



**Sylvia Linan-Thompson, Ph.D., University of Texas**

Sylvia Linan-Thompson is an associate director of the National Research and Development Center on English Language. She has developed and examined reading interventions for struggling readers who are monolingual English speakers, English language learners and bilingual students acquiring Spanish literacy. Linan-Thompson has authored articles, and books on literacy instruction and teacher professional development topics.

[NGReach.com](https://www.ngreach.com) Download Professional Development Podcasts

Listen to Sylvia Linan-Thompson share more information on comprehension.

## Build Strategic Thinking *by Sylvia Linan-Thompson*

We engage students in comprehension-building activities because we know that to learn and succeed academically, students must be able to actively construct meaning on a regular basis—while talking, listening, viewing, doing activities, and while reading. Comprehension is more than just understanding what you read; you must transform that understanding, communicate it, and use it to build new knowledge. Therefore, students have to be aware of their own understanding and they must possess strategies for accessing and organizing information that is presented in text. Further, to be able to communicate and build knowledge, students need to acquire not only new content or information but also the vocabulary and language and text structures associated with it. This is true whether we are reading for information, to perform a task, or for literary experience.

### What makes comprehension a challenge for ELLs?

Because the ability to comprehend text depends on language, English language learners (ELLs) often experience difficulty with comprehension tasks even when they are able to decode and have adequate reading speed. August, Francis, Hsu, & Snow (2006) identified the following challenges faced by ELLs when they are learning to read for understanding:

- smaller English vocabularies
- less background knowledge relevant to the texts they encounter in U.S. schools
- less familiarity with mainstream language patterns
- reduced motivation and limited interest in school-assigned reading materials

The good news is that these areas that can be addressed by robust instruction and the use of materials that tap into ELLs' interests and reflect their cultural background. *National Geographic Reach* is designed to address these specific needs of ELLs and enable them to reach high levels of comprehension.

**Vocabulary Development** Earlier papers in this section have emphasized the importance of vocabulary development for ELLs. In addition to needing foundational reading skills, and decoding skills in particular, students need to be able to access word meaning quickly (Perfetti & Mezynski, 1983). They must be able to recognize words, retrieve word meanings, and identify and use affixed word forms quickly. ELLs' limited knowledge of word meanings may make it difficult for them to comprehend what they read. *National Geographic Reach* focuses on developing important academic and content vocabulary through a systematic lesson plan and instructional routines that provide repeated exposure to key words, their varying meanings, and the contexts in which they are used.

**Background Knowledge** Comprehension may also be impacted by limited background knowledge. Our knowledge of specific topics and of the words used in talking about them facilitate our understanding of texts on those topics. Like many English-speaking striving students, ELLs may have limited knowledge of some academic and content area topics. *National Geographic Reach* fosters exposure to a wide range of topics and provides students with multiple opportunities to develop background knowledge in the process. These opportunities include

- multimedia resources for building background
- kinesthetic and cooperative activities that tap prior knowledge and experience
- concept-focused, visual, and contextualized vocabulary resources
- frequent opportunities to listen to and engage in oral language activities
- frequent use of graphic organizers to organize, build, and share knowledge



**Visual and multimedia resources build background.**

**Mainstream Discourse** The way language is used in school and in academic communication may be unfamiliar to ELLs. They may need explicit and systematic instruction to learn how English is used in academic conversations, discussions, presentations, and similar contexts. *National Geographic Reach* includes an extensive oral language strand that models the conventions of mainstream discourse and supports students in learning to use them. Lessons include a wide variety of language frames that demonstrate the appropriate use of academic English and coach students in developing these skills.

**Motivating Materials** ELLs need materials that expose them to new cultures and ideas through engaging text using rich vocabulary. With its emphasis on expository text and attention to diversity, *National Geographic Reach* provides reading material that will engage students, give some an opportunity to see their cultural background, and give others a chance to learn about new cultures, all the while exposing students to big ideas and rich vocabulary that build conceptual knowledge. To ensure that students engage with and understand the texts they read, lessons include collaborative oral-language and writing activities that are implemented prior to, during, and after reading.




## Designing instruction to meet ELLs' needs

In addition to addressing the issues discussed above, an effective program for ELLs must provide instruction that meets these students at their level and moves them forward in ways that develop their confidence and success. Scaffolding must include:

- pre-teaching of key vocabulary and concepts
- the use of think-alouds that show students how to monitor their understanding
- questioning strategies that engage and extend learning
- teaching students to use graphic organizers as frames for thinking about and organizing information
- explicit instruction and extended practice in reading strategies

*National Geographic Reach* incorporates all of these scaffolding strategies in the lesson plans for each unit. Key vocabulary is concept-driven. Words are selected that relate to key ideas that underlie all activities, including reading. By selecting words based on the concept rather than on a particular text, knowledge schema are developed before reading and revisited throughout the unit. Ideas and words encountered through reading can be integrated into that larger schema. Students have multiple opportunities to explore and revisit words and ideas, expanding their understanding across the unit. Academic vocabulary extends that understanding beyond the unit, focusing on high-utility words that are commonly used across a range of subject areas. Instruction consistently uses think-alouds to model for students the thinking processes that expert learners use. Questioning strategies are explicitly taught, and graphic organizers are used throughout the program to support students in thinking about and organizing information they are learning.

### Language Frames

-  I read \_\_\_\_.
-  I know \_\_\_\_.
-  And so \_\_\_\_.

◀ Scaffolds support ELLs.

## Focus on strategies

Strategies are plans we use and apply when hearing text that is read aloud or when reading independently. Strategies are not skills that can be taught by drill. They are complex procedures that provide an approach for completing a task. To use strategies effectively, students need to develop an awareness and understanding of the process, and then practice using the strategies with teacher assistance until they internalize the strategy and can master its application in reading, listening, viewing and other academic activities. They also need to learn when to use each strategy. *National Geographic Reach* focuses on seven key strategies to promote comprehension:

1. **Plan and Monitor Reading:** *Setting a clear purpose, predicting, checking predictions and understanding, and using “fix-up” strategies, if necessary*
2. **Determine Importance:** *identifying essential ideas and information*
3. **Ask Questions:** *interrogating texts for a variety of purposes*
4. **Visualize:** *forming sensory images*
5. **Make Connections:** *connecting information to yourself, the world, and connecting texts with other texts*
6. **Make Inferences:** *connecting ideas or information that the author does not explicitly link*
7. **Synthesize:** *putting ideas together to draw conclusions or make generalizations*

In the final unit of each level, *National Geographic Reach* focuses instruction on when and how to select strategies. Students who are strategic have tools that allow them to learn independently. Furthermore, strategic students learn to trust their own perceptions and to evaluate the quality of their products and the extent to which they have learned something. When they identify mistakes, they have tools to rectify them.

In addition to focused teaching of comprehension strategies, students need to learn about texts in order to understand them. Comprehension requires a full understanding of text structures, literary analysis skills, genre characteristics, and awareness of text features and how to use them. Building understanding of these skills before reading helps students know what to expect and better use the text to unlock key ideas and build understanding.

## Teach with a gradual release of responsibility

According to Swanson (2001), successful teaching of strategies involves the following steps:

1. Explanation (systematic explanations, elaborations, and/or plans to direct task performance)
2. Modeling by teachers (verbal modeling, questioning, and demonstration)
3. Reminders to use specific strategies or procedures (cues, tactics, or procedures)
4. Step-by-step prompts or multi-process instructions
5. Dialogue (teacher and student talk back and forth)
6. Teacher asks questions to assure that students are applying the strategy
7. Teacher provides assistance or coaching only if necessary

As Fisher and Frey (2008) noted, this gradual release process involves a focus lesson (“I do it”), guided instruction (“We do it”), collaboration (“You do it together”), and finally independent application (“You do it alone”).

Strategy instruction in *National Geographic Reach* follows these steps consistently.

Before reading, one strategy is introduced, helping students focus and develop the language and thinking to support strategic reading. They are connected to real-world examples to tap prior experience. They are then modeled by teachers. Clear instructions and language scaffolds are provided along with collaborative opportunities for students to practice and apply the steps of the strategy in short passages that integrate key vocabulary words. As students begin to read the selection, they are reminded to apply the strategy to the text.

As they read, supports are provided to build and apply reading strategies. **Before You Move On** questions scaffold the application of the strategy to the text. The gradual release model supports and scaffolds the application of the strategy through the Teacher’s Edition. First the teacher models the strategy again, then he or she guides

students in applying it, and finally students apply the strategy on their own, with support from the teacher only if needed. These steps include opportunities for students to discuss the application of the strategy with the teacher; further discussion takes place at the end of the unit when the class revisits the strategy learning experience. Companion selections and Leveled Library books are provided for further work with the strategy to help students apply strategies across multiple genres. In *National Geographic Reach*, strategies are taught in each level, so students’ ability to use them grows increasingly sophisticated as they deal with more complex texts.

*National Geographic Reach* also uses the gradual release model for instruction in literary analysis skills and text structure. Before reading, concepts in literary analysis or text structure are tied to students’ prior knowledge or experience and thinking maps (graphic organizers) are introduced, providing clear tools to scaffold the application of the skill. Guided practice and an opportunity for collaborative practice using a read aloud are provided before reading. During reading, the same scaffolds appear in the Student and Teacher materials, promoting gradual release of responsibility. After reading, students reread and use graphic organizers demonstrate their understanding of the literary analysis skill or text structure.

## Conclusion

Reading comprehension presents significant challenges for many ELLs, who may have limited vocabulary and language knowledge that makes it harder for them to focus on the meaning of texts. Instructional materials for ELLs must be designed to provide the vocabulary, background, and language knowledge they need in order to comprehend their reading. In addition, materials must provide extensive instruction to help students develop reading skills and strategies that they can apply independently. *National Geographic Reach* provides motivational texts on a variety of topics, with rich vocabulary development and explicit instruction in comprehension strategies to assure that all ELLs can develop into skilled strategic readers and thinkers.

Unit 1  
Strategic Reading

### Learn to Make Inferences

Look at the picture. Diego does not say what he forgot to do. Look for clues to figure out, or **make an inference** about, what he forgot.

You can **make inferences** when you read, too.

**How to Make Inferences**

1. Look for details in the text.
2. Think about what you already know about the details and the topic.
3. Put your ideas together. What else can you figure out about the details?

**Language Frames**

1. I infer \_\_\_\_\_.

2. From \_\_\_\_\_, I know \_\_\_\_\_.

3. And so \_\_\_\_\_.

**Jack and the Beanstalk**

Jack went to buy some food. He met a man on the road. “Buy my **SUPER SEEDS**,” cried the man. “It’s true! In just a week, you can feed your whole family with the food from just **one bean seed**!”

Jack bought the dried seeds and planted them in his backyard. It was a perfect **environment** for growing beans. In just a few days, the plant had **spread** across the yard. It was out of **control**! The garden wasn’t big enough to **contain** the huge stalk, which began to climb high into the sky.

Jack decided to **investigate**. So he climbed the plant tightly, careful not to crash the stalk. Finally he reached a cloud. There, he found a box filled with bright shiny gold. Jack grabbed the gold and climbed quickly down the stalk.

Then Jack heard a rumble in the sky. The beanstalk started to shake.

Jack took an axe and chopped down the stalk. He heard someone shouting in the clouds. Jack sighed with relief. Then he used the gold to buy some real food for his family.

◀ A good place to make an inference

◀ Reading strategy instruction includes explanations, models, and scaffolded practice opportunities.