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Reach for the Common Core

by Deborah J. Short

The development of academic language skills among all learners is important for success in school, in college, and in a career. Although college and career may seem far away to elementary students, these goals are present in their teachers' minds—made all the more so with the current educational climate focused on high standards and challenging assessments.

Academic language skills involve decoding meaning (determining what a text says, a question asks, or a task requires) and encoding meaning (expressing one's thoughts, orally and in writing, so they may be shared with others). The skills develop from a foundation of vocabulary, grammar knowledge, fluency, and oral discourse that grows into analytical reading and writing skills, clear communication, critical thinking, and creativity. The skills are reflected in the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English language arts and literacy and for mathematics, as well as in the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS).

These new standards raise the bar for knowledge and application of academic English across the grades but provide little guidance to states and districts that serve English language learners (ELLs). On the positive side, states and districts have the opportunity to design programs based on their students' needs and the best research-based practices. But on the negative side, the standards are written for native English speakers, and the educators of English language learners may not have the time or expertise to build the best program for their students. They have to teach their students English and at the same time teach them the subject area curricula.

Fortunately the *National Geographic Reach* program meets the need. It offers English language learners an on-ramp to the Common Core and Next Generation Science standards. It builds the academic English language skills ELLs need from their first day in Kindergarten and advances their proficiency as they move through and up the grades. They learn how to read a variety of text types on a range of subjects; how to discuss, analyze, and write about what they have read; how to increase their vocabulary knowledge; and

how to apply their new knowledge through creative projects. As a result of *Reach* instruction, students are prepared for standards-based instruction in the general education classroom.

Let's consider how *Reach* addresses in meaningful ways some of the shifts in instruction that have resulted from the CCSS and NGSS.

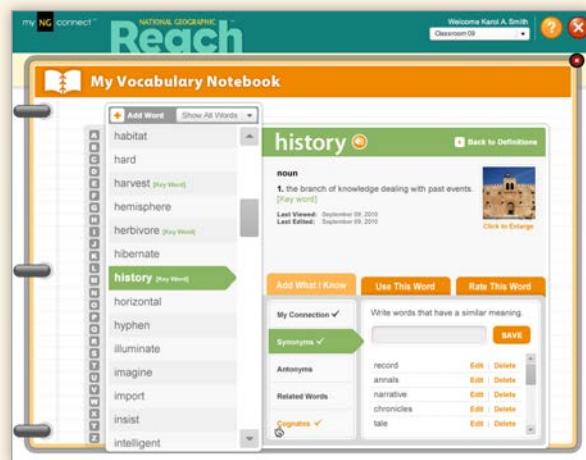
Emphasis on Vocabulary

The average native English speaking 6-year-old enters school with a speaking vocabulary of 5,000–6,000 word families (i.e., a word and all its forms, such as *go*, *going*, *gone*, *went*, *go over*, *go on*). This number is much higher than that of a beginning English language learner who may only know 1–100 words in English. Educators have long known how important it is to ramp up vocabulary instruction for ELLs but, with the Common Core's emphasis on word knowledge, it is all the more critical to do so now. The Common Core requires students to learn and use appropriately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, to be able to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words and words with multiple-meanings, and to understand figurative language and word relationships.

Reach's vocabulary plan accomplishes this with explicit instruction and repeated practice. Each unit introduces key content-specific words that correspond to the unit's science or social studies topic and key academic words, which can be used across the curriculum (like *characteristic*, *growth*, and *depend*). These words are directly taught and have been carefully selected to augment the students' understanding of the topic, prepare them to read the selections, and scaffold their ability to have academic discussions about the topic. The key words are reinforced in reading and writing tasks and structured opportunities for talk. Repeated practice moves these words into long-term memory and lets students make words their own.

Direct teaching of specific key words facilitates vocabulary growth and increases reading comprehension (Carlo et al., 2004) but it is not sufficient for English language learners. That is why *Reach* also teaches students strategies for word learning, such as examining context clues and word parts (e.g., roots and affixes), and encourages them to consider native language cognates as sources of meaning. English language learners also participate in a wide range of word-building activities with multiple opportunities to practice new words, determine word meanings, play vocabulary games, and expand their word knowledge. Daily vocabulary routines help students use independent word-learning strategies.

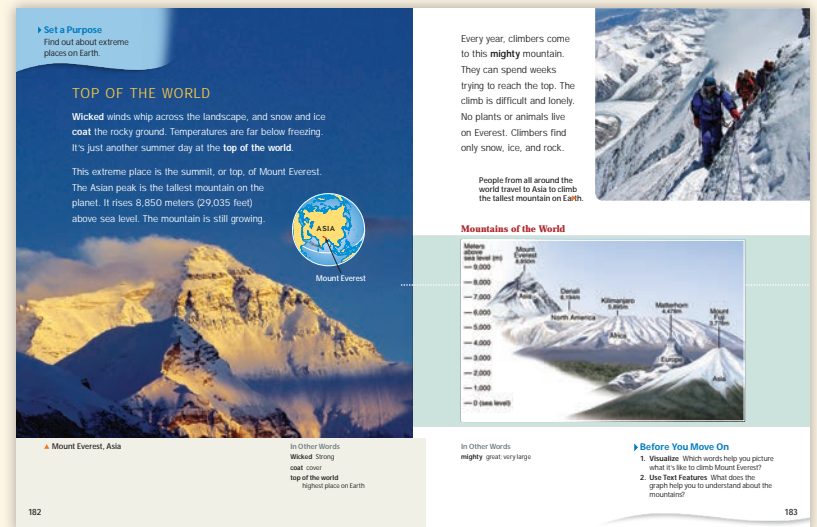
One additional exciting feature in the *Reach* program is the online My Vocabulary Notebook tool. Students create their own digital vocabulary collection by adding definitions, linking words to their synonyms, antonyms, and cognates, and using the words in context in order to remember and incorporate the vocabulary into their daily language.



More Informational Texts and Multiple Genres

The Common Core calls for students to spend approximately half their time working with informational texts. While traditional ESL and elementary ELA classes have relied on narrative books and stories for much of the reading instruction, *Reach* fits this new demand perfectly. Each unit in *Reach* has paired literature, fiction and nonfiction, linked thematically and organized in service of a Big Question, which represents a compelling big idea or concept (e.g., What is so amazing about plants? What does it take to settle a new land?) and which has no simple or predetermined answer. As students read the selections in a unit, they acquire knowledge of the concept and new perspectives that they use to respond to the question.

Many of these informational texts are related to the work that National Geographic does. They focus on science and social studies topics and are accompanied by exquisite photographs and video clips. The media helps the English language learners build background so they can make meaning from the text. Students learn to use the text features embedded in the passages, too. Science articles, for example,



have accompanying charts and diagrams. Social studies passages have maps and other graphic supports.

The reading passages in *Reach* present students with a wide variety of genres. Students work to develop meaning from short stories, science articles, poems, biographies, interviews, and more. The students also produce a number of these genres through the writing activities, and each unit includes a full-scale writing project that mirrors the type of summative assessments they must perform in their schools.

Increased Text Complexity and More Text-Dependent Questions

The new standards press students to grapple with complex text and respond to comprehension questions based on the texts being read. Such texts need to be both substantial and engaging so students will be motivated to do multiple readings and find value in a close look at the author's craft.

What is important to remember when working with ELLs, however, is that a complex text for a beginner would be a text written at an intermediate level. It does not have to be a text written on grade-level for a native speaker. As a student advances in English proficiency, the text they read should increase in complexity. This stair-step approach is built into the *Reach* program. The texts increase in complexity across a level and as students move up the grades.

Also, the classroom library selections offer a wide variety of multi-level readers. Teachers can consider the quantitative factors (e.g., Lexile® levels) and qualitative factors (e.g., background knowledge demands, sentence structure) of these readers as they choose among them for small group, partner, and independent reading activities.

The Big Questions engage and motivate students to extract information, data, and perspectives from the texts they read in order to share answers and reflect on others' ideas. According to the new standards, it is not acceptable to ask students only to recall basic information of what they have just read or tell how a text makes them feel. Instead, students must step beyond and think critically, analyzing

points of view, making inferences, synthesizing information, and connecting concepts across texts. *Reach* supports these higher-order thinking aims with the Before You Move On questions posed within the readings at regular intervals and the Think and Respond activities during which students talk about and write about the selections.



Real World Connections

The Next Generation Science and Common Core math standards are particularly concerned with real-world application of the scientific and mathematical knowledge. *Reach* presents an exciting way to achieve this objective. National Geographic Explorers have authored some of the texts and are subjects of other readings, and they truly exemplify science in action. As ELLs read about the Explorers' research-driven adventures, the students learn about the scientific method, the need for repeated trials when testing a theory or hypothesis, the use of mathematical models and operations, and the joy of discoveries. As students revisit the Big Question throughout each unit, they must apply the new knowledge they have acquired. They may change their responses as new information comes to light, just as scientists and mathematicians do.

For English language learners, these real-world connections are quite valuable. In many instances the reading passages associated with the marine biologists, geographers, wildlife photographers, and the

like take place outside of the United States. Some may be from the students' home countries or geographic regions. In this regard, the students' knowledge becomes an asset in both making meaning of the text and in rendering the instruction more culturally responsive.

Listening and Speaking Targets

In the recent past, elementary schools were heavily focused on teaching students reading skills, sometimes to the detriment of speaking and listening. The Common Core English language arts standards place speaking and listening on equal status with reading and writing. This shift is beneficial for English language learners because research has shown that concurrent development of the four language skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—is more effective for language acquisition than learning the skills in isolation.

Teaching the five components of proficient reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000)—to English language learners is necessary but not sufficient for developing their academic literacy. ELLs need to develop oral language proficiency, language functions, and academic discourse patterns. In this way students can participate in high levels of academic classroom talk, such as evaluating a historical perspective or presenting evidence for a scientific claim, and therefore meet the speaking and listening standards defined in the Common Core.

Reach lessons build oral discourse skills for English language learners and use oral language as a tool to support and strengthen reading and writing. Academic language functions are explicitly taught so students learn how to ask for information, explain an idea, compare texts, justify an opinion, cite evidence, and more. Language frames and sentence starters are provided as scaffolds for students as are models of the function in action, through songs, chants, and dialogues. Students' facility with these academic language functions are built first through listening and speaking activities as they participate in structured conversations around a topic and are then reinforced in reading and writing.

Crafting Arguments and Citing Text-based Evidence

The basics of listening and speaking can be taught, but the mastery comes when students have opportunities to use their skills to engage in academic discussions—to solve problems, to analyze text, and to apply new information to the old. The Big Questions in *Reach* provide opportunities for students to transfer the skills they have learned to oral and written interactions. They are explicitly taught



how to share their ideas and build on peers' comments, as well as how to craft an argument and how to counter one. These practices in *Reach* prepare students for the CCSS and NGSS, which call on students to construct explanations and arguments, evaluate and critique the arguments of others, and draw on text and other sources of evidence to bolster their arguments and counterclaims.

As the students move through a unit, they gain additional knowledge on the topic from the reading passages and the companion video clips. With the vocabulary and language functions they are learning and the information they are gleaning, not only can they add evidence to their initial responses but they can make them more sophisticated from a language perspective as well.



Conclusion

Reach also holds true to its roots as an English as a second language program. It teaches the foundation skills that learners new to English need, from sounds and sight words to grammar, spelling, mechanics, and sentence writing. But these basics are not taught without content or engagement. For example, decodable readers are offered for every level, and they are all high interest, nonfiction readings. Grammar rules are linked to the vocabulary or sentence structures in the reading passages. Writing activities are derived from the Big Questions.

English as a second language programs by their inherent design are temporary for their student learners. It is expected that students will gain proficiency in English and exit the program. As a comprehensive program that integrates academic language development with science and social studies topics, *Reach* prepares the students to exit with the skills and habits of mind needed to be successful in classrooms focused on the Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards.