CAL practitioner brief

Implementing the Common Core for English Learners

Responses to Common Questions

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Introduction

The recent initiatives to promote college and career readiness through the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have left K–12 educators with many questions. As educators have examined the standards more deeply, concerns have arisen about their implementation in classrooms with diverse groups of students, including English learners. In the course of conducting professional development and other activities designed to improve educational outcomes for English learners, staff at the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) have encountered many questions from educators about integrating the CCSS into content area curricula for English learners. These questions have been raised by English as a second language and bilingual teachers, who are charged with increasingly rigorous grade-level content instruction; by content area teachers, many of whom are newly incorporating language development techniques in their subject area classes; and by administrators, instructional support coaches, and other school staff working to integrate the CCSS into their educational practice. This brief, which is based on CAL's practical experience and academic expertise on language learning and English learners, attempts to answer the questions we have received from these educators.

In considering these questions, it is important to keep in mind that English learners are not a homogenous group of students—they have unique stories and linguistic, educational, and cultural experiences. These students, who are learning content concepts at the same time as they are developing language skills, are doing "double the work" (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007); they have an increased cognitive processing load and might need additional scaffolding of both content and language, including use of their first language, while they acquire academic English. Furthermore, as is true in any population of students, some may have learning differences that affect the instruction they need. Because of this diversity among English learners, instruction to meet the CCSS for this group should be differentiated not only by both language and content, but also on other dimensions reflecting their individual profiles. This process begins with teachers getting to know the backgrounds, experiences, motivations, and interests of the English learners with whom they work (Gonzáles, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

There are many social, cultural, programmatic, political, and other factors that affect the comprehensive achievement of English learners; however, this brief focuses specifically on classroom instruction. It begins by examining the language and literacy demands in the CCSS and describing some key challenges faced by English learners and their teachers as they work to meet these demands. It then addresses five questions related to effective implementation of the CCSS with Eng-

lish learners. The topics addressed represent a synthesis of the questions and concerns raised by educators participating in CAL professional development activities.

Language and Literacy Demands in the CCSS

Language and literacy demands are embedded throughout the CCSS (van Lier & Walqui, 2012). While it is difficult to compare the CCSS to the prior standards of each of the adopting states, there are general trends that reflect shifts in instructional emphases. In this section, we will outline three of the major shifts: a greater emphasis on language and literacy across content instruction, a shift toward using more informational (nonfiction) text, and a focus on argumentation.

A Focus on Language and Literacy

The most significant shift reflected in the CCSS is the focus on language and literacy development across all content areas and grade levels. For many mainstream content teachers, focusing on students' language development—particularly speaking and listening—may represent an instructional change. Teachers will need to purposefully integrate speaking and listening skills into content instruction more than is currently typical. Helping students learn to speak about and listen to content in English will also support development of the students' reading and writing skills; research demonstrates the important connection between oral language development and reading comprehension (August & Shanahan, 2006; Lesaux, Crosson, Kieffer, & Pierce, 2010).

This shift toward integrating language and content instruction may require professional development and guided practice for teachers. They need to learn to recognize the language embedded in a particular topic, to select the language features most appropriate for instruction, and to identify strategies to help students learn these features. Additionally, teachers will need to conduct formative assessments of these language skills to ensure that new language skills are mastered and to prepare students for standardized assessment of these skills (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, 2013). For example, as a formative assessment of speaking, teachers may keep a checklist or rubric of targeted language forms and tally the number of times individual students or small groups use them.

Research on second language acquisition offers promising solutions for emphasizing language and literacy in the content area classroom. Effective second language instruction focuses on context-embedded instruction and authentic task-based practices (Lightbown & Spada, 2006) rather than on rote memorization or verb conjugations. In the K–12 classroom, the concept of the lesson or text provides the context; the task can be an activity such as a science investigation or a math project.

Language learners also need authentic opportunities to interact in the target language and with native speakers of the target language (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Teachers need to require and scaffold academic language use, giving students authentic reasons to communicate and the skills to apply their academic language to contexts beyond the classroom. Academic language is defined broadly as the cross-curricular and discipline-specific language needed to be successful in school, including vocabulary, morphology, grammatical structures, turn-taking in conversations, and more (Anstrom et. al., 2010). Content lessons should incorporate guidance for students to practice oral and written academic language, such as by providing sentence starters in graphic organizers or posted on the wall (e.g., "My hypothesis is . . . ," "The outcome that I least expected was . . . ").

Some patterned structures and discourse features like the examples above are more prevalent in certain content areas (Anstrom et al., 2010), and teachers will need more guidance to recognize, instruct, and formatively assess these patterns. Although teachers may target specific academic language structures for students to practice, they should tailor their expectations based on factors such as students' language proficiency or the complexity of the topic. Particularly for difficult topics with language that is new to the students, or for beginner and intermediate English learners, teachers should accept all language forms and focus on meaning to avoid stifling authentic speech.

Another helpful strategy in integrating content and language instruction is to prepare, post, and orally present language objectives for students along with content objectives (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2012; Himmel, 2012). By writing, posting, and reviewing language objectives, teachers can better communicate, help students meet, and formatively assess mastery of the new language demands in the CCSS.

A Shift in Text Type

The CCSS recommend that informational texts be used for instruction in the English language arts classroom as well as in other content areas. According to the CCSS, the distribution of text types used in the classroom should reflect the distribution of text types in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2009 reading framework—that is, informational texts should comprise 50% of all reading in 4th grade, 55% in 8th grade, and 70% in 12th grade (National Governors Association, 2010b). This shift provides opportunities for students to develop content knowledge and language skills simultaneously but will require attention to various informational text types and language structures that differ from those found in fiction.

Students should be exposed to a wide variety of informational text types across content areas, including biographies, technical reports,

speeches, and other primary sources. In addition to attending to textual features, teachers can build bridges between students' practices and classroom learning goals by learning about and acknowledging students' own literacy practices involving informational texts from home and prior schooling (Heath, 1983; Street, 1985; Sweeny, 2010). Drawing attention to the features of school-based literacy tasks can help students navigate and gain fluency with them (Gibbons, 2002). Additionally, it is important to recognize that informational texts used in the United States may present information differently from texts that English learners know in their first language or culture. For instance, among the informational texts recommended by the CCSS, students are expected to read political cartoons, editorial pieces, and advertisements—texts that may differ significantly according to the sociopolitical context and degree of freedom of the press in the student's country of origin. While direct attention to these differences should be made for English learners, all students might benefit from exposure to texts from a variety of countries, allowing them to identify the features that make them distinct and to gain authentic information about other cultures and contexts (Short, 2013).

A Focus on Argumentation

The writing standards of the CCSS represent a shift in the communicative purposes of traditional student writing. A review by the groups drafting the standards revealed that college and career writing predominantly involve persuasion, explanation, and conveying experience. To align with these findings and with the NAEP, the CCSS promote argumentation across content areas and grade levels, in both the oral language standards and in writing, particularly at the high school level. The act of argumentation is considered essential for students to acquire the authentic practices of literate adults, which include, for example, writing opinion letters, citing textual or scientific evidence for a claim, and defending a thesis statement. Research demonstrates that students bring skills in everyday argumentation to the classroom (Berland & Reiser, 2009; Bricker & Bell, 2011); teachers can build upon these skills to help students learn to construct arguments in the context of specific disciplines and for specific academic purposes. Students' backgrounds and comfort communicating in English will influence their level of comfort with argumentation. Drawing attention to the ways that arguments are constructed in particular disciplinary contexts can help students learn those specific argumentation patterns and genres and become more familiar with this form of communication.

Because the kinds of evidence required for argumentation differ across disciplines, teachers should show students how to identify appropriate kinds of evidence for the subject area in which they're working (e.g., referring to textual evidence in language arts or social studies,

using measurements in science, citing the order of operations in math). Students should be made explicitly aware of the different forms of argumentation appropriate to each academic discipline, the process of building and exchanging arguments respectfully within the classroom, and the language embedded in each stage of this process. When targeting the skill of argumentation, teachers should capitalize on the way that the four language skills are interrelated, having students detect the forms of argumentation when listening or reading and then having them produce argumentation through speaking and writing tasks. Each language domain will reinforce the others, building students' language skills and abilities to express content knowledge.

Ideas for the Classroom

In this section, we describe practical ideas for the classroom based on the language and literacy demands in the CCSS.

Focus on Language and Literacy. Rather than focus on isolated lists of vocabulary or grammatical forms, meaningful instruction of academic language should be integrated within content instruction. For example, students might learn conditional phrases to predict the genetic makeup of offspring, the meaning of the suffix *–or* in math (e.g., *denominator, divisor*), or the way comparative phrases (*more or less/fewer than*) are used in persuasive text. Learning these language forms in the context of performing specific tasks helps learners acquire the content concepts and express their knowledge of those concepts. Integrating language and content also provides students with authentic reasons to communicate. For example, a student might need to explain to a partner how to solve a word problem, persuade the class that a particular bridge is the best possible model, or describe a favorite part of a book in a letter to the author.

Teachers can draw on the CCSS and state English language development standards as a resource when planning their language objectives. Displayed and reviewed alongside content objectives, language objectives should reflect a broad definition of academic language; they should not merely list the vocabulary to be learned. For example, one of the third grade math standards (CCSS.Math.Content.3.NF.A.3d) calls for students to be able to "compare two fractions with the same numerator or the same denominator by reasoning about their size"; one of the substandards is for students to justify their conclusions by using a visual model. A teacher might prepare for a related lesson by thinking about the language of comparison and justification embedded in the math problems and tasks that the students will encounter. Depending on instructional tasks and goals for that lesson, these are two possible language objectives: "Students will be able to label a model of two fractions with the denominator and numerator" or "Students will

Tips for Teaching Language and Literacy in the Content Classroom

- Integrate all four language skills—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—into content instruction.
- Select academic language features embedded in the content as targets for language instruction.
- Provide authentic opportunities to interact in the target language and with native speakers.
- Encourage the use of target academic language in classroom tasks, but accept all language forms when students participate, focusing on meaning.
- Scaffold academic language use by modeling and by providing sentence stems or resources such as glossaries.
- Formatively and summatively assess academic language development as well as content mastery.
- Plan, display, and review language objectives.
- Use a variety of informational text types.
- Analyze texts for academic language structures to select key features for instruction.
- Develop lesson plans that include opportunities for argumentation.
- Make connections between students' everyday argumentation skills and academic argumentation in the content areas.
- Model forms of argumentation with specific language structures and sentence stems.
- Give students opportunities to practice the forms of argumentation through speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

be able to compare two fractions orally to a partner using *greater than, less than, or equal to.*"

In terms of error correction, teachers should focus primarily on language forms that are a specific target of instruction. Consider a language arts lesson during which the teacher does a mini-lesson on the use of conditional phrases when making predictions about books based on their covers. While students are in their guided reading groups, the teacher will remind them to use the conditional tense, formatively assess their usage by tallying instances when students use it correctly, and correct their use of the conditional as needed. However, the teacher will be judicious about correcting other linguistic errors unless they impede understanding or are related to the comprehension of text.

Shift in Text Type. Each informational text type has specific academic language features. For example, informational text types in science class might include texts explaining scientific phenomena, with timeless verbs in the simple present tense (e.g., *rotates, adapt*); texts explaining the steps of a lab experiment, with procedural terms such as *measure* and *pour* or sequencing terms such as *first, next, following;* and reports describing experimental findings, with frequent use of the passive voice (e.g., *was caused by, were dissolved by, it was concluded that*) (based on Schleppegrell, 2004). Students should learn the specific academic language features of various text types, noting how these may be similar or different across content areas, and practice these features through listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities. For example, to prepare to read the biography of a famous composer, students may learn about the sequencing terms, past tense, and transitional phrases typically used in biographical narrative. Before reading a text about musical instruments, students may learn about the language of compare and contrast. In physical education, students might read a newspaper column describing a baseball game and learn the expressions by reenacting the game play by play (e.g., *she circled the bases, he hit a walk-off homer, they were trailing by 2, the team overcame the deficit*). While learning about slavery, the suffragette movement, or the Trail of Tears, students may describe in writing how various groups made their claims for more rights, citing evidence from primary sources such as songs, protest banners, and letters. To incorporate their digital and home literacies, students could post their thoughts about current political events on Facebook or Twitter before conveying these ideas in more formal academic writing.

Informational texts also have culture-specific features. For example, consider descriptions of causes and effects, which can be conceived of quite differently depending on the cultural context. An example would be texts describing the root causes of devastation inflicted by

natural disasters such as earthquakes or floods. Whereas in one context the causes might be described in relation to features and processes of the natural world (e.g., geology, meteorology), in another context the causes might be described in terms of divine or other spiritual factors, and in yet another context in terms of societal factors such as poor engineering of buildings or lack of assistance from the government. To help students make the connection to ways of describing causes and effects that are unfamiliar to them, teachers can ask them which kinds of causes they think might apply to a particular instance of devastation from a natural disaster, respectfully acknowledging different approaches to the topic, then conveying the form of cause and effect relevant to the instructional context. Instructing students on how to discuss cause and effect in the particular academic and discipline-specific context can help them learn not only how to comprehend informational text but also how to interpret it in a way that is appropriate to the context.

Focus on Argumentation. When targeting the skill of argumentation, a teacher might scaffold learning for English learners by prompting students to list the ways in which they use argumentation in everyday life, such as debating which basketball team is the best or whether the school's recycling program is effective. A teacher might post and model sentence starters such as "We think that . . . because . . . ," "Our evidence is . . . ," or "I disagree because . . ." to help students state claims, cite evidence, and pose rebuttals with justifications. Working with a partner or in a group, students could choose one of the areas of argumentation that they listed and engage in a debate using these sentence stems. To connect to the content topic, a teacher might have the students watch a video where scientists are discussing their findings using argumentation, then distribute a transcript and draw students' attention to the different parts of a scientific argument, such as claims, warrants (i.e., reasons), and rebuttals, guiding the students to highlight these three parts with different colors. As a formative assessment, the teacher can observe and record students' use of the sentence stems during activities such as a lab experiment and writing a lab report. Based on the information gathered, the teacher can determine how to modify the sentence stems and how best to incorporate them in future instruction.

Responses to Common Questions

Now that we have outlined overall language and literacy demands in the CCSS, we will turn to specific questions that have been posed to us by teachers charged with implementing the standards in classrooms that include English learners. For each question, we begin by providing a response; we then offer some ideas for the classroom.

Tips for Teaching the Conventions of Standard English

- Design lessons around content standards with intellectually challenging content.
- Consult the CCSS and your state's English language proficiency standards for grade-level standards on the conventions of English.
- Determine which conventions of English are embedded in the content of a particular lesson.
- Instruct students in the conventions of standard English using examples related to the content.
- Expose students to the conventions of standard English in reading, writing, speaking, and listening.
- Design lessons to allow students to practice and apply the conventions of standard English.
- Formatively assess students' acquisition of these conventions.

The CCSS refer to the "conventions of standard English." Does that mean I should explicitly teach grammar using traditional methods?

Research on second language acquisition indicates that direct grammar teaching and practice through traditional methods (e.g., worksheets with grammar drills) do not improve learners' fluency, communicative abilities, or comprehension in English (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). The focus of K–12 instruction should be on academic content and on development of language within that meaningful context. The conventions of standard English, including grammar, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling, should therefore be taught as embedded in the content and practiced through meaningful activities. Teachers should identify the conventions that are used to communicate effectively in a particular discipline and give students opportunities to learn, practice, and apply those language forms while involved in authentic content study.

Language learning is a risk-taking endeavor. Teachers can help English learners maintain the confidence to participate in class by focusing on communication and content concepts rather than on accuracy of form. Feedback on any misuse of targeted language forms must be tailored to the student's language proficiency and the context of the error. Corrective feedback is a complex process dependent on numerous student and instructional factors (Ellis, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2006), including whether the student demonstrates mastery of the content, whether the error involves a language form that was a target of instruction, and whether the student has sufficient proficiency in the language to use the targeted feature correctly. Ultimately, self-correction is more conducive to language learning (Ellis, 2008). Context may also affect the accuracy of students' use of language features. For example, students may use instructed grammar forms correctly in isolation (e.g., on worksheets), but this accuracy may or may not transfer to authentic communication in content instruction, particularly if time has elapsed since instruction (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). This is why it is more effective for students to practice language in the kinds of authentic contexts in which they will eventually be using that language.

Ideas for the Classroom. Lessons should still be designed primarily around content standards with engaging, intellectually challenging instruction. Once teachers have identified their content, they should consult the CCSS and their state's English language development standards to consider how to integrate the relevant conventions of standard English into their lesson and how to present and engage students with those language features. For example, when studying fables, the teacher might target the use of imperative verbs (commands) for

instruction, because imperatives are used to impart the moral of the story. The teacher may draw attention to the use of imperative verbs first through a mini-lesson and guided practice, then extended to classroom activities in other content areas that focus on specific language skills: for example, close reading of a manual (focus on reading skills), viewing of a video clip or teacher demonstration using the embedded structures of imperative verbs (focus on listening skills), role plays or hands-on investigations with imperative verbs (focus on speaking skills), or a project to make a how-to brochure on a subject using verbs in the correct form (focus on writing skills).

Certain language conventions are associated with a given topic or discipline. For example, geographers use prepositional phrases to express directionality; artists use descriptive language, including comparative adjectives, when engaging in art criticism; and poets use the passive voice to evoke a certain mood (Anstrom et al., 2010). Given that some students may hear academic English only in school, it is important for them to be exposed to and have opportunities to use the conventions that will allow them to communicate about the concepts they are learning. As a target of instruction, these conventions should also be formatively assessed. Attention to the language conventions is a way to facilitate access to content. The more students are listening to, speaking, reading, and writing these language forms, the better they will comprehend and use the language that gives them access to grade-level content concepts.

Some of my students are still learning English. Can they meaningfully engage in activities that are aligned with the CCSS?

Students with emergent and developing English can indeed participate meaningfully in CCSS-aligned activities with the proper supports. They should not be held back from grade-level content because that could lead to missing years of rigorous and intellectually challenging instruction. They would also miss exposure to an environment that is rich in language and the opportunity to engage meaningfully with the content and with more proficient speakers. In a supplement to the CCSS, the authors state their belief in holding all students to high standards but emphasize that "English learners may require additional time, appropriate instructional support, and aligned assessments as they acquire both English language proficiency and content area knowledge" (National Governors Association, 2010a). While students are in the process of learning English, teachers will need to differentiate instruction for both language and content. Learning as much as possible about the ways in which their students use language can contribute significantly to teachers' ability to build bridges for students to learn new content and language skills.

Tips for Engaging Beginning English Learners in CCSS-Aligned Instruction

- Learn about English learners' first language knowledge and use.
- Learn about English learners' prior content knowledge and life experiences.
- Focus on meaning, not accuracy, to build students' confidence to participate and share their understanding.
- Promote higher order thinking skills for all students, including beginning English learners.
- Shelter instruction by making content concepts accessible while developing academic language skills.
- Differentiate instruction according to language proficiency and educational background as needed.
- Consider the prerequisite skills at lower grades of the CCSS when necessary.
- Encourage students to use their first language to express content understanding.
- Distinguish between content knowledge and language skills when assessing student progress.

Although their communication in English may not yet perfectly represent the conventions of standard English, English learners can demonstrate their content knowledge and repertoire of learning strategies. Not having to worry about complete accuracy builds their confidence and motivation—key factors in language acquisition (Ellis, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2006). In fact, as the authors of the CCSS state, it is possible to achieve all strands of the standards "without manifesting native-like control of conventions and vocabulary" (National Governors Association, 2010b). Teachers must promote higher order thinking and engagement in challenging content even with beginning English learners while providing exposure to and opportunities to produce complex, elaborate speech and text (Wong Fillmore & Fillmore, 2012).

English learners should be encouraged, whenever possible, to use their first languages to help them understand both English and classroom content. Students who have learned grade-level concepts or who have had other relevant experiences can act as content resources for all students in the class. Some students may arrive in class with limited formal education or may have attended schools that covered different topics or introduced concepts at different grade levels than in their current school. So despite arriving with rich funds of knowledge based on their past experience, some students may need support to build bridges between their prior knowledge and the content concepts outlined in the CCSS. Teachers will need to learn as much as possible about their students so they can provide appropriate supports and differentiation. They will also need to recognize the value of students' life experiences and encourage their contributions to the classroom content and community.

Ideas for the Classroom. One approach to providing access to grade-level content for English learners is sheltered instruction. Sheltered instruction makes grade-level content accessible to English learners while developing their academic language skills (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2012). Scaffolds for building language development in content classrooms include providing students with graphic organizers, encouraging interaction through purposeful groupings (sometimes more homogeneous and, at other times, more heterogeneous depending on the objectives of the lesson, including considerations for grouping by native language or English proficiency levels), explicitly teaching learning strategies, making vocabulary word walls with contextualizing pictures of the terms, and modeling features of academic conversations (Zwiers & Crawford, 2009). Teachers should differentiate instruction according to students' language proficiency and educational background, in some cases looking at prerequisite skills at lower grades of the CCSS in order to scaffold instruction to meet students' needs.

Assessments should also distinguish between language proficiency and content mastery (Abedi & Linquanti, 2012) so that teachers do not mistake the inability to express newly learned concepts or skills as a lack of conceptual understanding. Beginning English learners will need opportunities to demonstrate their learning in less verbally dependent ways, such as pointing, acting out, or drawing; however, these scaffolds or accommodations should be gradually withdrawn to help students develop their English skills. Evaluating students with a rubric that separates content standards from language and literacy standards is one way teachers can determine whether students have mastered the content concepts and areas of focus for language instruction. For example, teachers can check not only the calculations and responses to a word problem, but also whether students justified their answers using previously taught statements such as "I multiplied because . . . " or "I knew this required division because . . . ." Students may also evaluate their own work using the same rubric so that they can see their development in terms of both content and language and set their own learning objectives.

According to the CCSS, students have to independently engage in close reading of complex grade-level text. Should I still build background knowledge?

In a word, yes. Before asking students to engage in a close reading of text, teachers should uncover what students already know, in terms of both the content and the language of the text. The teachers can then make connections with students' existing knowledge and build new background knowledge where there are gaps, providing both content and linguistic information that students can use to access the text.

The CCSS have increased expectations for students to be college and career ready. This is evident in the increased text complexity recommended for each grade-level span. Research has indicated that the texts students have been exposed to over the last half century have been decreasing in complexity, while workplace and college academic texts have remained at the same level of difficulty. Students have furthermore not been consistently expected to read independently (National Governors Association, 2010b, Appendix A). To ensure that each student is able to read texts at college and career levels of complexity before exiting 12th grade, the CCSS have developed a new scale of text difficulty using quantitative and qualitative methods (National Governors Association, 2010b, Appendix A). By the end of each grade, students are expected to be reading and comprehending appropriately complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently. Text vocabulary, sentence structure, coherence, organization, and requisite background knowledge are all features that make texts challenging (Shanahan, Fisher, & Frey, 2012), and teachers should draw students'

Tips for Engaging English Learners With Complex Text

- Build background knowledge for both content and language before students read a text.
- Explicitly teach vocabulary that is critical to understanding text and useful across academic contexts.
- Connect texts and topics to students' personal experiences.
- Make texts available that reflect students' experiences and interests.
- Elicit students' prior content knowledge.
- Encourage students to use their first language as a resource.

attention directly to these aspects of text complexity by pre-teaching the elements and by scaffolding access to the content. As they learn to read in English, English learners may need additional assistance reading grade-level texts. Some students will benefit from reading texts from lower grade levels independently to build fluency in English. But even English learners who have grade-level decoding skills may not understand what they read if they are not familiar with the vocabulary or grammatical structures or have limited experiences with the content of the text. All students need literacy instruction that attends to meaning first, including explicit development of vocabulary (Graves, August, & Mancilla-Martinez, 2013), and that builds on oral language.

The CCSS state that students should be able to read proficiently within the specified grade complexity range "by the end of the year." This suggests that earlier in the year, students will need scaffolding of both the content and the academic language in order to read and comprehend grade-level text. English learners with beginning-level proficiency or limited formal schooling will need additional scaffolding. Scaffolds for helping English learners access complex text include making connections with their experiences, eliciting prior content knowledge, and building background knowledge. Research suggests that connecting text and content topics to students' personal lives boosts their achievement (Gonzáles, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Less background building will be needed if students have options to read texts that reflect their lives, cultures, experiences, and interests.

Ideas for the Classroom. Many teachers are familiar with assessing student background knowledge through activities such as a KWL (Know–Want to know–Learned) chart. But it is important to make explicit connections between that knowledge and the classroom content and to build additional background knowledge for students who need it. In an English language arts classroom, for example, imagine that a key detail from a novel hinges on the fact that a person was out of breath from hiking. In this case, comprehension can be supported before reading by eliciting students' background knowledge with a simple question for discussion (e.g., *Has anyone ever hiked up a mountain?*), by making connections to students' lives by comparing photos of mountains or hills in the school's region with those in some students' home countries, and by building all students' background knowledge with a short video showing what hiking looks and feels like.

Before reading texts in any content area, teachers can build and connect to students' English language knowledge by directly preteaching vocabulary, language structures, and discourse forms embedded in the lesson. For instance, in math, word problems often refer to shopping, sales, and coupons, which may be unfamiliar to students. Teach-

ers may build background knowledge by teaching the terms *discount, $2.00 off, or the total price comes to.* Then they might have students act out the word problems using terms and language forms typical of a shopping interaction, then ask them to write their own word problems with these terms. Building background about aspects of shopping in the United States may be essential for English learners to understand the math operation required to solve the problem. Moreover, if teachers use students' first languages and experiences as resources (e.g., through cognate instruction or the use of translation dictionaries), they add to the strategies that students can use to become independent learners who possess metalinguistic awareness (Graves, August, & Mancilla-Martinez, 2013). Thus, building background to help English learners comprehend complex texts should include making connections to existing knowledge and skills as well as providing instruction in new knowledge and skills.

The CCSS for English language arts include recommended texts. Are these texts appropriate for English learners? What other kinds of texts should I use? How can I help English learners decode and comprehend texts at the recommended level of complexity?

The CCSS include a list of suggested texts at each grade span according to text type. While teachers may use the CCSS recommended texts as examples, the list is not intended to be exclusive, and the texts are not always appropriate for English learners because of the learners' language proficiency or reading levels. Additionally, the suggested texts do not reflect the diversity of English learners' experiences and knowledge. The CCSS authors explain that these "exemplary [texts] expressly do not represent a partial or complete reading list" (National Governors Association, 2010b, Appendix B). Rather, the texts listed exemplify the complexity, high quality, and range of materials that the CCSS require students to be engaged with at their grade level. The texts were identified both qualitatively and quantitatively as being complex at the recommended grade level. (Appendix A of the CCSS explains this process.)

Although the recommended texts for a grade-level span may be inaccessible at the independent reading level for some English learners, it is important for these students to access complex text in order to further develop their language and literacy skills and learn grade-level concepts. Otherwise, they are denied exposure to the very language that they are aiming to acquire (Wong Fillmore & Fillmore, 2012). At the same time, students at less advanced levels of proficiency will need scaffolding to do close readings of the text. Examples of this scaffolding include shared reading and think-alouds (Stahl, 2012). The authors of the CCSS also note that professional judgment can be used to select texts

Tips for Selecting Appropriate Texts for English Learners

- Make text selections based on individual readers and their language proficiency and reading level.
- Engage students with various text types and genres.
- Provide and scaffold access to complex text.
- Provide experiences with books that portray individuals from a variety of cultures.
- When students are gaining fluency, word recognition, and decoding skills in English, refer to the CCSS K–5 foundational reading skills.

based on individual readers and the tasks involved in reading (National Governors Association, 2010b, Appendix A), recognizing that not all readers have the same background, motivations, interests, and experiences. In addition to requiring scaffolding for comprehension, all students (not just English learners) need to be engaged with various text types and genres and with texts that represent different cultural backgrounds and varieties of English (Hughes-Hassell, Koehler, & Barkley, 2010; Landt, 2011).

Ideas for the Classroom. To promote meaningful English fluency, word recognition, and decoding practice for English learners, teachers may need to refer to the CCSS K–5 foundational reading skills standards and promote the independent reading of texts at levels below the recommended grade-level span. If given the opportunity, students who are literate in their first language may choose to read challenging texts in the first language, bringing one in from home or choosing one from the school library if available. After a guided mini-lesson in English from the teacher, who might also assign a question for students to answer following the reading (e.g., *Where does the author provide a detailed description of one of the characters?*), students could read their chosen native-language book, then demonstrate comprehension by responding to the assigned question in English. Students should also engage with books that portray individuals from a variety of cultures, including their own. Within and beyond the English language arts curriculum, classroom reading materials should represent various modes of expression and perspectives and honor students' home languages and cultures. Incorporating texts representative of students' home lives enhances motivation and feelings of belonging, enabling students to make greater connections to the text (Landt, 2011), including text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections (Hughes-Hassell, Koehler, & Barkley, 2010).

English learners may require scaffolding in order to read and comprehend texts at the level of complexity recommended by the CCSS. One scaffolding strategy for close reading involves class analysis of a single sentence (Wong Fillmore & Fillmore, 2012). For example, as students read from a challenging text such as one of the autobiographical stories of Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (1921), *The School Days of an Indian Girl,* the teacher might select one sentence for further analysis. The sentence "I despised the pencils that moved automatically, and the one teaspoon which dealt out, from a large bottle, healing to a row of variously ailing Indian children" might be segmented and discussed as follows: (a) I despised the pencils that moved automatically, (b) and the one teaspoon which dealt out, (c) from a large bottle, (d) healing to a row of variously ailing Indian children.

By segmenting the sentence into manageable units with meaning, the teacher can do a think-aloud or encourage students to get meaning from each part before linking the pieces to derive overall meaning. When looking at a science question embedded in a text—*Which of the following explains the four seasons?*—a teacher might analyze by doing a think-aloud of the meaning of *Which of the following* and the verb *explains.* In the lower grades, a sentence such as *Caterpillars turn into butterflies, while tadpoles turn into frogs* can be analyzed for the meaning of the connecting word *while* that marks the meaning of the entire sentence as one of contrast. Although students may not have the fluency to read these texts independently, they are being exposed to and interacting with grade-level complex text with support.

The CCSS do not address the first languages of English learners. Are there ways to incorporate students' first languages in instruction and still meet the objectives of the Common Core?

Incorporating students' first languages is a powerful tool in developing their academic language skills and in helping them meet CCSS objectives. Studies show that second generation youth who maintain connections to their home culture, and who are able to speak the home language of their grandparents, perform better academically and show more pro-social behaviors in school (Tannenbaum & Berkovich, 2005). For emergent bilinguals, using the first language is an effective strategy for learning new information (Centeno-Cortés & Jiménez, 2004). Because academic concepts or skills acquired in one language are transferable to a second language (Ellis, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2006), it makes sense for students to be given the opportunity, wherever feasible, to learn concepts or acquire skills in their first language while they continue to master English. Using the first language to support instruction is also a sheltering strategy for English learners in general education classrooms (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2012).

Emergent bilinguals sometimes think in their native language and use the linguistic structures and vocabulary from the language(s) they know to make sense of English. To support this strategy, it is important for teachers to acknowledge students' first languages as resources and, when possible, to build bridges for students to learn new content and language skills. For example, while emergent bilingual students are working on content, teachers may encourage them to engage in translanguaging—that is, to draw from their bilingual repertoires to use both languages to express concepts (García, 2011). Translanguaging is natural for anyone who understands more than one language, but there are specific strategies that can be used in the classroom by both students and teachers to enhance this linguistic practice (García, 2011).

Tips for Integrating Students' First Languages Into Classroom Instruction

- Incorporate students' first languages in instruction whenever possible with the help of bilingual aides, parent helpers, cognate awareness activities, bilingual dictionaries, and online resources.
- Encourage students to preview, summarize, and respond to content lessons in their first language.
- Encourage students to use their first language through reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities in the classroom.
- For Spanish–English dual language programs, consult the translated versions of the CCSS.
- For dual language programs, purposefully plan to build on and reinforce skills in both languages without repeating content.

English learners in bilingual or dual language programs have opportunities to learn grade-level content in their native language. However, when using the CCSS to design instruction in a language other than English, teachers may need to provide scaffolds based on students' academic language proficiency in that language, just as they would for English-medium instruction. In addition, there are cross-linguistic considerations that affect the use of standards for instruction. Teachers in dual language and bilingual programs will need to be knowledgeable about building on and reinforcing skills across the two languages of instruction without repeating content (Mid-Atlantic Equity Center, 2011). Specifically, there are language arts standards that are transferrable across languages (such as standards regarding concepts of print or determining the author's purpose), some that are transferrable across languages that have a similar orthography (such as standards regarding consonants and vowels, capital and lower case letters), and some that are not transferrable (such as standards on morphology—the smallest units of meaning—like the –s that signifies plurality in English). These cross-linguistic considerations are illustrated in recent efforts to translate and augment the CCSS for instruction in Spanish, the non-English language most commonly used in bilingual and dual language settings (Mid-Atlantic Equity Center, 2011; San Diego County Office of Education, 2013).

Ideas for the Classroom. There are several ways to encourage translanguaging practices and incorporate students' home languages into instruction even when formal instruction in those languages is not part of the program:

- Have students preview content in their first language before reading a passage or hearing a lecture in English

- Have students summarize or respond to a reading passage in their first language

- Encourage students to use their first language to discuss content with their classmates or to draft their ideas

- Have students complete some or all assignments related to content in their first language

- Identify a bilingual teacher, peer, or paraprofessional to help a student by translating key information

- Invite parent volunteers to record books in the first language for listening centers and then have students retell the stories in English

- Ask students to use their home language to complete the prior knowledge (K) column of a KWL chart in their home language and the information learned column (L) at the end of the unit in English

- Have students read primary sources in their first language and take notes in English

It is important to recognize that if a concept is new to students, they may not have the vocabulary for it in their first language. So when they are reading a text on that topic in their first language, they should be provided with a dictionary or other supports in their home language. Certain digital apps allow teachers to input oral or typed information in English and have it translated into a variety of languages. Materials such as bilingual textbooks, bilingual dictionaries, and online videos in languages other than English can also help clarify information.

Conclusion

While the CCSS present challenges, they also provide opportunities for English learners and their teachers. The CCSS promote attention to language in the content areas for all students, thus English learners may now be more likely to experience language-focused instruction in content classrooms, the school setting in which they spend most of their time. The simultaneous attention to content and language may facilitate interdisciplinary instruction and closer collaboration between ESL and content teachers, potentially also promoting co-teaching models. Additionally, although implementation of the CCSS and the content curriculum is different in each state and district, students who move across state lines may benefit from the common attention to language across the curriculum and from common standards.

While there are many considerations beyond the classroom that affect CCSS implementation, including state policy, school leadership, professional development opportunities, and the development of new standardized tests, this brief has focused on the instructional considerations involved in helping English learners meet these new standards. There are many resources and recommendations emerging on best practices for instruction, assessment, and curriculum aligned with the CCSS; however, teachers will ultimately be the true experts on implementation. Subject area teachers, who are familiar with grade-level content concepts, can learn to identify the language features that are associated with the expression of those concepts. Language teachers can share their expertise on language and benefit from the integration of language with grade-level content. Both groups, as well as school leaders, will need professional development on effective implementation of the CCSS for English learners. The integration of grade-level content concepts with techniques for developing the academic language and literacy skills of students provides educational opportunities for all students, and is especially beneficial for English learners.

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