

Transitioning from the ELPA21 English Language Proficiency Standards to the WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework

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Introduction

In the coming school year, Washington State will transition from the ELPA21 Consortium to the WIDA Consortium. WIDA, a nonprofit educational services organization within University of Wisconsin–Madison’s School of Education, advances academic language development and academic achievement for multilingual children to help ensure equitable, quality education. WIDA’s resources are used by 42 domestic states, jurisdictions, and entities (such as the Bureau of Indian Education and the Department of Defense Education Activity) and approximately 500 international schools throughout the world.

One part of Washington State’s transition will include the shift from the ELPA21 English Language Proficiency (ELP) Standards (CCSSO, 2014a; 2014b) to the WIDA English Language Development (ELD) Standards-Framework, 2020 Edition: Kindergarten–Grade 12 (WIDA, 2020). This article provides educators with an initial guide for bridging between the two standards.

Similar Asset-Based Orientations

The philosophical foundations for both sets of standards will be familiar to educators. Both sets of standards are

grounded in asset-based approaches. Rather than viewing students who have been identified as English learners (ELs) as if they were “failed” native English speakers (May, 2014; Kibler & Valdés, 2016), both standards’ Guiding Principles emphasize the importance of seeking, activating, leveraging, and sustaining students’ unique cultural and linguistic experiences, assets, interests, and potential (González et al., 2005; Paris, 2012).

The WIDA Guiding Principles of Language Development exemplify the overarching and ever-present Can Do Philosophy of WIDA. This orientation guides educators in planning and delivering instruction, leveraging the assets of multilingual learners, and supporting them in meeting rigorous, grade-level academic content standards. In the 2020 Edition, they are expanded upon using four Big Ideas, shown in Figure 1.

Rather than limiting its stance to the federal term of EL, WIDA uses the assets-based term multilingual learner to refer to students who have been identified as ELs. As these students develop their English skills and repertoires, they continue to draw on a wide range of linguistic and sociocultural resources from their native language(s). Proficiency in one language can foster proficiency in other languages and is regarded as an asset (Genesee et al., 2006; Aldana & Mayer, 2015).

Figure 1: Big Ideas Throughout the WIDA ELD Standards Framework

Different Strategies for Aligning to Content Area Standards

A fundamental difference between the two standards is their architecture. The descriptors for the ten ELPA21 ELP Standards draw heavily upon English Language Arts/Literacy (ELA) standards and the ELA standards provide the lens for interpreting and aligning with content area standards and practices in mathematics and science (CCSSO, 2014a, p. 31 and p. 35). As a result of these alignment choices, the ELPA21 ELP Standards need just two components: (1) the ten Standard Statements (CCSSO, 2014a) and (2) the K-12 Proficiency Level Descriptors (CCSSO, 2014b).

In comparison, the WIDA ELD Standards Framework incorporates the distinct framing found in four content areas: ELA, mathematics, science, and social studies standards and practices. (See Appendices B and C in the 2020 Edition for this information.) Shown in Figure 2, the WIDA ELD Standards Framework unpacks four nested building blocks of language development within and across academic content areas. These building blocks identify four focus areas for educators to examine during collaborative unit planning for content and language integration.

Teach Language for Learning

Since the 1980s, language instruction has moved from a focus on decontextualized, generic forms to increasing unity of language and content by discipline, purpose, intended audience, and other contextual factors (Gottlieb, 2016). (See Figure 3.) As a result, as academic content standards and language standards have evolved, “knowledge is not [considered to be] distinct from the linguistic means through which it is acquired and expressed” (Bailey & Heritage, 2014, p. 481).

The 10 ELPA21 ELP Standard Statements highlight language functions and forms that, to be used across content area standards and practices, are more summative and generic in nature. In contrast, the five WIDA Standards Statements intertwine content and language more closely. Rather than merely describing the language of a content area, in the 2020 Edition, the WIDA Standards Statements emphasize the importance of prioritizing the language students can use for thinking and acting in the world (Grant, 2012; Leont’ev, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978), including these five areas:

1. Language for Social and Instructional purposes (ELD-SI)

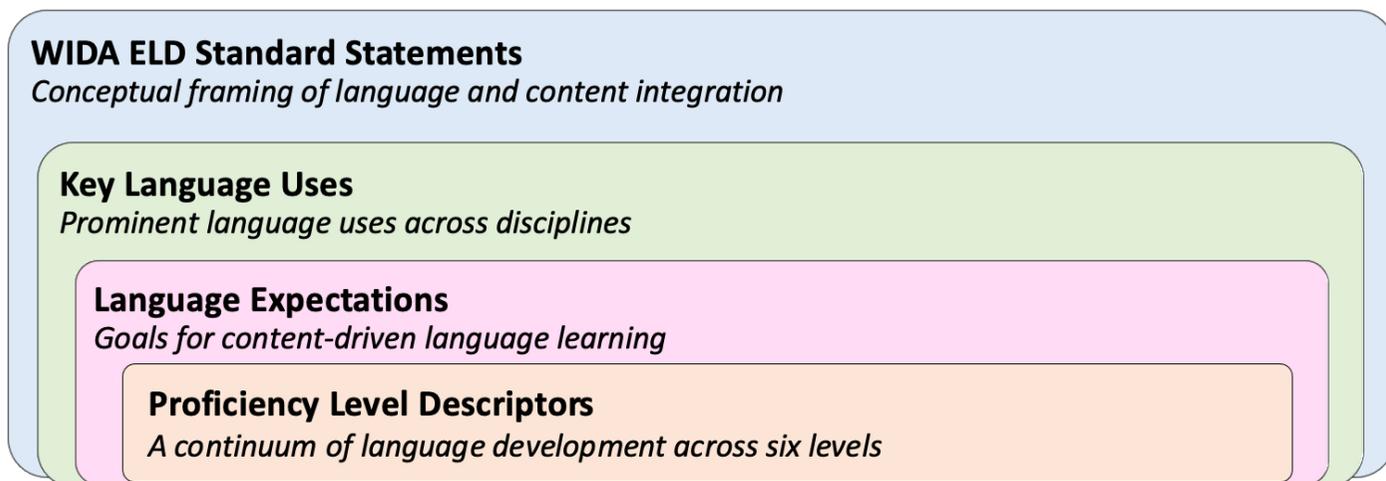


Figure 2. WIDA ELD Standards Framework

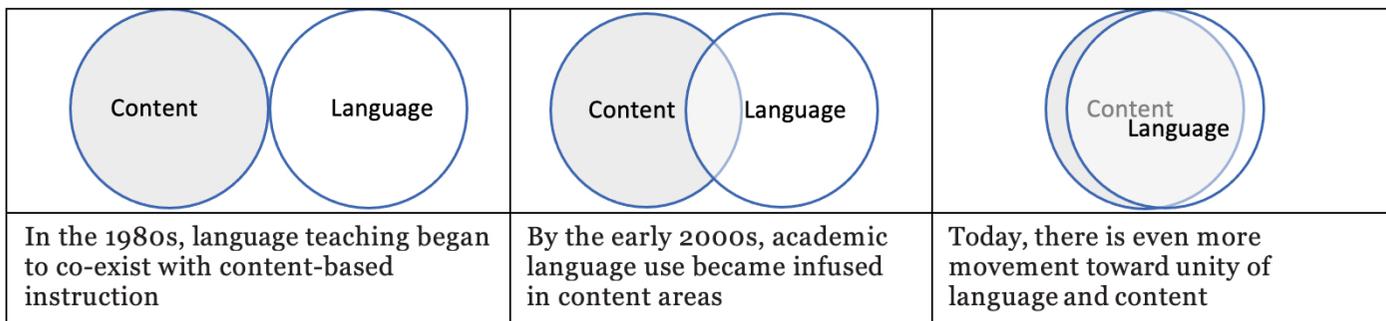


Figure 3. Evolution of the relationship between language and content in instruction

2. Language for Language Arts (ELD-LA)
3. Language for Mathematics (ELD-MA)
4. Language for Science (ELD-Sc)
5. Language for Social Studies (ELD-SS)

WIDA ELD Standard 1: Language for Social and Instructional Purposes broadens the traditionally narrow definition of academic language to include social language, approximations, and translanguaging (Canagarajah, 1999; García et al., 2017). These linguistic features are a natural part of academic discussions and explorations as students co-construct meaning (MacDonald et al., 2014; Wei, 2018).

However, Standard 1 also has an important socio-cultural component: As students develop their identities as learners, their language use reflects their interests, experiences, cultural and linguistic resources, socio-emotional development, and family and community ways of knowing (Gándara, 2015; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014). During unit planning, it is important to consider how to integrate the language and culture brought by students (WIDA ELD Standard 1) with the language for making meaning in schooling (WIDA ELD Standards 2-5). (See Figure 4.)

Identify the Purpose for Language Use

The ELPA21 ELP Standards include one standard, ELPA ELP Standard 7, that targets the adaptation of language to purpose, task and audience. These three concepts are infused throughout the WIDA ELD Standards Framework in the second component of the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, the Key Language Uses.

The Key Language Uses (four broad categories technically known as genre families) highlight opportunities for explicit instruction on recurrent patterns of language across a range of academic contexts (Rose & Martin, 2012). As part of the standards development process, WIDA researchers analyzed academic content standards, disciplinary practices, and research literature (e.g., Brisk, 2014; de Oliveira et al., 2020). The researchers identified four prominent language uses across academic content standards in ELA/literacy, mathematics, science and social studies: Narrate, Inform, Explain, and Argue. (Defined in Table 1.)

The Key Language Uses focus attention on genres and, in doing so, foreground the concept of purpose for language use as a key variable among contextual factors that shape student language choices (Hyland, 2007). They position multilingual learners as active users of language who make choices to adapt language by topic, purpose, audience, and situation (Derewianka & Jones, 2016; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

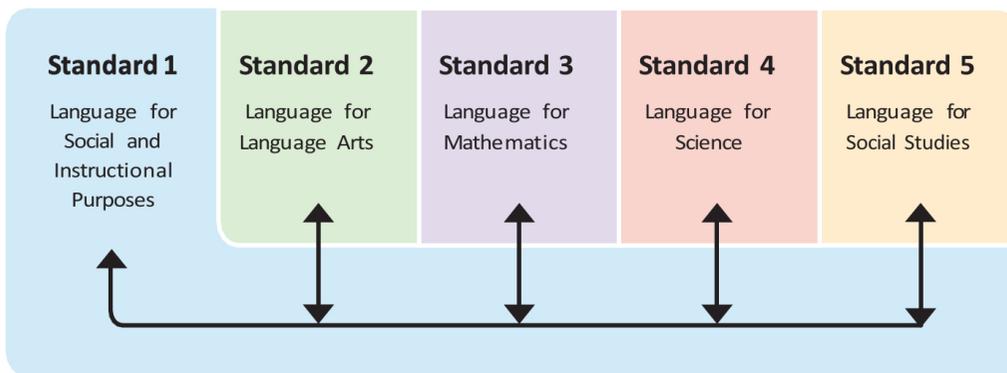


Figure 4: Relationship among the WIDA ELD Standard

Genre Family	Definition
Narrate	Language to convey real or imaginary experiences through stories and histories. Narratives can serve many purposes, including to instruct, entertain, teach, or support persuasion
Inform	Language to provide factual information. As students convey information, they define, describe, compare, contrast, organize, categorize, or classify concepts, ideas, or phenomena
Explain	Language to account for <i>how</i> things work or <i>why</i> things happen. As students explain, they substantiate the inner workings of natural, humanmade, and social phenomena
Argue	Language to justify claims using evidence and reasoning. Argue can be used to advance or defend an idea or solution, change the audience's point of view, bring about action, or accept a position or evaluation of an issue.

Table 1: Definitions of the Four Key Language Uses

The Key Language Uses move language instruction beyond a single, generic, one-size-fits-all Standard English into discussions of the many varieties of English (Pennycook, 2010). Because language use depends on the purpose, audience, and situation in a particular context, there may be differences in how experts in each field interpret and/or express the Key Language Uses. The following paragraphs provide two examples:

Lee (2017) points out that the K-5 developmental expectations for students' abilities to move from opinions to claims argumentation are different in science and ELA, with science introducing the concept of a claim in primary grades.

In Grades 9-12 social studies, discussions of evidence should emphasize use of multiple sources (Swan, Barton, Buckles et al., 2013), whereas in Grades 9-12 science, discussions of evidence should reference data, models, and/or information from investigations of a phenomenon or design solutions (Next Generation Science Standards Lead States, 2013).

Multilingual learners need to learn how to use the language functions and language features that fit with content area expectations.

The four Key Language Uses are not strict categorical divisions, but can intersect, blend, and build on each other. For example, an argument may also contain narratives (anecdotes or stories), informational texts (which name, define, describe, compare, or contrast something), and/or explanations (about the how or why of a concept). [For more information of the varieties within each Key Language Use, see Section 4 of the WIDA ELD Standards Framework document—Key Language Uses: A Closer Look.]

Set High Expectations for All Multilingual Learners

The ten ELPA21 ELP Standard Statements offer ELA-oriented language functions to describe convergences among disciplinary practices in ELA, mathematics, and science (CCSSO, 2014, pp. 31-33). In comparison, the WIDA Language Expectations contain sets of language functions (i.e., the bullets shown in Figure 5) that have been customized by content area. The Language Expectations highlight the importance of ensuring high expectations for all multilingual learners, regardless of proficiency level.

The WIDA Language Expectations can be used to create the unit-level language goals for the rigorous reasoning and sophisticated language that academic content standards demand. They may be especially useful during collaboration with content area teachers. In other words, once educators have identified their unit-level “destination,” they are then better positioned to plan lessons, differentiate, scaffold, etc. based who the students are. Educators may use different pathways to reach their Language Expectation destinations.

As shown in Figure 5, the Language Expectations are similar to what educators generally find in academic content

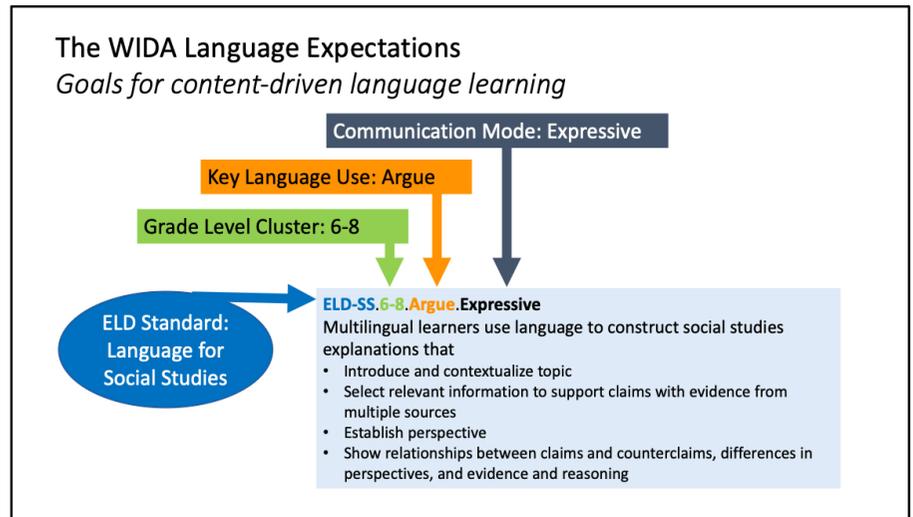


Figure 5: Standards Codes Used with Language Expectations

standards and include codes that indicate the WIDA ELD Standard Statement, grade-level cluster, Key Language Use, and communication mode. The Language Expectations for ELA, mathematics, science, and social studies are organized into six grade-level clusters (Kindergarten, Grade 1, Grades 2-3, 4-5, and 6-8, and 9-12). The Language Expectations for Standard 1 are organized in two groupings: one for Grades K-3, the other for Grades 4-12.

Focus on What Students Can Do with Language Along a Continuum

Both sets of standards include Proficiency Level Descriptors. They provide detailed descriptions of the typical stages of growth for multilingual learners along continua that may span many years.

Rather than taking a deficit perspective about a multilingual learner’s “lack” of English, the Proficiency Level Descriptors for both standards help teachers identify the language features the student can do at each level and what the student is working toward in the next level. It is important to remember that descriptors of proficiency in one level implicitly includes the previous levels. In other words, the descriptor for the end of Proficiency Level 4

(PL4) = End of [PL1 + PL2 + PL3 + PL4].

The WIDA Proficiency Level Descriptors explicitly highlight discourse uses of language, providing three discourse criteria (organization, cohesion, and density of language) vs. one sentence criterion (grammatical complexity of language) and one word/phrase criterion (precision of language). In other words, in the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, the concepts of language and language development are situated in relation to socio-cultural influences on discourse. The meaning of words and phrases should be examined above and “beyond the clause” in relation to text and contexts (Halliday & Mathiesson, 2014; Martin & Rose, 2007). (Illustrated in Figure 6.)

While both standards offer five proficiency levels, in its 2020 Edition, WIDA offers an additional proficiency level to describe grade-level performance. Level 6 is open-ended as language development continues throughout life. While the ELPA21 ELP Standards use a single continuum of K-12 Proficiency Level Descriptors, in the 2020 Edition, WIDA Proficiency Level Descriptors provide developmental continua for six grade-level clusters (K, 1, 2-3, 4-5, 6-8, and 9-12). (See Table 2 for an example.)

When using the WIDA Proficiency Level Descriptors, read the full “sentence” for each criterion. The lead-in phrase offers a language function that defines each criterion and has been designed to work across Key Language Uses and content areas. For example, as shown in Table 2, for the criterion Organization of Language, multilingual learners

Toward the end of each proficiency level, when scaffolded appropriately, multilingual learners will...

Criteria	End of Level 1	End of Level 2	End of Level 3	End of Level 4	End of Level 5	Level 6
DISCOURSE Organization of language	Create coherent texts (spoken, written, multimodal) using...					
	sentences that convey intended purpose with emerging organization (topic sentence, supporting details)	short text that conveys intended purpose using predictable organization (signaled with some paragraph openers: <i>First...Finally, In 1842, This is how volcanos form</i>)	expanding text that conveys intended purpose using generic (not genre-specific) organizational patterns (introduction, body, conclusion)	text that conveys intended purpose using genre-specific organizational patterns (statement of position, arguments, call to action) with a variety of paragraph openers	text that conveys intended purpose using genre-specific organizational patterns with strategic ways of signaling relationships between paragraphs and throughout text (<i>the first reason, the second reason, the evidence...</i>)	text that conveys intended purpose using genre-specific organizational patterns with a wide range of ways to signal relationships throughout the text

Table 2: Excerpt from Grades 6-8 WIDA Proficiency Level Descriptors for the Expressive Communication Mode (Speaking, Writing, and Representing)

will: Create coherent texts (spoken, written, and multimodal) using. . . [the descriptor shown in one of six Proficiency Level “boxes”]. The descriptor for each proficiency level is not used in isolation.

To avoid confounding cognitive expectations with language proficiency, WIDA separates Language Expectations from Proficiency Level Descriptors. This separation is important because multilingual learners do not need to first acquire “enough” English before being taught the content area curriculum. Multilingual learners in the early phases of English language acquisition can still interpret and express grade-level concepts and skills, especially when presented through multimodal means. As explained in CCSSO (2014b), these two components have been combined within the ELPA21 ELP Standards.

The WIDA Proficiency Level Descriptors are organized by Interpretive and Expressive Modes of Communication (Figure 7). They spotlight the multimodal nature of both language development and content area learning (Choi & Yi, 2015; Cope & Kalantzis, 2015). In doing so, they create a natural connection to the principles of Universal Design for Learning, namely multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression (CAST, 2015), extending accessibility principles to all multilingual learners, including those with more intensive learning needs.

When used in coordination with the other WIDA Standards Framework components (Standards Statements, Key Language Uses, Language Expectations), the WIDA Proficiency Level Descriptors can help educators consider two key questions:

- What can multilingual learners do with language in each grade-level cluster?
- How can I support multilingual learners as they interpret or express the language needed for the most prominent Key Language Uses and associated Language Expectations for their respective grade-level cluster?

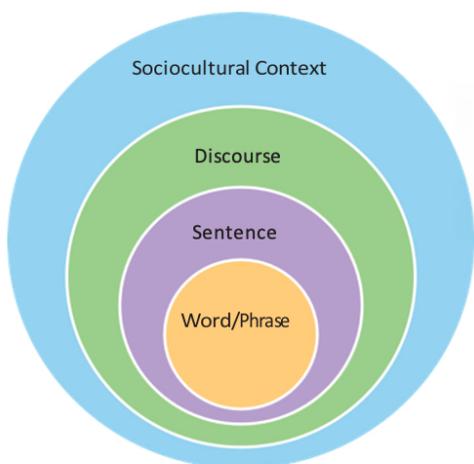


Figure 6: Dimensions of Language within a Sociocultural Context

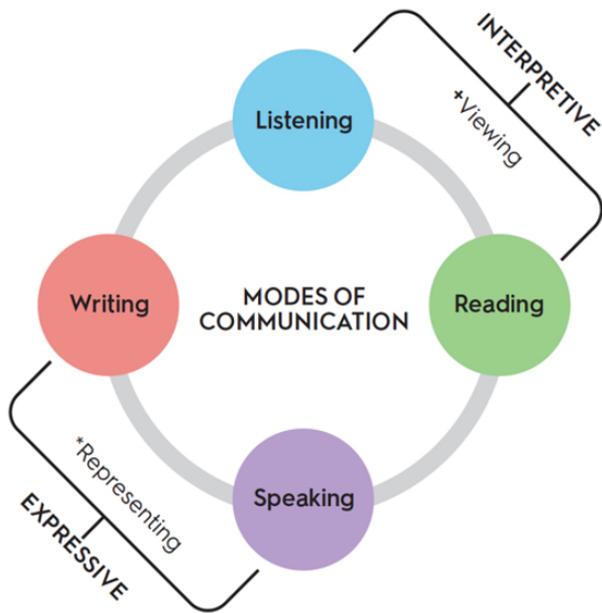


Figure 7: WIDA Modes of Communication

Final Thoughts

As Washington state makes the transition from the ELPA21 ELP Standards to the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, there are new opportunities to ensure access to rigorous instruction for multilingual learners. In addition, WIDA will be updating its Spanish Language Standards in the very near future which can also support these students in dual language programs.

The WIDA ELD Standards Framework positions language as being part of human action, rather than separate from it (van Lier & Walqui, 2012), as a meaning-making resource which students can be empowered to use strategically (Derewianka & Jones, 2016), and as being connected to purpose, with repertoires that expand over time and with experience (Christie & Derewianka, 2012). The WIDA ELD Standards Framework can provide a renewed focus on the purposeful use of language for content area learning to help multilingual learners make meaning in the classroom and beyond.

Figure 8 outlines three steps to use when exploring the WIDA Proficiency Level Descriptors. (See Section 2 and Section 3 and Appendix D of the WIDA ELD Standards Framework document.)

Consider:

1. What do the 5 criteria in the WIDA Proficiency Level Descriptors mean and look like in the classroom? (Discuss this question while looking at student writing samples.)
2. What do the 3 Discourse Dimension criteria (*Organization of Language, Cohesion of Language, and Density of Language*) mean and look like in relation to each Key Language Use (*Narrate, Inform, Explain, Argue*)?
3. What does student performance at each of the six proficiency levels in the WIDA Proficiency Level Descriptors mean and look like in relation to the Language Expectations for that grade-level cluster?

Figure 8: Exploring the WIDA Proficiency Level Descriptors

Suggested Next Steps

Pauline Gibbons' (2016) book, *Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning*, provides a user-friendly introduction to the functional approach to language development. Consider exploring it with your local professional learning community.

	ELPA21 ELP STANDARDS	WIDA ELD STANDARDS FRAMEWORK
ORIENTATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asset-based 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asset-based
ALIGNMENT TO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through the lens of English Language Arts • Focus on ELA-related literacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through the lens of each content area • Focus on disciplinary literacy
STANDARD STATEMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 standards statements • ELA standards used to filter language across all content areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 standards statements • Language for thinking in each content area [Standards 2-5] • Language for social and instructional purposes [Standard 1] – addresses the cultural and linguistic resources multilingual learners bring to interactive situations
FOCUS ON PURPOSE FOR LANGUAGE USE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ELP Standard 7: Adapt language choices to purpose, task, and audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose, task, audience, and situation infused across four Key Language Uses (narrate, inform, explain, argue)
LANGUAGE EXPECTATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 standards statements with summary language functions (similar wording across K-12) • 3 supporting standards statements with focus on language forms • Standards descriptors organized by Communication Mode and six grade-level clusters (K, 1, 2-3, 4-5, 6-8, 9-12) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language functions customized by content area • Organized by Key Language Use, Communication Mode, and six grade-level clusters (K, 1, 2-3, 4-5, 6-8, 9-12)
PROFICIENCY LEVEL DESCRIPTORS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 proficiency levels • Descriptors for discourse, sentence, and word/phrase • Three communication modes (receptive, productive, interactive) • Single K-12 continuum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 proficiency levels • Descriptors for discourse, sentence, and word/phrase with a particular emphasis on the discourse dimension • Two communication modes (interpretive, expressive) • Six grade-level cluster (K, 1, 2-3, 4-5, 6-8, 9-12)

Table 3: High-level comparison

Portions of this article contain excerpts from the WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020 Edition: Kindergarten-Grade 12 (WIDA, 2020), Wisconsin Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, on behalf of WIDA.

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Lynn Shafer Willner, Ph.D., works to improve equity and accessibility for multilingual learners through the design of digital tools, accessibility and accommodations research and guidelines, and standards for multilingual learners. While working at WestEd, she served as Lead Author of the 2014 ELPA21 ELP Standards (CCSSO 2014a; 2014b). Since her arrival at WIDA in mid-2014, Lynn co-authored the WIDA Accessibility and Accommodations Framework and an accompanying supplement used with ACCESS for ELLs. As part of her work on the WIDA ELD Standards Development Team, she created the alignment architecture for the 2020 Edition. You can contact her at [Lynn Willner](mailto:Willner@wisc.edu).

In writing this article, Lynn and Kristin also coordinated with **Margo Gottlieb** and **Fernanda Kray** who synthesized WIDA ELD Standards Development Team discussions and development work to create Section I for the 2020 Edition.

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