

The WIDA Standards Framework and its Theoretical Foundations



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The WIDA Consortium draws on multiple theories and approaches in an effort to describe language use in academic contexts; this is the language that language learners must acquire and negotiate to participate successfully in school. These multiple theories and approaches form a theoretical foundation that supports the WIDA standards framework. This document articulates that theoretical foundation.

Since 2003, WIDA has been designing language development standards with the assistance of local and national experts to ensure consistency with linguistic and educational theory, compliance with federal legislation, and to provide support for students and teachers. Today the Consortium has a suite of language development standards, including those for English language development, Spanish language development, early English language development, early Spanish language development, alternate English language development with accommodations, and English language development in international settings.

Rapid expansion of the Consortium's activities across a growing number of member states and entities, accompanied by an increase in the diversity of stakeholders and academic contexts, has provided the motivation to communicate the theoretical underpinnings of the WIDA standards framework.

The Standards Framework

The standards framework consists of five components. Some of these components are expressions of a particular philosophy, while others are explicit representations of knowledge. The five components are:

- Can Do Philosophy
- Guiding Principles of Language Development
- Age-appropriate Academic Language in Sociocultural Contexts
- Performance Definitions
- Strands of Model Performance Indicators.

The Can Do Philosophy and the Guiding Principles of Language Development can be found on the WIDA website (www.wida.us). The other three components are set out in the *2012 Amplification of the English Language Development Standards, Kindergarten-Grade 12*, which is also available on the WIDA website.

These components of the framework represent WIDA's view of the development of language use in academic contexts as operationalized in the language standards¹. The language development standards are both situated within and provide the organizational frame for the standards matrices that are implemented through instruction and assessment.

¹ WIDA English Language Development (ELD) Standards, for example, represent the social, institutional, and academic language that students need to engage with peers, educators, and the curriculum in primary and secondary schools. The ELD standards include Standard 1: Social and Instructional language, Standard 2: The language of Language Arts, Standard 3: The language of Mathematics, Standard 4: The language of Science, Standard 5: The language of Social Studies.

The standards framework codifies WIDA's stated approach to language development. However, it is important to understand the overarching philosophies and foundational principles that support the framework; those principles and philosophies are discussed in this paper.

Theoretical Foundations that Support the Standards Framework

A functional view of language primarily informs the WIDA standards framework. According to Halliday and Hasan (1985), language is one of many systems of meaning-making used in everyday life. Language is not learned absent of context. Rather, individuals learn the kinds of language needed for participation in the situations encountered. A functional approach to language, with its emphasis on communicative purpose, focuses attention on the language features relevant to a particular instructional activity. In a broad sense, WIDA's interest is in understanding language use in school and the expansion of ELL students' skills in making meaning from that language.

In addition to a meaning-based, functional perspective, foundational theories of second language acquisition and sociocultural theory have contributed to WIDA's view of language development. Within a learner's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), language is acquired and mediated in interaction with opportunities for meaningful practice, e.g. comprehensible input and output (Long, 1996; Mackey, 1999). Learners' evolving language proficiency is captured by the notion of interlanguage; as learners build on prior knowledge (schema) they acquire more complex features of language which they refine over time (Smith & Kellerman, 1989; Huebner, 1983).

A synthesis of research in language development, content learning, and sociocultural theory is implicit in the WIDA standards framework and is made explicit in the principles of language development that guide WIDA's work. This theory is described in the Guiding Principles of Language Development, a key WIDA document that is part of the standards framework. In the Guiding Principles, WIDA acknowledges the diverse linguistic resources that students draw from, and the unique pathways they follow throughout the process of language learning. Here, three broad statements, which encompass the 10 Guiding Principles of Language Development, further highlight the theoretical assumptions behind the Standards Framework. Appendix A provides more detail about these theoretical underpinnings, including the references and sources from which they were derived.

Language is organized around its communicative purpose. Language analyzed by a functional model serves as a vehicle to enable us to accomplish what we need to do with language to make sense of the world. Students use language in functional and communicative ways that vary according to context (Schleppegrell, 2004; Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983; Halliday & Hasan, 1976). The advantage of a functional approach is that language is not taught for its own sake; rather, it demonstrates how language operates in all areas of the curriculum (Derewianka, 1990).

Within the context of schooling, a focus on function can help negotiate the shift between language for everyday purposes and the language needed to be precise about conceptual knowledge (Moschkovich, 2002). Each content area has unique language or communicative functions (Schleppegrell, 2004), and each of these functions is related to grammatical and communicative rules and organizational patterns to accomplish content and specific purposes. When teachers make language functions explicit, they define

more fully the tasks that students must be able to perform in the content areas (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994) and can help to focus students and teachers on meaning-making (Gee, 2008; Moschkovich, 2002).

Language is used within a communicative context. It is well established that students learn language through meaningful use and interaction in contexts which are both socially and culturally contingent (Brown, 2007; Damen, 1987; Díaz-Rico & Weed, 1995; García & Hamayan, 2006; García, 2005; Kramersch, 1998; Halliday & Hasan, 1985).

In school, direct and frequent opportunities to interact in English are needed for language development (Wong Fillmore, & Snow, 2002), and it is through negotiation of meaning that English language learners extend their productive capabilities (Ellis, 1985; Swain, 1995). A language-rich environment that surrounds students with oral and written text provides opportunities for ongoing interaction and engagement in academic conversations (Frey, Fisher, & Rothenberg, 2008; Zwiers, 2008) and writing for a variety of purposes.

Language development occurs over time and depends on many factors. Second language and literacy skills develop interdependently but at different rates and in different sequences (Araujo, 2002; Fitzgerald & Noble, 2000; Pérez, 1994). A variety of individual and environmental factors impact second language acquisition, including age, time in the country, and educational background (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, Spolsky, 1989; Collier, 1987). Children's varied experiences and backgrounds in addition to program type, curriculum, and the number and quality of opportunities for learning in and out of school, shape their entry points into language development. Recent research shows that language growth occurs more slowly at intermediate levels of proficiency than at beginning levels of proficiency (Cook, Boals, & Lundberg, 2011). All of these factors result in a wide range of language proficiencies and a number of paths toward progress among language learners.

At school, teachers must take into account each student's stage of language development so as to provide relevant instructional practices (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan 2009). Since language development is a complex long-term process, students should have access to authentic curriculum concurrent with language instruction. Empirical research indicates that with access to grade-level content, students' academic literacy development and performance improves on standardized assessments (Short, Echevarría, & Richards-Tutor, 2011).

The WIDA English Language Development Standards

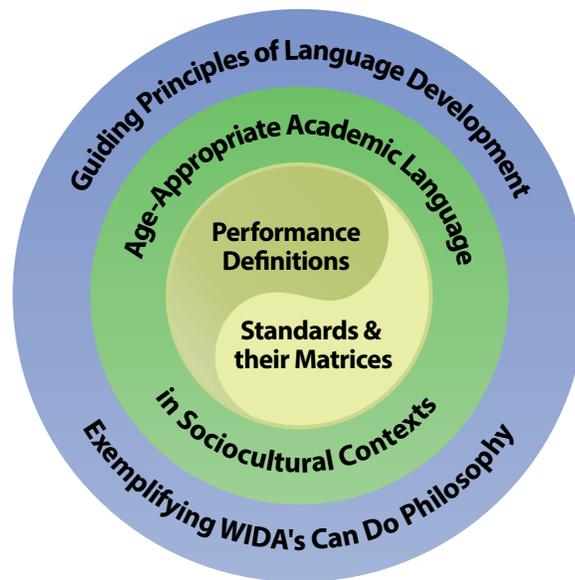
The 2012 Amplification of the English Language Development (ELD) Standards reflects WIDA's most current thinking on the language of school and how to promote language learning in ways that are helpful to teachers and students. The ELD Standards continue to be represented in a series of scaffolded steps within a linguistic progression across five levels of language proficiency (these steps are known as the standards matrices). The model performance indicators (MPIs) provide exemplars of language processing and use as students gain proficiency and can be readily utilized and adapted by educators to support instruction and curriculum development.

Newly added components to the WIDA ELD standards matrices include: (a) a connection between the example topic and state content standards, including the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

and Next Generation Science Standards which more explicitly situate the language features within disciplinary bodies of knowledge; (b) an example context for language use, which by identifying possible tasks, roles and audiences, emphasizes the importance of teaching language in meaningful sociocultural contexts; and (c) a common cognitive function across levels of language development which encourages teachers to create tasks that involve complex thinking for all language learners. The rationale of these components and the design of the ELD Standards, along with the other language development standards, reflect various theories and approaches that are described here.

A Graphical Representation of the WIDA Standards Framework

The figure below is a visual representation of the WIDA standards framework.



The conceptualization of language use in academic contexts and language development has been, and continues to be, shaped by WIDA's Can Do Philosophy and the Guiding Principles of Language Development. WIDA's Can Do Philosophy is based on the belief that all students bring established knowledge, skills and ways of seeing and understanding the world from their homes and their communities. WIDA believes that as educators, our role is to craft instruction that capitalizes on and builds upon those funds of knowledge. The Guiding Principles of Language Development outline the underlying theory that frames WIDA's core beliefs about language development.

Using the Can Do Philosophy and Guiding Principles of Language Development as a foundation, WIDA identified prominent features of academic language. Academic language—that is, language use in academic contexts in this framework—is viewed as a vehicle for communicating and learning within sociocultural contexts; the interaction between different situations and people in the learning environment.

At the core of the WIDA standards framework are the Performance Definitions along with the language development standards and their representative matrices. The Performance Definitions delineate what

the various levels of language proficiency look like, informed by the features of academic language. The standards matrices help educators envision what language development might look like in K–12 classrooms, with linguistic scaffolds across the five standards. These matrices are used in conjunction with the Performance Definitions to fully describe possible student trajectories for academic language development.

The components of the WIDA standards framework interact and influence each other in the design of curriculum, language instruction, and assessment of language learners. Teachers and school leaders are encouraged to mold the framework to fit the specific needs of individual students and in doing so, enable all stakeholders to participate in shaping the education of our increasingly diverse population.

Conclusion

The WIDA standards framework reflects evolving theoretical insights and a principled approach to language teaching and learning. The focus of this work has been on describing meaning-making during the process of language development required for students to engage in language use in academic contexts. With major theories of language and language development as a point of departure, the standards framework elaborates the relationships between language and student interaction that lead to success in academic tasks. As with all of WIDA's initiatives, students and teachers are at the center of this endeavor.

Appendix A: Theoretical Basis of WIDA Standards Framework

The selection of theories that sit behind the WIDA standards framework is purposefully eclectic. Given the diversity of students and teachers, no isolated theory or approach is adequate to guide the learning and teaching of all language learners. The following table outlines selected theories of language and language development² and their connection to the standards framework.³ While some theories overlap and many build on each other, the descriptions are illustrative and clarify their relation to the standards.

View of Language
Communicative Competencies
<p>Tenets:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicative competence is a learner’s ability to use language to communicate appropriately in different situations (Hymes, 1966). • Verbal and non verbal strategies are used strategically to mend breakdowns in communication (Canale and Swain, 1980). • Certain knowledge and competences are necessary to participate in, learn from, and acquire language in classrooms (Johnson, 1995). • Through the influence of communicative language teaching, it is widely accepted that the goal of language education is communicative competence, and not grammatical competence alone (Bachman, 1990; Savignon, 1997).
<p>Connections to WIDA standards framework:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standard 1 recognizes the importance of the interaction of social and instructional language with peers and teachers in school and the language students encounter across instructional settings (2012 Guide, p. 3). • Model performance indicators (MPIs) are functionally driven and topically-oriented, Instructional supports are encouraged and allow for increased interaction and engagement of students (2012 Guide, p. 11).
Integration of Content and Language
<p>Tenets:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicative purposes in academia are emphasized (Mohan, 1986). • Within academic disciplines there are distinct patterns of oral and written language (Bailey, Butler, Stevens, & Lord, 2007). • Language demands can be organized at three levels: word, sentence, and discourse (Gottlieb, Katz, & Ernst-Slavit, 2009; Bailey & Huang, 2011) • Lexicon in academic settings consists of general, technical and academic words (Scarcella, 2003). • Making explicit the forms and conventions associated with academic registers contributes to students’ language proficiency (Echevarría, Short, & Powers, 2006; Vaughn-Shavuo, 1990) and content area performance (Charmot, & O’Malley, 1994). • Attention to function facilitates more precise use of language and contributes to conceptual understanding (Moschkovich, 2002). • A tenet of “sheltered” instruction is the focus on higher-order thinking at all levels of language proficiency (Goldenberg & Coleman, 2010).

² Theories and approaches are listed in alphabetical order.

³ References to “2012 Guide” in the chart refer to the “The 2012 Amplification of ELD Standards.”

Connections to WIDA standards framework:

- Separate standards (Standards 2-5) specify the language of the content areas (2012 Guide, p. 3).
- Social, instructional and academic language is organized into three levels: discourse level, sentence, level and word/phrase level, and correspond to performance criteria (2012 Guide, p. 6-7).
- Linguistic Functions describe how ELLs process or produce language at different levels of language proficiency (2012 Guide, p. 10).
- The Topic-related Language section of the 2012 Guide contains example content-related words and expressions to which all students of that grade level should be exposed and are included with each strand of MPIs (2012 Guide, p. 12).
- A consistent Cognitive Function based on Bloom's revised taxonomy unites the different levels of language proficiency within a strand to emphasize that educators need to maintain the cognitive demands of a task as they differentiate language instruction and assessment (2012 Guide, p. 6).

New Literacy Studies**Tenets:**

- Reading and writing are not neutral activities but are embedded in ideology (Street, 1984).
- Language-in-use (little "d" discourse) gives way to socioculturally distinctive ways of thinking, acting, interacting, talking, and valuing (big "D" discourse) (Gee, 1990).
- Meaning-making and language production involves multiple modes (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000).

Connections to WIDA standards framework:

- Academic English can be considered a form of "cultural capital" and therefore a gateway to college/career readiness.
- Sociocultural contexts for language use involve the interaction between the student and the language environment which encompasses the register, genre/text type, topic, task/situation, and participants' identities and social roles (2012 Guide, p. 7).
- Language supports are sensory, graphic, and interactive (2012 Guide, p. 11).

Systemic Functional Linguistics**Tenets:**

- Language is a social semiotic system, constructing and deriving meaning in context (Halliday & Hasan, 1985).
- Every speech act or text simultaneously creates 3 types of meaning: ideational (representing experience), interpersonal (enacting relationship), and textual (organizing experience). (Halliday & Hasan, 1985).
- Context shapes the language choices by which meaning is constructed, through three dimensions of register: field (content), tenor (nature of relationship), and mode (whether language is ancillary to or constitutive of the experiential meaning) (Halliday & Hasan, 1985).
- Academic content areas tend toward some specific patterns of language use, linked to the deep purpose and values of the discipline (Schleppegrell, 2004).
- The capacity for increased linguistic abstraction (nominalization; grammatical metaphor) is linked to age and cognitive development (Christie, 2012).

Connections to WIDA standards framework:

- Features of Academic Language operate within sociocultural contexts for language use (2012 Guide, p. 7).
- Topic-related Language includes words, phrases and grammar that are situated within a learning experience (2012 Guide, p. 12).
- References to register, genre, and text types are referenced in the Example Topics and Example Context for Language Use (2012 Guide, p. 5).
- An explicit connection to the state content standard or CCSS is referenced in the example topic of each strand of MPIs (2012 Guide, p. 4).
- For each level of discourse the features of academic language included in the performance criteria are specified: quantity and variety of oral and written text; types, array, and use of language structures; and specificity of word or phrase choice (2012 Guide, p. 7).
- Performance criteria become more complex across levels of language proficiency (2012 Guide, p. 6).

View of Language Development

Bilingualism/Biliteracy

Tenets:

- Spanish language in schools, like English, is a semiotic meaning-making resource that is socially contingent (Colombi, 2006; 2009).
- Translanguaging is the process of going back and forth from one language to another to communicate with different people for different purposes (García, 2009).
- Languages are hybrid in nature, grammars are emergent and communication is fluid (Canagarajah, 2006).
- Common underlying proficiency is an interdependence of concepts, skills, and linguistic knowledge that makes transfer from an emergent bilinguals' languages possible (Cummins, 1981).
- Learning trajectories toward bilingualism involve two-way exchange between languages and are not treated as individual language proficiencies (Escamilla & Hopewell, 2010).

Connections to WIDA standards framework:

- Home language use is a type of instructional support (2012 Guide, p. 11).
- Spanish language development standards.

Second Language Acquisition

Tenets:

- Interlanguage is the language learners produce as they gain proficiency (Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972)
- Language learners process and acquire more complex language in stages (Pienemann, 1998, 2005).
- For learning to occur, language must be comprehensible and just beyond the current ability level (i+1) (Krashen, 1982).
- Opportunities for practice (output and interaction) are necessary to get feedback and automatize language (Swain, 1985; Long, 1996; Gass, 1997).
- Students develop language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing interdependently, but at different rates and in different ways (Spolsky, 1989).
- For ELLs especially, oral language is foundational to literacy development (August & Shanahan, 2006).

Connections to WIDA standards framework:

- For language proficiency levels 1-5 the arrangement of MPIs help students and teachers envision how language may progress from one level of language proficiency to the next (2012 Guide, p. 4).
- The standards framework addresses the four language domains: listening, speaking, reading and writing which help educators plan balanced opportunities for language learning and take advantage of the stronger English language skills in one domain to support development in the other domains (2012 Guide, p. 6).
- Language supports are listed at the end of each the MPI and illustrate the importance of scaffolding language development (2012 Guide, p. 11).
- English language development occurs over multiple years, is variable and depends on many factors including age, maturation, classroom experiences, programming, motivation and attitude, making it difficult to establish fixed language expectations for any grade level or age (2012 Guide, p. 4).
- ELD standards are organized around grade-level clusters (see 2007 edition) and examples are provided for individual grade levels (K-8) in the 2012 amplification for illustrative purposes.

Sociocultural Theory

Tenets:

- Knowledge is co-constructed and mediated (Vygotsky, 1978; Banks, 1993).
- Learning occurs within a zone of proximal development with scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978).
- There is a concern for collective vs. strictly individualistic learning (Engeström et al., 1999).
- There is a call to value and build upon funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992).
- The social context of learning contemplates students' lives in and out of school (Valdés, 1996; González, 2001).
- Students acquire multiple repertoires of languages and literacies in a variety of contexts (Gutiérrez et al., 2003).

Connections to WIDA standards framework:

- Strands of MPIs reflect a “zone” of learning possibilities and scaffold language learning (p. 2012 Guide, p. 10).
- An Example Context for Language Use is included with each strand of MPIs and addresses a possible task or situation in which communication occurs, as well as the intended audience and types of roles different participants enact (2012 Guide, p. 5).
- Language supports function as a form of scaffolding (2012 Guide, p. 11)

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