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Recommended Citation for Full Report

Armas, Ed.D, Elvira G. and Lavadenz, Ph.D., Magaly, "The Observation Protocol for Academic Literacies (OPAL); A Tool for Supporting Teachers of English Language Learners" (2011). *Journal Articles*. 1. https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ceel_journalarticles/1

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The Observation Protocol for Academic Literacies (OPAL) A Tool for Supporting Teachers of English Language Learners



By Elvira G. Armas, Ed.D. and Magaly Lavadenz, Ph.D., Center for Equity for English Learners, Loyola Marymount University

Schools and school systems are experiencing an instructional support gap that results in limited opportunities for educators to analyze, reflect on and improve research-based practices for ELLs so that outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse students can change. To address this need, an inter-disciplinary research team from the Center for Equity for English Learners¹, comprised of educational leaders, teachers, researchers, and content experts developed a classroom observational instrument - the Observation Protocol for Academic Literacies (OPAL). The OPAL is intended for teachers, educational leaders, coaches, and others to conduct focused classroom observations for three potential purposes: research/evaluation, professional development, and coaching.

Cultural and linguistic diversity has increased in California and throughout the United States. There are over five million students in the United States whose first language is not English, representing a 57% increase over the past ten years (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008). Increased diversity in the United States points to the need for an increased multicultural orientation in education, as well as enriched opportunities for students to establish a strong language foundation as a requisite for acquiring academic literacy. National and state student achievement standardized test data indicate increasingly widening gaps in reading and math achievement between English-proficient students and English Language Learners (Center on Education Policy, 2005, NAEP; Batalova, Fix, & Murray, 2007). This evidence points to the need for more teachers to receive comprehensive and sustained professional development required to refine classroom practice so that all students, including English Language Learners (ELLs), can achieve academically.

Research on effective professional development models for teachers of ELLs affirms several requisite components for effective teacher engagement and collaboration, including on-going, job-embedded opportunities for educators to learn, practice, and reflect on their teaching through coach-

ing, mentoring or observations (Castro, 2010; Gallimore, Ermeling, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2009; Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Focused, evidenced-based conversations about effective classroom practices support teachers in developing knowledge and expertise and provide differentiation, organizational support, and alignment of professional development goals with expectations for implementation (Diaz-Maggioli, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Walqui, 2001). However, few classroom observational tools exist to support this type of development of teacher expertise for ELLs (Waxman, Padron, Franco-Fuenmayor, & Huang, 2009). Consequently, schools and school systems are experiencing an instructional support gap that results in limited opportunities for educators to analyze, reflect on and improve research-based practices for ELLs so that outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse students can change.

To address this need, an inter-disciplinary research team from the Center for Equity for English Learners¹, comprised of educational leaders, teachers, researchers, and content experts developed a classroom observational instrument - the Observation Protocol for Academic Literacies (OPAL). The OPAL is an 18-item Likert-scale developed from a theoretic-

Table 1. OPAL Domains, Definitions, and Description of Indicators

OPAL Domains	Description of Indicators
<p>1.0 Rigorous and Relevant Curriculum <i>A rigorous and relevant curriculum is cognitively complex, relevant, and challenging. It allows educators to value and capitalize students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds.</i></p>	<p>1.1 Emphasizes problem solving and critical thinking 1.2 Provides access to materials, technology, and resources 1.3 Establishes high expectations 1.4 Organizes curriculum and teaching 1.5 Provides access to content in primary language 1.6 Facilitates transfer of skills from primary language</p>
<p>2.0 Connections <i>Bridging connections with students' prior knowledge is the ability to link content to students' lives, histories, and realities in order to create change.</i></p>	<p>2.1 Relates instructional concepts to students' realities 2.2 Helps students make connections 2.3 Makes learning relevant and meaningful</p>
<p>3.0 Comprehensibility <i>Comprehensibility is the attainment of maximum student understanding in order to provide access to content for all students.</i></p>	<p>3.1 Scaffolds instruction 3.2 Amplifies student input 3.3 Explains key terms 3.4 Provides feedback and checks for comprehension 3.5 Uses informal assessments</p>
<p>4.0 Interactions <i>Interactions are varied participation structures that facilitate access to the curriculum through maximum engagement and leadership opportunities.</i></p>	<p>4.1 Facilitates student autonomy 4.2 Modifies procedures to support learning 4.3 Communicates subject matter knowledge 4.4 Uses flexible groupings</p>

cal model based on four constructs: Rigorous and Relevant Curriculum, Connections, Comprehensibility, and Interactions. It was developed for use in pre-school through twelfth grade second language development and content area classrooms, namely English Language Development, Language Arts (English and Foreign Language), Mathematics, History/Social Science, and Science. The OPAL is intended for teachers, educational leaders, coaches, and others to conduct focused classroom observations for three potential purposes: research/evaluation, professional development, and coaching.

A Research-Based Classroom Observation Tool

The OPAL is a research-based classroom observation tool that captures classroom practices and interactions from sociocultural and language acquisition perspectives. This observation protocol utilizes a six-point Likert-type scale (1-6, Low to High) to describe instruction for academic Literacies, defined as a set of 21st century skills, abilities, and dispositions developed through the affirmation of and in response to students' identities, experiences and backgrounds. It is aligned with the National and California Standards for the Teaching Profession and encapsulates the four domains of

research on teacher expertise for English Language Learners: Rigorous & Relevant Curriculum, Connections, Comprehensibility, and Interactions. Table 1 provides an overview of the OPAL Domains and a synthesis of the indicators corresponding to each domain.

Three broad areas of research were used to establish the OPAL's theoretical framework. First, we considered socio-cultural issues in English Language Learner education, given that teaching and learning English in the United States cannot be conceptualized exclusively through the exploration of language theories and methods. At its centrality are concepts such as the relationship between language majority and language minority groups, perceptions of language status, immigration, economics, and language planning and policies (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Cummins, 1991). Effective instruction for ELLs must consider the historical, social and political contexts within which we develop, define, and implement curriculum and instructional practices for ELLs. As an extension of this, a classroom observation tool must not only consider the quality of instruction, teacher expertise, and instructional program, but also the ability to address micro-level contacts ELLs have with others on a daily basis.

Focused, evidenced-based conversations about effective classroom practices support teachers in developing knowledge and expertise and provide differentiation, organizational support, and alignment of professional development goals with expectations for implementation



Furthermore, a sociocultural approach serves to counter negative and deficit orientations regarding ELLs that stem largely from pointing to what they do not know and are not able to do as evidenced by standardized assessments (Abedi, 2007; Lucas & Beresford, 2010). Accordingly, notions such as subtractive and additive bilingualism, which either seek to eliminate (or subtract) the first language of students or augment the home languages of students (additive approaches) are part of the sociocultural context for learning English and illustrate the complex relationship between the development of the primary language and the second language from the standpoint of language status (Lucas & Beresford, 2010; Rumberger & Gandara, 2009). Thus, sociocultural approaches for ELLs are additive, consider contexts for learning, include appropriate teacher practices/opportunities to learn, and examine status issues as important variables in education (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008; Santamaria, 2009).

A second area of research important to the development of the OPAL is teacher expertise in second language literacy and acquisition. The National Literacy Panel for Language Minority Children and Youth (August, & Shanahan, 2006) examined the relation between general language skills, content-specific literacies, and content learning for ELLs. They concluded

Students who participated in programs that emphasized the use and development of primary language skills showed an increase in the acquisition of second language literacy.

that ELLs who have a higher level of academic language development performed better on literacy tasks in all content areas. Additionally, students who participated in programs that emphasized the use and development of primary language skills showed an increase in the acquisition of second lan-

guage literacy. However, there is a lack of research to inform practice as to how educators can best develop reading and writing abilities (National Research Council, 1998). Gibbons (2002), Cummins (2000), August and Hakuta (1997) and Short (1994) contend that an essential component of academic language development should include opportunities for interaction and oral language input and output.

Consequently, the OPAL was developed to address academic language development as a notion that is beyond solely a discrete set of linguistic features that can be taught (language functions and structures). It expands this notion to include academic discourse and register (Halliday, 1978; Solomon and Rhodes, 1995). Schleppegrell (2002) characterizes this as the discourse used in academic, professional and technical contexts, characterized by its high level discipline-specific vocabulary and rhetorical styles. More recently, new literacy studies (New London Group, 2000) have expanded these limited notions of academic language to contend that *academic literacies* require learners

to develop more complex sets of literacies that are essential for learning in the 21st century.

We include a third conceptual area—that of teacher expertise for English Language Learners. Wong, Fillmore, and Snow (2000) posit that effective classroom practices with ELLs require the following tenets of knowledge, skills, and attitudes: (a) teacher as communicator; (b) teacher as educator; (c) teacher as evaluator; (d) teacher as a human being who is educated and seeks knowledge continually; and (e) teacher as an agent of socialization. The expert teacher is a knowledgeable professional who is accomplished in curriculum, linguistics, cross-cultural understanding, assessor and a student advocate. Reflective cycles inform accomplished teachers' practices, and in turn affect the quality of instruction and curriculum delivery (Walqui, 2001).

There is a compelling need to better understand the sociocultural and language demands in teaching ELLs, and to simultaneously address the ways in which teachers can accelerate both language and content learning for their students. Accordingly, we framed the OPAL around four essential constructs that encapsulate effective teaching and learning for ELLs: (1) Rigorous and Relevant Curriculum; (2) Connections; (3) Comprehensible Input and Output; and (4) Interactions. The research supports these four critical areas of classroom practices as a means of addressing the academic and content area literacy development of ELLs. Additionally, investigation of teaching and learning in these areas provides the opportunity to collect research-based evidence that can lead to meaningful teacher reflection and inquiry.

The OPAL – Alignment to Teaching Standards

Creating a standards-based classroom observation tool required careful examination of the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (California Department of Education, 1997, 2009) and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). This was a critical phase in the OPAL's development process and ensured a correlation between the purpose of the instrument and the potential support for teacher reflection and continued professional development.

Using the OPAL

A condition for the use of the OPAL is the adequate training of the observers (Roberson, 1998). Key studies on classroom observations indicate that the skill, bias, and preparation of the observers are essential factors that affect the accuracy of results and the extent to which an instrument such as the OPAL can be used to promote reflective teaching and learning through professional development, coaching, and/or research and evaluation (Douglas, 2009). Consequently, special attention must be given to issues of training and inter-rater reliability.

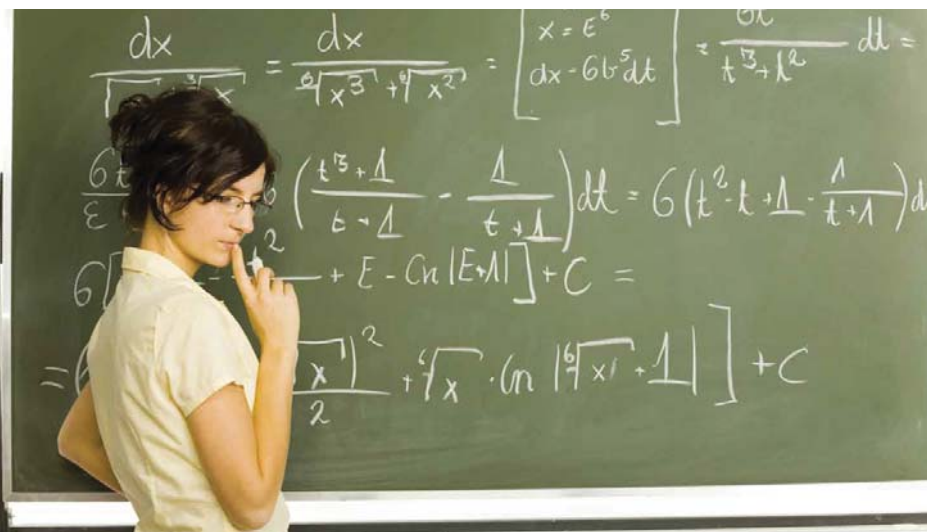
As part of the OPAL Training Modules, an observation guide was developed to establish guidelines with consider-

The OPAL is a research-based classroom observation tool that captures classroom practices and interactions from sociocultural and language acquisition perspectives.



ation for time, process, and procedures. Classroom observations are pre-arranged and range from 20-30 minutes in duration. A purpose and/or focus for each observation is determined prior to the observation. This is an essential part of the process given that the OPAL can be used to support district-wide, school-wide, or collaborative teacher professional development efforts. The observer uses the OPAL observation form to provide feedback for the classroom teacher in the form of a rubric score (if agreed upon prior to the visitation) and anecdotal notes based on evidence noted from the observation. Anecdotal notes provide objective statements about classroom practices, interactions, resources, and student engagement.

In the next section, we discuss ways in which developing a common language based on focused OPAL observations have been used to move the conversation regarding effective practices for English Language Learners forward. We address three main potential purposes for applying OPAL results in these conversations: 1) for coaching purposes and 2) for informing broader professional development, and 3) for research purposes.



The OPAL in Action

Professional Development and Coaching - CABE & JP Morgan Chase Grant

CABE's advocacy in promoting and supporting research-based practices for teachers of English Language Learners continues to be evidenced by the projects in which they engage. During the 2010-11 school year, CABE was awarded a JP Morgan Chase Grant focused on working with schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District² that have a high concentration of ELLs and are looking to refine and improve professional development for teachers of ELLs. A partnership between CABE and CEEL resulted in training a group of instructional leaders from each site on the implementation of the OPAL to support teacher professional development.

The use of the OPAL afforded instructional leaders the opportunity to reflect on classroom practices and identify areas of strength and need in on-going practices as a method of identifying targeted professional development topics and areas of investigation for teacher groups at their respective sites. Teams of teachers will attend focused training at an intensive 2-day institute on Student Interaction Through Cooperative Group work at the annual CABE conference. As a follow up, teachers will work collaboratively with instructional leaders from each site to reflect on their practice and identify change in practice using the OPAL as a reflective teaching tool. An option for this work will involve OPAL-based coaching whereby teachers and instructional leaders will engage in reflective conversations. These conversations will be structured by an examination of practices around the OPAL's domains and anecdotal notes, or evidence, recorded during classroom observations.

Research and Evaluation - The PROMISE Initiative

The use of the OPAL for a research and/or evaluation project affords counties, districts, and schools the opportunity to identify a system for change, implement a system-wide (or school-wide) project, and measure the effects of implementation. As such, the OPAL was used to document changes in classroom practices over a three-year school-reform study -- the PROMISE Initiative³. Over the duration of this project, staff from LMU's Center for Equity for English Learners (CEEL) conducted OPAL-based classroom observations to generate an evidence base for powerful and transformative teaching for ELLs that developed as a result of teachers' engagement in a variety of research-based professional development.

The research questions that framed the investigation for the study were:

- *What are teachers' current practices in instruction of ELLs?*
- *How do these practices reflect current research on effective instruction of ELLs as measured by the OPAL?*
- *What are teachers' perceptions of current practices for meeting the needs of ELLs?*
- *What professional development do they still need?*

A total of 381 classrooms were sampled from 14 PROMISE schools in the southern California region, wherein reside over 65% of the 1.6 million English Language Learners in the state. These schools service students in Preschool through grade 12, and represent the full spectrum of educational situations for ELLs, from schools where as few as 14.7% of the students are socio-economically disadvantaged (SED), to schools where as many as 86.5% of the students are SED.

Aggregate OPAL scores were calculated, maintaining the anonymity of individual classroom teachers and schools, and providing an overall picture of the effects of the PROMISE Initiative on classroom practices. PROMISE Leadership groups comprised of district, school, and county-level representatives were presented mean scores for each of the OPAL Domains and provided with patterns and themes that emerged from the anecdotal notes recorded during OPAL-based classroom observations. The following key findings summarize the PROMISE Classroom Impact Study*:

1. Overall, quantitative data from the OPAL observations reveal low to middle-range ratings across the observed domains: Rigorous and Relevant Curriculum, Connections, Comprehensibility, and Interactions. Ratings were lowest in the areas of Rigorous and Relevant Curriculum and Interactions.
2. Findings around teachers' practices and perceptions about planning and delivery of curriculum revealed that teachers, especially at the elementary and middle school levels are challenged by many of the pacing plans that are part of the curriculum delivery in many low performing schools. Additionally, observations and interviews revealed that there is limited use of supplemental materials that are linguistically, developmentally, and culturally appropriate for a diverse student population.
3. OPAL observations and teacher interview results indicate that the predominant method of instructional delivery was teacher directed, allowing few opportunities for student-to-student interaction, student-to-teacher interaction, and differentiated instruction. Limited interactions often affected opportunities for students to engage in meaningful and purposeful learning in order to process, internalize, and solidify concepts and skills.

Many teachers reported that the PROMISE Initiative emphasized an additive approach to working with ELLs and provided a unique opportunity to collaborate with peers and create structures for learning about and addressing the needs of English Language Learners. Additionally, teacher interview data showed that most teachers acknowledged a need for additional professional development in the area of effective instruction for ELLs

and recognized the possibilities of focused professional development, but also requested more support and focus in the effort.

We've been introduced to various professional development sessions. It shouldn't be just for English Learners. We also differentiate across the curriculum, across grade levels and with common assessments. [Middle School Teacher]

I don't think I'm an expert in teaching English Learners. I think the teacher workshops are helpful. I don't agree with everything they portrayed, but I am willing to learn and would like more help in my teaching. [High School Teacher]

We have applied only a few of the strategies, but I see a big difference from last year to this year. We should continue the focus. [Elementary School Teacher]

I felt as if my lens was out of focus. I could see things that I had never noticed before. I saw inequity in the system that I possibly was aware of, but hadn't realized... With this PD (professional development), I suddenly realized that these are different techniques and they may be appropriate in a regular class, but if you use them in the right way you can move students very quickly so that the playing field is leveled. [High School Teacher]

An extension of the OPAL can provide researchers an opportunity to conduct teacher interviews to expand on observed classroom practices focused around the OPAL's four domains. The team of CEEL researchers interviewed 177 teachers using a semi-structured interview protocol to introduce the following questions:

1. What professional development has most impacted your teaching practices with English Learners?
2. Relevant and Rigorous Curriculum Your lesson today was on (interviewer inserts specific point from observation). How do you plan to ensure that you differentiate instruction for ELs? How do you make decisions about the curriculum you teach?
3. Comprehensibility When you were (interviewer inserts specific point from observation), what strategies were you using to make sure that students understood what you were teaching?
4. Connections & Praxis What strategies do you use to help ELs make connections to content or daily lives?
5. Interactions How do you handle the grouping of students in your classroom? What has been most successful?
6. Do you have any questions for us?

Almost all teachers welcomed the opportunity for professional growth and readily identified additional professional development programs/efforts targeting teaching and learning for English Language Learners. Many teachers identified the need for guidance and professional development in the area of student grouping to promote more varied and positive classroom interactions. Several teachers also named specific training programs such as Project GLAD, Project WRITE, Step Up to Writing, Systematic ELD, and others that provide a structure and guidance for promoting comprehensibility through instructional scaffolds, targeted vocabulary instruction, and formulaic oral and written processes. Gathering focused information about the effects of a program implementation such as the PROMISE Initiative can lead to effectively retooling teachers to utilize and implement practices that positively affect the school-wide culture for teaching and learning in culturally and linguistically diverse settings.

Conclusion

Given the national achievement gap between ELLs and their native English speaking peers, the OPAL, when used appropriately in supportive and guided professional development settings, can serve as a vehicle for examining and refining dynamic teaching and learning situations in US schools. As such, the OPAL can be used in a variety of settings to support professional development, conduct research/evaluation, or focus coaching conversations. Collaboration between professional developers, teacher educators and classroom coaches in the effort of improving teacher practices with ELLs will be essential in narrowing the achievement gap.

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Endnotes

¹ The Center for Equity for English Learners (CEEL) was established at LMU in 2006. The Center's Mission is to pursue equity and excellence in the education of English Learners by transforming schools and educational systems through its research and professional development agendas. Visit <http://soe.lmu.edu/centers/ceel.htm> for more information.

² Six school sites from the Los Angeles Unified School District are participating in the CABE/JPP Morgan Chase Grant for 2010.

³ The PROMISE Initiative (Pursuing Regional Opportunities for Mentoring, Innovation, and Success for English Learners) was a collaborative of six southern Californian county offices of education wherein reside 65% of the 1.5 million ELs in the state.

⁴ A complete report of this study can be found in **The PROMISE Research Monograph** available on the CEEL website: <http://soe.lmu.edu/ceel>.