



WIDA™ RESEARCH REPORT

**HIGH QUALITY PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT FOR ENGLISH
LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

PREPARED BY

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World Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) advances academic language development and academic achievement for linguistically diverse students. WIDA was formed as the result of a federal grant to comply with the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. It is a consortium of states and districts working together to promote achievement of English language learners. The organization has created a comprehensive system that includes English Language Development Standards, Spanish Language Development Standards, English language proficiency assessments, professional development for educators of ELLs, and research on all aspects of English language learning.

RESEARCH

WIDA's Research Department seeks to provide timely, meaningful, and actionable research that promotes educational equity and academic achievement for linguistically and culturally diverse students. Its annual research agenda is developed under the guidance of the WIDA Consortium Board Research Subcommittee and includes topics in the areas of academic language, standards, professional learning, and policy.

Key components of high quality professional development for educators of English language learners

The increased presence of culturally and linguistically diverse students in our schools along with the push to integrate English language learners (ELLs) in mainstream classes have changed the roles and responsibilities of general education teachers. General education teachers, as Aída Walqui and Leo van Lier (2010) write, are now “language teachers, regardless of their main job to teach language arts, social studies, math, or science.” The challenge that many general education teachers face, however, is that they receive limited support in learning how to be effective teachers of the academic language of their disciplines (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009).

For several years now the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Consortium, which produces English language development standards and an English language proficiency assessment used in 32 states, has made an effort to support general education teachers in meeting this challenge. Together with the Center for Applied Linguistics, WIDA responded to requests from state educational agencies and district ELL coordinators by developing a professional development program specifically designed for educators working with ELLs. The program, called Content and Language Integration as a Means of Bridging Success (CLIMBS®), consists of five daylong meetings spread over several months. Two district-based facilitators authorized and trained by WIDA facilitate the program in a district or a regional education center. CLIMBS targets teams of educators that include one or more mainstream teachers, an ESL/bilingual specialist, and an administrator.

The research base: High quality professional development

In designing CLIMBS, WIDA took to heart four research-informed recommendations about high quality professional development specifically designed for teachers of ELLs: a) understanding ELLs means understanding the processes of second language development (Fillmore & Snow, 2002); b) discussions about the learning of ELLs must be based on the knowledge students *bring* to school rather than the knowledge that they lack (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005); c) ELLs thrive in schools where their education is the responsibility of the whole staff and not only of language specialists (Coady et al., 2008); and d) professional development is effective when it is coherent (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001), and language development standards can contribute to this coherence.

I studied the implementation of CLIMBS to find out how it helps raise educators’ awareness of the needs of ELLs and increase their capacity to meet those needs. In the sections that follow, I will describe the teacher learning I documented from the point of view of the four recommendations listed above. I will first illustrate how educators’ perceptions of student learning changed as they built knowledge about the process of second language development. Second, I will discuss how CLIMBS supported understanding and collaboration among general education and ESL/bilingual teachers by design and through discussion. I will explore the role that the ELD standards played in increasing the prestige of language specialists and adding coherence to the professional development sessions.

Language development and an assets-based view of students

The main purpose of professional development is to help teachers better meet the needs of their students. High quality professional development guides educators in supporting ELLs not by teaching them instructional strategies (though these

can be useful) but primarily by increasing their awareness of why ELLs perform the way they do. As educators learn more about the complex processes of language development, their understanding of students' learning transforms and they begin to see students in a more positive light. The new awareness educators develop also helps them become advocates for linguistically diverse students. Meghan, a general education first-grade teacher, is a case in point.

Meghan had always believed that students should be taught to read and write in English because when they come to school they are often learning to read and write for the first time. During CLIMBS, Meghan realized that ELL students should learn to read and write in their stronger language (which is usually their home language) and that they can then easily transfer those skills to English. This realization changed her perception of the support provided to ELLs in her school, whose practices suddenly seemed to fall short of what the students needed. (The school provided no reading instruction in languages other than English). Meghan began to see a relationship between the services provided to ELLs and their learning. She found an explanation for the challenges that many ELLs experienced when learning to read that did not place blame on the students or their communities. She began to ask herself how she could use students' knowledge and skills in their home language to support their content and language learning in English.

As the professional development program progressed, Meghan had the opportunity to act on her learning. She used the knowledge that she gained to advocate for an English language learner during a meeting of the school's Response-to-Intervention (RTI) committee. She shared the following during CLIMBS:

Meghan: We have a student we just met on last week who was referred RTI. It's getting to the point where they are saying, "Nothing we are doing is working!" They are thinking about giving him an IEP [individual education plan]. I had brought up, "Well, in our workshops, we are being told that because it is a second grade student, that the students should be taught in their native language." Nobody has ever tried teaching this student in Spanish but now fortunately we have an ELL teacher who speaks Spanish. In RTI we are saying, "Oops, there's got to be a learning disability here." How can we make this determination? So I talked to the principal about it and she said, "Let's give it a try. Let's start teaching him in Spanish and see if there is a difference. Maybe that's what the problem is."

Meghan's case illustrates that an educator's awareness of language and literacy development shapes in powerful ways their perception of ELLs' strengths and capabilities. Not only that, but it can support them in advocating for students. An assets-based view of ELLs thus has tangible consequences for both students and teachers.

A sense of shared responsibility and language development standards

CLIMBS also transforms the relationships between ESL/bilingual and general education teachers. ESL/bilingual staff in schools are often isolated from their colleagues and feel that their work has a lower status. In many cases mainstream teachers are also reluctant to collaborate with language specialists. The research literature has clearly indicated, however, that linguistically diverse students benefit immensely from a shared sense of responsibility for their education among all staff, and from collaboration among language specialists and general education teachers.

One way in which CLIMBS fosters a sense of shared responsibility for the education of ELLs is by design. Educators are asked to attend the professional development sessions in teams. The teams consist of general education teachers, a language specialist, and an administrator. Given the numerous responsibilities of administrators, they are encouraged to participate even if they can attend only some of the sessions.

During CLIMBS, I saw the relationship between the ESL/bilingual staff and the general education teachers improve. General education teachers and ESL/bilingual teachers learned more about the contexts in which they worked and

discovered unanticipated similarities in the challenges they faced. By the end of CLIMBS, general education and ESL/bilingual teachers spoke of a feeling of comfort with each other that had arisen as a result of their work together. Jeannine (a fifth grade general education teacher), for example, shared the following when she described the learning that she found most valuable in the program:

Jeannine: It was helpful to understand better just what ESL teachers are working with and what is guiding them. As I have mentioned before, our ESL program has struggled for a while in working with regular education teachers. It was interesting and helpful to see where they are sort of coming from and what sorts of things we can do to help them.

CLIMBS helped general education teachers better understand their colleagues because it raised their awareness of the content and purpose of ESL/bilingual instruction. The program provided ESL/bilingual teachers with multiple opportunities to demonstrate professionalism and show that they are held accountable in much the same way as general education teachers were. In addition, the numerous discussions of academic language helped make mainstream teachers aware of what it is and of the essential role that it plays in making content accessible to ELLs. General education teachers thus began to view ESL/bilingual teachers as colleagues rather than as specialists whose training, knowledge, and practice are of a completely different nature than their own. General education teachers began to see how content and language instruction reinforce and build on each other. The content and language specialists became allies with a common commitment to the academic success of ELLs and common ownership of their learning.

The ELD standards facilitated the understanding and collaboration among language specialists and general education teachers in a number of ways. The ELD standards, of which most general education teachers had not heard, increased the prestige of ESL/bilingual teachers by demonstrating that their instruction is also standards-based. In addition, the ELD standards underscored the inextricable connection between content and language. Working with the standards, the educators realized why they need each other in order to plan instruction that takes into account the needs and strengths of their language learners. Finally, the standards served as a shared reference point for both ESL/bilingual and general education teachers. This shared foundation not only contributed to the coherence of the professional development, but also served as an important shared resource for the educators.

Designing high quality professional development

Learning about language is difficult but powerful. It is important that educators have repeated opportunities to see their instruction through the lens of academic language. As they learn about language development, teachers begin to see linguistically diverse students in a different, more positive light. Educators also realize that supporting students' language development is as important as ensuring that students have access to rigorous grade-level content. The task of systematically creating meaningful opportunities for academic language development is new and daunting to most general education teachers, so the support of their ESL/bilingual colleagues as well as administrators is essential.

Professional development focused on ELLs is not just for the ESL/bilingual teacher. When general education teachers, ESL/bilingual teachers, and administrators participate in learning opportunities together, they build a shared foundation of awareness and understanding. They become more comfortable reaching out to each other. They begin to see ELLs' education as the common responsibility that it is.

English language development standards can be an important component of professional development specifically designed for educators working with ELLs. The ELD standards give educators a sense of the trajectory of academic language development through the use of language proficiency levels. More importantly, the standards help educators understand what the levels mean by providing numerous examples of tasks that students at different language proficiency

levels may be expected to successfully perform. The standards also give coherence to the professional development because they help educators connect language differentiation, instruction, and assessment. They are a rich resource that can provide a common foundation for a range of discussions. The true power of language standards can only be unlocked, however, when educators have the opportunity to use them in planning instruction and looking at student work in collaboration with their peers.

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The Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) is one of the nation's oldest university-based education research and development centers. WCER is based in the UW–Madison School of Education, which is consistently ranked one of the top schools of education in the country. With annual outside funding exceeding \$47 million, WCER is home to centers for research on the improvement of mathematics and science education from kindergarten through postsecondary levels, the strategic management of human capital in public education, and value-added achievement, as well as the Minority Student Achievement Network and a multistate collaborative project to develop assessments for English language learners.

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