

Developing targeted technology standards for Avenue language instructors, programs, and learners: An initiative of New Language Solutions

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Abstract

In August 2020 a new platform for adult newcomer language instruction was released by New Language Solutions (NLS) on Avenue.ca. NLS recognized the need for standards to support effective use of Avenue and technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) in online and blended classes. Concluding that existing technology standards from ISTE and TESOL were too broad for their purposes, NLS initiated a project to develop their own technology standards for Avenue stakeholders including instructors, programs, and learners. These would not be performance evaluation tools but rather best used for self-assessment and for guiding local innovation. Here we report on that initiative, which was introduced at TESL Ontario 2023, focusing on the instructor standards as they are currently the most fully developed.

Background

Since 2010, New Language Solutions (NLS) has provided a learning management solution (LMS) to front line settlement language training providers funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). The federal government contracts about 230 community colleges, school boards, and community organizations to improve the official language skills of newcomers and provide them orientation to life in Canada: Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) for English learners and Cours de langue



pour les immigrants au Canada (CLIC) for French. Newcomers are eligible for full or part-time LINC or CLIC instruction before they achieve Canadian citizenship.

The original LMS solution was hosted at EduLINC.org and built on the Moodle open-source and license-free platform. In August 2020, an enhanced solution was released as Avenue.ca. Currently almost half of the LINC and CLIC programs implement Avenue in their programs. In any 30-day period, Avenue has about 20,000 active users and hosts almost 2,000 teacher's courses across Canada (except Quebec). In September 2023, the Ontario government's newcomer language training programs gained access to Avenue after agreement with IRCC, doubling the potential Avenue user base.

The IRCC-funded sector is aligned with the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBs) language skills taxonomy. Task-based learning is mandated by the funders, and portfolio-based language assessment (PBLA) is the standardized approach to classroom assessment and learner progression. Avenue.ca provides an e-portfolio alternative to physical binders. Avenue supports a full range of learning modalities: blended/hybrid, HyFlex or online remote. Instructors are trained to adapt the course to their local context, and have control over the features, functions, and e-curriculum available to learners.

The COVID-19 crisis and the emergency remote teaching it spawned made it clear that language teachers need to be better prepared in understanding and using technology than many were. However, this realization was not new: A number of papers have argued that such preparation is needed (e.g., Nozawa, 2019), and organizations such as TESOL have had standards in place for years to address that need (Healey et al., 2011; TESOL, 2008). Yet despite the recognition of the value of such standards (Sun, 2022), they have failed to gain widespread traction. One reason is that standards like those of TESOL designed to be applicable to any language learning environment are not an ideal fit when used in their entirety for specific contexts (Hubbard, 2021). Here, we report on an initiative of New Language Solutions (NLS) to develop a set of targeted technology standards aimed at instructors in the Canadian settlement language sector. This article expands on our talk at TESL Ontario 2023. We also describe ongoing actions for sector consultation, dissemination, and adoption.

The plan is for the instructor technology standards being developed for this sector to be threaded into NLS's four stages of expertly mentored online teacher training. As well, the standards are already being integrated into Avenue Leadership Training for administrators and lead teachers. Importantly, these instructor standards will be complemented by sets of technology standards for programs and learners, described briefly later in the paper.



The development process

In February 2023, the team recruited by NLS for this project began their work. The team included three members of the task force that developed the TESOL Technology Standards (TESOL, 2008)—Phil Hubbard, Deborah Healey, and Greg Kessler—along with Canadian colleague Sharon Rajabi. Others centrally involved in the discussions were Rob McBride, John Allan, and Matthias Sturm from NLS.

The process of developing the instructor standards was fully online and yet highly collaborative. Beginning in February 2023, the team met on Zoom every week or two for 90 minutes or more, more than 30 times by the end of 2023. Although we worked offline on specific individual assignments as well, the online collaborative meetings represented the great majority of the total development time on the project.

Early on, we decided that our goal should be a set of reasonable, achievable standards relevant to the sector. We first revisited the TESOL standards and those of the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) as well as other relevant sources. Individually, we generated and shared an initial list of principles, aiming for a compact set that teachers would find manageable. After discussing these and reconciling differences, we used the results to draft an initial set of eight standards, which we later reduced to seven (vs. 14 for TESOL).

We strove to make the language of the standards and performance indicators (PIs) as direct and clear as possible. For example, the initial Standard 2 was “Teachers are able to use technology to identify and meet current and future needs of learners and to reflect critically on this practice.” This was later rewritten directly and precisely: “Understand and use a basic set of relevant technology resources and tools for language teaching and continue to update and expand this set regularly.” It is worth noting that we deliberately use terms such as basic and relevant without fully defining them. Even within the community of Avenue users and the settlement language sector at large, the interpretation of basic and relevant may differ depending on the context.

PIs went through similar shifts. For instance, the general indicator, Supporting learners’ plurilinguistic and pluricultural selves,’ was originally under Standard 2, which is about using tools and digital resources. It was ultimately reconceptualized into a more direct form: Model equitable practices by incorporating learners’ wealth of linguistic and cultural resources in technology use. It was then moved under Standard 4, covering areas of digital literacy and digital citizenship.

This is just a small sample of the collaborative process we used to develop the current versions of the standards and PIs as well as the other elements (text expansions, vignettes, and can-do statements). We



worked through shared online documents in Microsoft Teams, and many of the revisions occurred in real time during our many online meetings.

Overview of the instructor standards

Here is an abbreviated overview of the instructor standards. Readers can find a link to the full set of standards and support materials in the conclusion.

There are seven standards targeting the specific needs of the settlement language sector in Canada. Each standard is introduced with a short description as follows:

Standard 1 is about using devices and systems skillfully.

Standard 2 is about tools and digital resources.

Standard 3 is about technology-enhanced pedagogy.

Standard 4 is about digital literacy and digital citizenship for yourself and your learners.

Standard 5 is about using technology to help all learners thrive.

Standard 6 is about communicating with learners and observing their progress.

Standard 7 is about establishing and maintaining professional connections online.

Below is Standard 4 with its seven performance indicators (PIs). Each PI has an explanatory text, a reflection question, and a set of “can-do” statements for self-evaluation. We have included these for the first PI.

Standard 4 is about digital literacy and digital citizenship for yourself and your learners.

Be aware of and model the use of technology in safe, legal, ethical, and equitable ways.

PI 4.1. Guide learners to make positive and socially responsible contributions online.

In a blended, hybrid, or fully online class, learners are often expected to attend a synchronous session, engage in pair or group work, ask questions, or present to their peers. This may be a frustrating experience if your learners do not participate as planned. You may be compensating by doing the speaking most of the time. To create a welcoming class, acknowledge early on that the dynamics in a Big Blue Button or Zoom session are different than in-person sessions. This can help address learner anxiety and inhibitions. For example, you could dedicate the first session to an orientation about how and why the dynamics in an online class are different. Encourage your learners to ask questions. Introduce guidelines around active participation, group or pair work, turn-taking, and agreeing or disagreeing with peers respectfully in synchronous and asynchronous sessions. Incorporate in your daily plans multiple and varied opportunities for learners to ask questions and provide feedback.

Reflection: Think of strategies and practices that you incorporate in your online sessions. What works and what doesn't work? What would you do differently next time?



___ I help learners understand how to be respectful and collaborative in synchronous or asynchronous online sessions.

___ I encourage my learners—especially those who are quiet—to actively participate online.

___ I revisit recurring issues that my learners experience to ensure that an online interaction feels as comfortable as an in-person one.

PI 4.2. Know how to access and select safe resources online and share this knowledge with learners.

PI 4.3. Acknowledge learners' ownership of their online work.

PI 4.4. Learn about ethical use of technology and follow local, provincial, and national online privacy, copyright, and fair dealing regulations.

PI 4.5 Stay abreast of legal and ethical issues related to the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools.

PI 4.6 Model equitable practices by incorporating learners' wealth of linguistic and cultural resources in technology use.

PI 4.7. Model online behaviors that show respect for diversity in opinion, identity, and cultural practices.

To bring the standards to life, they are accompanied by a set of vignettes showing in detail how exemplary instructors have interpreted the standards in their courses. For example, a vignette from Jennifer Chow (Appendix A) describes how she has connected her Think-Aloud method in writing classes to elements of three of the technology standards: Standard 2 (tools and digital resources), Standard 3 (technology-enhanced pedagogy) and Standard 6 (communicating with learners and observing their progress).

Evaluation and implementation

Once we had a draft of the instructor standards in place that the team found satisfactory, we sent it to a Canadian university colleague who provided his feedback along with that of other faculty in applied linguistics and language teacher education. A number of their suggestions are reflected in the current form. Their responses also led us to add notes to teacher educators and program administrators clarifying the purpose of the standards.

Dissemination of the Avenue Standards for TELL focuses on the publication and distribution of the standards and their integration into Canadian language teaching sectors and key Avenue training initiatives. This dissemination plan is designed to weave the standards seamlessly into the fabric of teacher training, ensuring that educators are aware and trained with these standards throughout Avenue professional development. Avenue teacher training includes four stages of training that require up to eighty-five hours to complete. Only two of these training stages are mandatory.



Additionally, the Avenue leadership microcredentials integrate the technology standards throughout, including the teacher, student, and service provider individual microcredentials. The leadership microcredentials, which culminate in a capstone assignment, require participants to devise either a personal or an organizational plan aimed at enhancing the adoption of learning technologies, a critical step in advancing educational methodologies.

Taking those plans a step further, an Avenue course template is being developed to provide a local venue option for all the professionals in a service provider to innovate together and take their personal and shared practice to another level of standards implementation.

The emphasis is on the integration of these standards into all Avenue training, ensuring a consistent and thorough understanding of these guidelines among educators and leaders. A specialized course will be available for Service Provider Organization (SPOs), tailored to facilitate local integration of the standards. To make these standards more accessible, they will be made available in dual digital formats, including PDF and flipbook versions, which can be printed if required. Significant revisions are also planned for the LearnIT2teach Leadership Guide, incorporating chapters that specifically address these new standards. The Canadian language teaching community has been and will continue to be informed of the progress and continued integration of the technology standards through project communications including conference presentation, local workshop, webinars, social media posts, consultations, and professional articles. These initiatives will collectively endeavor to embed the standards deeply into educational practices, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and technological advancement in learning environments.

As a part of the sector-wide dissemination of the Avenue Standards for TELL and their integration in the instructor training and leadership course, a narrower stakeholder consultation of selected SPOs will generate data to evaluate the impact of operationalizing the standards. In this consultation, LINC clients, instructors and program administrators provide feedback. Clients follow a lesson plan developed to orient them to the learner standards and use a self-assessment tool. Instructors engage in reflective practice by self-evaluating how they are meeting the instructor standards or working towards them and the impact their adoption has on their teaching. Program administrators review the program standards to self-assess which standards their programs already meet or are on track to meet and which standards are priorities for continuous improvement, including making available instructor professional development and in-service supports.

The dissemination and consultation of the Avenue Standards for TELL will ensure that SPOs and instructors have access to formal and informal professional development and in-service supports to operationalize them. An impact analysis of the efforts of selected agencies will provide insights that will be reported on



to IRCC and to sector stakeholders at TESL conferences and in forums with instructors, Lead Instructors, and PBLA leads. Our aim is to build a community of practice, serving as a source for guidance for better practices and for TESL community presentations on the use of the standards in instructional practice and program-wide implementation.

Brief overview of program and learner standards

The Avenue Technology Standards for Language Programs assist administrators at all levels when making and implementing decisions about technology use. Collaboration is encouraged; programs are best served when stakeholders are well-informed, planning ahead, and working together to improve learner outcomes. The five standards may be implemented in different ways, depending on resources available, but they should guide decision-making and requests for funding. A checklist is included for self-assessment.

The Avenue Learning Technology Standards for Language Learners are designed to give instructors and administrators a framework for providing lessons and course offerings that build learner competence with technology, primarily for language learning and use. The aim is to enable learners to use digital tools to be more autonomous towards achieving their language goals. These standards are meant to work in concert with the instructor standards and the program standards.

As in instructor and program standards, learner standards include a guiding philosophy for the standards, followed by four standards with performance indicators and sub-indicators. Descriptive text is added where needed for clarification. Reflection questions are included for administrators and instructors, along with related tasks for learners. We anticipate including checklists and self-assessment tools that help instructors and learners chart learner readiness.

Conclusion

We have described the motivation, process, and product for technology standards targeting language instructors who use Avenue. We believe this project has value not only for that constituency, but also for the settlement language sector as a whole. Indeed, it offers a model of why and how to develop targeted technology standards for other specific contexts rather than relying exclusively on generic ones such as those of TESOL and ISTE.

The Avenue standards are not intended to assess professional practice on a pass or fail basis. They are not minimal standards, nor are they simply aspirational. Instead, they are designed to guide personal reflection and encourage uptake of better practices in teaching and learning by individual professionals, learners, or whole language training programs.



Over the next months and years, the standards will be disseminated in English and versioned into French. They are already influencing new National LINC/CLIC Curriculum Guidelines. In the next few years, the Canadian Language Benchmarks will be modernized. We anticipate that the standards will not only inform but also be informed by national frameworks as the sector evolves. Moreover, because technology and associated practices constantly evolve, the standards will be reviewed regularly and updated as needed.

The Avenue standards for instructors, programs, and learners with their support materials will be released under a Creative Commons license so that others may freely use and adapt them for non-commercial purposes (with attribution). NLS and the development team hope that the Avenue standards will guide development of learning technology standards beyond Canadian settlement language training. It is worth noting that NLS has articulated standards for itself as well. These are presented as a Mission, Vision, Values statement at <https://avenue.ca>.

Current versions of the standards and supporting documents can be found at <https://avenue.ca/>.

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Appendix A: Sample vignette

Jennifer Chow

The “Think Aloud” method: Technology-assisted language skills enhancement

By Ken Desson

Précis

The idea

When Jennifer Chow began teaching English as Another Language (EAL) at Vancouver Community College (VCC) in 2007, giving students effective feedback on self-paced spoken assignments was a challenge. When students learn to write, the mistakes they make are recorded on paper, making it easy to point out errors and assign remedial practice. Not so with speaking. If there is no way to record self-paced spoken exercises, errors are gone as soon as they are spoken. The search for a solution led Jennifer on a quest for a technology-assisted way to record, review, annotate, and help students reflect on spoken assignments. After trying several potential solutions over the years, she now uses a Think Aloud method—a software-based multimodal feedback-reflection loop to improve speaking skills.

The learners

Jennifer’s most recent blended learning class of 24 CLB-4/5 students ranged in age from 20 to 55, with the majority between 35 and 50. Class composition was diverse, with students from Ukraine, Turkey, Japan, Korea, Syria, Azerbaijan, Morocco, Afghanistan, and China. Coming from across the greater Vancouver area, the majority of daytime learners are female. Evening classes have a larger proportion of men. Unlike LINC, the VCC’s Pathways EAL program is open to Canadian citizens as well as newcomers. In the class of 24, three learners were citizens who had been in Canada for more than five years.

The approach

The Pathways program for CLB 5-8 learners is divided into two courses – Speaking and Listening and Reading and Writing. About 70% of students take both courses at the same time, devoting 3 hours in the morning to one course and 3 hours in the afternoon to the other. During a 13-week course, students attend face-to-face classes two days a week. On the remaining three days, learning is asynchronous.



In the Think Aloud method, which is used mainly in the Speaking and Listening course, students record a speaking assignment as either a voice or video file, then upload it to Kaltura Media Assignment in their own protected folder on VCC's Moodle-based learning management system. Kaltura automatically creates captions of what the student said. Jennifer then listens to the assignment and adds notations to the video using screen casting technology. Students listen to the feedback and make their own notes, enabling Jennifer to see what they have understood from the feedback. Students use their notes to devise a plan for improvement, perhaps committing to several self-paced homework sessions to improve their use of, for instance, verb tenses.

Interested in learning more?

Instructor Profile

After graduating with an undergraduate degree in English from Simon Fraser University, Jennifer Chow enrolled in the university's Professional Development Program, where she earned her B.C. Ministry of Education certificate to teach in the province's K-12 system. Beginning as a Grade 1 teacher, Jennifer soon progressed to teaching high school where, in addition to teaching English and Social Studies, she helped newly immigrated students improve their English skills. The experience was so positive that she decided to make English as Another Language (EAL) teaching a full-time job. In 2007 she began her second career as an EAL instructor for adult learners at Vancouver Community College (VCC). Today, Jennifer teaches in the provincially-funded Pathways EAL program at VCC's Broadway Campus.



Context

When Jennifer first started teaching at VCC, cassette tapes had just been introduced as a way to record student in-class speaking practice. That meant carrying a bag of cassettes home each evening to assess each student's progress. There had to be a better way! So, Jennifer—who had no previous experience in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL)—searched out and experimented with then-emerging applications that students could use to record speaking assignments, and she could use to provide feedback. The idea carried over to writing assignments. To replace the time-consuming process of providing written comments, Jennifer experimented with screencasting technology that enabled her to record verbal

comments on what a student had written. That way, students could hear her talk about what they did well and how to correct mistakes. The technology enhanced both teaching and learning.

In Jennifer's own words

When students are learning to write, any mistakes they make are recorded on paper. That makes it easy for an instructor to see the mistakes and point them out to the student. Things are different with speaking. If you are doing self-paced work and don't have a way to capture speech, it's gone as soon as it's spoken. So, students aren't aware of what they need to work on. For example, students sometimes think they're fluent because they speak quickly—when it might be difficult to understand what they are saying because they aren't using any intonation. You need to capture what is said in order to point out areas for improvement.

Portable recorders and cassette tapes were a break-through when they appeared. Digital recorders were even better. But both limited the ways in which feedback could be provided. I had no way to insert my comments into a student's audio file, so the recording and my feedback weren't linked directly. I really felt the need for something better.

Eventually, it arrived—online audio recording software such as Vocaroo, Audio Recorder, Audacity, Voicecoach, and others. When I assigned an in-class exercise or homework, students could use the software to record and upload it to a file for my review. Later, during COVID, we adopted Moodle as a learning platform and Zoom as our conferencing software. Zoom not only enabled me and other instructors to deliver online classes but could be used by learners to record speaking assignments. That enabled us to observe how students were forming words with their mouths and lips.

At first, students needed a lot of help getting acquainted with the software. Before using Zoom, I would deliver in-classroom instruction on how to record sessions. But, as it proved difficult for CLB-4 students to follow the instructions in real time, I prepared an instructional video to clarify the procedures. That worked quite well.

When we went back to blended classes, our use of Zoom dropped off. Instead, students would video-record speaking exercises using their phones or laptops, then upload them to Kaltura Media Assignment in their own protected folder in Moodle. Kaltura automatically creates a text file of what the student said. To provide feedback, I use ScreenPal (formerly called Screencast-O-Matic) to capture the video, highlight where a problem occurred, and record an audio/video comment. The student can see at a glance where feedback has been provided and can relate it directly to the captured text and video. This was the beginning of the Think Aloud feedback-reflection method now used to improve both speaking and writing skills, while reducing demands on instructor time.



To help students make use of new software, I have come to rely more and more on instructional videos. For every app, I make an instructional video using ScreenPal. I also use H5P to create interactive HTML5 content which allows students to pause an instructional video in order to try out a software feature themselves. For most students, the video or H5P tutorial is enough, but I check during synchronous classes to make sure they fully understand.

Even with these approaches, I still find myself spending a lot of time at the beginning of the term front-loading technology instruction so that we can then focus on language learning. My twice-weekly Zoom drop-in sessions really help. Students can share their screen and show me where they're having trouble so I can help them directly.

The think aloud method

At the beginning of a new intake of students, it's mainly me using the Think Aloud method to provide audio and video comments as I review student exercises. However, as the term progresses, I want students to use the same method to do their self-assessments and to comment on other students' work when asked to do so.

The Think Aloud method is also used when students do an experiential task. We have six speaking assessments throughout the term. Students unable to complete one of the assessments can choose to do an experiential task as a make-up assignment. For example, the assessment task might have been to record an 8-1-1 role play in which a nurse and a caller interact. For a student who does not successfully complete the assessment task, the make-up experiential task might be to seek information from a professional (for instance, a pharmacist, an exercise coach, or a nurse) record the conversation (optional), and add a self-reflection commentary using the Think Aloud method: "I made a mistake here. I was a bit nervous when I asked this question. I didn't use the auxiliary verb here. I didn't ask for clarification often enough."

The student was also required to record a reflection based on this experiential task. In their reflection, they would comment on how they planned the task, when and how they conducted the conversation, and how it went. Typically, the experiential tasks are about 9-10 minutes in length.

On the whole, I have found that students really like the two-way Think Aloud approach because it helps them see where they have made a mistake and learn what they need to do to correct it. It allows us to have an interactive asynchronous conversation about their strengths, weaknesses, and progression of skills.

I love being in the classroom. I love meeting students and seeing them gain confidence in what they're doing. I always say I have the best job in the world. What other job allows you to meet people from many different countries all in one place? Each has a unique story about how they came to Canada and how they've overcome the barriers and challenges they've faced. I have such respect for what they've gone through and



what resilience they have. During breaks, you hear many different languages being spoken. It's beautiful music. All these things make coming to work each day a pleasure.

Technology standards and performance indicators

Here are some key ways in which Jennifer's Think Aloud method demonstrates how NSL's standards for technology-enhanced language teaching and learning can be incorporated into EAL instruction.

Standard 2: Tools and digital resources

Understand and use a basic set of relevant technology resources and tools for language teaching and continue to update and expand this set regularly.

- As most students have had only limited exposure to online technology, Jennifer makes extensive use of instructional videos—created using ScreenPal—to walk learners through hardware and software functions step by step.
- Jennifer also uses H5P to create and share interactive HTML5 content which allows students to pause instructional videos while they try out a software feature themselves.
- For the Think Aloud method to work, students must learn to record voice and video files on their personal Smartphones or laptops using an app of their choice (e.g., Vocaroo, Audio Recorder, Audacity, Voicecoach, etc.). Jennifer recommends suitable software, provides self-paced video tutorials, and gives students one-on-one help, as needed.

Standard 3: Technology-enhanced pedagogy

Thoughtfully integrate technology in your teaching, informed by exemplary practice and relevant theory and research.

- To keep up on new ideas and technology solutions as they emerge, Jennifer relies on online collaboration with other teachers. Twitter has been the main platform used to share ideas, resources, tips, and discoveries.
- Although Think Aloud feedback is a signature element of Jennifer's approach, her classes incorporate a variety of approaches that respond to individual student needs. In her blended learning classroom, face-to-face instruction, help from tutors in VCC's Learning Center, self-paced tutorials, and support from classmates are all part of the learning environment.



Standard 6: Communicating with learners and observing their progress

Use technology to support, monitor, and assess learner progress.

- The essence of the Think Aloud method is to provide feedback on student spoken assignments that highlights and comments on issues at the moments where they occur but also noting successes and improvements since the last assignment. In contrast to more generalized written comments, this gives students a better sense of where progress is being made and improvements are needed.
- Student self-improvement plans are part of the Think Aloud post-assignment assessment process. After students listen to the specific spoken feedback they receive on an assignment (for instance, about ending consonant sounds), they might work out a plan to make additional recordings, and use the captions generated in Kaltura Media Assignment to identify any ending consonant sounds that they missed. Alternatively, they might plan to meet with a VCC Learning Center tutor to work on the pronunciation of ending consonant sounds. When it comes time for their next assessment, they can report on whether or not they carried out their plan as intended.



Author Bios



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Deborah Healey, PhD, University of Oregon, USA, 2019-2020 President of TESOL International Association and emerita faculty at the University of Oregon, explores issues in technology use.



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Sharon Rajabi, MEd, NLS, Canada, 2006-2008 TESL Ontario President and an Adult Education consultant has an interest in the application of technology in second language teaching and learning.



Matthias Sturm, PhD candidate, NLS Evaluator, Canada, is an adult education researcher and writer with special interests in assessment and equity.