Continuing the Conversation: Clarifying Information Around the WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020 Edition

Lynn Shafer Willner[1]
University of Wisconsin–Madison

Lee et al.'s (2025) *NYS TESOL Journal* article, "WIDA 2020 Edition: Conceptual shifts for English language proficiency or development standards aligned with content standards," brings welcome visibility to ELP/ELD standards and calls for stronger collaboration between content and language educators. Their message is clear: if we want multilingual learners to thrive, language development must be an active part of learning science, math, social studies, and English language arts (ELA).

Lee et al. spotlight important shifts in the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition—an asset-based stance to terminology, a focus on "language for" learning content, and attention to disciplinary practices, multimodality, and translanguaging. This response supports shared understanding of the 2020 Edition by contributing practical insights from additional resources.

ENHANCING UNDERSTANDING OF 2020 COMPONENTS

The 2020 Edition includes four components. Its implementation guide (Kray et al., 2023) adds four, aligned planning questions to show how language fits into content area instruction—not as extra work (see Figure 1).

1. **What grade-level academic content standards and practices am I working on?**

   Rather than focusing on "generic" language functions and features, the 2020 Edition emphasizes teaching multilingual learners the specific language that advances their learning (see Shafer Willner et al., 2021b).

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[1] shaferwillne@wisc.edu

Figure 1

WIDA ELD Standards Framework Components and Sample Planning Questions
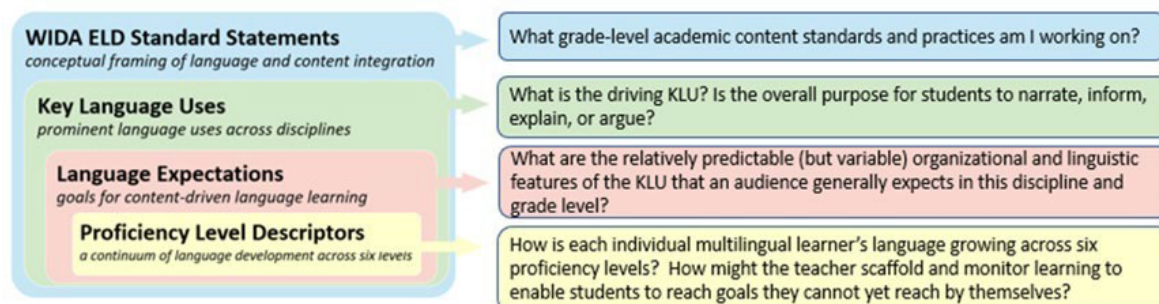
2. What is the driving Key Language Use (KLU)? To narrate, inform, explain, or argue?

The 2020 Edition positions multilingual learners as language users, adapting (by purpose) how they narrate, inform, explain, and argue based on topic, purpose, audience, and situation (see Shafer Willner et al., 2021a).

3. What are my integrated unit goals for content-based language learning?

To design integrated unit goals,

- Identify Language Expectations that specify how language functions in each content area.

- Pair Standard 1 (social and instructional language) with Standards 2–5 (academic content areas) to show how interaction and disciplinary language combine.

- Design tasks that engage students in the most prominent KLUs aligned with content demands.

- Finally, create spaces for students to use language in ways that honor their identities and cultural resources (see Shafer Willner et al., 2021a).

Sound complicated? To streamline unit and lesson planning across multiple sets of standards, Shafer Willner's (2025) recent article offers AI-assisted templates, prompts, and Google NotebookLM integration to streamline planning.

4. How is each multilingual learner growing across proficiency levels? How might I scaffold this growth?

Instead of focusing on what multilingual learners lack, the 2020 Proficiency Level Descriptors (PLDs) highlight the Language Features students can do at each level (in the Discourse, Sentence, and Word/Phrase Dimensions) and what they are working toward next. The six PLD sets align with grade-level clusters (K, 1, 2–3, 4–5, 6–8, 9–

12) instead of a single K–12 continuum, providing more precise feedback (Shafer Willner et al., 2021a).

WIDA's Implementation Guide (Kray et al., 2023) also provides ready-to-use routines and "Stories of Practice." The 2025 WIDA Language Charts (PDF and spreadsheet) provide observable indicators for end-of-unit summative assessments, aligned with PLDs and updated ACCESS Scoring Rubrics.

HOW CORRESPONDENCE RESEARCH SHAPED THE 2020 EDITION

Lee et al. (2025) suggest that external policy discussions of the early 2010s largely informed the design of the 2020 Edition. While those discussions represent the intensive, earlier phase of the national conversation around standards design, research and analysis conducted between 2018–2020 with the most recent version of state content standards shaped the framework's foundations and its four components.

Shafer Willner (2023) provides detailed information on 2020 design decisions, including updates to the evidence-centered design claims for WIDA ACCESS, a justification for creating Language Functions beyond single verbs, structures found in state content standards, and sample correspondence mappings of Language Expectations and PLDs to state academic standards.

Important Acknowledgement: Aida Walqui's 2012 presentation sparked the decoupling of the 2012 Model Performance Indicators to form 2020 grade-level cluster Language Expectations and PLDs (Shafer Willner, 2023, pp. 8, 57–58).

MOVING FORWARD

Lee et al.'s (2025) call for collaboration is compelling. The resources shared here support this call by providing practical ways to "combat the gravity of traditional practices" (Lee et al., 2025, p.16). Organized around the 2020 Edition's four components, they emphasize language-for-learning, communicative purpose, integrated planning, and asset-based language growth.

The proposal for a consensus study to reconcile multiple ELP/ELD standards and align research, policy, and practice is both timely and essential. We appreciate the recognition that Appendix F of the WIDA 2020 Edition "has made headway . . . by bringing together multiple theoretical foundations that have not always been in dialogue" (p. 14). Building on this progress, we hope that the WIDA 2020 Edition and its implementation resources can serve as a foundation for advancing this important work.

Lynn Shafer Willner (PhD from George Mason University) is one of the primary developers of the WIDA Language Charts and the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, and played a crucial role in creating its alignment architecture, Proficiency Level Descriptors, and Language Expectations. She was also instrumental in designing and developing the WIDA Standards Digital Explorer. She was the lead author of the 2014 CCSSO/ELPA21 English Language Proficiency (ELP) Standards. Dr. Shafer Willner started her career as a K-5 classroom and ESOL teacher at Bailey's Elementary for the Arts and Sciences in the Fairfax County (Virginia) Public Schools and now resides in Upstate New York.

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