Language Objectives: The Key to Effective Content Area Instruction for English Learners

By: Jennifer Himmel (2012)

This article includes:

- Language Objectives: An Overview
- Writing Language Objectives
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In this article written for Colorín Colorado, Jennifer Himmel of the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) provides an overview of how to use language objectives in content-area instruction for English learners. Her overview includes:

- what a language objective is
- steps that teachers can take to create language objectives
- how to implement language objectives in a general education classroom
- how to align objectives to content and language standards
- ideas and resources on how to support teachers as they become familiar with this practice.

Language Objectives: An Overview

Mrs. Shell has been teaching eighth grade math for twelve years. She has deep content area knowledge and wants to provide all of her students with authentic activities and tasks to relate the significance of the mathematical concepts that she teaches to their lives. Mrs. Shell has always felt successful at teaching her classes but this year has been different. Her sections include students with more diverse backgrounds than previous years, particularly more English learners.

As Mrs. Shell was beginning to feel frustrated with her inability to reach all her students because of their needs, she learned about one way to make her content more comprehensible to all her students — creating and posting objectives that tell the students not just what content concepts they will learn in each lesson, but also the academic language they will need to learn and use to meet the state's math standards. With this knowledge, Mrs. Shell is now confident that she not only knows what to teach, but also how to teach it so that all her students can be successful.

http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/49646/?theme=print
Academic English

Generally speaking, academic English is the language of schooling and the language that helps students acquire and use the content area knowledge taught in schools (Anstrom, DiCerbo, Butler, Katz, Millet, & Rivera, 2010).

Teaching content to ELs: The challenge

In my work supporting general education and ESL/bilingual teachers who provide sheltered instruction for English learners (ELs), I have met many teachers like Mrs. Shell. While these teachers want to provide effective instruction for their ELs, often they don't see themselves as language teachers and so they aren't sure where to begin with their students.

These teachers aren't alone, however, and they are facing a challenge shared by teachers across the country. We know that for school-age students, academic language is crucial for school success (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006). In addition, research allows us to state with a fair degree of confidence that English learners best acquire English when language forms are explicitly taught and when they have many opportunities to use the language in meaningful contexts (Goldenberg, 2008).

Yet while the explicit instructional support that ESL and bilingual teachers provide is essential to English learners' academic language development, English learners receive a majority of their instruction from general education and content area teachers who may not have experience teaching academic language development.

The question becomes then: What do general education classroom teachers need to do in order to support the academic English development of language learners, especially when English learners are one of many types of students they serve?

Teaching content to ELs: The solution

One principle that teachers of English learners can begin to apply immediately is creating and posting language objectives for their lessons. Many teachers are familiar with using content objectives to identify what students will learn and be able to do in the lesson. However, they are less likely to include language objectives that support the linguistic development of their students.

Implementing language objectives can be a powerful first step in ensuring that English learners have equal access to the curriculum even though they may not be fully proficient in the language. This is because the second language acquisition process requires opportunities for the language learner to be exposed to, practice with, and then be assessed on their language skills (Echevarria, Short, & Vogt, 2008).

To this end, language objectives:

- articulate for learners the academic language functions and skills that they need to master to fully participate in the lesson and meet the grade-level content standards (Echevarria, Short, & Vogt, 2008).

- are beneficial not only for language learners but for all students in a class, as everyone can benefit from the clarity that comes with a teacher outlining the requisite academic language to be learned and mastered in each lesson.

Now let's take a closer look at some examples and how to write language objectives.

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Writing Language Objectives

What is a language objective?
Language objectives are lesson objectives that specifically outline the type of language that students will need to learn and use in order to accomplish the goals of the lesson. Quality language objectives complement the content knowledge and skills identified in content area standards and address the aspects of academic language that will be developed or reinforced during the teaching of grade-level content concepts (Echevarria & Short, 2010).

These objectives involve the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), but they can also include:

- the language functions related to the topic of the lesson (e.g., justify, hypothesize)
- vocabulary essential to a student being able to fully participate in the lesson (e.g., axis, locate, graph)
- language learning strategies to aid in comprehension (e.g, questioning, making predictions).

Below are examples of language objectives for different content areas and grade levels. They come from the Common Core State Standards for Math and English Language Arts (2012) and state standards in New York and California.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3rd grade Science, States of Matter</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content Area Standard</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>California: Students know that matter has three forms: solid, liquid, and gas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content Objective</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Students will be able to distinguish between liquids, solids, and gases and provide an example of each.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language Objective</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Students will be able to orally describe characteristics of liquids, solids, and gases to a partner.</td>
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<tr>
<th>4th grade Math, Two-Dimensional Figures</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content Area Standard</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Common Core: Draw and identify lines and angles, and classify shapes by properties of their lines and angles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content Objective</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students will be able to classify triangles based on their angles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language Objective</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students will be able to read descriptions of triangles and their angles.</td>
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<tr>
<th>7th Social Studies, Colonial Communities</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Content Area Standard</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>New York: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the geography of the interdependent world in which we live.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content Objective</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students will be able show how geographic features have affected colonial life by creating a map.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language Objective</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students will be able to summarize in writing how geography impacted colonial life.</td>
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</tbody>
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<tr>
<th>9th grade English Language Arts, Informative/Explanatory Texts</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content Area Standard</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Core: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence. Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content Objective</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students will be able to draft a conclusion paragraph for their expository essay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language Objective</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students will be able to use transitional phrases (e.g., as a result) in writing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sources:

- *Common Core State Standards for Math and English Language Arts, 2012*
- *Science Content Standards for California Public Schools, K-12*, reprinted 2003

How do I create effective language objectives?

**Video Bonus!**

Dr. Cindy Lundgren discusses the process of writing language objectives in this excerpt from her Meet the Expert interview.

Language objectives are directly correlated to content objectives. Once a teacher determines the lesson topic from the appropriate content standards, the teacher will want to begin thinking about the academic language necessary for English learners to complete the tasks that support the content objectives. This identification of the academic language embedded in the lesson's content will become the basis for the lesson's language objectives.

You can use the following guidelines to start thinking about appropriate language objectives for the lesson:

1. Decide what **key vocabulary, concept words, and other academic words** students will need to know in order to talk, read, and write about the topic of the lesson. Those words might be taught as a language objective. They should include technical terms, such as *ecosystem*, and terms like *distribution* that have different meanings across content areas. Other terms to highlight are those that language learners may know in one context, such as family (as in parents, siblings, etc.), but that have a different use in science (e.g., family of elements in the periodic table).

2. Consider the **language functions** related to the topic of the lesson (e.g., will the students describe, explain, compare, or chart information). See the *WIDA English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards* for examples of these functions for English language arts, math, science, and social studies for all English proficiency levels and grade-level clusters.

3. Think about the **language skills** necessary for students to accomplish the lesson's activities. Will the students be reading a textbook passage to identify the stages of mitosis? Are they able to read a text passage to find specific information? Will they be reporting what they observe during a scientific demonstration to a peer? Do they know how to report observations orally? Acquiring the skills needed to carry out these tasks might be the focus of a language objective.

4. Identify **grammar or language structures** common to the content area. For example, many science textbooks use the passive voice to describe processes. Additionally, students may have to use comparative language to analyze two related concepts. Writing with the passive voice or using comparative phrases might be a language objective.

5. Consider the **tasks** that the students will complete and the language that will be embedded in those assignments. If students are working on a scientific investigation together, will they need to explain the steps of the procedure to one another? The language objective might focus on how to
4. Explain procedures aloud.

6. Explore language learning strategies that lend themselves to the topic of the lesson. For example, if students are starting a new chapter in the textbook, the strategy of previewing the text might be an appropriate language objective.

(Adapted from Short, Himmel, Gutierrez, & Hudec, 2012. Used with permission.)

**Aligning Language Objectives and Standards**

**English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards**

Developing appropriate language objectives for lessons involves becoming familiar with a state's content area and ELP standards. Whereas the content standards will provide the topic of the lesson and what exactly the students should be doing with that topic (e.g., solving problems, creating models, ranking ideas), the English language proficiency or development standards help to identify language skills and functions that students should be working on to achieve academic language fluency. These ELP standards can help to identify:

- communicative tasks (e.g., retelling, asking clarification questions)
- language structures (e.g., sequential language, past-conditional tense)
- types of texts students need to understand (e.g., informational text versus literature).

**English Language Arts (ELA) standards**

Other resources in addition to the ELP standards are a state's English Language Arts standards or the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History, Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (CCSS). The English Language Arts and Literacy CCSS might be especially useful to teachers of English learners due to its attention to literacy across the content areas.

Additional resources to consult, especially if a state is a member of the WIDA consortium, are the Model Proficiency Indicators (MPIs) outlined in their ELP standards. The MPIs outline what an English learner at a specific level of English language proficiency can do in a language domain (e.g., listening) by addressing the language functions embedded in an example topic for that content area with appropriate scaffolds or support (Gottlieb, Cranley, & Cammileri, 2007). Classroom texts and other materials (e.g., science investigations, primary source documents) are other good sources to consult when preparing a lesson.

**Classroom example #1: The cell cycle**

To demonstrate how teachers can begin to explore identifying academic language in a lesson, let's look at how one teacher, Mr. Zhang, approaches this task.

Mr. Zhang's 7th grade science students have been working on the cell cycle. The content standards for 7th grade science indicate that students must be able to investigate and understand that all living things are composed of cells, with a key concept being cell division. The content objective for this lesson asks the students to compare and contrast the cycle of a normal cell with a cancer cell.

Because the students have already focused on the new vocabulary and grammar structures in this unit, Mr. Zhang and Mr. Lewis decide that addressing the language functions required to complete tasks should be their next linguistic goal for the students. From there, Mr. Zhang and Mr. Lewis brainstorm some scientific language related to the cell cycle that might need to be directly taught in order for the students to master the content and ELP standards:

1. **The language of comparison** — in order to have students explain what they learned about the normal and cancer cell cycle (e.g., more than...less than)
2. **Sequencing** — in order to have students clearly outline the steps in the cycle for each type of cell (e.g., first, second, finally)

3. **Recording ideas in a graphic organizer** — for students to be able to identify main ideas and organize them (e.g., Venn diagram),

4. **Summarizing** — either orally or in writing, in order to have students demonstrate mastery of the topic.

Once Mr. Zhang and Mr. Lewis have identified the language objectives they want to focus on, they must look at the state’s grades 6-8 ELP standards. When they look at the standards, they see that the students at low-intermediate to advanced language proficiency must be able to record information from oral input and explain, with detail, the similarities and differences between ideas/concepts/things. Given these ELP standards and the content objective, they decide that the best use of class time is to highlight oral language development and thus create the following the language objective:

*Students will be able to orally explain the differences and similarities between normal and cancer cell cycles.*

### Getting Started

#### How can I get started?

**Planning template**

The **Content and Language Objectives Planning Template** used in SIOP Model workshops offered by CAL helps teachers begin to practice writing their own objectives.

**Careful lesson planning**

In creating measureable and student-friendly language objectives that support the content objectives, it is important that learner tasks in the lesson are aligned with the objectives. It is not enough to have well-written objectives that promote language acquisition if the lesson is lacking in tasks that support the objectives. If the language objective for a middle school social studies lesson is for the students to orally retell the key characteristics in a historical event using sequential language, it is important that the teacher previews sequential language with the students, such as providing sentence stems or frames, and builds into the lesson some structured pair work so the students have an opportunity to retell the event to a peer. Therefore, careful lesson planning is another essential step in preparing effective language objectives.

**Collaboration**

It is also useful for content area and ESL/bilingual teachers to plan lessons together, as we saw with the 7th grade science lesson scenario involving Mr. Zhang and Mr. Lewis. In this co-planning scenario, each teacher used his expertise to better integrate content and language instruction for the language learners. This type of collaboration can help a teacher like Mr. Zhang learn more about the second language acquisition process of his students and can help a teacher like Mr. Lewis become more familiar with the grade-level content expectations that his English learners encounter in content area classes.

**How do I know which language objectives are best for my students?**

The language objective that the teacher selects will depend on what the English learners in the class need most at that point in the year and what language is most important to understanding the content concepts. If the students have already spent a good deal of time working with new vocabulary, then the teacher might consider having students use that vocabulary to develop their writing skill by writing a summary of the process they followed.
Conversely, the teacher might want to help students become more proficient with a particular type of graphic organizer in order to develop more strategic language learning. As all teachers know, teaching is a dynamic and complex process that requires a multitude of decisions to be made. However, the advance planning required in creating language objectives allows teachers to better anticipate the academic English needs of all students thus increasing the comprehensibility of the lessons.

It is important for teachers to realize that even though their lesson may include all four language skills (it is good if they do, since the language skills reinforce one another), they do not need to post a language objective for every language-related item addressed in the lesson. Teachers address many instructional needs in a 50- or 60-minute class period. Rather than highlighting all language uses in a particular lesson, it is important for the teacher to think about what is non-negotiable in that lesson.

In other words, the teacher should keep the perspective of the English learner in mind and ask, "Of all of the skills and functions addressed in my lesson, which is most important for helping students meet the grade-level standard and develop their language proficiency?" These objectives then must be measureable (i.e., can you see or assess the student's mastery of that objective?) and written in language that accounts for the linguistic and cognitive development of the students.

**Language objectives: More examples**

A second grade English Language Arts class language objective might be something like this:

"I can **write describing words** about Charlotte and Wilbur."

A language objectives for a high school English Language Arts class might look something like this:

*Students will be able to **orally justify their character's actions** during a discussion group.*

**How can I make language objectives "student-friendly"?**

Both of the above objectives are measurable, but both also take into account appropriate developmental stages of the students. Teachers of young students (e.g., PK or K) may even want to consider further adapting the objectives. For example, we have seen kindergarten teachers use symbols such as a pencil to symbolize "write" and a mouth to symbolize "talk" when they post their objectives for the children to see. We have also seen teachers of young learners rely on pictures to show the key terms they want the students to use or to convey the topic of the lesson (e.g., a picture of a ruler and of hands to discuss standard and non-standard measurement).

One way that teachers can ensure that their language objectives are measureable and student-friendly is by using appropriate verbs. Because language objectives should provide students with practice in the four language skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, verbs related to those skills might include, but are not limited to, the following:

- List
- Retell
- Summarize in writing
- Record
- Read

It is also important to not equate low language proficiency with limited cognitive ability. Therefore, teachers will want to make sure that the language objectives they create also reflect tasks that fall on the higher end of **Bloom's Taxonomy** and use verbs (e.g., orally justify) accordingly.

As noted above in the guidelines to creating language objectives, language functions are also a potential source for language objectives. Verbs related to language functions might include:
Describe
Orally explain
Report findings in writing

**Classroom example #2: Solving math inequalities**

This example offers some ideas for creating language objectives using the Common Core and WIDA ELP standards.

**CCCSo Math Standard:** Solve equations and inequalities in one variable

**Math task:** Solve multi-step inequalities that involve multiplying or dividing by variables

**Content objective:** Students will be able to solve inequalities

**WIDA ELP Standard, Language of Math:** Rephrase or recite phrases or sentences involved in problem solving using models and visual support in L1 or L2 with a partner; Explain to peers, with details, strategies for solving problem

Possible language objectives:

- Students will **record** ideas in a graphic organizer showing the steps in the process.
- Students will **write** a summary of the process followed to solve the problem.
- Students will **define and use** key math vocabulary (list key vocabulary).
- Students will **read** a story problem, identify key information, and solve the problem.
- Students will **create** their own story problems.

**When should I share language objectives with students?**

To help students take ownership of their learning and provide explicit direction to students, especially the English learners who are processing content in a new language, it is important that objectives be stated at the beginning of the lesson and reviewed with the students at the end of the lesson to allow them to assess if they have met the objectives (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2008).

How this happens may differ according to the grade level and content area of the class. Some teachers like to have the students choral read the objectives, while teachers of older students sometimes have them record the language objectives in their journal in addition to asking an individual student to read them aloud. Some teachers, such as those who teach science, like to reveal the objectives later in the lesson, perhaps after the warm up or exploratory activity, so that they can maintain an inquiry-based approach (Echevarria & Colburn, 2006).

**Should I differentiate language objectives based on my students' language proficiency?**

Although all teachers have students of varying language proficiency and skill levels in their classes, it is not necessary to differentiate language objectives by creating and posting multiple language objectives that reflect these proficiency levels. Rather, teachers should have one language objective that is appropriate for all students to meet. To provide the appropriate differentiation, the teacher would provide different scaffolds (e.g., adapted text, visuals, sentence frames) for students to use in order to reach the objectives.

For example, an appropriate language objective for an upper elementary language arts class might be for the students to be able to orally list text features found in a non-fiction book. For lower proficiency language learners, the teacher may give them a word bank from which to choose the text features; therefore, the students are meeting the same objective but with the appropriate amount of linguistic
support from the teacher.

Next Steps

How can I learn more?

SIOP Model

For more information on the SIOP Model, see *Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP Model* (Echevarria, Short, & Vogt, 2008).

Although language objectives can be implemented in any lesson design approach, they are especially congruent with sheltered instruction and the SIOP Model. Since language objectives ensure that teachers meet the unique linguistic needs of English learners, they are sometimes easier to implement in the context of instructional practices espoused by the SIOP Model.

Practices that focus on explicit academic language teaching include:

- development of key vocabulary
- peer-to-peer interaction
- meaningful activities that allow learners to practice the academic language in authentic contexts.

Below are other resources that can help you learn more about creating language objectives and about integrating academic language into content area classes.

Final Thoughts

We realize that it takes teachers some time to become very comfortable with creating language objectives, but our experience has shown that the implementation of language objectives can bring immediate benefits to instruction. Some immediate benefits include teachers understanding more concretely that they are both a content area and language teacher — as one teacher said in a CAL SIOP Model workshop, "I now see myself as a math teacher AND a language teacher".

We have also observed that when teachers consciously plan to meet the academic English needs of their learners, they end up with better planned learner tasks, and students begin to have more ownership of their content area and language learning. When it comes to building proficiency in academic English, as many teachers in our workshops remind us, "If you want to see it, you have to teach it." Therefore, if teachers want to see language development, language objectives are a great first step in helping teachers explicitly teach it.

Resources


Teaching of English Language Learners (CREATE) Brief.
http://www.cal.org/create/resources/pubs/professional-development-framework.html


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**Video Clip: Language Objectives**

In this excerpt from her *Meet the Expert interview*, Dr. Cynthia Lundgren explains the value of writing language objectives when teaching English learners.

This video is also available on YouTube.

**About the Author**

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**References**


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