The Role of English Language Development Standards in Amplifying Language and Literacy

A Practice Brief for the Inclusive Access to a Diploma Initiative

**Authors: Holly Harding and Zach Smith**

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Executive Summary

Multilingual learner (ML) students face the unique challenge of learning English as an additional language while simultaneously learning grade-level English subject content. This challenge becomes even more apparent for ML students with disabilities (also referred to as dually identified students). As a result, teachers face two hurdles to creating instruction for ML students with disabilities. One hurdle is to ensure that all ML students with disabilities have access to inclusive instruction and assessment that meets the unique needs tied to their having a disability and the second is to ensure that these students simultaneously develop the advanced levels of English necessary for success with academic tasks and texts in those content areas. English language development (ELD) instruction is but one necessary component of a comprehensive instructional program for ML students that fulfills this dual responsibility. This dual responsibility is elevated for ML students with disabilities because these students also have individualized education program (IEP)-defined goals, supplementary aides and services, and specially designed instruction (SDI) as a core component of their instructional program.

Regardless of their individual backgrounds and levels of English language proficiency or ability level, ML students at all levels of proficiency can engage in intellectually challenging and content-rich lessons and learning experiences—with appropriate support from teachers and specialists that address both their language and learning needs. Integral to the success of inclusive lessons is the ability for instructors to have clear and rigorous learning objectives while at the same time providing ML students with disabilities with alternative means of expression. Alternative means of expression are the different assessment mediums (for example, tests, performance tasks, hands-on projects, spoken or written responses, and so on) offered to students with disabilities within instruction that give them flexibility in how they showcase their learning while still meeting coursework proficiency requirements—especially those requirements tied to earning a diploma. By offering different ways for ML students with disabilities to show what they know in ways that include ties to their first language, realia, or their resources, educators provide the infrastructure for these students to communicate understanding in preferred and often language-rich ways.

The Role of the California English Language Development Standards

The California ELD Standards are intended to support language development as ML students engage in rigorous academic content. The standards provide a foundation for ML students to gain access to academic subjects, engage with them, and meet the state’s subject matter standards for college and career readiness. Students learn content alongside language and teachers should plan content lessons in a way that includes a careful selection of both sets of standards. The integration of ELD standards, within ELA instruction, therefore, makes language proficiency a critical consideration when selecting alternative means of expression that satisfy ELA/ELD coursework requirements.

The ELD standards should amplify and highlight specific language connections within students’ learning along with the content regardless of the chosen alternative means of expression. Within this model, teachers are also expected to consider the ELD standards as they plan lessons that are linguistically accessible for all students making it impossible for the CA ELD Standards to be used in isolation from the CA CCSS for ELA/Literacy and other content standards during academic content instruction.

To be used appropriately and effectively, standards articulated in both “Part I: Interacting in Meaningful Ways” and “Part II: Learning About How English Works” are designed to be implemented in tandem. Each ELD standard has multiple alignment and connection points to other content standards, and as teachers are planning, it is expected that they notice how the aligned ELD standard helps to amplify the language of the content that is the focus for that lesson and any related alternative means of expression they curate as viable options for ML students to use when showing their understanding.

The Design of the California English Language Development Standards

Part I of the CA ELD Standards sets expectations for ML students, including ways to participate in meaningful, relevant, and intellectually challenging ways across various contexts and disciplines. Part II focuses on the ways ML students develop awareness of language resources available to them, how English is structured and organized, and how meaning is made through language choices. Instruction about English is designed to improve ML students’ ability to comprehend, respond to, and produce academic texts in various content areas (CA ELD Standards 2012, pp. 13–14). Embedded within these structures is the importance of offering ML students, especially those with disabilities, a varied array of alternative means of expression that offer different ways for students to engage with language.

Part III of the CA ELD Standards is presented separately to highlight for teachers the potential need to provide ML students with specialized instruction to support the development of foundational literacy skills. This specialized instruction is designed by adapting, in particular, the Reading Standards in Foundational Literacy Skills (K–5) in the CA CCSS for ELA/Literacy based on the age, cognitive level, and previous literacy or educational experiences of ML students. Because the Reading Standards in Foundational Literacy Skills are intended to guide instruction for students in kindergarten through grade five, these standards need to be adapted—using appropriate instructional strategies and materials—to meet the particular pedagogical and literacy needs of ML students at the secondary level, including the need to teach foundational literacy skills in an accelerated time frame.

Proficiency Level Descriptors

The Proficiency Level Descriptors (PLDs) are designed to help teachers understand the stages of English language development through which ML students are expected to progress and should be incorporated when identifying and assessing a student’s selected alternative means of expression. The PLDs depict the student knowledge, skills, and abilities as a continuum, identifying what MLs know and can do at early stages and upon exit from each of the three proficiency levels (CA ELD Standard 2014):

* Emerging: Students at this level typically progress very quickly, learning to use English for immediate needs as well as beginning to understand and use academic vocabulary and other features of academic language.
* Expanding: Students at this level are challenged to increase their English skills in more contexts and learn a greater variety of vocabulary and linguistic structures, applying their growing language skills in more sophisticated ways that are appropriate to their age and grade level.
* Bridging: Students at this level continue to learn and apply a range of high-level English language skills in a wide variety of contexts, including comprehension and production of highly technical texts.

Alignment of Proficiency Level Descriptors to the Inclusive Access to a Diploma Initiative

For the Inclusive Access to a Diploma initiative, the big ideas, unpacked standards, and sample alternative means of expression have all been aligned to the “Bridging” level of language proficiency. The “bridge” alludes to the transition of full engagement in grade-level academic tasks and activities in a variety of content areas without the need for specialized ELD instruction. However, ML students at all levels of English language proficiency should fully participate in grade-level tasks in all content areas, therefore, alternative means of expression can be offered to ML students at the Expanding and Emerging levels of language proficiency with proper scaffolding. When assessing English language development progress using alternative means of expression, educators should set the language expectations within students’ responses based on their individual levels of English language proficiency.

California ELD Standards and Collaborative Structures

The CA ELD Standards guide teachers in supporting their ML students at different English language proficiency levels to participate in collaborative discussions about this rich content. For example, teaching frequently used phrases (for example, “Can you say more? Can you explain that again? Yes, I agree with you.”) and sentence stems (ׅ“Why do you think \_\_? What is your idea about \_\_? How do you \_\_?”) to ML students supports active participation in conversations and language development. Posting these phrases and sentence stems, along with domain-specific vocabulary (with a picture or drawing when needed), promotes their frequent use during conversations about content (CA ELA/ELD Framework 2015). Collaborative structures, such as think-pair-share, structured group work, and reciprocal teaching—in which students use the new language purposefully are essential for ensuring that all ML students, especially those with disabilities—have opportunities to actively contribute to conversations and not just listen passively. Additionally, these structures allow students to practice the language requirements prior to being formally assessed via an alternative means of expression.

How Teachers Can Support Language Learning

As ML students progress along the ELD continuum, teachers need to adjust the level of support they provide to meet their students’ language learning needs and promote the use of academic English required for specific topics. For example, specifically, within the big idea of Collaborative Discourse, teachers would need to review with students carefully chosen academic content words and phrases they know students need to include in their discourse. To promote the use of general academic or domain-specific vocabulary to prepare students to use alternative means of expression to show understanding, teachers can

* briefly preview some of the words that are critical for content understanding before students read (for example, *determination, mitosis, meiosis*);
* explain some of the words while students read;
* explicitly teach a select group of high-leverage general academic words *after* students have encountered them in the text;
* post the words so students can refer to them; and
* encourage students to use the words during conversations or in writing, using a sentence frame when needed (for example, *Rosa Parks showed determination when she* \_\_\_.).

For more information on Designated Supports and Accommodations, please consult the California Practitioners’ Guide to Educating English Learners with Disabilities.

To promote the use of increasingly more complex grammatical structures (for example, complex sentences that incorporate particular subordinate conjunctions, such as *although* or *despite*), teachers provide open sentence frames containing the target academic language (for example, *Although both characters change throughout the story, one character \_\_.*). In contrast, closed sentence frames (for example, *All objects are made up of tiny particles called* \_\_\_.) limit student language production and are used sparingly for very specific purposes (for example, to provide a substantial level of support for an ML student at the early “Emerging” level). These types of linguistic resources support oral language development and collaboration and also serve as a bridge to writing (CA ELA/ELD Framework 2015).

The design of the ELD standards empowers teachers to know how to provide opportunities for students to practice specific academic language through extended discourse on a particular topic. Language is a complex and social meaning-making resource to be fostered via intellectually challenging, interactive, and dialogue-rich contexts focused on content knowledge and linguistic development. Students use their knowledge of the English language in the context of intellectually engaging instruction in which the primary focus is on comprehending and making meaning. When designing and implementing instruction for English learners, teachers should consider the following variables (CA ELD Standards 2014):

* Purposes for Using Language: The purposes for using language are featured prominently in the CA CCSS for ELA/Literacy and, correspondingly, in the CA ELD Standards. Teachers support ML students to develop an awareness of these purposes as students progress in language proficiency and through grades.
* Text Types: Provided in the CA CCSS for ELA/Literacy, each text type has particular language features based on the discipline, content, purpose, and audience. Teachers help ML students develop an awareness of text types and language features as ML students progress through the grades. Informational text types are presented first to emphasize their importance in college and career readiness, as well as in developing content knowledge.
* Audiences: As they use language, ML students need to consider the audience, which might be a peer in a one-to-one conversation about a social topic; a group of peers engaged in an academic conversation (one peer talking while in a group); an entire class, such as when a student makes an academic oral presentation or completes a written task (one student talking to many); and other types of audiences. Teachers help ML students develop an awareness of the audience as ML students progress through the grades.

All teachers need to understand the linguistic needs of their students and know how their use of the ELD standards provides additional support to ML students with disabilities to access content and communicate understanding through alternative means of expression. At the high school level, ELD depends on a carefully crafted comprehensive program that ensures ML students, including those with disabilities, have full access to intellectually rich curricula and their accelerated development of English. All teachers should attend to the language learning needs of all ML students in strategic ways that promote the simultaneous development of content knowledge and advanced levels of English. By providing alternative means of expression within learning environments, teachers provide a rich array of ways for students to use language to express their knowledge.

For further learning, one document that might be of interest to teachers as they are using ELD standards to plan and prepare lessons is the *Alternate English Language Proficiency Assessments for California Test Blueprint*. This document provides ELD Connectors which reduces the depth, breadth, and complexity of the standards as appropriate for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. As teachers read through the ELD connectors for their grade span, they should notice how the language of the standards has been modified to be more inclusive of students with a range of communication preferences.

Conclusion

Language awareness (the conscious knowledge about language and how it works to make meaning) is prominently featured in the CA ELD Standards intending to make language learning concrete for students. When teachers draw attention to the nuances of language and how it works, ML students, including those with disabilities, become increasingly aware and knowledgeable of how particular language choices affect meanings. Examples include learning how the word “reluctant” to describe a person produces a different effect than the word “sad;” how an argument is organized differently than a narrative because its purpose is to persuade rather than to entertain; and why the language used with friends during lunch is different from the language expected to be used in academic or work settings. When teachers plan instruction that includes content standards and aligns with ELD standards tied to language acquisition and development across a wide array of alternative means of expression, ML learners—especially those with disabilities—have the opportunity to thrive.

References

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