

Understanding Adult ESL Content Standards

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Background on Adult Learners

Adult education programs serve learners who are native English speakers and those whose first, or native, language is not English. Native English speakers attend adult basic education (ABE) classes to learn the skills needed to earn high school equivalency certificates or to achieve other goals related to job, family, or further education. English language learners attend English as a second language (ESL) or ABE classes to improve their oral and written skills in English and to achieve goals similar to those of native English speakers.

Audience for This Brief

This brief is written for adult ESL teachers and program administrators, as well as educational researchers, policymakers, and stakeholders who work with adult English language students in ESL classes or in mixed ABE classes (with native English speakers and English language students).

Background

Education standards describe for all stakeholders (program administrators, teachers and other school and district staff, parents, students, employers, and policymakers) the goals, teaching and learning conditions, and expected outcomes of education programs. Education standards include content standards, progress indicators or benchmarks, and program standards. This brief defines standards terminology and describes the instructional benefits of using adult ESL content standards. It also describes characteristics of content standards in the adult ESL field and discusses existing research about the implementation of content standards.

In standards-based education, standards, curriculum, and assessment are aligned to ensure that instruction addresses the needs of learners and that learner outcomes are measured appropriately. When these elements are integrated, programs can answer the following questions:

- What should students know and be able to do? (content standards, progress indicators)
- How should students learn the target knowledge and skills, and how should they be taught? (curriculum, materials, and activities)
- How will teachers and students know that content and skills have been mastered? (assessment)
- Content standards are broadly defined as *what learners should know and be able to do in a certain subject or practical domain* (American Institutes for Research and U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2005; Kendall, 2001). Content standards describe the knowledge and skills that adult students will have upon successful completion of an instructional program. Content standards are the foundation for designing curricula, instruction, and assessment, but they do not stipulate the types of lesson plans, activities, or teaching methodologies that should be used. Content standards, curriculum frameworks, and resource guides that states have developed can provide guidance to local programs and practitioners in developing effective curriculum and instruction (Florez, 2002).
- Progress indicators (or benchmarks) are developed from content standards to provide specific information about how students can demonstrate progressive mastery of the knowledge and skills described in the standards. Indicators and benchmarks describe the set of skills that learners need to develop to meet the more broadly stated standards (O'Brien & Schwerdtfeger, 2006; Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2006). Successful achievement of a standards-based progress indicator or benchmark can be measured with a performance assessment task that allows learners to demonstrate what they can do with the language (Moon & Callahan, 2001).
- Program standards describe the components and features of a program that should be in place to provide context and resources that support student learning and achievement (TESOL, 2003). They also can be used for program development and self-review (Peyton, 2005), so that a program may assess how well it supports students' progress towards mastery of the content standards.

In short, standards-based adult ESL instruction offers broad guidelines (content standards) from which to develop the specifics of what to teach (curricula, progress indicators, lessons) and how to measure progress (assessment) within an instructional context (program standards).

Why are adult ESL content standards important?

A focus on standards in K-12 education began in the 1980s with the National Education Goals Panel, which expressed the goal that all American students would demonstrate competency in challenging subject matter by 2000 (National Council on Educational Standards and Testing, 1992). Standards-based educational reform began to gather momentum in the 1990s as the traditional American public education system came under increasing scrutiny for not serving the needs of all children. Subsequently, the U.S. Department of Education and other federal agencies and foundations made grants to professional organizations and academic institutions to develop model standards in subject areas such as math, science, social studies, and language arts (see, e.g., National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association, 1996). The adult education field also recognized the need for clearly articulated standards of what adult learners should know and be able to do at home, in the community, and at work, beginning with the *Equipped for the Future* project in the 1990s (Stein, 2000) and continuing through to current development and implementation projects (described below).

As is the case in K-12 standards-based education, adult ESL content standards are designed for certain purposes. McKay (2000) proposed three main purposes for content standards: *planning* instruction to help students progress from one level to the next, *professional understanding* to inform teachers of the progress that students at a certain level can be expected to make, and *reporting* student achievement for accountability or funding requirements. Content standards can also

- provide teachers and program administrators with a shared vision for adult ESL education; a common language for discussing outcomes; and guidelines for structuring curriculum, instruction, and assessment;
- serve as guideposts for students to follow as they make progress in learning English, giving them more responsibility for their learning, and helping them to formulate specific goals for the future; and
- describe to stakeholders outside the adult ESL field (e.g., employers who want to know what skills potential employees have) what adult students know and are able to do.

What adult ESL content standards are in use?

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Adult and Vocational Education (OVAE) has funded several standards-based initiatives, including an online warehouse for ABE and ESL content standards (www.adultcontentstandards.org); the publication *A Process Guide for Establishing State Adult Education Content Standards* (American Institutes for Research and U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2005); and technical assistance to help states develop, pilot, implement, and promote ESL content standards. The Adult Education Content Standards Warehouse hosts a collection of adult ESL content standards, curriculum frameworks, resource guides, and learning objectives from ten states, CASAS (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System), and *Equipped for the Future* (EFF), all of which are available for programs or states to adapt or to use to guide their development of standards. The Adult Literacy Education (ALE) Wiki Web site on Standards (<http://wiki.literacytent.org/index.php/Standards>) provides a list of existing and in-development standards, curriculum frameworks, and resource guides from over 20 states, as well as links to standards from four other English-speaking countries. These Web sites provide samples of standards-based tools that other states may consider when developing or adapting standards. The National CASAS Consortium developed CASAS Basic Skills Content Standards for Reading and Listening, which are aligned with CASAS competencies and assessments, for use in ABE and ESL programs (see www.casas.org). The international TESOL organization is developing standards for adult ESL instruction as well, with a tentative release date of 2006 (see www.tesol.org for more information).

What are the characteristics of adult ESL content standards?

Adult ESL content standards are typically organized around the skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, but they may vary in content, format, and purpose. Some standards explicitly address grammar, pronunciation, cultural competence, lifelong learning, workplace skills, and technology skills. For example, the EFF system has 16 content standards that span communication, decision-making, interpersonal, and lifelong learning skills (http://eff.cls.utk.edu/fundamentals/16_standards.htm). Some ESL content standards are linked to the National Reporting System (NRS) ESL educational functioning level descriptors (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Adult and Vocational Education, 2006), such as the *Massachusetts Adult Basic Edu-*

cation Curriculum Framework for English for Speakers of Other Languages (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2005). Massachusetts' three overarching ESL content standards for speaking skills are accompanied by benchmarks aligned with the NRS educational functioning levels that demonstrate expected progress over time in speaking, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Massachusetts (MA) Adult Basic Education Curriculum Framework for English for Speakers of Other Languages and the National Reporting System

MA Speaking Standard 1: "Express themselves orally in English for a variety of purposes."

Benchmarks

- S1.3a (NRS high beginning level): "Produce simple statements, providing more detail without necessarily more complexity (e.g. a daily routine, a simple instruction, preferences, and opinions)."
- S1.6a (NRS advanced level): "Express themselves on unfamiliar topics and/or in problematic situations (e.g. giving information at the scene of an accident, talking to your child's teacher)."

MA Speaking Standard 2: "Acquire vocabulary and apply knowledge of English language structure and mechanics to produce comprehensible speech in English."

Benchmarks

- S2.3c (NRS high beginning level): "Use basic grammatical structures with less reliance on learned phrases (e.g. some irregular past verb forms and future tenses, prepositional phrases, some conjunctions and contractions)."
- S2.6c (NRS advanced level): "Use most verb tenses and forms, including present perfect and past progressive tenses."

MA Speaking Standard 3: "Use a variety of strategies to acquire and convey meaning through spoken English."

Benchmarks

- S3.3c (NRS high beginning level): "Use conversation strategies to participate actively (e.g. turn-taking, interrupting appropriately, attracting attention)."
- S3.6b (NRS advanced level) "Sequence and organize information for the listener (e.g. use of more sophisticated transitional words and phrases such as, here's another example; my point is; in that case)."

(Massachusetts Department of Education, 2005)

Arizona's *English Language Acquisition for Adults (ELAA) Standards* contain four levels of performance (beginning, approaching, met, and exceeds) that illustrate not only *what* students should be able to do at a given NRS level, but also the criteria for *how well* they have mastered the content at different stages within the NRS level. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2. Arizona ELAA Reading Proficiency Standards for NRS Beginning Literacy Level: Sample proficiency indicators

Beginning: "Recognizes numbers (1-10) and a few upper and lower case letters in print."

Approaching: "Recognizes and names numbers (up to 20) and some upper and lower case letters in print and cursive."

Met: "Recognizes and names numbers (up to 100) and many upper and lower case letters in print and cursive."

Exceeds: "Names numbers (up to 100) and all upper and lower case letters in print and cursive."

(Arizona Department of Education, 2004)

The development of standards in any educational context involves consensus building among stakeholders, piloting, and usually several rounds of revision. Each state approaches the development of standards and curriculum frameworks in the way that best suits its needs. States may be informed by more general national standards (such as TESOL's) or by other states' existing standards that are posted online. In the National CASAS Consortium, a group of states has collaborated to develop and adopt a set of standards for reading and listening, although some states will adapt the standards to meet their own specific needs (Jane Eguez, personal communication, August 28, 2006).

How are content standards implemented?

Content standards provide a roadmap to guide instruction and assessment in measurable ways when they are accompanied by progress indicators and assessment tasks that students can use to gauge their progress and set new goals (Snow, 2000). Content standards and indicators are the basis for curriculum and assessment (Carr & Harris, 2001; see, e.g., TESOL, 2001a, 2001b for examples of curricula and assessment tasks developed from standards in K-12 ESL). Once the broad (yet measurable) instructional guidelines of well-written content standards, indicators, and performance standards are laid out, teachers can use the standards to create a specific, classroom-focused curriculum and determine if the students have achieved the standards.

Within a state using one set of ESL content standards, curricula can vary across regions or programs depending on the learner population (e.g., pre-academic, competency-based, life skills, workplace, family literacy, computer literacy, or corrections). Based on clearly articulated content standards and progress indicators of what learners should know and be able to do in speaking, listening, reading, and writing, an adult ESL curriculum might include the following:

- Unit topics and themes, such as health, employment, banking, or telephone communication, with specific scope and sequence for covering the material and expectations as to how many units will be covered within a specific time frame
- Lists of textbooks, prepackaged materials, Web sites, teacher books and magazines, and other resources that support the standards and supplement the curriculum
- Sample needs assessments, lesson plans, and activity ideas
- Descriptions of proficiency levels of program learners
- Correlations to internal and external benchmarks (e.g., program-specific class levels, Student Performance Levels [SPLs], standardized test scores)
- Samples of formative and summative assessments
- Recommended teaching approaches, methodologies, or strategies

A standards-based curriculum should include examples of authentic materials and performance tasks, and allow for teacher creativity in developing activities and lessons based on learners' needs that help move students towards meeting the standards. For example, an ESL class is working on a reading standard with progress indicators related to scanning for information, while the curriculum's thematic unit deals with employment. The students need to look for jobs with a minimum income and they might bring local newspapers to the class. The teacher guides them through the task of finding jobs in the newspaper listings with the students' minimum income requirements, and the students calculate how much tax they would pay at this income level, their net annual income, and living expenses that may affect their ability to work for that salary.

Alignment of content standards and curriculum with assessment refers to the methods used to measure student progress on the standards, whether by formal standardized tests; quizzes; portfolios; informal observation; projects; or performance assessments. Properly aligned assessments give teachers (and students) the information they need to make instructional decisions based on students' mastery of the content and skills described in the standards and

related progress indicators. The ability of a given assessment to reliably measure progress on or mastery of specific content and skills depends on how well the content standards and indicators are written; if the standards and indicators are not meaningful, measurable, and clearly written, it is difficult to assess learner progress in meeting them.

How does standards-based education improve teaching and learning?

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. Both the CASAS Basic Skills Content Standards system and the *Equipped for the Future* standards system have been developed and enhanced based on extensive research on the needs of the field (CASAS, 2006; McGuire, 2000). Surveys of teachers, learners, and other stakeholders in ABE and ESL programs have guided the development and inclusion of standards that directly address the topics, skills, and content knowledge that stakeholders have identified as important for adult learners and essential for quality instruction.

However, research on the implementation and effectiveness of adult ESL standards is limited; the majority of research on standards-based education 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 policies influence teaching and learning in K-12 classrooms, but the nature of these influences depends on how standards-based policies are perceived and implemented by teachers. (Lauer, Snow, Martin-Glenn, Van Buhler, Stoutemyer, & Snow-Renner, 2005, p. 102)

This review found that K-12 standards-based curricula and instructional guidelines can have positive influences on K-12 student achievement when students have sufficient exposure to standards-based instruction, teachers understand the standards and have support from principals and the district in implementing them, and student achievement measures match the goals of the standards-based curriculum. The review of research 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. Professional development on how to implement standards-based education for principals (or program administrators, in the case of adult basic education programs) was also found to be important. Finally, this review concluded that although many teachers say they are implementing standards, observations indicate that this is not always the case (Lauer et. al, 2005).

Other research studies found that teachers' perceptions of content standards and the professional development provided for them play a strong role in the successful implementation of standards. Specific professional development about standards-based curriculum and assessment contributed to better student math achievement in California, according to a self-report of 1,000 K-12 teachers (Cohen & Hill, 2000). Case studies and descriptions of professional development to support standards-based education in K-12 document a wide range of activities used by school districts to train teachers, including workshops and conferences, institutes, observations of expert teachers, mentoring, study groups, grade-level meetings with other teachers, site-based inquiry seminars, training and support to use new curricula and standards, and certification training (Bye, 2004; Dutro, Fisk, Koch, Roop, & Wixson, 2002; Stein & D'Amico, 2002).

Research in both mainstream and ESL K-12 education is beginning to demonstrate that in order for standards to be implemented successfully, teachers need appropriate curricula and assessments that can reliably and validly test students' achievement in line with the standards (Gottlieb, 2006). To that end, the World-class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Consortium has created English language proficiency standards for students in K-12 that are aligned with WIDA-developed English language proficiency assessments. (See www.wida.us for more information and a copy of their standards and benchmarks.)

As more states and organizations 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 measures of instructional quality, such as student performance on formative and standardized assessments, student outcomes based on NRS core and secondary measures (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Adult and Vocational Education, 2005), and professional development and teacher satisfaction.

Conclusion

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 (Stites, 1999). Additional research is needed to investigate the impact that adult ESL content standards have on instruction, student learning, and accountability outcomes; and the professional development needed to support teachers who use content standards. Research on K-12 standards-based education shows that student progress depends to a great extent on teacher professional development and commitment to the standards. Although adult ESL programs, instructors, and students often do not have the time, resources, or support that exists in K-12 systems to implement standards-based education (Smith & Hofer, 2003; Smith, Hofer, Gillespie, Solomon, & Rowe, 2003), a growing number of states are finding ways to successfully use standards in a variety of adult ESL instructional contexts. Adult ESL content standards hold the promise of providing effective guidelines for instruction and assessment, and eventually, of improving student outcomes.

Online resources for standards-based education

Adult Literacy Education (ALE) Wiki

<http://wiki.literacytent.org>

This wiki was created in November, 2004 for practitioners, researchers and learners to pose and answer important questions in adult literacy education practice. There is a collection of national and international adult education standards and related resources.

The Splendid ESOL Web, Pima College Adult Education

<http://cc.pima.edu/~slundquist/index.htm>

This Web site has links to Internet and classroom activities that are aligned with the language functions found in Arizona's ELAA Standards. Users can search by language function to find related activities.

National Institute for Literacy's Adult Education Content Standards Discussion List

<http://www.nifl.gov/mailman/listinfo/Contentstandards>

This list features discussions about developments in and resources for adult education content standards. Users can subscribe to the list or can read archived postings at the link above.

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning

<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>

This Web site houses a collection of K-12 education standards, as well as research papers, policy briefs, instructional tools, and training materials for the development and implementation of standards. It does not cover adult education.

Standards, reporting, outcomes, accountability and teacher credentials - What's online

http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Swearer_Center/Literacy_Resources/standards.html

Literacy Resources/Rhode Island has posted a collection of adult education standards-related links.

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