Adult English Language Learners and Learning Disabilities

Some adult English language learners experience difficulty in making expected progress in English as a second language (ESL) classes, in showing progress on assessment measures, and in sustaining employment. In some cases, this difficulty may be due, in part, to learning disabilities. According to the federal Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities, learning disabilities are disorders that "create difficulty in acquiring and using skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and reasoning. These disorders can also inhibit mathematical abilities and social interactions" (Brown & Ganzglass, 1998, p. 2). Learning disabilities are generally thought to be caused by a dysfunction in the central nervous system. People who have learning disabilities are considered to possess average or above-average intelligence. Learning disabilities often appear related only to specific skills, rather than affecting skills overall. For example, an individual may have problems processing spoken language but can read, write, and perform math without problems; a person with a reading disability may have difficulty decoding but is able to process well what is heard.

Questions about the Education of Adult English Language Learners with Learning Disabilities

Little is known about how learning disabilities affect adult English language learners. However, with the limited instructional time and resources available in most programs, teachers need to know methods and materials that may help learners who are not making expected progress in class, regardless of whether they have been identified as having learning disabilities. To address these issues, this section discusses the following questions:

- What are the issues involved in identifying English language learners with learning disabilities?
- When and how should adult learners be assessed regarding possible learning disabilities?
- What instructional methods and materials are likely to be effective in assisting learners who may have learning disabilities?
- What do learners say about their instructional needs?

What are the issues involved in identifying English language learners with learning disabilities?

It is thought that the percentage of adults with learning disabilities in adult education classes may exceed the percentage in the population as a whole, with some estimates being as high as 50-80% (National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center, 1995, 1996). However, there is a general sense in the field that the incidence of learning disabilities in

adult ESL programs may be much lower. Unlike native English speakers in adult education programs, many adult English language learners were successful in their previous educational experiences. They are enrolled in programs to learn to speak, read, and write in a new language.

Being identified as learning disabled can be stigmatizing for anyone. It is important to weigh the advantages of identifying learning disabilities (planning instruction to help learners, making them eligible for services, and so forth) against the possible stigma of the label (Almanza, Singleton, & Terrill, 1995/96). It is also important to use the term "has a learning disability," as a description of a learning factor, and "is learning disabled," when referring to a person with learning difficulties.

Before an adult learner is tested and labeled as having a learning disability, other reasons for lack of expected progress should be considered. The following reasons for slow progress in learning English have been noted:

- Limited academic skills in a learner's native language due to limited previous education.
- Lack of effective study habits.
- Interference from the native language, particularly if the learner's written language is a non-alphabetic language or uses a non-Roman alphabet.
- Mismatch between the instructor's teaching style and the learner's expectations of how the class will be conducted.
- Stress or trauma the learner has experienced that may cause difficulty concentrating and memory dysfunction.
- Sociocultural factors such as age, physical health, social identity, and even diet.
- Vision and hearing problems.
- External problems with work, health, and family.
- Sporadic attendance.
- Lack of opportunities to use English outside the classroom.

These factors most likely affect all learning, whereas a learning disability usually affects only one area of learning (Adkins, Sample, & Birman, 1999; Almanza, Singleton, & Terrill, 1995/96; Isserlis, 2000).

When and how should adult learners be assessed regarding possible learning disabilities?

The use of standardized testing to identify learning disabilities presents problems. First, instruments designed to diagnose learning disabilities are usually normed on native English speakers, so the results cannot be reliably used with learners whose first language is not English. Second, since the concepts and language tested may have no direct translation, the validity of tests translated into the native language is questionable. Third, most tests are

primarily designed for and normed on younger students and may not be suitable for adults. No single assessment technique is sufficient to diagnose a learning disability; multiple assessment measures are necessary. Even before an interview or other assessments are administered, instructors should answer the following questions about a learner:

1. Has the problem persisted over time?
2. Has the problem resisted normal instruction?
3. Does the learner show a clear pattern of strengths and weaknesses in class?
4. Does the learner show a clear pattern of strengths and weaknesses outside of class?
5. Does the problem interfere with learning or another life activity to a significant degree?

If the responses to these questions are affirmative, the situation should be looked into more closely. Following are suggestions on how to do this.

- *Interview the learner*. An interview may provide a variety of useful information, such as educational and language history and social background, the learner's strengths, and the learner's perception of the nature of the suspected problem.
- *Collect information about the learner's work*. Portfolios that include measurements of learner progress in reading and writing, attendance data, writing samples, autobiographical information, and work on class assignments may provide documentation of persistent problems and of teaching strategies that have or have not worked.
- *Use vision screening and routine hearing tests*. What appears to be a learning disability may be due in part to correctable vision or hearing problems.
- *Consult a licensed psychologist to obtain a learning disability diagnosis.* The program could provide some referrals for psychologists in the community, but the learner would have to cover the cost.

What instructional methods and materials are effective?

Educators of children and adults with learning disabilities give the following suggestions for providing instruction for this population.

- Be highly structured and predictable.
- Teach small amounts of material in sequential steps.
- Include opportunities for learners to use several senses and learning strategies.
- Recognize and build on learners' strengths and prior knowledge.
- Simplify language but not content.
- Emphasize content words and make concepts accessible through the use of pictures, charts, and maps.
- Reinforce main ideas and concepts by rephrasing rather than repeating.
- Be aware that learners often can take in information but may have difficulty retrieving and using it.
- Provide a clean, uncluttered, quiet, and well-lit learning environment.

- Use technology if possible. Learners often feel more comfortable and productive working alone and in front of a computer, where they receive positive feedback, than in a crowded classroom.

  (Almanza, Singleton, & Terrill, 1995/96; Ganschow & Sparks, 1993; Riviere, 1996)

Regardless of whether learners have learning disabilities or other needs, they can provide insight into their own learning. Teachers need to have this information so to assist the adults they work with. Figure IV–5 below, provides an example of how one ESL teacher was able to assist an adult English learner based on his input.

Figure IV–5: **Teacher Example**

Over the course of several months, I observed a student, Ismael, a former refugee. Ismael had studied for nine months in our General ESL classes. He was one of the students who never seemed to advance at the same pace as the others. He had remained at our l00 level (literacy) class for 2 three-month cycles and had just advanced to the 150 level class. My class was an intensive 8 hours a week, 5-week course open free of charge to refugees with low literacy skills. Ismael was in a multi-level class of 6 students. Attendance was very sporadic, as many of the refugees were busy in the afternoons with doctor's appointments, finding housing, and other immediate concerns. Because of the class size, I was able to give him the attention he needed and to learn more about his personal background and how it applied to the educational challenges he was facing.

Ismael is a 68-year-old man from Somalia with no formal education. His oral skills were much higher than his literacy skills. He was a clan leader and successful farmer in Somalia, but he lost everything to the war. During the war, he had been shot five times and was a victim of a bomb blast. As a result, he suffered traumatic brain injury and injury to his eyes from the shrapnel. He also had trouble walking, because his legs had been severely broken. In spite of all this, Ismael attended class every day and demonstrated a great eagerness to learn.

In a large-class situation, Ismael had trouble filtering the background noise. He could not focus on one voice. He said it was sometimes like "cars on the road. Too loud." He liked working one-on-one with a teacher or in small groups. Because of his eye injuries, he was very sensitive to light. He preferred to have the lights low in the room. He also said that he often got headaches when writing and reading from the whiteboard in the classroom. Reading from a blackboard did not produce this effect.

I often had one or two students in the class, and I was able to take them to the Adult Learning Center, a computer lab then housed at Wilson Adult Center. Ismael enjoyed the intense focus that computer learning provided. I was able to control the noise and light in the lab to better suit Ismael's needs. We used a program called *Eye Relief* with great success. *Eye Relief* is a word processor with adjustable sizing and screen color. We were able to work with the background and lettering colors until we came up with a combination that was most comfortable for him. I used the Language Experience Approach, where we carried out activities, discussed them, and read about them, to utilize Ismael's oral skills in aid of his reading. I also typed stories from our reading text into *Eye Relief,* which enabled him to read with greater ease and to keep up with his fellow students.

We also used *English Express* on CD for vocabulary building. With the program, Ismael could hear a word, see a picture of it, repeat the word, and compare his speech to the computer's and to mine.

Ismael studied with me for three five-week cycles. During that time we were able to explore many learning alternatives. He was willing to try anything new and was never discouraged. The other students looked to him for inspiration in their studies, even though his skills were somewhat lower than theirs. This attitude, combined with a class situation that allowed flexibility and adjustment, allowed Ismael to continue to make progress at his own pace. (Almanza,, Singleton, & Terrill, 1995-1996, pp. 2-3)

Conclusion

Adult learners in ESL classes learn skills at different times and in different ways. Rather than quickly labeling students, teachers need to watch, listen, and speak with students over time to gauge how they are learning. While there are some situations where a formal diagnosis of a learning disability might be useful to adult English language learners (to be eligible for accommodations on the GED or other tests and at work), there may be no advantage in the adult ESL class to having such a label. What is more important for these learners is that teachers use a variety of methods and strategies and build on learners' strengths to help them reach their language learning goals. This strategy holds promise for all adult learners, including those who may have learning disabilities.

This section is based on a paper by Robin Schwarz and Lynda Terrill*, ESL Instruction and Adults With Learning Disabilities* (2000).
www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/LD2.html

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