



Adult Learners in SLW (Part 1): Content-Based Instruction

by [Rebeca Fernández](#)

In the digital age, writing has become a routine aspect of social, educational, and workplace communications. Consider a call center worker or the attendant at a car repair shop, whose job can entail reporting on conversations with customers or describing repair work, respectively, into a computer database. For the individual pursuing a job requiring a 4-year degree, the rhetorical demands and amount of writing are even greater (Droz & Jacobs, 2019). Yet, for several years, the National Association of Colleges and Employers' (2021) *Job Outlook 2022* survey of employers has pointed to the gap between employers' expectations and the proficiency in communication skills, including writing, of recent college graduates.

Writing is especially important to immigrant and refugee students, who require it, along with other English literacy skills, to pursue further education and achieve economic self-sufficiency in their new country. In the adult English as a second language (ESL)/English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) programs that serve them, a focus on writing can support multiple language skills and modes (Fernandez, 2019) while also facilitating content learning (Manchón, 2011).

Content-Based Instruction in Adult Education

Content-based instruction (CBI) is a pedagogical approach to second language teaching characterized by the following (Brinton et al., 2003):

1. Language is learned as part of a content area course, unit, or lesson.
2. The sequence and form of language learning are dictated by the content.
3. The content is determined by the academic needs and interests of the learners.
4. Learning builds on learners' knowledge, language, and previous learning experiences.

Many non-credit-bearing adult education program courses rely on some variation of CBI. Although CBI courses often focus on unpacking class readings or lecture material, such courses are also rife with robust opportunities for writing (Brinton & Griner, 2019) that teachers may overlook without quality professional development on the teaching of writing (Fernández et al. 2017).

The following will provide adult ESL instructors with a step-by-step guide for designing theme-based courses for CBI that expand opportunities for students to write for different audiences and

purposes, while improving their vocabulary, grammar, speaking, listening, and reading skills. It features an example of a theme-based CBI course I taught in collaboration with a local history museum and funded through the English Literacy and Civics (EL/Civics) grant program.

A Quick Guide to Designing a Writing-Centered Content-Based Instruction Course

Before delving into design, instructors should know that CBI course development is often iterative and not set in stone. A general roadmap for teaching and learning is helpful in the beginning, but components of the course, especially writing tasks and assignments, may have to be modified or added to address student needs and interests as they arise. The following questions, though not necessarily in this order, can help in the early planning stage (adapted from Brinton et al., 2003):

- What are the goals for and expected outcomes of this specific program or course?
- What approach/model/format will you use?
- Who are the learners, and what are their needs and interests, now and in the future?
- What authentic materials can you find and use?
- What instructional strategies will you use?
- How will you know that course goals are being achieved?

1. Set Student-Centered Goals, Whenever Possible

Course topics and goals in U.S. federally funded adult ESL programs are often created in response to local workforce development needs, assessment targets, and funding requirements. Although these constraints limit the setting of student-centered goals in the early stages of planning, adding general writing goals under communication skills may help set the tone for writing among students.

➤ *Real-Life Example*

The goals of the CBI course featured in this article, known colloquially as the “museum course,” were initially established by my supervisor, the Adult ESL Program director, who was inspired by Columbia Teachers’ College Museum Education courses. In her grant application, she persuasively argued for the alignment of EL/Civics objectives and the knowledge of local history, community integration, and increased parental involvement that students could achieve by partnering with the Levine Museum of the New South, a local history museum and field trip destination for the area’s public school students. This rationale became the basis for the initial course goals. In addition, because students had to demonstrate progress on the CASAS reading test, the writing goals could be justified from the beginning.

2. Create a Tentative Framework in Advance

A CBI syllabus may be approached in several ways, depending on whether the course is adjoined or stand-alone. If paired with a credit-bearing content course, the CBI course may follow that course’s syllabus structure and weekly assignments to help students meet that course’s

objectives. An autonomous, theme-based CBI course may afford instructors greater flexibility. Syllabi may be organized around essential questions or topics centered on a common theme and/or a chronology of events. Language skills and content knowledge can then be shaped by the materials available, as discussed in the next section.

➤ *Real-Life Example*

I designed the museum course around the Levine Museum of the New South’s permanent exhibit, which documents the history of the region since the Civil War through a series of dioramas, each the title of a unit theme. To enhance opportunities to write, each unit included

- a warm-up writing activity (sometimes done collaboratively or used in a think-pair-share activity afterwards),
- an authentic reading sample,
- focus-on-form work,
- discussion topics,
- an extended writing prompt, and
- practice CASAS test questions (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sample Syllabus Framework and Unit From the Museum Course

Theme	Informal Writing	Reading	Language Focus	Discussion	Extended Writing	Civics (CASAS)
From Cotton to Cloth	Describe your first job.	Textile Industry Industrialization in the South (article)	Phrasal verbs and new vocabulary	Which was better: The mill or the farm?	Should child labor be allowed?	Employment laws

3. Take Advantage of Digital Tools to Select and Modify Authentic Materials

Authentic materials allow adult ESL students, who are often isolated by language and other social barriers, to interact with real-world discourses in meaningful ways (Roberts & Cooke, 2009). In the writing-enhanced CBI classroom, authentic materials accessed on the internet can become the basis for rich conversations and a springboard to writing, provided they are scaffolded sufficiently for students. With the help of digital tools, hyperlinking, glossing, translating, or adding images can make materials more accessible and support the learning of unfamiliar words.

Authentic texts (e.g., readings, films, podcasts) do not have to be used in their entirety. A podcast clip can be turned into a meaningful dictation activity, used to generate discussion and, for more advanced students, as the basis for extended writing. Students at all levels can also practice writing skills by captioning videos, memes, or other visual material.

➤ *Real-Life Example*

In the museum course, images and excerpts of archival documents worked well as authentic materials. Students at all levels could describe historical photographs, however

simply, and empathize in writing with the humble lives of sharecroppers laboring to support their families under harsh conditions.

4. Design Writing Tasks According to Students’ Learning Needs and Interests

Although there are six educational functioning levels in adult ESL (National Reporting System, 2019), most classes are multilevel, even when students enrolled perform similarly on the placement test. Assessing students informally by asking them to complete a personal writing task at the start of the course can assist you in setting individual writing goals for students and planning appropriate writing tasks and activities. Table 2, compiled from data in a national survey of adult ESL teachers (Fernández et al., 2017), may also provide a useful comparison.

Table 2. Writing Focus of Adult ESL Instructors by Educational Functioning Level With Related Genres and Sample Activities (Adapted from Fernández et al., 2017)

	Levels 1–2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
Writing Focus	Sentence construction, spelling, vocabulary, basic syntax, and subject-verb agreement with short sentences; keyboarding	Constructing longer sentences, prepositions, subject-verb agreement, simple connectors	Paragraph construction, including topic sentence and supporting details; connectors and prepositions; netiquette	Extended writing with a clear purpose and supporting evidence; prepositions and connectors	Source-based writing (longer than 1 page); summarizing, quoting, and citation; avoiding plagiarism
Genres	Short personal statements or comments	Informational writing	Public online writing	Professional writing	Source-based academic writing
Sample Activities	Dictation, captioning a meme or other image, exchanging simple text messages	Collaborative writing of a step-by-step process or a recipe in list form.	Online customer/product review or social media post	Cover letter or email to child’s teacher	Reading response or short (3–5 pp) research paper

➤ *Real-Life Example*

Designed for Levels 3 and 4, the museum course’s writing tasks tended to produce student texts from a few sentences to two-thirds of a page in length. I used readings, graphic organizers, and sentence templates to support students at different levels with the tasks. Assignments were also modified and enriched as students shared their rich funds of knowledge. For instance, during a discussion about a reading passage about traditional cotton farming, a group of students who had woven cotton thread from a young age described the cotton-to-cloth process to the class, prompting me to modify the writing assignment so that students could apply new vocabulary (e.g., *bud*, *blossom*, *boll*), demonstrate their content expertise, and expand their language skills.

5. Assess Student Progress and Course Goals Through Writing

Writing can allow you to gauge and document student progress toward their personal and course goals in ways that are more individualized than standardized listening or reading tests and avoid the time-induced anxiety of speaking tests. For CBI writing tasks to align to course goals, you will need to elicit more than personal writing throughout the course.

As with the sample unit in Table 1, you may ask students for personal writing as a lesson warm-up or to make sense of new information. A quick glance at students' informal writing at the start of a unit or student comments in a collaborative annotation platform, such as [NowComment](#), can act as a formative guide for subsequent reading and language instruction. As the class progresses into the unit theme, asking students to refer to readings or discussions in extended writing can help you determine whether progress toward content and language objectives is being made.

To support learning, these longer drafts will require more attention. Ferris (2019) lists best practices for responding to student work, among them, meeting individually with students to focus on priority areas, such as content and organization. With respect to language, identifying unclear passages may be the most efficient approach in the first draft (Campbell et al., 2020). During 2- to 3-hour adult ESL classes, you may use class time to read drafts and hold writing conferences, ideally in a computer lab; because not all students compose or keyboard at the same rate, you'll have time to work on meetings with all students.

Conclusion

Writing-enhanced CBI tacitly acknowledges that students benefit from participating in multiple forms of writing. From consolidating word knowledge by handwriting notes from the board, to practicing listening comprehension through dictation exercises, to developing rhetorical knowledge by writing paragraphs and essays, writing can be as much an act of the mind as it is of communication. It can support deep learning of content and language as well as create a space for students to gather their thoughts, find community, and advance in their employment or educational goals.

The next two parts of this series on adult learners in second language writing explore other ways that adult ESL/ESOL instructors can incorporate more writing into their courses. In Part 2, Joy Kreeft Peyton offers strategies for stimulating and scaffolding student writing at multiple levels. Part 3 by Kirsten Schaezel addresses concerns about writing and assessment by guiding instructors on the use of test prompts to teach academic writing.

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