What’s on the “LO” Menu? Supporting Academic Language Objective Development

KRISTEN LINDAHL and NAOMI M. WATKINS

Abstract: To effectively serve culturally and linguistically diverse students in public schools, many pedagogical models call for the integration of content and language instruction. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) also present increased attention to how language is conceptualized for all students. One technique to heighten both teacher and student focus on academic language is via the use of language objectives in tandem with content objectives. In this article, the authors offer a language objective (LO) menu from which teachers can identify the language demands of their lessons, recognize student needs relative to those demands, and select appropriate instructional strategies to meet language objectives. Sample language demands, objectives, and strategies are provided for elementary, middle, and high school academic language development.

Keywords: minority students, lesson plans, diversity, effective schools, language

The robust presence of English language learners (ELLs) in U.S. public schools and abroad has engendered changes not only in the classroom strategies used to teach culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners but also in the way that teachers conceptualize language in the classroom. To best serve ELLs in content-heavy environments like secondary schools, popular models of instruction, such as the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP; Echevarría, Vogt, and Short 2012), the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA; Chamot 2005), and the European-based Content-Language Integrated Learning (CLIL; Maljers, Marsh, and Wolff 2007), call for the inclusion of both content and language learning goals as means to foster simultaneous development of subject-area and academic language learning. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) also support such instruction for ELLs, stating that “these students may require additional time, appropriate instructional support, and aligned assessments as they acquire both English language proficiency and content area knowledge” (National Governor’s Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers 2010, para. 1). Despite best intentions, many teachers may find it difficult to craft effective language objectives due to the extensive nature of academic language (Kim 2007), and most resort to identifying only vocabulary objectives while ignoring other aspects of academic language (Regalla 2012). The CCSS effectively discourage this oversimplification of language, and instead focus on using language to participate in academic discourse communities (Hakuta and Santos 2012). To help teachers more strategically plan their language objectives, we present a menu consisting of academic language areas common across all content disciplines, as well as instructional strategies that teachers can implement to ensure ELLs achieve the identified language goal.

What Is “Academic Language”? Academic language, or the “language of school,” differs greatly from the conversational or social language used outside of the classroom in that it is often decontextualized, more complex, more abstract, and places higher demands on student cognition (Schleppegrell 2004). In addition to using more morphologically complex words and a higher proportion of nouns, adjectives, and prepositions, the sheer density of information in academic language is higher (Nagy and Townsend...
Academic language also places different cultural and experiential demands on learners as they attempt to relate to both the content information and their peers and teachers who may be from diverse backgrounds. Increased attention is being paid to academic language in K-12 schools; for example, the CCSS in grades K-6 have increased academic language demands due to a larger focus on informational text in the primary grades (Roberts 2012), while in the secondary grades, each content area has its own sophisticated disciplinary register, which makes academic language at this level increasingly complex (Schleppegrell and O’Hallaron 2011).

These different sophisticated registers are part of the reason that disciplinary literacy has become a focus of literacy instruction in content-area classrooms. Disciplinary literacy instruction emphasizes the uniqueness of each discipline, focusing on teaching students how to read, write, and think according to the specialized knowledge, discourses, and routines of each respective discipline (Draper et al. 2010; Moje 2008; Shanahan and Shanahan 2008). However, Fagella-Luby and his colleagues (2012) and Hynd-Shanahan (2013) note that disciplinary literacy should not replace content-area literacy instruction. Content-area literacy instruction focuses on teaching students generic strategies that can be used across all disciplines; disciplinary literacy emphasizes the differences. “In disciplinary literacy, the discipline itself and the ways of thinking in that discipline determine the kinds of strategies to use in order to understand texts. This differs from content area literacy, in which the strategies one knows determine how reading ensues” (Hynd-Shanahan 2013, 94). For example, a content-area strategy would have students make predictions and draw conclusions when reading all types of texts. Reciprocal teaching, What I Know-What I Want to Know-What I Learned (KWL), and Survey-Question-Predict-Read-Respond-Summarize (SQP2RS) are other examples of popular content-area literacy strategies that could be applied to narrative or informational text as well as differing content areas, such as social studies, math, or language arts. An example of a discipline-specific strategy would be to have students in a science setting generating hypotheses and justifying their conclusions, using specific terminology to do so. English language learners benefit from both types of literacy instruction as they develop academic language, but are in particular need of general literacy skills—skills that fall under the content-area literacy umbrella.

Given the pivotal role that academic language and literacy development play in school success, it becomes imperative that K-12 teachers recognize the academic language demands of school settings. They must formulate objectives that address those demands, and ultimately implement teaching strategies and assessments that match the academic language demands identified at the outset. With this iterative process in mind, we have created a menu for language objectives that supports teachers through the cognitive process of identifying a language demand, composing a language objective relevant to the content objective, and selecting an appropriate classroom strategy. The language objective (LO) menu includes six potential areas of academic language demands, a brief explanation of each area, possible ELL student needs that may arise in each area, and suggested instructional strategies to address these needs. The academic language demands we present align well with the CCSS, because they represent the foundational skills called for in the standards, such as being able to comprehend both literary and informational text, developing persuasive writing skills, and being aware of appropriate grammar, conventions, and functions to achieve communicative purposes (Hakuta and Santos 2012). The LO menu focuses on more general content-area strategies, many of which can be adapted to discipline-specific purposes and settings. In addition, the strategies we include are in no way an exhaustive list, and one strategy may be used to address multiple academic language demands. Following, we describe the six potential areas of academic language demands in terms of the LO menu (see Table 1), and model a step-by-step progression for its use.

### Academic Language Demands

#### Vocabulary

Vocabulary includes the variety of content words students need in order to comprehend and express academic knowledge and information. Vocabulary development may include the processes of acquiring new words that represent known concepts, acquiring new words that represent new concepts, clarifying and enriching the meanings of known words, learning idioms, learning abstract high-frequency words, or using context clues to decipher meaning (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan 2013). Explicit vocabulary instruction is preferred for ELLs because it can help target the context or linguistic cues used to decipher and/or define unfamiliar words (August et al. 2005). Teachers must also attend to the types of vocabulary terms they are teaching ELLs, as key terms may be content-obligatory words—those words so closely associated with the lesson’s content that the content cannot be understood without knowledge of these terms—or content-compatible words—those words that are academic in nature and are frequently used across curricula and content areas (Genesee 1994). Examples of content-obligatory terms in a social studies lesson about the U.S. Constitution could include, “legislative,” “executive,” “judicial,” and “amendment.” Content-compatible terms from this same lesson might be “independent,” “compromise,” or “exploration,” terms that are still academic in nature and apply to the social studies context but
can be found in other contexts as well. Distinguishing between these two bodies of words is important, because most teachers tend to focus on content-obligatory terms when identifying language demands and composing language objectives (Lindahl, Baecher, and Tomas 2013; Regalla 2012). However, knowledge of content-compatible vocabulary may be more useful to ELLs in the long term, because these words are used more frequently across content areas and academic contexts (Coxhead 2011). Therefore, ELLs can take the knowledge of these words that they acquire in one content area and utilize it in another. In addition, the repeated exposure to content-compatible words in various contexts may provide the repetition that ELLs need to acquire a word, as well as deepen their semantic understanding of the way the word functions in different settings.

**TABLE 1. The Language Objective Menu**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Demand</th>
<th>Reading Comprehension</th>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
<th>Word Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>The process of constructing meaning from written text</td>
<td>Bodies of words students need in order to comprehend and express content knowledge and information</td>
<td>Instruction about word structure and components</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible ELL Needs</td>
<td>• Activating prior knowledge</td>
<td>• Abstract high-frequency words</td>
<td>• Cognates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Building background knowledge</td>
<td>• Basic oral vocabulary</td>
<td>• Compound words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Context Clues</td>
<td>• Clarifying and enriching the meanings of known words</td>
<td>• Homophones</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Figurative Language</td>
<td>• Content-compatible terms</td>
<td>• Semantic (meaning) relationships to structures</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Identify main idea</td>
<td>• Content-obligatory terms</td>
<td>• Sound patterns</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Predicting/Inferring</td>
<td>• Idioms</td>
<td>• Visual (orthographic) patterns</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Questioning</td>
<td>• New words representing known concepts</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Summarizing</td>
<td>• New words representing new concepts</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Text Structure</td>
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<td>• Text Features</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Visualizing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Means of Instruction</td>
<td>• Anticipation guide</td>
<td>• Analogies</td>
<td>• “Detective” looking for certain word parts in connected text</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Concept mapping</td>
<td>• Categorizing words by meanings or concept</td>
<td>• Categorization activities based on orthographic, semantic, or sound patterns</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Insert Method</td>
<td>• Cloze activities</td>
<td>• Flip books of word parts</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• KWL varieties</td>
<td>• Concept definition maps</td>
<td>• Graphic organizers or word mapping</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• List-group-label</td>
<td>• Dictionary activities</td>
<td>• Prefix-suffix-root memory or matching games</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Note-taking</td>
<td>• Pantomime/Charades</td>
<td>• Word searches</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Paragraph draw</td>
<td>• Picture dictionaries</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Predict-Revisit</td>
<td>• Picture/word sorts</td>
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<td>• Problematic situation</td>
<td>• Semantic feature analysis</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Question-Answer</td>
<td>(Mind/word mapping)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Relationship (QAR)</td>
<td>• Synonym/Antonym webs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Re-tell</td>
<td>• Vocabulary notebooks</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Skim and scan</td>
<td>(self-collected or teacher-directed)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Story mapping</td>
<td>• Vocabulary word squares</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Text/Plot structure graphic organizers</td>
<td>• Word walls</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Think-alouds</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(Continued on the next page)
Table 1. The Language Objective Menu (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Demand</th>
<th>Functional Language</th>
<th>Grammar</th>
<th>Writing and Conventions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>Terms that are not content-specific but perform a certain language function</td>
<td>The rules that govern the use of a language</td>
<td>Using written language to respond to typically recurring situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible Student Needs</td>
<td>• Asking for information • Comparing/Contrasting • Describing things • Discussing probability • Determining steps necessary to complete a task • Explaining • Requesting services • Interrupting • Making suggestions • Being humorous • Talking about events • Talking about self</td>
<td>• Articles • Capitalization • Complete sentences • Complex sentences • Contractions • Paragraphing • Parts of Speech • Proper vs. common nouns • Question Formation • Singular vs. plural • Subject-verb agreement • Word Order</td>
<td>• Context (cultural, social, political, etc.) awareness • Genre awareness • Organization • Punctuation • Sentence Variation • Spelling • Topic knowledge • Use of Media/Design • Word choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means of Instruction</td>
<td>• Interviews Conversations (Scripted, Guided, Independent) • Classroom routines • Debate • Group work (pair, collaborative, and cooperative structures) • Role play • Sentence stems • Show-and-Tell variations • Use pictures/wordless books to tell stories or recall events • Tell jokes</td>
<td>• Change sentences into various questions • Create and label unique sentences using parts of speech • Edit sample, peer, or own writing for specific grammar errors • Identify/highlight parts of speech in text • Mad-Libs • Re-order mixed up sentences • Structure discussion topics to elicit certain grammar structures</td>
<td>• Brainstorming • Free recall • Free writes • Manipulate or re-organize pieces of a text into the correct order • Outlining • Modeled writing • Paragraph or essay advance organizers • Interactive writing • Sentence strips • Shared writing • “Show, Not Tell” sentences • Process journals • Process writing • Sentence combining • or shortening</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

List (Coxhead 2011) includes many functional, content-compatible terms as well.

**Grammar**

Grammar is the structure of a language. More specifically, grammar consists of rules that govern a language and its use. These rules both describe how speakers of a language use various structures to convey meaning and enable speakers and learners of that language to create new, unique utterances that make sense to other speakers of that language (Birch 2014; Finegan 2012). Particularly in school settings, teachers may feel a need to instill the rules of “correct” grammar in their ELLs and other students. English language learners will require explicit instruction in English grammar so that they can learn the system and begin to generalize it for themselves; however, instead of focusing entirely on prescriptive grammar rules for memorization, teachers can demonstrate how words behave differently in sentences and the systematic ways that words combine to form phrases, clauses, and sentences (Murray and Christison 2011). Teachers may also want to consider that different academic disciplines use grammar in different ways to construct their specific discourses (Schleppegrell 2004). For example, the passive verb tense is often used in scientific disciplines to promote the idea of objectivity: A science text might say, “an experiment was conducted. . .” rather than “she conducted an experiment.” Content areas that often deal with issues of agency and “who did what to whom,” such as social studies, might use fewer passive constructions and more active ones.

**Word Study**

Word study is instruction about the structure of words and how word parts contribute to word meaning. Some common word study practices include instruction on
prefixes, suffixes, and affixes; compound words; or word pronunciation, showing students how word parts generalize across words and providing clues as to their meaning, as can be seen with the prefix “photo” and its relationship to light: photograph, photosynthesis, photogenic, photocopy, and so on (August et al. 2005). Word study also includes instruction on word patterns, homophones, or cognates (August and Shanahan 2008). This word awareness can help with academic vocabulary acquisition (Snow, Met, and Genesee 1989), and specific focus on the way a word is pronounced and/or its structures can also help ELLs develop oral language proficiency (Au et al. 2002; August and Shanahan 2008).

Reading Comprehension

Research on comprehension strategy instruction shows that teaching students reading strategies, such as making predictions and inferences or asking questions, can improve their comprehension (Dole et al. 1991; Duke and Pearson 2002; Goldenberg 2011; National Reading Panel 2000). English language learners can benefit from instruction in the same components of English literacy as native English speakers. However, because ELLs who are learning to read in English must simultaneously learn English literacy and oral language skills, instructional supports are necessary (Goldenberg 2011). Some ELLs will have reading strategies that they use in their first language, which they will try to transfer to reading in their new language. Others may need to learn a whole new set of strategies for reading in English (Hughes 2011). Teachers, then, will need to provide additional support—particularly language support—to help ELLs learn the thinking processes behind comprehension strategies.

Writing and Conventions

Writing is the act of using written language to respond to typically recurring situations (Hyland 2008). Older ELLs who enter the public school system after the early elementary grades may not be familiar with the English alphabet (or any alphabetic system), and/or may have less ability to express themselves in writing depending on their level of oral English proficiency and their level of prior knowledge—both about academic topics and writing itself (Wright 2010). Regardless, students should be taught specific writing strategies for planning, revising, and editing, and about various forms, genres, styles, and tones (Graham and Perin 2007). Frequent process writing activities help ELLs transition from invented spelling to conventional spelling. English language learners also need to be made aware of how conventions govern acceptable writing practices within a language and convey clues about the meaning of words and the organization of ideas (Peregoy and Boyle 2008). Conventions are included here with writing instead of with grammar, because conventions primarily govern written text, whereas all languages—those with writing systems and those without—have a grammar.

How to Use the LO Menu

To show how the LO menu can be used when creating language objectives, we provide step-by-step instructions with examples from various grade levels.

Step 1: After Creating Your Content Objective(s), Identify the Language Demand(s) of Your Current Content-area Lesson

- A 5th-grade teacher conducting a science unit creates the following content objective: Students will be able to classify rocks by observing, note taking, and gathering evidence by participating in a “rock walk” outside. She considers the language demands of this activity and decides that students will need to: (1) use a variety of words to describe the rocks they find, such as the content-obligatory terms “sedimentary,” “igneous,” and “crystals,” and content-compatible adjectives such as “hard,” “scratchy,” “smooth,” and “gritty” (vocabulary); (2) take notes about what they see and feel (writing process); or (3) know words such as “similar/different” for purposes of comparison (functional language).
- A 7th-grade English teacher creates the following content objective: Students will be able to describe the mood, style, and theme in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell Tale Heart” by writing a descriptive paragraph. He identifies the following language demands of this objective. Students will need to know how to: (1) identify and use figurative language (reading comprehension), (2) make inferences (reading comprehension), (3) know content-obligatory words (vocabulary), or (4) understand the functional language used for description.
- An 11th-grade history teacher creates a sample content objective for tomorrow’s lesson: Students will be able to defend the importance of three key events that occurred during the civil rights movement by writing a short essay independently. She recognizes that this objective creates several different language demands for her students. They will need to know how to: (1) skim and scan texts for information (reading comprehension), (2) summarize key events in writing (writing and/or reading comprehension), (3) use opinion or argument language (functional language), or (4) structure an argumentative essay (writing).

Step 2: Prioritize the Language Demand(s)

Due to time constraints, not all language demands can be addressed simultaneously and adequately. Teachers should consider which language demand takes the highest priority for their students—which demand best addresses their most immediate needs?
The 5th-grade science teacher feels fairly comfortable with her students’ ability to take notes in their science journals about the rocks, so she elects to focus on promoting students’ use of more academic vocabulary terms.

The 7th-grade English teacher realizes that his students really need help making inferences, particularly with a challenging text like “The Tell Tale Heart.” However, he notices that in order to make these inferences, his students need more modeling and scaffolding.

The 11th-grade history teacher knows that the majority of her students already know how to skim and scan, but rarely use more sophisticated opinion or argument language in their writing. Thus, this teacher might focus on addressing that need.

**Step 3: Select a Corresponding Instructional Strategy from the Menu**

Teachers then check the menu to find a corresponding instructional strategy within the appropriate language demand.

- The 5th-grade science teacher consults the LO menu for vocabulary activity ideas. She opts to have students complete vocabulary word squares on five of the key terms before beginning their “rock walk,” wherein they write the vocabulary word in one corner of their paper, write the definition of the word in another, draw a visual representation of the word, and use the word in a sentence.

- The 7th-grade English teacher uses the LO menu to find an appropriate instructional support to assist his students to make appropriate inferences. He creates a graphic organizer that requires students to write the key phrases from the text, their background knowledge, and the inference they made based on this information.

- After deciding that her students need help using opinion language in their essays, the 11th-grade history teacher consults the LO menu and sees that this need falls within the functional language area. She decides to provide sentence frames and stems that her students can use in their essays, such as “in my opinion,” “the author asserts that,” or “from my point of view.”

**Step 4: Formulate Your Language Objective**

After deciding on a language need and corresponding instructional strategy, teachers then compose their language objectives. Notice how the language objective supports the completion of the content objective by addressing a specific academic language demand; they hinge together.

- Fifth-grade science: Students will be able to define five key vocabulary terms by completing vocabulary word squares.

- Seventh-grade English: Students will be able to identify the steps of their inferences by completing a graphic organizer.

- Eleventh-grade history: Students will be able to use opinion language in their essays by using sentence frames.

**Step 5: Implement Your Strategy and Assess Student Achievement of the Objective**

Did the 5th-grade students correctly define five of their key vocabulary terms, and did they then use those terms accurately when describing and classifying the rocks they found on their “rock walk”? Did the 7th-grade students identify their inference-making steps using the graphic organizer, and did they use these inferences when identifying the mood, style, and theme of “The Tell Tale Heart”? Did the 11th-grade students use sentence frames in order to incorporate opinion language in their essays?

**A Balanced “Meal” from the LO Menu**

While content and language-learning goals are highlighted for ELLs, it is important for teachers to remember that language itself “permeates all educational and pedagogical activity” (Van Lier and Walqui 2012, 49); thus, today’s teachers are well served by paying increased attention to developing academic language among all of their students. As such, the LO menu presents six areas of academic language demands that teachers may consider when planning effective instruction that integrates both content and language. It also includes corresponding instructional strategies that teachers may implement to ensure student attainment of academic language objectives. As the LO menu demonstrates, academic language has multiple layers beyond simply the vocabulary of any one content area, and we encourage teachers to sample from all of the areas of the LO menu to provide students with a “balanced meal” of academic language that connects to their content-area learning. We hope that use of the LO menu helps teachers become more aware of the academic language present in their content-area lessons, as well as assists them in better aligning their objectives and classroom practices to promote the most effective ELL instruction possible.

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