Virtually anything written or talked about in the English-speaking world can be content for English language study. So how are we to choose topics and organize our curricula? Our answers to this question keep evolving as the field pushes forward with new research, and as our own experience as teachers grows and deepens. Students, too, affect us, as their goals and interests develop in response to the world around them. The generation now entering colleges and universities, for example, may know more about world issues and movies but less about history and literature than previous generations. In designing textbooks for English language study, we must also consider sociopolitical and institutional circumstances. And of course, we have to deal with the fact that real-life conditions of schedules, teacher training, and educational policy may trump ideal formulations based on research, theories, and principles.

Yet, as educators, we are optimists; and as language educators, we are seekers. While our ideals may not immediately translate into actual classroom practice, our goal is to take what we learn from research and experience and try to come up with engaging, authentic, and timely lessons that make language learning come alive. This goal has continually informed our teaching, and it provided the inspiration and foundation for the NorthStar program.

—Frances Boyd and Carol Numrich
**Five Key Principles**

The NorthStar program is based on five general principles of language learning and teaching.

**Principle One:** In language learning, making meaning is all important. The more profoundly students are stimulated intellectually and emotionally, the more language they will generate and retain (Brown, 2001; Lightbown and Spada, 1999). One particularly effective way that teachers can engage students in making meaning is by organizing language study thematically.

**Principle Two:** Second- or foreign-language learners need and want to learn both the form and content of the language. To accomplish this, it is crucial to integrate the study of grammar and vocabulary with rich culture.

**Principle Three:** Both teachers and students need to be active learners. Teachers must encourage students to go beyond whatever level of acquisition they have reached. Teachers, too, must feel they are learning along with their students.

**Principle Four:** Feedback is essential for language learners and teachers. If students are to become better able to express themselves in English, they need responses to both what they are expressing and how they are expressing it. Teachers need multiple opportunities to provide such feedback.

**Principle Five:** The quality of relationships among students and between the students and teacher is crucial, particularly when students are asked to express themselves on issues and ideas. Materials can and should be designed to encourage interaction and build community.

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**Key Concepts**

In addition to the five general principles for curriculum organization and topic development, the NorthStar approach is grounded in two more specific concepts: the importance of content and the need for critical thinking in language learning.

**Content**

In recent years, content-based instruction has become increasingly widespread in teaching English as a second or foreign language (Stoller and Grabe, 1997; Richard-Amato, 2003). In some ESL/EFL textbooks, content is linked directly to traditional academic disciplines such as biology, fine arts, or history. However, Richard-Amato points out that most language classes are usually independent of other subject areas in the school or university. Moreover, many ESL classes include a broad range of students with mixed goals and interests. Thus, language instruction as preparation for academic study can be problematic when limited to teaching content that prepares students for specific fields. An alternative approach is to include topics chosen for their thought-provoking qualities. When topics that are both interdisciplinary and universal in scope provide the base of the language curriculum, the content engages a greater proportion of students and at the same time presents key issues and vocabulary that are central to understanding and working within the various areas of academic study. Further, when content is fresh, or even unusual, both students and teachers become more engaged in the teaching process, resulting in more energetic exchanges and thus, in greater learning.

The NorthStar series teaches a variety of language skills through an exploration of
contemporary content-rich material. The content presents numerous perspectives—at times complementary, at other times opposing—that encourage student curiosity and motivation. With two listening selections or two reading selections in each unit, students explore diverse viewpoints from multiple print and non-print sources, allowing for in-depth engagement with a particular topic or theme. Thus, students learn meaningful content and language skills simultaneously. With sustained content, a natural recycling of vocabulary and grammatical structures unfolds. NorthStar then enhances this natural recycling with intentional recycling of language by carefully scaffolding language practice within each unit. For example, if students have studied vocabulary in a pre-listening exercise, they will not only hear that vocabulary in the listening material, but will work with it later in a vocabulary review activity, a grammar exercise, and in a freer activity, such as a role play or debate. Or, if a particular rhetorical structure is the focus of the writing style section, one of the reading selections might be reexamined for the structure's use in context, or that same structure could be used in designing questions for a fieldwork assignment. With repeated exposure to new language within diverse contexts and activities, students more readily internalize—and ultimately produce—the language on their own. Simply put, there are more opportunities for meaningful communication.

**Critical Thinking**

With more opportunities for meaningful communication come more opportunities for higher-level thinking tasks calling for analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. We believe that part of the mission of teacher and text is to promote and encourage complex thinking, especially when our students are preparing for academic and work contexts that will require them to think analytically as they become involved in decision-making processes. Our students must develop the necessary skills to absorb information, digest it, and make informed decisions about it.

Even though most educators would agree that critical thinking has an important role in teaching, there has been much debate over its definition, as well as its most appropriate method of instruction. Two camps of thinkers have emerged: the “psychologists,” who tend to believe that problems have correct, definable solutions, and the “philosophers,” who believe that many problems are ambiguous and often have no solutions. For the psychologists, educating our students means engaging them in analytical activities, those that sharpen the mind. For the philosophers, educating our students means engaging them in activities that broaden and challenge the mind, that teach tolerance of ambiguity and the willingness to reevaluate one's own assumptions.

We believe both views of critical thinking are important in language learning. Like many educators, the NorthStar authors use an “infused” approach (Swartz, 2000), in which thinking skills are blended into content-based instruction. By providing an abundance of activities at all language levels, students infer from and interpret text, categorize and synthesize both discrete language points and broader concepts, and evaluate and judge the vantage points of writers and speakers as well as their own.

**Conclusion**

The NorthStar series offers one kind of answer to the question of how to choose topics and organize curriculum for English language study. In language education, we
strive to meet students where they are and empower them to move forward with increased knowledge, skill, and confidence. To accomplish this, the series starts at an introductory level and in five progressive levels, moves students to an advanced language level. Along this path, students and teachers become engaged in fifty different themes, developed through print, audio, visual, and other media.

In each book of the series, students are challenged to focus inward to discover their knowledge, preferences, doubts; to look around themselves to gather, comprehend, and manipulate information and opinions with other people; and finally, to explore beyond the confines of the classroom in order to participate in larger conversations across national and linguistic borders.

“Language is the house of being,” wrote the philosopher Martin Heidegger. We would say that our goal is to create a series of textbooks that help students construct their unique houses out of rich content, choose where they want to build these houses through critical-thinking processes, and become aware of their neighbors. Ultimately, we hope that the NorthStar series will help students “be”—in all of their dimensions—in English.

References


