

## **A Language-Based Approach to Content Instruction (LACI) for English Language Learners**

by Luciana C. de Oliveira, University of Miami

When I taught high school in California, my students were all English language learners (ELLs) who had been deemed by the school as needing additional assistance to improve their academic language skills so they would have a chance to go to college. I was deeply influenced by my experiences teaching these students in high school. I focused on the teaching of writing, and specifically academic language in writing and decided to pursue a Ph.D. in Education at the University of California, Davis, to further explore academic language in writing for ELLs. This led me to continue my work as an ESL teacher at the college level with students who were struggling with academic language in their first year in college. They used many oral language features in their writing and that intrigued me. More and more I saw students with very good spoken English but really struggling with academic writing. In addition to working with ESL students as an ESL writing teacher, I also worked as a linguistics researcher for the UC Davis History Project where I collaborated with history teachers and historians to develop a “literacy in history” curriculum for in-service professional development in a context where virtually every teacher has a range of levels of English language learners in the regular history classroom, but few teachers have backgrounds or preparation in ESL teaching or applied linguistics (see, for example, de Oliveira, 2011; Schleppegrell, Achugar & Oteiza, 2004; Schleppegrell & de Oliveira, 2006). This work sparked my interest in the content area classroom and led me to expand my focus to the content areas of English language arts, mathematics, and science.

In this short article, I will briefly describe a teacher preparation model - **a language-based approach to content instruction (LACI)** - developed over the past 10 years of research in content area classrooms with English language learners (ELLs) and based on recent scholarship on the language demands of schooling (e.g. de Oliveira, 2007, 2011; de Oliveira & Dodds, 2010; de Oliveira & Iddings, 2014; de Oliveira & Lan, 2014; de Oliveira & Schleppegrell, 2015; Fang, 2006; Fang & Schleppegrell, 2008,

2010; Schleppegrell, 2004). I will take this opportunity to describe this model and discuss its key components and principles. I'm currently working on a book that extends these ideas and puts them into practice in each one of the four main content areas I've studied – English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. The book will have many examples of how LACI can be implemented in classrooms.

To develop this approach, I first observed classroom teaching to expand my understanding about the skills and knowledge teachers needed to help ELLs fully in the content area classroom. Teachers had a range of strategies for building background knowledge, for helping students predict from headings, layout, visuals and other features, and for using strategies such as collaborative work, group work, graphic organizers and other techniques that have been shown to be helpful for ELLs. But teachers had few strategies to employ when it came to actually reading texts and getting meaning from texts. I also identified patterns in content area texts and developed language-focused strategies to help teachers understand the linguistic challenges presented in content area texts and tasks. Over time we discovered the ways of talking about language that teachers found most accessible, and identified the linguistic constructs that teachers most readily adopted in their own teaching.

A language-based approach to content instruction (LACI) places emphasis on language learning in the content classroom. Teachers must use language to teach content, rather than using content to teach language. Instead of finding relevant content to further language development goals, this approach focuses on enabling teachers to foreground the language as a way into the content. Talking about language *is* talking about content. LACI, with a focus on content through language rather than on language *through* content, can be a means through which instruction for ELLs can be accomplished in meaningful ways in a mainstream classroom.

A key component of LACI is providing mainstreamed ELLs with *access* to the language of the different content areas, not by simplifying content but by enabling ELLs to manipulate language as it is written, without simplification. The notion of making content *accessible* is taken here to mean providing *access* to the academic language that constructs content knowledge. LACI draws on a functional theory of language, allowing for a

simultaneous focus on the meanings that are made (the “content”) and the language through which the meanings are expressed. This approach is a powerful tool for raising teachers’ awareness about the challenges of learning content, and enables them to more effectively contribute to the language development of ELLs in their mainstream classes. The goal is to provide teachers with ways of talking about the language that enable them to focus on the content at the same time that they offer ELLs opportunities to develop academic language proficiency.

LACI draws on a meaning-based theory of language, *systemic-functional linguistics* (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). This theory does not separately address language and content, but instead sees the language as the realization of meaning in context. This perspective puts the focus on content, helping teachers understand how the language works to construct knowledge in the discipline. It offers a way of getting meaning from the text itself, going beyond general reading strategies to provide a means of tackling a content area text, unpacking meanings clause by clause to examine how any content is presented in language. LACI enables a focus on language from each of these three angles: *presenting ideas, enacting a relationship with the reader or listener, and constructing a cohesive message*.

In order for teachers to understand how language works in their discipline, they need practice in seeing how language expresses disciplinary knowledge. Choosing a particular text and deconstructing its language features provides more than an abstract focus on language. ELLs will have opportunities to explore the different patterns of language that construct different types of texts. By focusing on texts, we can show ELLs language patterns that present specific content, which encourages conversation in the classroom about which content is presented, who is represented and how, and how the text is organized.

### ***Presenting Ideas***

In terms of presenting ideas, we focus on the content of the message, looking at verbal and visual resources that construct the content presented in the nouns, verbs, prepositional phrases, and adverbs.

## ***Enacting a Relationship with the Reader or Listener***

When we read, write, listen and speak, we draw on language resources that indicate the kind of relationship we are enacting; whether it is formal or informal, close or distant, and whether it includes attitudes of various kinds. We can explore the verbal and visual resources that construct the nature of relationships among speakers/listeners, writers/readers, and viewers, and what is viewed.

## ***Constructing a Cohesive Message***

Some of the language choices we make are not about presenting content or enacting a relationship, but instead are in the service of constructing a message that holds together. For this we explore the verbal and visual resources that are concerned with the organization of the information and elements of texts and images used to present content in a cohesive way.

## **LACI Application Framework for Teachers**

The following analysis and application framework can guide teachers' application of LACI in their classrooms as they set goals based on key concepts, select texts to work with students, analyze these texts, and plan instruction for their ELLs.

### **Setting goals, based on key concepts**

The first step in this framework would be to set particular goals based on key concepts that students will need to develop. Specify the content knowledge that students need to develop.

### **Selecting a text**

The second step is to identify a text – it could be two or three paragraphs that have significant content information related to the key concepts and the main points you want to make. Carefully read the text.

A. What is most important for students to learn from the selection you have chosen? Write at least one ***guiding question*** that will guide your teaching of this content.

B. What language challenges in the text may make it difficult for students to understand the content?

### Analyzing a text

To explore different language patterns, follow the steps below, looking at the language features of the text:

<i>Presenting Ideas</i>	<i>Enacting a Relationship with the Reader or Listener</i>	<i>Constructing a Cohesive Message</i>
Focus on content	Focus on relationships	Focus on organization
1. What is the text/image about?	3. What is the author's perspective?	5. How is the text/image organized?
2. What are the key concepts developed in the text/image?	4. How does the author of this text/image interact with the reader/viewer?	6. How does the text/image construct a cohesive message?

### Planning instruction with a focus on language and content

Here is when the teacher plans how to draw students' attention to the language as it is encountered in the text. Use these additional steps to guide your planning:

- A. Identify language features that will help students understand the content. Focus on those.
- B. Identify and discuss the main points necessary to understand the text with students.
- C. Write some discussion questions or a list of important questions/points that can be used to guide students to examine the language features and main points.

Follow the six principles (the 6 Cs of support) as support for ELLs:

1. *Connection:* Pedagogy and curriculum are connected to students'

backgrounds and experiences.

2. *Code-Breaking*: Language and content are inseparable. Academic literacy is a process of making academic dimensions of subject matter transparent for ELLs, and bridges between everyday and academic language are essential for understanding of content.
3. *Community and Collaboration*: Collaboration is a key component of practice as communities of learners.
4. *Culture*: Cultural and linguistic resources that ELLs bring are used to support academic learning as they develop new resources to be able to participate in new situations.
5. *Challenge*: Classroom goals and activity explore disciplinary literacy and higher-order thinking and reasoning. High challenge and high academic standards and content are maintained for ELLs.
6. *Classroom Interactions*: Classroom interactions focus on “interactional scaffolding,” the use of oral discourse to prompt elaboration, build academic literacy, and move discourse and learning forward.

## Conclusion

Learning content presents particular challenges for ELLs who need to be able to see how language works in texts that they read and write. LACI prepares teachers to focus on the language that students encounter as they learn content. ELLs need to develop new language resources that will enable them to participate in different content area classes and engage in advanced literacy tasks. Simplifying tasks for ELLs, especially those who have achieved an intermediate level of English proficiency, just puts them at a disadvantage. Teachers need to develop their knowledge about how language works in different content areas to help all of their students, and particularly ELLs, succeed in school. This is a tall order for teachers and students, but one for which I hope an approach such as LACI, can be useful.

## References

de Oliveira, L. C. (2007). Academic language development in the content



areas: Challenges for English Language Learners. *INTESOL Journal*, 4(1), 22-33.

de Oliveira, L. C., & Dodds, K. N. (2010). Beyond general strategies for English Language Learners: Language dissection in science. *Electronic Journal of Literacy Through Science*, 9(1). Retrieved from <http://ejlts.ucdavis.edu/article/2010/9/1/beyond-general-strategies-english-language-learners-language-dissection-science>

de Oliveira, L. C. (2011). A linguistic approach in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms: A focus on teacher education. *Linguistics and the Human Sciences*, 4(2), 101-159.

de Oliveira, L. C., & Iddings, J. (2014). (Eds). *Genre pedagogy across the curriculum: Theory and application in U.S. classrooms and contexts*. London: Equinox Publishing.

de Oliveira, L. C., & Lan, S-W (2014). Writing science in an upper elementary classroom: A genre-based approach to teaching English language learners. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 25(1), 23-39.

de Oliveira, L. C., & Schleppegrell, M. J. (2015). *Focus on grammar and meaning*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press.

de Oliveira, L. C., & Yough, M. (2015) (Eds). *Preparing teachers to work with English language learners in mainstream classrooms*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing and TESOL Press.

Fang, Z. (2006). The language demands of science reading in middle school. *International Journal of Science Education*, 28(5), 491-520.

Fang, Z., & Schleppegrell, M. J. (2008). *Reading in secondary content areas: A language-based pedagogy*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

Fang, Z., and Schleppegrell, M. J. (2010). Disciplinary literacies across content areas: Supporting secondary reading through functional language analysis. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 53(7), 587-597.

Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. (2004). An introduction to functional grammar (3rd ed). London: Arnold.

Schleppegrell, M. J., Achugar, M. & Oteíza, T.. (2004). The grammar of history: Enhancing content-based instruction through a functional focus on language. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(1), 67-93.

Schleppegrell, M. J. (2004). The language of schooling: A functional linguistics perspective. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Schleppegrell, M. J., & de Oliveira, L. C. (2006). An integrated language and content approach for history teachers. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 5(4), 254-268.



Luciana C. de Oliveira is an associate professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Miami, Florida. Her research focuses on issues related to teaching English language learners (ELLs) at the K-12 level, including the role of language in learning the content areas and teacher education, advocacy and social justice. She is the series editor of five volumes focused on the Common Core and ELLs (2014-2016) with TESOL Press.