

# Creating a Culture of Language Awareness in Content-Based Contexts

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A *toolkit* approach to professional development is frequently used to assist teachers of English language learners (ELLs), wherein teachers are provided a grab bag of activities and strategies to implement in their classrooms. However, today's heightened language demands call for teachers to develop teacher language awareness (TLA), a language lens that teachers use as a filter for text and material selection, instructional planning, and responsive teaching. Deeper professional development experiences are required to help teachers develop knowledge and expertise in the three domains of TLA: the user domain, the analyst domain, and the teacher domain. This article provides justification for TLA development, explanations of each TLA domain, plus concrete professional development ideas that can be implemented at a school, institution, or district level.

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**Educators** in both English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts require continued professional development to stay abreast of new research and pedagogical innovations in the TESOL field. This article is directed at those TESOL educators who belong to the content-based instruction community of participation, that is, language teaching environments wherein content and language are taught simultaneously. Often referred to as CBI (for content-based

instruction) in the United States and CLIL for content-and language-integrated learning in Europe and other locales, settings where language is both the *medium* of instruction as well as the *object* of instruction require advanced pedagogical language skills of teachers (Liyanage & Bartlett, 2010).

However, in many schools across the United States and other Anglophone countries, professional development for teachers working with culturally and linguistically diverse populations has centered around more of a *toolkit* approach—one that arms teachers with many pedagogical activities and strategies to implement with their English language learners (ELLs), but not necessarily one that provides teachers with the language experience required to successfully develop their students' academic language in the content areas. In contrast to the toolkit approach, we advocate for teachers to develop teacher language awareness, or TLA, which is a type of language lens through which teachers may select text and materials, plan instruction, and respond to student needs (Andrews, 2007).

## TEACHER LANGUAGE AWARENESS

What is TLA? The Association for Language Awareness defines language awareness as “explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use” (Association for Language Awareness, 2015). TLA focuses more on what the *teacher* needs to know about language, and how that knowledge is incorporated into pedagogical practice (Andrews, 2007). It can be conceptualized in three overlapping and dynamic domains: the *user domain* (the teacher's own command of English and awareness of types of English that are used by culturally diverse learners, the *analyst domain* (the teacher's understanding of general linguistic rules and systems, and the *teacher domain* (the teacher's ability to plan instruction that will engage and support the culturally diverse English learner in the content areas) (Wright & Bolitho, 1993). As Svalberg (2007) comments, TLA is a multidisciplinary research paradigm; thus, it draws from varying literature on second language (L2) teaching and learning. For example, the user domain also entails the L2 teachers'

acceptance of multiple varieties of English (Widdowson, 1994), curiosity toward language learning, and being aware of linguistic imperialism (Canagarajah, 1999). The analyst domain draws on research on metalinguistic awareness (Alderson, Clapham, & Steel, 1997; Bialystok, 2001), ability to notice language forms and functions (Schmidt, 1990), awareness of ELL interlanguage (Selinker & Rutherford, 2013), and the ability to metacognitively reflect on language use. The teacher domain focuses on the L2 teacher's pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986), or their ability to transfer what they know in a way that is engaging and relatable to students, as well as teachers' life experiences and prior knowledge (Johnson, 1994). In this domain, TESOL educators must also tap into their knowledge of second language acquisition (SLA) theory, L2 teaching methodology, and expertise (Tsui, 2003).

Why do teachers in the content-based community of practice need to develop TLA? As an example, the U.S. Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and growing literacy demands in school and society require more complex academic language use by both students *and* teachers. Even when language is not explicitly mentioned in the CCSS, it still permeates all of the standards (Van Lier & Walqui, 2012). For example, one of the CCSS reading standards for fifth grade (ages 10–11) requires that students “explain the relationships or interactions between two or more individuals, events, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific, or technical text based on specific information in the text” (CCSS Initiative, 2015, RI.5.3). At the 12th-grade level (ages 17–18), a similar standard requires students to “determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text” (CCSS Initiative, 2015, RI.11–12.4). Many of these standards across grades K–12 call for more analysis, comparison, and persuasion, expecting students to engage in the formal language that these tasks require. As literacy and language demands increase and genres shift toward informational text, the level of language content and pedagogical knowledge that teachers must

exhibit also increases (Roberts, 2012; Santos, Darling-Hammond, & Cheuk, 2012; Schleppegrell & O'Hallaron, 2011).

Nonetheless, teachers' skill development for responding to language of such sophisticated nature does not happen overnight. While a toolkit approach is appealing in its immediacy and tangibility, we instead encourage the creation a culture of language awareness over time among school faculties in order to develop teachers' abilities to work more effectively with culturally and linguistically diverse youth. This culture may be developed along the three dimensions of TLA—user, analyst, and teacher—which we see as essential components of today's teacher expertise. Teachers draw upon all three of these domains when faced with the challenge of developing instruction that simultaneously addresses content information and academic language—two complementary processes that simply must occur for ELLs in content-based settings (Chamot, 2005; Lyster, 2007; Snow & Brinton, 1997). If teachers do not have balanced TLA in all three domains, they may, for example, implement strategies or activities without knowing which forms or functions they address (teacher domain), they may not be able to respond to language-related questions that students pose during content-area study (analyst domain), and their own (lack of) awareness of language dialects and varieties may impact how they treat students from various language backgrounds in the classroom (user domain). Andrews (2007) concurs, noting that the quality of a teacher's engagement with content-area information will “potentially be affected to a large extent by the TLA of that teacher” (p. 95).

TLA is most often developed by learning a second or foreign language, yet many U.S. public school teachers are monolingual and have neither time nor resources to undertake language learning themselves (Smolcic, 2010), nor do they see themselves as language educators (Harper & de Jong, 2009). Educators in these communities of participation, then, require professional development that provides deeper awareness and understanding of language in all three areas of TLA without having to actually learn another language. To address this issue we provide fuller descriptions of the TLA domains below, and then provide nine concrete suggestions for fostering a culture of language awareness

among teachers in a way that we hope will promote positive attitudes toward linguistic diversity in today's schools, with the ultimate goal of increasing ELLs' access to academic language speech communities.

### **User Domain**

The user domain entails not only teachers' proficiency in English, but also includes teachers' beliefs that influence how they use English and how they interact with people who speak other types of English, or even other languages. The user domain may seem like a given, considering many TESOL educators are native or very fluent users of English (Smolcic, 2010). However, Lavender (2002) found that, for nonnative English-speaking teachers, language improvement (in English) was ranked as most important to them during their teacher education experience. In addition, teachers who are first language (L1) speakers of English themselves are culturally diverse, and may speak a dialect of English that differs from that of their students. Being aware of these dialectical or linguistic differences may help teachers both relate to and communicate with their students about the *language of schooling* relative to languages spoken at home (Schleppegrell, 2004). In addition, teachers themselves may need to improve their own use of academic vocabulary and functional language in the classroom, rather than communicating with students about academic concepts using more social or conversational language.

Suggestions for professional development focused on the user domain follow.

**Observing conversations.** Have teachers observe a conversation between students at school, or perhaps visit a community location, such as a grocery store, park, library, or restaurant. In professional learning communities or in grade-level teams, have teachers share their results and analyze the language or type of language that was used, including any slang, idioms, or grammar structures that might differ from the ones they use. Promote conversation that centers around what teachers consider "acceptable" or "standard" forms of English, and why that may or may not relate to their students.

**Language stories.** Encourage faculty members or grade-level teams to write or produce their own “language stories.” In these stories, they might discuss any language learning experiences they have had, what they learned from learning language, or what dialects or languages other than English are present in their family heritage. Teachers may want to create posters, digital stories, PowerPoints, or iMovies to showcase their own linguistic diversity. Be sure to share schoolwide with students!

**Book club.** Create a school- or even district-wide community by selecting a book to read that highlights issues germane to English language learners, such as immigration, language differences, being new to a school or city, refugees, or other cultural and linguistic diversity. In addition to learning about these issues, a book club encourages teachers to be readers themselves—a habit that can improve their own academic language. Consider adult nonfiction, memoirs, young adult, or even children’s literature books. Allow time for faculty—or better yet, faculty/student—discussion via guided questions during faculty meetings or advisory-type periods.

**Schoolwide words of the week.** As a school, select a word or two that can be widely used across content areas for the faculty, staff, or students to incorporate into their speech and writing for the week (Watkins, 2012). Teachers should not only integrate the chosen words into their lesson delivery, but they should use the words in conversations with students in and out of class. Encourage faculty, staff, and students to continue using the highlighted words throughout the school year and to keep track of how they use the words in their own speech and writing, when they recognize others using the words, and when they notice the words used outside of the school setting. Schoolwide attention to academic vocabulary can help improve the academic vocabulary usage of faculty, staff, and students.

### **Analyst Domain**

The analyst domain includes knowledge about language, both its forms and functions. It encompasses (but is not limited to) knowledge about the structure of English, its phonemic systems, how context can change the meaning of certain words, or the way

different expressions are used in context. Metalinguistic awareness, which is defined by an ability to reflect on language use, compare features across two or more languages, or develop different language learning strategies (Jessner, 1999), can also be found in this domain. On a larger scale, research has long demonstrated the metalinguistic abilities of students, but still begs investigation in teachers. Moore (2006) wonders if a possible lack of metalinguistic awareness leaves teachers “unaware of children’s knowledge and abilities in different languages and [therefore teachers] fail to see them as potential resources for learning” (p. 136). When teachers do possess knowledge about language and metalinguistic awareness, it may be used to solve potential language problems of students. For example, an ELL may present a teacher with questions about language or make errors in their second language (L2) that require the teacher to provide clarification or instructional supports. Language knowledge and awareness also translates to teachers being able to structure academic conversation opportunities at differentiated levels for classes with L2 learners.

Suggestions for professional development focused on the analyst domain follow.

**Identifying language demands.** In content-area or grade-level teams, have teachers use a sample lesson plan to practice identifying the language demands inherent in the lesson. Have teachers use a tool or framework to assist them in recognizing the academic language used in their lessons and texts (Lindahl & Watkins, 2014). Focus on constructing language objectives that aid both teachers and students in paying attention to language and that help students meet these demands.

**Case studies with language focus.** Use case studies of student language challenges to help teachers not only pinpoint specific language concerns of students, but to also figure out how to best solve them. For example, a sample case study might include a student who frequently confuses their L1 syntax with English syntax. Analysis of case studies will help teachers when they are faced with similar, real-time situations. These conversations may most naturally occur in professional learning community or grade-level types of meetings.

**Teacher language journals.** Teacher language journals add an additional layer to the skills acquired when observing conversations of others. Journals require that teachers take a metacognitive approach to their personal language use during classroom instruction. After teaching, ask teachers to not only reflect on their lesson's effectiveness, but have them consider the language they did or did not use during the teaching of the lesson. Did they use and model the language they wanted their students to use? If so, did they notice that their students are using this same language? If not, how might they do so in the future?

### **Teacher Domain**

The teacher domain is likely the domain most frequently addressed in professional development due to the need for teachers to learn about classroom strategies and practices that will increase the efficacy of their instruction for ELLs. Bigelow and Ranney (2010) argue that in order for teachers to succeed in the new ELL educational paradigm, language awareness must be developed alongside content-teaching skills in ways that foster inquiry among teachers so that they, in turn, can engage ELLs in authentic communication about content. Hence, in addition to actual classroom practices, the teacher domain includes knowledge about how second languages are learned; a sense of empathy for the challenges that ELLs face on a daily basis in settings where their language and culture differs from the "mainstream"; and an ability to develop pedagogical expertise through reflection on teaching practices, classroom events, and student progress.

Suggestions for professional development focused on the teacher domain follow.

**Lessons in another language.** As very fluent speakers of English, it can be difficult for teachers or administrators to truly feel or remember what it is like to learn academic content in another language. Enlist the help of bilingual community members or colleagues, and ask them to prepare and present an academic lesson in a language unfamiliar to the faculty. Angelova (2005) did this with Bulgarian and found the lessons to increase teacher



cognizance of how second languages are learned, as well as how important appropriate classroom practices are to learning it. Encourage teachers to respond via journals or discussion groups with regard to how well they were able to access the academic content, any cognitive strategies they employed to try to decipher information, and how they felt on a social/emotional level as they participated in the lesson. Apply these reactions to how ELLs might feel at school.

**Interview an ELL adult or child.** Sometimes the most effective way to motivate educators to evolve professionally is to hear from learners themselves. Have educators compose questions that they would like to ask an ELL, both about their school experience and how they learned English, as well as their home life, their home culture, and whether/how that culture was/is acknowledged in the formal school setting. Allow time for teachers to share their postinterview impressions with grade-level teams or professional learning communities, and discuss any innovations they may want to make as a result of the interviews.

**Implement multicultural lessons.** In the push to develop academic language, cultural acknowledgment may fall by the wayside when it actually may help promote language learning. Some L2 scholars link acculturation processes with faster rates of L2 acquisition (Schumann, 1986), others suggest that learning a language is in fact learning the cultural context of discourse in the target language (Kramsch, 1993), and others more recently advocate for the use of students' funds of knowledge to present academic concepts within a more familiar cultural context to enable engagement and cognition (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2013). Allow teachers time to brainstorm, plan, and include cultural elements in their lesson plans—not just strategies for content sheltering—when designing instruction for ELLs. Compel teachers to move beyond the “heroes and holidays” of world cultures and deepen understanding of global cultural contributions, so that students might be more engaged in the topic and feel that they may have a place in the target language discourse community. For example, a science or math thematic unit could present *time* as a multicultural notion, wherein students would study the Hebrew, Islamic, Chinese, Aztec, and Christian

Church calendars to compare traditions and concepts of how time is measured via social and political considerations (Tiedt & Tiedt, 2010).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, most professional development for teachers in the field of ELLs has focused only on classroom activities, strategies, and models that develop academic language. We do not propose TLA as an alternative to those strategies and activities or models (which are in fact an inherent part of the teacher domain), but rather as a more longitudinal, holistic language lens for teachers that helps them to better implement those pedagogical strategies and activities that they have in their repertoire, as well as to respond more effectively when student outcomes vary. For TESOL educators in the CBI community of participation, an awareness of the dynamic role language plays in their own analytical cognition and teaching practices may enrich the ways in which they conceptualize language for and with their students.

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