

Using Proficiency Level Descriptors to Plan Instruction and Assess Multilingual Learners

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Summary: In this article, we will take a deep dive into how Language Expectations relate to Proficiency Level Descriptors (PLDs), how to use PLDs to examine student work and assess students' language skills, and how to plan instruction and scaffolding to support students at various levels.

Keywords: proficiency level descriptors, instructional planning, formative assessment, scaffolding, WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework

Lowell Elementary's fourth grade team gathered in a classroom after school to plan their upcoming unit. [All names used in this article are pseudonyms.] Students would be learning about the life cycle of salmon and their importance to Northwest Tribal lifeways using the *Since Time Immemorial* curriculum (Washington OSPI & Federally Recognized Tribes in Washington State, 2015). The unit would culminate in students writing and presenting persuasive speeches about how to keep the watershed clean and preserve salmon for the future. The teachers pulled out the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition (WIDA, 2020), to look at the Language Expectations for the Key Language Use of Argue in the Language for Language Arts section and noticed that students would be working on constructing arguments by stating an opinion, supporting it with reasons and information, and connecting it to appropriate evidence, facts, and details.

One teacher told the team, "I need to think about how to support Thao, who just arrived from Vietnam last year, but also push Carlos, who is almost at grade level in his writing." The EL Specialist, who was collaborating with the team, suggested they look at the Grade 4-5 Proficiency Level Descriptors to think about what their multilingual learners can do now and how to scaffold them to the next level as they work towards this performance task at the end of the unit.

As educators in Washington state become more familiar with the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, collaborative planning sessions like this one will allow teachers to use the Proficiency Level Descriptors (PLDs) as a tool to determine each student's strengths and needs and plan appropriate language goals and scaffolds. This process will support English learners in meeting grade-level appropriate content standards and developing their language skills.

The PLDs go beyond merely explaining students' language

domain scores on an assessment. These continua of language development allow educators to better understand students' interpretive and expressive language skills in the moment and formatively across time. In this article, we will take a deeper dive into

- how Language Expectations relate to PLDs,
- how to use PLDs to examine student work and assess students' language skills, and
- how to plan instruction and scaffolding to support students at various levels.

How Do Language Expectations Relate to Proficiency Level Descriptors (PLDs)?

In examining the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, teachers may notice that PLDs are the most specific of the four nested components (shown in Figure 1). The PLDs describe the performance of *individual* multilingual learners at the end of a specific language proficiency level.

Moving upward within the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, the Language Expectations, Key Language Uses, and ELD Standard Statements are

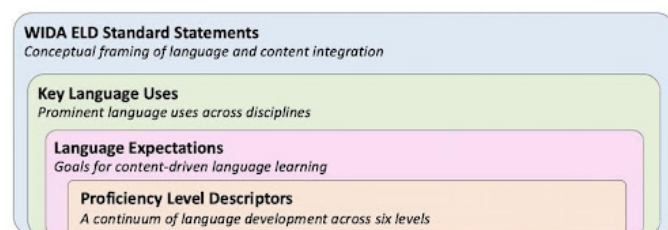


Figure 1: Components of the ELD Standards Framework (see WIDA, 2020, p.23)

increasingly broad in scope and apply to all students. Although the four components of the Standards Framework are interrelated, each has a distinct role in the language development process.

The PLDs should be viewed within the context of the ELD Standard Statement, Key Language Use, and Language Expectation that have been identified as the foci of an instructional task. They describe how an individual student performs that task in relation to the six levels of language proficiency.

When implementing the PLDs (see Figure 2) in classrooms with multilingual learners, there is a lot to think about.

- *Two* modes of communication—interpretive for listening, reading, and viewing and expressive for speaking, writing, and representing—show the natural interaction and interdependence of how we use language purposefully.
- *Six* levels of language proficiency along developmental continua illustrate language growth over time for multilingual learners within each grade-level cluster (K, 1, 2-3, 4-5, 6-8, and 9-12).
- *Three* dimensions of language, from discourse to sentence to word/phrase, illustrate how multilingual learners make sense of language within context. [The importance of building meaning is discussed further in [Putting Discourse First](#) (Lundgren & Shafer Willner, 2021).]

- *Five* criteria illustrate these dimensions: three for discourse (organization, cohesion, and density of language), one for sentences (grammatical complexity of language), and one addressing words/phrases (precision of language).

What are the similarities and differences between the “old” and “new” PLDs in Washington state? For a comparison between the ELPA21 and WIDA PLDs, refer to the Winter 2021 issue of WAESOL Educator: [Transitioning from the ELPA21 English Language Proficiency Standards to the WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework](#) (Shafer Willner, Percy Calaff, Gottlieb, and Kray, 2021)

Although the continua of PLDs appear to be linear, as seen in Figure 2, progressing from level 1 through 6, language growth actually depends on the socio-cultural context, including a multilingual learner’s familiarity with topics, audiences, and situations.

To summarize, educators of multilingual learners should be aware that the PLDs are

- developmentally attuned to each grade-level cluster (K, 1, 2-3, 4-5, 6-8, 9-12),
- illustrative of a set of criteria across three dimensions of language,
- representative of the end of a proficiency level, although movement from level to level indicates a range, and
- cumulative in illustrating language development across six levels of language proficiency.

Grades 4-5 WIDA Proficiency Level Descriptors for the Expressive Communication Mode (Speaking, Writing, and Representing)
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...					
	short sentences linked by topic to convey an emerging sense of purpose (to inform, explain, argue, narrate)	sentences that convey intended purpose with emerging organization (topic sentence, supporting details)	short text that conveys intended purpose using predictable organizational patterns (signaled with some paragraph openers: <i>first, and then, then</i>)	expanding text that conveys intended purpose using generic (not genre-specific) organizational patterns across paragraphs (introduction, body, conclusion) with a variety of paragraph openers	text that conveys intended purpose using genre-specific organizational patterns (statement of position, arguments, call to action)	text that conveys intended purpose using strategic ways of signaling relationships between paragraphs and throughout text (<i>the first reason, the second reason, the evidence is...</i>)
DISCOURSE Cohesion of language	Connect ideas across a whole text through...					
	some frequently used cohesive devices (repetition, demonstratives)	some formulaic cohesive devices (pronoun referencing, etc.)	a growing number of cohesive devices (emerging use of articles to refer to the same word, synonyms, antonyms)	an expanding variety of cohesive devices (given/new, whole/part, class/subclass)	a flexible number of cohesive devices (substitution, ellipsis, given/new)	a wide variety of cohesive devices used in genre- and discipline-specific ways
DISCOURSE Density of language	Elaborate or condense ideas through...					
	a few types of elaboration (adding familiar adjectives to describe nouns: <i>maple syrup</i>)	some types of elaboration (adding newly learned or multiple adjectives to nouns (<i>thick, sweet, sticky maple syrup</i>))	a growing number of types of elaboration (adding articles or demonstratives to nouns: <i>the dark syrup</i>)	a variety of types of elaboration (adding in a variety of adjectives including concrete and abstract nouns: <i>the long, slow process...</i>)	a wide variety of types of elaboration (adding in embedded clauses after the noun: <i>the sap which boiled for six hours...</i>)	flexible range of types of elaboration that includes embedded clauses and condensed noun groups (elaborating: <i>a sweet sap that turned into a delicious syrup after hours of boiling</i> and condensing through nominalization: <i>this tedious process</i>)

Figure 2: Proficiency Level Descriptors—Grades 4-5 Expressive Communication Mode (pp. 137-138)

Criteria	End of Level 1	End of Level 2	End of Level 3	End of Level 4	End of Level 5	Level 6
SENTENCE Grammatical complexity	Extend or enhance meanings through...					
	sentence fragments and emerging use of simple sentences (<i>the blue one, the red one</i>)	simple sentences (<i>The red side pushed away. The blue side stayed.</i>)	sentences with emerging use of clauses (<i>The red side blocked the paperclip. The blue side picked it up. They are opposites.</i>)	simple or compound sentences with familiar ways of combining clauses (with coordinating conjunctions: <i>The red side repelled the paperclip, but also it...</i>)	compound and complex sentences with frequently used ways of combining clauses (with coordinating conjunctions: <i>Neither the red one nor the blue one...</i>)	compound and complex sentences characteristic of the genre and content area, with a variety of ways of combining clauses (with a range of techniques to extend, or shorten sentences: <i>The magnetic force caused the paperclip to lift off the table because the paperclip is metal.</i>)
WORD, PHRASE Precision of language	Create precise meanings through everyday, cross-disciplinary, and technical language with...					
	some frequently used words and phrases with some precision (<i>social studies, government</i>)	a small repertoire of words and phrases with developing precision (<i>branches of government, executive power</i>)	a growing repertoire of words and phrases with growing precision (<i>the founders, "two if by land..."</i>)	an expanding repertoire of words and phrases, including idioms and collocations with expanding precision (<i>the lights are on but nobody's home...</i>)	a flexible repertoire of words and phrases, such as adverbials of time, manner, and place; verb types; and abstract nouns; with consistent precision (<i>as a result of the war, forming a new nation</i>)	a variety of words and phrases, including evaluation, obligation, idioms, and collocations (<i>necessary sacrifices, outdated law, fit for a king</i>)

Figure 2 continued: Proficiency Level Descriptors—Grades 4-5 Expressive Communication Mode (pp. 137-138)

How Do We Use Proficiency Level Descriptors to Assess Students' Language Skills?

Lowell's EL Specialist suggested that the fourth-grade team begin by reading the PLDs for Expressive Language in the grade 4-5 cluster to familiarize themselves with each level. She posed the following questions: *Where are Thao and Carlos performing currently when they use persuasive language orally and in writing? Do you have any oral or written language samples from these students to review as we begin this unit? If not, what activities could we include early in the unit to pre-assess these skills? How could we use the PLDs to plan collaboratively for instruction and assessment for these students?*

One way to begin planning for student learning is to look directly at what students can do by examining student work using

1. Language Expectations to set the goal for what all students are doing with language,
2. PLDs to determine to what extent each student can use language in relation to the Language Expectation, and
3. scaffolding to provide individualized support for each student.

ELD-LA.4-5. Argue.Expressive

Multilingual learners will construct language arts arguments that

- Introduce and develop a topic clearly; state an opinion
- Support opinions with reasons and information
- Use a formal style
- Logically connect opinions to appropriate evidence, facts, and details; offer a concluding statement or section

What are the Language Expectations for All Students?

Lowell's fourth grade team might begin their planning by identifying the goal of the unit as drafting, writing, and delivering a persuasive speech to keep the watershed clean and preserve salmon. Figure 3 illustrates Language Expectations for this unit.

To make clear what they would like to hear and see from students in this task, it is helpful for teachers to actually write an example of how students are expected to express their learning during the speech. When meeting together, teachers can then ask: *What is most critical for conveying the message in this task?*

The Lowell team might determine that certain language functions (e.g., stating an opinion, supporting it with reasons, connecting it to evidence) from the Language Expectations are most critical for the task.

What Can Each Student Currently Do with Language?

The PLDs can be a useful tool for formative classroom assessment. While ACCESS for ELL scores offer a reference point in time, it is by analyzing current samples of student work together that the teachers can best identify next steps in teaching and learning. In that way, they

Figure 3: Expressive Language Expectation for Key Language Use-Argue for Grades 4-5 Language Arts

Support opinions with reasons and information through...

- A variety of clauses (adverbial, embedded) to support opinion and/or claim (quotes, examples, detailed descriptions)
- Expanded noun and verb groups to add detail (*Faizah arrived for her first day of school with a new backpack and light-up shoes.*)
- Connectors to elaborate an idea/interpretation (*so, this means, therefore, a way to think about this*)
- Connectors to link claim/opinion with evidence and reasoning (*because, as a result, when, if, although, but*)
- Modality to express obligation or certainty (*might, could, must, need to, have to*)

Figure 4: Sample Language Features for the Key Language Use-Argue for Grade 4-5 Language Arts

can take Thao and Carlos from their current performance to the next expansion of what they can do with language. They might choose samples from the students' recent work or from a unit's entry task and analyze the samples in relation to the PLDs.

They might decide to focus on the sentence level (Grammatical Complexity), as shown in Figure 2. The team might look closely at how Thao and Carlos use clauses and sentences to "extend or enhance meanings," as the students "support opinions with reasons and information." They look not only at how much language is being used but at how the language is being used.

The teachers notice that by the end of level 3, students can generally use sentences with emerging use of clauses, which is evident in Carlos's writing, but he is not yet combining many clauses, which is typical of level 4. The team might look at the sample language features in Figure 4. To advance language development, one focus of support might be explicitly teaching the use of connectors to combine clauses into compound or complex sentences in a persuasive speech. With this focus, the collaborating teachers can design and refine lesson tasks and scaffolding to support students' simultaneous development of content and language.

An annotated text sample for ELD-LA.4-5.Argue.Expressive is available on pp. 130-131 of the [WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition](#).

What Scaffolding Can I Provide Each Student to Meet the Language Expectation?

According to Gibbons (2015, p.16), "scaffolding is temporary assistance by which a teacher helps a learner know how to do something so that the learner will later be able to complete a similar task alone." While all students are working towards the Language Expectation to support opinions with reasons and information, each student may need specific scaffolding, based on their individual levels on the PLDs. Thao might need a simple sentence frame such as "I think ___ because ___" to connect opinions with reasoning while Carlos, using more advanced language, will be given a graphic organizer to link multiple pieces of evidence with various connectors.

The team might decide to plan instructional activities throughout the unit in which students can practice linking opinions with reasons and evidence. They could monitor students' progress towards the Language Expectations throughout the unit using the PLDs. As teachers continue to use the PLDs in assessing students' expressive language, they might begin to internalize the continua and be able to react in the moment to provide concrete and actionable steps to further students' language growth.

Conclusion

The PLDs are a powerful tool that connects to the other components of the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition. As teachers become more familiar with all the components, they will be able to connect ELD Standard Statements to Key Language Uses and Language Expectations. In addition, teachers can plan use of PLDs along with scaffolding with individual multilingual learners to foster their linguistic access to grade-level content.

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