



**Jennifer D. Turner, Ph.D., University of Maryland**

Jennifer D. Turner teaches reading education, and multicultural literature and instruction for reading specialists. She has published on exemplary literacy teachers and teaching for African American elementary students. Recently, Turner received the Elva Knight Research Grant from the International Reading Association for her work with new reading teachers in urban elementary schools. Jennifer serves as a co-editor of the Literacy Leaders department for *The Reading Teacher*.

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

«MP3» Listen to Jennifer Turner share more information on assessment.

## Know What They Know *by Jennifer Turner*

We all know that good assessment is the cornerstone of good instruction for English language learners (ELLs). Lately, however, teachers seem to have become increasingly frustrated with their current assessment systems. Teachers often collect huge amounts of data on their ELLs, but they don't know how to interpret it. Other teachers are overwhelmed by the data they collect, and they spend hours trying to figure out how the scores relate to the lessons that they are planning. It's not uncommon for teachers to say that they feel as if they are literally "drowning" in assessment data. So what can teachers do?

### Conduct purposeful assessments

Assessment is not a one-size-fits-all process, so teachers need to know how to use assessment data for a number of different purposes. First, teachers use assessment data to diagnose students' needs and strengths (Schumm & Argüelles, 2006). Teachers can use assessments to determine areas of difficulty for students, including language, reading, and writing development, or to identify gaps in their content knowledge. In addition to identifying student needs, it is important that teachers gather and interpret assessment data in ways that illuminate the strengths that ELLs bring to the classroom (Au, 2006; Schumm & Argüelles, 2006). Dong (2006/2007) reminds us that ELLs are often extremely bright; however, they may have some difficulties expressing their knowledge because they are still learning to speak, write, and think in English. As a result, teachers must be careful not to interpret assessment results in ways that undermine ELLs' cultural background, or underestimate their cognitive, literacy, or linguistic capabilities (Au, 2006).

Second, and related to this first point, teachers need to use assessment data to inform their instructional planning and decision-making (Afflerbach, 2007; Edwards, Turner, & Mokhtari, 2008). Teachers assess students' background knowledge and strategies to make appropriate choices about materials and to form groups. Teachers use frequent, in-the-moment assessments to adjust their instruction based on students' understanding and engagement.

Teachers may also assess students' understanding after instructional lessons to determine if particular skills or concepts need to be retaught. Using assessment to guide classroom instruction is critical, because all students, including ELLs, learn within different zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers work with ELLs in their zones of proximal development by starting with children's independent level and moving them to higher levels of performance through scaffolding. To understand ELLs' learning levels, and the kinds of scaffolding needed to help them expand their reach, teachers must conduct comprehensive and systematic assessments.

Finally, teachers use assessments to monitor ongoing student learning. Teachers use a variety of formal and informal assessment measures to document ELLs' growth in English language, literacy, and content knowledge, as well as to highlight areas for improvement. Teachers use this data to provide useful information to parents about their child's achievement and development, which can strengthen home-school connections (Schumm & Argüelles, 2006). Teachers can also use this assessment data to communicate more effectively with ESL teachers and other specialists, and to create greater instructional coherence for ELLs across general and English language education programs.

### How can teachers find out what ELLs know?

The *National Geographic Reach* program has been built on six research-based principles that help teachers assess what their English Language Learners know and need to learn:

1. Integrate English language and literacy assessments
2. Look at and listen to ELLs
3. Pair process and product measures to assess content knowledge
4. Identify learner differences
5. Integrate authentic and test-oriented assessments
6. Orchestrate opportunities for ELLs' self-assessment

### 1. Integrate English language and literacy assessments.

Assessing children's proficiency in English provides critical information for classroom teachers. Second language development is uneven, and teachers need to make certain that the learning environment and instruction are comprehensible to ELLs at their own proficiency levels (Au, 2006; August & Shanahan, 2006). Crosson and Lesaux (in press) recommend that teachers use English oral language proficiency assessments to generate an understanding of ELLs' development rather than to develop broad profiles based on skill level (e.g., students having "low" or "high" language skills).

In the literacy domain, teachers can use the same effective measures to assess ELLs because all children, including native English speakers, are developing phonemic awareness, phonics, comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency (Au, 2006; August & Shanahan, 2006). Assessing foundational skills with multiple measures is important because English literacy learning is both multidimensional and complex (Crosson & Lesaux, in press). For example, teachers may use early literacy assessments to gauge ELLs' print awareness, phonological awareness, and letter-word identification, but these measures do not provide adequate information about their oral language proficiency, vocabulary knowledge, and/or listening and reading comprehension levels (Crosson & Lesaux, in press). In addition, recent research has shown that text-reading fluency is not a reliable indicator of reading comprehension for ELLs, so teachers need to supplement fluency measures with vocabulary assessments to create a more comprehensive profile of students' English literacy skills (Lesaux & Kieffer, in press).

*National Geographic Reach* offers an English language assessment which teachers can use to determine ELLs' proficiency levels (i.e., beginner, intermediate, advanced, or advanced high) for differentiated instruction. By administering the language proficiency assessment as a pre- and post-measure, teachers can also evaluate the gains that ELLs make in their English language proficiency within a particular unit. In addition, every unit in *National Geographic Reach* incorporates a rich array of English literacy assessments. For example, the Comprehension Coach is an online tool which enables teachers to monitor students' oral reading fluency in English. Most importantly, teachers have multiple opportunities to gauge ELLs' comprehension and vocabulary knowledge before, during, and after the text is read. Because these literacy skills are embedded within rich, academic conversations and writing activities, teachers can also monitor ELLs' conversational and academic English language development.

2. **Look at and listen to ELLs.** Teachers can gather a wealth of information about ELLs by simply observing them and listening to them in the classroom. Goodman (2002) uses the term "kidwatching" to characterize the kind of ongoing, interpretive professional observations made by classroom teachers. By

watching a young child who is learning English read a book, for example, teachers can determine his or her knowledge of concepts of print (e.g., reading from left to right, title). Teachers can also attain substantive information from ELLs by talking with them (Frey & Hiebert, 2002). Questioning, for example, is one form of assessment that many teachers are familiar with and constantly use in their classrooms. Research has shown that questions which are intended for specific purposes, use simplistic language and sentence structure, and provoke critical thinking are highly effective for assessing ELLs (Dong, 2006/2007; Schumm & Argüelles, 2006).

*National Geographic Reach* helps teachers to maximize the information obtained through observation and dialogue with ELLs. Each lesson includes questioning frameworks which support English language, literacy, and content learning. By asking a rich array of literal, inferential, personal and critical questions in the Talk Together sections, teachers can gauge ELLs' comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, and critical responses to fiction and informational texts. *National Geographic Reach* units are also structured to provide teachers with the flexibility to observe ELLs working independently, in pairs, small groups, and in whole group settings, and to listen in on their discussions.

3. **Pair process and product measures to assess content knowledge.** According to Afflerbach (2007), students' content knowledge can be gauged using two types of assessments. *Process assessments* help to illuminate the processes of student learning and development. Elementary teachers may use a K-W-L graphic organizer as a process assessment because it helps them to determine students' background knowledge about a topic, their interest level and motivation to read, and the reading strategies for comprehending and attaining new information. *Product assessments* demonstrate students' learning and mastery. Unit tests, written compositions, and projects may serve as product assessments because they help teachers to evaluate student learning.

*National Geographic Reach* offers a number of process and product assessments. Each unit incorporates process assessments, such as the Thinking Map and the Concept Map, to help teachers understand how ELLs are organizing and learning new content, and communicating their understanding in verbal and written form. Process assessments related to the Strategic Reading component give teachers information about the skills and strategies that ELLs are using to understand content-rich selections. In addition, Unit Wrap-Up projects serve as product assessments which highlight ELLs' mastery of important academic content and language.

4. **Identify learner differences.** ELLs are not a monolithic group. Children who are learning English often represent a number of cultural and ethnic groups. For example, while a number of children in a classroom may speak Spanish, they may have emigrated from countries as diverse as Mexico, Argentina,

and Spain. Research has demonstrated that students' English language and literacy attainment are shaped by a number of sociocultural factors, including family experience and schooling in the home country, immigration experiences, and heritage language proficiency (Goldenberg, Rueda, & August, 2006). In addition, children who are learning English have personal interests, preferences, and attitudes which shape their engagement in language and literacy learning (Krashen, 1987). Consequently, teachers can determine which instructional materials and activities are motivating for ELLs by using assessments to learn about their cultural and personal backgrounds.

**National Geographic Reach** helps teachers to learn more about ELLs' cultural and linguistic heritage. Units and lessons feature high-quality fiction and informational texts which focus on diversity. Global perspectives are also highlighted in a number of selections. As ELLs discuss these diverse texts, make personal connections, and share their family and community experiences, teachers can discover new insights about their cultural backgrounds. Affective measures in the **National Geographic Reach** program, such as interest surveys, also provide multiple opportunities for teachers to gather information about ELLs' reading preferences in and out of school.

**B I A AH**

#### Home Connection: Recipes

Explain that potatoes were developed thousands of years ago by native peoples of South America. Today potatoes are an important food everywhere in the world. Remind students about **Family Newsletter 3**, which asked them to collect favorite recipes for potatoes. Gather the recipes in a class Potato Cookbook.



◀ **Home Connection features help teachers understand students' cultural backgrounds and family experiences.**

- Integrate authentic and test-oriented assessments.** Teachers can glean a substantial amount of information about ELLs' language, literacy, and content development through authentic assessments. Authentic assessments are not only aligned with the curriculum, but they also emphasize real-world learning and task performance (Au, 2006). At the same time, ELLs need additional exposure to the "culture of testing" because they may not be familiar with the materials, procedures, and language demands related to high stakes testing (Afflerbach, 2007).

**National Geographic Reach** offers teachers a number of authentic measures, such as rubrics for performance-based projects (e.g., Theme Theater, writing projects), which help teachers gauge ELLs' reading, writing, and grammar development. Children who are learning English also have

multiple opportunities to engage with electronic print (e.g., emails, blogs), which teachers can use to ascertain their familiarity with technology. Equally important, teachers can evaluate their ELLs' knowledge about the questioning formats common in formal testing using the test-taking strategy components within each lesson, as well as the end-of-unit tests.

Describing a Story Rubric		
Scale	Content	Language
B	<input type="checkbox"/> Misses many characters <input type="checkbox"/> Does not give details about characters	<input type="checkbox"/> Frequently hard to hear or understand <input type="checkbox"/> Often seems uncomfortable with the describing task
I	<input type="checkbox"/> Covers some story characters <input type="checkbox"/> Gives some details about characters	<input type="checkbox"/> Can be understood some of the time <input type="checkbox"/> Seems somewhat comfortable with the describing task
A	<input type="checkbox"/> Covers most characters in the story <input type="checkbox"/> Gives details about characters	<input type="checkbox"/> Can be understood most of the time <input type="checkbox"/> Seems comfortable with the describing task
AH	<input type="checkbox"/> Covers all important story characters <input type="checkbox"/> Gives many details about characters	<input type="checkbox"/> Speaks clearly and is easily understood <input type="checkbox"/> Seems very comfortable with the describing task

▶ **Rubrics help teachers evaluate students' development in multiple areas including reading, and language. Rubrics also can be used to help students assess their own progress as learners.**

#### 6. Orchestrate opportunities for ELLs' self-assessment.

Sometimes teachers forget that students also need to assess their own learning in school. Self-assessments hold many important benefits for students. When ELLs and their classmates use self-assessments, they take control of their own language and literacy learning, and they achieve greater ownership of critical skills and strategies and build their confidence (Johnston, 2005; Turner & Kim, 2005).

Tools embedded within the **National Geographic Reach** program provide students the opportunity to document their growth in English language, literacy, and content. Each unit provides students with a rubric which enables them to determine what topics they know well and where they need continued support. Also, **National Geographic Reach** lessons include a number of activities (e.g., Writing Projects, Respond and Extend) and artifacts (e.g., Thinking Maps) which help ELLs develop metacognitive awareness.

## Conclusion

It is not enough for teachers to assess ELLs for accountability purposes. Teachers not only need to know how to collect pertinent data on students' learning and development, but they must understand how to interpret the data and use it to make appropriate instructional decisions. Using the **National Geographic Reach** program, teachers can responsively assess the ELLs in their classroom, and use the information to design tailored and effective learning environments and instruction.