

ORAL LANGUAGE in the CLASSROOM



Multilingual learners have voice, agency, and – ultimately – success in school when they have the oral language skills that allow for effective communication in the classroom.

When multilingual learners have the opportunity and the ability to speak at length, they can contribute meaningfully to the discourse of the content classroom. The ability to support a viewpoint or claim with relevant reasons and details is a critical skill that allows students to communicate across academic disciplines with both peers and educators.

With this foundational skill in mind, the ACCESS for ELLs Speaking test presents English language learners (ELLs) with the opportunity to “hold the floor” and deliver an extended and elaborated response to an academic task. Tasks that allow students to demonstrate their ability to speak at length on a topic, using appropriate vocabulary and sentence structures and connecting ideas coherently, provide students opportunities to fully demonstrate their oral language skills. Doing so across several disciplines provides evidence that students are well prepared to succeed in the content classroom.

WIDA Focus Bulletins are resources for practitioners and educators who support, instruct, and assess multilingual learners in early care and education and K-12 settings. To see other Focus Bulletins, please visit wida.wisc.edu/resources.

Tasks on the ACCESS for ELLs Speaking test are designed to give students precisely this opportunity. Responses to these tasks can be evaluated and interpreted with the tools of the WIDA Standards Framework, which detail linguistic development across the discourse, sentence, and word dimensions of language. This connection between test design and standards is a key feature of how WIDA supports the language development and academic achievement of multilingual learners.

WIDA supports the academic achievement of ELLs with a strong connection between standards and test design.

We know it's critical that students develop the ability to communicate effectively in the classroom. But what kind of language do they need to be successful? What features of spoken language make it possible for a student in a science class to describe how to perform an experiment or for a student in a social studies class to compare different voting systems?

Developing the right kind of language to perform those linguistic tasks is a challenge – and that challenge begins with understanding what “the right kind of language” actually means.

Tools for Learning about Oral Language in the Classroom






WIDA has developed several tools you can use to understand the kinds of spoken language students need for success in the content classroom. These tools—[all of which are included in the 2012 Amplification of the WIDA English Language Development Standards resource guide](#)—can spark ideas about how to focus on these skills in the language classroom.

The five WIDA English Language Development Standards statements describe the language areas in which ELLs must attain proficiency to access the classroom and curriculum content. Supporting the ELD Standards is the WIDA Standards Framework, a collection of tools that detail the ways language develops as students build the communication skills they need for academic success.

Dimensions of Language

The WIDA Features of Academic Language describe three distinct dimensions of language: the discourse, sentence, and word or phrase dimensions. The features and performance criteria of these dimensions vary as students' language skills develop.

The Five WIDA English Language Development Standards

	Social and Instructional Language
	Language of Language Arts
	Language of Mathematics
	Language of Science
	Language of Social Studies

WIDA Features of Academic Language

Adapted from the 2012 amplification of the English language development standards, Kindergarten-Grade 12

	Performance Criteria	Features
Discourse Dimension	Linguistic Complexity Quantity and variety of oral and written text	Amount of speech Structure of speech Density of speech Organization and cohesion of ideas Variety of sentence types
Sentence Dimension	Language Forms and Conventions Types, array, and use of language structures	Types and variety of grammatical structures Conventions, mechanics, and fluency Match of language forms to purpose/perspective
Word/Phrase Dimension	Vocabulary Usage Specificity of word or phrase choice	General, specific, and technical language Multiple meanings of words and phrases Formulaic and idiomatic expressions Nuances and shades of meaning Collocations

As students build linguistic skills with the kinds of language used in a classroom, they can do the following:

- Speak more, producing a greater volume of spoken language in response to prompts in an academic context.
- Speak more fluently, with fewer pauses and less hesitation.
- Use more technical (academic discipline-specific) words and phrases rather than using general or vague vocabulary, like “that thing” or “this one.”
- Use more effective and appropriate collocations or phrases. For example, “save time,” “do homework,” and “pay attention” are natural-sounding word combinations students might begin to use as their language skills develop.
- Produce a broader variety of grammatical structures.
- Better organize speech by joining ideas together more effectively and presenting thoughts in an order that listeners can easily follow.

The WIDA Features of Academic Language outline how academic language might vary and develop over time. In this Focus Bulletin, we home in on productive language – the language a student uses to express thoughts and ideas in the classroom – and more specifically oral language – the speech choices and patterns that shape a student’s academic voice.

Linguistic Features of Productive Language

The WIDA Standards Framework includes another tool that provides a detailed look at the linguistic features of language as it develops: [the WIDA Performance Definitions](#). The Performance Definitions are expanded, context-specific versions of the more general Features of Academic Language. The Performance Definitions use the WIDA English language proficiency levels to show the linguistic features that differentiate stages of language development.



For example, a student at Level 2 might produce short phrases and sentences, use repetitive phrasal and sentence patterns, and communicate with general content words and expressions.

	Discourse Dimension	Sentence Dimension	Word/Phrase Dimension
Level 2 Emerging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phrases or short sentences Emerging expression of ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formulaic grammatical structures Repetitive phrasal and sentence patterns across content areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General content words and expressions Social and instructional words and expressions across content areas

However, by Level 4, that student can produce some complex sentences, use a variety of grammatical structures, and communicate with specific and some technical content-area language.

	Discourse Dimension	Sentence Dimension	Word/Phrase Dimension
Level 4 Expanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Short, expanded, and some complex sentences Organized expression of ideas with emerging cohesion characteristic of particular content areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compound and complex grammatical structures Sentence patterns characteristic of particular content areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specific and some technical content-area language Words and expressions with expressive meaning through use of collocations and idioms across content areas

Key Linguistic Skills for Effective Oral Communication

The best tool for exploring the nuance of how oral language evolves as a student's skills develop is the [Speaking rubric](#), which outlines key linguistic skills necessary for success in a school context. It describes specific levels of expectations for students' ability to express themselves and communicate in content areas.

Speaking Rubric of the WIDA™ Consortium Grades 1-12			
	Discourse Level	Sentence Level	Word/Phrase Level
	Linguistic Complexity	Language Forms	Vocabulary Usage
Level 6 Reaching	<p>Response is fully comprehensible, fluent, and appropriate to purpose, situation and audience; comparable to the speech of English proficient students meeting college- and career-readiness standards; characterized by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> sustained, connected oral language characterized by confidence, coherence, and precision in the expression of ideas tailored to purpose, situation, and audience clear evidence of consistency in conveying an appropriate perspective and register 		
Level 5 Bridging	<p>Response is comprehensible, fluent, and generally related to purpose; generally comparable to the speech of English proficient peers; characterized by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> sustained, connected oral language that shows appropriate and coherent expression of ideas related to purpose, situation and audience clear evidence of conveying an appropriate perspective and register 		

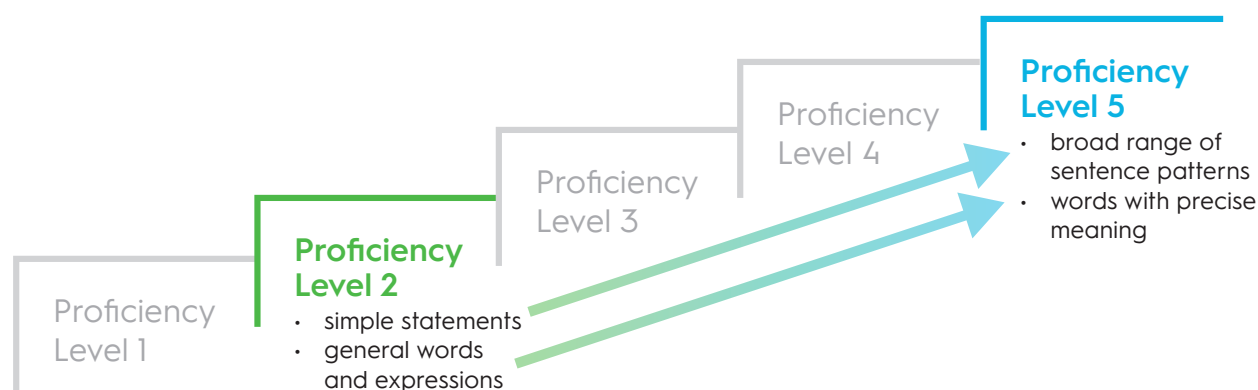
The rubric makes it clear, for example, that at advanced stages of language development, students produce spoken language that conveys appropriate perspective and register; use a broad range of sentence structures that align with language use in the relevant academic discipline; and employ technical, discipline-specific vocabulary to communicate precise meaning.

Oral Language in Context

As we look closely at how language changes as a student builds the skills described above, it's important to remember that language development depends on the context in which it happens.

For example, Grade 1 students might produce social and instructional language in the context of discussing classroom collaboration. They might use technical, discipline-specific vocabulary like "taking turns," "cooperation," "job," "today," or "tomorrow." At Level 2, a student can produce simple statements about working collaboratively, while at Level 5 that student will be able to elaborate on working together, using supports such as a spoken model.

In Grade 6, students might use the language of social studies to discuss forms and organization of government. They might use technical, discipline-specific vocabulary like "forms of government," "personal rights," "equality," or "the common good." At Level 2, a student can suggest detailed features of model governments, potentially incorporating a home language. At Level 5, a student can defend and debate viewpoints on features of model governments.



In summary, the oral language we expect students to produce varies by their individual level of development and the discipline or content area with which they are engaging. By analyzing the vocabulary, sentence, and discourse features of students' spoken language, we can compare the skills of one student to another and place students' performance along the continuum of the WIDA proficiency levels.

By giving students a chance to show their skills and by giving educators and raters a chance to evaluate those skills using the WIDA standards framework, the ACCESS for ELLs Speaking test helps us understand both what students can already do and where they may need to improve.



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ACCESS for ELLs Speaking Test

The ACCESS for ELLs Speaking test is designed to assess the academic oral language skills defined in the WIDA Performance Definitions. The test requires students to process and respond to academic content across the five WIDA ELD Standards. Test tasks are designed to elicit oral language at beginner, intermediate and advanced levels of language proficiency.


Let's take a look at how the detail of the Features of Academic Language, Performance Definitions, and Speaking rubric inform how to evaluate student responses to two sample ACCESS for ELLs Speaking tasks.

The sample tasks below are for the Grades 6–8 grade-level cluster and use the Language of Language Arts and the Language of Social Studies. You can find one of the items discussed here, as well as additional sample items, at wbte.drcedirect.com/WIDA/portals/wida.

Task 1: Level 3





Students are presented with biographical information about a historical figure – in this case, the American musician Scott Joplin. Content is delivered multi-modally: students listen to or read the task input and have graphic support on each screen providing meaningful context.

Scott Joplin



Scott Joplin was a musician who played piano and wrote songs. These pictures show Joplin as a child and as a young adult.



We will talk about them. Then, I will ask you questions about Joplin's life.










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After the content is presented, the virtual test administrator presents a speaking task to the model student, Nina.

Scott Joplin







Nina, tell me about Joplin's early life.

The questions posed to Nina correspond in difficulty and opportunity to the tasks presented to the student. Nina demonstrates how students should respond, modeling the length and complexity of a very effective spoken response. Each task targets a particular proficiency level, as defined in the WIDA Performance Definitions and Speaking rubric. Nina's response reflects the expectations of the targeted level. Therefore, in addition to being a model for students, Nina's response serves as a language-use benchmark for raters who score students' responses relative to Nina's.

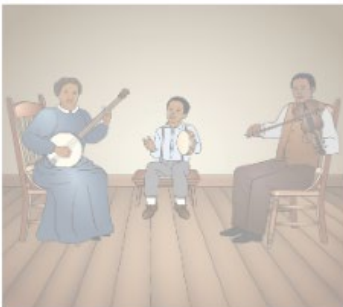



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Test-takers listen to Nina's response before they are presented with a comparable speaking task. Test-takers record their responses using the recording feature built into the online test platform.

Scott Joplin


Now it's your turn.

Tell me about some things Scott Joplin did when he was a young adult.

☐
☒ **Record**

Features of Oral Language in Responses to a Level 3 Task

Model Task: Tell me about Joplin's early life.

Nina's Response: Scott Joplin's family loved music. When he was growing up, both his parents played instruments, and he learned to play instruments, too. A music teacher heard about his talent and taught him how to play piano.

Nina recounts, in her own words, the content of the first half of the task input. Her explanation of the first and second pictures is characterized by a combination of simple and complex sentences and some discipline-specific vocabulary: "growing up," "played instruments," "talent," "taught him how to play piano." Nina's response demonstrates how to respond to the task and the level of linguistic complexity that is expected in a Level 3 response. Her response completely fulfills the task expectations.

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Now consider some actual student responses to a comparable task, taken directly from ACCESS for ELLs.

Student Task:

Tell me about some things Scott Joplin did as a young adult.

Student Response 1:

He started playing piano at a club and then began to write his own music.

This response is relevant to the task, but it lacks the linguistic complexity that could be anticipated at Level 3 in Grades 6–8. An appropriate rating for this response is **Adequate**.

Student Response 2:

When Scott was a young adult, he played the piano also along with his parents. He learned how to play piano by a famous piano player. And he taught Scott how to play.

This response shows a mix of simple and complex sentences. The minor errors do not interfere with the intended message, and the response includes appropriate vocabulary: “played the piano,” “learned,” and “taught Scott how to play.” An appropriate rating for this response is **Strong**.

Student responses are scored according to the ACCESS for ELLs Speaking Scoring Scale, used by both local test administrators and centralized raters.

ACCESS for ELLs Speaking Scoring Scale	
Score point	Response characteristics
Exemplary use of oral language to provide an elaborated response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language use comparable to or going beyond the model in sophistication • Clear, automatic, and fluent delivery • Precise and appropriate word choice
Strong use of oral language to provide a detailed response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language use approaching that of model in sophistication, though not as rich • Clear delivery • Appropriate word choice
Adequate use of oral language to provide a satisfactory response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language use not as sophisticated as that of model • Generally comprehensible use of oral language • Adequate word choice
Attempted use of oral language to provide a response in English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language use does not support an adequate response • Comprehensibility may be compromised • Word choice may not be fully adequate
No response (in English)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not respond (in English)

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Student Response 3:

When he was a young adult, Scott Joplin was a musician who liked playing the piano, and he wrote songs. Everyone in his family loved to play music. He played piano in churches and parties, so he could continue his music education. Then, he became...began to write his own songs.

This response demonstrates a high level of proficiency in oral language, connecting ideas with appropriate devices such as “who liked,” “so he could,” and “then, he became.” The response includes a variety of discipline-specific and task-relevant vocabulary (“musician,” “wrote songs,” “played piano,” “music education,” “write his own songs”) that builds specificity into the response. This response goes beyond the standard established by the model response, so an appropriate rating for this response is **Exemplary**.

Task 2: Level 5

Students are presented with additional biographical information about Scott Joplin. To help them listen and read strategically, the question they’ll be asked is previewed.

Scott Joplin



Now, let's talk more about Scott Joplin's life and work. He was a creative musician who worked in a new style or type of music called "ragtime." His hard work and original songs helped this new type of music become popular.



Later, I will ask you to pick one word to describe Scott Joplin.



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Test-takers see the prompt that was previewed and record their responses after listening to Nina’s response to the same prompt.

Scott Joplin


Nina picked the word determined.
Now it's your turn.

Think about everything you've learned about Scott Joplin. Choose a different word that describes Joplin, and tell me why you picked that word.

☐

Record

Stop



Features of Oral Language in Responses to a Level 5 Task

Model task: Nina, now that you’ve heard about Scott Joplin’s life, I want you to think of a word that describes him. Tell me which word you chose, and why you picked that word.

Nina’s Response: The word I chose is ‘determined.’ I think Scott Joplin was determined because he worked hard for a long time to make music in a new style. He started creating music when he was young and didn’t give up. He even brought ragtime style to other forms of music like opera. His opera was not successful at first, but eventually his work became very popular. This took determination.

Nina uses complex syntax, for example: “...was determined because he worked hard for a long time to make music....” Nina also produces discipline-specific vocabulary, including “music in a new style,” “creating music,” “ragtime,” “opera,” and “determination.” This response reflects a level of language proficiency consistent with the Level 5 descriptions in the WIDA Performance Definitions.

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	Discourse Dimension	Sentence Dimension	Word/Phrase Dimension
Level 5 Bridging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple, complex sentences Organized, cohesive, and coherent expression of ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A variety of grammatical structures matched to purpose A broad range of sentence patterns characteristic of particular content areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technical and abstract content-area language, including content-specific collocations Words and expressions with precise meaning across content areas

Now consider some student responses to this task.

Student Task: Nina picked the word ‘determined.’ Now it’s your turn. Think about everything you’ve learned about Scott Joplin. Choose a different word that describes Joplin, and tell me why you picked that word.

Student Response 1: *Confident. He’s confident of what he do, of what he does. He likes what he does and he’s just confident.*

This response is on topic but lacks the complexity of the model response. The student does not use any discipline-specific vocabulary. While the response does show what the student can do with language, it doesn’t fully meet the expectations of a Level 5 task. An appropriate rating for this response is **Adequate**.

Student response 2: *The word I picked was creativity because, um, Scott Joplin was creative. He started making, he started writing music since he was little. And now he he has become the king of Ragnet. He has made lots of musics and, um, staged opera and more.*

This response nears the syntactic and lexical complexity of the model response. The student appropriately incorporates some discipline-specific vocabulary, such as “creative,” “writing music,” “king of Ragnet [sic],” “made lots of music,” and “staged opera,” but the response uses a smaller variety of sentence structures than the model response. An appropriate rating for this response is **Strong**.

Student response 3: *I would pick the word inspire because he would inspire me to not give up on my dreams, and he worked really hard for his. He even worked hard for his own theater and now he is remembered for a lot. He would inspire a lot of children, a lot of kids to not give up for what they’re looking for in their life. And I won’t give up on mine, thanks to Scott Joplin.*

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This response uses a variety of complex sentence structures as well as a wide variety of appropriate vocabulary and accurate collocation (for example, “give up on my dreams,” “not give up,” “he is remembered for,” and, “what they’re looking for in their life”). The student’s last sentence delivers a clear closing to the response and contributes a cohesive expression of ideas.. This response is comparable to the standard established by the model response, so an appropriate rating for this response is **Exemplary**.

The Vocabulary Usage descriptors from Level 5 of the Speaking rubric help to explain how students employ lexical resources to produce proficient academic oral language.

Speaking Rubric of the WIDA™ Consortium Grades 1-12			
	Discourse Level	Sentence Level	Word/Phrase Level
	Linguistic Complexity	Language Forms	Vocabulary Usage
Level 5 Bridging	Response is comprehensible, fluent, and generally related to purpose; generally comparable to the speech of English proficient peers; characterized by:		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sustained, connected oral language that shows appropriate and coherent expression of ideas related to purpose, situation and audience clear evidence of conveying an appropriate perspective and register 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a broad range of oral phrase and sentence patterns and grammatical structures matched to the content area topic controlled, fluid use of oral language to convey meaning, including for effect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> usage of technical and abstract content-area words and expressions as appropriate usage of words and expressions with precise meaning related to content area topics as appropriate vocabulary usage that fulfills the speaking purpose

Features of Oral Language across Proficiency Levels

The student responses in the Closer Look show how oral language varies as proficiency develops. Student responses rated Strong and Exemplary are characterized by original and academic vocabulary use beyond the language delivered in the task, while the Adequate responses satisfy the prompt but don’t demonstrate the complexity and discipline-specific vocabulary of the model student response.

These examples show how the three dimensions of academic language – the discourse, sentence, and word or phrase dimensions – differentiate spoken language across the levels

of oral language proficiency. As proficiency increases, students are able to produce a wider variety of simple and complex sentence structures, and they more frequently and more clearly use connective devices to link ideas.

The tools of the WIDA Standards Framework detail the features of oral language that allow students to communicate effectively in school contexts. Understanding what those features are and how they appear in practice can help you to both identify the expectations of the ACCESS for ELLs Speaking test and plan classroom instruction that helps students develop the sentence structures, vocabulary, and expressive organization skills critical to their success in the classroom and beyond.

REFLECTION

As students' proficiency increases, they move from using simple to more complex sentence structures, joining ideas with connectors like "because," "so," and "however" or sequence terms like "first," "next," "then," "later," and "finally."

- **What classroom activities encourage students to use these kinds of connectors?**
- **What can you do to encourage students to join ideas together when they speak?**

Employing technical, discipline-specific vocabulary is one critical way students express themselves clearly in academic contexts.

- **What can you do to encourage students to use less general terminology and instead develop vocabulary that is specific and uniquely appropriate to academic contexts, like the language used in social studies or science textbooks?**

In casual conversation, speakers can respond directly to previous comments with simple statements and imprecise language. In school communication, speakers often respond to multiple arguments and maintain clarity by using specific language, rather than pronouns like "it" or "that," to connect ideas within an audience's body of prior knowledge.

- **What can you do to encourage students to use discipline-specific nouns and noun phrases rather than generic pronouns?**

Additional Reading

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