

Language Dives

Overview

What is a Language Dive?

A Language Dive¹ empowers students to analyze, understand, and use the language of academic sentences, which often seems opaque to students. During a Language Dive, the teacher and students slow down for 10–20 minutes to have a conversation about the meaning, purpose, and structure of a compelling sentence from a complex text, or from a learning target, checklist, or rubric included in the curriculum. Following the engaging deconstruct-reconstruct-practice routine of the Language Dive (see below), students play with the smallest “chunks” of the sentence, acting them out, rearranging them, or using them to talk about their own lives. As a result of paying close attention to how language works, all students begin to acquire the necessary facility with academic English, and English language learners (ELLs) foster their overall language ability.

The teacher uses the Language Dive Guide and the Questions We Can Ask during a Language Dive anchor chart to guide the conversation with questions about specific meaning and language structures. The questions help students deconstruct, reconstruct, and practice the language structures found in the compelling sentence. Teachers should avoid using the Language Dive Guide to lecture about grammar; the Guide helps teachers prompt students as they grapple with the meaning and purpose of the sentence and the chunks. The Language Dive Guide is included in a given lesson, and the Questions We Can Ask during a Language Dive anchor chart, provided below, is first introduced to students in Module 3.

Consider this compelling sentence from the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (Students read excerpts of this text in Grade 5, Module 1.)

Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.

1. **Deconstruct:** Teachers guide students to deconstruct the sentence by discussing what it means and its purpose in the text. They segment the sentence into its most essential phrases, or chunks, as shown above, each containing a useful language structure, such as as well as. They discuss the meaning and purpose of each chunk, at times joyfully acting out or creatively sketching the meaning. (“What if we replaced as well as with and? Can you figure out why the author wrote as well as?”)

¹The EL Education Language Dive is based on “Juicy Sentences”: Wong Fillmore, L., & Fillmore, C. (2012, January) “What does text complexity mean for English learners and language minority students?” Paper presented at the Understanding Language Conference, Stanford, CA.

2. **Reconstruct:** Students scramble and reconstruct the chunks, chunk by chunk like a puzzle, to create the full sentence and any possible variations, revisiting the meaning and purpose.
3. **Practice:** Students practice using one or more of the language structures as they say and write their own sentences. (Everyone has the right to ____ as well as ____.)

As part of this inquiry-based process, students acquire academic language through analysis, conversation, and usage, appreciating the time provided to focus on just one sentence.

They commonly become filled with curiosity about language and delight in unlocking its mysteries. This is more effective than having language explained through lectures, rules, and memorization.

Consider providing students with a Language Dive log inside a folder to track Language Dive sentences and structures and collate Language Dive note-catchers. Assure students that this log will not be graded; however, consider inviting students to use their log and note-catchers to gauge the progress of their speaking and writing skills.

What makes a good Language Dive sentence?

Designers select a sentence for a Language Dive based on several criteria. The sentence should be:

- Relevant to present and future content and skills, such as the guiding question of a module, the main idea of a text, speaking and writing tasks, or the CCSS—or all of these. (For instance, in the Grade 5 example, the sentence helps students answer the guiding question: What are human rights, and how can they be threatened?)
- Contain specific language functions, or purposes for using language. (In the example, one language function is asserting a right.)
- Contain complex language structures. (In the sample, complex structures include as well as and in association with. The sentence also features ellipsis, where after as well as, the authors intentionally omitted the structure to own property because readers don't need the structure to understand the author is still talking about owning property: Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as to own property in association with others.)
- Contain academic vocabulary or figurative language. (In the sample, academic vocabulary includes association.)

When do students do Language Dives?

EL Education's K–5 ELA curriculum includes Language Dives as follows:

- All students participate as a whole group in a Language Dive at least twice a week (either in the main body of selected Grades K–5 module lessons or close read, or routinely in specific components of the Grades 3–5 ALL block).
- ELLs participate in a Language Dive daily.
- Teachers also can strategically choose sentences and times for Language Dives, and go beyond ELA to Science, Math, History, and Social Studies texts, offering conversation and practice across several days and subjects to meet student language needs.

What are the benefits of Language Dives?

Language Dives:

- help students deconstruct and reconstruct academic sentences and independently create their own;
- help native English speakers gain deeper insight into their native language;
- maximize language development for ELLs, especially long-term English learners, as they listen to and interact with native English speakers and other ELLs; and
- build both habits of mind and character as students have metacognitive conversations about language.

What principles underlie Language Dives?

EL Education believes that the language of complex texts can seem opaque to many students. At the same time, simplified or leveled texts shortchange students, especially ELLs, who need multiple examples and opportunities to understand and work with complex language. Therefore, it is critical that students get help reading and discussing complex texts, focusing in particular on academic sentences. When students deconstruct, reconstruct, and practice the language of academic sentences every day, they begin to develop a vibrant interest in how language works. They consistently pay attention to the language structures they need to understand and more effectively use in college and career.

Questions We Can Ask during a Language Dive Anchor Chart

(Example, for Teacher Reference)

Questions about the sentence

- “What is the meaning of this sentence? Why do we think that?”
- “How does the sentence add to our understanding of the guiding question?”
- “How can we say this sentence in our own words?”
- “Can we divide this sentence into two or more sentences? What do we have to remove or change?”
- “Can we say this sentence in a different order? How?”
- “What other questions can we ask that will help us understand this sentence?”

Questions about the chunks

- “Who or what is this chunk about? What is the person or thing doing in this chunk?”
- “What does this chunk tell us? Why do we think that?”
- “How can we say this chunk in our own words?”
- “Can we act out the chunk? Can we sketch the chunk?”
- “Why did the author write this chunk?”
- “What if we remove _____ in this chunk? Does it still make sense? Why do we think that?”
- “What if we replace _____ in this chunk with _____? How does that change the meaning?”

Questions about words

- “What do we think this word means?”
- “What is the translation of this word?”
- “Is there a familiar word or affix in this word? How does that help us understand the unfamiliar word?”
- “What are some synonyms of this word? How are they different in meaning?”

Questions about the Language Dive

- “How can we use this sentence structure in our speaking and writing?”
- “Does the language in this sentence remind you of the language or chunks in other Language Dives? How?”