The Role of NIFL Content Standards and CASAS Competencies in an ESL Adult Education Teacher's Course Development

Mary Anne Sullivan

B.A. The College of New Rochelle 1990

This project by Mary Anne Sullivan is accepted in its present form.

Date:_____

Project Advisor_____

Project Reader_____

Abstract

This project explores the relevance of the National Institute of Literacy (NIFL) Equipped for the Future (EFF) Content Standards to an Adult Education ESL Teacher's course development and the prioritization of the CASAS competencies in an Adult Education ESL Teacher's course Development. It examines their role among other sources of input for teacher course development. And finally it concludes that the degree of implementation of the EFF Content Standards and CASAS competencies is dependent on the appropriateness to the context.

ERIC Descriptors

Adult Basic Education
English (Second Language)
Basic Skill Competencies
Curriculum Development
Curriculum Guides
Literacy
Notional Functional Syllabi
Teacher Education Curriculum

CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

To what extent should the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) Equipped for the Future (EFF) Content Standards be incorporated in an adult education ESL teacher's course development and how should the CASAS competencies be prioritized.

The forest of what to teach is an enigmatic and challenging mass of options through which every teacher must sort, select and prioritize in order to develop a coherent course for particular students. Fortunately the options are narrowed and framed by State requirements and institutional curriculum guides. These help the teacher set goals and objectives in a thoughtful selective process. Even so, setting the goals and objectives can be quite daunting the first time teaching in a new context. And, it is also a continuing process, one which begins before a class convenes, is re-evaluated and changed after the class is in session based upon the schema, needs and interests of the students in a given class, and reconfigured at the end of the session according to what might be more successful for a future class. Then the process begins again. Figuring out this "what to teach" is a primary goal of this ESL teacher at this time.

Why am I at this teaching juncture? Because I have changed my adult education contexts often over the past six years: in the USA from teaching classes at a church school to an adult education school system program to an adult education program at a community college; in Moscow to tutoring at a law firm; and in Budapest to teaching classes at businesses under the auspices of language schools. I want to be sure to set the

goals of a curriculum based upon my teaching philosophy, the educational institution's

goals and requirements, State requirements, and the personal and educational needs and abilities

of my students. In addition I want the goals and objectives of a curriculum to be based on

established principles of teaching and research on language learning. I don't want to find my

course development driven uni-dimensionally -- by **a** text, **a** test, **a** single skill, **an** ESL computer

program, grammar, tasks, or student interests and desires.

Recently, while on this journey of content course development, I thought about

what my course development has been missing up until this point.   From the beginning I

recognized real conversations (listening and speaking), pronunciation and grammar as

beginning points in teaching English as well as meeting the students interests and needs

for survival language. As I worked with each of these, I knew reading and writing skills

must be included as well as characteristics of American culture and culturally appropriate

responses in different situations. Part of the latter had to be life skills to live effectively

in the US both now and in the future. But, what life skills I wondered were essential to

be included.

About this time, one ESL educator at Westchester Community College suggested

I consider to what extent the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) content standards

established in 2000 are relevant to ESL teaching.   She pointed out that they are meant to

prepare adults to live with families and friends, to live as active citizens and to work in

the community successfully at the beginning of the 21st Century. I was unaware of these

content standards and felt I should consider their relevance.

Another ESL educator at Stamford Adult Education in Connecticut suggested I consider prioritizing the CASAS (The Comprehensive Adult Students Assessment System) life skills and competencies, which are mandated by the State of Connecticut. The Connecticut State Department of Education has chosen the CASAS competencies and Assessment System to provide a framework for instruction and to measure the success of ESL instruction in the State. As I had not attended to all the three hundred CASAS competencies, which I had been handed when I first started teaching ESL in a Connecticut continuing education program, I realized I must consider them more comprehensively in my Connecticut ESL course development and make them more manageable.

As the National Institute for Literacy content standards are recommended at the national level and the CASAS life skills mandated at the State level where I teach, I want to know to what extent I should fit the NIFL standards into my overall ESL course development and how to prioritize the CASAS competencies into my ESL course development in Connecticut. Their part in past course development will be addressed in this paper. Responses of colleagues teaching ESL adult education to a questionnaire regarding the time their students spend on the NIFL content standards will be included so that I can see the relative degree of relevance each of the standards holds for my colleagues in each of my contexts. This will give me an opportunity to see if I am missing or underutilizing any appropriate components in my course development and consider and evaluate whether I should increase the time spent on these components in future course development. Regarding the CASAS skills, I will address how to make

them more manageable in course development by prioritizing them by category and

discussing their usefulness to the Stamford Adult Education adult education students.

II.   BACKGROUND

A. An overview of teacher's contexts

The writer's adult ESL education contexts are: semi-intensive, non-credit, 9-leveled courses at Westchester Community College where she has taught levels 1, 5, 6, 7, and intensive, non-credit 4-leveled courses at an adult education program of the Stamford Public Schools where she has taught intermediate and advanced levels.

At Westchester Community College the students are leveled and placed in classes according to the results of the CELSA English Language Skills Assessment tests. These include a grammar and grammar functions test, and a 45-minute writing test (the same test given to all students regardless of level) whereas at the Stamford Public Schools students are leveled and placed according to the results of a CASAS listening comprehension test. Neither context provides reading comprehension assessment at intake. And Stamford Adult Education provides no writing or grammar assessment.

At the College a grammar and writing test similar to the one given at the beginning of the semester is given at the end of the ESL semester to determine graduation to the next level, but there is no reading comprehension assessment. However, at Stamford adult ESL education, students move to the next level based upon favorable comparison between performance on a pretest and a posttest in listening comprehension at the beginning and intermediate levels and reading comprehension at the advanced level. The CASAS reading test incorporates some of the State competencies, all of which are State mandated to be included in the curriculum. There is no formal writing or

speaking assessment at the end of the semester. The State expects 40% class level advancement at the beginner level and 30% at the Intermediate and Advanced levels. In both contexts, effort is made to place students at the appropriate level with different teachers each semester, whether at the same level or at the next.

Westchester Community College non-credit ESL courses are primarily grammar text driven courses with the expectation that each teacher will teach the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking.) The English Language Learning Institute chooses the grammar text and chapters to be covered and perhaps related audio tapes, while the teacher creates the course outline for the students, develops the curriculum, and chooses a reader at the intermediate levels and above. The expectation at the College is that students will be prepared to take some college level courses by the time they reach level 6 or above with the recommendation of the faculty. This, in fact, occurs for most of the students by the time they pass level 7. However, the Math and English departments require that **all** WCC students take an entrance test in order to take classes in their departments. In addition, the College offers special non-credit ESL courses for particular areas of interest of its customers: Business English for Internationals, Computer Skills – Basics for ESL Learners, English Pronunciation, TOEFL Preparation Workshop, ESL Writing Workshop, ESL Writing Intensive, and Introduction to Academic Writing I.

On the other hand, the Stamford Public Schools Adult and Continuing Education ESL courses are determined by the teacher's plan with the expectation the four skills will be used and some grammar will be taught to help the students develop essential living skills and related competencies. To that end, the 300 CASAS life skills competencies are

mandated by the State of Connecticut to be addressed in the curriculum.

This program has begun to incorporate the development of English language skills through the use of the computer program ELLIS in some of the beginning and intermediate classes. The Ellis program is leveled for beginners, intermediate and advanced students and has a special section on Pronunciation. In addition, the Stamford Adult Education program provides classes mandated by the State in citizenship, GED and the High School Credit Diploma program. By the time the student graduates from Stamford ESL Adult Education, the student should be able to take college level courses if they have a High School diploma. In some cases this may be true, but the lack of emphasis on writing development in ESL courses at the present time may preclude this in some cases thereby putting the students back into non-credit ESL courses at the community college.

II. B. An Overview of the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL)
Equipped for the Future (EFF) Content Standards

As an independent federal organization, NIFL seeks to lead the national effort toward a fully literate America so that the national, regional and state literacy systems can better serve adults in the 21st Century. The need for a fully literate America became critical when the National Adult Literacy Survey of 1993 showed that "more than 40% of American workers had inadequate literacy skills."[1] This provided the impetus for the development of the EFF Content Standards completed in January 2000.   An overview of the content standards can be observed by looking at the pie chart in Appendix A from *Equipped for the Future Content Standards. What Adults Need to Know and Be Able to Do in the 21st Century*[2] A brief summary follows:

Communication skills: read with understanding, convey ideas in writing, speak so others can understand, listen actively, observe critically.

Decision-making skills: use math to solve problems and communicate, solve problems and make decisions, plan.

Interpersonal skills: guide others, resolve conflict and negotiate, advocate and influence, cooperate with others.

Lifelong learning skills: use information and communications technology, learn through research, reflect and evaluate, take responsibility for learning.

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[1] Sondra Stein, *Equipped for the Future Content Standards: What Adults need to Know and be able to Do in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy), 4.

[2] Stein, 21.

These standards "***define the core knowledge and skills adults need to effectively carry out their roles as parents, citizens, and workers***…They do not address the full range of activities adults carry out in these roles; rather they focus on the knowledge and skills that enable adults to gain access to information and ideas; communicate with the confidence that their message makes sense and can be understood by others; make decisions that are based on solid information and reached through thoughtful analysis, consideration of options and careful judgment; keep on learning so they won't be left behind." 3 The standards are based on a new meaning of knowing: being able to find and use information rather than remember and repeat . 4 They are more focused on higher thinking skills. They are founded on research by the Secretary's Commission on Necessary Skills (SCANS) completed in 1990. They grew from EFF adult role maps for parents, citizens and workers which were linked to databases of knowledge, abilities and skills in 1996, i.e., Civics Standards, K-12, MCOL Content Standards for Adults as citizens, PTA standards, The Family functioning Scale, standards from various industries. From here, common core activities across the three roles were defined as well as "generative skills" which supported them. These skills were seen as "integrated skill processes that are durable over time, in the face of changes in technology, work processes, and societal demands." 5 They provided the framework for adult learning from which the EFF content standards were drawn.

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3   Stein, p 11.

4   Stein, p 1.

5   Stein, p. 15.

The content standards were developed from 1997 to 1999 by an EFF Development Team, Field Development Partners across 13 US States from a cross section of educators and an Expert Review Panel. The partners include some State Departments of Education, Community Colleges, Adult Learning and Literacy programs, city Adult & Community Education programs, Family and Child Education, Adult Literacy Resource Centers, The Reading Program, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, an Education and Employment Program. The development was advised by: a National Policy Group; advisory groups of citizens, family members and workers; and technical advisors. The learners in twenty-five programs using the EFF field development process over two years contributed their input. So did representatives of employers from the food, construction and health care industries and others, i.e., AFL-CIO, National Association of Manufacturers, National Retail Federation, Arlington Education and Employment Program, National Institute for Metalworking Skills, Workforce Educator & Consultant of Texas Instruments.

It is in the area of employers and job/career opportunities that I would have liked to see more input into the Content Standards. What jobs and professions will be needed tomorrow and in what quantities? What skills and credentials will be needed for these jobs and professions? To be prepared for this century as a worker and to educate for it, this information is essential. Perhaps these questions were asked and the information considered, but it is difficult to tell from the text.

So, how are the content standards presented? Please see Appendix B for an

example of a standard "Take Responsibility for Learning" 6 As you can see,

a standard begins with a purpose, itemizing what needs to be done to develop the skill

and ends with its use and a monitoring of the effectiveness of the learning of the skill. A

list of thirteen common activities are listed with each by which the standards can be

developed for the student as a family member, citizen or a worker.   For a complete list of

EFF Content Standards, see Appendix C. 7 For an overall view of Content Framework

for EFF Standards, see Appendix D. 8 Role maps are also included for family members,

citizens and workers. The maps are useful for teachers and administrators planning

curriculum and programs.

Presently, EFF is working on an assessment system framework (due for

completion in 2004) and on particular credentials defined by learners, programs and

system customers. The credentials will be defined based on "external criteria of effective

performance."9   The assessment framework requires "defining multiple levels of

performance for students to strive for and identifying –and, where necessary, developing

–accurate assessment tools to meet a range of purposes for assessment. These tasks move

the EFF development process from content standards that describe what adults know and

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6   Stein, 49.
7   Stein, 150-1.
8   Stein, 111.
9   Stein, 91.

can do to performance standards that describe how well they can do it." 10 The levels

defined in the EFF Assessment framework "must be explicitly linked to key external

measures of competence (e.g., certificates of mastery, NAA/IA survey levels, diplomas,

and other credentials) and key pathways (e.g., entry to higher ed. and entry to

employment as defined by occupational skill standards) so that adults and systems can

rely on them as accurate predictors of real-world performance…The levels defined in the

EFF Assessment Framework must be the products of a national consensus-building

process that assures portability of certificates and credentials…Work on the development

of this framework must maintain the strong customer focus that has distinguished the

EFF Standards development process to date. It must be based on a broad, inclusive

definition of maximizing accountability for all activities to all customers—starting with

the adult learner." 11

       In the text, various EFF participating teachers explain how they used the

standards and how useful they were to them. The appropriate skills were selected based

upon the purposes of a particular class. To meet the overall objective of preparing adults

for the 21st Century, examples in the text demonstrate how they are best served by real-

world projects and measurable results requiring cooperation and higher thinking skills.

Among the ESL teachers who used the standards, "practitioners are finding that using the

EFF framework supports and validates the array of skills that ESL practitioners teach but

10 Stein, 56

11 Stein, 58

rarely have the opportunity to validate." 12

Overall, the EFF content standards are a beginning for system reform. They provide "a broad 'curriculum framework' for adult learning that states and programs can use to guide their own curriculum development processes to assure that teaching and learning focuses on results that matter." 13 Of course, the proof will be in whether adult literacy will increase.

As to what role the NIFL content standards play in my and some other ESL teachers course development, please see III. E.

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12 Stein, 75.

13 Stein, 103.

II. C.   An Overview of the CASAS Competencies

CASAS is an acronym for Comprehensive Adult Students Assessment System.
The CASAS System is a national Consortium of agencies based in San Diego. It
provides an adult education framework for educating secondary and adult level learners
in the necessary skills for success in the Labor market and the "real world" based on and
correlated to the SCANS competencies researched and identified by the Department of
Labor in 1990. This educational framework includes the CASAS Competency List, a
CASAS curriculum Materials Guide, and a CASAS Assessment system. The CASAS
Competency List totals 300 competencies broken down into eight categories. The
CASAS Assessment System develops and conducts assessment training and evaluation
designed to assist adult education programs in documenting learner outcomes and
reporting program impact to students, staff, local boards and policy makers. TOPS
(Tracking of Programs and Students) is part of the CASAS program.   The Connecticut
State Department of Education has mandated the CASAS competencies to be included in
Adult Education courses. Take a look at them in Appendix E.

It is my purpose in this paper to organize and prioritize the 300 CASAS
competencies among other important items into my ESL adult education course
development at Stamford Adult Education and to make them more manageable. This will
be done in III F.

III. INPUT FOR TEACHER COURSE DEVELOPMENT

To develop an ESL course, every teacher must consider many factors including her philosophy of student ESL learning; the State and educational institution's requirements; and the student's needs, interests and language learning needs. In addition, I found a need to develop my own step-by-step guide for what belongs in every ESL curriculum, which you can see in Appendix G. This now includes the NIFL standards and most of the CASAS competencies. From the guide it is easier to draw up goals and objectives for what the students need to know and be able to do in the specific context.

A. Teacher's Philosophy of Student ESL Learning

As an ESL teacher, I believe students learn what they choose to focus upon through their perceived needs and interests dependent upon their language learning abilities and their learning environment.

The learning environment begins with the student and is added to by the institution, the teacher and his classmates. It is interactive and dynamic. The student's attitude and desire is fundamental to his learning. So also are his needs and interests. So, also is the student's personal environment. If the student's focus is obfuscated by personal, work or world issues, little learning can occur.

The educational institution's environment affects student attitudes and desire through the institution's academic (admissions policy, pre-requisites, tests), financial requirements, physical plant, campus atmosphere, student support systems (financial,

academic and personal), course description, assessment, personnel interaction with

students and instructors, and instructions to the teachers, i.e., required curriculum or texts.

 A teacher plays an important role in the learning environment. The teacher stimulates the

student's desire to learn the language and enables the students to learn. To stimulate the

student's desire to learn, the teacher must learn about the student's language learning

needs and interests and language learning ability and consider them in her course design.

See Appendix F for the English Questionnaire regarding students' needs, interests and

language learning. These must be factored into the course design insofar as possible

along with State and institutional requirements. Students can participate in choosing the

course design and environment within the guidelines provided by the teacher and can

enrich it by their personal class participation.

Through what means does a teacher enable students to learn English? This leads

me into a stream of consciousness as to the various means a teacher uses: innate

enthusiasm for teaching English and in students learning; genuine interest in individual

people of different cultures, ages and backgrounds and sensitivity to their concerns;

coherent course design with clear goals and objectives which are given to the students in

abbreviated form; student learning goals and self assessment; clear and concise daily

lesson outlines so that students know what they are learning and can assess whether they

have learned it; student feedback on their learning; intermittent testing so that the teacher

and students know what has been learned; a mixture of student and teacher centered

teaching; individual and interactive activities; building on previous English language

proficiency one small step at a time as in Krashen's i+1 (14); small chunks of content so

that students can discover what they learn, assimilate it and use it; an environment which

helps students develop lower and higher thinking skills through inductive and deductive

mental exercises; intermittent review of new content; different sizes of class groupings; a

variety of activities, structured and unstructured, that stimulate the whole student socially,

psychologically, mentally, emotionally, physically and appeal to his multiple

intelligences…STUDENT ENGAGEMENT.

The more the students are engaged or personally involved in what they are

learning, the more they will learn. As Izumi and Bigelow point out, "In cognitive

psychology, cognitive science and second language acquisition, the notion that attention

is necessary for learning to take place is relatively well accepted .15   Recent studies

"suggest that drawing learners' attention to form facilitates their L2 learning. Learners

whose attention is deliberately drawn to targeted elements via external input or task

manipulation tend to demonstrate more accurate use of language forms than learners who

are exposed to non-manipulated input."16   To get a student's attention, it certainly would

help to capture his personal interest or engage him in choosing the targeted language. As

Beebe put it in 1985, "language learners acquire 'the right stuff,' that which they are

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14 Robin C. Scarcella, and Rebecca L. Oxford, *The Tapestry of Language Learning: the individual in the communicative classroom* (Boston, MA: Heinle and Heinle, 1992), 41.

15 Shinichi Izumi and Martha Bigelow, "Does Output Promote Noticing and Second Language Acquisition," *TESOL Quarterly 25* (2), 1991, 244.

16 Izumi and Bigelow, 243.

active participants in choosing as the target language models they prefer." 17

Therefore, in my opinion, what should be included in an effective language learning environment is meaningful and useful subject matter, life skills and communicative activities for the **particular** students utilizing pronunciation, the four skills, grammar, culture. And, the teacher must design and structure the content into a coherent course design. See III E. and F. as to what extent the NIFL Content Standards and CASAS Competencies are factored into my curriculum development.

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17 Scarcella and Oxford, 42.

III. B. Educational Institution and State Requirements

The specific institutional requirements of my contexts which affect curriculum development have been thoroughly detailed in II. Background A. Generally, at Westchester Community College, these requirements include following the course calendar from the institution and the institutional course content directives from the ESL administrative faculty, i.e., assigned grammar and writing tests, grammar and reading texts, assigned chapters, audio tapes and language lab time and inclusion of the four skills. On the other hand, at Stamford Adult and Continuing Education, they include: the Connecticut State mandated CASAS competencies and tests; a new text series (*Stand Out* by Staci Lyn Sabbagh and Rob Jenkins published by Heinle) linked to EFF, SCANS and CASAS competencies; the four skills and grammar.

III. C. Students' Needs, Interests and Language Learning Questionnaire

Over the years of teaching I have developed the Students' Needs, Interests and Language Learning Experience Questionnaire, Appendix F, which I give my students the first day of class so that I can factor these into my curriculum design and lesson plans. I often adapt the questionnaire to the level of the student and the particular class based upon what I want to know. As I said above, English language teaching should address these as they provide the incentive for the students to learn. H. D. Brown has said, "Motivation is seen as a desire or drive which results in a particular action. Intrinsically motivated learners learn because of the goals/needs which they perceive within themselves when their desires and needs are being addressed."

III.   D. A Teacher's Generic Curriculum Guide

Would it be possible to have a generic curriculum guide which I could use as a starting point for designing any ESL course I taught? It seemed to me this would make the curriculum development process simpler, more ordered and less overwhelming. So, I formulated this guide to provide a framework for making choices as to what should be included in any ESL adult education curriculum I taught. The guide provides an order to follow to make these choices. See Appendix G for this guide. From this guide, an organizing principle for the course could be determined and specific content and texts selected. The course content then must be chosen, organized and prioritized. An assessment system of what is to be learned needs to be included. And, finally how the content would be discovered or presented should be addressed in a general way with the specifics left to unit development and lesson plans.

III. E.   NIFL standards as applied to ESL Course Development

To what extent do I as an ESL teacher use the NIFL EFF content standards in the pie chart in Appendix A in my ESL curricula? As an adult education English as a Second Language teacher, I consider enabling students to develop communication skills is my number one goal because all of the students I teach need English for this purpose. Using interpersonal skills is one of the tools I use to do this. Problem solving, decision-making, reflecting and evaluating, and students' taking responsibility for and evaluating their own learning are other activities that I use to tweak and maintain the interest of my students and give them a desire to communicate in English. So, which of the content standards don't I use very much?

Up until this point in my ESL teaching, I have not used math very much. I have used math in terms of simple addition and subtraction in shopping and comparative shopping for food, clothing, low interest loans, credit cards, mortgage rates, etc. But, most of the time, the activities are focused on making sure students quickly seek sight number comparisons of savings and search for all hidden charges, i.e., smart living skills. I have not considered using math problems as a total class activity because I would have to teach math to some adult students in the room who may not know how to add and subtract. I have felt that math problems and skills belonged to the field of ABE and literacy and not ESL, and that if I taught this it would seriously impinge on the English language learning time the students so desperately need and want in an ESL class.

Furthermore, I have not used computers and research in my teaching for distinct

reasons: Up until this semester, computers were not accessible to my students. Only

about 15% of the students have had access to the Internet either at work or at home.

While the students have access at school, the students do not have the personal time to

utilize the computers primarily because of work schedules. Most libraries have a few

computers which are accessible to the Internet, but not for long periods of time. Of

course, I could assign computer research to those 15%, which would encourage others to

try and get access to computers at work or at libraries.

Westchester Community College has just recently opened a new library where

there is more computer and Internet access than previously available and support help

from the staff. There are also other places on campus with computer access.   However, I

have been teaching in the Saturday program and most of these students work all week

and go to school all day Saturdays, so that they have no time to use these facilities. This

semester I will be teaching in the evening, so I might try a computer assignment.

As of January 2002, Stamford Adult Ed introduced computers and ELLIS

software into the regular ESL program in some of the beginning and intermediate classes,

and offered the students access to the computer room from 1:00 PM to 3:00 PM two

afternoons a week. Two or three of my students took computer classes in the morning

after my class, but most worked in the afternoon so they couldn't take advantage of the

access. I did introduce my class to the Internet access facilities at the Stamford Library,

so computer research assignments now are more feasible. And the Ellis software is

available in the computer room where the students can work at their own rate on sound

differentiation, grammar and appropriate responses in everyday conversations and work

to higher levels. Therefore, I plan to begin using computer assignments in this program.

While I have not used computers in my classes, I have used other communications technology in the ESL classroom to acquire, process and manage information and to learn and practice skills. I use the telephone for students to talk to each other about class assignments. Often I use the video series "On Common Ground" for students to figure out the story from visual and audio clues, predict what comes next, summarize or describe what happened, or to trigger discussion on citizen or human rights issues. And, I use the audio tape recorder for a multitude of uses, i.e., to recognize pronunciation problems, to record oral conversations or presentations, to listen for lyrics or to listen to real conversations while the students read them or to listen for information in a radio news segment or for a plot in books on tape.

As to research, most of my students work long hours and go to school in their free time. Frankly I do not believe they have the time to do research. But, I should try by give longer range (1 week or 2 weeks) research assignments on something they want to know, and have the students share the results in class so that they feel validated and rewarded for their work by having useful, shareable knowledge and encouraged to do more. Perhaps giving more time for research will allow it to happen.

As an ESL teacher I believe in using effective teaching tools. Certainly computers and research are effective and necessary tools for living in the 20th century and should be included in ESL course development to a realistic extent based on the context. I will incorporate them in my classes in some manner.

ESL Teacher Questionnaire and its implications for curricula

Because I have an intense curiosity as to what extent my colleagues use the NIFL content standards in their curriculum planning (unwittingly or not,) I created a questionnaire (Appendix H) to see what percentage of time these teachers had their students use each of the NIFL EFF content standards in their classroom. I wanted to compare their answers with mine to see whether I should consider using some more than I do and others less than I do. First, I filled out the questionnaire so that I could compare results with my colleagues and would not be dissuaded by their responses. I discovered that a different questionnaire needed to be filled out based on each context as my answers changed with each class I taught; two of the respondents remarked on this as well.

So, how did my questionnaire answers compare with the majority of ESL teachers surveyed at Stamford Adult Education as to how frequently they asked their students to practice each skill over a typical course? See Exhibit H. The following answers were similar:

1. 25% usage of math to solve problems and communicate, plan, resolve conflict and negotiate, advocate and influence, use information and communications technology, and learn through research,.

2. 100% speak so others can understand, listen actively and cooperate with others. However, the majority used other skills more than I: solve problems and make decisions, and guide others. And, I used the following skills more than they: read with

understanding, convey ideas in writing, and students take responsibility for their own learning.

I found the NIFL definition of "observe critically" in EFF Content Standards, Appendix C, possibly misleading, that is only referring to media. Research on language learning indicates most people learn visually. But, observing visually applies to so much more than the media. Don't we all "read" a situation or interpret something visual in every day life based on clues and based on what we know, our schema? Think of how much you interpret a situation based upon the total scene, the action, the body language, the register and tone and pitch of voice. So, it would seem appropriate to expand the standard definition to include ***observe the context of a situation, statement or visual.***

What are the implications for future curriculum development at Stamford Adult Education for this teacher as a result of considering the NIFL content standards? I will use more lesson plans focusing on the decision-making skills, the interpersonal skills and lifelong learning skills.

So, how did my responses at WCC compare with my responses at Stamford Adult Education? Compare # 8 in Exhibit H with all the answers in Exhibit J (where my responses for each of the class levels I have taught at WCC are included by level number.) I used the decision-making skills, interpersonal skills and lifelong learning skills even less at WCC except for "solve problems and make decisions" in two of the four classes," "cooperate with others," "reflect and evaluate" (which I also used in every

class at the upper intermediate level) and responsibility for learning. What this tells me as a teacher is that I am primarily a four skills teacher and need to change my curricula to include life and thinking skills more. It also tells me that the context changes the emphasis in curriculum content.

Why the differences in my answers from Stamford to WCC? Stamford is an adult and continuing education program of the Board of Education (k-12) whereas WCC is a higher education adult education program. Basically at WCC there is so much grammar mandated to be covered that when there is time I focus the classroom time on speaking to each other about their interests and the readings, listening or reading for specific information and homework time for writing about their interests or specific thought provoking questions about the assigned reading. Henceforth, I will enliven and enrich the speaking time and, where appropriate, the writing time with more problem solving, planning, guiding others, resolving conflict and negotiating, advocating and influencing.

So, how did my answers compare with 5 other colleagues teaching ESL adult education at the college level? Compare all answers in Appendix I with all the answers in Appendix J. Their answers seemed more balanced across all the skills, whereas I used the communication four skills 100% of the time.   However, it is significant to note that we all used math to solve problems and communicate 25% of the time or Never. And, four out of six of us used research 25% of the time or never.

I submit that even though I had 13 ESL adult education teachers respond to my questionnaire, the lack of use of math to solve problems and communicate and learn

through research probably is not surprising for language teachers. Should

these teachers be encouraged to do more of each of these or is their use appropriate? I

submit this very much depends upon the context. For example, if I were teaching ESP

like TOEFL, I would not teach math or assign research. But, if I were teaching a skill

such as writing, I would not teach math but probably would assign some sort of research.

ESL teachers like other teachers need to choose the content for their curricula based upon

its appropriateness to the course description, State and institutional directives, the needs

of the students and their teaching philosophy.

III. F. Prioritizing the CASAS Competencies in ESL Course Development

The CASAS competencies elaborate on the NIFL EFF Content Standards. The CASAS Competencies (See Appendix E) need to be made manageable in curriculum development for all ESL teachers in adult education in the State of Connecticut for they are mandated to be included. But how does one manage three hundred of them in a coherent way and prioritize them in curriculum planning? CASAS has made this easier by organizing them in eight categories. But, it is up to the teacher to prioritize them in terms of how much time should be spent on each of the categories. And, it is up to the teacher to consider if all of them should be included in every context in an ESL curriculum unless the State mandates their inclusion, and, if so to what extent.

Herein I will manage and weight the use of the 300 competencies based upon the students' needs and interests, skills useful to me in everyday life, and what I have come to value as an ESL language teacher.

To begin weighting categories using students needs and interests as a guide, one category jumps out which has more relevance to most of the students' interests that I have taught than the others: **4. Employment**. In the Needs and Interests Questionnaire, which I usually give my students on the first day of class (Appendix F), most of the students over my last six years of teaching say they are learning English to get a better job. So, in terms of time spent in the curriculum, it is this category of the eight which deserves the most weight, the most curriculum time. Included here is the very necessary

building up of computer skills, which obviously can only be addressed depending upon availability of computers to adult education programs, because only a small percentage of the students have personal computers.

Included also under employment should be **8. Independent Living Skills** insofar as they relate, i.e., "8.1 "Perform self-care skills."   However, the category 8.2 "Perform home-care skills" should be included depending upon the context. In Pre-lit, beginner or family literacy classes, parenting classes or home economics classes, performing home-care skills would be appropriate, but not in most ESL classes at the intermediate or advanced levels. For those levels such classes might appear demeaning to adult immigrant students. As I teach intermediate and advanced students, I would not include 8.2 in my curriculum. But, I do teach the vocabulary relevant to these skills at a beginners level, and do include part of 8.2.6 "Recognize general household repair and maintenance" insofar as what to tell a clerk in a hardware store or maintenance person in an apartment, condo or home, but I do not "demonstrate" this or any of these skills except as a means to teach vocabulary.

Another content area that ESL students that I have taught gravitate to in classroom instruction is **3. Health.** The students need to know where to go when they are sick, how to describe what is wrong with them, and how to interpret doctor's directions and medicine directions. They need to know how to fill out medical health history forms. And, more basic to every day life, the students need to identify practices which promote health. Interpreting food package labels fits well here. Because of the

students' interest, this category would be addressed thoroughly in the curriculum.

Helping students find and use community agencies and services is another important content area of interest to ESL students and would also be addressed thoroughly in the curriculum. It is covered in the list under **4. Community Resources**. ESL students need to identify and locate community resources such as emergency help, child care services, health services, family planning, education and library resources, human service agencies, employment agencies, recreational and cultural resources, legal services and perhaps immigration services. In addition, ESL students need help finding, understanding and using banking and financial services, including how to send money out of the country to help their families. This is addressed under **1. Consumer Economics**, "1.8 Use banking and financial services in the community," and should be given sufficient attention in the curriculum.

Obtaining housing is another essential content area for ESL students and should be given through consideration in the curriculum and curriculum time. It is specified under "1.4 Understand methods and procedures to obtain housing and related services" in the CASAS list of competencies. This is an excellent area for students to share experiences and to teach each other. This is a chance for students to learn other options which will be useful later in their lives.   Interpreting classified ads certainly is worthwhile content because the vocabulary and abbreviations are often unknown to them. And, work on lease agreement language is essential for their understanding of their rights, responsibilities and protection. This should help them read and understand their own signed leases.

Shopping captures ESL learners: where they can find what they need and how to compare prices and quality. They need to know about comparison shopping in 1.2, particularly learning about unit pricing at supermarkets, interpreting and comparing ads, and quickly computing discounts. They also need 1.3 "Understand methods and procedures used to purchase goods and services, " and 1.6. "Understand consumer protection measures," and 1.7 "Understand procedures for the care, maintenance and use of personal possessions." If the ESL students do not know addition and multiplication, these students should be given basic addition and multiplication tables to learn independently and, after ESL instruction should be referred to ABE. In my opinion, teaching and practicing these tables would seriously impinge upon valuable English language teaching and learning time for the majority of students who know basic math and therefore should not be included in the ESL curriculum.

5.Government and Law is so extensive and broad ranged in content compared to the other categories that I find it daunting and impossible to cover in its entirety. But, what would I cover? I do address content issues through the ESL newspaper, "News for you." As most of our students are not citizens and there is a class in Citizenship, I do not cover topics appropriate to this, i.e., voting requirements and detailed U.S. history. However, I do discuss some U.S. history and interpret U.S. historical documents in conjunction with the video series *On Common Ground*. I also include working within the democratic system for change and justice under the law as it may relate to their lives, i.e., reporting a crime, speaking to policemen, dealing with bureaucrats, handling a traffic

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ticket, appearing in court, tenant rights and consumer rights. Interpreting tax forms and tables seems beyond the ESL province as well, but relating the W2 form to income tax forms probably would be worthwhile.

6. Computation has not been covered in my ESL classes for the reasons just mentioned. That is not to say that I do no computation in ESL classes. The measure I use as to what computation to cover in ESL curriculum is what I use in everyday life and it is included according to level, topic and context. So, identifying numbers, number sequencing and calculating units of time have been covered at the beginning ESL level. Simple addition has been used in tallying bills, calculating hidden charges and credit card penalty charges. Addition and subtraction have been used in figuring out family budgets and time management. In everyday life, I do not use decimals and fractions, geometric equations and algebraic formulas, but I do use estimation of discounts, eyeballing of credit card percentage rates, loan and mortgage rates. I do interpret data from graphs but I do not compute averages, medians or modes. I do interpret diagrams, illustrations and scale drawings. I do interpret statistical information in news reports and articles and interpret statements of probability. So, what I compute in life I include in the curriculum appropriately. Beyond that I leave it to literacy, ABE and GED.

7. Learning to Learn. As I said under Teacher Philosophy, students learn what they decide to learn, so having the students recognize their goals and objectives and that of the given course and their bringing these together at the beginning of a course is crucial for maximum interest and learning. Learning to learn has become more a part of

my curriculum and lesson planning as I have recognized that students learn languages differently and have become aware of the research on multiple intelligence and how people learn. It is evident that each student needs to know how he learns best and consciously use these methods. As the competency list states, students need to: "7.4.9 Identify personal learning style," and "7.4.1 Identify or utilize effective study strategies." Lessons should be geared towards the many ways people learn to reach all the students' learning needs. That said, the students in class need to focus on what is being taught--be aware of what that is, what he is doing to learn it, and assess at the end of class if he has learned it and what he will do if he hasn't. Schmidt in his "Noticing Hypothesis" of 1994 purports that noticing is the "necessary and sufficient condition for the conversion of input to intake for learning..." 17 Schmidt believes that noticing requires focal attention and awareness for intake to take place, but I believe learning takes place sometimes with attention but without our awareness, i.e., when I produce a word in another language that I did not know I knew and did not try specifically to memorize or learn. But, as I said earlier "In cognitive psychology, cognitive science and second language acquisition, the notion that attention is necessary for learning to take place is relatively well accepted." 18 So, the teacher must make sure time and opportunity are given to help students focus on what is to be learned and to assess their learning.

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17 Izumi and Bigelow, 244

18 Izumi and Bigelow, 244

By studying the CASAS competencies list, particularly "**7. Learning to Learn,**" my awareness of the value of developing certain skills has been raised as has the importance of their inclusion in curriculum planning in a more prominent manner. These skills are identifying how one learns and using that in developing study skills, using thinking skills, problem solving skills and personal management skills. They will appear more prominently in my future curriculum and lesson plans.

A Closer Look at the CASAS List of Competencies

When I read the list of competencies, I am struck by the focus on speaking, understanding and doing in everyday life. In contrast I am struck by the absence of the word GRAMMAR, i.e., demonstrate the ability to use grammar appropriately in conversation and writing. It underlies **0. Basic Communication** and it is assumed but never stated. While I thought culture was overlooked at first, acting and speaking appropriately in the culture is covered under basic communication under: "0.1 Communicate in interpersonal interactions, and "0.2 Communicate regarding personal information." Both include identifying and using appropriate behavior in a variety of situations. Culture is also included in community resources under "2.7 Understanding aspects of society and culture," and under employment in "4.8.7 Identify and use effective approaches to working within a multicultural workforce, including respecting cultural diversity, avoiding stereotypes and recognizing concerns of members of other ethnic and gender groups."

The process of studying the 300 competencies and 8 categories has helped me recognize their relative value to the students and to prioritize them so that I can plan appropriate time for them in ESL curriculum in adult education continuing education programs, particularly in the State of Connecticut. And, since I embarked on this paper, the publishing by Heinle in 2002 of the ***Stand Out*** Standards-Based English series by Staci Lyn Sabbagh and Rob Jenkins has made the process of addressing the SCANS, EFF and CASAS standards in curriculum planning easy as the entire series is written for this purpose. Fortunately, the Stamford Adult and Continuing ESL Education program has chosen to use this series in their classes to aid the teachers in addressing the CASAS competencies.

IV. Conclusion

Ultimately, the extent to which the NIFL Content Standards and the CASAS Competencies are factored into ESL course development depends upon the awareness of them by the teacher and institution, their consideration of them as to their value for a particular context and commitment to their use. The NIFL Content Standards are meant to be a recommended guide for US adult education to prepare students to be able to function successfully in the twenty-first century. The CASAS Competencies, on the other hand, are part of a complete delivery system of ESL adult education (student competency list, teacher lesson plans and assessment tools) which can be adopted by a state or educational institution. The State of Connecticut has done just that and mandated them to be adopted by ESL education in the State. As the NIFL Content Standards and the CASAS competencies are both based on the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) Competencies, they build on the same skills. The NIFL Content Standards provide a general framework for the skills whereas the CASAS Competency List provides a specific list of what an ESL student is to know and be able to do. Both are useful for an ESL teacher in setting up curriculum learning and proficiency goals and objectives and planning an ESL curriculum.

The extent to which either the NIFL Content Standards or the CASAS Competencies are or should be factored into ESL curriculum development depends upon the context, State and institutional requirements, students' needs and interests and the teacher's philosophy. In addition, these decisions are affected by the

availability of computers and the Internet for ESL students to explore topics, gather information and communicate. Students' time to do research, practice the language and study while working long hours is another consideration.

As to the extent the Standards and Competencies should be factored into my ESL curriculum, I believe more extensive use of decision-making and interpersonal skills and the higher thinking skills should be factored into my curriculum planning. And, I believe more focus on "Learning to Learn" should be given in my curriculum planning, so students discover how they learn languages best and purposefully use those means. In addition, researching and organizing information should also be considered. However, I do not find frequent math computation or teaching of high school level math appropriate in an ESL classroom nor is the teaching of math to those illiterate in math (who do not know the addition and multiplication tables.) But I do believe students learn a language quicker if they are reading and writing as well as listening and speaking in that language as well as learning grammar. But, why not use these language skills to develop life skills such as: be able to find and keep a better job or place to live; be able to plan one's budget and utilize banking resources; be able to maintain one's health using community resources; be able to understand civic responsibilities; be able to buy, sell and negotiate; be able to communicate in English with others to develop relationships; be able to live comfortably in America. The prioritization of these life skills in a curriculum in terms of time spent on each is contingent upon the needs and interests of the particular students in a course and State and institutional requirements.

Therefore, in summary, I would continue to use pronunciation, the four skills,

grammar and cultural exchange in my curriculum but I would direct them more towards

giving students the life skills they need in the 21st Century, the life skills which I have

come to respect and value more in terms of curriculum development after studying the

NIFL EFF Content Standards and the CASAS Competencies.

VI. Appendixes

A. National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) Equipped for the Future (EFF) Content Standards in pie chart, Stein, 21.

B. Chart of One Content Standard, Take Responsibility for Learning Stein, 49.

C. Complete list of EFF Content Standards, Stein, 150, 151.

D. EFF Content Framework, Stein, 111.

E. Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) Competencies by category.

F. Students Needs, Interest and Language Learning Experience Questionnaire.

G. A teacher's generic curriculum guide.

H. Adult ESL Teacher Questionnaire at Stamford, CT. Adult Education re NIFL Content Standards.

I. Adult ESL Teacher Questionnaire re NIFL Content Standards at college level.

J. Writer's Response to Questionnaire at college level listed by class level

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