



National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

## Collaborating with Students to Build Curriculum that Incorporates Real-Life Materials

**by Charissa Ahlstrom**

*My formative experiences as a teacher of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) occurred 10 years ago, as I began teaching in and coordinating Inglés Para la Comunidad, a church-based ESOL program serving Latin American immigrants in New York City. The program's founders were committed to shaping the program around a particular understanding of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. One of their focuses was on Freire's premise that a liberating education needs to be "co-intentional" (Freire, 1972, p. 56). They interpreted this to mean that students and teachers should engage in dialogue, investigating themes as equals and creating new understandings of the world together. The curriculum had to address student needs, reflect collaboration between the learners and the teachers, and include regular student evaluation.*

Ever since then, I've tried to create curricula that reflect collaboration between the students and me. Today, my curriculum includes student-identified themes combined with structured language practice, and an emphasis on communication. Sometimes I use the themes in a Freirean way, as ways to enter into an examination of underlying power structures. I often use the themes more simply as a way to ensure that students are learning content that matters to them. I try to use a wide variety of material and media, prioritizing student-created texts and materials that students might encounter in their daily lives. In this article, I'll explain why and how I do this.

### **The Students' Perspective**

In the orientation we provided to volunteers at Inglés Para la Comunidad, we shared this story from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1972). Freire describes an educator who was working with Brazilian tenement residents and wanted to do a lesson on alcoholism. The teacher showed the tenement residents a picture of a drunken man and three men talking, and asked them to comment on the picture. Rather than comment negatively on the alcoholism, the residents said:

*The only one there who is productive and useful to his country is the souse who is returning home after working all day for low wages and who is worried about his family because he can't take care of their needs. He is the only worker. He is a decent worker and a souse like us" (p. 111).*

Freire used this example to demonstrate how teachers should begin "thematic investigations" (p. 112). I like this story because it reminds me not to assume that I know my students' perspectives or needs with regard to a particular theme. Auerbach (1992) also stresses the importance of this collaborative process of identifying "the real (rather than imagined) issues of each group" (p. 1).

It's easy to get carried away with my own excitement in creating curriculum or with my own perspective on an issue. Once, when I was teaching a unit on shopping, I asked the students what problems they encountered at stores. One student complained that cashiers had treated her unkindly because she used food stamps. Hearing that, I immediately planned to have the students practice writing letters to a manager. But then I remembered that I should pose the question to the students and brainstorm ideas so we could collaboratively reach solutions. They said they were more inclined to talk to the manager immediately, so we practiced conversations, in addition to brainstorming multiple ways to respond to the situation.

#### **My Definition of Curriculum**

Underlying my use of the term "curriculum" are two interrelated assumptions. First, building on my understanding of Freire (1972), I believe that curriculum is not neutral. The curriculum I use supports the development of English language skills. It also instills values and political views. This transmission of knowledge and values is both explicit and implicit. I also agree with Combleth's understanding of curriculum (1990) as a "contextualized social process." Curriculum includes not only the entirety of activities, methods, materials, and physical and social environment of the whole learning center, but also the dynamic processes that shape and change these components. Multiple bodies and forces, for example, the staff, the broader sociopolitical forces, a program's funders, the students themselves, as well as community and national or international events, shape these processes. While the term "curriculum" can refer to the entirety of learning occurring within a center, in my article I often use the term to refer to the environment of my class, including students' input alongside the program's criteria for my level.

-Charissa Ahlstrom

At Inglés Para la Comunidad, we did not consider formal grammar instruction to be ineffectual (Krashen & Terrell, 1995), but, at the same time, grammar was not an end in itself.

Communication was the primary focus: we worked on grammar within the context of the themes brought out by the students; and we also addressed grammar in its role as an aid to effective communication. If students had difficulty with the past tense, and we were discussing health, we had students share past experiences at the doctor, in the hospital, and how they dealt with illnesses in their country. We used these contexts to introduce or review past tense forms, and examined how grammar issues impeded their effective conversation and writing.

### **Program Framework**

I currently teach ESOL at the Adult Learning Program (ALP) of the Jamaica Plain Community Centers, in Boston, MA. I am teaching a class of advanced beginners (level two of six levels of ESOL); the lowest ability level in the class is SPL 2-3 as measured by the Basic English Skills Test (BEST) and the Arlington Education Employment Program (REEP) writing assessment. My students are from Haiti, Somalia, and Latin America; their educational levels range from some higher education to only three years of education. My class is held three evenings a week for a total of eight hours a week. We have classes throughout the year, with on-going entry. We do not have exact "sessions," although September, January, and June emerge as times of greater transition for students entering, leaving, and advancing to higher levels within the program.

In our program, the ESOL teachers have created level guides that identify what standards we use to advance students to the next level. These lists include such items as "demonstrates familiarity [with] and usage of simple present and present progressive" and "able to use a bilingual dictionary." Teachers created the original checklists a number of years ago. Each year, the teachers work together to "tweak" the lists so that they reflect the current students' needs, adjusting them if students' language needs have changed significantly. The level guides are helpful tools to use when talking to students and to other teachers about students' progress, as well as for initial placement. We also use these lists to guide, but not dictate, language and skill instruction at each level. The teacher and the class determine the manner in which a class covers these skills and language.

### **Soliciting Themes from Students**

I build curricula by soliciting themes from students and combining them with language skills typical of our program's level two, using our level guide as the reference. I use a variety of structured activities, such as checklists (with pictures) or brainstorming, to discover what themes are interesting or important to students.

I also gain ideas informally, noticing which topics engage students emotionally. For example, during a recent conversation about what people did over the weekend, one woman told us

that her car was stolen. This sparked an active discussion, with many students recounting their experiences of crime, and sharing advice and suggestions on crime prevention. Class members were very concerned, so I included crime prevention as a subsequent free-writing and conversation topic.

Once I have ideas about students' wants and needs, I follow the example of a colleague and place the themes on a list and ask students to vote on which topic to cover next. When I finish that unit, which may take anywhere from six to eight weeks, the list goes back up, the students add more topics if they like, and they vote again. (Since they are level two students, sometimes I put pictures up next to items on the list to help them decipher the vocabulary.) This past year, the students concluded most thematic units with projects. For example, at the end of a unit on maps and directions, the students composed directions to their homes, and we all used one student's work when she invited the class over for dinner. At the end of a unit on reading the newspaper, the students created their own newspaper, writing columns, horoscopes, an advice column, and drawing cartoons.

Spontaneous themes sometimes emerge from my own reading of our class dynamics, or when I want to emphasize alternatives to the dominant US culture. For example, I often highlight Muslim culture and holidays and ask Muslim students if they are willing to present their traditions, since their peers have expressed a lack of knowledge of the words mosque, Muslim, and Ramadan, and why students leave the room to pray. If difficult or large-scale political or news events occur, I provide time in class to discuss and explore them, and develop them further as themes if students are interested. If a difficult issue has arisen in class, such as an offensive comment or a conflict between students, I try to address it quickly through the curriculum and in a class discussion.

### **Materials**

Based on the themes and goals the students have chosen, I use whatever materials are needed to build students' abilities to address their goals: this often includes what I call "real life" material, but not necessarily or exclusively. The term "real-life" implies to me certain survival-level and practical themes related to daily life in the community, such as shopping, getting jobs, and transportation, which are often - but not always - the themes students choose. Others use the terms "real life" and "authentic" fairly interchangeably, and apply them to a wider range of materials. Nunan (1988) uses the term "authentic" materials to describe those that "reflect the outside world," and "have been produced for purposes other than to teach language" (p. 99). Purcell-Gates and colleagues (2001) describe authentic materials, or

learner-contextualized materials, as print materials that occur naturally in the lives of learners outside of their adult education classrooms (p. 19). Some obvious examples are newspapers, magazines, bills, maps, job applications, or novels. Radio broadcasts, music, television, or videos can be considered authentic "listening" materials, and an important element of ESOL.

I also use technology - mostly computers, but occasionally tape recorders, cameras, or camcorders as well - for real life purposes. While I occasionally use an ESOL software program to reinforce a theme or language skill in a traditional "school" way (for a drill, for example), I focus on creating lessons that allow learners to use the computer in ways they want to outside of the classroom. For example, my students have set up e-mail accounts, looked up information from their countries, examined web sites created by other ESOL learners, contacted legislators, learned games, practiced typing, and typed their own writing using the computer.

I use real life materials to connect further the theme the students have chosen to their learning goals. Widdowson (1990) points out that it is not the text or source itself that fosters student learning, but rather students' engagement with it. Poorly selected or presented authentic - real life - materials can be irrelevant or inaccessible to students. Collaborating with students to choose themes and materials is an important aspect of ensuring that materials are meaningful to the learners, but so is ensuring that the materials are accessible.

### **What It Looks Like**

Once the class has decided upon a topic, I ask the students for more details. For example, my students recently voted to review maps and directions, so I asked them what maps they found difficult, and which ones they wanted to practice. A few said the "T" (Boston subway) map was pretty easy, but the Massachusetts or Boston neighborhood maps could be very difficult. Since they were familiar with the "T" map, I used it to introduce and practice new vocabulary and to review prepositions, which seemed to be difficult for them. I introduced the other two maps once they were more comfortable with giving and getting directions.

In that example, the students used actual "real-life" materials as a basis to learn to use more difficult authentic materials. But sometimes students cannot immediately use the materials in the ways that native speakers may use them. Widdowson (1990) discusses how "meanings are achieved by human agency, and are negotiable; they are not contained in the text." I need to present the materials in a way that students can create the most meaning from them, and therefore I may need to scaffold them into a particular text or media. For example, when

the class and I look at bills together, we sometimes examine small pieces of the statement at a time. We do preliminary brainstorming on the parts and difficulties of bills. If students want to work together on filling out job applications, for example, they might create work and education time lines as a first step before jumping to the format of actual applications. We might do some games, activities, or exercises to reinforce new concepts or vocabulary found in the materials.

Last year, students wanted to read newspapers, such as the *Boston Globe*, the *Metro*, and the *Boston Herald*. Yet my students find even *News for You*, a newspaper written for adult learners and published by New Readers Press (see [www.news-for-you.com](http://www.news-for-you.com)), very challenging, and, for a few learners, overwhelming. Many students, for example, have difficulty understanding the difference between "article" and "advertisement," and differentiating an article from an advertisement in the newspaper. Many do not know how to use the index or list of contents. I scoured the popular papers for articles that were short and accessible to some, and also conducted activities that familiarized students with the formats of newspapers. In addition, I provided them with opportunities to discuss and build their knowledge of current events, by watching the TV news or reading newspapers from their home countries online and reporting on the articles in English in class or small groups. So although they did not use the newspapers as full reading texts, they increased their abilities to navigate and understand the media, as well as to discuss current news topics.

### **Practicing Conversation "Authentically"**

Using authentic materials can be a struggle when students want to focus on conversation. This past fall, students chose the theme "conversations with the doctor." How can I replicate individual doctor conversations? I can't bring their individual doctors in, so I created situations to simulate conversations, and had them practice with each other. After they chose health topics they wanted

to practice discussing, they used "authentic materials" to do some research. The medical pamphlets, encyclopedias, and health books were often too difficult, so a volunteer tutor and I simplified a few passages, and provided videos and children's health books on the topics as well. Then they used tape recorders to tape spontaneous dialogues on their topics. The students transcribed and edited their dialogue, then retaped them in a more rehearsed way. We used these tapes as the texts for listening and comprehension, as well as the transcripts for reading texts.

This undertaking was our project-based component. In between these activities, we had

conversations about problems people had with the doctor, and we compared American hospitals and concepts of health and medicine with those of the students' native countries. The students read photo-stories (created by adult learners) and short books (created for adult learners) on breast cancer and debated the question of prescribing medicine for children diagnosed as hyperactive. They also shared opinions and stories on these issues, and gave presentations on their stories.

### **Student-Created Materials**

My students often create things, such as the transcriptions of dialogues described above, as well as newsletters, tapes, or stories that, with permission, I can use in future classes. Sometimes, students take pictures at work, or bring in objects from their home as sources for conversation or writing. I use learner-created materials to provide texts that are relevant and meaningful to my students. The materials are usually accessible to others in my class, and they create a base of learning that is centered on the class's own knowledge. Students appreciate reading the work of their peers, and I want to use the inherent power of my position as a teacher to validate students' work as rich texts.

### **Integrating Specific Language Skills**

When students need to review specific language skills, I intentionally integrate activities that focus on those skills. For example, I present the structures, and then incorporate activities for students to self-edit, paying attention to these particular structures in their own texts. I lead a few drills and games to practice an isolated pattern, and I try to draw on the students' native language knowledge to help them understand or analyze a particular language structure. To the extent possible, I use students' own work as well as the thematic topic as the point of departure for work with grammar.

### **Old Favorites**

Regardless of what themes or language topics learners choose, I always assign dialogue journals, which involve correspondence between individual students and me. The journals help students to develop their abilities and provide more individualized opportunities for skill development than activities that are more collectively created. They are by nature on-going and run concurrently to the shorter-term thematic units. I don't mark the journals, but provide students with feedback via the questions I pose. I also model correct spelling or structures within my response letter. The students also keep free-writing journals, in which, twice a month, they write without any restrictions on topic, without any editing or correction of grammar. Both journals give students an opportunity to reflect and explore about personal

topics that might interest or concern them. For example, sometimes students write about why their work day was difficult, or that it's their child's birthday. Their entries provide me with insight into what shapes or affects them as learners.

I also have students engage in reading circles or specialized circles throughout the year. In the former, students choose from a list of some longer books to read (often texts created by and/or for adult learners), and separate into groups based on their choices. The books can take up to 10 weeks for the students to finish. These groups meet once a week during class to read and discuss the books together, with pre-reading or post-reading activities specific for their book. When students finish these reading circles, I introduce specialized circles, for which students choose an area of focus: speaking and listening, reading, or writing. These groups then meet once a week and focus on activities for their specific needs, often ending with a small project or presentation to share with the class. Individual spelling or vocabulary cards provide students with reinforcement for spelling or word issues - not theme-based - that have been difficult for them. Some students have fewer cards, and some students do not need the same amount of review. All these activities provide more individualized opportunities for students to focus on vocabulary or topics that are difficult or interesting for them.

### **In Conclusion**

One of my highest priorities in building curriculum is that the material is drawn from learners' lives, and that the students are continually part of shaping the curriculum. As a result, I have an emergent, theme-based curriculum, where I integrate student-created and authentic materials on a regular basis. I use authentic - real-life - materials in multiple ways, and I also integrate other sources such as stories created for adult learners, student-created texts, poetry, as well as some workbook, but more often teacher-created, activities. Sometimes I forget to go to the students for further ideas, and sometimes I get too focused on a student's ability to do isolated skills. Yet the structures I have set in place for building curriculum keep bringing me back to students for ideas and focus.

Collaborating with students to create a theme-based curriculum is always dynamic. Each class has slightly different needs and goals. New facets of a familiar topic emerge as individuals bring their own experiences to the discussions that shape our agenda. Each year brings new topics and interests as well. When I approach a new or repeated topic, the collective process makes each unit unique.

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