Do current English language development/proficiency standards reflect the English needed for success in school?

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Abstract

English language development or proficiency (ELD/P) standards promise to play an important role in the instruction and assessment of the language development of English language learner (ELL) pre-K-12 students, but to do so effectively they must convey the progression of student language learning in authentic school contexts for authentic academic purposes. The construct of academic English is defined as the vocabulary, sentence structures, and discourse associated with language used to teach academic content as well as the language used to navigate the school setting more generally. The construct definition is informed by a relatively modest number of empirical studies of textbooks, content assessments, and observations of classroom discourse. The standards of a state with a large ELL population and a large multi-state consortium are then reviewed to illustrate the role of the academic English construct in the standards' coverage of language modalities or domains, levels of attainment or proficiency, grade spans, and the needs of the large number of young English learners. Recommendations and potential strategies for validating, creating, and augmenting standards that reflect authentic uses of academic language in school settings are also made.

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This paper focuses on standards for the English language development/proficiency (ELD/P) of English language learners (ELL) in the United States and their relationship to the construct of academic English.[1] Under Title III of Public Law 107-110, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2001), states that did not already have existing ELD/P standards were required to create such standards. Before NCLB became law in 2002, the consequences of using language standards for the assessment and instruction of ELL students were relatively low. State standards are now used as the blueprints for creating state standards-based assessment systems. They also remain influential for informing instructional practice, and are ideally used to guide teacher professional development in the design of language curricula, instruction, and assessment (e.g. Gottlieb, Cranley, & Camilleri, 2007; Kenyon, MacGregor, Li, & Cook, this volume). A framework was also recently prepared with US Department of Education funding to guide states and school districts in the development and refinement of their ELD/P standards and assessments to help assure valid, high quality products (Assessment and Accountability Comprehensive Center, 2009). In this paper, we examine important aspects of the conceptualization and construction of ELD/P standards, particularly as they relate to the academic English construct. In doing so, we address the issue of how well ELD/P standards currently reflect the language demands of school.

In the second section of the paper, 'History of ELD/P standards', we situate the ELD/P standards in a broader educational context by discussing the role of ELD/P standards in the national standards-based reform movement with its focus on the creation of academic content standards. This section then provides a brief history of ELD/P standards in the United States before NCLB and the subsequent impact of regulations under NCLB.

The construct of academic English is explored in the third section, 'The role of academic English'. While the distinction between the language used in everyday social contexts and the language used in academic settings for learning content area material was made by Jim Cummins (1979) thirty years ago, there has been renewed interest in the construct of academic English. Review of definitions of academic English suggests that it can mean different things to different educational practitioners from its broadest sense as the literate use of English to more specific notions of specialized vocabulary, sentence structures, and discourse encountered in each of the academic disciplines (Bailey, 2010).

The fourth section of the paper, 'Review of key ELD/P standards', offers illustrative reviews of the standards of a key state with a high proportion of ELL students and a large multi-state consortium. The brief reviews are not exhaustive but rather are meant to show how ELP/D standards can be scrutinized for their conceptualization and incorporation of the academic English construct. We focus on the coverage of modalities or domains (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), levels of attainment or proficiency, and grade span and age-level considerations. We use the defining features of the academic English construct, provided in the third section, as a reference point by which to judge examples of the conceptualization and content of the language standards.

The fifth and final section of the paper makes several recommendations to improve or augment existing ELD/P standards. The content of the standards as a reflection of authentic uses of English in the classroom is in need of validation, as is their impact on student learning and teacher practices. We also discuss the potential for a common core of ELD/P standards for use nationwide, as well as the creation of detailed learning progressions of

language and discourse features to augment existing standards and tied to the much needed longitudinal study of academic English development.

History of ELD/P standards

The national standards-based reform movement in the 1990s was represented by the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, other legislation, and organizations such as the National Alliance of Business. The reform movement focused on academic content standards in the different disciplines (e.g. mathematics, language arts, science, etc.) and arose out of concerns with the low quality of education in the United States (National Alliance of Business, 1995; Short, 2000). Standards describe what students ought to know and be able to do and are a reflection of a society's expectations or ideals for its students (e.g. Wixson, Dutro, & Athan, 2003). Most often, standards are conceptualized and their content chosen by stakeholders in the educational community (e.g. teachers, school districts, county offices of education, and state departments of education, California Department of Education [CDE], 1999). Other stakeholders include subject matter specialists and researchers in universities, professional organizations (e.g. Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages [TESOL]), as well as individuals representing the wider community such as business people. Unfortunately, however, these various stakeholders disagree on what students should know and be able to do and on the level of specificities standards should stipulate, and their conflicting beliefs can constitute major obstacles in developing academic content standards (Wixson et al., 2003). Wixson and colleagues found that the more social and cultural issues a content area contains (e.g. history, social studies), the more divergent the beliefs of the stakeholders. Given that language is the medium of social interaction and embedded within a culture, it is likely that ELD/P standards by their very nature engender a disparate range of ideas about the knowledge and skills students need in order to be considered proficient in English.

The standards-based reform movement aimed to promote academic excellence for all students and encouraged each state to develop academic content-area standards to serve as guidelines for curriculum design, assessment, and teacher professional development. Under the assumption that the standards would be intended for *all* students and take into account the linguistic needs of ELL students, federal officials did not designate ESL as a separate content area for standards development before the passage of NCLB (Bunch, this volume; Short, 2000). However, ultimately the state-designed content-area standards failed to take into account the needs of the ELL student population (Short, 2000), despite the concurrent rapid growth of pre-K-12 students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds enrolled in US schools (The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition & Language Instruction Educational Programs [NCELA], 2006). Not until the creation of the initial World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) *ELP Standards* in 2004 do we see standards with anything close to this notion of language fused with academic content. We can only imagine the benefits had this integration taken place in the 1990s: by now, there would have been close, long-time collaborations between ESL and content-area teachers that would be valuable for effective instruction of ELL students and the construct of academic English would have been more thoroughly researched and likely much further evolved by this point in time.

TESOL closely watched this disappointing omission of ELL-specific needs and consequently established a task force to explore the creation of the organization's own ESL standards to fill the gap (Short, 2000; Gómez, 2000). These initial ESL standards are discussed below.

Pre-NCLB ELD/P standards

Before the passage of NCLB in 2001, two examples of conceptualizing and constructing ELD/P standards stand out: those of TESOL and the State of California. In view of the lack of incorporation of the linguistic needs of ELL students in the developing content-area standards in the United States, and informed by the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia *ESL Bandscales* (McKay, Hudson, & Sapuppo, 1994), TESOL created the *ESL Standards for Pre-K-12 Students* in 1997 (TESOL, 1997). The model presented by the Australian *ESL Bandscales* articulated standards for the purpose of understanding how English language develops in ESL students. The *ESL Bandscales* are meant for teachers in mainstream classrooms so they can better meet the instructional and assessment needs of ESL students. A key feature of the *ESL Bandscales* is the three age-related pathways that have separate sets of descriptors for progress in Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing for students beginning English language acquisition as young primary, upper primary, or secondary students. The *ESL Bandscales* do not assume that the route to English proficiency is the same for students who begin the acquisition process at different ages.

The initial TESOL standards were organized by three main goals with three standards for each. The three goals encompass the ability to use English for communication in social settings, for achieving academically in content areas, and for pragmatic purposes, specifically the ability to 'use English in socially and culturally appropriate ways' (Short, 2000, p. 3). The three standards associated with communication in social settings require students to 'use English to participate in social interaction … interact in, through and with spoken and written English for personal expression and enjoyment ... use learning strategies to extend their communicative competence' (TESOL, 1997). The three standards associated with academic achievement in all content areas parallel those of the social setting but reflect language use in the classroom and for applying academic knowledge. The three standards associated with pragmatic uses of English require students to 'use appropriate language variety, register and genre according to audience, purpose and setting … use nonverbal communication appropriate to audience, purpose and setting … use appropriate learning strategies to extend their sociolinguistic and sociocultural competence' (TESOL, 1997).

The initial TESOL standards followed the functional approach to language acquisition and were purposefully set at an abstract level to allow for modification in curriculum and instructional practices. The lack of specificities in the standards rendered them less useful for the design of curriculum and assessments; such specificity being a key distinguishing characteristic of the different approaches to standards creation (e.g. Chalhoub-Deville & Deville, 2008; Wixson et al., 2003). However, the original nine standards were later explicated by descriptors and progress indicators that offered specificities for curriculum objectives and classroom activities, and, like the Australian *ESL Bandscales*,

articulated separate pathways for younger (pre-K-Grade 3) and older learners (Grades 4–8 & 9–12). There were also accompanying vignettes written by practicing teachers as concrete illustrations of effective instructional practices for each standard. Thus a major purpose of the TESOL ESL standards would appear to be for teacher planning (McKay, 2000).

To connect ESL learning to levels of student development, the standards had ESL proficiency levels (*Beginning, Intermediate,* and *Advanced*). The standards also took into consideration the needs of students with limited formal schooling and with learning disabilities. It is also worth noting that one of the standards explicitly sets an objective for students to acquire *Learning Strategies* in order to improve their socio-linguistic and sociocultural competence; learning how to learn is a rare goal in standards but is understandable in the ESL arena where students continue to learn new linguistic and discourse features in out-of-school contexts or once they exit their formal ESL classes.

California is an example of a state that created ELD standards for its ELL student population before the passage of NCLB. Instead of conceptualizing and constructing a separate set of standards, the California Department of Education (CDE) designed its ELD standards in order to supplement the existing English Language Arts (ELA) content standards (California State Board of Education, 1998). We return to a more detailed review of these standards in the fourth section.

ELD/P standards in the era of NCLB

NCLB has ushered in a new era for the standards-based reform movement in general and has brought renewed attention to the ELL population and ELD/P standards. Historically, assessment of ELL students' academic performance and language proficiency had resulted less from a concern with equality in educational attainment than from racial and ethnic anxieties with increasing immigration (Figueroa, 1990). Assessments had been used in a discriminatory manner to determine the intellectual potentials of immigrant populations (Figueroa, 1990; Figueroa & Hernandez, 2000). Beginning in the early 20th century, research, most of which was conducted with Mexican-American children, naively generalized inferior intelligence from low test scores and linked limited English proficiency to genetic arguments about the lower intelligence of non-northern European immigrants (Figueroa & Hernandez, 2000). The phenomenon was labeled the 'language handicap' of immigrant test-takers and was used to justify eradicating the primary language of immigrant students and thereby any opportunity for maintaining bilingualism (Figueroa & Hernandez, 2000).

NCLB mandates that all states now have ELD/P standards and standards-based assessments must be used in accountability for NCLB Title III funding of ELD programs. Rather than create one set of ELD/P standards for the nation or adopt those of the national organization TESOL, the NCLB regulations require each state, or consortium of several states collaborating together, to create its own ELD/P standards if none previously existed. This accountability system has led to profound changes in the conceptualization, creation and purposes of standards for language learning and attainment, not least the operationalization of the construct of academic English. As we mentioned, the opportunity for collaboration between ESL and content-area educators presented itself but was ignored in the earliest days of the standards-based reform movement. The

opportunity would appear to have presented itself anew under the NCLB requirement of separately reporting the performance of subgroups of students within schools, including reporting the English language arts/reading, mathematics, and science scores of all ELL students. Thus general education teachers who once had little stake in the education of ELL students, such as mathematics and ELA teachers, now have a very pressing reason to have ELL students reach sufficient proficiency in academic English in order to take state academic content tests mandated by NCLB (e.g. Silliman, Wilkinson, & Brea-Spahn, 2004). Moreover, teachers are now teaching ELL students in mainstream classes and need to collaborate with ESL teachers to gain knowledge of English language development and adopt strategies for teaching academic English alongside content-area material (e.g. Schleppegrell, 2004; Bailey & Heritage, 2008). Similarly, ESL teachers need to know more about the linguistic and discourse features of the different disciplines so they can incorporate them into their instruction. In turn, both kinds of knowledge can inform the creation/revision of ELD/P standards to better reflect the language of school.

Most recently, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) coordinated the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) to develop K-12 standards for English Language Arts and Math due to criticisms of the quality of many existing state standards. The finalized K-12 standards were released in June 2010 (CCSSI, 2010a), having been previously endorsed by 48 states and the District of Columbia, the exceptions being Texas and Alaska. States are now in various stages of adoption. The notion of academic uses of language appears to be articulated in part with the inclusion of reading in the content areas of science and social studies in the draft standards. However, this new standards initiative does not include separate ELD/P standards for ELLs, but expects ELL students to be held to the same levels of ELA standards, with some acknowledgement of the different learning experiences of ELL students (CCSSI, 2010b).

We might still question the value of making each state create its own set of ELD/P standards because conceivably the ELD/P construct should not differ around the Nation. However, there may be concentrations of ELL students with different characteristics that do differentiate the states (e.g. unschooled students of migrant workers in the Southwest, Native American students with little reading experience in their heritage language in North Dakota, etc.) and their needs may require attention to different aspects of language during the creation of ELD/P standards. Thus NCLB created an intense amount of interest and work in the area of ELD/P. Specifically, researchers and educators are attempting to create ELD/P standards reflecting the language that ELL students will need not only in order to succeed in the acquisition of English, but, as we noted above, to also succeed on the mandated assessments of English language arts/reading, mathematics, and science. This academic need for the use of language knowledge and skills is the focus of the next section.

The role of academic English

Since Cummins' (1979, 1980) introduction of the distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), the academic English construct has been conceptualized at different linguistic levels,

from lexical to discourse (e.g. Bailey & Butler, 2002/3; Schleppegrell, 2001), as well as on various dimensions, from cognitive to socio-cultural (e.g. Scarcella, 2003). This renewal of interest in academic English seems to be for several reasons. First, from an assessment perspective, there was a lack of correspondence between ELD assessments prior to NCLB and the kinds of English students need to 'access and engage in the curriculum' (Bailey & Heritage, 2008, p. 12). This lack of correspondence was manifest in the poor predictive validity of pre-NCLB ELD assessments for student performance on assessments of ELA and mathematics (Butler, Stevens, & Castellon, 2007).[2] Second, from an instructional perspective, ELL students may not only miss the requisite content material if they are schooled in ESL pullout or sheltered English contexts (e.g. Francis, Lesaux, & August, 2006), but also miss the opportunity to be exposed to the challenging language of content area instruction to the same degree as their non-ELL peers (Martinez, Bailey, Kerr, Huang, & Beauregard, 2010). Ultimately, ELL students are more likely to learn less, drop out of school, and have fewer opportunities for higher education than their non-ELL peers (Gándara, 2005). Quite possibly both assessment and instruction have ignored the unique characteristics of English required for success in school.

For the purposes of this paper, we include in our discussion of academic English the oral and written language used in classrooms by teachers and students for the purpose of classroom management and academic learning, as well as the language of textbooks, assessments, and other curricular materials. We first provide an overview of definitions of academic English, discussing and evaluating conceptualizations by researchers. We then review the existing systematic empirical research on academic English.

Overview of academic English definitions

The BICS/CALP distinction proposed by Cummins (1979, 1980) serves as the precursor to many subsequent views of academic English. BICS and CALP were placed on two continua: context and cognitive complexity, with BICS viewed as context-embedded and low in cognitive complexity and CALP viewed as context-reduced and high in cognitive complexity. Cummins argues that there are clear differences in the acquisition patterns between BICS and CALP. In contrast to the communication of BICS which often occurs with contextual support and paralinguistic cues to facilitate communication, the de-contextualized communication of CALP involves sophisticated lexical variety and syntactic constructions and is thus more difficult to acquire.

Although the pioneering BICS/CALP distinction helped raise attention to the evaluation of ELL students' language proficiency, the boundary between BICS and CALP is not clear. It is questionable that basic interpersonal skills are always contextualized and less cognitively complex than academic language skills (Bailey, 2007, in press). Children's pretend play, for example, involves highly decontextualized use of language and reasoning skills. The cognitive ability required to persuade, deceive or win over others in every-day life is also no less complex than what is needed to comprehend a persuasive argument in a social studies textbook. Additionally, Scarcella (2003) suggests that the simple distinction does not provide enough specificities for generating tasks for instruction or assessments of academic English and is thus of limited practical value.

Drawing from Halliday's approach to characterizing language use in terms of language functions, Chamot and O'Malley (1994) suggest that academic English refers to 'the language that is used by teachers and students for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge and skills … imparting new information, describing abstract ideas, and developing students' conceptual understanding' (p. 40). While Chamot and O'Malley's definition is broad in its incorporation of the uses of language by teachers and students, it still does not provide sufficient specificity of exactly 'what' language is being used in school tasks in terms of vocabulary, sentence structures, and kinds of genre. In line with Chamot and O'Malley's position, but with far more specificity, Schleppegrell defines academic English as a special 'register' that entails a specific 'constellation of lexical and grammatical features' used in the school context (2001, p. 432).

A recent conceptualization by Bailey and Heritage (2008) characterizes the language of school-age children by contexts of use: the social context outside school and two academic contexts which include the use of curriculum content language (i.e. discipline-specific language) to teach academic content, and the use of school navigational language for other within-school contexts such as classroom management. Within each of these contexts language at the *word* level, at the multi-word *sentence* level, and at the multi-sentence *discourse* or text level can be distinguished. This division usefully highlights the different demands each of the levels places on the learner, and relatedly, the different pedagogical emphasis that will be required by teachers. Characterizing linguistic and discourse features in this way is important not only for the learning and instructional reasons already mentioned, but because specificity of this kind is necessary so we can readily make distinctions between the lexical, grammatical, and discourse features that may differentiate the academic disciplines, grade levels, and proficiency levels.

The word level.   Learners must attach meaning to lexical items and place new items into semantic networks of already known words (e.g. antonyms, synonyms) in order to broaden and deepen their word knowledge. Vocabulary knowledge plays an important role in school success. Research has consistently identified vocabulary knowledge as one crucial component in reading ability (Braze, Tabor, Shankweiler, & Mencl, 2007; Grabe, 2004; Nagy, 1988; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002; Scott & Nagy, 2004). Schleppegrell (2004) argues that the difference between the everyday vocabulary and what she terms the 'specialist lexis' signifies the major distinction between language in daily interaction and the language of academic texts. This specialist lexis or academic vocabulary itself can be further divided into three categories based on the contexts within which it appears (Bailey & Heritage, 2008). The three categories include general academic vocabulary, context-specific academic vocabulary, and specialized academic vocabulary. General academic vocabulary refers to words that occur across academic content areas, such as 'synthesize' and 'explain' (e.g. Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Nation, 2001; Scarcella & Zimmerman, 1998). Context-specific academic vocabulary contains everyday words that are used with a different meaning in a content-area context, such as using the word 'by' in a mathematics context to mean 'divide' (e.g. Bailey, 2007). Finally, specialized academic words are discipline-specific technical vocabulary such as the word 'thermal' in the science content area and 'multiplication' in the mathematics content area (e.g. Beck et al., 2002; Scarcella & Zimmerman, 1998).

The sentence level. Language requires paying attention to word order, parts of speech, and English inflectional morphology and grammar so that the syntactic structure of the language can be acquired. To precisely convey the relationship between objects, events and ideas in academic texts, more complex grammatical structures are required such as comparatives (e.g. greater/less than), prepositions (e.g. divided 'into' vs. divided 'by') and logical connectors (e.g. if… then…) (e.g. Schleppegrell, 2001; Spanos, Rhodes, Dale, & Crandall, 1988). In comparisons of mathematics, science and social studies, Bailey, Butler, Stevens, and Lord (2007) found that certain grammatical features, such as prepositional phrases and noun phrases, were more common than others in fifth-grade textbooks, and more passive verb forms were observed in science and social studies than in mathematics.

The discourse level. At the oral discourse or text level, the learner is required to organize oral or written sentences into logical combinations that can be used to convey specific purposes such as form an argument, give an explanation, maintain coherence across multiple clauses, display new knowledge (e.g. formative assessment exchanges), or follow the expected format of narrative or expository genres (Butler, Bailey, Stevens, Huang, & Lord, 2004; Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Leung & Mohan, 2004; Schleppegrell, 2001, 2004; Short, 1994). Academic discourses or texts, such as story retelling, scientific talks, lab reports, and journal articles, can follow specific organizational conventions that set them apart from their everyday/social counterparts. These organizational patterns, such as well-sequenced events in a story and a hierarchical structure in a scientific argument, are part of the academic English construct to be considered for inclusion in ELD/P standards.

Chamot and O'Malley (1994) argued that academic English consists primarily of 'language functions needed for authentic academic content' (p. 40). The major academic language functions they explicitly espouse teaching across content areas are 'explaining, informing, justifying, comparing, describing, classifying, proving, debating, persuading, and evaluating' (p. 41). Focusing on the science content area, Lemke (1990) also argued that the talking and writing of science entails specific functions such as hypothesizing, questioning, challenging, designing experiments, comparing, analyzing, evaluating, and generalizing.

Systematic empirical research on academic English

While many definitions of academic English have been offered, fewer systematic empirical investigations have been attempted (e.g. Bailey et al., 2007; Davies & Green, 1984; Gibbons, 1998; Lunzer & Gardner, 1984; Schleppegrell, 2001, 2004; Short, 1994). In one attempt to respond to the NCLB mandates on standards-based assessments and address the gap between ELL students' performance on ELD/P assessments and content-area assessments, Bailey and colleagues (2007) at the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) conducted a multi-year project to operationalize academic English. They investigated academic English empirically via classroom observations and analysis of national content standards, state standards and textbooks. For example, analysis of textbooks in fifth-grade mathematics, science and

social studies revealed both commonalities and discipline-specific characteristics in academic English features across the content areas that should further inform definitions of the academic English construct. Specifically, in mathematics there were shorter and grammatically simpler sentences containing fewer derived or multisyllabic words than in science or social studies. Mathematics also used fewer specialized or technical words. Words that cut across the three content areas suggest a general academic vocabulary needed by students (e.g. *analyze, predict*). At the discourse level, mathematics also had a smaller repertoire of language functions than the other content areas, mainly limited to uses of language for comparison, description, enumeration, and sequencing, whereas science and social studies also used definitions, exemplifications, and explanations, amongst others.

Schleppegrell (2004) also reports on key grammatical differences in science and social studies linked to the functions these content areas serve. The register of science focuses in part on classification, explanation and theory building that require features such as technical terms and expanded nominal phrases, whereas history texts enable explanation and interpretation through organizational structures such as conjunctive links, and temporal and locative phrases.

Focusing on the 'information structure' (i.e. the underlying information and organization of text constituents), Davies and Green (1984) compared the texts of two content areas: science and English. They found that the two types of academic texts differ substantially in their information constituents and structures. English texts are mostly *narrative* with a general function to tell a story, whereas science texts are *informative,* and, depending on the topic of the text, fulfill a wide range of purposes such as description, explanation, and classification.

A recent study of the opportunity to learn science in elementary school science classrooms provides further empirical details of academic language functions in school settings (Martinez et al., 2010). These included functions for sorting and organizing information (*classifying, comparing/contrasting, sequencing, enumerating*), functions for providing information (*explanations, descriptions, definitions, sequencing steps*), and functions for higher-order thinking (*causal reasoning, predictions, generalizations, inference-making, hypothesis-generating*). The latter set of language functions, in particular, suggest greater cognitive demand on students than the more straightforward uses of language for sorting and organizing information. In addition, Short (1994) found explanation, description and justification to be the main hallmarks of the language used in middle school social studies discourse. Such studies show how the different disciplines draw on different features of the academic English register in order to achieve different academic goals: in science, theorizing experience; in history, interpreting experience (Schleppegrell, 2004).[3] Collectively, these findings suggest that in addition to the notion of general academic language, content-specificity should be a consideration in ELD/P standards conceptualization and content coverage.

The role of cognitive demands in ELD is a complex one. As discussed above for academic language functions, the level of cognitive demands placed on learners can vary depending on the nature of a task, as in the case of sorting and categorizing information being a simpler mental operation than predicting a future event. It is particularly

important to consider the cognitive demands placed on the very youngest ELL students because, as mentioned previously, much of cognition is guaranteed to still be developing in this age group. In alignment studies of the correspondence between the skills represented in content standards and the assessments designed to measure them, evaluations of the degree of cognitive complexity of the standards and test items have been attempted (e.g. Webb, 1997). However, Schleppegrell (2004) points out that it makes less sense to think of language as inherently cognitively demanding due to the nature of the interaction between students and linguistic tasks. What task a student will find cognitively demanding will depend on their own prior world and linguistic experience and not simply the nature of the task itself.

Another important consideration in the conceptualization of the academic English construct is the issue of *when* academic English exposure begins. Whether academic English exists and/or can be readily identified at the preschool and early elementary years is currently debated (Bailey, 2008; Bailey, Huang, Osipova, & Beauregard, 2010). However, under NCLB but unlike the content areas that begin assessment at grade 2, states must assess ELL students from kindergarten onwards and other federal programs that provide funding for academic preschools now also require assessment of ELD (e.g. the Head Start Program).[4] In fact, the largest numbers of ELL students are concentrated at this young English learner (YEL) level (e.g. in California, 37% of the State's large ELL population are enrolled as K-2 students, CDE, 2009). This age group poses the biggest challenges to the definition of academic English both in practice because of its sheer size and from a conceptual perspective due to the cognitive, social, and academic development still occurring at this early age (McKay, 2000). As already mentioned, one model of standards development is to explicitly take account of these age differences in learners by creating different standards pathways (e.g. *the ESL Bandscales*, McKay et al., 1994).

Although academic English may not be as distinctive a construct at the preschool and kindergarten stage as it is in the later school years when children take content-area classes, there is some empirical evidence to suggest that it still distinguishes itself from social language and is foundational to the further development of the construct. In the domain of oral language, Schleppegrell (2001) reports that preschool teachers have implicit assumptions about the format of children's talk during *sharing time* (i.e. a popular preschool activity during which children tell a personal narrative or describe an interesting object from home), and their interactions with children are also organized around linguistic expectations. Children who produce linear oral narratives of sequential events with an orientation, complicating actions, high point and resolution (Peterson & McCabe, 1983) thus have more opportunities to interact with their teachers and advance their language skills (Michaels, 1981). By kindergarten, teachers also expect children to use specific grammatical constructions and be able to give expected definitions – a significant correlate with their academic success (Schleppegrell, 2001). Children are also aware of distinctions between 'social' and 'school' language as evidenced in their modification of the register they use to 'play' school (Andersen, 1986).

Requirements for literacy in ELD/P standards also need to take the unique developmental stage of YEL students into consideration, particularly given the close ties between oral language and literacy skills at this early stage (see Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998 for

a review). For example, the oral language skill, phonological awareness, has been built into most if not all state ELA standards possibly because of the robust evidence of its link to literacy development in the monolingual English-speaking population (e.g. Anthony & Lonigan, 2004). However, phonological awareness includes several components which follow divergent developmental paths and are influenced by YEL students' native languages to varying degrees (e.g. Durgunoglu, 2002; McBride-Chang, Bialystok, Chong, & Li, 2004). YEL students with Spanish as their first language (L1) appear to derive an advantage for phonemic segmentation skills because of the similarities in phonological systems between Spanish and English (Bialystok, Majumder, & Martin, 2003), whereas students with Chinese L1 perform better at syllable awareness tasks because of the salience of syllable units in Chinese (McBride-Chang et al., 2004). In view of the differences in the relationships between oral language and orthography across languages, how or even whether we should stipulate reading and writing requirements, such as phonological awareness, to the same degree for YEL students as done in ELA standards designed for their monolingual English peers, remain critical questions for future investigation and debate. However, given that academic uses of English are evident at the preschool and kindergarten levels, ELD/P standards should at the very least attempt to operationalize the construct with this young age and characterize the language demands encountered from the very first days of formal schooling.

To conclude this section, an extended discussion of the academic English construct has been relevant for the upcoming discussion of two sets of influential ELD/P standards. In particular, the characterization and an understanding of the complexities of the construct are crucial for the development of standards that reflect the construct in all its complexities and nuances, and possibly serve as the blueprint or underpinnings of future curricula and assessments.

Review of key ELD/P standards

In this section, we conduct illustrative reviews of the standards of a key state, California, highest in its proportion of the Nation's ELL student population, and the standards of the WIDA consortium, a large multi-state consortium dedicated to the design and implementation of standards, assessment and curricula for ELL students. These two sets of standards were chosen because their creation had very different histories; California's standards coming before NCLB and the WIDA standards being both created and revised since NCLB. As a result, the two sets of standards provide contrasting approaches to operationalizing academic English. The reviews are not intended to be exhaustive nor overly evaluative, but rather as a mechanism to surface important aspects about ELD/P standards for further consideration. Specifically, we examine coverage of language domains (a term used in the K-12 arena to refer to the four modalities of listening, speaking, reading and writing), articulation of levels of attainment or proficiency, and division of grade levels or spans. We also examine the match, or lack thereof, between the content of the language standards and the academic English construct, as well as pay special attention to academic English expectations with young English learners. Due to the complexity of the standards, we recommend the reader access the documents directly in order to better follow their descriptions below.[5]

English-language development standards for California public schools: K-12

The California (CA) ELD standards impact over 1.55 million students. Approximately 35% of the Nation's English language learners are educated in Californian schools (CDE, 2009). California Assembly Bill 748, enacted in 1997, required 'That the test or tests assessing the progress of English learners toward achieving fluency in English be aligned with state standards for English-language development' (CDE, 1999, p. iv). The San Diego County Office of Education, under contract with the Standards and Assessment Division of the California Department of Education, was responsible for the standards development with the guidance of a 32-member advisory board consisting of educators, academics (e.g. applied linguists), and ESL specialists from throughout the state. The ELD standards were adopted in 1999 with the overarching goal to mainstream all ELL students into regular ELA curricula. The ELD Standards are thus designed as 'pathways' to the ELA standards. More specifically, they are 'designed to assist classroom teachers in assessing the progress of English learners toward attaining full fluency in English' (CDE, 1999, p. 15), and are the blueprint for the state assessment, the California English Language Development Test (CELDT, CDE, 2008a). The CELDT has been revised continuously to include greater representation of the academic language construct, evolving from its initial form as the Language Assessment Scales (LAS, Duncan & De Avila, 1988, 1990). The LAS, a commercial test, had originally been designed to measure the more social aspects of language (Mayer, 2007).

Organization of the California ELD standards. The CA ELD standards combine Listening and Speaking domains and cover Reading and Writing separately. Proficiency is divided into three summary levels (*Beginning, Intermediate,* and *Advanced*) but descriptions are elaborated at five levels (additionally *Early Intermediate* and *Early Advanced* levels). Within each domain the standards are organized by these five proficiency levels and by sub-strands of the ELA standards (CDE, 1998) (e.g. *Comprehension, Decoding and Word Recognition, Phonemic Awareness*) to create matrices of these two dimensions. The content of the standards is focused entirely on descriptions of linguistic features or characteristics of language usage, what are termed variably *Strategies and Applications, Word Analysis, Fluency and Systematic Vocabulary Development*, *Reading Comprehension,* and *English-Language Conventions,* depending on the language domain. This organization is repeated for four grade spans (K–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12), thus creating a large number of discrete standards. An example of *Intermediate* (Level 3) Reading domain for Grades 9–12 is *'Apply knowledge of common English morphemes in oral and silent reading to derive meaning from literature and texts in content areas.'* The CA ELD standards do not include pre-K expectations for English proficiency; rather CDE has published the *California Preschool Learning Foundations* (CDE, 2008b) to address this population.

Conceptualization of English language in the CA ELD standards. According to the CA ELD standards, 'Students must be prepared to use English effectively in social and academic settings' (CDE, 1999, p. 16). Thus the notion of academic English is present. However, other than the stated overt linkage to the CA ELA standards, reference to the language of other content areas is less systematic. Indeed, the close linkage to the CA ELA standards, particularly reading, provides the opportunity for us to examine a number of issues

regarding the conceptualization and content of the CA ELD standards including: (1) the role of the academic English construct; (2) the distinction between the ELD and the ELA content areas; and (3) the degree of specificity of word, sentence, and discourse expectations in the standards.

The academic English construct: There appears to be little systematicity to the explicit inclusion of the academic English construct. Some of the standards for the Reading and Writing domains reference the language of subject matter texts. These standards are predominantly for the literacy skills of the higher grade spans. The summary of the standards does not mention academic uses of English in the combined Listening and Speaking domain, even at the *Advanced* proficiency level; rather the focus is on being able to 'Negotiate and initiate social conversations by questioning, restating, soliciting information, and paraphrasing the communication of others' (CDE, 1999, p. 3). Confusingly, however, the standards starting with the 6–8 grade span at the *Early Intermediate* proficiency level, do call for oral presentation abilities for subject-matter content.

Distinction between the ELD and the ELA content areas: The ELD standards also emphasize the learning of reading by ELL students in kindergarten through second grade to demonstrate proficiency in ELA-related standards, such as the mastery of phonemic awareness and concepts of print. There may be considerable overlap between ELD and ELA in YEL students first learning to read, but even with young learners the differences in their experiences learning English as a second language in addition to the different relationship their native language may have with printed language as mentioned, both caution us to maintain the difference between ELD and ELA. Moreover, in the case of older ELL students, the content of the ELD curriculum may be very different from that of the ELA curriculum as the ELA content area shifts away from a focus on learning to read to a focus on literature and literary criticism. The different sets of standards should reflect these differences, not minimize them, if they are to be most effective for teachers and their students learning English as a second language and ELA as an academic content area. However, the content of the CA ELD standards is ostensibly designed to counter this separation: 'At the more advanced levels, the skills in the ELD standards begin to resemble those in the English-language arts standards and represent the standards at which an English learner has attained academic proficiency in English' (CDE, 1999, p. 12). It appears that academic proficiency in English language is synonymous with proficiency in English language arts.

Specificity: The CA ELD standards also lack much of the specificity about word, sentence and discourse level features that is needed to be able to distinguish amongst different grade level expectations and proficiency levels. An extreme instance of this is an example of the Listening and Speaking combined domain for Grades K–2 at *Early Intermediate* (level 2). For Grades K–2 this standard is articulated as *'Ask and answer questions by using phrases or simple sentences.'* For Grades 3–5 this standard is articulated as *'Ask and answer questions by using phrases or simple sentences'* as it is for Grade spans 6–8 and 9–12 also. Not only is this standard worded identically for each of the four grade spans it is also identical for both *Beginning* (level 1) and *Early Intermediate* (level 2) proficiency levels for all grade spans. We have to question whether this approach to standards construction can very effectively meet the stated objective to 'assist classroom teachers in assessing the progress of English learners.'

The WIDA English Language Proficiency Standards, 2007 edition, pre-K-12

The WIDA *ELP Standards* have been adopted by 26 states at the time of writing since the passage of NCLB. The WIDA 2nd edition, published in 2007, is an updated version of the initial 2004 WIDA standards that were developed with an Enhanced Assessment Grant to the original consortium states (Wisconsin, Delaware, and Arkansas) from the US Department of Education, with provision of funding from NCLB. Moreover, the WIDA *ELP Standards*, 2004 edition, were augmented by TESOL in 2006 to replace their initial standards published in 1997. The developers view the standards as a 'critical tool for educators of ELLs for curriculum development, instruction and assessment' (WIDA, 2007, p. i). A stated major purpose of the WIDA *ELP Standards* is to serve as a blueprint for the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State to State for English Language Learners (ACCESS for ELLs®) assessment that states use for accountability under NCLB.

Organization of the WIDA ELP Standards. Five identical standards appear in summative and formative frameworks that focus on the outcomes and processes of learning, respectively. One standard targets the social and instructional language used in school settings and four standards target the language associated with each of the main content areas; namely, the language of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. The five standards cover four separate domains: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The five standards are written at a very abstract level: 'Communicate for Social and Instructional purposes within the school setting and 'communicate information, ideas, and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of Language Arts/Mathematics/Science/Social Studies' (WIDA, 2007, p. i). Proficiency is divided into five main levels: *Entering, Beginning, Developing, Expanding,* and *Bridging*, with a sixth level *Reaching* that is not articulated in the WIDA *ELP Standards* frameworks but is used to indicate the attainment of English language proficiency.

It is at the intersection between domains and proficiency levels that specificity is offered for the kinds of language demands placed on students by each of the five standards. The content of the cells for the resulting matrices of the summative and formative frameworks is presented within a strand of *Model Performance Indicators (MPIs),* scaffolded across the five levels of language proficiency, and reflects the kinds of example topics that students would encounter in content classes at their grade span. This complex organization is repeated for all five grade spans (pre-K-K, 1–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12), so the standards for the language thought necessary for the four main content areas applies to even the very youngest ELL students. The grade-level cluster topics have been derived from academic content standards from states and national organizations. The following example is an *MPI* from Grades 1–2, Standard 4 (Science language) at Level 3 (*Developing*) for the Speaking domain in the Formative Framework: *'State relationships between objects of earth or sky using diagrams, photographs or models (e.g. "Mercury is closest to the sun.").'*

Conceptualization of English language in the WIDA ELP Standards. A salient feature of the WIDA *ELP Standards* is the exclusive focus on language used in the school context. The

language construct we can identify in the standards and which the developers term their 'vision of language proficiency' is language that 'encompasses both social and academic contexts tied to schooling' (WIDA, 2007, p. i). The standards attempt to operationalize this by integrating language learning within the context of academic content. This conceptualization raises at least four issues for further consideration: (1) the scope of the definition of ELP; (2) a possible inadvertent reliance on content-area knowledge and skills; (3) the degree of specificity of word, sentence, and discourse expectations in the *MPIs*; and (4) the age-appropriateness of the standards.

Scope of ELP definition: By limiting the scope of the definition of ELP to language use (both social and academic) within the school context, the WIDA *ELP Standards* certainly place academic language squarely at the forefront. However, it is questionable what other contexts for the development of ELP are missed. Arguably, English is developed in many out-of-school contexts as well.[6] However, we can argue that the WIDA *ELP Standards* reflect the reality of the kinds of language teachers should reasonably be held most responsible for developing – the language necessary for school success.

Reliance on content-area knowledge and skills: It is a legitimate concern that the chosen topics for the *MPIs* associated with each of the content areas inadvertently rely on language arts, mathematics, science, or social studies content knowledge or skills. For example, statistical content knowledge and presumably skill will be needed to demonstrate English abilities reflected in the *MPI* for Grades 6–8, Standard 3 (Mathematics), at Level 4 (*Expanding*) in the Listening domain of the Formative Framework: *'Make predictions or estimates of measures of central tendency from oral scenarios and visual or graphic displays.'* However, the *ELP Standards* always include some form of instructional support (e.g. sensory, graphic, or interactive) through ELP Level 4.

Specificity: Interestingly, other than through use of example phrases and sentences and brief summaries of *Performance Definitions* for the six levels of English language proficiency, the WIDA *ELP Standards* do not explicitly provide the specific kinds of English expected at the word, sentence, and discourse levels in the *MPIs*. For example, Grade 1–2, Standard 4 *MPI* from Level 3 (*Developing*) in the Speaking domain of the Summative Framework is *'Compare/contrast weather conditions from pictures, photographs or graphs'*. However, without explicit mention of *what* vocabulary, sentence structures, and degree of organization and elaboration of discourse are desired for ELL students in this grade span, at this level, and in this oral language domain, this description of desired language usage could hold for other grade spans, for modalities other than expressive oral language, and presumably for *all* levels of proficiency. This lack of specificity thus poses challenges to the development of instructional and assessment material for ELL students in different grades and at different proficiency levels.

Age-appropriateness: Adopting a content-area basis for the pre-K-K standards should also be examined more closely. Best practices in early childhood education increasingly call for more integrated approaches to early academic experiences, such that instruction and learning are not easily divisible by traditional disciplines such as mathematics or science.[7] Rather, young children are learning in deliberately construed environments that allow them to explore their worlds by making use of an array of mathematical or scientific principles. For example, in learning about the topic of ants, preschoolers can learn to tally their different behaviors, or count their legs together with learning about their

habitats and metamorphosis from larva to adult forms. Language learning that occurs in such an environment is multifaceted, using vocabulary that is specific to some disciplines and that also cuts across content-areas (e.g. Bailey et al., 2010). Certainly, we identify this as an exciting new avenue for empirical research and for creating language goals or standards for the earliest years of formal schooling.

To conclude this section, we return to the title question, *'Do current ELD/P standards reflect the English needed for success in school?'* in relation to our reviews of the standards. Clearly, the more recent WIDA *ELP Standards* directly address the use of English in the different content areas that students will need to master for school success. The empirical work we reviewed above indicates that there are meaningful differences, as well as some commonalities across linguistic and discourse features of the different content areas. The commonalities appear not to be articulated as a general academic language construct in the WIDA *ELP Standards*. California's standards were written in the years preceding NCLB and thus the representation of academic English is not specified for all the different content areas. A strength of the WIDA *ELP Standards* would appear to be the continuity in the educational spectrum offered by including pre-Kindergarten standards. This is promising because the field is in the throes of attempting to define early academic English and its role in young children's educational experiences, particularly early literacy. Finally, academic English has not yet been studied across the full pre-K-12 spectrum; indeed much of this work has been conducted at just a couple of grade levels, mainly upper elementary and some early secondary grades. However, both sets of standards articulate desired goals for the grade spans without this empirical base.

Moreover, we argue that neither set of standards offers the descriptions of linguistic and discourse features with the degree of specificity necessary for teachers to create ELD curricula, or for test developers to create academic English assessments. In the CA ELD standards there is certainly more mention of linguistic features of English but there does not appear to be an empirical or reasoned tie to proficiency levels or grade spans. In the case of the WIDA *ELP Standards* the details are focused on the kinds of tasks students encounter in different content areas across the different grade spans, rather than on the details of the specific features of language, such as the progression of student knowledge of the derivational morphology in English that is important for expanding their academic vocabulary. We turn now to broader implications of the academic English construct and recommendations for its future role in efforts to create or revise existing state ELD/P standards.

Implications and recommendations

First, tied to our observation that there has been no empirical study of the content of ELD/P standards, all state standards are in need of validation both in terms of content as a reflection of authentic uses of English in the classroom, and in terms of their impact on student learning and teacher practices.[8] Without a systematic review of the content of their standards, states have no way of knowing whether their standards reflect the kinds of English language knowledge and skills that are demanded for school success at the different grade levels. Careful attention to the academic English construct as it is operationalized is warranted. Standards also need validating through studies of their impact on

student learning to help evaluate their consequential validity (McKay, 2000). Case studies of the effects of student and teacher use of ESL standards suggest teachers who use standards in their instruction find that standards help them better conceptualize what their students should know (Cumming, 2001, cited in McKay, Coppari, Cumming, Graves, Lopriore, & Short, 2001). However, there has been little quantitative research of the validity of ELD/P standards in terms of their benefits to students and teachers (McKay et al., 2001). Quantitative approaches will enable researchers to statistically test hypotheses about specific causal relationships between standards, instruction, and student learning outcomes.

Second, tied to our observation that the ELL population is heterogeneous in various aspects such as home language background, socioeconomic status and levels of English language and literacy proficiency, we believe that ELL students will benefit more from state-based descriptions than from nationwide ELD/P standards. As mentioned previously, the CCSSI has developed a set of new Common Core Standards for content and skills in ELA and mathematics, but not in ELD/P. States could still use the opportunity presented by CCSSI to explore the creation of a core set of ELD/P standards that they base on empirical research of ELD content and skills. This core can then be supplemented with state standards tied to the specific needs of the local ELL population. However, the empirical base for academic English usage and acquisition is still limited; detailed information about the features of academic English across all domains, grades, and content areas would still need to be generated before such an initiative can claim to have created research-based standards.

Finally, according to the guidelines of the American Federation of Teachers (2003), 'Standards must be written clearly enough for all stakeholders to understand' (p. 11). The reviews of two influential sets of ELD/P standards revealed that both had a high level of complexity in their organization. This may make them less effective for teacher and student use alike. We therefore propose a solution that involves the creation of companion *learning progressions* (e.g. Masters & Forster, 1996). This could allow for the standards themselves to be streamlined and simplified while the linked learning progressions can take on all the necessary details and subtleties of developmental sequences, in a myriad of linguistic areas. Such details make the current standards documents cumbersome yet incomplete if they are ignored. These companion learning progressions should be based on empirical research of academic English development, thus calling for longitudinal studies in order to most accurately document the developmental sequences of academic English. As already mentioned, this detailed developmental information is currently sorely missing from our understanding of the pre-K-12 student population. Learning progressions for specific aspects of academic English development (e.g. development of co-reference in connected discourse or texts) could have the potential to powerfully augment existing standards so that students can access them for their learning needs and teachers for their instructional and assessment goals.

In this paper, we have detailed rationale for the adoption of state ELD/P standards and situated the construct of academic English within current standards initiatives. From this perspective, the standards of a large ELL population state and a large multi-state consortium could be critiqued for coverage of authentic uses of language in school. Notwithstanding limitations to the research base by the scant number of empirical studies of academic English characteristics and development, recommendations were made

for the validation of existing standards, the creation of a new core set of standards for states to supplement locally, and the augmentation of a limited set of key standards with detailed learning progressions of academic English development.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. We use ELD/P to capture the shift from use of the term ELD standards to ELP standards, likely due to the influence of content area proficiency reporting under NCLB and Annual Measurable Achievement Objective 2 (AMAO 2) focused on attaining English proficiency.
2. Research is under way to evaluate the predictive validity of the new generation of ELD/P assessments that have attempted to incorporate the academic language construct (e.g. Gary Cook, personal communication, March 18, 2010).
3. Note, however, that high school level textbooks would suggest that higher math sub-disciplines (e.g. algebra, calculus) also make use of definitions, exemplifications, and explanations, and for higher science (e.g. biology, chemistry, physics), lab reports also require interpreting the experience not just theorizing the experience (Veronica Aguila and Cynthia Gunderson, Personal communication, August 28, 2009).
4. The ELD/P standards and accountability arena stands to be a model for the fair and valid assessment of young students in other content areas should states move in this direction.
5. California ELD standards are available online at www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/englangdevstnd. pdf. The WIDA *ELP Standards* are at www.wida.us/standards/prek-5Standardsweb.pdf and www.wida.us/standards/6-12Standardsweb.pdf.
6. It should be noted however, that despite the ELP construct articulated as 'social and instructional language used school settings,' the topics selected for the *MPIs* of Standard 1 include such things as leisure activities, likes and dislikes and personal experiences that presumably would not preclude the use of language acquired and supported outside the school context as well.
7. In the WIDA *ELP Standards*, teachers have the flexibility to substitute, combine, or add elements to the strands of *MPIs* through 'transformations' which may therefore allow for this kind of integration.
8. New developments are under way at WIDA to address aspects of validity of the ELP Standards and other points raised here (personal communication Margo Gottlieb, October 2, 2010).

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