

Curriculum Matters: A Comparative Analysis of Three Adult ESOL Curricula

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Adult education programs arose from a growing understanding of the importance of educating adults, including the many immigrants and refugees who want to learn English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL; Sandlin & St. Clair, 2005). Many community-based programs that offer English classes have been fortunate to find volunteers who take time out of their busy schedules to teach these adult learners (Vinogradova & Ross, 2019). While some volunteers, as well as part-time paid staff, may have a background in education, many do not. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that community-based programs have the necessary tools to offer practical initial training and ongoing professional development to practitioners. Given the reality that programs are often staffed by part-time teachers and/or volunteers, the quality of curricular resources plays an outsized role. Hence, it is imperative to evaluate instructional resources as well as any accompanying training materials that are available from the publishers.

Overview of Adult ESOL Curricula

The curriculum chosen at a community-based organization is a foundational decision to ensure the needs of adult English learners are met. This review analyzes three popular curricula used around the world in the field of adult ESOL: *Burlington English Core*, *Stand Out*, and *Side by Side Extra*. The comparison of each resource highlights these aspects of the curricula: (a) instructional approach, (b) integration of digital literacy, (c) alignment with the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS) standards, (d) accessible assessment tools, (e) integration of culturally relevant andragogy, (f) available training resources, and (g) cost.

Table 1 provides a concise overview of *Burlington English Core*, *Stand Out*, and *Side by Side Extra* to support community-based programs to consider which curriculum best fits their organization and the needs of the adult learners they serve.

Discussion

This review compares three popular adult ESOL curricula to offer some guidance to adult ESOL programs on their decision-making. The analysis of *Burlington English Core*, *Stand Out*, and *Side by Side Extra* reveals gaps, particularly within digital integration, culturally relevant andragogy, and instructor training and support. It also suggests how cost can affect the quality of the curriculum and highlights the additional resources offered by the publishers.

Digital Integration

Being digitally literate can open many doors for adult learners, particularly for those entering the workforce. In fact, digital literacy skills are imperative in the 21st century. While each curriculum includes a digital component, they are not equivalent. Since *Burlington English Core* is solely a digital platform, which can be accessed via web browser or app, its digital integration is more comprehensive than *Stand Out* and *Side by Side Extra*. *Burlington English Core* has embedded videos, audio clips, and interactive activities throughout each lesson. Additionally, students can complete a placement exam and module tests on the platform. Students also engage in lesson activities and homework assignments online and receive immediate feedback. *Side by Side Extra* offers an ebook of its material and some additional online activities for students to complete through FunZone.

TABLE 1: Adult ESL Curricula Comparison

	Burlington English Core (Burlington English, 2025)	Stand Out 4th Edition (Jenkins & Johnson, 2024)	Side by Side Extra (Molinksy & Bliss, 2016)
Instructional Approach	blended learning; intertwines language learning skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) with digital literacy skills	problem-based language learning with real-world applications	holistic approach to language learning focusing on speaking, listening, reading and writing; units heavily focus on grammar
Digital Integration	comprehensive digital platform that incorporates interactive/projectable in-class lessons, embedded videos, and skill-building activities with speech recognition technology; can be accessed via web browser or application	student ebooks through Spark platform and online videos that correlate with lessons; available via web browser or application	ebook and FunZone (digital skill building activities) via web browser
CASAS Standards Alignment	explicitly aligns with the workforce readiness and life skills sector	explicitly aligns with the workforce readiness and life skills sector	no clear alignment with CASAS standards
Assessment Tools	includes digital placement tests, print and digital end-of-module assessments, and digital progress tracking tools	includes digital placement tests, print and digital unit tests, and formative assessments implemented within each lesson	includes chapter checkup tests; unclear if curriculum includes placement tests
Culturally Relevant Andragogy	relevant real-life skills and topics discussed throughout the modules (e.g., getting a job, healthcare)	incorporates real stories from people across the world; uses problem-based learning to ensure real-life skills are being taught	no clear indication of culturally relevant andragogical approaches; curriculum uses cartoons versus pictures of real people/places
Instructor Training and Support	teacher resources available, extensive professional development, webinars and training sessions via website, instructor-training focused podcast, and physical support team available for in-person training	teacher resources with lesson-planning tools and webinars; professional development workshops via website	teacher resources, such as teacher edition, provided; webinars and blogs available via website
Cost	Highest Cost covers seat subscription, 12-month period, transferable if student leaves, and program updates automatically when changes are made	Medium Cost covers textbook and Spark digital platform	Lowest Cost covers the workbook and includes access to ebook and FunZone (additional digital activities for extra practice)

While FunZone does provide extra practice, the digital program itself is outdated and limited. As for *Stand Out*, the publishers have recently updated the fourth edition, adding the Spark platform where students can take tests. The Spark platform also provides “Life Online” sections that have been developed to support students to enhance their digital literacy skills (Jenkins & Johnson, 2024). Additionally, students have access to digital worksheets that align with workforce skills.

Culturally Relevant Andragogy

Culturally relevant andragogy is an essential component in teaching emergent multilingual adults. Intertwining

Ladson-Billings’ (1995) theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Knowles’ (1977) theory of andragogy affirms that adult learners deserve a curriculum that not only embraces their cultures and native languages but also focuses on supporting them to develop the skills needed in the real world.

A careful review of each curriculum’s website and resources reveals some significant differences regarding how each curriculum infuses culturally relevant andragogy within their program. While *Burlington English Core* and *Stand Out* include topics that promote andragogy concepts, such as connecting the students’ learning to their everyday lives

(e.g., career goals), *Side by Side Extra* focuses more on grammar concepts with no direct connection to real-world applications. Additionally, *Side by Side Extra* lacks authentic and relatable material due to its use of cartoon images compared to the photos and videos of real people from diverse backgrounds that are featured in *Burlington English Core* and *Stand Out*. Moreover, *Burlington English Core* and *Stand Out* infuse cultural diversity in their instructional activities, using various real-world scenarios. In contrast, *Side by Side Extra* lacks this cultural dimension, although an attempt is made by including cartoons that portray diverse races and ethnicities.

Instructor Training and Support

Without a doubt, initial training and ongoing professional development are foundational to ensure instructors are well-prepared to effectively teach adult English learners. While *Burlington English Core* and *Stand Out* both provide in-depth initial training for those who purchase their curriculum, *Side by Side Extra* offers fewer training options. For instance, *Burlington English Core* has regional representatives that can provide one-on-one training to programs that are implementing the curriculum. *Stand Out* also has local consultants that are available to explain how the textbook and Spark platform interact. While *Side by Side* does have webinars and blogs, the website itself is outdated compared to the other two curricular options' sites. *Burlington English* and *Stand Out* have modern websites with resources available for those who are interested in webinars or workshops. These websites are updated monthly and provide options for live webinars as well as access to recorded ones. These options give practitioners the flexibility to build their instructional toolboxes on their own time.

Cost

Providing quality programming for those they serve is at the forefront of community-based programs' missions. Yet, at times, community-based programs have to make difficult sacrifices to keep their doors open; quality curriculum should not be one of them. The curriculum can have long-term effects on adult English learners' progress and retention rates. It is perhaps no surprise that the least costly curriculum, *Side by Side Extra*, is the most limited regarding ongoing professional development, alignment to CASAS standards, alignment with culturally

relevant andragogy, and digital integration. These limitations can have an impact on adult learners who deserve high-quality programs. While *Side by Side Extra* is limited, it may be appropriate for more informal settings, such as conversation classes or for individuals learning English independently on a budget.

The curriculum that offers the most robust digital platform also costs the most: *Burlington English Core*. This curriculum includes automatic revisions, eliminating the need to purchase updates as well as physical replacements. The cost for *Burlington English Core* can be justified, especially for programs who want to integrate language learning with digital literacy skills. *Stand Out* offers a middle ground option and also aligns with CASAS standards. What it lacks in digital sophistication, compared to *Burlington English Core*, *Stand Out* makes up for by its affordability.

Recommendations

Based on this curriculum comparison, community-based programs should prioritize selecting a curriculum that intentionally incorporates culturally relevant andragogy and provides meaningful ongoing support for instructors. Since practitioners may not come from an educational background, access to ongoing professional development is key for the success of the tutors and learners alike. Community-based programs that decide on *Burlington English Core* or *Stand Out* would likely benefit from the training webinars and workshops provided through their websites. *Burlington English Core* even provides a free podcast created for instructors wanting to improve their practice. Since neither curriculum incorporates culturally relevant andragogy to an ideal extent, supplementing with additional resources would be valuable.

In addition, digital integration should be seen as non-negotiable when selecting curriculum. Instructional materials that integrate digital literacy is a valuable investment since it benefits adult learners beyond the classroom. *Burlington English Core* is a good option for programs that want to provide digital literacy instruction through language teaching, while *Stand Out* provides a cost-effective solution to those who want both a physical textbook and some digital integration. Understanding that cost and access to technology is a concern, especially

for programs with restricted budgets, *Side by Side Extra* could be an option. However, programs using *Side by Side* should consider offering additional basic digital skills classes as a supplement.

Adult education programs must not only evaluate their curriculum choices by cost but also by the long-term impact the instructional materials will have on practitioners, adult learners, and the community. Though *Side by Side* may be the most affordable, it lacks integration of digital skills and culturally relevant andragogy, as well as in-depth training support and explicit alignment to CASAS. Programs are advised to select curricula based on their specific community's needs, including their instructional goals and budget.

Conclusion

Community-based programs that serve emergent multilingual adults, with dedicated volunteer tutors by their side, make tough decisions daily to ensure they can continue to provide much needed services. Choosing

a curriculum is one of the most important decisions programs make. The goal of this review has been to offer guidance to decision makers on choosing which adult ESOL curriculum best fits the needs of their organization, particularly for volunteer tutors. When the curriculum features quality content, training, and digital integration, it can provide a strong foundation for any program's future.

Ultimately, no curriculum is perfect, which is why understanding each curriculum's strengths and limitations is key to making choices that lead to more impactful and effective instruction. Whether programs opt for the digitally savvy *Burlington English Core*, the balanced and standards-aligned *Stand Out*, or the budget-friendly *Side by Side Extra*, the key lies in understanding that each of these tools has pros and cons. The specific gaps that exist can be bridged to ensure that all adult learners receive the quality instruction they deserve.

While this article discusses only three of the many ESOL curricular resources currently available, the framework utilized here could well be drawn upon to review other curriculum products in the marketplace.

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