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## Lada Kratky, M.A.

Lada Kratky is a bilingual educator and featured national speaker. She has authored several Spanish reading programs including *Alfarrimas*; the phonics programs, *Phonics and Friends*; and ESL series *Avenues*.

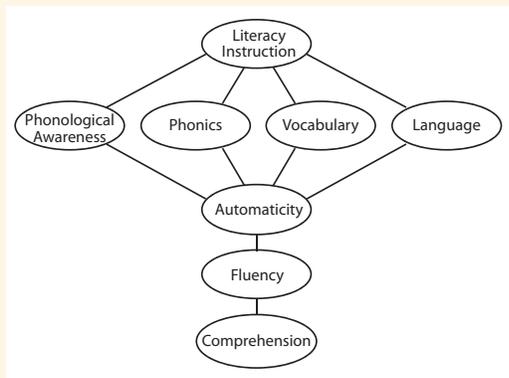
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## Reach into Beginning Reading *by Lada Kratky*

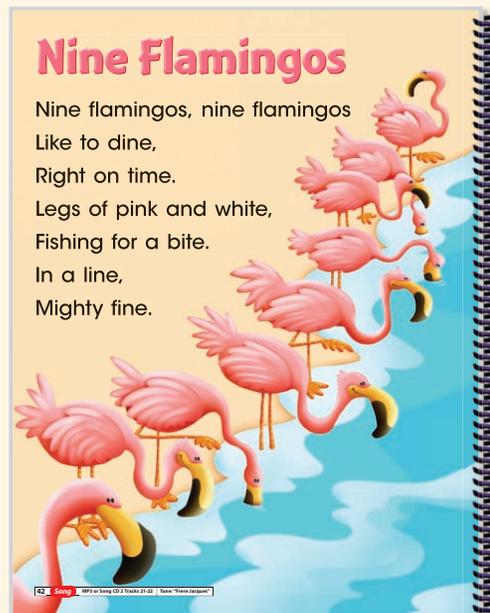
A classroom filled with beginning readers is typically made up of students from a wide range of backgrounds and with varying strengths. The teacher's task is to discover those strengths and build on them. It is generally said that one third of the students in such a classroom will learn how to read relatively easily; another third will have to work harder; and for the last third, reading will be one of the most difficult skills they will ever have to master. English language learners (ELLs) may face even greater challenges, as they will have to master both language and literacy skills at the same time, since reading is not just decoding, but working through text to arrive at its message.

The report of the National Reading Panel in 2000 identified five key components of reading instruction: phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. As teachers of ELLs, we must add another component – that of language. ELLs who are learning to read in English must also learn how English works – its grammar and syntax, language functions, and the meanings of many new words. An effective reading program for ELLs will focus on all these skills. As students develop their phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and language, they will also develop increasing reading fluency. And as fluency develops, it will in turn strengthen comprehension—the ultimate goal of reading.



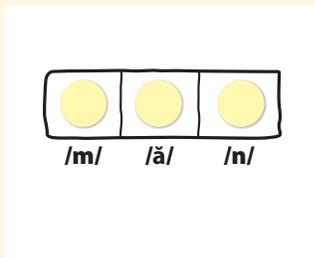
*National Geographic Reach* provides explicit and systematic instruction in all these areas to assure success for ELLs who are learning to read.

- 1. Phonological awareness** Phonological awareness is the ability to hear, identify and manipulate sounds in words. It is an essential skill for emergent readers; children must be able to distinguish sounds in words before they can link the sounds to the letters that represent them. Explicit instruction in phonological awareness significantly improves students' reading (National Reading Panel, 2000). Phonological awareness is generally included in classrooms from Kindergarten to Grade 2, but it is appropriate and necessary in any classroom, with students of any age, where beginning reading is taught.



As in all areas of learning, students bring to the classroom different strengths which will affect the sequence in which phonological awareness skills are taught. For those children with little awareness of the sounds they articulate while speaking, Yopp (2000) recommends starting with activities that focus on rhyme. Playful poems will naturally engage young learners, and encourage them to focus on repeating sounds in words.

**National Geographic Reach** begins phonological awareness instruction with identifying rhyming words. As instruction continues, children become aware of word parts by clapping or tapping syllables. After syllables, lessons shift to teaching students to hear individual sounds, focusing first on those that are easiest to hear—the vowels and continuous consonants (*f, h, l, m, n, r, s, w, y, z*). **National Geographic Reach** makes extensive use of Elkonin boxes, or sound boxes – a row of rectangles (first developed by the Russian psychologist Elkonin) that visually represent the sounds children listen for. These boxes help children distinguish separate sounds and identify which sounds come first, last, or in the middle of a word.



◀ Sound boxes help beginning readers visualize the distinct sounds they hear in words, in this case the word *m-a-n*.

After some practice with sound boxes, children can start to identify the sounds without visual support. Phonological awareness then continues developing sound awareness skills like changing initial, medial, and final sounds in words to make new words. As children start to associate letters with sounds, phonological awareness activities can begin to also include letters.

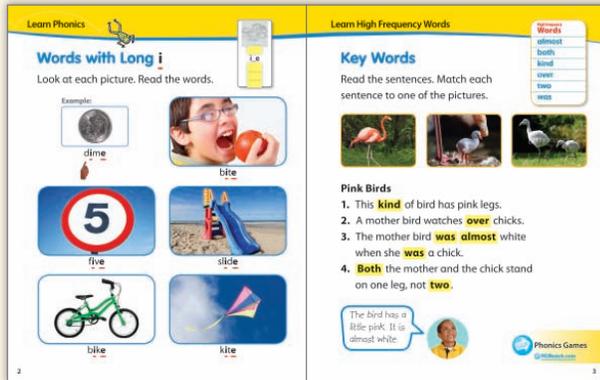
2. **Phonics** Explicit and systematic phonics instruction is an essential part of a successful classroom reading program (National Reading Panel, 2000). Phonics instruction teaches students to map sounds to letters and then to blend the sounds to decode words. Some students will begin to sound out words as soon as they have learned letter-sound correspondences. Other students, however, need explicit and repeated coaching to blend sounds and recognize the words they are decoding. **Reach into Phonics**, the phonics component of **National Geographic Reach**, uses consistent routines to teach letter-sound correspondences and word blending. Children are first taught to blend using the sound-by-sound blending routine; additional routines (vowel-first blending; whole word blending) are included for children who need additional support.

**Reach into Phonics** includes a wide variety of engaging activities that support children in practicing their decoding skills. Word building activities reinforce sound/spellings. Word sorting helps familiarize ELLs with the many ways some English sounds (such as long o) can be spelled. After learning and practicing phonics skills in individual words and sentences, children read the **Read on Your Own Books**. These decodable texts focus on content area topics linked to the instructional units of **National Geographic Reach**. They provide practice with the phonics skills that have been taught, but unlike many decodable texts, they feature meaningful and engaging text that children want to read, illustrated with outstanding photographs.



3. **High Frequency Words** Typical English text includes a large number of High Frequency Words—common words that appear very frequently and are often phonetically irregular, such as *a, one, are,* and *of*. Readers must learn to recognize High Frequency Words on sight. To teach instant recognition of these words, **National Geographic Reach** uses a research-based High Frequency Word Routine in which children look at the word, hear it pronounced, hear it used in a sentence, then say the word, spell it, and say it again. Children have multiple opportunities to read the words after they are taught, including in context in the **Read On Your Own Books**. High frequency words are reviewed as part of language function lessons, reinforcing the meaning and pronunciation of these essential words.

4. **Vocabulary and Language** Lessons in phonological awareness, phonics, and high frequency words support beginning readers in developing effective decoding skills, which are essential to becoming a fluent reader. However, while these skills are necessary, they are not sufficient. As we have seen above, many children, and ELLs especially, need robust vocabulary and language instruction to achieve their potential as readers.



▲ Pages include visual and contextual supports.

Earlier papers in this section have detailed the research basis of vocabulary and language instruction in *National Geographic Reach*. These same strengths are built in to all levels of the program. Visual and contextual visual supports are also a key part of beginning reading instruction to ensure that all shell support and develop English language proficiency growth.

5. **Comprehension** Building meaning and understanding is central to all parts of the program. As they learn to read children are challenged to think and talk about ideas and concepts.

Children don't spend time reading simplistic decodable texts. **Read on Your Own Book** topics are grade level science and social studies concepts, topics which relate to real life, texts that are worth reading and interest the students. Beginning readers read for meaning and are then asked to think about their reading. They give opinions, hold discussions, ask questions and answer them.

Content-based texts provide opportunities to develop comprehension and early literacy skills. ▶

Beginning readers benefit from the same robust and systematic vocabulary and language instruction as in later grades *National Geographic Reach*. Key vocabulary words are carefully selected for high academic and content utility. They are initially taught using a consistent research-based routine for introducing words. The words are then revisited each day of the lesson plan, so that children have multiple opportunities to explore the words and deepen their knowledge of them, to learn additional meanings, and to use the words many times in discussion, writing, games, graphic organizers, and skits or dramas. This repeated and varied exposure to words is what makes it possible for children to internalize and “own” the words and to use them effectively in academic discourse.

The same is true of language instruction in *National Geographic Reach*. Throughout each day, children are continually involved in learning and using language. In **Language of the Day** activities, language function lessons, grammar lessons, discussions with the teacher and with peers, **Theme Theater**, and daily writing, children are constantly encouraged and motivated to practice using new academic language and to make it part of their lives.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, many ELLs are able to decode text rapidly, but often their limited vocabulary and language skills interfere with their ability to comprehend. As ELLs develop more extensive vocabulary, comprehension, and language skills, they are increasingly able to combine decoding skills, language structures, and vocabulary knowledge to work their way through meaningful texts. Repeated exposure to content vocabulary helps develop reading fluency, which in turn leads to increased comprehension. With the repeated, focused practice encouraged in *National Geographic Reach*, students become fluent readers and develop strong comprehension skills, leading to enjoyment of learning and high levels of academic success.

