

COMMON CORE STANDARDS IN DIVERSE CLASSROOMS

*Essential Practices for Developing Academic
Language and Disciplinary Literacy*



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Introduction

*Language yearns to be used
in meaningful ways.*

Many lessons still focus on filling students' minds with as many "parts" and "pieces" as possible. Yet what is needed for the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; the Standards), and especially in diverse classrooms, is an increased focus on helping students put the pieces together. Students must learn to *use* pieces such as facts, rules, and word meanings to understand and communicate whole ideas in meaningful ways across disciplines. Students do not need to use perfect English, but dealing in whole ideas will require significant changes in how we teach content, language, and literacy in every lesson.

The Common Core State Standards require an unprecedented emphasis on developing the sophisticated language and literacy of each discipline. However, many students lack sufficient baselines of academic language and literacy to engage successfully in CCSS lessons at grade level. Granted, some of these differences stem from nonschool factors such as home language variations, rarely being read to, and lack of literacy resources. Then again, in our observations of many lessons across different grade levels and subject areas, we saw a range of school factors that we can improve, two of which were as follows: (1) Many popular lesson activities such as sentence starters, think-pair-shares, and vocabulary exercises were not powerful enough to build students' abilities to understand and communicate complex whole ideas. (2) In diverse classrooms with large numbers of English learners and others who struggle with school's language and literacy demands (called "academic English learners" [AELs] in this book), the teaching was even more focused on disconnected pieces than in nondiverse classrooms with high percentages of proficient English speakers.

We therefore wrote this book to provide educators with a practical resource for teaching Common Core State Standards to students who need accelerated growth in their academic language and literacy. The practices focus squarely on increasing the quality of students' understanding, thinking, and communicating. This book is for teachers of students who need extra support and practice in (1) comprehending and learning from complex texts; (2) communicating complex ideas orally, visually, and in writing; and/or (3) engaging in authentic conversations about content.

In our research we identified a handful of essential practices to address these needs. These practices focus on teaching students the language and literacy skills that support Common Core literacy, math, and English Language Arts (ELA) standards. The three practices with the highest impact are using complex texts, fortifying complex output, and fostering academic interaction (Chapters 4, 6, and 8). These are supported by the three crosscutting practices of clarifying, modeling, and guiding (Chapter 3), and the foundational practice of designing instruction (Chapter 2). This book describes these seven practices in detail with many classroom examples and full lesson examples (Chapters 5, 7, and 9). We top it all off with practical ways to foster professional development and systemwide capacity (Chapter 10).

Objectives of This Book

This book seeks to do the following:

- Clarify how to support the learning of the complex language that students need for reaching the Common Core and other new standards.
- Provide clear and practical ways to realize the instructional shifts needed with implementation of new standards in diverse classrooms. These include shifting from access to ownership; from piece skills to whole-message skills; from focusing on content to focusing on language-literacy-thinking-content; from individual to collaborative skills; from playing school to learning in school; from checklists of strategies to frames of practice; from tests to assessment and beyond; and from silos to capacity.
- Provide practical frameworks for understanding the practices that have the highest impact on students' development of complex language and literacy needed for Common Core and related standards.
- Provide practical descriptions and concrete examples of how to use texts to develop students' complex language; improve students' complex speaking, writing, and

communication of ideas; and develop students' abilities to engage in interactions that produce learning.

- Provide ways to maximize students' independence in using texts to learn, communicating with high-quality oral and written output, and interacting to effectively build ideas with others.
- Provide ways to work at the coach, professional development, school, and district levels to support the work and build capacity to implement the work across an educational system.

The Common Core State Standards provide us with plenty to do, but they are not the entire picture. Many of the same language demands are also found in standards outlined in the Next Generation Science Standards, the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) English Language Development (ELD) Standards, English Language Development standards (of various states), the English Language Proficiency Development Framework (CCSSO 2012), state history and social science standards, and 21st-Century Skills, which have also informed this work. What these documents and standards have in common is the urgent need to develop grade-level language and literacy skills. As we succeed in addressing this need across the horizontal and vertical axes of schooling, all learners will not only meet but exceed the many "standards" that come their way in the future.

Designing Activities and Lessons

The bigger the building, the stronger its foundation needs to be.

The building of complex language and literacy is exciting and highly challenging. It needs a solid “foundation” that is based on knowing how the learning of content, thinking, literacy, and language reinforce one another within a lesson. At the bottom of each of the three essential practice frames, you see that designing activities and lessons forms the foundation for the other practices. While not everything can be planned, many lessons can be *better* planned. An ounce of planning is worth a pound of confusion avoidance and pedagogical triage when it comes to the complexity of language development in each lesson.

REFLECTION TOOL FOR DESIGNING ACTIVITIES AND LESSONS

In every chapter from here on there are tools for reflecting on improvement of the strands within each practice. Each reflection tool briefly describes the different strands, which are more tangible and observable, that make up the practice. Each tool can be modified to look more like a rubric and to have more space for note taking.

Throughout this book, the rows in each reflection tool should be seen as “interlaced” components, that strengthen learning as they work together. Even though they are separate in Figure 2.1, they often overlap. These strands should be woven together before, during, and after instruction. You will also notice three-letter codes after each strand. The codes can be used to bulk up lesson plans and to take notes during classroom observations.

FIGURE 2.1

Teacher reflection tool for designing activities and lessons

Strands of Designing Activities and Lessons	Limited Evidence	Acceptable Evidence	Strong Evidence
Identify complex language demands to create language objectives that support content objectives (OBJ)			
Structure tasks to be engaging and require authentic and original communication using complex language (AUT)			
Build on students' background knowledge, language, and cultural strengths (BLD)			

STRAND 1 OF DESIGNING: Identify Complex Language Demands to Create Language Objectives (OBJ)

One of the first things we need to do before we design the lesson is to take a close look at what and how we are teaching in order to identify the language that supports and communicates learning. If we don't develop a clear idea of the language that we need to emphasize during a lesson, then the language learning tends to get watered down by the many things happening in the lesson.

In too many settings, academic language development has been reduced to teaching vocabulary meanings. For example, a teacher might create a short list of difficult words and think of them as the language demands of the lesson. Yet for the Common Core and other important standards across disciplines, we must look for complex language in the message and syntax dimensions of academic language (refer to Figure 1.1). Other educators have identified language demands mostly by unpacking standards (Clancy and Hruska 2005). Yet it is also vital to analyze the texts and tasks used in a lesson. Therefore, we developed a set of steps that help a teacher identify the most pressing complex language demands and then use them to create language objectives.

STEPS FOR CREATING LANGUAGE OBJECTIVES

In the first column of Figure 2.2 are several steps for creating language objectives based on the identification of language demands in a lesson or unit. In the second column are examples from a seventh-grade teacher that correspond to each step. Figure 2.3 is a visual organizer that you can use to keep track of the information that you gather during the steps in Figure 2.2.

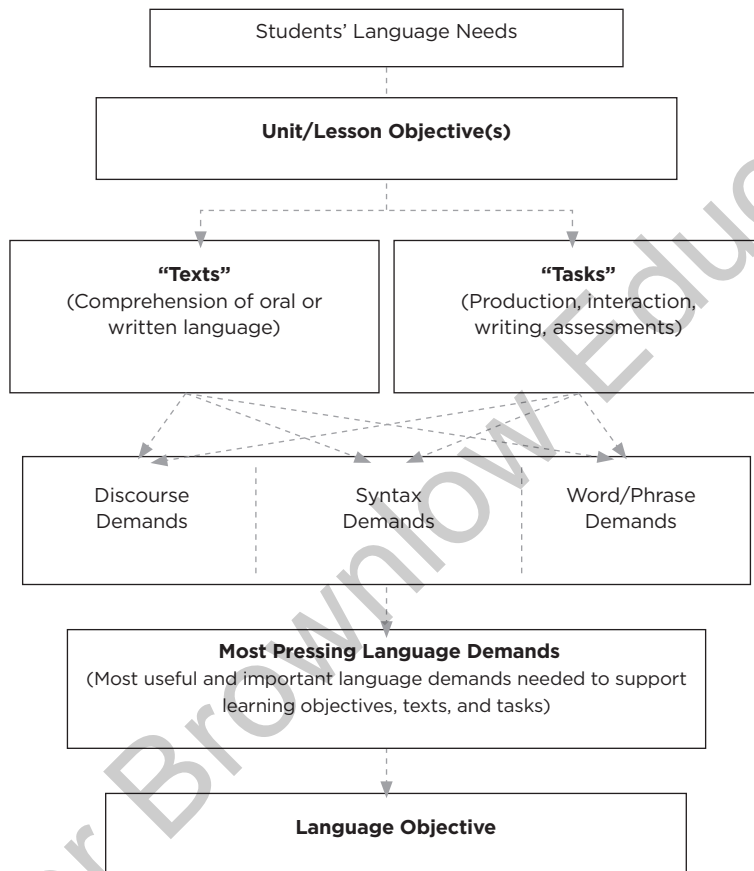
FIGURE 2.2

Steps and examples for identifying language demands to create language objectives

STEPS	EXAMPLE
Step 1. Reflect on the complex language needs of the students in the class. What language knowledge and skills do they most need to develop? Analyze their written work and listen to their conversations. Have short interactions with them to gauge their language abilities.	My seventh-grade history students struggle to support their ideas with good examples. They also lack clarity when evaluating the relevance or strength of an argument. Some students do not connect their ideas well.
Step 2. Analyze the “content” objective for message organization (i.e., discourse) demands; then sentence-level demands; and then word and phrase demands.	For example, here is a Common Core Anchor Standard: “Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.2).
Step 3. Analyze texts that will be used. Texts include written texts, oral messages, videos, and visuals. Identify the most challenging language for message organization (i.e., discourse) demands; then sentence-level demands; and then word and phrase demands.	The textbook weaves narratives and expository sections together. Students are challenged to integrate them with boxed text, primary source pieces, and visuals. They need to closely read the texts for contradictory and nuanced language.
Step 4. Analyze tasks that will be used, including assessment tasks. Tasks include activities and products. Identify the most challenging language for message organization (i.e., discourse) demands; then sentence-level demands; and then word and phrase demands.	They need the language of negotiating conflicting ideas in pairs and small groups. They need to summarize long paragraphs and recognize bias in them. They need to connect their sentences as they describe their evaluations of the information presented about the Black Plague.
Step 5. Choose the most pressing demands. Look back at the lesson objective and decide which language is most useful for learning and showing learning of the objective.	Most pressing would be skills of describing the criteria used to evaluate texts and images presented about the Black Plague.
Step 6. Use the language identified in Step 5 to create a clear language objective. The objective will usually have a function (communication or thinking skill); and may or may not have specific terms or syntax strategies in it.	Objective: Students will be better able to use and explain criteria for evaluating textbook and primary source information, using strong topic sentences supported by details and examples from the text.

FIGURE 2.3

Visual organizer for identifying language demands and creating language objectives



In most cases, a content objective consists of something that students need to do or know. This is often a skill, display of knowledge, or communication function—all of which need language. Thus, the language objective should directly support the content objective. Sometimes in ELA or English lessons, the content and language objectives are the same. Figure 2.4 provides examples of content objectives in math, science, English, and history in the first column, with language objectives that support them in the second column. The content objective might be based on standards from Common Core State Standards, Next Generation Science Standards, WIDA English Language Development Standards, History-Social Science Standards, etc. Focal skills and functions are underlined in the chart.

It can be tempting to generate many “text-dependent” questions during a lesson, but not all of them are worth the time. Sets of questions should have focused purposes beyond just filling time, covering a list of facts, or checking for comprehension. Goals include helping to clarify and build essential ideas in preparation for a conversation, a written product, or a performance task. *Answering questions should not be used in place of using the information in meaningful and authentic ways.* Questions can play a role, but a hyper-focus on them can promote students’ belief that school is about memorizing information and answering questions to score points or please a teacher who knows the answers.

CLASSROOM EXAMPLE

Here is an example from Ms. Ashton’s second-grade classroom, reading a book on ladybugs:

- Ms. A:** What is this book about? How do you know?
- Paul:** About bugs. Ladybugs. Cuz of the pictures.
- Ms. A:** Is it a story or does it teach us information?
- Ada:** A story!
- Ms. A:** Why?
- Ada:** Cuz it has pictures and something happens.
- Lisa:** I think both cuz I learned about it laid eggs. But also there is a baby and I think it will grow.
- Ms. A:** Yes, the author is using a story to make it interesting, but also to teach us about life cycles of insects. Now, I wonder something. Why might the mother not stay around to care for her eggs and babies?
- Manny:** Some bugs don’t need mothers. They born knowing what to do. They eat other bugs.
- Ms. A:** Hmmmm. I wonder if this story will teach us this. I also wonder how this is like other stories or science texts.
- Zach:** Like that story ’bout salmon. The fish lay eggs and die. Babies swim down and then come back. The cycle.
- Ms. A:** Nice. So we learn about the ladybug but also more about life cycles. What is a good question I could ask right now?
- Manny:** What’s a life cycle?