**Overview**

Explicit instruction in speaking has a great impact on oral language development for English learners (ELs) of all ages. When teachers model and scaffold oral language, ELs can engage in deep conversations that explore academic and cultural identities. As students are taught expressive communication skills, language is used as a tool to create, shape, and share ideas.[[1]](#footnote-1) Students benefit from oral language instruction and practice with the WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020 edition [Key Language Uses](https://wida.wisc.edu/teach/standards/eld/2020): Narrate, Argue, Inform, and Explain. They also benefit from explicit instruction and practice across dimensions of language use (word, sentence, and discourse levels). Fortunately, many English learners bring strong oral language traditions from home into school and strong culturally responsive ESL pedagogy can have a positive impact not only in the classroom, but also across an entire school. As English learners develop the ability to speak at length, they can be powerful change agents. For example, supporting an argument or claim with evidence and reasons orally is a critical skill that promotes not only academic success, but also perspective-taking, empathy, and cross-cultural connections. To promote belonging and bring student voice to the forefront, educators must center the student-learning process on higher-order inquiry questions that stretch and support oral language. These strong oral language skills also interconnect and fortify literacy skills.

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| **Potential Strengths and Common Challenges to English Learners’ Oral Language Development** |
| **Strengths** | **Challenges** |
| * Can share valuable knowledge of languages and cultures with others
* Learn language through social interactions with peers
* Interpret and share perspectives, build relationships, and affirm identities
* Many come from cultures that are collectivist with strong oral traditions
* Families and caregivers are important partners in building conversation skills
* Often develop oral proficiency before other communication modes (reading, writing, etc.)
* Use multiple languages flexibly to make meaning by metalinguistic awareness, codeswitching, and translanguaging
 | * May need support for applying social language skills to academic and discipline-specific contexts
* English learners are frequently offered fewer opportunities for participation in classrooms with traditional discourse structures (e.g., “raise your hand and wait to be called on”)
* Teachers may misinterpret silence and non-participation as disinterest or shyness
* Systemic racism and cultural incongruence establish norms and procedures for participation that are only useful within the school building
* Questions and prompts must be carefully crafted to ensure classroom talk values the experience and knowledge of all students, not only white students or students from high socioeconomic backgrounds
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**Strategies and Best Practices**

Educators can implement the following strategies and best practices to effectively develop English learners’ oral language:

* **Adopt an asset-based perspective.** An asset-based approach views English learners as having a wealth of cultural and linguistic knowledge to share and contrasts a view of ELs simply as students who face challenges that need to be overcome. Educators who listen, observe, and ask questions better understand students and their families. This [approach](https://getsupported.net/elassets/) honors “story-centered” and oral traditions by incorporating student identity maps, biographies and autobiographies, and oral histories. It also provides “[street data](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69-hTpX9HRw)” educators can use to design and deliver instruction that draws on students’ linguistic and cultural resources.[[2]](#footnote-2) Gathering information about student assets informs planning of instructional supports for the expressive communication mode (speaking, writing, and representing)[[3]](#footnote-3). Additionally, as students develop metacognition about their strengths, they can become more comfortable advocating for themselves to support greater academic success.

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| **Questions to Support Asset-Based Approach for Developing English Learners’ Oral Language** |
| **Learning About Students’ Assets*** **Histories:** What is the history of your schooling/school experiences? What is the history of your families/cultures?
* **Identities:** How do you define yourself? What do you desire to be in your future?
* **Literacy and Language Practices:** How do you practice literacies at home and in your communities? What is the purpose of literacy and language in your lives?
* **To Inform Unit-Level Planning:** What are some of your home/community experiences related to this topic? Does this topic relate to something in your community? How does the topic influence your community? How does your community influence this topic?
 | **Reflecting About Equity-Focused Practice: Identity, Skills, Knowledge, and Criticality*** How will conversations in my class help students learn something about themselves and/or others?
* How will my instruction and modeling of oral academic language build students’ skills for the content area?
* How will my instruction on core communication skills (building ideas, clarifying ideas, supporting with evidence, and evaluating evidence) build students’ knowledge and mental powers?
* How could I leverage students’ multilingualism and linguistic assets to encourage translanguaging?
* How will my discussion prompts engage students to think about power, equity, and disrupting oppression?
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| *Adapted from Muhammad, G. (2020). Cultivating Genius: A framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy. New York: Scholastic, Inc. and WIDA, 2020.The WIDA ELD Standards Framework: A Collaborative Approach eWorkshop Module 2: Student Assets for Learning.*  |

* **Explicitly teach oral language skills to English learners at all language proficiency levels, tailoring instruction to what students can do.** For example, educators can useProject-Based Learning (PBL) to develop oral language. PBL promotes real-world problem solving with choice and authentic audiences for students. Although PBL incorporates multiple opportunities for student-to-student and community interaction, teachers of ELs will also need to explicitly teach the language needed to be successful during interactions. Educators can also use strategies such as restorative justice circles/experiential learning circles, academic conversations, Socratic Seminars, photo elicitation, and reciprocal teaching to build on students’ assets, promote interaction and develop oral language. These strategies can also be adapted to connect to what educators want students to learn how to do with language (extending or enhancing meanings, elaborating or condensing ideas, creating precise meanings, creating coherent spoken texts, and connecting ideas across a whole spoken text, etc.). The tables below present examples of how educators can adapt strategies for developing oral language to tailor them for English learners at different proficiency levels.[[4]](#footnote-4)

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| **Restorative Justice Circles/Experiential Learning Circles.** In the [Restorative Justice](https://www.c4rj.org/images/c4rj-schools-toolkit-revised-2017.pdf) approach, participants respond to a prompt or engage in shared experiences, followed by a reflective circle to identify lessons learned. It includes a keeper, participants, and guidelines created by the group to describe expectations for behavior. The keeper is a facilitator for the process who is also a member of the group circle. In a circle, all participants have an opportunity to speak and to tell their story. Participants can express their perspective and listen to everyone else’s perspective. Educators can use the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition Proficiency Level Descriptors for the expressive communication mode to assess how speaking at the sentence level becomes more complex (sample rubric below designed for an experiential learning circle using WIDA Grades 4-5 Proficiency Level Descriptors):  |
| **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 1:** Extend or enhance meanings through sentence fragments and emerging use of simple sentences (the blue one, the red one). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 2:** Extend or enhance meanings through simple sentences (The red side pushed away. The blue side stayed.). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 3:** Extend or enhance meanings through sentences with emerging use of clauses (The red side blocked the paperclip. The blue side picked it up. They are opposites.). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 4:** Extend or enhance meanings through simple or compound sentences with familiar ways of combining clauses (with coordinating conjunctions: The red side repelled the paperclip, but also it....). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 5:** Extend or enhance meanings through compound and complex sentences with frequently used ways of combining clauses (with coordinating conjunctions: Neither the red one nor the blue one...). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 6:** Extend or enhance meanings through compound and complex sentences characteristic of the genre and content area, with a variety of ways of combining clauses with a range of techniques to extend or shorten sentences (The magnetic force caused the paperclip to lift off the table because the paperclip is metal.). |

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| **Academic Conversations.** Teachers model and help students develop oral language through academic conversation by explicitly teaching and giving time to practice relevant skills, including posing initial ideas, clarifying, supporting with evidence, and evaluating evidence in arguments. This approach capitalizes on the knowledge and strengths individual students bring to the classroom. Additionally, it helps English learners build relationships, empathy, and social skills. Educators can use the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition Proficiency Level Descriptors for the expressive communication mode to assess how students elaborate and build their ideas with a partner while conversing (sample rubric below designed for an experiential learning circle using WIDA Grades 4-5 Proficiency Level Descriptors):  |
| **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 1:** Elaborate or condense ideas through a few types of elaboration (adding familiar adjectives to describe nouns: maple syrup). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 2:** Elaborate or condense ideas through some types of elaboration (adding newly learned or multiple adjectives to nouns (thick, sweet, sticky maple syrup). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 3:** Elaborate or condense ideas through a growing number of cohesive devices (emerging use of articles to refer to the same word, synonyms, antonyms). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 4:** Elaborate or condense ideas through a variety of types of elaboration (adding in a variety of adjectives including concrete and abstract nouns: the long, slow process...).  | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 5:** Elaborate or condense ideas through a wide variety of types of elaboration (adding in embedded clauses after the noun: the sap which boiled for six hours...). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 6:** Elaborate or condense ideas throughflexible range of types of elaboration that includes embedded clauses and condensed noun groups (elaborating: a sweet sap that turned into a delicious syrup after hours of boiling and condensing through nominalization: this tedious process). |

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| **Socratic Seminars.** A structure for deep discussions with close textual analysis where students talk to each other rather than to the discussion leader or teacher. The Socratic Seminar fosters engagement, respect, meaning-making, and use of evidence. Educators can use the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition Proficiency Level Descriptors for the expressive communication mode to assess students’ spoken language at the word level as they use more precise vocabulary during Socratic Seminars (sample rubric below designed for an experiential learning circle using WIDA Grades 4-5 Proficiency Level Descriptors):  |
| **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 1:** Create precise meanings through everyday, cross-disciplinary, and technical language with some frequently used words and phrases with some precision (social studies, government). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 2:** Create precise meanings through everyday, cross-disciplinary, and technical language with a small repertoire of words and phrases with developing precision (branches of government, executive power). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 3:** Create precise meanings through everyday, cross-disciplinary, and technical language with a growing repertoire of words and phrases with growing precision (the founders, “two if by land...”). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 4:** Create precise meanings through everyday, cross-disciplinary, and technical language with an expanding repertoire of words and phrases, including idioms and collocations with expanding precision (the lights are on but nobody’s home...). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 5:** Create precise meanings through everyday, cross-disciplinary, and technical language with a flexible repertoire of words and phrases, such as adverbials of time, manner, and place; verb types; and abstract nouns; with consistent precision (as a result of the war, forming a new nation). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 6:** Create precise meanings through everyday, cross-disciplinary, and technical language with a variety of words and phrases, including evaluation, obligation, idioms, and collocations (necessary sacrifices, outdated law, fit for a king). |

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| **Oral Presentations with Photo Elicitation.** A strategy whereteachers provide models from other students’ work so remaining students see what is expected for the project. Students take “photo walks” throughout the school and into the community. First, students converse about the photos in partners. Next, they write about the photos, and finally, they present the products to classmates. Beyond language development, oral presentations that bring out of school experiences into the classroom can also help increase student engagement. Educators can use the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition Proficiency Level Descriptors for the expressive communication mode to assess students’ how speaking and writing becomes more coherent (sample rubric below designed for an experiential learning circle using WIDA Grades 4-5 Proficiency Level Descriptors):  |
| **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 1:** Create coherent spoken “texts” (utterances) using short sentences linked by topic to convey an emerging sense of purpose (to inform, explain, argue, narrate). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 2:** Create coherent spoken “texts” using sentences that convey intended purpose with emerging organization (topic sentence, supporting details). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 3:** Create coherent spoken “texts” using short text that conveys intended purpose using predictable organizational patterns (signaled with some paragraph openers: first, and then, then). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 4:** Create coherent spoken “texts” (utterances) using expanding text that conveys intended purpose using generic (not genre-specific) organizational patterns across paragraphs (introduction, body, conclusion) with a variety of paragraph openers.  | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 5:** Create coherent spoken “texts” (utterances) using text that conveys intended purpose using genre-specific organizational patterns (statement of position, arguments, call to action).  | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 6:** Create coherent spoken “texts” (utterances) using text that conveys intended purpose using genre-specific organizational patterns with strategic ways of signaling relationships between paragraphs and throughout text (the first reason, the second reason, the evidence is...).  |

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| [**Reciprocal Teaching**](https://www.nbss.ie/sites/default/files/publications/reiciprocal_teaching_strategy_handout__copy_2_0.pdf)**.** A strategy where educators model and provide practice with these skills: summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting. Students are divided into groups of four, each with a role (summarizer, questioner, clarifier, and predictor). Students first learn from observing a model discussion and practicing the roles with a partner. Then they can assume responsibility for actively engaging in reciprocal teaching in their assigned small group. Educators can use the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition Proficiency Level Descriptors for the expressive communication mode to assess how students connect ideas while speaking in their small groups (sample rubric below designed for an experiential learning circle using WIDA Grades 4-5 Proficiency Level Descriptors):  |
| **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 1:** Connect ideas across a whole spoken “text” through some frequently used cohesive devices (repetition, demonstratives). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 2:** Connect ideas across a whole spoken text using some formulaic cohesive devices (pronoun referencing, etc.). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 3:** Connect ideas across a whole spoken text using a growing number of cohesive devices (emerging use of articles to refer to the same word, synonyms, antonyms). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 4:** Connect ideas across a whole spoken text usingan expanding variety of cohesive devices (given/new, whole/ part, class/subclass).  | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 5:** Connect ideas across a whole spoken text using a flexible number of cohesive devices (substitution, ellipsis, given/new). | **ELs towards the end of English Proficiency Level 6:** Connect ideas across a whole spoken text using a wide variety of cohesive devices used in genre- and discipline-specific ways.  |

* **Keep equity front and center during oral language instruction**. In practice, this means recognizing power relationships in the classroom and being aware of how cultural and linguistic privilege might shape discussion dynamics in the classroom. To maintain an equitable environment, educators can create a safe space for students to engage with one other partner first and then with a small group. They can also provide background knowledge, pre-teaching of vocabulary, plenty of modeling, visual support, sentence frames, and anchor charts with academic talk moves to support oral interaction. Educators can also use translanguaging strategies (e.g., having students discuss key concepts, topics and/or themes in their home language prior to entering a full class discussion in English) to scaffold whole class discussions.
* **Promote students’ metacognitive awareness through self- and peer-assessments of discussion skills**. Educators can teach students about what effective oral language looks and sounds like, along with ways to evaluate the way they are using language orally using a variety of strategies such as daily exit tickets, oral self-assessment rubrics that are student friendly, and regular opportunities to use common oral language assessment rubrics to listen to and provide feedback to peers.

**Suggestions for Low, Middle and High-Incidence Districts**

**Regardless of the size of the English learner population they serve, educators can support English learners’ oral language development by:**

* Engaging in regular two-way communication with families and communities through home visits or phone calls to learn about students’ home language use. They can ask questions to gather information about language use (such as: *Who do students speak with in their first language? When are they using the first and second languages at home and in the community?*) and ensure that families and students feel welcomed to enter school spaces feel and supported to use their first language.
* Scheduling regular [Language Assessment Team](https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/Page/5883) (LAT) meetings in each school. During LAT meetings, educators can collaboratively analyze oral language development of individual students using the WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020 edition Proficiency Level Descriptors.

**Educators in low and mid-incidence districts can also support English learners’ oral language development by:**

* Analyzing multiple forms of data (beyond ACCESS for ELLs or MCAS scores) to determine if English learners are producing desired amounts and types of oral language. Educators can record interviews and video record paired conversations and use a [speaking rubric](https://wida.wisc.edu/resources/oral-language-classroom) to assess students’ oral production. They can also collaborate with colleagues to adjust oral language instruction based on patterns and trends that emerge.
* Supporting educator (grade level/content area, ESL, special education, bilingual education, etc.) participation in ongoing professional development about topics relevant to oral language development for English learners such as culturally responsive and anti-racist pedagogy, academic conversations, the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 edition, among others. Afterwards, these teacher ambassadors can share back with their colleagues.

**Educators in high-incidence districts can also support English learners’ oral language development by:**

* Ensuring oral language assessments that are valid and appropriate for English learners are included in the district’s assessment calendar.
* Using data collection platforms and software to analyze datafrom multiple sources (ACCESS for ELLs, MCAS, student work from grade level/content area and ESL classrooms, etc.) to determine if English learners are producing are producing desired amounts and types of oral language.
* Prioritizing common planning time for teachers to collaboratively analyze data and adjust oral language instruction.

**Actions-at-a-Glance**

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| **Actions for Classroom Educators** |
| * Co-construct classroom agreements with students to allow for participation without hand-raising and being called on.
* Incorporate courageous conversations about race, class, gender, language, and ethnicity into lessons and use trauma sensitive practices to support these conversations.
* Engage families through oral history projects, photo elicitation and storytelling (students sharing about a special person in their lives during a designated class period, etc.).
* Co-develop specific oral language goals with students and add them to English Learner Success Plans (ELSPs) developed during Language Assessment Team (LAT) meetings.
* Co-create anchor charts (to post on classroom walls or provide as slide decks during remote instruction) and sentence frame handouts (for notebooks or index cards) as scaffolds for oral interaction.
* Teach and model participation in relevant oral language development strategies (Restorative Justice Circles, academic conversations, Socratic Seminars, Reciprocal Teaching, and oral presentations with photo elicitation, etc.). Provide students time and space to practice them, get and offer feedback on their oral language and use this information as part of formative assessment to inform future instruction.
* Provide students daily opportunities to self-assess their oral language development using student-friendly rubrics.
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| **Actions for School and District Leaders** |
| * Provide professional development focused on creating positive classroom culture and courageous conversations about race, class, gender, language, and ethnicity. Ensure teachers are well-prepared to use trauma sensitive practices.
* Schedule regular Language Assessment Team (LAT) meetings to co-develop specific oral language goals for English Learner Success Plans (ELSPs) with student input and monitor progress at regular intervals.
* Conduct learning walks with other school administrators, coaches, and teachers to listen to student oral language production and collect data relevant data of student discourse. Use data to identify trends, plan instruction, and strategize for improvement.
* Design school improvement plans that include goals focused on oral language development (developing valid rubrics and other measures of oral language development, collecting and analyzing data on oral language development and academic conversations across a variety of classrooms, using data collected to inform instruction, etc.).
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**Instructional Planning Resources**

## **DESE Practical Tools and Resources**

English Learner Collaboration Tool provides a structured process language and content educators can use to develop language-driven curriculum aligned to Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020 edition.

[ESL Model Curriculum Units](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/instruction/mcu/) provide sample units of instruction. Units span a range of topics and grade levels including access to clean water, family stories, weathering and erosion, and emotions, among others.

ESL Tools and Resources provides guidance for support effective ESL instruction including the Unit and Lesson Planning Thinking Processes and Templates.

**DESE Guidance**

[Massachusetts Blueprint for English Learner Success](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/blueprint/) unpacks the Massachusetts vision for English Learner Education into pillars that are essential for their success including school culture, access to educators, meaningful opportunity and support, and a plan for future success.

ESL Best Practices Quick Reference Guides provides guidance on a variety of key topics (formative assessment, racial equity and social justice, early literacy, etc.) as well as English learner student groups (students designated as long-term English learners, English learners with disabilities, etc.).

Next Generation ESL Curriculum Resource Guide provides support for collaborative ESL curriculum development, including collaborative tools, processes, protocols, and resources used in the development of ESL MCUs.

**Federal Resources**

[Supporting Young English Learners at Home](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/Resources/CaregiverActivities) provides a collection of family and/or caregiver activities to support oral language development through relevant activities such as making a meal, asking and answering questions about experiences, and interviewing a special person. They are available in Spanish and English.

[Meaningful Classroom Talk: Supporting English Learners’ Oral Language Development](https://ncela.ed.gov/meaningful-classroom-talk-supprting-english-learners-oral-language-development) explains how educators can ensure all English learners have opportunities to productively use oral language in academic settings.

**Other Featured Resources**

[A Restorative Practices Guide: How schools can build community and address conflicts](https://www.c4rj.org/images/c4rj-schools-toolkit-revised-2017.pdf) provides an overview of the ideas behind Restorative Practices (RP) in schools, examines and discusses the three main Restorative Practices commonly used in schools today (Community Building Circles, Restorative Chats, and Restorative Conferences).

[Focus Bulletin: Oral Language in the Classroom](https://wida.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/resource/FocusBulletin-Oral-Language-Classroom.pdf) explores the kind of oral English language English learners need to develop to be successful at school and beyond, making connections to ways in which oral language is described in the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, related resources, and ACCESS for ELLs assessment.

[Literacy Practices that Adolescents Deserve: Oral Language Development](https://storage.googleapis.com/wzukusers/user-24880839/documents/5aecb8bc16f111FVR8sO/IRA%20Mini-ebook%20-%20Zwiers%20-%20PDF.pdf) explains how educators can help English learners in secondary schools build robust ideas through classroom discussions by teaching them discussion skills, tools, and mindsets.

[6 Strategies to Help ELLs Succeed in Peer Learning and Collaboration](https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/6-strategies-help-ells-succeed-peer-learning-and-collaboration) provides ideas for how to introduce new strategies that involve pair or group work. Recommendations include teacher modeling, providing clear directions, and carefully assigning English learners’ roles for group work and incorporating comprehension checks.

[Seeing how to ask first: Photo elicitation motivates English language learners to write](https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ990871.pdf) describes how English learners in middle school can use this strategy to reflect upon, speak, and write about their lives as part of systemic oral language development instruction.

[Reciprocal Teaching: Reading and Learning Strategy](https://www.nbss.ie/sites/default/files/publications/reiciprocal_teaching_strategy_handout__copy_2_0.pdf) presents how students can practice comprehension strategies (summarizing, questioning, clarifying, predicting, and responding) with a common text in pairs or small groups.

[Three Strategies for Promoting ELs Assets](https://getsupported.net/elassets/%29) describes practical ways educators can implement an asset-based instructional approach with English learners.

[**For additional resources you may wish to consult, click here.**](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/esl-toolkit/tools-resources/)

1. Zwiers, J. 2019. *Next steps with academic conversations: New ideas for improving learning through classroom talk*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse; Zwiers, J. & Hamerla, S. 2018. *The K-3 Guide to Academic Conversations: Practices, scaffolds, and activities.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Safir, S. & Dugan, J. 2021. Street Data: A next-generation model for equity, pedagogy, and school transformation. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. WIDA. (2020). WIDA English language development standards framework, 2020 edition: Kindergarten–grade 12. Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Teachers can adapt these ideas for specific grade levels/grade level bands by referring to the appropriate WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 edition Proficiency Level Descriptors (general description - p. 31-34; by grade level: Kindergarten - p.57, Grade 1 - p.79, Grades 2-3 - p.101; Grades 6-8 - p.171, and Grades 9-12 - p. 209). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)