

Addressing the Needs of Specific Groups of Learners

The previous section of this Toolkit, *Adult English Language Learners and Learning Disabilities* (see page IV–59), discusses strategies for working with adult English language learners with disabilities. Adult English language learners may, however, face other barriers to program participation and learning as well. Learners with the following characteristics may need special attention and may take longer than others to learn English:

- They may be elderly.
- They may be deaf or hard of hearing, visually impaired, or they may have other physical challenges.
- They may have no schooling or limited formal education (less than seven years).
- They may be incarcerated.
- They may be suffering effects of political torture and trauma.
- They may have a disrupted education due to war or other political crises.
- They may come from a culture where the native language is not yet written, is in the process of being written, or is written in a non-roman script or alphabet.
- They may have cultural backgrounds and educational perspectives different from those of the dominant U.S. culture.

This section presents the challenges and strategies related to meeting the needs of learners with these characteristics. Any one learner may fit into several of these groups. For example, an elderly Kurdish learner may be hard of hearing, have limited formal education and limited literacy in a language that does not use the Roman script, and suffer from the effects of political torture. A younger learner from El Salvador may have limited education due to disruption caused by war, relocation, or may be incarcerated.

Elderly Language Learners

Elderly immigrants and refugees learning English may experience memory loss and have difficulty concentrating. An appropriate learning environment can compensate for factors that can affect performance and progress, such as perceptual acuity, psychomotor coordination, and memory. English classes can decrease the older person's isolation and increase their access to services and community activities. The learning environment should be physically comfortable (e.g., with sufficient lighting and size-appropriate desks and tables). Instruction should include topics and activities that are relevant to the learners' experiences, concrete tasks that make use of many different senses (e.g., hearing a text read aloud and carrying out activities related to it in addition to reading it), and reviews of content presented with increasing complexity of ideas and language. Learners' anxiety can be reduced by helping to create supportive relationships within the class. Slowing the pace of instruction and putting the emphasis on receptive rather than productive skills (i.e.,

allowing them to just listen at times rather than always having to respond orally) will assist all elderly learners. (For more information, see Allender, 1998).

Learners Who Are Deaf Or Hard Of Hearing, Visually Impaired, Or Who Have Other Physical Challenges

Because deaf and hard of hearing learners do not hear spoken English or only hear it in limited ways, their challenges in developing English literacy may be much greater than those faced by non-native English speakers without hearing impairment. (see discussion of a student, Ismael, on page iv-62.) Oral (speaking and listening) activities and phonics-based approaches (that focus on English sounds) are usually not effective, since printed words are not connected clearly with sounds for these learners. Effective approaches to English literacy development with deaf learners include uses of technology that makes language visible in print. For example, teachers and learners can interact with each other in writing on computer networks, discuss topic ideas in writing and then write texts about those topics, and give feedback to each other on their texts in writing. Teachers of deaf adults need to focus on the writing and problem-solving skills needed in the workplace and avoid a preoccupation with correcting errors. Errors with English are often prevalent in deaf learners' writing, and learners need strategies for finding and addressing errors themselves rather than being continually corrected. For discussion of working with learners who are deaf and hard of hearing, see Bruce, Peyton, & Batson, 1993; Holcomb & Peyton, 1992, and resources available online at www.cal.org/resources/archive/rgos/asl.html.

Some learners may be visually impaired or have other physical challenges and limitations that have an impact on program participation and learning. Adult ESL programs seek to assist these learners as well as they can, depending on specific situations and resources. For example, if a program is directly related to a public school, there may be resources that can be provided to help learners. In a workforce training program helping unemployed adults find jobs, there may be institutional connections with local rehabilitation agencies that can provide assessment, assistive devices, and expertise to help learners as they learn English. Technology exists to enlarge text on the computer screen (Aladdin Gene) and translate text into Braille and send it to a Braille embosser (Duxbury Braille Translation Software). Other software takes text from paper, scans it into a computer, processes it, and then reads it aloud by computer using a software speech synthesizer. Students in college programs (e.g., in the graduate school of education at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA) have access to these assistive devices. (for more information, see Assistive Technology Lab, Helen A. Keller Institute for Disabilities, <http://kihd.gse.gmu.edu/>) in many adult education programs teachers must use their own time and ingenuity to help learners who are blind or visually impaired or who have other physical challenges. For example, a volunteer or another student may read a text aloud to a learner while other learners work silently. Programs may provide tutoring at home to students who cannot leave their residences due to physical

challenges. There are no easy solutions to making English language learning available for all adult immigrants, but many programs work hard to serve all learners.

Learners with Minimal First Language Literacy

Learners with limited literacy in their first language benefit from instruction that builds on their backgrounds and immediate personal experiences, focuses on familiar topics, and uses concrete materials. A study of instructional practices with this population revealed that many activities assume too much shared cultural knowledge (Achren, 1991). For example, even simple line drawings of such things as body parts (in a health unit) may not be as transparent as teachers think for learners who do not have the same cultural frames and life experiences. Such materials may be confusing, upsetting, or offensive and create barriers to learning. Educators recommend using real objects to set an immediate and meaningful context, gradually replacing those with photos or realistic pictures and moving to more abstract diagrams or graphics (Hiffeldt, 1985; Ramm, 1994). When possible, meanings can be clarified in learners' native languages (Allender, 1998).

Incarcerated Learners

Because correctional facilities are responsible for inmates' safety as well as for providing work and education programs, security issues take precedence over access to educational programs. Students may have limited access to technology. Books and notebooks may only be available inside the classroom. Limited time is another issue, as classes can be cancelled at the discretion of the correctional facility. Movement within the facility, court dates, probation, and attorney and family visits can also restrict participation in programs. Instruction should combine basic skills (reading and writing words, letters, and sentences) with functional uses of literacy such as reading labels, letters from friends and family, magazines, and newspapers. Use of computers should be included if possible, because computer use can extend learning outside class time (Dellicarpini, 2003).

Survivors Of Trauma

Immigrants and refugees are generally affected by stress that occurs when they move from one country and culture to another. Additionally, many of these learners also are coping with stress from extreme events that occurred prior to or during their migration to the United States such as assaults, war-related injuries, and torture. It is generally believed that traumatic stress caused by the deliberate actions of other humans is the worst kind of stress to live with. Survivors of traumatic stress may have difficulty paying attention and participating in class. These learners may be absent frequently. They also may appear to be uncomfortable with ambiguity and tend to see things as "all or nothing" (Horsman, 1998, p. 2).

Suggestions For Teachers Include The Following:

- Discuss with learners what it means to be present in the class and give them some control over their amount of participation. Give them a “quiet corner” to retreat to when they feel unable to participate in a classroom activity. Be aware that certain topics often discussed in adult ESL classes, e.g., family and health, can cause discomfort. Give them options, such as allowing them to talk or write about another family (e.g., one pictured in a magazine) rather than their own.
- Find out about community resources to help students. If appropriate, create classroom activities to help them access these services (e.g., role playing activities in which they use the communication skills necessary to call a hotline to ask for assistance).
- Discuss health and cultural content relevant to learners, including accessing medical services, going to the doctor, using available recreational facilities, and interacting with school staff.
- Conduct goal-setting exercises. Learners feel valued and can chart their success as they achieve their goals. Teachers will find out what students need and what to learn. (For more suggestions see Adkins, Sample, & Birman, 1999; Isserlis, 2000.)

Different Cultural Backgrounds

Many adult English language learners come from cultures that are markedly different from that of the mainstream United States. For example, the roles of women and men may be vastly different from those in the United States (e.g., men work outside the home and women inside the home, education may be viewed as only for males or only for the elite). Learning may be seen differently (e.g., as something passed down from teacher to student). Age and family status may be revered above financial success, and so on. Learners from these cultures may be especially resistant to activities such as group and pair work. This may especially be the case when older students are grouped with younger ones and men are grouped with women.

In some ways cultural issues are the most difficult ones for teachers to address. Teachers must negotiate a fine line between being responsive to students’ expectations and making the classroom a comfortable place, and using practices that promote active learning and prepare students for success in United States cultural environments. In matters of culture, the teacher should tell students why they are engaged in specific activities in class and the value of such activities.

Conclusion

Ideally, students with special needs would be served in classes of approximately ten students, in a quiet and pleasant environment. Bilingual assistance and on-site childcare would be provided, and classes would be conducted on weekends or at times that suit the participants. These classes would integrate community, work, and health information with language and literacy skill development. Students' needs would be assessed regularly, and there would be adequate time for students to learn the language and skills they need to be successful in the United States. While striving for these ideal situations, teachers of all English language learners—whether they have special needs or not—can better meet students' needs by following the suggestions outlined in this paper.

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