

ACTION 3

Apply the background knowledge of English language learners, including their language proficiency profiles, in planning differentiated language teaching.

Every student has a distinct personality, life history, and educational background. Influenced by these experiences and opportunities, every language learner, at any given time, has a unique language learning profile with varying levels of proficiency in each of the domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. By understanding students' strengths and current levels of language proficiency, educators can plan for and monitor their progress along the language development continuum.

RESEARCH-BASED EVIDENCE FOR ACTION 3

The complexity of vocabulary and linguistic patterns increases as language develops from a beginning stage of the language to native-like language proficiency (Goldenberg, 2008). Empirical research indicates that progress from beginning to mid levels of English language proficiency is relatively rapid in comparison with middle to upper levels of proficiency (Hakuta et al., 2000; Howard et al., 2003; Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Thomas & Collier, 2002). Different amounts of time are necessary to reach proficiency depending on where a student begins on the scale (Cook & Zhao, 2011).

Information about student background, including linguistic and content abilities, is key to plan and deliver instruction to optimize opportunities for learning (Tomlinson, 2003; Fairbairn & Jones-Vo, 2010).

Once students' level of language proficiency is known, scaffolding may be used to help the learner "move toward new skills, concepts, or levels of understanding" (Gibbons, 2002, p. 10). In his work on the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Vygotsky (1978) described learning opportunities as interactions that are challenging but also within reach for the learner. Information about the backgrounds of the students, including their linguistic and content abilities, is key to plan and deliver differentiated instruction to optimize opportunities for learning (Tomlinson, 2003; Fairbairn & Jones-Vo, 2010).

A REPRESENTATION OF ACTION 3 IN THE WIDA STANDARDS FRAMEWORK

The Performance Definitions are central to understanding and implementing language standards as they describe the milestones of language development, from level 1, Entering, through level 5, Bridging. In essence, the Definitions holistically illustrate what constitutes each level of language proficiency according to three criteria: 1. Linguistic Complexity, 2. Language Forms and Conventions, and 3. Vocabulary Usage. These criteria delineate the expectations of receptive language (listening and reading) and productive language (speaking and writing) across the language development continuum, always within a sociocultural context.

The Performance Definitions apply to all ELLs from Kindergarten through Grade 12; therefore, educators need to ensure that their interpretation is developmentally appropriate for their students' ages. For example, producing "organized, cohesive, and coherent expression of ideas," which typifies level 5, Bridging, looks much different for a 7-year-old than a 17-year-old. Additionally, the youngest ELLs in Kindergarten and grade 1, like their peers, are just beginning the road to literacy; therefore, the language expectations for these students must take into account their early stage of literacy development.

The Performance Definitions are shown on the following pages.

PUTTING ACTION 3 INTO PRACTICE

By José Reyes, Gadsden, NM

Schools throughout New Mexico are challenged to meet the needs of ELLs as well as those of students who are fluent in English. New Mexico classrooms serve the highest percentage of Hispanic students in the nation and a high percentage of Native American students, second only to Alaska. In addition to Spanish, there are eight different indigenous languages spoken in New Mexico, some of which are traditional oral languages that have existed for hundreds of years and are not written. Many students bring to their school classrooms cultures and linguistic structures that are fundamentally different from a "standard" English-speaking tradition. The diversity that students bring to school must be highly valued as resource to build upon.

Our district is located in southernmost part of the state, bordering with Mexico. In fact, the language minority (Spanish) is the majority in this region of the state. Our kindergarten teachers make a home visit at the beginning of each school year to make observations of home life and home language to inform instruction. Our district policies ensure that teachers have information about students' language use to make appropriate program and school placement appropriate to their language goals and language proficiency in their various languages. This practice allows educators to broaden their view of the language profile of students to include all of the languages in their lives.

By Martha Mason Miller, Roseville, MN

Many ELLs who enter American secondary schools for the first time do so with limited formal education, but also rich experiences, often beyond our imaginations. When I plan content instruction, I strive to connect it to their lives and to honor their experiences. Building the academic background that is assumed in American high schools is a great challenge for educators. The key to ELLs' learning is to differentiate using language that is appropriate to their language proficiency levels.

In order to introduce basic science vocabulary and the concept and procedures of scientific investigation illustrative of scientific discourse to students at the entering or emerging levels, our class engages in hands-on real life science. Students practice new skills in a cooperative environment. They also engage in critical thinking as they question their results and participate in intense discussions in their first languages, and later explain their outcomes to me in English. In their science notebooks, they draw and label diagrams and write simple hypotheses, materials, procedure, and results. The group works together with the stronger students clarifying complex ideas in their L1 to other students.

Figure H: WIDA Performance Definitions Listening and Reading, Grades K–12



At each grade, toward the end of a given level of English language proficiency, and with instructional support, English language learners will process...

	Discourse Level	Sentence Level	Word/Phrase Level
	Linguistic Complexity	Language Forms and Conventions	Vocabulary Usage
Level 6 – Reaching Language that meets all criteria through Level 5, Bridging			
Level 5 Bridging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rich descriptive discourse with complex sentences Cohesive and organized related ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compound, complex grammatical constructions (e.g., multiple phrases and clauses) A broad range of sentence patterns characteristic of particular content areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technical and abstract content-area language Words and expressions with shades of meaning for each content area
Level 4 Expanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connected discourse with a variety of sentences Expanded related ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A variety of complex grammatical constructions Sentence patterns characteristic of particular content areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specific and some technical content-area language Words and expressions with multiple meanings or collocations and idioms for each content area
Level 3 Developing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discourse with a series of extended sentences Related ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compound and some complex (e.g., noun phrase, verb phrase, prepositional phrase) grammatical constructions Sentence patterns across content areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specific content words and expressions Words or expressions related to content area with common collocations and idioms across content areas
Level 2 Emerging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple related simple sentences An idea with details 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compound grammatical constructions Repetitive phrasal and sentence patterns across content areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General and some specific content words and expressions (including cognates) Social and instructional words and expressions across content areas
Level 1 Entering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Single statements or questions An idea within words, phrases, or chunks of language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Simple grammatical constructions (e.g., commands, Wh- questions, declaratives) Common social and instructional forms and patterns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General content-related words Everyday social and instructional words and expressions

...within sociocultural contexts for language use.

Figure I: WIDA Performance Definitions *Speaking and Writing*, Grades K–12



At each grade, toward the end of a given level of English language proficiency, and with instructional support, English language learners will produce...

	Discourse Level	Sentence Level	Word/Phrase Level
	Linguistic Complexity	Language Forms and Conventions	Vocabulary Usage
Level 6 – Reaching Language that meets all criteria through Level 5, Bridging			
Level 5 Bridging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple, complex sentences Organized, cohesive, and coherent expression of ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A variety of grammatical structures matched to purpose and nearly consistent use of conventions, including for effect A broad range of sentence patterns characteristic of particular content areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technical and abstract content-area language Words and expressions with precise meaning related to content area topics
Level 4 Expanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Short, expanded, and some complex sentences Organized expression of ideas with emerging cohesion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A variety of grammatical structures and generally consistent use of conventions Sentence patterns characteristic of particular content areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specific and some technical content-area language Words and expressions with multiple meanings or common collocations and idioms across content areas
Level 3 Developing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Short and some expanded sentences with emerging complexity Expanded expression of one idea or emerging expression of multiple related ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Repetitive grammatical structures with occasional variation and emerging use of conventions Sentence patterns across content areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specific content words and expressions (including content-specific cognates) Words or expressions related to content areas
Level 2 Emerging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phrases or short sentences Emerging expression of ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formulaic grammatical structures and variable use of conventions Repetitive phrasal and sentence patterns across content areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General content words and expressions (including common cognates) Social and instructional words and expressions across content areas
Level 1 Entering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Words, phrases, or chunks of language Single words used to represent ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Simple grammatical constructions (e.g., commands, Wh- questions, declaratives) Phrasal patterns associated with common social and instructional situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General content-related words Everyday social and instructional words and familiar expressions

...within sociocultural contexts for language use.

As students develop their English language proficiency beyond level 3, Developing, they are expected to write several related sentences describing their observations, stating findings, and suggesting reasons for the differences, independently using key academic vocabulary.

At all levels, the students use critical thinking, practice academic skills, build background, and become familiar with or use academic vocabulary and sentence structures. The difference from level to level is the increasing complexity of the language and increasing individual responsibility for work. Discussion and collaboration in the students' home language may continue through the levels as they grapple with new concepts.

The questions below provide an opportunity to consider how to apply the ideas from Action 3 to practice.

1. How might you use the Performance Definitions to help formulate instructional strategies (e.g., in grouping students or differentiating language objectives)?
2. How might you use the Performance Definitions to help scaffold content instruction for ELLs?
3. When might educators use a student's overall composite language proficiency level (from ACCESS for ELLs) versus the language proficiency level for each language domains?