WIDA FOCUS ON English Language Arts

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Introduction

Teachers are currently faced with the challenge of reconceptualizing how they present content area knowledge to meet the increased expectations set forth by the Common Core State Standards and to help a growing number of English language learners (ELLs) advance their academic language development. First, we will take a close look at the Common Core English Language Arts Standards in relation to their language demands. Later, we'll introduce you to Mr. Barrero, a 10th grade English language arts teacher. His classroom will give us insight into a variety of important considerations for content area teachers working with ELLs on key Common Core expectations that involve both language and content learning. Mr. Barrero realizes that for his ELLs, it is imperative that he provide them with meaningful, content-rich experiences so that they may not only deepen their language abilities but also acquire and apply the academic knowledge and skills needed across disciplines.

Overview

The purpose of this bulletin is to provide guidance to teachers of English language arts (ELA) who are implementing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and working to respond to the specific needs of ELLs. In their treatment of academic language (or the language of school), the CCSS represent a departure from existing content standards. The CCSS expect students to develop more sophisticated language and literacy skills as they engage in more intellectually demanding tasks independently and in collaboration with others.

In order to successfully implement the CCSS with students who are still learning English, practitioners need to understand the language demands of the standards. The Council of Chief State School Officers recently produced a document that teases out these demands for ELA, mathematics, and science called the Framework for English Language Proficiency Development Standards Corresponding to the Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards (from now on, the ELPD Framework). The ELPD Framework outlines key disciplinary practices embedded in the CCSS, thus providing educators with an idea of what their students will be doing with language as they engage with content in a particular discipline. Read more about the ELPD Framework at www.ccsso.org.

Key CCSS ELA "Practices"[19]

1. Support analyses of a range of grade level complex texts with evidence
2. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience
3. Construct valid arguments from evidence and critique the reasoning of others
4. Build and present knowledge through research by integrating, comparing, and synthesizing ideas from texts
5. Build upon the ideas of others and articulate their own when working collaboratively
6. Use English structures to communicate context specific messages

Source: CCSSO, 2012, p. 11.

The power of focusing on disciplinary practices rather than on language features (such as specific grammar or vocabulary) is that the practices in many ways determine the kinds of organization, grammar, and vocabulary that students will need to use and understand. Therefore, a focus on disciplinary practices does not mean a lack of focus on language features; whereas a strict focus on language features risks

decontextualizing language instruction and studying language in an abstract manner. When we look at instruction through the lens of disciplinary practices, we can see how language and content interact.

Naturally, disciplinary practices look different within different contexts and content areas. In the ELPD Framework, each language practice is associated with a set of analytical tasks, or cognitive activities, that students need to master. As students *progress in their academic careers*, they add new tasks to the ones they have already learned. As language learners *advance in their language proficiency,* they expand the ways in which they use language to engage in these tasks.

This bulletin will focus on one of the key disciplinary practices for ELA described in the ELPD Framework. This practice is the following: "Build upon the ideas of others and articulate their own when working collaboratively." We chose this particular practice because it represents one of the key differences between the CCSS and other sets of content standards. The CCSS expect students not just to share ideas but to construct new meaning together.

Key CCSS ELA Practice 5: Build upon the ideas of others and articulate their own clearly when working collaboratively	
Analytical Tasks	**Tasks that are primarily introduced at the elementary level** • Work productively in pairs, small groups, and whole class settings • Contribute effectively in group settings to the overall project or understanding sought • Explore the task and purpose and adjust goals accordingly • Analyze the main ideas and other key details of a speaker • Break down the speaker's message conceptually into component parts • Use evidence to make inferences beyond what is explicitly stated • Render an understanding of what has been said through assembling details and ideas • Identify confusions on the part of the listener as well as on the part of the speaker • Employ the use of technology to present or amplify communications through use of digital and multimedia texts **Tasks that are primarily introduced at the secondary level (in addition to elementary)** • Identify the contributions of others and leverage them for greater insight into the problem or issue • Synthesize comments, arguments, claims, and evidence • Determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task • Identify the disciplinary expectations and take them into account when planning communications

Source: CCSSO, 2012, p. 16.

Expanding Students' Oral Literacy

Traditionally, giving students opportunities to talk with each other was seen only as a support: a chance for language learners to receive help from peers. The CCSS, however, require that we see student interaction in a different light. Peer discussions encourage students to expand their understanding and develop critical thinking as they engage with each other's ideas, refine their own, and find effective ways to express them. Student interaction is crucial for ELLs because this expansion and refinement concerns language as much as content. As students work to understand others and make themselves understood, they have powerful opportunities to develop strong language skills.

We all know, however, that productive discussions do not just happen. They have to be carefully and purposefully set up. And even then, despite our best intentions, they may fail to be the rich spaces we want them to be. On the next pages we provide a number of principles that are particularly important in supporting ELLs' participation in meaningful interactions with teachers and peers (Bunch et. al. 2013).

PRINCIPLES	SCENARIO
Instruction should build on students' existing language and cultural resources in order to expand them. Students come to the classroom with a wealth of knowledge about interacting with others. Their in-school and out-of-school experiences shape their participation and engagement in the classroom. Critically examining these experiences to find similarities and differences among them, as well as between students' experiences and the types of classroom interactions that teachers aim to foster, is essential in supporting ELLs as they navigate multiple spaces with divergent expectations.	*Meet Mr. Barrero, a 10th grade English language arts teacher. His class is comprised of both English language learners (ELLs) and non-ELL students. The ELL students' English language proficiency is at the intermediate level or higher. Today his class will continue their work on argumentation through whole group, small group, and independent activities. Throughout this section, we will show why Mr. Barrero chose to cover the content in this format, as well as how the lesson addresses both the content and language development needs of his students simultaneously.* As the class begins, the students are asked to get together with their partners from the previous day and pull out the newspaper article they read on deportation. The student pairs had been asked to read the article highlighting in yellow what they felt were the important ideas, in orange the language they had questions about, and to write any other questions they had in the margins. Mr. Barrero then combined partners with another pair, taking into consideration factors including their English language strengths and needs, prior academic achievement, and background knowledge. He reminds the students to use the comprehension strategies they have been practicing such as how to ask for clarification or restate what you have heard to check for accuracy and points to the poster the class had created listing the strategies. The small groups were given several minutes to ask each other any questions they had about the content or the language of the article. Groups are formed to build on students' existing language and cultural resources. How might you structure and guide group work to help students achieve the comprehension and collaboration standards put forth by CCSS ? *For more information on group work with ELLs, check out "Focus on Group Work for Content Learning" (see references)*
Participation can be fostered through relevant and explicit language instruction. All students need to learn how to work together. ELLs, however, have to learn how to do so in English. In order for them to be successful, they require opportunities to practice the language they need to express (dis) agreement, interrupt, hold the floor when interrupted, ask for clarification, build on other's opinions, and so on. Meaningful engagement with this kind of language is essential in enabling students at all levels of proficiency to contribute to the classroom learning community.	Next, Mr. Barrero wrote on the board and asked students, "Who do you agree with more in the article, the father or the government? Why? What evidence from the text did you find to be persuasive or how can you justify your response?" To support students' language as they thought about their answers, he wrote the following sentence frames on the board under the two columns "Agree and Disagree": How is Mr. Barrero fostering participation of all ELLs in the discussion? How is he supporting their language development? Agree: • I agree with _____ in that___ (state the opinion/stance) __because___ (provide support/rationale for your claim from the text and your own experiences) ____. • As stated in the text, _____, and therefore I agree with _____. Disagree/Adding a counterargument: • Although I disagree with much that _____ says, I fully endorse his/her conclusion that _____. • I agree with you up to a point, but I think that _____. • I disagree with ____ because____ and therefore, that is why I agree with ___ Mr. Barrero gave students several minutes to think and write independently. Then, he asked them to turn to their partner to share their opinions. As students shared with their partners, Mr. Barrero walked around the classroom observing students' responses. In what ways did Mr. Barrero structure this lesson to help students apply their content knowledge and language skills across language domains (for example, in their writing)?

PRINCIPLES	SCENARIO
Students need support in developing listening and speaking strategies. ELLs at all levels of English language proficiency should have opportunities to engage in rich discussions with teachers and peers. This means, however, that misunderstandings are inevitable. Language learners need support in developing strategies they can use to make themselves better understood, and to help them understand others.	Mr. Barrero asked two students, Clara and Nadan, who he feels have strong speaking skills, to help him model for the rest of the class how to state an opinion, explain why with evidence, and summarize the argument of a peer. Students had previously practiced summarizing other's arguments and now Mr. Barrero wants to focus on supporting students to present their own, as this will be a skill they will need in several academic disciplines. Clara begins by using one of the sentence frames to explain why she sides with the government. Mr. Barrero then models how to restate or summarize the opinion of Clara and asks her if he correctly captured her argument. Next, he asks Nadan to state whether his opinion is in agreement or disagreement with Clara, and explain why he holds the opinion that he does. Then, he asks Clara to summarize Nadan's argument. He listens now as his students turn to their groups of four and begin building off one another's ideas as they discuss the article by stating their opinions, defending their arguments, and providing counterarguments. As he listens, he prompts students to restate their peers' arguments and check for clarity. Modeling is an effective way to support ELL students' comprehension. Modeling alone, however, is not enough. In what other ways does Mr. Barrero give students opportunities to negotiate meaning?
Students need opportunities to develop metacognitive awareness of how language is used across disciplines and modalities, such as written texts, oral texts, visual representations, and video. As students learn, they engage in formal as well as informal interactions with their peers and teachers. The differences between these interactions in terms of language are often subtle and thus may not be immediately obvious to language learners. Teachers need to guide students as they become aware of the multilayered differences between writing and speaking in different genres, dissimilar modes, and multiple disciplines. Metacognitive awareness supports the transfer of knowledge from one situation to another and helps students become more autonomous.	Mr. Barrero brings the class back together as a group and asks if anyone made such a persuasive argument in their group that it caused someone to change an opinion. If so, what about the argument was so compelling? What did the student use as evidence or justification? Through collaboration with the school's ESL educator, thoughtful planning, as well as in-the-moment teaching, Mr. Barrero is able to help his students develop an academic understanding of English language arts content. He also helps deepen all of his students' knowledge of how to construct an effective argument while simultaneously providing opportunities for ELLs to accelerate their English language development, all of which help to prepare his students to work with increasingly complex texts across academic disciplines. Such metacognitive reflections on the work students just did can help them transfer language skills to other language domains (or disciplines). In a follow up lesson, Mr. Barrero will use today's work to help them write arguments. **REFLECT ON THE LESSON:** IN THIS LESSON, HOW DID MR. BARRERO FOSTER THE ACADEMIC INDEPENDENCE OF HIS ELL STUDENTS?

Observing Academic Language Practices in Action

It is important for Mr. Barrero to monitor his students' content understanding as well as their language development. For content, he focuses on their engagement in the English language arts practices in the CCSS. For language, he focuses on the three features of academic language.

Mr. Barrero used the form below to capture his observations related to content and language use during group discussions. In the first column, he writes the names of his students; in the other columns, he records observations.

STUDENT	CONTENT	LANGUAGE
	Focus • Using evidence to construct valid arguments • Building upon others' ideas	**Focus** • Introducing arguments and counterarguments effectively • Completing complex sentences using because, therefore, although, but, and • Using third person, simple present, and simple past verb forms appropriately • Including specific and technical words and phrases
Clara	Provided evidence, prompted to state opinion	"I agree with the dad because his family was left in the U.S. and they didn't have much." "I agree that he should be given a chance to stay in the U.S." • Attempted to use sentence frame, did not use "in that" to state her opinion until prompted to use provided frames • Simple past • Used general language
Nadan	Disagreed with Clara, provided a counterargument	"I agree with Clara up to a point, but I think that the father's perspective is only one case. I also agree with the government in that it is hard to decide who should be deported because cases are all very different." • Used sentence frames for disagreement and for providing evidence as a counterargument • Complete complex sentences • Cases (specific) and perspective, deported (technical)

As you can see, Mr. Barrero wrote students' actual comments and analyzed them on the spot. Although he is not able to observe and record all students' language all of the time, he focuses on a few students each time. Over time, he collects several language samples from all his students to inform his ongoing language instruction and monitor the language students are processing and producing in his class. For example, for Clara, it is clear that she has a good understanding of the reading and she is able to provide evidence for her opinions. However, she still needs opportunities to practice extending her discourse and producing more complex sentences. Mr. Barrero is intentional about how he designs instruction and tries not to focus on language in isolation, but instead think about how language helps students engage in classroom learning activities, so he will likely continue his focus on complex sentences for her as they explore a variety of English language arts topics and genres.

Prior to this lesson, Mr. Barrero noticed how Nadan has begun to use the sentence frames independently. He has been helping Nadan use more precise vocabulary when building on others' arguments. These types of instructional decisions are the focus of individual conferences that Mr. Barrero holds with his students. He synthesizes information from his observations to show students their individual language progress and set goals with them. From Mr. Barrero's notes, he realizes Nadan no longer needs sentence frames when creating or building on other's arguments. Nadan is ready for a new language focus.

WIDA Resources for Meaningful Engagement of ELLs

Focusing on disciplinary practices during instructional planning helps to highlight the language features students will need to use and understand in order to participate in the lesson while keeping the language contextualized. Nevertheless, Mr. Barrero is aware of the salient language features in the content material and by using the observational tool, he is able to track his students' development in both the content and language while providing meaningful opportunities to interact with the academic language.

However, knowing the language demands of the content or a lesson isn't enough. It is critical for educators to know where their ELLs are currently in terms of their English language development. By knowing your students' strengths, areas of growth, and English language proficiency levels, you can then decide how to best support them. WIDA offers resources to help educators learn more about their students and learn how to differentiate instruction so that each student is appropriately challenged.

The WIDA Can Do Descriptors are a tool educators like Mr. Barrero can use when they have information on students' English language proficiency levels. The Descriptors provide educators with a sampling of the language their students can process and produce at different English language proficiency levels within all four domains. They may help to highlight student strengths in various language domains as well as identify domains where a student may benefit from more language supports. Additionally, the Can Do Descriptors can help foster an awareness of the language development process and help educators understand that ELLs are not behind but rather, can demonstrate their understanding in different ways.

However, the Can Do Descriptors only offer a glimpse of the language a student may be able to use and produce at a given proficiency level. Using the WIDA Performance Definitions, which explicitly highlight the features of academic language for both the receptive and expressive domains, educators may gain insight not only in the amount and complexity of the language you would expect a student to use at their current proficiency level, but also the progression we would expect to see a student move through in regards to the quantity and complexity of their academic language use as they gain higher English proficiency levels. The information included in the Performance Definitions can be useful for teachers in designing instruction. For instance, looking at the Performance Definitions at the proficiency levels of his ELL students (3 and above), Mr. Barrero can see that in the productive domains, he would expect his students to be able to use short and some expanded sentences with emerging complexity as well using sentence patterns across content areas. As he looks at the data he has collected, Mr. Barrero asks himself, "Can all my ELL students do this or do I need to support them in this area of language development?" He then realizes that he needs to differentiate his language goals and provide more explicit instruction and supports in this area. He decides to offer a variety of sentence frames that include both compound and complex sentences. He thus encourages students who are not comfortable with producing longer sentences towards greater quantity of language, and students who use longer sentences towards greater complexity. In this instance, the Performance Definitions help Mr. Barrero choose language supports that are appropriate for his students based on their language development trajectory.

Once educators have a sense of where their students are in terms of their academic language development, they can decide what language supports will be helpful for students to have during various academic activities. WIDA differentiates between three different categories of supports for ELLs. These are sensory supports, graphic supports, and interactive supports. Thoughtful incorporation of various language supports helps ELLs to access the content and develop their academic language in English. For instance, Mr. Barrero's use of interactive supports in the form of his intentional grouping allowed for students to have meaningful interactions and ample opportunities to practice language skills. Also, the use of sensory supports, such as the poster of comprehension strategies and the agreement sentence frames, provided additional support for ELLs as they develop their communication skills across the various language domains. For more information on the different types of supports and examples of each, please see the 2007 English Language Proficiency Standards and Resource Guide available for free at wida.us.

Academic Language Observation Tool

The following tool may be used to record observation related to both content and language. Write the content and language focus in the top section and the names of the students that will be observed in the left column.

STUDENT	CONTENT	LANGUAGE
	Focus	**Focus**

Conclusion

The different sections of this bulletin illustrate how educators can pay attention to both language and content as they design instruction, collect student data, and set goals based on that data. Such an approach to the teaching and learning of ELLs is essential for their academic success and is fostered by a focus on disciplinary practices. The practices remind us of our overarching goals for students. When we examine the participation of our ELLs in these practices, we see how students' language competencies interact with their content knowledge. We can then offer instruction that consistently and intentionally fosters language development through content learning. This kind of instruction, in which content and language standards are interconnected and neither is privileged at the expense of the other, is what our students deserve.

About the Academic Language and Literacy Initiatives

WIDA's Academic Language and Literacy Initiatives (ALLI) team plays a key role in developing tools and supports for the language development of students in various programs, including English and Spanish language development, Early Childhood, and programs for ELLs who have been identified as having significant cognitive disabilities. Members of the ALLI team have also worked on the development of tools to promote the engagement of K-12 ELLs with CCSS curriculum and learning practices, like CCSSO's Framework for English Language Proficiency Development. Currently, the ALLI team is furthering this work through its involvement in the development of a teacher guide for the ELPD Framework and through its work on language progressions.

The language progressions project, based on UCLA's latest research on language, follows students as they develop English language around single language functions. For example, UCLA researchers have collected hundreds of student samples related to the language practice of explaining. They have observed how students' explanations become more sophisticated linguistically as they progress in their language development. Capturing the different stages of language development with this amount of detail will help educators plan daily instruction and monitor language growth through formative assessment practices. Over the next year, stay tuned to hear more about language progressions and how you can become involved in their development, piloting, and implementation.

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Further Reading

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About WIDA

WIDA is a consortium of states dedicated to the design and implementation of high standards and equitable educational opportunities for English language learners. To this end, WIDA has developed English language proficiency standards and tests aligned with those standards, such as ACCESS for ELLs®. Research and professional development activities importantly complement the WIDA standards and assessment products. To learn more about the products and services available through WIDA, please visit www.wida.us.