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## A Functional Approach to Language Development for Dual Language Learners

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## **A Functional Approach to Language Development for Dual Language Learners**

### **Introduction**

A functional approach to language development draws on functional linguistic perspectives to offer ways of engaging students in exploring meaning in texts through classroom discussions about language. This approach provides a metalanguage for talking about the meanings in the choices authors make. It also enables teachers to identify language patterns in order to help dual language learners see how language works. This approach can be implemented in any language classroom and is especially important for multilingual learners (MLs) in dual language classrooms as they develop their linguistic repertoires in more than one language so they can effectively engage with educational knowledge.

A functional approach to language development (de Oliveira, 2016; Fang & Schleppegrell, 2008) is grounded in systemic functional linguistics (SFL; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). SFL is a social semiotic theory that sees language as a resource for making meaning in context. SFL offers a three-way perspective on language which we describe in this article. SFL has been used to develop and analyze many languages other than English, including Arabic (Ab Abdel-Malek, 2019, 2020), Chinese (Cheng & Chiu, 2018), French (Troyan, 2021), German (Ryshina-Pankova, 2015), Italian (Fernández, 2021), Japanese (Kawamitsu, 2015), and Spanish (Ramírez, 2020; Troyan, 2016).

This approach has significant contributions to the teaching and learning of MLs in dual language classrooms (Ramírez et al., 2018). For example, using a functional approach, Sembiante (2013) showed different instructional practices that support the early academic language development of dual language learners in an English and Spanish dual language program. She concluded that it is important to explore differences in language structure in dual

language classrooms to better support dual language learners' literacy development in each language. Since the structures of English and Spanish are different, she reported, it is important for teachers to have specific preparation in bilingual instruction that highlights a focus on language. This article contributes to the paucity of literature on the use of a functional approach in dual language classrooms. We contextualize this approach as part of the new WIDA Standards (WIDA, 2020) and present a case study to showcase how the functional approach can be used in a dual language classroom with annotated science texts in English and Spanish.

### **A Functional Language Approach in the WIDA Standards**

In December 2020, WIDA, an organization dedicated to the academic achievement of MLs, published a new edition of the WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework (henceforth, *WIDA Standards* or *the Standards Framework*; WIDA, 2020). Although the Standards are designed to support English Language Development, they can and should be used in dual language programs. The revised edition offers a renewed commitment to equity for dual language learners (DLLs) 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 Standards Framework is anchored in four Big Ideas in the education of DLLs (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*The Big Ideas in the WIDA 2020 Edition of the English Language Development Standards*



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The four Big Ideas are not new to the WIDA Standards or to the field of education of MLLs (Shafer Willner et al., 2020). However, they provide a fresh reminder of what is needed to design culturally and linguistically sustaining learning environments where DLLs can thrive and reach their full potential. The first big idea, *Equity of Opportunity and Access*, renews educators' commitment to equity of educational opportunities for DLLs by setting high expectations for students and providing the necessary scaffolding for their success. When equity is at the front and center in a school community, DLLs are positioned as equal contributors of knowledge, ideas, and resources. The second big idea, *Integration of Content and Language*, reminds educators and curriculum leaders that language is best learned in the service of disciplinary learning, not separate from content areas. When language and content are integrated, language becomes the vehicle for learning the concepts, co-constructing meaning together around themes, issues or phenomena, and communicating knowledge and new understandings with the bigger world outside the classroom, and in so doing, function in the world. The third big idea,

*Collaboration Among Stakeholders*, reminds educators that it takes a village to create inclusive and equitable educational experiences for DLLs. It also highlights that the responsibility to educate DLLs belongs to all because they are first and foremost, learners, not merely *language learners*. Finally, the fourth big idea, *Functional Approach to Language Development*, highlights the idea that language is our resource not only to communicate, but to enact roles and relationships, and act on the world.

Another set of standards we want to mention is the Spanish Language Development Standards (WIDA, 2013). Though published before the most recent WIDA ELD Standards, the WIDA Spanish Language Development Standards, Kindergarten through Grade 12 is a resource for planning and implementing language instruction and assessment for DLLs who are learning academic content in Spanish and could be used alongside the ELD Standards in Spanish-English dual language classrooms for instruction and assessment in Spanish and English.

With this overview of the big ideas and the introduction to the functional language approach, the remainder of the article will elaborate on what it means to teach language through these lenses.

### **What is a Functional Approach to Language Development?**

A functional approach to language development draws on a meaning-based theory of language, systemic functional linguistics (SFL), to provide teachers with ways to talk about and address the language demands of the content areas for DLLs. SFL sees language as the realization of meaning in context. It sees language as a resource for making meaning. We use language for various purposes connected to various audiences and situations which realize systematic patterns of choices. According to SFL, the language represents system networks, not an inventory of rules and structures (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

This 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 (Schleppegrell, 2013). Using academic language includes a process of making academic dimensions of subject matter transparent. Especially in multilingual contexts, educators need to be knowledgeable about the language in and through which they are teaching, as they are faced with an additional task of scaffolding students’ learning about not only content but also language. Many scholars have shown how bridging between everyday and academic languages is essential for understanding content (de Oliveira, 2016; Gibbons, 2006; Khote, 2018). We draw on the notion of *genre*, represented by the culturally expected patterns of types of texts (Martin & Rose, 2005) to explicitly focus on academic language development. Genre is a recurrent configuration of meanings, described as a staged goal-oriented social process (Martin, 2009). It is:

- staged: because it usually takes us more than one phase of meaning to work through a genre,
- goal-oriented: because unfolding phases are designed to accomplish something and we feel a sense of frustration or incompleteness if we are stopped, and
- social: because we undertake genres interactively with others.

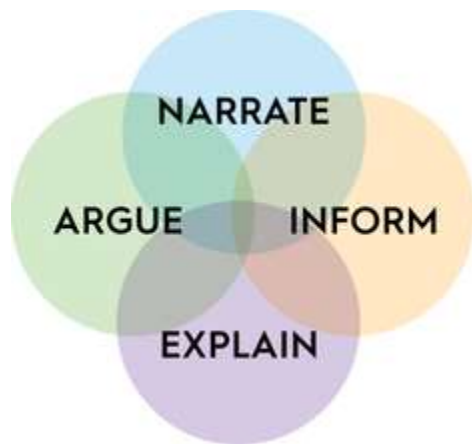
While genre represents the context of culture at large, register is the context of a more immediate situation. It comprises *field*, *tenor*, and *mode*. Field refers to the topic and content of the text. Tenor refers to the roles and relationships among people involved in a text. Mode refers to how 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.

## WIDA Key Language Uses

In the WIDA Standards, functional language is represented at the level of genre through the *Key Language Uses* and at the level of register through language functions and features to illustrate the Language Expectations. The Key Language Uses (Figure 2) exemplify the Big Idea: Functional Approach to Language Development.

### Figure 2

#### *Key Language Uses*



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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.

Key Language Uses 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 *Key Language Uses* (KLU).

For example, for the content area of mathematics and grade level cluster 6-8, two prominent *Key Language Uses* are present: Explain and Argue. Each Key Language Use is further represented through Language Functions. 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

### **Teaching–Learning Cycle**

One way to enact the functional approach is through the Teaching-Learning Cycle (TLC). It is a pedagogical framework which provides learners with explicit knowledge about language. The TLC applies the principle “guidance through interaction in the context of shared experience” (Martin & Rose, 2005, p. 253). This principle refers to the guidance provided by teachers in talking, reading, and writing about a specific text in the context of a shared experience - a common text, field trip, movie, science experiment or a reading, etc. Students write about something that they shared as an activity, not about something that only they experienced on



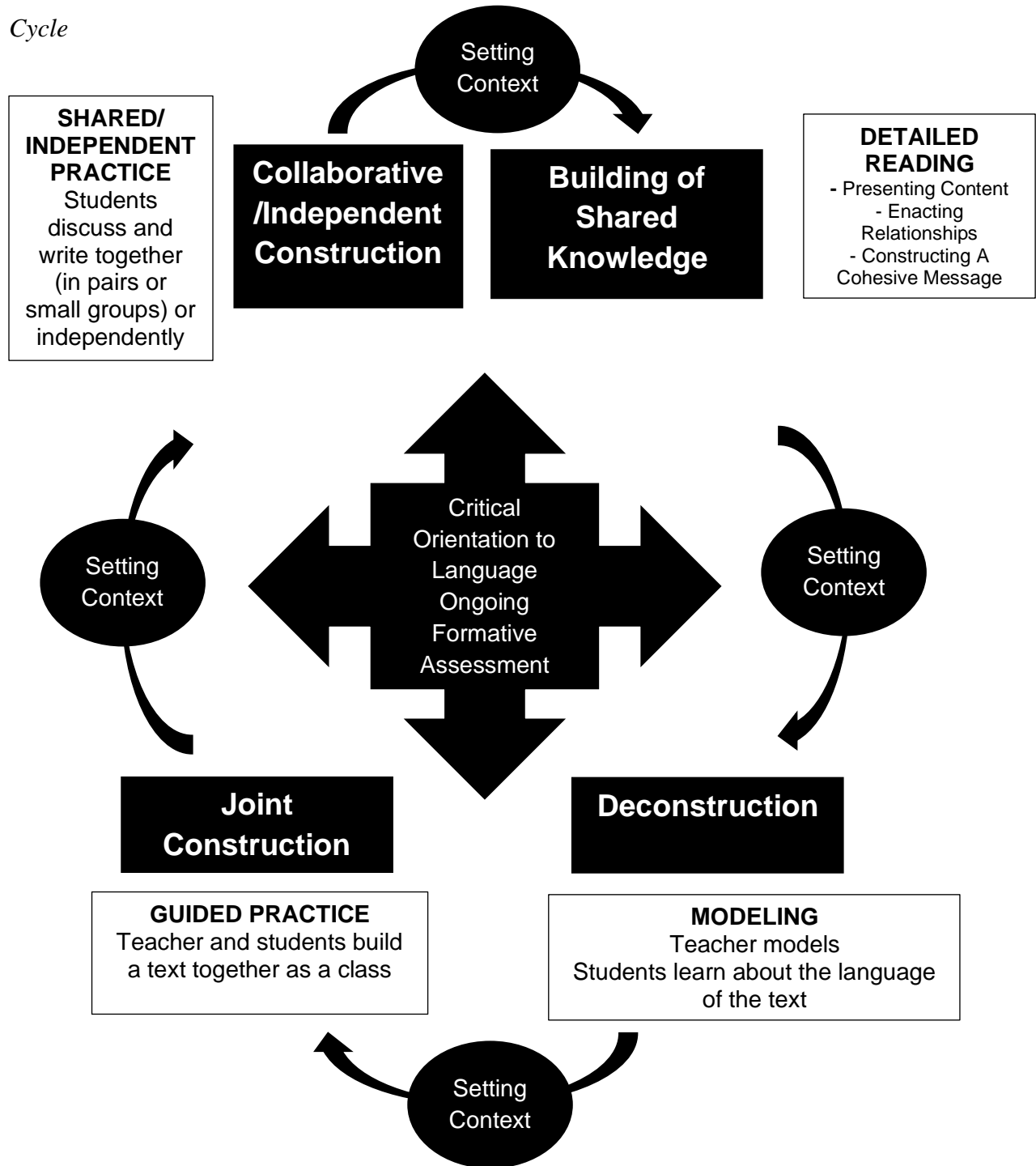
their own – that is why the concept of a shared experience is so critical for students.

The TLC takes students through the phases of building shared knowledge through detailed reading, deconstruction of mentor texts, joint construction, and collaborative/independent construction. Though the TLC allows students different points of entry and enables teachers to start at any one of these phases, it is important to build shared knowledge about a new genre by starting with building of shared knowledge, deconstruction, joint construction, and collaborative/independent construction. Following these phases is vital so all students are prepared to write in the expected genres. Just giving students a topic or prompt and asking them to write is not teaching writing but assessing what students already are able to do with writing. This process can be recursive and repeated as students become more familiar with specific genres. *Setting context* occurs at each phase as an important step to build with students as they think of the specific context for writing a specific genre within other possible contexts. The notion of *building shared knowledge* as a phase is key, as students develop their knowledge of the content and context of particular texts. Students also build a critical orientation to language by learning about language and about the genre while teachers assess student learning at all phases of activity. During the deconstruction phase, the TLC provides students with teacher interaction, guidance, and support as students go through these phases. Most recently, after their work in K–5 classrooms, both Brisk (2014) and de Oliveira (2017) included an additional, optional phase entitled *collaborative construction*, found in Figure 3 together with the independent construction phase. Collaborative construction can also be an additional phase in the TLC, as described in de Oliveira et al. (2020).

**Figure 3**

*Enactment of a Functional Approach to Language Development: The Teaching and Learning*

*Cycle*



### **Building Shared Knowledge: Learning About Language through Detailed Reading**

This phase includes a strategy entitled Detailed Reading (de Oliveira et al., 2015). This strategy is often part of the Deconstruction phase of the TLC. However, we believe that detailed reading should occur as students are building shared knowledge about the content to be explored so we have included this as part of building shared knowledge. Teachers select a short excerpt or short text to explore with students that includes content that is important for students to learn, addressing state content standards. Students and teacher explore how the text is written and how it accomplishes its goals through its language choices. *Detailed Reading* focuses on classroom interactions with students, conducting read-alouds, identifying language features, focusing on grammatical expressions, target vocabulary, and main ideas. They focus on three areas of meaning: *presenting content*, *enacting relationships*, and *constructing a cohesive message* and teacher and students explore the text as it is written, without any simplification (de Oliveira & Schleppegrell, 2015). Table 1 presents these three areas of meaning, questions to guide language discussion, and the focus of language related to each area of meaning, described in more detail next.

**Table 1***Detailed Reading: Areas of Meaning, Questions, and Focus of Analysis*

Area of Meaning	Question to Guide Language Discussion	Focus of Language
Presenting content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is happening?</li> <li>• Who are the people or things involved?</li> <li>• What are the circumstances surrounding events?</li> </ul>	Sentence Constituents: Participants, processes, circumstances
Enacting relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the roles and relationships taken up by participants?</li> </ul>	Mood choices: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Declarative</li> <li>• Interrogative</li> <li>• Imperative</li> <li>• Modality</li> </ul>
Constructing a cohesive message	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is the text organized?</li> <li>• How is the language used?</li> </ul>	Theme/New Cohesion

*Note.* Table is based on de Oliveira and Schleppegrell's (2015) previous work.

*Presenting content* explores the Participants (typically expressed through nouns) engaged in some kinds of Processes (typically expressed through verbs) under certain Circumstances (typically expressed through prepositional and adverbial phrases; Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Participants are the entities involved in the process, typically realized in noun groups (e.g., *the magnet, many metal objects, a scientific phenomenon*), and these participants take on different semantic roles in different process types. There are four major process types, expressed through verbs: **doing verbs** that represent actions such as *participate* and *run*; **relating verbs** that show relationships between ideas such as *is* and *has*; **thinking verbs** that represent thought such as *think, know, consider*; **feeling verbs** that represent feelings such as *admire, love, like*; and **saying verbs** that indicate what someone or something has said such as *say, tell, ask*. Processes also take place around circumstances (of time, space, conditions, purpose etc.), typically realized in adverbs (e.g., *finally, separately*) or prepositional phrases

(e.g., *around the corner, with a fork*). Teacher and students explore participants, processes, and circumstances in clauses to reveal how content is presented.

*Enacting relationships* explores mood and modality. We can look at the presence or absence of the subject and finite elements of the clauses and in what order they occur with respect to one another (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). These are important because they realize the grammatical choice of the *mood* of a clause: either declarative, interrogative, or imperative. The mood system allows us to make statements (typically expressed in declarative mood), ask questions (typically expressed in interrogative mood), and declare commands (typically expressed in imperative mood). Another aspect is *modality*, an area which concerns the different ways in which someone expresses evaluation, attitudes, and judgments of various kinds. Modality allows us to express possibility, certainty, normality, usuality, necessity, and obligation. This includes modal verbs (e.g., *should, might, could*), modal adjectives (e.g., *frequent, usual*), modal adverbs (e.g., *probably, certainly, typically*), and modal nouns (e.g., *condition, necessity*). Evaluative vocabulary enables the construction of stance and judgment. Mood, modality, and evaluative vocabulary express meanings that enact a relationship between reader and listener and writer and speaker.

*Constructing a cohesive message* explores Given/New patterns. Given is the first experiential element of the clause and the New encompasses the remaining bit of the clause (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Additionally, it is useful to track the given patterns (also called thematic development) through texts which, in part, helps organize the overall text as it moves from stage to stage and within the stage. Another important area of to explore is cohesion, the way a text hangs together with the support of cohesive devices such as pronouns (e.g., *they, that, her*), synonyms and substitutes (e.g., *exemplar-ideal; The Declaration of Independence—this*

*document*), and connectors (e.g., *and*, *despite*, *if*).

### ***Deconstruction***

During Deconstruction, teachers introduce mentor texts in a specific genre that students are expected to read and write (e.g., imaginative recount, procedural recount, biographical recount); guide students to deconstruct these texts through demonstration, modeling, and discussions about their purpose, text structures (stages), and language features typical of a specific genre; and build up students' knowledge of the content information (i.e., setting context).

### ***Joint Construction***

Teachers and students work together to write a text in the same genre. In this phase, the teacher and students co-construct texts that are similar to the mentor texts that they already explored in the deconstruction phase. Students start using the language features of the specific genre about which they are learning. In co-constructing texts, teachers are expected to provide a bridge for students between their everyday language and the academic language of school so attention will be directed to text organizational issues such as purpose, stages, and language features. The teacher is typically in front of the room scribing while everyone is writing together.

### ***Collaborative/Independent Construction***

*Collaborative Construction* can be added as a bridge between the joint construction and independent construction phases, especially for students in grades K–2 who are novice writers. Students work with other students in pairs or small groups to construct a text together, brainstorming and negotiating ideas, writing, revising, etc. Teachers continue to support collaborative pairs or groups as needed. *Independent Construction* is a phase in which students are ready to work independently to construct their own texts in the specific genre. Teachers are

expected to minimize their support, scaffolding, and guidance so students have more opportunities for their independent writing of the specific genre. These phases of the TLC start with the whole text as the unit in focus rather than individual sentences. Thus, these phases enable teachers to support their students in developing their knowledge and control of school genres across disciplines.

### **Why is a Functional Approach Relevant for Teaching Dual Language Learners?**

Next, we present a case study to showcase how a functional approach to language development could be implemented in dual language classrooms based on our experiences in various elementary classrooms. The case study illustrates one phase of the TLC to demonstrate how a functional approach to language can be helpful to build students' content knowledge about the topic.

### **A Case Study of a Functional Approach to Language Development**

Ms. Rodriguez is a dual language teacher in an urban elementary school and was teaching the unit on science using the Teaching-Learning Cycle. Students in the program have been attending school in a large urban district for periods of between one year and one year and a half, and, although all had made quite substantial progress as demonstrated in ACCESS for ELLs, they were still very much in the process of developing literacy in English and Spanish. In science in particular, a focus was on coping with the demands of grade level content and engaging in writing to learn and demonstrate knowledge. So, Ms. Rodriguez decided to implement the Teaching-Learning Cycle (TLC) as part of the day-to-day planning in the unit, *What is Science?* Her students were learning that science is all about investigations and that anyone can be a scientist.

Ms. Rodriguez connected to the Big Ideas in the WIDA Standards Framework of equity,

collaboration, integration of content and language, and functional language approach through planning, instruction, and assessment. She is an equity-driven educator who validated and built on students' assets, cultural knowledge, and their linguistic repertoires to provide access to new rigorous science learning. Collaboration with the science teacher allowed her to integrate content and language in meaningful ways. Ms. Rodriguez used the functional approach to language to develop students' language resources in the service of learning. She focused her instruction on *Inform*, one of the *Key Language Uses* from the WIDA Standards. The WIDA definition of *Inform* is to communicate factual information on a topic. This *Key Language Use* also helped her select the mentor text (see Figure 4) to build students' language knowledge needed to write a descriptive report about science.

#### ***Building Shared Knowledge: Learning About Language through Detailed Reading***

Because the concept of science felt abstract and distant to some students, Ms. Rodriguez wanted to begin building shared knowledge on the topic and connect science to students' real lives and experiences, both in and out of school. Particularly, she wanted to make sure that students had opportunities to interact with one another and with visual, narrated and printed texts as a way to develop the language necessary to explore the unit's abstract topic in depth. The activities at the beginning of the unit were deliberately designed to provide students with opportunities for purposeful interaction with peers, with engaging, interactive texts and with modeling activities on the big topic.

Ms. Rodriguez decided to examine the unit's Day-by-Day Planner to identify specific moments within the unit to build in the writing using the Teaching-Learning Cycle to scaffold writing for her students. She noticed that the previous unit encompassed 14 days but to build in writing, she had to add several lessons because writing was not explicitly taught in this unit in



the past. Previously, students engaged in hands-on science, recorded observations, explored nature outdoors, and discussed science use at home. As the teacher began to architect this new plan—amplifying and prioritizing certain areas within the unit—she understood that the students’ funds of knowledge on the abstract concept of science needed to be drawn on so they could connect and build new knowledge. Ms. Rodriguez made sure to draw on students’ home learning as so much science happens at home in the garden or in the home kitchen. She concluded that the various ways we use science in everyday life and observe in nature—life cycle of plants, electricity, weather and climate, energy and motion—could be accessed by her DLLs through a variety of texts and activities: videos, visual and printed texts, digital texts, phenomenon-based inquiries, word-knowledge building activities, collaborative and interactive content-based student talk, and writing for both learning and showing knowledge activities. For example, Ms. Rodriguez decided that students could demonstrate their understanding of what science is through a choice of products accompanied by a written text. Students could choose a demonstration of how they use science at home and describe what science is through an information report accompanied by graphics and real-life objects. As the unit progressed, Ms. Rodriguez’s goal was that students would be gradually apprenticed into the concepts and the register of science and to be able to articulate their knowledge orally and in writing.

Ms. Rodriguez chose a text (Figure 4) that was meaningful for building knowledge about science and for students to learn about language in descriptive reports. She used the WIDA Standards for the grade level cluster 2-3, *Key Language Use Inform*. Together with students, she analyzed the text to see how language works so they can learn from it to deepen their knowledge of science and to learn language resources to add to their repertoire for writing. The annotations highlight some of the language functions and features that Ms. Rodriguez identified as important

in the text, following the WIDA descriptions.

Ms. Rodriguez discussed how declarative statements are used in the text in both English and Spanish to make statements, exploring *enacting a relationship* in the functional approach. She also explored the **doing verbs**, **relating verbs**, and **thinking verbs** to highlight how they help construct the content of the text, exploring *presenting content*. She highlighted how the **relating verbs** helped construct the declarative statements to **define and classify objects and concepts**, as part of WIDA's language functions and features; specifically, they explored how the relating verbs were used to define what science is and what investigations are like.

The *Key Language Use Inform* had several functions in Standard 1 (WIDA Standards, p. 66). However, being guided by her curricular focus and the essential questions *What is Science?* And *What Investigations Do Scientists Do?*, she selected key functions that were important to answer those questions: *define and classify objects or concepts*, and *describe characteristics, patterns, or behavior*. In the end, students chose different ways to communicate their knowledge about science and what scientists do. Some created a poster while others shared their knowledge orally. The text exploration and language work helped all students understand what science is and gave them language resources in both English and Spanish to be able to demonstrate their knowledge.

Table 2

## Annotated Text

Language Functions and Features	Annotated Text	Language Functions and Features
<p>Define and classify objects or concepts</p> <p>Declarative Statements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Science is about Earth and everything beyond it.</u></li> <li>• <u>Las ciencias tratan sobre la tierra y lo que la rodea.</u></li> <li>• <u>Science is a way of looking at the world and thinking about it.</u></li> <li>• <u>Las ciencias son una forma de ver el mundo y pensar en lo que es.</u></li> </ul> <p>Relating verbs to define what science is and what investigations are like</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• is</li> <li>• son</li> <li>• are</li> <li>• son</li> </ul>	<p>What is Science?</p> <p><u>Science is about Earth and everything beyond it.</u> What does a scientist look like? To find out, take a look in the mirror!</p> <p><u>Las ciencias tratan sobre la tierra y lo que la rodea?</u> Como es un científico? Para averiguarlo, ¡mírate al espejo!</p> <p>Science <b>is</b> a way of looking at the world and thinking about it. When you <b>think</b> like a scientist, you <b>ask</b> questions about the world around you. You try to answer your questions by doing investigations.</p> <p><u>Las ciencias son una forma de ver el mundo y pensar en lo que es.</u> Cuando <b>piensas</b> como un científico, <b>haces preguntas</b> sobre el mundo que te rodea e intentas responder a tus preguntas con investigaciones.</p> <p>Some investigations <b>are</b> simple, such as watching animals play. Other investigations take planning. You need <b>to gather and set up</b> materials. Then you <b>write down</b> what happens.</p> <p>Algunas investigaciones <b>son</b> sencillas, com over a los animals cuando juegan. Otras investigaciones tienen que planearse. Necesitas <b>conseguir y preparar</b> materiales. Luego <b>anotas</b> lo que pasa</p> <p>You can think like a scientist on your own or in a group. Sharing what you learn is part of the fun. So get started!</p> <p>Puedes pensar como un científico port u cuenta o en grupo. Comunicar lo que aprendes es parte de la diversion. ! asi que manos a la obra!</p>	<p>Describe characteristics, patterns or behavior</p> <p>Declarative statements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Some investigations are...</u></li> <li>• <u>Algunas investigaciones son sencillas ...</u></li> <li>• <u>Other investigations...</u></li> <li>• <u>Otras investigaciones ...</u></li> </ul> <p>Doing verbs to describe what scientists do</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• gather and set up</li> <li>• conseguir y preparar</li> <li>• write down</li> <li>• anotas</li> </ul> <p>Thinking verbs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• think</li> <li>• piensas</li> <li>• ask</li> <li>• haces preguntas</li> </ul>

## **Conclusion**

A functional approach to language development is a useful approach to focus on language learning in dual language classrooms. By offering ways of engaging students in exploring meaning in texts through classroom discussions about language, this approach provides a metalanguage for talking about the meanings in the choices authors make. The case study we presented shows some ways a teacher can identify language patterns in order to help DLLs see how language works. This approach is especially useful in dual language classrooms as multilingual learners develop their linguistic repertoires in more than one language so they can effectively engage in classroom discussion and other meaning making activities.

The introduction of the new WIDA Standards brought forth this functional approach as a Big Idea to support the concept that language is a resource not only to communicate, but to enact roles and relationships, and act on the world. Though the Standards focus on English Language Development, the language functions and features can also be used to inform the work in other languages.

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