

# Accelerate Success for English Learners

Formative Assessment Support for  
Integrated and Meaningful Language  
Learning

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This brief is part of a series that highlights key features of high-quality instruction for English learners<sup>1</sup> and the role formative assessment plays in their success. Formative assessment supports teachers to enact these features by providing them with tools to gauge and react to student learning in real-time. These practices also support students to assess their own learning, enhancing their sense of agency. Overall, the series illustrates how instructional methods and assessment practices work together to improve English learner outcomes.

This brief highlights that quality instruction for English learners integrates learning of concepts, analytic practices, and language simultaneously. Quality instruction also intentionally draws attention to how language works to make meaning in the academic discipline through rich, authentic tasks.

## **Quality instruction for English learners integrates learning of concepts, analytic practices, and language simultaneously.<sup>2</sup>**

### **Introduction**

It may be tempting to think of language development as a separate process from content learning in academic areas like mathematics or literature. However, in the past decade (starting with the shift to college- and career-ready standards in most states), scholars and educators have increasingly emphasized that the language and content of academic disciplines are interconnected and that the role of language within disciplines should be acknowledged and integrated into content-area instruction.<sup>3</sup> Across disciplines (e.g., science, English language arts), specific disciplinary language is used to make arguments, convey ideas, and support problem-solving. Learning these skills occurs most effectively when students are supported to participate in structured opportunities to read, write, speak, and listen within the context of disciplinary learning.

Research has found that many classrooms are structured so that teachers primarily talk and students listen; students often have few opportunities to speak or write during class.<sup>4</sup> However, carefully designed learning activities in which students are required to use language result in students expanding conceptual knowledge, increasing the ability to engage in analytic practices, and developing the language needed to express their deepening understandings.<sup>5</sup>

These types of learning opportunities are not extra or additional but are instead embedded in and integral to teaching science, English language arts, or any other subject. Academic content teachers should see themselves as teachers of language. As such, they will need support to develop their own understanding of the specific language of their discipline.

Thus, to enact this feature of quality instruction for English learners, teachers plan lessons which

- create or leverage opportunities for students to use language and reflect on their understanding across the four language domains (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) and in direct connection to rigorous, grade-level content and
- provide opportunities for students to work together intellectually and
- language-rich learning environments around worthwhile and engaging inquiry questions, texts, and topics.

### Disciplinary Practices

**Conceptual understandings** are interconnected ideas that make up central and generative concepts of the discipline (e.g., equivalence in mathematics or characterization in literary fiction) that can be used over and over again and transferred to a variety of contexts.

**Analytic practices** are distinct mental operations used in the discipline, such as constructing explanations or developing arguments from evidence.

**Language practices** are specialized uses of language specific to the discipline.

## Formative Assessment Support for This Feature: Learning Goals and Success Criteria

While it is important to integrate concepts, analytic practices, and language simultaneously into lessons, not every lesson will require the same level of emphasis on each type of disciplinary practice. Teachers strategically decide which to emphasize. Then, using an integrated formative assessment approach, they represent the disciplinary practices in the learning goals and success criteria they develop for lessons. Learning goals and success criteria are the first part of the formative assessment process.

Fundamentally, **learning goals** articulate what students are expected to know and be able to do—beyond what they can already do autonomously—by the end of a lesson (e.g., one or more class periods). This differs from statements that define activity procedures that students are expected to carry out (e.g., participate in an expert group jigsaw). When teachers of English learners define learning goals to include the language required to engage in the target disciplinary content, they address the methods of communication that support student learning in that area.

**Success criteria**, a key formative assessment practice, outline how students will demonstrate that they have met the learning goal and indicate an observable action, e.g., students explain, write, solve, etc.<sup>6</sup> Success criteria are used to support interpretations of evidence. They guide teachers and students on how to direct their attention during lessons and can be thought of as “look-fors” or “listen-fors.” Below is an example of lesson learning goals and associated success criteria that support students’ content and language learning.

Teachers ground **learning goals and success criteria** in an understanding of

- how learning typically progresses in their discipline,
- the language patterns associated with the analytic practices,
- the assets students bring with them, and
- where students are in their language and content learning.

### Snapshot: Early Elementary Lesson Example

In an early elementary science lesson in which English learners and monolingual English-speaking students are observing plants to gain an understanding of living organisms and systems, lesson learning goals and success criteria might include the following:

#### Learning goals

- I understand the parts of a plant and can identify them.
- I understand the role each part plays in keeping the plant healthy.
- I understand how to communicate how the parts of a plant work together.

#### Success criteria

- I can observe and draw the parts of a plant I see.
- I can label the parts of a plant I observe.
- I can use linking words like “because” and “then” to explain how the parts of a plant work together to keep it healthy.

Teachers use learning goals and success criteria as a guide to develop effective learning activities. These activities, in turn, help students meet the goals and demonstrate their understanding through actions and outputs, such as labeled drawings and written and oral explanations.

During lessons, teachers attend to these demonstrations of learning and interpret them in relation to the success criteria. This allows teachers to accurately monitor student progress toward language-, analytic practice- and content-focused learning goals. In effect, the success criteria support teachers to stay focused when interpreting and responding to evidence of learning as it unfolds throughout the lesson. Their takeaways from this process serve to inform their upcoming teaching decisions.

Students also benefit from developing an understanding of the success criteria. This helps guide their learning. Research has found that teachers' intentional effort to develop a common understanding of the expected learning, e.g., the learning goals, success criteria, and elements of student tasks, helps all students to be successful, instead of only those who arrive in the classroom with school-aligned prior knowledge and experiences.<sup>7</sup> Teachers can provide explicit explanations of the success criteria, conduct think-alouds about student work, and co-create the success criteria with students to communicate their learning expectations.

## **Quality instruction for English learners intentionally draws attention to how language works to make meaning in the academic discipline through rich, authentic tasks.**

### **Introduction**

Not all opportunities to use language are equivalent. Lessons are most effective when they focus on engaging students in thinking about how specific language works to achieve a communicative purpose.<sup>8</sup> This means that even time dedicated to targeted and explicit language development should reflect and connect to current grade-level content learning and disciplinary practices. Time spent concentrating on grammatical, lexical, or morphological structures for their own sake should be avoided. For example, asking English learner students to study vocabulary lists, conjugate verbs, or translate sentences that bear no connection to the content under study lacks meaning or context. It is not a productive way to prepare students for independent participation in content instruction. Opportunities to use and practice language are most beneficial when they reflect the actual uses and content that students will be expected to use in the classroom.

For example, in the previously described science lesson about plants, teachers may provide vocabulary support and model sentences to help students use linking words in their descriptions (e.g., Plants need roots because they bring in nutrients.). In social studies, students may come to understand disciplinary-specific language requirements by analyzing how the organizational structure of an argument serves to persuade the reader (e.g., by starting with a compelling scene). In math, teachers may design activities that draw students' attention to specialized meanings for common terms (e.g., unit or rate) in math word problems.<sup>9</sup> This type of language practice—carefully targeted to students' specific linguistic needs and closely related to their content learning—helps them develop the linguistic skills and knowledge required to operate independently in content-area classrooms.

Thus, to enact this feature of quality instruction for English learners, teachers

- design instruction that supports students to develop an understanding of how language works within the content discipline and also includes clear success criteria that articulate the specific language skills and knowledge students should demonstrate,
- engage students in interactive and discussion-based learning tasks about the language of complex content-area texts and ideas, and
- immerse students in a language-rich environment.

### Formative Assessment Support for This Feature: Gathering Evidence

As noted in the previous section, teachers can intentionally draw attention to how language works in context to make meaning in their academic discipline by incorporating a language focus into their lesson learning goals, success criteria, and tasks. To gather evidence of student progress in relation to these, teachers and students utilize various methods, including observing, questioning, listening, analyzing work, and engaging in conversations. Teachers and students interpret evidence from these efforts in relation to the success criteria to guide decisions about the next steps in learning.<sup>10</sup>

To ensure enough evidence is produced during lessons, teachers deliberately plan opportunities to gather evidence. These are times when student learning is visible or audible (e.g., ideas are written, spoken, drawn, acted). Teachers create structures throughout lessons for students to generate these outputs, then gather this evidence while students are engaged in tasks.

For example, if a teacher is trying to discern students' understanding and use of reference chains in science texts, teachers can design activities where students use color coding to identify the references in the texts they are reading. In the sentence below, the same organism (the gray whale) is referenced using various phrases (underlined). Understanding that these phrases all refer to the same thing can be challenging for any student, particularly for English learners.

**Reference chains** are the related instances in which an object, person, organism, phenomena, situation, or idea is referred to in a text; it is typical of science explanations for objects and phenomena to be referred to differently at various points in a document.

The gray whale is one of the largest mammals. This giant creature is known to travel great distances.

To gather evidence of student understanding of this type of disciplinary-specific language, students can verbally explain their thinking about a text or write their own using intentional reference chains on topics of study, e.g., the gray whale. If students share their work with a peer for feedback, this provides an additional evidence-gathering opportunity. When students

write their own science texts, this also becomes an opportunity to develop their science writing skills (an analytic practice). For example, a teacher can note whether students describe the whale in different ways and consider what this says about their knowledge of the whale's characteristics, habits, environment, etc.

This example demonstrates that teachers do not need to have a separate test or quiz to learn where students are in relation to the learning goals, nor do they need to have separate language activities or assessments. These can be integrated meaningfully into content-area learning.

When teachers plan tasks to gather evidence and frame students' learning experiences, they should be rigorous, interactive, authentic, support language, and offer a choice of modality. This enhances both learning and assessment. Below are further descriptions of these task characteristics.

- **Rigorous** tasks promote deep conceptual, higher-order thinking.
- **Interactive** tasks invite collaboration, interaction, and engagement among peers and teachers as a means of learning and to generate evidence.
- **Authentic** tasks address students' lived experiences and communities. Teachers' work is to collectively tailor the lesson goals, approaches, and material to be responsive to these facets.
- **Language-rich** tasks integrate speaking, reading, writing, and listening and support students to use the linguistic resources they have. This includes inviting and integrating the use of different linguistic domains for sensemaking, expression, and collaboration.
- **Multimodal** tasks offer a choice of modes for students to access learning and for representing knowledge and skills, e.g., verbally, pictorially, dramatically, textually, etc.

For these types of tasks, teachers can gather evidence by looking at work products, listening to students in discussions, and engaging in conversations with students. Even in a warm-up activity, teachers can work through examples with students and glean where they are in their understanding. In a lesson wrap-up, students can also talk through their thinking and work with the larger group to get feedback. Below is another example of a lesson that demonstrates how to gather evidence in the context of using language as a source of meaning in an academic discipline.

#### **Vignette: Upper Elementary Lesson Example<sup>11</sup>**

In this 5th grade elementary classroom with a mix of student language levels, students are learning about how words and phrases create mood in a narrative. At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher reminds students that they are exploring how authors convey rich moods



in their writing and that students will be able to use these same strategies to create powerful scenes in their own writing. The teacher reminds students of a previous lesson where they worked on understanding strategies authors use to convey characters' moods and feelings.

The teacher states that the lesson **learning goal** is to **understand how an author uses types of words and phrases to communicate mood in specific scenes**. The learning goal is also written on chart paper with supportive images for students to reference during the lesson. Before moving to the content of the lesson, the teacher asks students to verbally share their understanding of the learning goal. This quick check-in allows the teacher to sense how well students understand the lesson expectations and to also provide further support, particularly for English learners, by paraphrasing what students say to address misconceptions and review key ideas such as what it means "to communicate mood." The teacher then asks students to turn and talk to their partner about a particular scene from a book they have read recently together in class and what mood it communicated to them. Students have access to **formulaic expressions** to support their speaking, e.g., "In the scene, I thought it felt \_\_\_\_\_. Then, with the whole group, students share their thoughts while the teacher takes stock of the status of their learning, recording what they say on chart paper, including words such as "dark," "dangerous," and "spooky."

Next, the teacher shows the students a few paragraphs of a story written on chart paper from the book *The Jumbies* by Tracy Baptiste. She reads it aloud and the students share what feeling the scene conveyed to them. As a scaffold, the teacher provides students with a wheel chart at each of their tables full of feeling words. They agreed that what they felt from the text was suspense. Together, they identify which words and phrases from the story helped convey this mood. The teacher lists these words on the whiteboard under categories for grammatical features (parts of speech). Students point out some of the author's moves, such as using rich adjectives, adverbs, and prepositional phrases. The teacher comments that students seem to be well on their way to reaching the learning goal since they were able to identify the key types of words and phrases that the author used to make the passage suspenseful. She says that she believes that students will also be able to use these specific language features to create powerful moods in their own writing in the next lesson. The teacher then shares the success criteria with students, which she reads aloud and has written on chart paper.

#### Success criteria

- I can identify the mood or feeling of a scene.
- I can identify words and phrases that communicate that mood.
- I can explain how the author uses these words and phrases to communicate the mood.

Students then work independently reading a new passage from the same book, identifying the mood and underlining key words and phrases that communicate that mood. They write these words and phrases in a graphic organizer that has columns to help sort the words and phrases by grammatical feature. There are a few example words already in each column to refresh students' memories about the meaning of the grammatical features. Around the classroom, there is also a word wall organized by these same features, including words and images students have previously identified. The grammatical features are ordered so students can pick one word from each list and formulate a sentence. Students have the option to complete the graphic organizer activity in pairs. Several English learners in the class choose to pair up with a peer who provides them with language support in their home language. They finish the activity by writing a brief explanation of how the author has used specific types of words and phrases to communicate a particular mood for the scene. Some students draw pictures and labels and then provide oral explanations.

At the end of the lesson, the teacher asks students to share what they discovered during their independent work. Many students reference the success criteria in their responses, e.g., "It was easy for me to identify the mood in the scene, which was sadness, but it was harder to identify the words that showed this feeling." The teacher then asks students to share what the three top grammatical features were that this author used to convey mood. Students agree that the author primarily used rich action verbs, noun phrases, and prepositional phrases to convey the mood of the scene. The teacher tells students that in the next lesson, they will focus on those same grammatical features in their own writing to create a strong mood. Before they leave, the teacher asks students to refer to the success criteria at the front of the room and write a quick reflection about what they learned during the lesson and what they still had questions about.

**Formulaic expressions** are phrases that help start or link ideas that can be used across various situations (e.g., "I wonder if ...." and "The reasons for this are ....").

This type of learning experience provides ample and diverse opportunities to gather evidence—spoken, written, individual, and collective. The content and language learning of this lesson supports English learners in several ways. Understanding the language that authors use to communicate the mood of a text helps them grasp the overall meaning and subtleties of the text. It also scaffolds their writing, providing students with a model they can replicate in their own work. This helps students go beyond the literal meaning of the words to interpret the feeling behind them, supporting their understanding of the cultural context. Research shows that attention to the author's specific use of language supports English learners' understanding of concrete and practical author's moves that they can then emulate themselves.<sup>12</sup> Overall, lessons such as these provide

opportunities for English learners to simultaneously engage in content, language, and analytic practices in meaningful ways.

## **Related Briefs in This Series**

- Accelerating Success for English Learners With Formative Assessment
- Students Work Beyond the Edge of Their Current Abilities With Formative Assessment
- Students Take Ownership Over Their Learning With Formative Assessment
- Students Participate in Collaborative Discussions

# Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Over time, terms that we use to refer to students who speak multiple languages have evolved with many using the term “multilingual learner” in order to focus on the strengths these students bring to school. In many organizations, the term “multilingual learner” is used as an umbrella term for all students who use or are learning multiple languages, regardless of whether they are formally classified as English learners. In this document, we use the term “English learner” to describe the specific group of students who constitute a protected class, are entitled to specific supports and services by law, and whose achievements must be tracked and reported for federal accountability.
- <sup>2</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2018). *English learners in STEM subjects: Transforming classrooms, schools, and lives*. Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25182>; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017). *Promoting the educational success of children and youth learning English: Promising futures*. Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/24677>
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- <sup>4</sup> Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge.
- <sup>5</sup> Walqui, A., & Bunch, G. C. (Eds.). (2019). *Amplifying the curriculum: Designing quality learning opportunities for English learners*. Teachers College Press.
- <sup>6</sup> Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge
- <sup>7</sup> Pryor, J., & Crossouard, B. (2008). A socio-cultural theorisation of formative assessment. *Oxford Review of Education*, 34(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980701476386>
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- <sup>10</sup> Heritage, M., & Wylie, E. C. (2020). *Formative assessment in the disciplines: Framing a continuum of professional learning*. Harvard Education Press.
- <sup>11</sup> Jones, B. (2019), *What You Might See: Learning Goals and Success Criteria in an Elementary ELA Lesson*, FAIR Course, WestEd.
- <sup>12</sup> Aguirre - Muñoz, Z., Boscardin, C.K., Jones, B., Park, J., Chinen, M., Shin, H.S., Lee, J., Amabisca, A.A., & Benner, A.D. (2006). Consequences and Validity of Performance Assessment for English Language Learners: Integrating Academic Language and ELL Instructional Needs into Opportunity to Learn Measures. CSE 678. *National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing*.