Dream and the idea of "American exceptionalism" – the term used to describe the US's special place

among nations because of its commitment to liberty, egalitarianism and individualism – have taken knocks. And there is talk of the end of its role as the world's leader, as China's star rises.

Not far from Long Island, 24-year-old Gracelyn Bateman walks across town to her job in a digital-media agency in Manhattan. She loves this lively, diverse city and says she feels "privileged" to live here.

Bateman's parents had no problem paying for her to study sociology at an Ivy League university. However, she does not believe she will reach her baby-boomer parents' socioeconomic status. "It is going to be difficult for my generation to live out the American Dream the way our parents did," she says. "I do not have a single friend in New York who is financially stable or able to save." Unemployment for those aged between 16 and 24 is around 14%, compared to the national figure of just over 6%.

Even though GDP is expected to grow by nearly 3% in 2014 and unemployment has fallen significantly in recent years, real wages have been stagnating since the 1970s. A recent OECD report ranked US socioeconomic inequality as the fourth worst of OECD countries, after Chile, Mexico and Turkey.

"To many people, what matters is not so much inequality of incomes but rather inequality of opportunities," say the authors of the OECD report. They believe the problems are structural and will not be solved by an economic recovery. Instead, policy changes are needed to improve education, to build the skills needed for a changing, more technological workplace and, especially, to reform tax and benefit policies, which are the most "direct and powerful instruments to redistribute income," says the report.

A 2013 Pew study on American attitudes also found that, while 48% of Americans believed the US was the greatest country in the world, only 32% of millennials had this view.

5

6

7

8

9

An impossible dream?

- 10 But is America really in decline? After all, the American Dream has never worked for everyone. In the past few decades, anti-discrimination policies have been created to remove the glass ceiling for disadvantaged groups. Yet whites still enjoy greater social mobility than blacks. Only 17% of black children born to middle-income families exceed their parents' incomes, compared to 37% of white children in the same income group, according to a report by the Brookings Institution, a policy organization in Washington, DC.
- 11 However, the American Dream remains fundamental to America's sense of self. It is an ideal that says the highest human achievement is to do one's best. "This is why ambition, self-promotion, success and beating the odds are so highly valued in America," says intercultural and diversity expert Melissa Lamson. Lamson adds that pride in these values is what unites Americans across all levels of society.
- 12 In one sign of renewal, US mayors have stepped in where federal politics have failed. The US Conference of Mayors, an organization that represents city leaders, recently formed a task force to fight inequality in their cities. "We recognize that rising inequality and declining opportunity are threats to our fundamental values and to the nation's economic growth," the mayors said in a press statement. More than 30 mayors have promised to secure better wages, improve early childhood education and expand internet access for low-income residents, as well as make their cities better places to live in.
- 13 In south Texas, another local initiative is bringing jobs and growth, this time to the Eagle Ford shale region, the heart of America's shale gas and oil boom. "We want to make sure we get the most out of this boom," says Thomas Tunstall, research director at the Institute for Economic Development of the University of Texas in San Antonio. Tunstall

is working with the Eagle Ford Shale Consortium, a group of city and county officials, businesses and research organizations set up to boost development in the region. University of Texas studies show that the shale industry in south Texas supports more than 116,000 full-time jobs. Plans are to take advantage of the boom to develop infrastructure, by building roads, revitalizing downtown areas and diversifying the local economy to attract other forms of business and agriculture.

14 The shale revolution is a sign of hope in America – although a controversial one – which, in some ways, sums up the US struggle with itself. Growing energy independence is helping to reduce the US petroleum trade deficit and means reduced dependence on politically unstable suppliers in the Middle East. The boom is also attracting US petrochemical firms back home and benefitting the local manufacturing sector. But opponents of fracking – which uses highly pressurized liquids to fracture rocks hundreds of metres below the earth's surface to release oil and gas – believe that the energy industry is insufficiently regulated and that serious environmental damage is being done in the process. Sharon Wilson, an anti-fracking activist who had moved to Eagle Ford in the 1990s to live out what she calls her "American Dream" in the countryside, moved away after friends and neighbours became sick. "It's not right for firms to put families' health at risk," she wrote in her blog. "Americans are better people than that."

15 George Packer, a journalist at *The New Yorker*, says the only thing that never changes in the US are the voices, "American voices, open, sentimental, angry ...". As long as Americans are raising their voices, change and renewal will come. And, as Kwasi Enin's case shows, the American Dream is still alive, even if it is not particularly well.

© Business Spotlight, 6/2014, www.business-spotlight.de

An impossible dream?

4 Understanding the article

Answer the questions, without referring to the article, where possible. Then discuss your answers.

1. Why is Kwasi Enin said to be an example of the American Dream?
2. How is Obama's "Yes, we can!" statement connected to the American Dream?
3. Which country is said to be threatening the US's position as world leader?
4. How do Gracelyn Bateman's professional expectations differ to those of Kwasi Enin?
5. How do the economic statistics for 2014 look?
6. According to the Pew study, are Americans in their 20s and 30s more or less positive about their home country than all Americans?
7. What does the article say about the difference in social mobility between whites and blacks?
8. Which characteristics are highly valued by Americans?
9. What, according to the article, are the positive and negative sides of fracking?
10. Is the American Dream an impossible dream?

5 Expressions

Find the following expressions in the article.

1. eight higher education institutes in the US that have a particularly good reputation (3 words, para 1)
2. despite the probability of something happening being very low (3 words, para 3)
3. been badly affected by something (2 words, para 4)
4. grows in importance (2 words, para 4)
5. gradually decreasing in importance (2 words, para 10)
6. knowing yourself and having self-confidence (3 words, para 11)
7. try as hard as you can to achieve something (3 words, para 11)
8. succeeding despite difficulties or conditions that make success unlikely (3 words, para 11)
9. states what something or someone is like (2 words, para 14)
10. speaking out about things that are important (3 words, para 15)

6 Discussion

Do you think you would have a better chance of a good career, a healthy life and a good standard of living if you moved to the US? Why? Why not?

If you're living in the US, do you think you have a better chance of a good career, a healthy life and a good standard of living because you live in the US?

An impossible dream?

7 Webquest

Search the internet to complete the fast fact file about the USA.

United States: fast facts

Official name: the United States of America

Government: constitution-based federal republic

Capital: (1) _____

President: (2) _____

Population: (3) _____ million

Unemployment: (4) _____%

Inflation: (5) _____%

Main trading partners: Canada, China, Mexico, Japan and (6) _____

Main ethnic groups: white 80%; (7) _____ 15%; black 13%;
(8) _____ 4%, native American 1%

Main religions: (9) _____ 51.3%; (10) _____ 23.9%;
Mormon 1.7%; other Christian 1.6%; Jewish 1.7%; Buddhist 0.7%; Muslim 0.6%

