

# Explicit Language Support for CCSS Tasks



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With the arrival of the Common Core State Standards comes a new generation of assessments. For years, multiple-choice questions have dominated the landscape of standardized tests. In the new CCSS paradigm, students will be required to produce complex written performance tasks to demonstrate understanding.

This shift implies that in addition to deeper comprehension, students will be expected to use academic English to express their ideas in concise and cogent ways. With multiple-choice questions, students pick the answer from four options, whereas with constructed response items, students are given only a blank space to write. The answer needs to come from their comprehension of the reading and the knowledge they bring to the task. No longer can students mark a bubble when they know the answer. Now they must also have command of vocabulary and syntax to explain their reasoning. This will be a much more difficult task for the many English learners in our schools.

Consider the following ELA 9th grade sample assessment developed by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC).

*Use what you have learned from reading “Daedalus and Icarus” by Ovid and “To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph” by Anne Sexton to write an essay that analyzes how Icarus’ experience of flying is portrayed differently in the two texts. Develop your essay by providing textual evidence from both texts. Be sure to follow the conventions of standard English.*

In addition to comprehending both texts, to complete the task above, students also must know how to organize and articulate their response in a compare and contrast format. To accomplish this, students must be familiar with a compare/contrast text structure and the language specific to that way of thinking. They are expected to know and use words and phrases such as: *similarly, in contrast, as opposed to, however, unlike*.

Only through explicit language instruction and frequent oral and written practice will students be adequately prepared to independently and confidently tackle a task of this complexity.

The CCSS set the standards and consortiums are creating the assessments. However, neither of these shows teachers how to accelerate instruction for English learners so that they are prepared to successfully complete these performance tasks.

E.L. Achieve’s mission is to equip English learners for academic achievement by ensuring that they have flexible and fluent command of English for a range of purposes. We meet that goal by supporting teachers in providing instruction that explicitly teaches the target language of the task.

Before students ever see a compare/contrast prompt in a CCSS assessment, they should have read and written compare/contrast texts in class. By pairing focused written practice with structured student talk, teachers can offer students support with both the structure and language of compare and contrast.

We can’t assume that students come to class with a fluent command of academic English. Explicit attention to both the content and the language of the task is essential if English learners are to internalize the knowledge they need to truly participate in the academic dialogue and convey the sophistication of their understanding.

The new focus on performance-based assessment recognizes the importance of learning to clearly communicate complex ideas. After all, we don’t live and work in a multiple-choice world, but rather in communities where the exchange of ideas is crucial to addressing complex issues.

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