

A Lesson in Taking

Teachers can help their English language learners develop proficiency in academic language by engaging in formative language assessment and giving targeted feedback.



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In my 25 years of experience working with both English language learners (ELLs) and their teachers, I've often heard teachers discuss their ELLs in terms of "level." But if I were to say to a teacher, "You have four Level 2s in your class," how does that help us have a common understanding of the students' needs?

One approach has great potential to increase students' language growth: focusing formative assessment on the specific needs of ELLs (Alvarez, Ananda, Walqui, Sato, & Rabinowitz, 2014). This requires analyzing students' linguistic level and providing specific feedback.

Feedback is an essential component of the formative assessment process, as noted by both John Hattie (see Mediamerge, 2011, for a discussion of Hattie's effect sizes) and Grant Wiggins (2012). However, it's rarely well implemented when it comes to language learning. Most educators haven't been trained to analyze and provide specific language feedback. Most feedback (corrected papers, comments, teachable moments, and so on) addresses content, not language.

WIDA to the Rescue

What might it look like to analyze the language level of English language learners and give targeted feedback? I've used the WIDA Performance Definitions tool

(www.wida.us/get.aspx?id=5) as a rubric for this work.

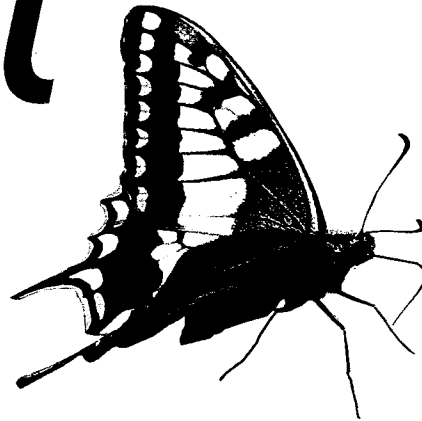
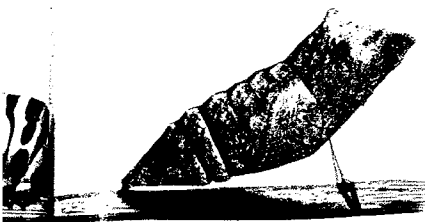
The tool signals six levels of linguistic development: *entering*, *beginning*, *developing*, *expanding*, *bridging*, and *reaching*. For example, at the *entering* level, a student would rely on pictorial or graphic representation of the language of the content areas; at the *developing* level, the student would be using general and some specific vocabulary related to those areas; at the *bridging* level, he or she would have advanced to using specialized or technical language.

The Performance Definitions rubric aligns with the ACCESS language proficiency assessment used in 36 U.S. states. Designed by WIDA at the Wisconsin Center of Educational Research, ACCESS is administered annually to ELLs to meet federal language assessment requirements.

ACCESS test items are evaluated on three dimensions: discourse (linguistic complexity); sentence (language forms and conventions); and word/phrase (vocabulary usage). If teachers understand these dimensions and use them to give students feedback to improve their language skills throughout the year, the students are likely to show growth on the annual ACCESS language proficiency assessment.

The Performance Definitions tool contains two rubrics—one for receptive language (listening and reading) and one for productive language (speaking and writing); and it outlines the three language dimensions by proficiency level. By using the WIDA

Flight



Performance Definitions tool for productive language, a teacher could analyze the academic language skills of an English language learner and be prepared to provide specific feedback according to each of the three language dimensions.

Look at WIDA's Performance Definitions for Speaking and Writing chart, shown in Figure 1 on page 58, and examine each column. How do the expectations for language change according to proficiency level? How would you describe the difference between Level 1 and Level 4 proficiency in the sentence dimension? How might the expectation of a "variety of grammatical structures" change according to grade level? These are excellent questions for a professional learning community to explore as educators look at student work.

Step by Step

You can start with formative language assessment by taking the following steps (see Alvarez et al., 2014; Heritage & Stigler, 2010; and WIDA Consortium, 2009):

1. *Establish a language learning goal.* What kind of language skills do students need to be successful on the assignment? Do they need to justify an idea? To

compare two items? What are the language features?

2. *Determine success criteria.* What does using the language as expected look like and sound like?

3. *Elicit language samples from the assignment.* Work with both written and oral samples. To collect student

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oral samples, use applications such as flipgrid.com; YouTube's webcam capture feature (www.youtube.com/my_webcam); or smartphone voice recorders.

4. *Evaluate the language using the Performance Definitions speaking and writing rubric.* Students may demonstrate different ability levels according to the three academic language dimensions of discourse, sentence/phrase, and vocabulary.

5. *Determine areas for growth, and give feedback to students.* For example, if a student uses repetitive grammatical structures, the teacher could identify ways to combine the sentences and then discuss this move with the student.

FIGURE 1. WIDA Performance Definitions: Speaking and Writing Grades K-12

Within sociocultural contexts for language use . . .

	Linguistic Complexity	Sentence Dimension	Word/Phrase Dimension
	Linguistic Complexity	Language Forms and Conventions	Vocabulary Usage
At each grade, toward the end of a given level of English language proficiency, and with instructional support, English language learners will produce . . .			
Level 6: REACHING	Language that meets all criteria through Level 5		
Level 5: BRIDGING	Multiple, complex sentences Organized, cohesive, and coherent expression of ideas	A variety of grammatical structures matched to purpose A broad range of sentence patterns characteristic of particular content areas	Technical and abstract content-area language, including content-specific collocations Words and expressions with precise meaning across content areas
Level 4: EXPANDING	Short, expanded, and some complex sentences Organized expression of ideas with emerging cohesion	A variety of grammatical structures Sentence patterns characteristic of particular content areas	Specific and some technical content-area language Words and expressions with expressive meaning through use of collocations and idioms across content areas
Level 3: DEVELOPING	Short and some expanded sentences with emerging complexity Expanded expression of one idea or emerging expression of multiple related ideas	Repetitive grammatical structures with occasional variation Sentence patterns across content areas	Specific content language, including cognates and expressions Words or expressions with multiple meanings used across content areas
Level 2: EMERGING	Phrases or short sentences Emerging expression of ideas	Formulaic grammatical structures Repetitive phrasal and sentence patterns across content areas	General content words and expressions Social and instructional words and expressions across content areas
Level 1: ENTERING	Words, phrases, or chunks of language Single words used to represent ideas	Phrase-level grammatical structures Phrasal patterns associated with common social instructional situations	General content-related words Everyday social, instructional, and some content-related words

Source: 2012 Amplification of the English Language Development Standards, Kindergarten–Grade 12, WIDA, Wisconsin Center for Education Research, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Copyright © 2012 Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, on behalf of the WIDA Consortium. Used with permission.

6. Allow students more opportunities to practice and apply the feedback. Students will need another task that requires similar language production so they can apply the feedback.

What It Looks Like in the Classroom

Let's see how these steps play out in a hypothetical example. Ms. Shostad, a 2nd grade teacher, and Ms. Hunt, an English as a second language (ESL) teacher, co-teach for two hours each day. They have 12 ELLs in their classroom. They're hoping that by working together to share content and language expertise, they will further develop their ELLs' academic language skills through content instruction.

They're preparing for their unit on the life cycle of the butterfly, which Ms. Shostad has taught in previous years. She's well versed in the content and asks Ms. Hunt for advice on any language areas she should be aware of. They focus their discussion on the following question: What will it sound like if students are successful in describing the life cycle of the butterfly? They look through the readings to determine the vocabulary, sentence structures, and discourse dimensions needed to be successful. Together they identify the language elements they will model and expect students to produce throughout the unit.

They begin by setting their language expectation for students—the language learning goal: Students will be able to explain the life cycle of the butterfly using language such as *larva* and *pupa*. The language elements they include are

- **Vocabulary:** *metamorphosis, larva, pupa, egg, caterpillar, chrysalis, and butterfly.*

- **Sentence structures:** *first, next, then,*

finally, and compound sentences (such as, "First the egg is on the leaf, and then it hatches.")

- **Discourse:** expression of sequential progression from caterpillar to butterfly.

Over the course of the unit, the teachers will introduce and reinforce these language goals.

Ms. Shostad introduces the new vocabulary and concepts and asks the students to write an explanation of the butterfly life cycle in their own words. This will serve as a baseline indicator of the students' content and language needs in the unit.

Giving feedback in context and in a caring way—and keeping it focused—won't be perceived as hurtful.

Muna, an English language learner from Somalia, has been in the United States since kindergarten. Although she has high verbal skills and is able to engage in discussions in the classroom and answer short questions about the life cycle of the butterfly, writing is a challenge for her. This might be Muna's written explanation of the process:

The egg on the leaf den larva an eat a lot leaf. catapila grow big and eat more leaf. The catapila go in the leaf in a bag an slep long time. finally catapila wake up and a buterfly. It ken fly away.

Translation: The egg is on the leaf. Then it's a larva and eats a lot of leaves. The caterpillar grows big and eats more leaves. The caterpillar goes on the leaf in a bag [chrysalis] and sleeps a long time. Finally, the caterpillar wakes up and is a butterfly. It can fly away.

Ms. Shostad and Ms. Hunt review Muna's writing according to the WIDA Performance Definitions tool. They ignore spelling and punctuation errors for the time being and agree on the following language analysis:

- **Vocabulary:** Level 3 (developing). Uses general and some specific words, such as *egg, caterpillar, larva.*

- **Sentence/phrase:** Level 3 (developing). Uses repetitive grammatical structure with some variation. Uses simple present tense ("it is . . . it eats . . . it can . . ."). Also uses *then* and *finally*.

- **Discourse:** Level 2 (emerging).

Uses phrases/short sentences and emerging expression of ideas. Describes the life cycle accurately from beginning to end. Sentences connect one idea to the next, although transition words are missing.

Next they discuss how to give Muna feedback that's positive, clear, and not too overwhelming. Both Ms. Shostad and Ms. Hunt will give her language feedback. Ms. Shostad has individual check-ins with students each Monday, so she decides to share her feedback then. Ms. Hunt advises her colleague to focus on one or two things that are most important to increasing the clarity of Muna's message, and they draft the following feedback script:

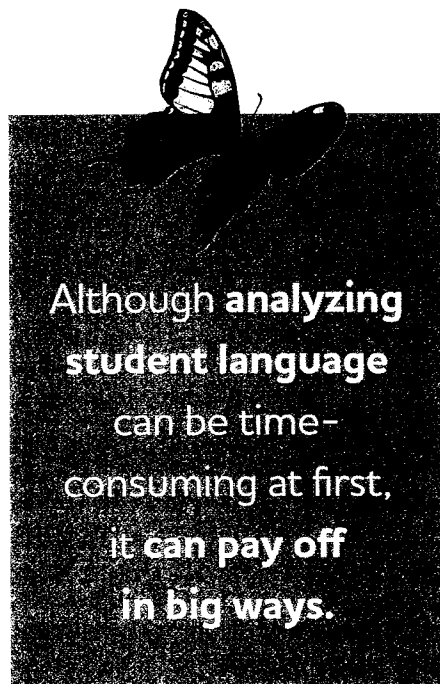
Muna, I can see that you understand how an egg turns into a butterfly. You wrote about all the stages in the life

cycle—egg, larva, caterpillar, chrysalis, and butterfly. Nice work! I want to tell you a couple things that will help me understand your writing better and make you sound more like a scientist when you write.

I want you to use the specific vocabulary that we used in class. Here you said, “The caterpillar goes on the leaf in a bag.” The name for that bag is *chrysalis*. Can you say that with me? *Chrysalis*. You will have a chance to use that word again to show me that you know it.

I also want you to use transition words that show the sequence of the life cycle. These words are *first*, *next*, *then*, and *finally*. In English, we use these words to show that one idea or action follows another. For example, “First I got out of bed. Next I got dressed. Then I had breakfast. Finally I came to school.” Do you see how each idea has a transition word? Can you point to them? Let’s look at your writing. Do you see where you can put the words, *first*, *next*, and *then*? (Ms. Shostad works with Muna to find the places.)

Ms. Hunt works with Muna in a small-group setting during part of each day, and she uses that time to give feedback and further instruction on the verb *to be* and on adding *s* to third-person-singular present-tense verbs. She selects examples from Muna’s and other students’ writing to work with during the lesson. She puts each sentence on a separate index card and writes it in correct English on another card. She asks students to match and discuss the sentences. For example, “The egg on the leaf” matches “The egg is on the leaf.” As a group, they talk about when to use the word *is*. Other sentences also highlight the third-person *s*, and the students



discuss when to use it in English.

Ms. Shostad and Ms. Hunt give Muna time to practice the key vocabulary, the verb *to be*, and third-person *s* by providing a graphic organizer with sentence frames for her to review (see fig. 2). There are four boxes, one for each stage in the life cycle of the butterfly. After practicing

verbally, Muna writes a descriptive sentence about each stage, selecting the correct transitional word.

After practicing, Muna has another opportunity to rewrite the original assignment without the supports. The teachers are thrilled to see that although Muna’s writing isn’t perfect, her message is much clearer and she can use the language features they highlighted. They agree that over the next few weeks, they’ll both look for opportunities to reinforce Muna’s language learning by giving feedback during other learning activities on how to correctly use the verb *to be*, third-person *s*, and transitional words.

From Caterpillar to Butterfly

Although analyzing student language can be time-consuming at first, it can pay off in big ways when teachers begin to see improved language production based on their feedback. Many teachers fear that giving feedback on language will seem critical or

hurtful to students who are trying to learn a new language. My experience has been that giving specific feedback in context and in a caring way—and keeping it focused—will become the standard for learning and won’t be perceived as hurtful.

Many educators believe that English language learners will eventually “grow into” correct language usage through continual exposure. Although some students will manage to grow in that way, most students will not. I ask teachers to consider which is more hurtful: students’ possible sensitivity to language

FIGURE 2. Graphic Organizer for Transitional Words

Complete each sentence and choose the right word to start it!

then first next finally

Example:

_____ *First* _____ the egg is little.



_____ the larva hatches on the leaf.


_____ the caterpillar forms a chrysalis.

_____ the caterpillar becomes a butterfly.

Although some students may eventually “grow into” correct language usage through continual exposure in the classroom, most students will not.

feedback during learning, or the long-term discrimination and missed opportunities they may experience if they're unable to produce accurate language in academic discussions?

When you engage in regular cycles of formative language assessment with your students, you'll see language growth throughout the year and have detailed notes to document it. Find some teacher friends (especially ESL teachers and bilingual teachers) and invite them to get started with you. You'll be in the weeds sometimes as you try to make sense of student language, but you'll be learning together. It's not so much about the perfect analysis of language, but rather about the value of the process.

I often tell teachers, “If students don't say it in your class, they're never going to say it.” Our classrooms are the natural habitat for academic language, but just because the teacher uses academic language, it doesn't mean that students will be able to do so, too. As you engage in this process of analyzing language and giving specific feedback, you'll become more adept at modeling language for students, setting clear expectations for language production, and providing crucial opportunities for practice and interaction. What better way to help your English language learners soar? 

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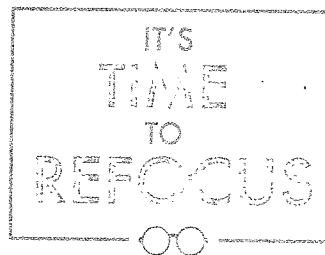
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