Content standards for teaching adult English language learners

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ABSTRACT
As immigration to the United States of America continues to grow, the adult English as a Second Language (ESL) field has increasingly turned to standards-based instruction to meet the needs of adult English-language learners and the instructors who serve them, many of whom are new to ESL themselves. The movement for developing and implementing adult ESL content standards is gaining momentum in the United States as more emphasis is placed on learner outcomes, accountability and professionalism in the field. This article describes the development of content standards for adult English-language learners in the United States, the questions teachers need to consider in aligning their instruction and assessment with content standards, and considerations of the benefits and challenges of implementing state content standards within a national context.

Introduction
During the past 20 years the immigrant population in the United States has continued to grow. Between 2002 and 2006 the immigration rate averaged 1.8 million per year (Meissner et al 2006). In 2005 immigrants comprised over 12% of residents and 15% of the workforce (Capps, Fortuny and Fix 2007). The need for education services for immigrants has increased as these populations have grown and dispersed. According to recent statistics (McHugh, Gelatt and Fix 2007):

- 5.8 million legal permanent residents are in need of English-language instruction to pass the naturalisation test and be able to participate in civic life
- 6.4 million unauthorised immigrants will require English-language instruction to obtain work permits and obtain legal permanent-resident status
• 2.4 million immigrant young people aged between 17 and 24 years need English instruction in order to pass the high school equivalency examination or to begin post-secondary education without remediation.

In addition, 55% of immigrants eligible to be naturalised and 67% of immigrants soon to be eligible have limited English proficiency (Passel 2007).

Adult ESL programs in the United States focus on helping students develop the oral communication and literacy skills they need to attain their goals, which may include helping their children in school, obtaining a high school diploma, entering a post-secondary education program, getting a better job or earning United States citizenship. The 2003–04 program year is the latest year for which data is available; in this year 1 172,579 adults were enrolled in federally funded ESL classes. However, this number excludes adults enrolled in programs not funded by the federal government (such programs include private programs, university programs, academic intensive English programs and those run by some community-based, faith-based, workplace or volunteer organisations). The five states with the highest number of adult ESL students enrolled in federally funded programs in 2004–05 were California (429,024), Florida (114,310), New York (86,111), Illinois (72,311) and Texas (64,726). The majority of these students were 25 to 44 years of age (57%) and of Hispanic or Latino origin (70.9%) (Pane nd).

Adult English-language learners in federally funded ESL programs come with a variety of prior educational and life experiences, native language literacy levels, English-language proficiency levels and educational goals. Learners have different opportunities to use and practise English outside the classroom and different circumstances that affect their participation in class. Other factors such as language aptitude, age and motivation also play a part in their English-language acquisition. Adult education programs are often tailored to take advantage of the few hours (typically four to eight hours per week) that adult learners have available to study.

Program types and design, instructional and assessment practices, instructor education and experience, curriculums and materials used, and funding sources are not consistent in adult ESL programs throughout the United States (Tamassia et al 2007). Instruction may focus on a limited number of learner goals or may span a wide variety of content topics and language skills. In the midst of the complexities surrounding the education of adult English-language learners, federally funded adult ESL programs operate within the accountability context of the National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS), which came about as a result of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Title II of the Workforce Investment Act. The NRS is designed to provide states with a data collection system to help them evaluate the effectiveness of their adult education programs and to monitor the implementation of the federal funding mandates.
Act of 1998 (US Department of Education, OVAE 2007). As a result of this act, students enrolling in federally funded adult ESL programs are placed into one of six educational functioning levels based on their pretest scores in a standardised assessment. Table 1 outlines the sample NRS educational functioning level descriptors for ESL.

Student progress through these levels is reported each year by state departments of education to the United States Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (see www.nrsweb.org for more information). Each year states negotiate a target percentage of students at each educational functioning level who will advance at least one educational level. Federal funding to states for adult ESL programs is tied to student performance on these assessments, and states are eligible to receive incentive funding when their adult ESL programs exceed the performance targets.
### Table 1: Sample National Reporting System educational functioning level descriptors for English as a second language (listening and speaking, basic reading and writing) (US Department of Education, OVAE 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NRS Literacy Level</th>
<th>Sample Listening and Speaking Descriptors (abridged)</th>
<th>Sample Basic Reading and Writing Descriptors (abridged)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginning ESL Literacy</td>
<td>Individual cannot speak or understand English, or understands only isolated words or phrases.</td>
<td>Individual has no or minimal reading or writing skills in any language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Beginning ESL</td>
<td>Individual can understand basic greetings, simple phrases and commands. Can understand simple questions related to personal information spoken slowly and with repetition … Speaks slowly and with difficulty. Demonstrates little or no control over grammar.</td>
<td>Individual can read numbers and letters and some common sight words. ... Can read and write some familiar words and phrases, but has a limited understanding of connected prose in English. Can write basic personal information …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Beginning ESL</td>
<td>Individual can understand common words, simple phrases, and sentences containing familiar vocabulary, spoken slowly with some repetition. Individual can respond to simple questions about personal everyday activities, and can express immediate needs, using simple learned phrases or short sentences. Shows limited control of grammar.</td>
<td>Individual can read most sight words, and many other common words … Individual can write some simple sentences with limited vocabulary. Meaning may be unclear …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Intermediate ESL</td>
<td>Individual can understand simple learned phrases and limited new phrases containing familiar vocabulary spoken slowly with frequent repetition; can ask and respond to questions using such phrases; can express basic survival needs and participate in some routine social conversations, although with some difficulty; and has some control of basic grammar.</td>
<td>Individual can read simple material on familiar subjects and comprehend simple and compound sentences in single or linked paragraphs containing a familiar vocabulary; can write simple notes and messages on familiar situations but lacks clarity and focus …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Intermediate ESL</td>
<td>Individual can understand learned phrases and short new phrases containing familiar vocabulary spoken slowly and with some repetition; can communicate basic survival needs with some help; can participate in conversation in limited social situations and use new phrases with hesitation; and relies on description and concrete terms …</td>
<td>Individual can read text on familiar subjects that have a simple and clear underlying structure … can use context to determine meaning; can interpret actions required in specific written directions; can write simple paragraphs with main idea and supporting details on familiar topics …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced ESL</td>
<td>Individual can understand and communicate in a variety of contexts related to daily life and work. … Shows control of basic grammar but has difficulty using more complex structures. Has some basic fluency of speech.</td>
<td>Individual can read moderately complex text related to life roles and descriptions and narratives from authentic materials on familiar subjects … Individual can write multi-paragraph text …</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thirty-six percent of students enrolled in 2003–04 ESL classes advanced to the next English proficiency level (US Department of Education, OVAE 2006; McHugh, Gelatt and Fix 2007). In their study of community college programs, Chisman and Crandall (2007) estimate that only 10% of adult ESL students transfer to certificate or degree-bearing programs. These relatively low rates of progress through English-proficiency levels and advancement to higher education are problematic, and may be due to a variety of instructional, learner and programmatic factors. Teacher quality is key to helping students make progress to reach their goals. It is challenging to enhance teacher knowledge and skills in adult ESL, where many teachers work part-time, have little formal training in adult education and in ESL teaching methodologies, and have few opportunities for professional development (Schaetzel, Peyton and Burt 2007; Smith and Gillespie 2007).

In this context, states and adult education programs are determining how to develop standards and how to use them and align them to instructional practice. Standards documents include teacher quality standards, program quality standards (TESOL 2003) and content standards.

**Content standards**

As a result of several federal education initiatives encouraging standards-based education in primary, secondary and adult programs, a number of states have developed and begun to implement adult ESL content standards, which describe the knowledge and skills that adult students should have upon successful completion of an instructional program. These standards are the basis for designing curriculums, instruction and assessment (Young and Smith 2006; Schaetzel and Young 2007). However, no national adult ESL content standards exist in the United States.

The development and implementation of content standards for instruction and assessment in adult ESL programs is one way in which states are meeting the need for teachers to develop knowledge and skills and the challenges students face in progressing in their English skills. Content standards are defined as what learners should know and be able to do in a certain subject or practical domain (American Institutes for Research and US Department of Education, OVAE 2005). These state that adult ESL content standards have three main purposes (Young and Smith 2006):

1. planning instruction to guide students in their learning
2. describing for teachers student progression from one level of instruction to another
3 reporting student achievement for accountability and funding requirements.

The standards movement in adult ESL education grew out of the standards movement in elementary and secondary education (Marzano 1998; Stites 1999). The use of standards in adult English-language programs reflects two important changes over the past 50 years, one in education generally and the other in English-language teaching. First, for many years teacher accountability was determined by the amount of information teachers taught in class, specifically how much of the course textbook they were able to cover. Newer measures of accountability focus on what students actually learn and can do (Daggett 2000). Standards reflect this focus on student learning and are one way of determining what students need to learn and actually do learn.

A second change pertinent to the use of standards in adult ESL education occurred in the 1980s, when the field of English-language teaching moved from grammar-based to communicative and content-based methodologies (Savignon 1983; Brinton, Snow and Wesche 1989; Brown 2000; Gersten and Hudelson 2000). With this change, adult ESL programs moved from grammar-based curriculums to communicative, content-based curriculums. Other programs abandoned the grammar curriculum but did not replace it with a curriculum based on communicative, content-based methodologies. Therefore new and some experienced teachers were not certain what to teach and how to implement communicative, content-based instruction. They selected textbooks aligned with the new focus and the textbook material became the course (Brinton, Snow and Wesche 1989).

The philosophy of self-directed learning, which had been commonly accepted in adult education (Knowles 1990), also came under fire, with critics charging ‘that self-directed learning is simply a way for instructors to become less accountable for their own classroom performance; that it is a watered down form of education’ (Fisher 1995: 7).

In contrast, when teachers and students have clear standards, competencies, benchmarks, and curriculums to guide their teaching and learning, the result may be systematic learning in their classes. Weiss et al (2003: 34) stress that ‘teachers need a coherent set of messages and clear goals to guide their instructional choices’. Standards give teachers a coherent set of messages that guide instruction and help them identify what their students should know and the extent to which they need to know it (Spohn and Zafft 2006). With standards to describe what to teach at each level, teachers may be better able to use communicative language learning and content-based instruction in an efficient and effective manner.
Eleven states now have content standards for teaching adult English language and several other states are in the process of developing content standards. The United States Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education has an online content standards warehouse (see http://www.adultedcontentstandards.ed.gov), a repository for content standards in use. Content standards from the 11 states, as well as those developed by Equipped for the Future and the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System, are available online. The warehouse also contains a guide for establishing standards and resources when developing and using content standards.

States organise their English Language Acquisition content standards differently. Content standards are usually developed through teams of teachers, professional developers, curriculum specialists, materials writers, department of education officials and, in some cases, students. Content standards for ESL are commonly organised into the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, with some states having content standards for each language skill and some combining listening and speaking. New York, for example, subsumes the four language skills into adult goals for ESL. Massachusetts has content standard strands for the four language skills and also adds strands in intercultural knowledge and skills, navigating systems, and developing strategies and resources for learning. Other states have variations that reflect a state vision of adult ESL. Most state adult ESL content standards are linked to the NRS educational functioning level descriptors (see Table 1).

**What to consider when planning standards-based lessons**

Since the use of content standards in English-language classrooms has so many benefits for teachers and students, it is important that teachers align their lesson planning and classroom activities to them. New teachers may be overwhelmed when planning objectives, materials and assessment for lessons that must align to standards and student needs and goals. The following questions can be used by teachers to align their lesson planning and classroom activities to their state standards. The questions do not describe a step-by-step process for teachers but, rather, describe lesson characteristics that teachers need to think about when developing lessons based on standards.

- **WHAT DOES THE STANDARD EMPHASISE AND FOCUS ON?**

In planning a lesson based on standards, a teacher can analyse the standard
in order to find a direction for lesson planning. The questions a teacher needs to answer about a standard are:

1. What skill(s) does the standard cover – reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar or vocabulary?
2. What skills, language functions, grammar and vocabulary should the materials incorporate to facilitate students reaching the standard?
3. What are some indicators of student progress in meeting the standard?
4. How does the standard relate to what students need and want to learn?

By answering these questions, about skills, materials, indicators, progress and relevance, a teacher gains a focus for the lesson, knowing which skill or skills to work on and knowing what to incorporate into materials.

**WHAT ARE THE GOALS AND NEEDS OF MY STUDENTS?**

In order to know student needs and goals, it is important to undertake a needs assessment at the beginning of the class (Weddel and Van Duzer 1997). When a teacher is aware of student needs and goals for learning English, content standards offer an outline for meeting those needs. When students look back over the standards that they have mastered, they can see visible progress towards their goals.

All adult English-language students have a reason for studying English. Adult learning is self-directed (Knowles 1990; Fisher 1995), but adult education has been criticised for being so self-directed as to lose its focus. By following standards, student needs and goals can be supported while a coherent course is delivered.

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**Example**

Reading Strand of the Massachusetts Adult Basic Education Curriculum Framework for English for Speakers of Other Languages (Massachusetts Department of Education 2005), Standard 1: *English language learners will read and comprehend a variety of English texts for various purposes.*

1. The standard covers reading skills, specifically reading comprehension.
2. The standard mentions different kinds of reading materials and materials should give the reader a purpose for reading them in home, family, community or work contexts.
3. For the Low Beginning level, the indicators are that students can:
   - understand short, simple paragraphs on a familiar topic
   - scan and extract relevant information from such texts as forms, labels and maps
   - read and follow simple, familiar one-step written directions.
4. Students need to read many different types of texts including news and directions at the Low Beginning level, and they need to be able to follow written directions for finding where something is located, taking medicine or understanding a schedule.
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What are my curriculum and lesson objectives?

Adult ESL curriculums may vary from program to program within a given state. Some curriculums may be based on a textbook series, while others are organised according to content-area topics or the type of program – workplace, family literacy or academic transitions. Overall, a curriculum is an outline of instructional topics, themes, activities, teaching methods and materials to be used for a given course. In contrast, standards are usually based on specific language skills from which curriculum is developed: ‘The content area of the curriculum creates the context for the language skills outlined in the standards to emerge, by relating things back to a work situation and corresponding tasks’ (McCargo).

In standards-based education, curriculum should be developed from a set of content standards, rather than having standards developed from a curriculum. However, in programs that have a longstanding curriculum already in place to which new content standards are added, links can be made back to the standards until a standards-based curriculum is developed.

Once a standard is chosen for a particular lesson, the lesson objectives are articulated. The resulting structure of the lesson plan and activities to be used should gradually build student skills and knowledge through practice and application, in preparation for a final evaluation of their ability to complete the task or demonstrate the required knowledge.

For example, if the benchmark or lesson objective is related to writing a paragraph, the teacher should consider the following questions:

- What do we think about paragraph writing in my program?
- What grammar points would be needed to write the paragraph?
- What content or life skill topic would be appropriate?
- What would be the functional use of the paragraph?

Example


To teach a lesson based on this standard and to meet student needs and goals, it would be relevant to survey students on the types of directions that they encounter at work or in the community. Students could then learn how to give and follow two-step directions for finding areas within the school or classroom. Situations at an airport or hospital may also be role-played so that students can learn to respond to instructions such as *take out your identification and boarding pass and take a number and wait.*
WHAT MATERIALS WILL I USE?

Instead of restricting teacher creativity and autonomy in planning instruction, a well-written content standard will allow teachers the flexibility to use a number of materials to illustrate and evaluate the content that students are learning. In some cases, lessons in ESL textbooks have been correlated to content standards, making it easy for a teacher to find appropriate textbook materials based on the selected standard. However, a wide variety of materials will keep both teachers and students engaged and better informed and be more tailored to different learning styles.

The following should be considered when selecting or creating materials for a standards-based lesson or activity:

- Does the material fit the literacy level of the students?
- Does the material exemplify the standards and their intent?
- Is the material interesting?
- Does the material require students to practise skills measured in the standard?
- How does the material address the needs of students?

For example, the lesson from Arizona, described in the boxed inset, shows both classroom and computer materials for assisting students to learn how to provide detailed personal information, the language function of the standard.

Example
Using Internet-based materials: FBI’s most wanted list. An activity for implementing Arizona’s content standards (Pima College Adult Education: Splendid ESOL Web INSERT YEAR).

Level 1 (Beginning ESL)

Function 1: Provides detailed personal information

Supporting grammar: Prepositions of time and place; present tense

Computer Activity 1 (can also be printed out and used as a worksheet): http://www.fbi.gov/wanted/topten/fugitives/fugitives.htm

Students are assigned one of the ten most wanted and find the required information under description, which they have practised in class.

Classroom Activity 1: Students share the information that they discovered, using prepositions of time and place, eg S/He was born in (place), on the (date), of (month), in (year).

Computer Activity 2: Students visit their local police station website for Most Wanted. Students memorise as much information as they can, including why the man is wanted.

Classroom Activity 2: Groups complete, from memory, a fill-in-the-blank exercise about the personal description of their local Most Wanted.

(For these and other computer and classroom activities linked to Arizona’s standards and language functions, visit http://cc.pima.edu/~slundquist/index.htm)
WHAT ARE MY METHODS OF ASSESSMENT?

Measurement of student progress on a particular standard, through the identification and use of formal and informal assessment tools, develops from the sample indicators or benchmarks and subsequent lesson objectives. Before engaging students in the lesson, a teacher needs to have a clear idea of the outcome of an instructional activity, or what students should know to fulfil the standard. *Scenarios for ESL standards-based assessment* (TESOL 2001) outlines an instruction and assessment cycle that includes:

- planning or creating a sequence of instructional activities, based on indicators or benchmarks found in the standards, that lead to the final standards-based outcomes
- collecting and recording information or determining the formative and summative assessment tools to measure outcomes
- analysing and interpreting information or comparing current and previous performances to measure progress of individual students and the class as a whole
- reporting and decision-making or providing feedback to students on their progress and determining mastery of the standard and next steps, if more practice is needed.

Further considerations

The use of content standards in adult ESL instruction is a relatively new undertaking, and more research needs to be done on the effects of standards-based education on adult English-language acquisition and on best practices in developing and implementing standards and training teachers to use standards. The majority of research on standards-based education in the United States comes from the K–12 field. A recent review of 113 scientifically based research studies on K–12 standards-based education found that standards-based curriculums and instructional guidelines can have positive influences on student achievement. This is when students have sufficient exposure to standards-based instruction, teachers understand the standards and have support from principals and the school district in implementing them, and student achievement measures match the goals of the standards-based curriculum (Lauer et al 2005). The review also identified specific types of supports that teachers need to implement standards-based education effectively, including clear expectations and a common terminology for using the standards, adequate professional development, ongoing mentoring for all teachers, induction for
new teachers, guidance on how to use student data to adjust instruction, examples of good instruction based on the standards and sufficient time to prepare for instruction.

As more states and organisations develop and implement adult ESL content standards, a growing body of research will be needed that investigates the relationships between standards-based adult education and federal measures of instructional quality, such as student performance on standardised assessments for the NRS, and professional development and teacher satisfaction. Although there have been several federal initiatives to support the development of adult ESL standards in recent years, each of the 50 states is faced with the prospect of developing an entirely unique set of content standards. While content standards may meet the specific needs of learner populations and educational contexts of a particular state, a lack of consistency across states in the quality and content of standards can make it difficult to analyse and compare instruction on a national level. In addition, while most states use a handful of standardised assessments for federal accountability and reporting purposes to the NRS, the majority of state content standards have not been aligned to these assessments.

**Benefits of using standards**

Many teachers have stated that standards have made a difference to teaching adult English-language learners. Their reactions include:

- The standards give a focus to teaching but do not rein teachers in.
- The standards allow teachers to use real-life materials.
- The standards orient new teachers because they give more guidance than a textbook. When new teachers are faced with textbooks and curriculums using content-based instruction, often they are not sure what skills, topics or language features should be the main focus of lessons. Content standards guide new teachers to areas that give students most practice and application.

According to Andrea O’Brien, Staff Developer at the Adult Learning Center in Lawrence, Massachusetts (personal communication, August 22, 2006), teachers feel that their use of content standards has professionalised the field of teaching adult English-language learners. Teachers now have a justification for what they do in the classroom and a common language to talk about what they are doing. Content standards also give administrators a focus for talking with teachers about what they do in the classroom. Finally, content standards can provide a tool for employers, community members,
funders and other outside agencies to better understand what adult English-language learners should know and be able to do as a result of ESL instruction. Adult ESL content standards hold the promise of providing effective guidelines for instruction and assessment and, eventually, of improving student outcomes.

REFERENCES


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