Making language visible in content area classrooms using the WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework

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The resources in the WIDA Standards Framework can be used by content area teachers to attend to the discipline-specific ways language works in their content area.
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WIDA Standards Framework approach to content area teaching

In December 2020, WIDA published a revised edition of the English Language Development (ELD) Standards Framework (henceforth, the WIDA Standards Framework). This new edition provides a renewed commitment to teacher collaboration and integration of content and language to support students in accessing rigorous grade-level curriculum. In addition, it adds a laser-like focus on making language visible through a functional approach to language, specifically Systemic Functional Linguistics (e.g., Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). This functional approach views language as a dynamic system of choices as opposed to a random list of grammar rules devoid of context. Looking at language this way empowers teachers to see language as a resource used in our everyday lives, and in everything we do, from posting on Facebook to teaching about global warming. This approach invites all teachers (not just English as a Second Language Teachers) to take responsibility for making language visible to support their students. This article aims to illustrate how the resources in the WIDA Standards Framework can be used by content area teachers to attend to the discipline-specific ways language works in their content area.

In each content area, there are specific ways we use language, for example in Social Studies we explain causes and consequences of historic events and social issues; in Science, we explain the underlying causes of natural phenomena; in English Language Arts, we interpret literary themes; and in Math we describe an approach used to solve a problem (Brisk, 2015; de Oliveira et al., 2018; Fang, 2005; Shin, 2019). The WIDA Standards Framework groups these ways of using language into four Key Language Uses: Narrate, Inform, Explain, and Argue. These represent high leverage disciplinary genre families that appear in content area standards and in common learning tasks that teachers assign to their students. The table below illustrates this relationship.

What ways of using language do students need to use to meet the demands of the learning tasks?

Each Key Language Use is delineated through a set of Language Expectations specific to that Key Language Use. Language Expectations set goals for content-driven language learning and focus on what language students need to be able to produce (and comprehend) in order to meet

content standards. Language Expectations are represented through Language Functions and Language Features which carry out those functions. Functions tell us what the writer or speaker needs to do in order to meet the purpose of the text. Different Key Language Uses are represented through different functions; for example, the Key Language Use of Explain has functions like "describe valid and reliable evidence" and Argue has functions like "support claims and refute counterclaims." However, naming these functions doesn't tell us how to use language to carry them out. This is where the features come in. Each function has a set of features that may be used to carry out the function. An example of a feature would be "noun groups" such as "The meaning of the American dream" which carries out the function to "Introduce the claim." In the WIDA Standards Framework, there are lists of functions and features that are found with each Language Expectation. These lists of features are meant to be examples and not an exhaustive list, as writers and speakers have many choices that will be appropriate and effective in carrying out functions. In addition, the WIDA Standards Framework illustrates functions and features in context through a series of annotated texts. Annotated texts are a valuable resource for teachers to use to deepen their understanding of the language demands in their discipline.

Sample Learning Tasks or Assignments	Key Language Use
- Imagine you are a soldier in the Civil War. Recreate their experiences, feelings, and fears in a war journal. - Write a short story of an amusing episode from your own life. - What were the pivotal moments in the main character's life? - Write a word problem to match the proof drawing.	**Narrate** Represent real or imagined experiences through stories and histories
- Describe the Ming Dynasty administration of government in the 1400's. - What is the difference between cumulus and cumulonimbus clouds? - Describe the difference between climate and weather. - What does polynomial mean?	**Inform** Communicate factual or generalized information on a topic
- Explain the consequences of the Westward Expansion from 1844-1877. - How do tornadoes form? - Make a poster explaining the consequences of not following our classroom community rules. - Give the domain and range of the relationship. Then tell whether the relation is a function. Explain your answer. $Y=X2 - 5$	**Explain** Give account for how or why things work
- The American Dream is accessible to all. Rebut this position. - Which symbol best represents the United States? - What is an important cause of the Trail of Tears that people should know about today? - What is the common theme in <u>Edward the Emu</u> and <u>Mixed Up Chameleon?</u> Support your opinion with evidence from the text.	**Argue** Justify one's claims using evidence and reasoning

Table 1. Relationship between learning tasks and Key Language Uses

We now turn to an example of an annotated text. This example is from a Grade 10 English Language Arts (ELA) class. Throughout the year the students in the class had been exploring the question "What is the American Dream and who has access to it?" For this learning task, they first read a newspaper article about how underrepresented students in their town do not have equal access to resources for college. Then they wrote an argument which tied the reading to the question. To prepare them for this writing task, the teacher spent several lessons working with students discussing language choices in a mentor text and then jointly constructing one to apprentice students into this genre (For more ideas of activities, see de Oliveira & Westerlund, 2021). See Table 2 below. The student-written text is in the center column. The Functions and Features used in this text from the WIDA Standards Framework are listed on the left and right columns.

Functions and Features	Grade 10 English Language Arts The American Dream	Functions and Features
Introduce and develop precise claims through… Declarative statements to frame the topic, provide background information, state claim ● The meaning...the case. Noun groups to provide details ● The meaning of the American Dream ● a high education ● a well-paying job ● the academic pressures of college A variety of verb tenses to present position and/or provide background information	The meaning of the American Dream varies widely depending on who's talking, but the general idea always remains the same: a high education, a well-paying job, a house, and a family. Ideally, everyone in America has the capability and opportunity to create their own American Dream. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Many Americans struggle with going to college, not because they're not smart enough, but *because of variables like race, family income, and poor guidance.* Right here in Newton, *in spite of the high quality of public schools, students (especially low-income students) don't feel prepared to deal with the financial aspects of college, even if they are capable academically*. **Because of this,** some students drop out of college before graduating, like Pachia Moua from North High School. Moua felt that while high school prepared her for the academic pressures of college, she didn't know enough about the financial aspects of college living, and dropped out because she couldn't pay her bills. And this condition didn't merely apply to Moua. ***According to** the Boston Globe's study,* in Moua's graduating year, only *39 percent of low-income students at North* earned a college degree after six years. When considering that 70 percent of other students received a college degree in that	**Support claims and refute counterclaims with valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence through…** a variety of clauses to support claim ● *Because of variables like race, family income… (Causal clause)* ● *In spite of the high quality of public schools, students don't … (concession clause)* ● *Even if they are … (conditional)* **Logically organize claims, counterclaims, reasons, and evidence, offer conclusions…** Connectors to maintain logical progression ● Because of this… ● According to… ● Since

• earned (past)
• considering (present progressive)
• don't have (present)
• shows (timeless present)
 	
Establish and maintain formal style and objective tone through…
 	
Nouns, adjectives, and adverbs to evaluate the positive/negative qualities of topic, position, or evidence
  • *obvious* (adjective)
  • *severely underprepared* (adverb and adjective)
  • *skews* (verb)
 	
Third person to maintain neutrality
  • *This data*
  • *39 percent of low-income students at North*
	time, there are some *obvious* imbalances in the level of education of students with differing incomes, even when they come from the same high school. And even if these high schools don't have any income gaps between students, there is still a stark difference in college graduation rates of white and Asian students and those of black and Latino students. *This data* shows that even though urban schools in Boston get most of the attention (and funding) for improvement, suburban schools are *severely underprepared* to educate these low-income students on college life and applications.
	
	Since the students from more affluent families don't have to worry as much about bills, housing, and food, suburban schools don't place as much emphasis on teaching students these important skills, and the low-income students suffer. Socioeconomic status *skews* access to the American Dream largely in favor of affluent, white students, even with equal education, because students with different socioeconomic backgrounds need to learn different things in order to succeed in the college environment.
		Cohesive devices
		  • Some students - Moua - she (renaming, pronoun reference)
		  • This data - 70 percent ... degree, stark difference...students (renaming)
		
		Summary statement to reiterate a claim
		  • Socioeconomic status skews access to the American Dream...environment

Table 2. Annotated mentor text illustrating language functions and features

Note: Since this example is an argument for Grade 10 ELA, the functions and features we have annotated in the text below come from ELD Standard Statement 2, Language for Language Arts, Key Language Use Argue, 9-12 (WIDA, 2020, pp. 188-189).

In "The American Dream" argument, the first function the author needs for this text is to *introduce and develop a precise claim*. She does this through declarative statements (an example

of a Feature) to set the context and state the claim. She also uses noun groups (another example of a Feature) like "the meaning of the American Dream" to provide details of her claim. The next function she needs for this text is to *support her claim*. She chooses to do this with a variety of clauses which express cause, concession, and condition. For example, to explain why many Americans struggle with going to college, she uses a causal clause "because of variables like race, family income, and poor guidance." Some functions need to be carried out throughout the text, like this next one, *logically organize claims, counterclaims, reasons, and evidence*. The author carries out this function through connectors which maintain logical progression such as "Because of this" and "According to." She also does this through cohesive devices that refer back to earlier chunks of information such as when she uses the demonstrative "this data." "This data" refers to both "70 percent of students" and "a stark difference in college graduation rates of white and Asian students and those of Black and Latino students." Throughout, she uses a variety of verb tenses to develop her claims, a variety that is typical in argument writing. Another function that needs to be carried out is *establish and maintain formal style and objective tone*. The author does this through adjectives (e.g., "obvious"), adverbs (e.g., "severely") and verbs (e.g., "skew") to evaluate the positive/negative qualities of her topic, position, and evidence. The author ends the piece by fulfilling the last function: *offer a conclusion*.

The process of annotating text answers the question, *What ways of using language do students need to use to do the task?* For example, in the text above, students need a variety of clauses to support their claims, they need connectors to maintain logical progression, and they need nouns, adjectives, and adverbs to evaluate the positive or negative qualities of their position. Once teachers know that, they can plan lessons that expand students' resources to carry out the functions that the texts call upon them to do. Next, we describe some considerations and sample activities teachers can use to make language visible with students.

Considerations for using annotated texts to make language visible with students

Planning

1. Start with a learning task. Figure out what Key Language Use(s) match the learning task.
2. Find an Annotated Text in the WIDA Standards Framework that most closely matches your learning task.
3. Find or write a mentor text for the learning task.
4. Use the WIDA Standards Framework annotated texts to help you identify the language functions and features that the students need to do for your learning task.
5. Choose one or two features that you feel are most important to make visible for your students, e.g., connectors, noun groups, clauses.
6. Design lessons and activities that draw students' attention to those features.

Activities

1. Before focusing on a particular language feature, ask students to look at the whole text first and teach them how the text is organized to meet its purpose. This is best done by contrasting texts and asking students questions such as
   a. Is this a story or an argument? How do we know?

      b.   What in the text shows us this is not a story but an argument?

2. Let students cut up the text and put it back together. This will give them a chance to think about the structure of the whole text.

3. Create word banks of language features that go with the function. For example, to cite sources, students will need reporting verbs. Avoid turning word banks into a static list of vocabulary words posted on the wall. Instead, create activities that deepen students' understanding of how to use words to carry out functions, for example, by having students reorder a list of reporting verbs like the one below (see Figures 1 and 2) from weak to strong. Have a discussion with students about how our language choices create different meanings.

> Said
> Argued
> Suggested
> Contributed
> Claimed
> Contradicted

Figure 1. A list of vocabulary reporting verbs for citing sources in arguments

Weak   Strong

$\longleftarrow\longrightarrow$

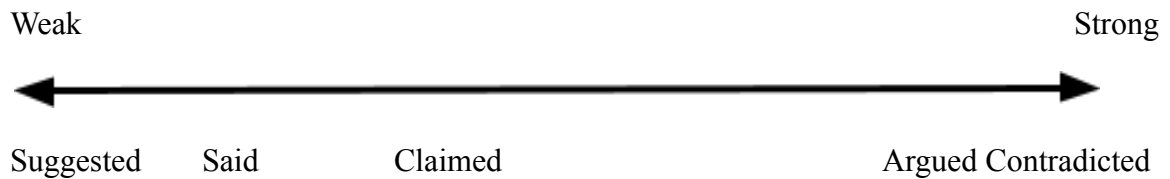Suggested   Said   Claimed   Argued Contradicted

Figure 2. Activity for Class Discussion About Reporting Verbs

4. Teach students that texts are divided into paragraphs for a reason. Explain to them that each paragraph has a unique purpose. Create manipulatives and talk about the purpose each paragraph has.

Background Information Purpose of the paragraph: To prepare your reader for the issue that you are persuading them about	The meaning of the American Dream varies widely depending on who's talking, but the general idea always remains the same: a high education, a well-paying job, a house, and a family.

Claim Purpose of the paragraph: To state what you believe about this issue	Ideally, everyone in America has the capability and opportunity to create their own American Dream. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Evidence Purpose of the paragraph: To support your claim	According to the Boston Globe's study, in Moua's graduating year, only 39 percent of low-income students at North earned a college degree after six years. When considering that 70 percent of other students received a college degree in that time, there are some obvious imbalances in the level of education of students with differing incomes, even when they come from the same high school.

Summary Statement Purposes of the paragraph: To remind the reader of the main points in your argument	Socioeconomic status skews access to the American Dream largely in favor of affluent, white students, even with equal education, because students with different socioeconomic backgrounds need to learn different things in order to succeed in the college environment.

5. Students with lower levels of language proficiency could cut-up the claim statement itself to see its parts. They could move around words and see which words can be moved and which ones can't. They could compare the word order in English to their home languages and have a metalinguistic conversation about how sentences are structured in different languages.

Unfortunately,	the American Dream	is not	accessible to all.

Summary

This article illustrated how content area teachers can use the resources in the WIDA Standards Framework to deepen their own understanding about how language works in the texts they assign their students to read and write. First, we described Key Language Uses through examples of learning tasks teachers assign. Then we used an Annotated Text to illustrate how Language Features carry out specific functions that vary according to the Key Language Use (Argue, Explain, Narrate, and Inform) of the text. Annotated Texts can make language visible and reveal the language demands of disciplinary genres. We concluded with a list of suggested activities teachers can use to draw their students' attention to language and understand how our language choices impact meaning. Ultimately, the aim of this article (and the WIDA Standards Framework) was to develop teachers' knowledge about language in the context of their disciplinary genres.

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Author bios

Ruslana Westerlund is an educational linguist and one of the developers of the WIDA ELD Standards Framework. Ruslana's role was to make language visible and for it to come alive by developing Language Functions and Features and contextualizing them in the annotated language samples. She supports WIDA products and services using Systemic Functional Linguistics and the Teaching and Learning Cycle as a pedagogy of apprenticeship used in her research of disciplinary writing in K-5 classrooms.
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Feature image