

April 2012

## **The Purpose of English Language Proficiency Standards, Assessments, and Instruction in an Age of New Standards: Policy Statement from the Understanding Language Initiative**

The new standards – including Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics as well as Next Generation Science Standards – signal a fundamental upward shift in the knowledge, skills, and abilities that students must develop in order to be college- and career-ready in the 21st century. Nowhere is this shift more obvious than in the sophisticated language competencies students will need. While previous content standards were largely silent on the kinds of language competencies students need to perform in academic subject areas, the new standards make them explicit. Consider this descriptive portrait of students meeting the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards:

“Students can, without significant scaffolding, comprehend and evaluate complex texts across a range of types and disciplines, and they can construct effective arguments and convey intricate or multifaceted information. Likewise, students are able independently to discern a speaker’s key points, request clarification, and ask relevant questions. They build on others’ ideas, articulate their own ideas, and confirm they have been understood” (Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, p. 7).

The new Mathematics Standards place similar importance on students’ ability to use language to effectively perform and communicate their mathematical understanding:

“Mathematically proficient students understand and use stated assumptions, definitions, and previously established results in constructing arguments. They make conjectures and build a logical progression of statements to explore the truth of their conjectures...They justify their conclusions, communicate them to others, and respond to the arguments of others” (Common Core State Standards for Mathematics, p. 6).

Although the development of Next Generation Science Standards is just beginning, the recently published National Research Council framework guiding their development makes clear that students will need to engage in similarly sophisticated uses of language to enact scientific inquiries, explanations, and arguments.

English language learners in English-medium classrooms face the dual challenge of learning effective academic uses of a second language while simultaneously learning academic content and skills with and through that language. To ensure these students’ linguistic, cognitive, and academic potential is realized, state and consortium English language proficiency (ELP) standards must align with and support development of the language capacities found in the new

state content standards. While the Understanding Language Initiative does not seek to develop ELP standards, its work has implications for how those standards are framed. Our reading of the new standards finds a view of language proficiency far beyond vocabulary, control of grammatical forms and native-like fluency. The new standards call for high levels of cognitive engagement, metacognitive skill, and academic discourse within the disciplines. Just as these competencies cannot be developed using a traditional, transmission-model subject matter pedagogy, neither can they be fostered with a language pedagogy that values accuracy and correctness at the expense of meaning-making and communicative performance. Like all students, English learners need opportunities and support to effectively *act with language* in the disciplines.

What are the implications for designing appropriately aligned next-generation ELP standards? Current ELP standards need to be reconceptualized so that they uncover and delineate the linguistic demands embedded within the new standards, including social as well as general and discipline-specific academic language uses. This includes specifying key language functions that students must be able to carry out in discipline-appropriate ways (e.g., obtaining information, demonstrating understanding, constructing explanations, engaging in arguments, etc.). Such target language uses must be expressed in meaningful progressions that assist teachers to appropriately scaffold and support students in continually building the linguistic capacities needed to develop sophisticated content knowledge, skills and abilities. If done well, these progressions can also guide ELP assessment developers to design appropriate language tasks that operationalize and measure growth of these target language uses. They can also help content assessment developers to better understand and modulate the language demands of academic test items and performance tasks. And they can inform the formative assessment resources that the comprehensive assessment consortia are to provide for teachers of English learners.

What implications does this have for current instructional arrangements? At present, second language development is seen largely as the responsibility of the ESL/ELD teacher, while content development is that of the subject area teacher. Given the new standards' explicitness in how language must be used to enact disciplinary knowledge and skills, such a strict division of labor is no longer viable. Content area teachers must understand and leverage the language and literacy practices found in science, mathematics, history/social studies, and the language arts to enhance students' engagement with rich content and fuel their academic performance and opportunities for discourse. ESL/ELD teachers must cultivate a deeper knowledge of the disciplinary language that ELL students need, and help their students to grow in using it to carry out disciplinary practices. Far greater collaboration and sharing of expertise are needed among ESL/ELD teachers and content area teachers at the secondary level. At the elementary level, far greater alignment and integration are needed across ESL/ELD and subject matter curricula, including units of instruction and lesson design that teachers in self-contained classrooms prepare and deliver.

Seen in this light, then, the purpose of next-generation English Language Proficiency standards is multifold. They illuminate the social and academic uses of language inherent in – and needed to fully access – the new, language-rich content standards. They articulate these language

dimensions and target uses in progressions that teachers, parents and students themselves can understand and act together on to foster beginning level ELs' "inclusion readiness," identify intermediate level ELs' "challenge zone," and recognize more advanced level ELs' readiness for removal of specialized scaffolds and supports. They guide ELP assessment developers to design language tasks that measure growth of these target language uses, and help content assessment developers to better understand and modulate the language demands of test items and performance tasks. And they inform the formative assessment practices and resources that teachers urgently need in order to learn from EL students and guide their next steps in development.

The systemic implications of these changes for students, parents, teachers, school leaders, and administrators are enormous, yet we believe the new standards require us to undertake these efforts if all of our students are to fully realize their potential.

## **Acknowledgments**

This policy statement was prepared by Robert Linqanti, Kenji Hakuta, and Martha Castellón, and derives from the Understanding Language Initiative Conference presentations, papers, and subsequent conversations among its participants.

Special thanks to Alison Bailey, Gary Cook, Margo Gottlieb, Mikyung Kim-Wolf, and Guadalupe Valdés for their insights and contributions.

The Understanding Language Initiative would like to thank the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for making this work possible. For more information about this brief, please contact **[UnderstandingLanguage@stanford.edu](mailto:UnderstandingLanguage@stanford.edu)**

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