

Cultivating Critical Thinkers and Problem Solvers in ESL Classrooms Amid Political Unrest: Integrating IWT CLASP Approaches

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I have worked at the Haitian Education and Leadership Program (HELP) for almost a decade now, and my coworkers and I have always made it a serious and personal commitment to carry and deliver our mission which is to bring about the generation that will achieve justice in our society. As Haitians, like so many other nation citizens out there, we have been through our share of hardships. And we did share at least one of those with the rest of the world, too. The COVID pandemic, which was around five years ago. The pandemic must have been when I really started noticing how there had to be more to my job than teaching a foreign language to Haitian Creole-speaking young adults. The particular nature of our own context, however, even before the pandemic, has been one of political instability and unrest. In situations like that, ESL learners face unique hurdles where language, power, and survival intersect. It is imperative, and also my job as their teacher, to cultivate their capacity for critical thinking and problem-solving. Not only to foster linguistic proficiency but also to equip them to navigate complex socio-political realities. Four to five years ago, my home institution started collaboration with the Open Society University Network (OSUN at the time). Today it is known as the Global Higher Education Alliance for the 21st Century (GHEA21). And through GHEA21 I had the opportunity to become part of the Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking (IWT) and the Center for Liberal Arts and Sciences Pedagogy (IWT CLASP) 2023-2025 Fellows Cohort. In CLASP, I engage with new and robust pedagogical models anchored in writing-as-inquiry and student-centered learning. And my work here will attempt to show how integrating those CLASP approaches into our HELP ESL Curriculum will help make critical thinkers, problem solvers and community builders out of our students while guiding them through language acquisition.

Now, to get back to the question. My students are all from underprivileged backgrounds, and many of them are the first in their families to attend university, and now, even more than in the past couple months, their lives outside the classroom are filled with challenges that you would have a hard time imagining. Some travel long distances through dangerous neighborhoods just to reach our Center, others juggle university schedules, internships (mandatory for our nursing students), and even care for younger siblings before coming to class. Despite these obstacles, they carry a quiet determination that I personally find inspiring. Lately though, I have been struggling to reach them. My lessons are organized, my explanations clear, but many students have started to become quite distant. They remained polite, but they were clearly reserved, too, as if English were just another requirement they had to survive, not a tool that could open doors.

As I mentioned earlier, I had the opportunity to discover IWT CLASP methodologies, and that's when things began to shift. Now I'll level with you and say that I had some skepticism, wondering if these approaches could work in my context. IWT's writing-to-learn concept seemed especially ambitious to me, for students already overwhelmed with responsibilities outside school. CLASP's collaborative strategies also appeared risky in a classroom where proficiency levels varied widely and confidence was fragile. Nevertheless, I decided to try small steps, introducing quick little writes at the beginning of each class. Just two or three minutes of free writing on prompts such as "What are you hoping to achieve this week?" or "Describe a challenge you faced yesterday" became a surprisingly powerful start to our sessions.

The first time a student shared her quick write voluntarily, I felt a jolt of realization. This one student, who didn't speak that much in class, wrote about waking up at 4 a.m. to help her younger brother get ready for school before walking across her whole neighborhood just to get to public transportation. She ended her piece with a simple line: "I want my family to be proud, even if I am tired." Not everyone came out and read their writings, but when that little session was over, there was a minute of silence in the classroom. These students were definitely carrying weights of their own. It occurred to me then, that teaching English is not just about grammar or vocabulary, it is also very much about connecting with these young people whose lives are often complicated by circumstances beyond their control.

As the semester progressed, these short writings became a bridge of trust between students and me. IWT gave them a private space to reflect honestly, and in doing so, they began to open up in class discussions. I could notice subtle but meaningful changes: students who had avoided eye contact now engaged more, asking questions and offering their thoughts. I began to see them not just as learners of English but as individuals with aspirations, fears, and resilience. One stu-

dent (another generally quiet one) wrote about missing class because he had to rush both his mother and little sister to the hospital because of a bad case of food poisoning. Later, during group activity, he shared ideas with a confidence I had never seen him display before, bridging his outside struggles with his academic life in a new way.

CLASP's collaborative strategies deepened this transformation. Working in pairs or small groups, students compared interpretations of readings, explained grammar rules to one another, and debated ideas. One memorable session involved a dialogue exercise about environmental issues in Haiti. Normally quiet students suddenly spoke with passion, correcting one another and building on ideas together. I watched this one student, who had been timid for weeks, leading her group in a discussion, explaining a vocabulary word to her peers, and smiling proudly when they understood. The classroom energy shifted from one of tentative compliance to active, supportive engagement. Students were not competing for my approval, they were learning from each other.

Beyond academics, these methodologies strengthened the emotional bonds in the classroom. During a particularly chaotic week, when protests blocked roads and the city felt tense, with gun shots all around, I noticed students arriving late and anxious. I adapted a lesson using CLASP techniques, asking them to write about one challenge they faced that week and then discuss possible solutions in small groups. The discussions were heartfelt; students supported one another, shared coping strategies, and laughed together despite the difficulties. The classroom had become a safe space, one of the few places where they could process life's challenges while still learning.

Building on my experiences with IWT and CLASP, I have begun to envision how these methodologies can be more fully integrated into my curriculum to meet the unique needs of my students. In a politically unstable context like ours, where young people are constantly navigating conflicting narratives and social pressures, English is not just a subject; it is a tool for critical inquiry and self-expression. I plan to incorporate Focused Freewriting and reflective prompts into each class, inviting students to respond to questions such as, "What do you believe and why? What media have you encountered?" These prompts are designed not for grammatical perfection, but for authentic voice and metacognitive awareness. By allowing students to explore their personal convictions and examine the sources of their information, I hope to help them develop critical literacy and self-awareness – skills they will need to navigate both academic challenges and the social realities of Haiti.

In addition, I will use dialogic written responses to guide students into a deeper engagement with texts and ideas. Instead of passively consuming information,

students will respond in writing to readings, questioning authorial perspectives, and uncovering underlying ideologies. For instance, when reading news articles or essays about local politics or social issues, students can maintain double-entry journals – a strategy that I was introduced to, and that I have used quite a bit so far, called the Dialectical Notebook. One column is for textual notes and vocabulary; the other is for personal reflections or connections to their lived experiences. This approach helps students analyze not only the content of a text but also its context, bias, and intent. In a setting where information is often manipulated, these strategies equip students with the tools to articulate reasoned responses and navigate competing perspectives with discernment.

I also plan to integrate IWT with CLASP's collaborative framework. Freewriting and reflective exercises will not exist in isolation – they will serve as the foundation for peer discussions, group analysis, and inquiry-based projects. For example, after a focused freewriting session, students can share key insights in pairs or small groups, transforming individual reflection into collaborative dialogue. Gallery Walks are another strategy I aim to use: students post short reflective passages around the classroom and rotate in groups to read and comment on their peers' writing. Activities like these foster democratic classroom dynamics where every voice is valued and inquiry becomes collective, supporting both cognitive and socio-emotional development.

I did more research outside of our regular workshop sessions and I found about other interesting approaches. Another strategy I am excited to incorporate is writing-as-inquiry, which positions writing as a tool for exploration rather than polished output. I see strong potential in a practice like the Question Ladder, where students generate questions about a reading, exchange and refine them in groups, and then use those questions to guide discussion. I also like how this is a little bit similar to something that we have already been doing in our Literature Circles sessions at HELP. This not only develops comprehension and critical thinking but also reinforces the idea that every student's perspective matters, including those still gaining fluency in English. Coupled with CLASP's emphasis on democratic, experiential learning, this approach turns the classroom into a space where students can safely explore complex ideas while building confidence in their language skills.

Sociopolitical realities in Haiti demand that the classroom also be a psychologically secure space. By embedding anonymity in writing exercises and modeling participation, IWT practices create safety for students to share sensitive reflections. CLASP's attention to context-sensitive pedagogy will allow me to adapt prompts and activities to the political and cultural realities of my students' lives. For instance, discussions about local events or social media narratives can be guided carefully so that students feel supported while critically engaging with the material.

In this way, students are not only learning English, they are developing the critical and reflective capacities to interpret the world around them.

In practical terms, I plan to sequence these methodologies throughout my curriculum. Short, Focused Freewrites will open each class, followed by peer discussion and collaborative inquiry. Longer assignments, such as essays responding to current events or literary texts, will incorporate double-entry journals, Loop Writing, and Socratic Seminars. By layering individual reflection with dialogue and democratic discussion, students will strengthen language fluency while also honing analytical and communicative skills. Even in a context where educational resources are limited, these strategies can create meaningful, interactive, and student-centered learning experiences.

Finally, the integration of IWT and CLASP prepares students to navigate life beyond the classroom. I was recently in Les Cayes (Haiti), interviewing a new cohort for their speaking tests, and I heard stories of resilience, struggle, and perseverance. It became even clearer to me that equipping these students with only a second language is not enough. By combining exploratory writing with collaborative, inquiry-based practices, I aim to help students grow as writers, thinkers, and citizens. They will leave my classroom not just with improved English, but with the skills to analyze, reflect, and act thoughtfully in a complex and often unstable world. This is the promise of the curriculum I am building, and it is one I am committed to realizing with each cohort I teach.

Now, in order to put my curriculum vision into practice, I have looked up ideas for a 90-minute in-person ESL lesson that models how IWT and CLASP can work together to promote language development, critical thinking, and socio-emotional growth. The attempt here is to focus on writing as critical inquiry, reflective engagement with texts, and collaborative discussion.

LESSON PLAN

Lesson Title: Voices and Perspectives: Understanding Media and Personal Beliefs

Objectives: by the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- 1 Articulate personal viewpoints in English using Focused Freewriting & reflective prompts.
- 2 Engage in dialogic written responses to critically analyze texts and media narratives.
- 3 Collaborate to discuss and refine ideas, building confidence in both oral & written English.
- 4 Develop critical literacy skills, recognizing how political and social contexts shape beliefs.

Materials:

- Short news article or editorial relevant to Haitian society or global events.
- Whiteboard and markers
- Paper or notebooks for freewriting and journals
- Post-it notes or index cards for Gallery Walk activity

LESSON PLAN OUTLINE:

00:00–00:10 *Warm-Up and Focused Freewriting*

I begin the lesson with a brief check-in, asking students to reflect silently on the prompt: *What do you believe about [topic of the chosen article] and why? What sources or media have influenced your thinking?*

Students write continuously for five minutes. The emphasis is on exploration and authentic expression, not grammar or spelling. This freewriting allows learners to articulate emerging thoughts while reducing anxiety about correctness—a key goal of IWT.

00:10–00:25 *Pair Sharing and Dialogic Response*

Students pair up to share key points from their freewriting. Each student practices active listening while their partner reads, then responds in writing to a partner's idea, asking clarifying questions or offering reflections. This process embodies IWT's dialogic writing, encouraging students to interrogate assumptions and examine multiple perspectives. I circulate, guiding and modeling constructive feedback while maintaining a safe, supportive environment.

- 00:25–00:45 *Text Analysis and Double-Entry Journals*
 Students receive a short news article or editorial. They now create actual double-entry journals: one column for textual notes, vocabulary, or quotes, and a second column for personal reflections, reactions, or connections to their own experiences. I explain that their goal is not to summarize but to engage critically, asking: *What is the author's perspective? What assumptions underlie this text? How does it connect to my beliefs or experiences?*
 This stage blends IWT's writing-as-inquiry with CLASP's emphasis on context-sensitive, student-centered learning.
- 00:45–00:60 *Small Group Inquiry and Gallery Walk*
 Students form small groups to discuss insights from their journals. Each group posts a brief reflective statement on index cards or sticky notes around the classroom. Students rotate, reading and commenting on other groups' contributions, guided by prompts such as: *What new perspectives did you discover?* or *Which ideas challenge your own thinking?*
 This activity turns individual writing into a communal learning experience, reinforcing CLASP's democratic, collaborative principles.
- 00:60–00:75 *Question Ladder / Dialectical Notebook Extension*
 To deepen inquiry, I introduce a Question Ladder activity. Each student writes 2–3 questions inspired by the text or peers' reflections. Students exchange questions with a partner, refine them together, then discuss them in their groups. This practice strengthens critical thinking, comprehension, and oral communication while honoring every student's voice, including those still developing fluency.
- 00:75–00:85 *Socratic Seminar and Reflection*
 I guide the class into a Socratic Seminar, drawing on students' freewriting, journals, and questions. Students are encouraged to articulate their ideas in English, respond to others respectfully, and cite evidence from the texts or their reflections. My role at that point is to facilitate, scaffold language as needed, and ensure discussion remains inclusive and contextually sensitive.
- 00:85–00:90 *Closing and Meta-Reflection*
 We conclude with a brief reflective prompt: *What did you learn about your own beliefs or the perspectives of others today? How might this influence your engagement with English and with your community?* Students write for 3–5 minutes. I invite volunteers to share, highlighting how writing and collaborative inquiry can illuminate both language and life in a politically complex environment.

And there you have it. By combining focused freewriting, dialogic responses, double-entry journals, and collaborative inquiry, students are not only practicing English, they are developing the skills to navigate complex social and political realities with critical awareness, empathy, and confidence. These abilities being just as essential as language proficiency.

The experience I have had so far, using Bard's IWT/CLASP methodologies in my classes, shows me how continuing with this will give my students more than just English skills. These approaches will give them a voice, a sense of agency, and the confidence that their experiences and ideas matter. In a city as unpredictable as Port-au-Prince, (or should I say In a country as unpredictable as Haiti) where opportunities are scarce and life can feel precarious, these small victories can carry enormous significance. Witnessing a student gain confidence in writing, participate fully in a group, or express a thought for the first time is a constant reminder of why I teach.

In the end, teaching with IWT and CLASP has the potential to transform not only my students but also myself. I have learned to listen more deeply, to respond to needs beyond the syllabus, and to embrace the humanity that exists behind every line of writing and every collaborative conversation. Each class is a reminder that even in difficult circumstances, education can be a source of hope, a space where young people can discover their own strength, resilience, and potential. It is a nice feeling to know that my students can discover together just how learning is not just about language; it is about building light in the midst of uncertainty.

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