

Research in Second Language Learning

Applying a Functional Approach to Language Development in Teaching the Content Areas to Multilingual Learners in K-12 Classrooms



Edited by

Luciana C. de Oliveira

**Applying a Functional
Approach to Language
Development in
Teaching the Content
Areas to Multilingual
Learners in K-12
Classrooms**

Research in Second Language Learning

Series Editor
Bogum Yoon

The field of second language learning research has grown rapidly in recent years. Educators have become increasingly aware that pedagogical knowledge varies significantly from one subject domain to the next and that findings from educational research in one domain are not necessarily applicable to the next. Researchers in second language learning are adding to our understanding of second language specific pedagogy. There exists a need, therefore, for an outlet for these ever-improving understandings of this content-specific pedagogy. The *Research in Second Language Learning* series promotes a research-based approach to the decision-making process in second language teaching/learning.

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Applying a Functional Approach to Language Development in Teaching the Content Areas to Multilingual Learners in K-12 Classrooms

Edited by

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Virginia Commonwealth University, USA



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CHAPTER 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH TO LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT: APPLICATIONS IN CONTENT AREA CLASSROOMS WITH MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces a functional approach to language development, grounded in systemic functional linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), a social semiotic theory that sees language as a resource for making meaning in context. The chapter identifies the main principles of a functional approach to enable teachers to recognize language patterns in order to help multilingual learners (MLs) see how language works. This approach can be implemented in any content classroom and is especially important for MLs as they develop their linguistic repertoires so they can effectively engage with educational knowledge.

A functional approach to language development enables teachers to identify language patterns in order to help multilingual learners (MLs) see how

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language works. Grounded in systemic functional linguistics (SFL; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), it offers ways of engaging students in exploring meaning in texts through classroom discussions and explicit attention to language. SFL is a social semiotic theory that sees language as a resource for making meaning in context to achieve social goals (de Oliveira & Schleppegrell, 2015; de Oliveira & Westerlund, 2021; Schleppegrell, 2013). We use language for various purposes connected to various audiences and situations which realize systematic patterns of choices. This approach provides a metalanguage (Moore & Schleppegrell, 2014) for talking about the meanings in the choices authors make with a simultaneous focus on the meanings that are made (the “content”) and the language through which the meanings are expressed. Teachers and students explore texts as they are written, without any simplification.

With the publication of the new WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework (henceforth, WIDA Standards or the Standards Framework; WIDA, 2020), the need to focus on a functional approach is even more pronounced. WIDA 2020 includes four Big Ideas that focus on what is needed to design culturally and linguistically sustaining learning environments where MLs can thrive and reach their full potential. The revised edition offers a renewed commitment to equity for MLs by building on students’ linguistic and cultural assets, bridging content and language in collaborative environments, and making language visible through a functional approach to language. The Big Idea *A Functional Approach to Language Development* highlights the concept that language is a resource not only to communicate, but to enact roles and relationships, and act on the world.

This book responds to a current need in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) for more guidance on how to apply a functional approach to language development for teaching MLs in K-12 classrooms, specifically with a focus on teaching the content areas of English language arts (ELA), mathematics, science, and social studies. This book aims to contribute to the TESOL field by providing teachers with guidance on how to plan instruction for MLs in the content areas using a functional approach to language development. Section 1 includes applied chapters that use a language-based approach to content instruction (LACI; de Oliveira, 2020, 2023a, 2023b) to design unit plans with a template to plan instruction for MLs in each content area and across grades K-12. Section 2 includes chapters that highlight implementation of a functional approach in teacher education programs in various states. Next I present key ideas about a functional approach that are taken up in the chapters presented in this book.

AN EXPLICIT PEDAGOGY AT THE CORE OF LEARNING

We want to engage MLs in exploring how language is used and how meanings are presented in texts (de Oliveira et al., 2021). This exploration affords teachers an explicit pedagogy that keeps language at the core of learning.

Learning language from this perspective means learning the options that are available in the new language to make meanings of different kinds, for particular purposes, in various situations.

A functional approach supports the development of *academic language*—or the language used for schooling purposes—as existing on the same continuum and emerging from the same repertoire as *everyday language* used for communicative purposes in everyday life (de Oliveira & Westerland, 2021). With a focus on whole texts, a functional approach attends to academic language as much more than vocabulary. We advocate not pre-teaching vocabulary words outside of texts and independent of the contexts in which the words occur (for a full description about why we need to move beyond pre-teaching vocabulary, see Molle et al., 2021).

We draw on the notion of *genre*, represented by the culturally expected patterns of types of texts (Brisk, 2015; de Oliveira, 2023a; Gebhard, 2019; Martin & Rose, 2008) to explicitly focus on academic language development. Genre is a recurrent configuration of meanings, described as “a staged goal-oriented social process” (Martin, 2009, p. 13). It is:

- staged: because it usually takes us more than step to reach our goals,
- goal-oriented: because unfolding stages are designed to accomplish something and we feel a sense of frustration or incompleteness if we are stopped, and
- social: because we address our texts to specific audiences and use them interactively with others.

While genre represents the context of culture at large, register is the context of a more immediate situation. Register comprises *field*, *tenor*, and *mode*. Field refers to the topic and content of the text. Tenor refers to the roles and relationships among people involved in a text. Mode refers to how the message is conveyed such as via email, spoken text, presentation, blog or other ways people communicate. These three dimensions of register are always present in each instance of language use and contribute to the realization of the overall message.

Genres are socially recognized ways of using language that enable people to present, enact relationships with others, and organize information to achieve various goals. To understand how different written genres accomplish this, it is important to consider the purpose, organization, and specific language features of each genre.

Purpose. Language use is goal-oriented. Written genres are distinguished by what the text is meant to achieve within a particular context and content area—that is, their social purposes. Genres are used to achieve social purposes. Purposes include narrate (e.g., telling about an experience or an event), inform (e.g., telling about a historical event or science facts),

explain (e.g., helping others to understand a system or a process), and argue (e.g., persuading others to believe something or act on an issue). Genres produced for different purposes in different contexts have different language features.

Organization. Each genre has evolved and continues to evolve to be organized in expected ways and use specific language features connected to the genre's social purpose. To accomplish their purposes, genres generally move through a number of *stages*. Stages are named according to their function and go beyond a typical three-step structure as an Introduction, a Body, and a Conclusion. In fact, we do not use this terminology when discussing genre stages. Each stage plays a particular role in the developing text. Identification of the organization of a genre through its stages and reflection on what job these stages are performing in the text is important. The stages are not meant to be presented firmly as a prescription—rather, stages are functional for each genre and, therefore, may change as the social purpose changes. For example, a Procedural Recount genre typically has the purpose of recording steps taken to carry out experiments, tasks, and observations. The typical stages are Aim (Materials), Record of Events, and Conclusions. In science, when we write Procedural Recounts about experiments, the Aim stage provides information about the goal of the experiment and usually includes materials required to conduct the experiment. The second stage is Record of Events in which the writer includes the step-by-step process that was followed in the procedure, in this case, the science experiment. The Conclusions stage describes the findings of the experiment.

Language Features. Different genres have typical language patterns to achieve their social purpose. Identifying language features can help teachers and students develop an understanding of how texts achieve their social purposes most effectively. Helping students recognize patterns of language present in different genres helps them become familiar with the expectations for that particular genre. While identifying the stages of a text is a useful starting point, we need to dig deeper into the language of the texts to see how an author has made particular choices to make the meaning that they wanted to convey. The role of the teacher is instrumental in extending students' repertoires of language choices, both in their comprehension of meaning in texts and their construction of meaning in texts.

WIDA KEY LANGUAGE USES

In the WIDA Standards, functional language is represented at the level of genre families through the *Key Language Uses (KLU)* and at the level of register through language functions and features to illustrate the Language Expectations.

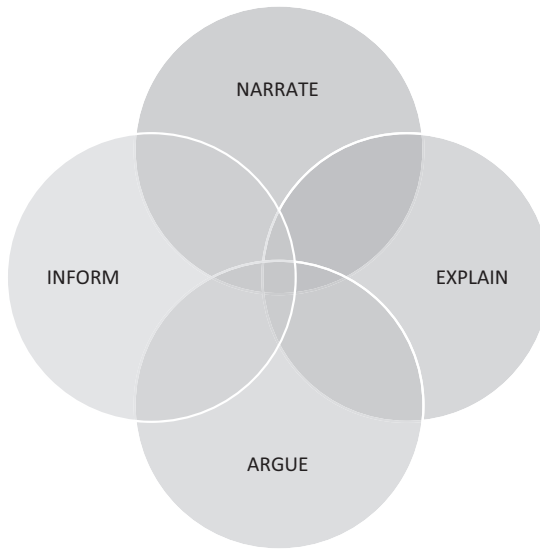


Figure 1.1 Key language uses.

The KLU (Figure 1.1) exemplify the Big Idea: Functional Approach to Language Development.

They

- emphasize language use for particular purposes, with particular audiences, and in particular sociocultural contexts.
- bring focus and coherence to the language of schooling.
- help educators make choices to prioritize and coordinate content and language integration.
- serve as an organizing principle for the Language Expectations.

KLU share some common aspects across disciplines, and yet each discipline also has unique ways of applying each. Below are brief definitions for each Key Language Use.

- **Narrate** highlights language to convey real or imaginary experiences through stories and histories. Narratives serve many purposes, including to instruct, entertain, teach, or support argumentation.
- **Inform** highlights language to provide factual information. As students convey information, they define, describe, compare, contrast, organize, categorize, or classify concepts, ideas, or phenomena.

- **Explain** highlights language to give an account for how things work or why things happen. As students explain, they substantiate the inner workings of natural, man-made, and social phenomena.
- **Argue** highlights language to justify claims using evidence and reasoning. Argue can be used to advance or defend an idea or solution, change the audience’s point of view, bring about action, or accept a position or evaluation of an issue.

Each content area and grade level cluster has its own set of *KLU*. The language functions are the different ways we use language in carrying out each *Key Language Use*. For example, for the KLU Argue in Math, the following language functions have been identified:

- Create conjecture using definitions and previously established results
- Generalize logic across cases
- Justify conclusions with evidence and mathematical facts
- Evaluate and critique others’ arguments

To help teachers identify some common genres for schooling contexts and how they map out to KLU, I developed a table that contains typical genres, their social purposes, typical organization in stages, and language features associated with each genre, following previous work done on genre instruction (Derewianka & Jones, 2016; de Oliveira et al., 2020; Rose & Martin, 2012). Table 1.1 can be used by teachers to develop their awareness of typical genres of schooling. It is not meant to be “taught” to students out of context. Rather, it is meant as a resource for teachers to develop their own understanding of genres, stages, and typical language features associated with each genre.

A LANGUAGE-BASED APPROACH TO CONTENT INSTRUCTION

One way to enact the functional approach is through a (LACI; de Oliveira, 2023b). LACI provides a simultaneous focus on the meanings that are made (the “content”) and the language through which the meanings are expressed. Language is seen as a meaning-making system used to achieve social goals (de Oliveira & Schleppegrell, 2015). Organized around six Cs of support for scaffolding content-area instruction for MLs (Figure 1.2), LACI has been implemented in elementary and secondary classrooms. Even though each C is presented separately in the framework, they do not occur separately in planning and instruction: connection, culture, code-breaking, challenge, community and collaboration, and classroom interactions.

TABLE 1.1 Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Text Types, WIDA Key Language Uses, Example Genres, Purpose, Stages, Language Features, and Examples (de Oliveira, 2023b)

Text Type	WIDA Key Language Use	Example Genre	Purpose	Stages	Language Features	Examples
Narrative	Narrate	Stories	To entertain or engage	Orientation Complication Resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple past tense (<i>she saw, they looked</i>) • Doing processes [verbs] (<i>drank, went, did</i>) • Time connectors (<i>on Saturday, then, next, after church</i>) • Specific participants [nouns] (<i>Mary, Jose, the cat</i>) • First person pronouns (<i>I, we</i>) • Creative or literary elements • Personal reactions 	Narrative Anecdotes Fables
		Recounts	To tell what happened	Orientation/ background Record/account of stages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sequenced in time • Simple past tense (<i>she saw, they looked</i>) • Doing processes [verbs] (<i>drank, went, did</i>) • Time connectors (<i>on Saturday, then, next, after church</i>) • Specific participants [nouns] (<i>Mary, Jose, the cat</i>) • Typically first person pronouns (<i>I, we</i>) 	Recounting a historical event Recounting solving math problems

(Continued)

TABLE 1.1 Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Text Types, WIDA Key Language Uses, Example Genres, Purpose, Stages, Language Features, and Examples (de Oliveira, 2023b) (continued)

Text Type	WIDA Key Language Use	Example Genre	Purpose	Stages	Language Features	Examples
Informational/ Explanatory	Inform	Procedures	To instruct how to do something	Purpose Equipment Method/steps Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing processes [verbs] mainly commands (<i>place, give, add</i>) • Generalized participants, referring to whole class of things and specific things • Time connectors (<i>first, when, then</i>) • <i>Directions</i> tend to use declarative clauses in simple present tense with <i>you/we/one</i> as a generalized actor. • <i>Instructions</i> tend to use imperative clauses. 	How to do a craft How to play a game How to go somewhere How to make candy
		Reports	To provide information about a topic	Classification or positioning Description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relational processes (<i>is, has, were, have, belong to</i>) describe characteristics and present generalizations. • Doing processes in the present tense (<i>spread, climb</i>) describe activity. • Generalized participants (<i>sharks, cultures</i>) • Timeless verbs in simple present tense (<i>exist, grow</i>) 	Types of sharks A description of Antarctica Greek and Roman cultures
	Explain	Explanations	To explain how things work/why they happen	Phenomenon Explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generalized nonhuman participants (<i>generators, ecosystems</i>) • Logical organization (<i>if/then, so, since</i>) • Relational processes (<i>is, are, has</i>) • Doing processes (<i>shift, increases</i>) • Timeless present tense (<i>happens, turns, decrease</i>) 	How a life cycle works What causes hurricanes