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# Teaching the Whole Child



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## Get to Know Your Learners *by Jennifer Turner*

Every year, thousands of children who are learning English stream into elementary classrooms across the country. But not all classrooms are created equal. In some classrooms, English language learners (ELLs) seem to be lost; these students sit by themselves, rarely talk or interact with other students, make few attempts to open their books or join into classroom discussions, and gaze silently at the teacher during instruction. In other classrooms, however, ELLs seem to “fit into” the flow of classroom life; they are willing to communicate with other students and with the teacher, they take risks to participate in classroom conversations, and they are much more engaged with books and other reading materials during instruction.

What makes some classrooms inviting for ELLs and not others? A key factor is the classroom community that teachers and students work together to develop throughout the year. Classroom communities are dynamic learning environments that are rich in social relationships, promote collective agency and responsibility in learning, and foster collaborations involving talking, listening, reading, writing and thinking (Rousculp & Maring, 1992). Research has shown that while classroom communities are effective environments for all learners, they are particularly critical for the language and literacy development of ELLs. Classroom communities provide a safe environment for ELLs to take intellectual risks and to “play” with language (Fitzgerald, 1993; Turner & Kim, 2005). Consistent instructional routines, such as choral reading or interactive writing, help elementary ELLs to become familiar with the kinds of reading and writing valued within the classroom community, and to take ownership of those literate practices (Au, 2006; Kim & Turner, 2006). As a result, ELLs often want to “get into the action” of the classroom community, because they feel a sense of responsibility for their classmates’ learning as well as their own (Day, 2002).

Personal relationships are the heart of vibrant classroom communities. To build classroom community, elementary teachers must take the initiative to establish and maintain strong social relationships with students (Kim & Turner, 2006). In these classrooms, teachers don’t just learn about their ELLs on their first day of school; rather, they are committed to getting to know all their students throughout the year. Research has shown that teachers must get to know the ELLs in their classroom in five important ways:

1. Get to know them as **Language** Learners
2. Get to know them as **Literacy** Learners
3. Get to know them as **Content** Learners
4. Get to know them as **Cultural** Learners
5. Get to know them as **Digital** Learners

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### **1** Get to know them as Language Learners

It is important for elementary teachers to recognize that ELLs are acquiring proficiency in two forms of English language in classroom communities (Cummins, 2000). Conversational language enables students to communicate in a variety of informal ways, and represents the kinds of “social talk” that students use in the lunchroom and on the playground. In contrast, academic language is formalized English that is conceptual, abstract, and content-oriented. For ELLs, learning academic English language is much more cognitively demanding. Research has shown that while children can acquire conversational English language in 1–2 years, it can take 5–7 years for them to acquire proficiency in academic English (Collier, 1989).

Teachers not only need to know about their students’ conversational and academic language knowledge, but they need to understand how these children have developed English language knowledge in schools. Some children may have been in Sheltered

English Immersion (SEI) classrooms, some may have been in English pullout programs in their schools, while others may have participated in bilingual programs that foster development in their home languages as well as English. Teachers may also discover that some of their students have had very little formal schooling in their home countries, or that their schooling in the United States has been extremely fragmented. As elementary teachers get to know the language histories of their ELLs, they can use this information to strategically build connections to these students' prior linguistic knowledge.

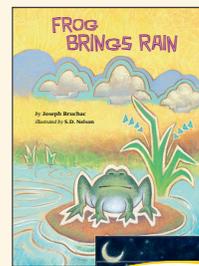
*National Geographic Reach* can help teachers to enhance their students' English language development. Instructional activities are implemented through a rich variety of collaborative formats, such as partner work, small groups, and whole class discussion, which build ELLs' conversational and academic English proficiency. *Reach* also provides scaffolding for students with a range of language proficiency levels in order to build their confidence and to support active participation within the classroom community.

## 2 Get to know them as Literacy Learners

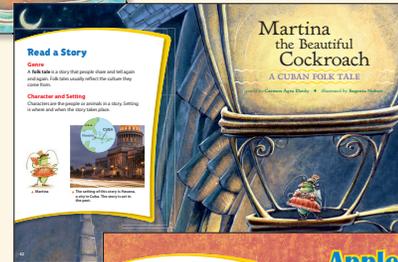
Good readers, including those who are learning English, need a variety of literacy skills, including phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, oral reading fluency, comprehension, writing, and spelling (August & Shanahan, 2006; Shanahan & Beck, 2006). Elementary teachers, then, must get to know their students as literacy learners in order to orchestrate multiple opportunities for learning, developing, and mastering English literacy skills. For example, teachers must adjust their literacy instruction to accommodate children who are biliterate and can read and write in their primary language as well as those whose literacy skills are emergent in their home language (Fitzgerald, 1993).

We know that all elementary students have varied literacy preferences, learning styles, and literacy strengths and needs, and ELLs are no exception. Children may share similar home languages, such as Spanish or Korean, and yet their literacy backgrounds may be completely different. Some children who are learning English, for example, may prefer to read fairy tales or mysteries, while others may become engrossed with informational texts about volcanoes or insects. Outside of school, some ELLs may avidly read video game manuals, while others may enjoy writing letters to family members back in their home countries. Teachers must get to know the literacy interests of all children, including those who are learning English, in order to understand how to address their unique literacy strengths and needs, and to enhance their motivation to read, write, and talk within the classroom community.

*National Geographic Reach* offers elementary English learners a wide variety of fiction and nonfiction texts. Genres highlighted in *Reach* include realistic fiction, science articles, photo essays, poetry, and folktales. Lessons provide ELLs with multiple opportunities to experience the process of “becoming readers and writers in English” through text-based activities embedded within rich oral language contexts, such as singing songs, joining in choral reading, and composing texts. *Reach* also offers Libraries for additional



◀ Literature includes a wide variety of fiction and nonfiction.



reading. Providing students with the ability to choose texts and extend reading and learning enhances motivation and accelerates the acquisition of new skills and knowledge. At the same time, lessons feature Language Frames, which offer children ways of thinking about and understanding higher-order comprehension skills and reading strategies, such as summarizing or visualizing, in English. Importantly, *National Geographic Reach* encourages ELLs to not only acquire new literacy skills that will help them to become strategic readers and writers, but this program encourages them to actively use these skills through performances like Theme Theater and other dramatic skits, and through collaborative writing projects.

## 3 Get to know them as Content Learners

Schools have not traditionally viewed children who are learning English as “content learners.” In fact, the curriculum for children who are learning English has often emphasized low-level content, language, and literacy skills in English (Au, 2006). A number of programs for ELLs have focused on discrete parts of the English language (e.g., nouns, verbs) and/or isolated grammatical skills rather than on higher-order processes such as comprehension, summarization, or composition (Fitzgerald, 1993). Often schools have provided ELLs with a less demanding curriculum because their expectations for these children are extremely low, given that these students may have limited content knowledge or vocabulary knowledge in English (Fitzgerald, 1993).

However, students who are learning English need and deserve a curriculum that covers basic language and is content-rich and rigorous. Research has shown that ELLs can learn academic content when teachers effectively build their background knowledge and enhance their content vocabularies (Fitzgerald, 1993). When teachers get to know their ELLs, they begin to realize that while these students may have difficulty expressing their thoughts and ideas in English, they do have strong critical thinking skills, and are fully capable of mastering material in the content areas (Dong, 2006/2007).

The units in *National Geographic Reach* are designed with a strong content focus that integrates science and social studies topics with English language and literacy skills (e.g., reading, writing, speaking, listening). Each unit centers on a Big Question that not only aligns with core content standards, but also encourages elementary ELLs to think critically about new ideas and concepts, express their ideas and interests, and inquire about their world.

#### 4 Get to know them as Cultural Learners

Although students may be learning English in our elementary classroom communities, they do not come to us as “blank slates.” Rather, these students do have cultural knowledge and experiences that may serve as resources for their English language, literacy, and content learning (Goldenberg, Rueda, & August, 2006). Teachers must get to know what ELLs and their families are doing in their homes, because many daily activities, including cooking, paying bills, and making grocery lists, support young children’s knowledge about the purposes, meanings, and uses of language and literacy (Anderson & Stokes, 1984). Even if families are not primarily speaking English, the home language and literacy environments that they create for their young children are still important. Research has shown that using their first language does not confuse young children who are learning English in schools, and may have positive contributions to their English language and literacy development (August & Shanahan, 2006).

##### Cultural Perspectives

Explain that haiku is a form of poetry that started long ago in Japan and now people from many countries write them. Ask students to find words in these haiku that tell the reader they are from a modern time and place. Possible responses include modern words (*yum*); foods from different countries and cultures.

◀ Cultural Perspectives highlight the rich variety of cultures and emphasize the positive value of cultural diversity in the classroom.

*National Geographic Reach* features high-quality literature that represents people and places within a wide variety of cultural, racial, and ethnic communities. Primary languages are often incorporated into the selections in ways that affirm students’ linguistic backgrounds, and multiethnic characters and storylines build on students’ cultural funds of knowledge. By tapping into students’ cultural knowledge and home literacy experiences, units are designed to enhance students’ English language proficiency, literacy acquisition, and writing development. Importantly, *Reach* also helps children who are learning English to expand their understanding of the world by including a number of fiction and nonfiction texts written from a global perspective.

#### 5 Get to know them as Digital Learners

Like many elementary students, children who are learning English are often exposed to and use technology in a variety of ways, including surfing the internet, using computers, and communicating through email, text messaging, and other electronic formats. However, for young children who are learning English, technology may be a particularly useful educational tool. Researchers have found that technology can enrich ELLs’ language, literacy, and content knowledge (Medina-Jerez, Clark, Medina, & Ramirez-Marin, 2007; Ybarra & Green, 2003). Case and Truscott (1999), for example, observed that when students used computers for reading instruction, their sight word vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension improved. Using technology enabled students to engage more actively with texts, to receive immediate feedback on reading performances, and to gain additional practice.

Children who are learning English have extensive access to technology through *National Geographic Reach*. The online Comprehension Coach offers ELLs opportunities to practice fluent reading. *Reach* units also include a rich digital library and Build Background videos, which teachers can use to build students’ background knowledge and to promote interest in the topic. Games and the Vocabulary Notebook create personalized, interactive learning and practice opportunities. In addition, many lessons feature technology-based texts, such as emails and blogs, to promote student engagement and to help students understand how English language and literacy skills can be used to communicate diverse perspectives to diverse audiences.

#### Conclusion

Children who are learning English are not a homogenous group. They come to elementary classrooms with varying critical thinking skills, different instructional histories, and varied interests, cultural backgrounds, and family experiences. Elementary teachers must get to know their ELLs as individual learners with diverse language strengths and needs, literacy interests and preferences, content knowledge bases, and cultural and technological resources, and use that knowledge to build classroom communities which inspire children to learn English language, literacy, and content. *National Geographic Reach* provides a rich array of resources to help teachers accomplish this goal.