

# NorthStar: Helping ELL High School Students Succeed

Ann Hilborn

**The NorthStar series ensures student success by:**

## **Developing Language and Literacy**

*NorthStar* develops language proficiency while using language as a tool for learning.

## **Developing Academic Skills**

The *NorthStar* texts focus on providing high-interest and meaningful tasks which foster academic skill development.

## **Developing Critical Thinking Skills**

Students are exposed and re-exposed to information and skills to elicit increasingly complex levels of understanding.

Every teacher of secondary English language (EL) learners faces the same formidable challenges: preparing students to meet state standards and graduate within four years. This entails accelerating students' language proficiency and, at the same time, developing their academic skills and ability to think critically. If our students are to become independent thinkers, able to apply knowledge both academically and in real-world situations, we know that we must supply rigorous coursework which motivates and challenges students to press forward with their learning. The question then becomes, not what, but how. How can we engage our English language learners in rigorous, standard-based curriculum when language appears to be the obstacle rather than the vehicle to learning?

## **Developing Language and Literacy**

We can begin by considering language acquisition and literacy development as synergistic processes. Acquiring the basic building blocks of English and the development of literacy (reading and writing skills) can occur simultaneously and more powerfully when students read, discuss, and write about thought-provoking topics that stimulate them to think and to express their own ideas. When we ask students to become engaged in the expression of ideas, we increase their opportunities to experience language more fully so that both language learning and academic knowledge are accelerated. The earlier we begin to combine the acquisition of language and the development of literacy, the more effectively we prepare students for mainstream content and facilitate the achievement of grade-level standards in the few short high-school years available.

In the *NorthStar* approach to language learning, students examine issues from various perspectives to solve problems and to communicate in a meaningful way:

- Students explore language-learning skills through activities which are carefully constructed and sequenced to stimulate thinking and facilitate learning.
- The thematic curriculum explores such diverse topics as the arts, sports, employment, health, personality, and food.
- The units focus on topics that are meaningful and relevant to students.
- The units scaffold exercises to provide multiple opportunities to listen, speak, read, and write about these topics.

*NorthStar* develops language proficiency while using language as a tool for learning. As a result,

students are not only motivated, but they also develop skill at learning increasingly complex concepts. This process helps them meet grade-level state standards at the same time as they acquire essential language.

### **Developing Academic Skills**

We can also provide rigorous study necessary to develop specialized academic skills. Demands on students are increasing as EL students are more frequently placed into mainstream classrooms, often with teachers who have not been specifically trained to meet their needs. Therefore, it falls to the EL teacher to provide higher levels of preparation and support in the EL classroom and to provide the academic strategies students require to manage their content classes. We can make it possible for students to learn more advanced skills by layering instruction from more interpersonal and comprehensible communication to more cognitively demanding tasks. By moving consistently through all four language skills, using each to build upon the next, we can effectively scaffold and deepen instruction in a way that allows students to frame increasingly abstract concepts.

The *NorthStar* series is written to grade-level standards. For example:

- It uses high-interest materials to teach the skills students need to prepare them for mainstream content.
- The texts engage students in authentic activities, layering skills and information over five levels, Introductory through Advanced.
- In each unit of the student text, language and concepts are presented, reworked, and mastered with balanced concentration on all four language skills.

- Students practice a variety of listening and speaking skills, which lead to debates, role plays, and oral presentations.
- Expository reading is presented in newspaper reports, magazine articles, expository essays, interviews, and letters.
- Students also read a wide variety of literary genres, including short stories, poetry, autobiography and biography, and excerpts from novels.

Reading skills are taught implicitly through exercises in each unit. In the comprehension activities, students practice reading skills such as skimming and scanning; they identify main ideas and supporting details, and learn to use those details to support their own responses. Vocabulary is taught both directly and indirectly, including the identification of words through context and idiomatic informal expressions used in spoken English.

Writing is taught both implicitly and explicitly along with reading development because one process models and supports the other. The writing process begins at the start of each unit and continues throughout the unit, guiding students to express their opinions, reactions, experiences, and ideas. In *NorthStar*, in addition to having reading selections that serve as models for good writing, the writing process is taught explicitly through analysis, explanation, and guided practice with emphasis on paragraphs and essays reflecting opinion, personal expression, persuasion, organization, and rhetorical structure. Additional writing process support is available in the Writing Activity Books, one per level, linked directly to the readings.

Grammar is taught both inductively and deductively and grows from the writing experience. The *NorthStar* texts focus on

providing high-interest and meaningful tasks which foster academic skill development so that students can communicate with increased confidence and sophistication in all their classes.

### **Developing Critical Thinking Skills**

Finally, we can enhance students' ability to think critically by teaching them to read, question, discuss, predict, and explore outcomes and consequences, evaluate evidence, and sort relevant from irrelevant information. We can show them how to analyze, make connections, use their information to generate new ideas, and provide evidence to support their beliefs and inferences. We want our students to be able to weigh and assess information, gather and interpret data, solve problems, and formulate well-reasoned conclusions. This requires that the curriculum we choose, the materials we offer, and the strategies we teach reflect those goals.

In *NorthStar*, critical thinking skills are built into every unit with engaging, motivating activities and real-world implications:

- Students learn to hypothesize, paraphrase, and summarize.
- Students categorize and classify information, make inferences, and draw conclusions.
- Students analyze and synthesize, compare and contrast, and learn to support their ideas with detailed examples.
- Creative and varied exercises offer students multiple opportunities for reflection, discussion, reading, and writing.

Beginning with a warm-up activity and working through content and language to direct application, students are exposed and re-exposed to information and skills to elicit increasingly complex levels of understanding:

- a. The warm-up introduces students to the topic, usually by having them respond to a visual image;
- b. Vocabulary study builds additional background;
- c. A first reading selection or listening passage encompasses the primary content of each unit;
- d. A comprehension sequence builds carefully to culminate in an inference exercise; and
- e. Students read or listen to a second selection that builds on the ideas from the first but contrasts in viewpoint, genre, and/or tone.
- f. Students review language from the two selections, study the related grammar and writing styles, apply their knowledge through writing and speaking topics, gather data, and report through oral or written presentations.

Students review language from the two selections, study the related grammar and writing styles, apply their knowledge through writing and speaking topics, gather data, and report through oral or written presentations. This systematic progression of activities allows students to work with challenging content and skills, material that could be overwhelming in a less carefully constructed curriculum.

### **Getting Ready for Graduation**

We are perpetually cognizant of the need to prepare students to meet district and state requirements for graduation. A new generation of standardized tests, more rigorous requirements for graduation, and new demands on high-school graduates require a new generation of EL materials. These materials must be able to support instruction designed to take our students to levels

of learning unimagined a decade ago. If we are to demand more of ourselves and our students, support and resources must be commensurate with those demands. Time constraints, rising expectations, and increased responsibilities for teachers require high levels of curricular support—all of which *NorthStar* supplies. In addition to the student texts, *NorthStar* provides:

- a Workbook designed for high-school students
- Test Generating software
- a Writing Activity Workbook
- an audio program
- a video program that includes clips from ABC News
- a Companion Website (with additional classroom materials)
- a comprehensive Teachers' Manual.

*NorthStar's* rigorous, thematic, integrated instructional approach to language development and academic skill development gives high-school teachers the necessary tools to prepare students to meet grade-level language arts standards. Moreover, the series helps students approach standardized tests with confidence and graduate from high school ready to confront new challenges.



Ann Hilborn is a former high school English and ESL teacher, with thirty years experience in the field of second language education. She has written grants and curriculum, conducted professional development workshops, and coordinated EL programs at a large urban high school in Houston, Texas. She currently consults and writes for publishers of English language materials, conducts workshops for schools and districts, and coaches educators in best instructional practices for English learners.



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