

WIDA 2020 Edition: Conceptual Shifts for English Language Proficiency or Development Standards Aligned with Content Standards

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This article highlights conceptual shifts underlying WIDA 2020 as the latest English language proficiency or development (ELP/ELD) standards aligned with content standards. Specifically, the article promotes awareness and understanding of ELP/ELD standards that have largely remained on the margins of language education policy. We begin by describing the policy context for WIDA 2020. Then, we highlight two key conceptual shifts related to language learners in content areas: (a) shifts in terminology for language learners and (b) shifts in conceptions of content and language. Next, we illustrate how these shifts manifest in WIDA 2020. Finally, we discuss implications for policy, research, and practice.

Keywords: language education policy, multilingual learners, language learners, content and language integration, English language proficiency standards

For the education system to move forward, it is critical that policy, research, and practice are in agreement and mutually support one another. English language proficiency or development (ELP/ELD) standards sit at the intersection of policy, research, and practice for language learners in content areas. Starting from the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and continuing into the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, each state must adopt ELP standards (the term used in federal legislation). The ESSA states that ELP standards must meet three requirements:

Each State plan shall demonstrate that the State has adopted English language proficiency standards that—(i) are derived from the 4 recognized domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing; (ii) address the different proficiency levels

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of English learners; and (iii) are aligned with the challenging State academic standards. (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 24)

Development of ELP/ELD standards that meet the ESSA requirements faces two major challenges. One is that the language education community does not have broad agreement on what language is and how language is developed in content areas (Valdés et al., 2014). In the absence of such broad agreement, there are multiple sets of ELP/ELD standards, each with different conceptual underpinnings (Lee, 2018, 2019). The other major challenge is that ELP/ELD standards must align with content standards that continue to evolve with conceptual shifts in content area education. As content standards evolve, ELP/ELD standards must likewise evolve to align with each new generation of content standards.

The *WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020 Edition* (hereafter WIDA 2020) is the latest set of ELP/ELD standards that seeks to address these challenges. WIDA 2020 embodies key conceptual shifts in the fields of content area education and language education that emphasize an asset-oriented view of language learners and a conception of language for content learning (Molle & Wilfrid, 2021). In making these conceptual shifts, WIDA 2020 meets the ESSA requirements for ELP standards and goes beyond them. It is noted that while the ESSA refers to ELP standards, the WIDA Consortium refers to ELD standards: "Since 2012, WIDA has referred to its language standards as language development to describe the process over time rather than language proficiency that points to performance at a point in time" (WIDA, 2020, p. 263). In this article, we use ELP standards, ELD standards, and ELP/ELD standards as appropriate.

The purpose of this article is to highlight conceptual shifts underlying WIDA 2020 as the latest ELP/ELD standards aligned with content standards across English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. Specifically, this article promotes awareness and understanding of ELP/ELD standards that have largely remained on the margins of language education policy (e.g., Grapin & Kim, 2025; Morita-Mullaney, 2017). This is despite evidence suggesting that ELP/ELD standards developed by multistate consortia (e.g., WIDA Consortium) have substantial buy-in among educators (Desimone et al., 2019) and may therefore be significant levers for improving practice with language learners. Promoting awareness and understanding of WIDA 2020 has become even more urgent as resources to support implementation are only beginning to become available (e.g., WIDA, 2023a, 2023b).

We, first, briefly describe the policy context for WIDA 2020. Second, we highlight two key conceptual shifts across policy and research related to language learners in content areas: (a) shifts in terminology for language learners and (b) shifts in conceptions of content and language. Third, we illustrate how these conceptual shifts manifest in WIDA 2020. Specifically, we compare WIDA 2020 to the ESSA requirements for ELP/ELD standards and to its predecessor, WIDA 2012. Finally, we discuss implications for education policy, research, and practice. By harnessing the growing agreement across policy, research, and practice and across language education and content area education, the education system can move forward with creating more equitable education for language learners.

POLICY CONTEXT FOR WIDA 2020

WIDA 2020 builds on current policy, represents emerging research, and responds to critiques of WIDA 2012 and other ELP/ELD standards. In this section, we describe the policy context for WIDA 2020. We highlight the growing agreement across policy, research, and practice and across language education and content area education.

In the early 2010s, new content standards were released in English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. These content standards highlight disciplinary practices (e.g., argue from evidence, construct explanations) that are both academically rigorous and language intensive. Thus, the content standards present both opportunities and demands for all students, especially language learners (Lee et al., 2013). To make these content standards accessible to language learners, initiatives such as Understanding Language were launched to bring together policy, research, and practice across language education and content area education (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2012; Hakuta et al., 2013; see also Bunch et al., 2012, in English language arts; Moschkovich, 2012, in mathematics; Quinn et al., 2012, in science).

Since the early 2010s, ELP/ELD standards have been developed and updated to reflect contemporary conceptions in language education and to be aligned with content standards. Unlike content areas that went through consensus building for two generations of content standards in the 1990s and the early 2010s, language education has not gone through building a consensus on what language is and how language is developed in content areas (Lee, 2018, 2019; Molle et al., 2015; Valdés et al., 2014). Currently, 35 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, and three territories, as well as the Department of Defense Education Activity and the Bureau of Indian Education, use WIDA 2020 (WIDA, 2020).

WIDA 2020 resulted from a multiyear revision of WIDA 2012, which was a revision of its 2004 and 2007 versions. Whereas WIDA 2012 was based on content standards from the 1990s, WIDA 2020 is based on the latest content standards from the early 2010s (Molle & Wilfrid, 2021). Across language education and content area education, WIDA 2020 builds on policy initiatives (e.g., Understanding Language), represents emerging research (e.g., the consensus study report on English learners in STEM subjects by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2018), and responds to critiques of WIDA 2012 and other ELP/ELD standards (Lee, 2018, 2019). In doing so, WIDA 2020 represents the most recent effort to develop ELP/ELD standards that reflect conceptual shifts related to language learners in content areas.

CONCEPTUAL SHIFTS RELATED TO LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN CONTENT AREAS

The education of language learners has been shifting from a focus on what they were lacking (a deficit-oriented view) to what resources they bring to the classroom (an asset-oriented view). Grounded in a deficit-oriented view, traditional conceptions in content areas focused on limited English proficiency and how the education system could “fix” this perceived deficit, for example, by pre-teaching and frontloading vocabulary as a precursor or prerequisite to participating in content learning. With a shift to an asset-oriented view, contemporary conceptions in content areas focus on meaning-making resources that language learners bring to the classroom and how the education system can cultivate these resources, for example, by engaging language learners in disciplinary practices (e.g., argue from evidence, construct explanations) and providing them with opportunities to use language and communicate ideas regardless of their English proficiency (Lee et al., 2013; Molle et al., 2015; NASEM, 2018).

Shifts in Terminology for Language Learners

The terms used for language learners in policy indicate conceptual shifts from deficit- to asset-oriented views. Over two decades ago, the federal legislation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 used the term “limited English proficient students” (or LEP students), which was criticized for its deficit-oriented view in emphasizing limited proficiency in English without recognizing proficiencies in other languages. As a result, less objectionable terms, such as “English language learners” and then “English learners,” were widely used by researchers as well as in some policy initiatives, including WIDA 2012 (which used “English language learners”).

About a decade ago, the ESSA of 2015 adopted the term “English learners,” indicating a shift away from the deficit-oriented view in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. However, researchers continue to point out that the term English learners, while less deficit oriented, focuses exclusively on the English language and fails to recognize and value other languages (Gu & Kim, 2025; Martínez, 2018). The alternative term “emergent (or emerging) bilinguals” has gained popularity for its recognition of students’ developing bilingual proficiency (García et al., 2017), but “emergent” can be construed as indicating lower levels of proficiency, and “bilinguals” falls short of recognizing students who are *multilingual*. Most recently, the term “multilingual learners” has gained favor as being descriptive of proficiencies in multiple languages and indicative of an asset-oriented view. This term is used in WIDA 2020, as described in the next section.

Shifts in Conceptions of Content and Language with Language Learners

Building on an asset-oriented view of language learners, there have been parallel shifts in conceptions of content and language (for details, see Grapin, 2021; Grapin et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2019; NASEM, 2018). In content area education, contemporary conceptions emphasize learners’ engagement in disciplinary practices of content areas through participation in classroom communities, which is a shift from traditional conceptions focused on individual learners’ mastery of discrete elements of content. Because contemporary conceptions involve using knowledge for a purpose, they have been referred to as *knowledge-in-use* (Harris et al., 2019). In language education, contemporary conceptions emphasize learners’ development of dynamic meaning-making practices through participation in various communities of language use (García & Li, 2014; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Valdés et al., 2014), which is a shift from traditional conceptions focused on individual learners’ mastery of discrete elements of vocabulary (lexicon) and grammar (syntax). Because contemporary conceptions involve using language and other meaning-making resources for a purpose, they have been referred to as *language-in-use* (Lee et al., 2013).

These conceptual shifts in content area education and language education are mutually supportive (NASEM, 2018). This emphasis on “what language does” in disciplines (i.e., functional use of language for a purpose), beyond “what language is” (i.e., structural elements of language, including vocabulary and grammar; Grapin et al., 2019), underlies WIDA 2020’s conception of language for content learning, as described in the next section.

Conceptual shifts related to language learners in content areas indicate growing agreement across policy and research and across language education and content area education. Specifically, shifts in terminology reflect an asset-oriented view of language learners. In addition, shifts in conceptions of content and language in content area education and language education have been parallel and mutually supportive. These conceptual shifts provide the foundation for WIDA 2020.

CONCEPTUAL SHIFTS IN WIDA 2020

We illustrate how the two key conceptual shifts described above manifest in WIDA 2020: (a) shifts in terminology for language learners and (b) shifts in conceptions of content and language with language learners.

Shifts in Terminology for Language Learners

Whereas the ESSA of 2015 uses the term English learners and WIDA 2012 used the term English language learners, WIDA 2020 uses the term multilingual learners (MLs hereafter) to refer to “all children and youth who are, or have been, consistently exposed to multiple languages” and “all students who come in contact with and/or interact in languages in addition to English on a regular basis” (p. 11). WIDA 2020 uses the term ML “as part of its asset-based belief system” and “in an effort to encourage the field to use terminology that is asset-based and inclusive” (p. 11). Thus, WIDA 2020 explicitly promotes an asset-oriented view beyond the terminology used in the ESSA.

WIDA 2020’s use of MLs involves associated shifts, including one notable shift of highlighting *translanguaging*, a theory and pedagogy that aims to disrupt socially constructed boundaries between named languages, such as “Spanish” and “English” (García & Li, 2014; Otheguy et al., 2019). A key premise of translanguaging is that the tradition of understanding named languages as bounded systems has contributed to the oppression of language minoritized individuals and communities (see Makoni & Pennycook, 2007, for theoretical origins of translanguaging). By taking a translanguaging stance—a “mindset . . . for educating bilingual students that informs . . . the way we view students and their dynamic bilingual performances” (García et al., 2017 p. 50)—educators can work toward disrupting linguistic hierarchies in schools (e.g., privileging of English language) and focus on cultivating learners’ full linguistic repertoire.

WIDA 2020, as one of its guiding principles, emphasizes that “multilingual learners use their full linguistic repertoire, including translanguaging practices, to enrich their language development and learning” (p. 12). WIDA 2020’s emphasis on full linguistic repertoire (rather than separate named languages, such as English and Spanish) and language development broadly (rather than English specifically) is a shift from WIDA 2012’s emphasis on the use of home language(s), such as Spanish, for developing English, but without mention of a translanguaging stance (WIDA, 2012, p. 114). This shift is notable given that ELP/ELD standards, by virtue of their charge, have traditionally focused on the development of a named language (i.e., English). Moreover, WIDA 2020’s more expansive conception of meaning-making is evident in how the standards address nonlinguistic modalities (beyond *linguistic* repertoire), as described below.

Shifts in Conceptions of Content and Language with Language Learners

Grounded in an asset-oriented view of MLs, WIDA 2020 highlights four Big Ideas that indicate contemporary conceptions of content and language. For each Big Idea, we describe key constructs of contemporary conceptions (WIDA, 2020):

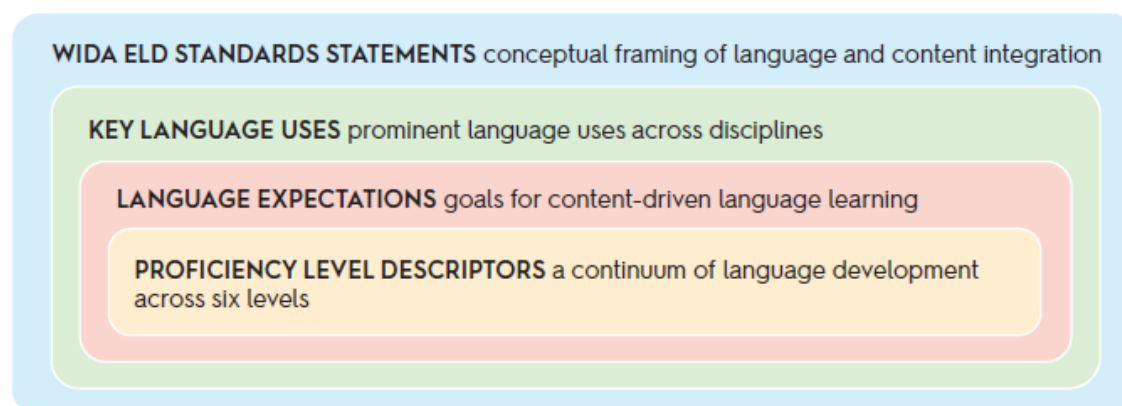
- Equity of opportunity and access, such as “access and use of multiple languages, including through translanguaging” (p. 18).
- Integration of content and language with a focus on multimodality that is “inherent to and essential for how students make meaning and engage in disciplinary practices” (p. 19).

- Collaboration among stakeholders across language and content areas so that “multilingual learners and their families benefit from a coherent and shared understanding of expectations and common goals for learning” (p. 20).
- Functional approach to language development “as an interactive social process that occurs over time to expand what we *can do* with language” (p. 20).

Grounded in these four Big Ideas, WIDA 2020 consists of four components “like building blocks of language development” (p. 23), as shown in Figure 1. These four components build progressively in promoting language development with all students, especially MLs, across content areas and over the K-12 grades. We use capital letters for the components (e.g., Key Language Uses) to reflect how they appear in WIDA 2020.

Figure 1

The Four Components of the WIDA ELD Standards Framework



Each of the four components of WIDA 2020 is described in the second column in Table 1. Then, correspondence to the three ESSA requirements for ELP standards and comparison to WIDA 2012 are summarized in the third and fourth columns, respectively.

Below, we describe how WIDA 2020 addresses ESSA requirements and, in some instances, goes beyond the requirements. We also describe how WIDA 2020 indicates shifts from WIDA 2012. While WIDA 2020 explicitly addresses alignment with four content areas (language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies), for clarity and consistency, we use examples that address language for *science* to discuss the four components of WIDA 2020. These examples illustrate alignment with the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS Lead States, 2013).

Component 1: WIDA ELD Standards Statements

WIDA 2020 starts with meeting Requirement 3 of the ESSA—ELP standards are “aligned with the challenging State academic standards” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 24). This requirement defines a purpose for using language in school (i.e., to learn content) and was an impetus behind WIDA’s latest revision (CCSSO, 2012).

Table 1*WIDA 2020 Correspondence to ESSA Requirements and Comparison to WIDA 2012*

Component in WIDA 2020	Description of Component in WIDA 2020	Correspondence to ESSA requirements for ELP standards	Comparison to WIDA 2012
Component 1: ELD Standards Statements	"Language for" content areas: Use of language for a purpose in a content area	iii) are aligned with the challenging State academic standards	"The language of" content areas: A discrete set of language features (e.g., vocabulary, grammar) in content areas
Component 2: Key Language Uses	Use of language for engaging in disciplinary practices (e.g., "doing" disciplines, using language)	iii) are aligned with the challenging State academic standards	Language features through linguistic modalities in content areas
Component 3: Language Expectations	Language functions and features through linguistic modalities (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) and nonlinguistic modalities (viewing and representing) in content areas	i) are derived from the four recognized domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing	Language features through linguistic modalities in content areas
Component 4: Proficiency Level Descriptors	MLs across levels of English proficiency meet cognitively demanding content standards, though they do so in different ways using language along with nonlinguistic modalities	ii) address the different proficiency levels of English learners	English proficiency appeared to be conflated with cognitive ability

While WIDA has maintained its five original Standards Statements since its inception in 2004 (see Figure 2), there is a key shift in their underlying conceptualization. In WIDA 2012, the abbreviation of the Standards Statements indicated "the language of" content areas, for example, "The language of Science" (p. 3). This focus on "The language of Science" indicates a discrete set of language features defined by scientists and science educators and presented in science textbooks. In WIDA 2020, in contrast, the abbreviation for the Standards Statements indicates "language for" content areas, for example, "Language for Science" (p. 24). This focus on "Language for Science" indicates the use of language for a purpose in the science classroom (i.e., language-in-use).

Figure 2

Comparison of the Abbreviated Standards Statements in WIDA 2012 and WIDA 2020

WIDA 2012

Standard		Abbreviation
English Language Development Standard 1	English language learners communicate for Social and Instructional purposes within the school setting	Social and Instructional language
English Language Development Standard 2	English language learners communicate information, ideas and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of Language Arts	The language of Language Arts
English Language Development Standard 3	English language learners communicate information, ideas and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of Mathematics	The language of Mathematics
English Language Development Standard 4	English language learners communicate information, ideas and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of Science	The language of Science
English Language Development Standard 5	English language learners communicate information, ideas and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of Social Studies	The language of Social Studies

WIDA 2020

ELD Standard 1:	Language for Social and Instructional Purposes (ELD-SI)	
ELD Standard 2:	Language for Language Arts (ELD-LA)	
ELD Standard 3:	Language for Mathematics (ELD-MA)	
ELD Standard 4:	Language for Science (ELD-SC)	
ELD Standard 5:	Language for Social Studies (ELD-SS)	

The shift from “the language of . . .” to “language for . . .” points to WIDA 2020’s functional approach to language development (i.e., one of the four Big Ideas, p. 20) that emphasizes how language *functions* (in other words, “what language does”) to construct and communicate meaning in disciplines (see Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, for theoretical origins of a functional approach). Specifically, WIDA 2020’s functional approach draws “attention to

- The dynamic nature of language
- Communicative purposes of the discipline or content area
- The use of language to communicate and make meaning
- Language use in the service of learning—in other words, language for thinking and doing” (p. 24).

Component 2: Key Language Uses

To unpack “language for” content learning (Component 1), WIDA 2020 highlights “prominent ways that language is used in school, across all disciplines” (p. 23). This component, referred to as Key Language Uses, also addresses Requirement 3 of the ESSA—ELP standards are “aligned with the challenging State academic standards” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 24).

WIDA 2020 identifies four Key Language Uses—narrate, inform, explain, and argue—that align with disciplinary practices across content areas. WIDA 2020 articulates Key Language Uses across content areas and over the K-12 grades, as shown in the example in Figure 3 (WIDA, 2020, Table 3-3, Table 3-13). For example, in science, students use language to argue, which is “prominent” in kindergarten (see top of figure) and “most prominent” in Grades 9-12 (see bottom of figure).

WIDA 2020’s articulation of Key Language Uses across content areas represents a shift from WIDA 2012, which emphasized language features to learn and communicate content knowledge. WIDA 2012 did not explicitly address disciplinary practices since these standards were developed prior to the latest content standards (CCSSO, 2012). In WIDA 2020, aligning ELP/ELD standards with content standards via disciplinary practices is logical for multiple reasons. First, disciplinary practices involve “doing” disciplines (e.g., “doing” science), not just learning about disciplines (e.g., learning science knowledge). Second, as “doing” disciplines involves using language (e.g., argue from evidence), disciplinary practices are language intensive with all students, especially MLs (Hakuta et al., 2013; Stage et al., 2013). Finally, disciplinary practices cut across content areas (e.g., argue from evidence in English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies), which is consistent with the ESSA requirement for ELP/ELD standards to align with content standards across multiple content areas (Lee, 2019).

Component 3: Language Expectations

While the Standards Statements (Component 1) and Key Language Uses (Component 2) describe, at a high level, how students use language for content learning, Language Expectations “add specificity” by “setting goals for content-driven language learning” (WIDA, 2020, p. 23). Language Expectations in WIDA 2020 meet Requirement 1 of the ESSA—ELP standards are “derived from the 4 recognized domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 24). While the ESSA requires only the linguistic modalities of speaking, listening, reading, and writing,

Figure 3

Examples of WIDA 2020 Key Language Uses Aligned With Disciplinary Practices Across Content Areas and Over the K-12 Grades

Distribution of Key Language Uses in Kindergarten				
WIDA ELD Standard	Narrate	Inform	Explain	Argue
1. Language for Social and Instructional Purposes	●	●	●	●
2. Language for Language Arts	●	●	○	◐
3. Language for Mathematics	○	●	◐	◐
4. Language for Science	○	●	●	◐
5. Language for Social Studies	◐	●	○	◐

● Most Prominent ◐ Prominent ○ Present

Distribution of Key Language Uses in Grades 9-12				
WIDA ELD Standard	Narrate	Inform	Explain	Argue
1. Language for Social and Instructional Purposes	●	●	●	●
2. Language for Language Arts	●	●	◐	●
3. Language for Mathematics	○	◐	●	●
4. Language for Science	○	◐	●	●
5. Language for Social Studies	◐	○	●	●

● Most Prominent ◐ Prominent ○ Present

WIDA 2020 emphasizes nonlinguistic modalities as well as linguistic modalities, described below.

In WIDA 2020, Language Expectations are “goals for how all students might use language to meet academic content standards” (p. 31) and “are the statements most similar to what educators generally find in academic content standards” (p. 23). In WIDA 2020, Language Expectations are articulated across grade-level clusters (K, 1, 2-3, 4-5, 6-8, and 9-12).

Language Expectations emphasize multimodality, or “the use of multiple means of communication” (one of the four Big Ideas in WIDA, 2020, p. 19; see Bezemer & Kress, 2008, for theoretical origins of multimodality). This is a shift from WIDA 2012, which focused on linguistic modalities and framed nonlinguistic modalities as supports for learning English (see Grapin, 2019, for a critique), to WIDA 2020, which focuses on both linguistic and nonlinguistic modalities and frames multimodality as “an essential way for all students to access and engage in the content areas” and “inherent to . . . how students make meaning and engage in disciplinary practices” (p. 19). The interpretive mode of communication encompasses viewing as well as listening and reading, and the expressive mode of communication encompasses representing as well as speaking and writing. By including the nonlinguistic modalities of viewing and representing as part of language for content learning, WIDA 2020 goes beyond linguistic modalities in the ESSA and WIDA 2012.

Language Expectations consist of language functions and features. This is a shift from WIDA 2012’s focus on language features (i.e., “the language of” content areas) separate from their functions (i.e., “language for” content areas). In WIDA 2020, language functions are common patterns of language use for “doing” content areas. For example, when arguing (one of the four Key Language Uses; see Figure 3), students may engage in the language function of “supporting a claim with evidence.” Language features include the words, phrases, clauses, and sentences that enable students to engage in language functions. For example, connectors such as “as a result” and “therefore” are language features that can be useful for indicating how evidence supports a claim (i.e., the language function). These language features are functional for engaging in the language function.

Component 4: Proficiency Level Descriptors

While the first three components of WIDA 2020 (i.e., Standards Statements, Key Language Uses, and Language Expectations) apply to all students as they use language for content learning, Proficiency Level Descriptors focus on MLs specifically. As MLs move toward meeting Language Expectations, Proficiency Level Descriptors describe how they might develop language across levels of English proficiency. Thus, Proficiency Level Descriptors enable WIDA 2020 to meet Requirement 2 of the ESSA—ELP standards “address the different proficiency levels of English learners” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 24).

In WIDA 2020, Proficiency Level Descriptors provide “a detailed articulation of how [MLs] might develop language across the six levels of English language proficiency” (p. 23). WIDA 2020 identifies three dimensions of language—discourse, sentence, and word/phrase—within sociocultural contexts (e.g., a science classroom). Based on these three language dimensions, WIDA 2020 illustrates how MLs might use language toward the end of each proficiency level until they reach Level 6 proficiency.

WIDA 2020 is a substantial shift from WIDA 2012 in terms of articulating what MLs can do across proficiency levels. In WIDA 2012, English proficiency appeared to be conflated

with cognitive ability, and teachers often interpreted the matrices as suggesting that students at beginning levels of English proficiency were expected to engage in lower cognitive demand, although WIDA maintains that was never the intent (Lee, 2018). In addition, WIDA 2012 emphasized grade-level vocabulary words and expressions according to “the language of” content areas (Lee, 2018). In contrast, based on the three language dimensions of discourse, sentence, and word/phrase, WIDA 2020 expects and clearly articulates how MLs at all six levels of English proficiency can meet cognitively demanding content standards, though they will do so in different ways using both linguistic and nonlinguistic modalities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION POLICY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE

This article brings awareness and understanding of conceptual shifts underlying WIDA 2020 as the latest ELP/ELD standards. Specifically, we highlighted two key conceptual shifts: (a) a shift from a deficit-oriented view to an asset-oriented view of MLs, which predated but is more fully reflected in WIDA 2020, and (b) a shift from “the language of” content areas to “language for” content areas. Then, we described how these conceptual shifts manifest in WIDA 2020, which goes beyond the ESSA requirements for ELP standards as well as beyond its predecessor, WIDA 2012 (see the summary in Table 1). In this section, we discuss implications of WIDA 2020 for education policy, research, and practice. Our intent is to address how WIDA 2020 and content standards could promote collaboration between language education and content area education.

Implications for Education Policy

In language education, developing ELP/ELD standards that meet the ESSA requirements needs to address two tasks. The first task involves building a broad agreement on what language is and how language is developed in content areas (Valdés et al., 2014). Currently, this community does not have broad agreement, presenting challenges to developing ELP/ELD standards (Lee, 2018, 2019). WIDA 2020 offers an opportunity to take stock of where the field has been, how it has shifted, and what challenges lie ahead. WIDA 2020 has made headway with this task by bringing together multiple theoretical foundations that have not always been in dialogue (see Appendix F of WIDA 2020), including language functions and features from systemic functional linguistics (e.g., Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), multimodality (e.g., Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Jewitt, 2008), and translinguaging (e.g., García et al., 2017).

The second task involves developing ELP/ELD standards that are aligned with content standards across English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. As content standards continue to evolve with conceptual shifts in content area education, ELP/ELD standards must also change and evolve. Currently, this task presents a challenge due to a lag of almost a decade between the latest content standards, which were released in the early 2010s and are likely to be revisited, and WIDA 2020.

WIDA 2020 is the latest set of ELP/ELD standards that has attempted to address these two tasks (i.e., developing broad agreement in language education and ensuring alignment with content standards). As WIDA 2020 is a policy initiative among the consortium of 35 states, the District of Columbia, three territories, and two educational entities, implementation across multiple levels of the education system will offer valuable insights that can inform future policy initiatives.

Implications for Research Agendas

One research agenda for language educators could focus on resolving or bringing together multiple constructs and theoretical perspectives. This might be accomplished by developing a consensus study report fashioned after the ones in literacy education (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; National Research Council [NRC], 1998), mathematics education (NRC, 2001), and science education (NRC, 2012). Similar to how these reports paved the way for the development of content standards, such a report in language education could allow policymakers to reconcile the current multiple sets of ELP/ELD standards and develop a more coherent set of standards that brings research and policy together. This opportunity for consensus building would give the language education community a seat at the table alongside content areas that have traditionally been a focus of policymakers and practitioners.

Another research agenda could focus on supporting content area educators' understanding and implementation of ELP/ELD standards. Although ELP/ELD standards have traditionally been considered the province of language education, content area education would benefit from ELP/ELD standards such as WIDA 2020 for at least two reasons. First, given the increasing linguistic diversity of the U.S. K-12 student population, all content area educators need to be prepared to work with MLs. Second, ELP/ELD standards can be a key resource not only for working with MLs but also for engaging *all* students in the language-intensive disciplinary practices of content standards. WIDA 2020 provides an entry point for this research by connecting components of its ELD standards with content area educators' disciplinary homes (i.e., Key Language Uses, such as argue and explain, that reflect disciplinary practices in content areas). In this way, content area educators can extend their knowledge to components that may be less familiar (i.e., Language Expectations and Proficiency Level Descriptors that reflect language use in content areas across levels of English proficiency).

These broad research agendas point to specific research directions related to the four components of WIDA 2020. For example, related to the ELD Standards Statements (Component 1), how can educators operationalize a focus on "language for" content areas in their curriculum, instruction, and assessment in ways that avoid the pitfalls of a focus on "the language of" content areas? Related to Key Language Uses (Component 2), how can educators support MLs and all students to engage in a range of disciplinary practices across content areas and the K-12 grades, including practices that are not directly named as Key Language Uses but are crucial from a disciplinary perspective (e.g., developing models in mathematics and science; Hakuta et al., 2013; Stage et al., 2013)? Related to Language Expectations (Component 3), how can content and language educators collaborate to integrate language functions and features in ways that reflect disciplinary norms (e.g., what counts as argument in science) and progressions (e.g., how argument develops over the K-12 grades in science; Lee, 2017)? Related to Proficiency Level Descriptors (Component 4), what kinds of professional learning will educators need to support MLs' progress along the English proficiency continuum as their content understanding becomes more comprehensive?

Implications for Classroom Practices

Conceptual shifts in WIDA 2020 call for significant *instructional* shifts in classroom practices. While standards such as WIDA 2020 do not prescribe curriculum or pedagogy, they create opportunities for educators to reframe traditional classroom practices with MLs in content areas. For example, whereas traditional classroom practices with MLs focused on decontextualized teaching of "the language of" content areas, WIDA 2020's emphasis on

"language for" content areas (Component 1 ELD Standards Statements) creates opportunities for educators to foreground the purpose for using language in content areas, such as arguing and explaining (Component 2 Key Language Uses). Likewise, whereas traditional classroom practices focused narrowly on developing MLs' proficiency with the English language and linguistic modalities, WIDA 2020's emphasis on translanguageing (WIDA 2020's guiding principles) and multimodality (Component 3 Language Expectations) creates opportunities for educators to expand what counts as legitimate communication in their classrooms. Finally, whereas traditional classroom practices focused on simplifying or watering down content for MLs, WIDA 2020's emphasis on MLs meeting cognitively demanding content standards regardless of their English proficiency (Component 4 Proficiency Level Descriptors) creates opportunities for educators to develop their expertise in amplifying (Molle et al., 2015; Walqui & Bunch, 2019), rather than simplifying, their instruction.

At the same time, the fact that WIDA 2020 creates such opportunities does not mean they will be realized in classrooms, particularly given mechanisms in education systems that tend to reproduce current practices (e.g., Valdés, 2018). For example, efforts to adopt more asset-oriented terminology for language learners (e.g., multilingual learners) can fall back into deeply entrenched deficit-oriented views of these students that permeate education systems (e.g., Gu & Kim, 2025; Martínez, 2018). Likewise, efforts to embrace more expansive views of communication (e.g., "language for" content areas, multimodality, translanguageing) can fall back into narrowly conceived definitions of "academic language" (e.g., García & Solorza, 2021) that *curricularize* language as an end in and of itself rather than a means to achieving disciplinary ends (e.g., Lewis, 2021; Valdés, 2018). We argue that resisting the gravity exerted by traditional classroom practices will require educators not only to develop new practices but also to understand the conceptual underpinnings of those practices. In this way, educators can deploy classroom practices in ways that are conceptually sound as well as responsive to the particulars of their contexts. This article represents a step in that direction by promoting educators' awareness and understanding of conceptual shifts underlying WIDA 2020.

Conclusion

By building on policy initiatives and emerging research across language education and content area education, WIDA 2020 offers directions for the education system to move forward with creating more equitable education for MLs. Future research is needed to understand how language education and content area education can foster productive collaboration that maintains their respective fields while developing a shared vision for promoting content learning and language development. Ultimately, the goal is for language education and content area education to be coordinated in their efforts to promote equitable education for MLs and all students.

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