



Learning Disabilities Checklist

Learning Disability is the term currently used to describe a handicap that interferes with someone's ability to store, process or produce information. Learning disabilities create a gap between a person's true capacity and his day-to-day production and performance. (Levine, 1984)

The following checklist was designed for Bow Valley College's ESL Literacy programs. It aims to help instructors determine whether or not an ESL literacy learner might have a learning disability that interferes with his or her learning. Although many of the patterns could also apply to English speakers, this list has been designed specifically for **English as a Second Language literacy learners**. It is not designed to professionally diagnose students. If you begin to notice inconsistencies in the learning patterns of your student and you suspect that it is more than just a language-learning problem, refer to the checklist. Mark off behaviors that the learner exhibits consistently and monitor this behavior over a period of time. Watch for patterns in where the learner seems to have difficulty.

Once you have recognized whether or not there is a learning disability present, try to work with this disability, focusing on the learner's strengths and presenting materials in a manner that is easier for the student to process. Plan tasks in such a way as to utilize different learning strategies. For example, if the student has trouble remembering words that they have read, try doing paired reading exercises: read to them, then let them read to you. Try adding visuals to the text.

The presence of one or a combination of these characteristics does not absolutely mean that there is a learning disability present. It may simply be a language-learning problem. **If you suspect that a learning disability is interfering with your learner's achievement, use the checklist to identify patterns of learning difficulties and watch to see if there is a combination of the indicators listed below.** If you repeatedly observe a combination of behaviors from the checklist and discrepancies in the learner's performance ability, or the learner identifies a history of difficulties in his/her native language, then it is most likely that there is a learning disability present.

Key things to watch for that when combined with some of the behaviors on the following checklist could indicate the presence of a learning disability are:

- **Is there a discrepancy between what the learner seems to be capable of and what he/she is actually achieving?**
- **Are there discrepancies in the different areas of language, i.e. the learner reads well, but has difficulty writing; the learner understands when read to, but cannot understand when reading alone; the learner has great difficulty recalling information from work that he/she has completed previously?**
- **Has the learner experienced similar difficulties in learning his/her native language?**

Checklist

Written Language (reading and writing) Difficulties:

- The learner reads well, but does not write well or vice versa.
- The learner speaks well, but does not read or write well.
- The learner understands when material is read to him/her, but does not understand text when he/she reads alone.
- The learner has difficulty recognizing and using word analysis skills for reading and spelling.
- The learner's written language may be comprised of ideas that are tangled together, lacking paragraph organization, main idea and structure while his/her oral language displays much more complexity.
- The learner makes many spelling errors and spells the same word a number of different ways in the same piece of writing.
- When the learner spells on paper, it is very different from their oral spelling.
- The learner unintentionally omits, substitutes or inserts words in written work. It seems that the brain is saying one thing, but the hand operates as though it has a mind of its own.
- The learner learned how to write with a pencil in their own language, yet still displays labored handwriting, uneven pressure, lots of broken pencil points, awkward pencil grip and unique letter format.
- The learner exhibits a lack of punctuation or overuse of punctuation as though he/she cannot hear the breaks and rhythm of language.
- The learner uses familiar words in the wrong context, confuses words intended with similar ones, or makes up his/her own words.
- The learner has difficulty listening and taking notes at the same time.

Visual Processing Problems:

- The learner confuses similar letters or numbers, reverses them, or confuses the order of letters, numbers or syllables in a sentence.
- The learner adds, reverses or substitutes words without meaning to. He/she has trouble tracking when reading and may mix up words from lines above or below.
- The learner is unable to read familiar words in isolation, but has no difficulty with the same words in context.
- The learner does not notice errors when proof reading. He/she doesn't catch omitted words or errors when reading for meaning.

Auditory Processing and Oral Language Difficulties:

- It takes the learner a very long time to answer questions, but the answers are usually correct.
- The learner has great difficulty understanding and applying phonics.
- The learner has difficulty remembering a series of instructions told to him/her orally, but has no trouble remembering these instructions if they are written down.
- The learner has difficulty understanding speech unless they can see the person speak, and the person speaks slowly and distinctly.
- It takes the learner a very long time to process and respond to questions presented to him/her.

Classroom Behavior / Organization / Attention Difficulties:

- There is performance inconsistency from day to day.
- The learner appears to tire quickly or may be easily distracted.
- The learner is not able to block out background noise distractions and focus on the task at hand. He/she may appear to be daydreaming or blanking out.
- The learner fidgets a lot or needs to get up and move around the room to keep alert and focused.
- The learner consistently needs more than the usual amount of time to complete tasks.
- The learner appears to be forgetful.
- The learner has difficulty sequencing.
- The learner tends to repeat a task over and over again, or continues to refer to a past lesson or error even after you have moved on.
- The learner seems disorganized in time and space: he/she confuses left and right, up and down, and seemingly has no concept of time.
- The learner has trouble paying attention when listening to speech unless it is accompanied by pictures, gestures and other non-verbal cues.

Social Behavior Irregularities:

- The learner may be overly defensive, and reacts out of proportion to the simple correction of an error.
- The learner has great difficulty understanding humor and using it appropriately.

Adapted from:

Karassik, June (1989). *Literacy and Learning Disabilities: A handbook for literacy workers*. Ottawa, Ont.: Learning Disabilities Association of Canada.

Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (1991). *Bringing Literacy Within Reach: Identifying and Teaching Adults with Learning Disabilities*. Ottawa, Ont.: LDA of Canada.

Root, Christine (1994). *A Guide to Learning Disabilities for the ESL Classroom Practitioner*. TESL – EJ Vol. 1 No.1 A-4.



Strategies for Working with Learning Disabled Students

If you encounter a student who appears to be having trouble progressing but seems capable of more, he or she may have a learning disability. Try observing the student while referring to the Learning Disability Checklist to determine whether or not there is a learning disability present.

Learning disabilities cannot be “cured,” but the instructor and student need to learn to work with them, drawing on the student’s strengths and working around the difficulties. The following strategies compiled from *A Guide to Learning Disabilities for the ESL Classroom Practitioner*, *Learning Together: The Challenge of Adult ESL Literacy*, *The Adult ESL Literacy Student and Learning Disabilities* and *LD Toolbox* can be employed to aid the student in their learning. These strategies are helpful to any learner, and many of them would benefit the non-learning disabled student as well.

- Present material using graphic or sensory media.
- Write it, say it and repeat it. Use a multi-sensory approach to teaching which uses all of the student’s senses to reinforce learning: Have the student listen to the way a word or letter sounds, see the way it looks in writing and feel the movement of the hand when writing it or of the mouth when saying it. Many students must see, say, hear, discuss, or draw things before they can fully understand new materials presented.
- Use colour for visual impact.
- Always explain the purpose of each lesson or activity.
- Never make assumptions about what the learner already knows. Always explain things clearly and precisely.
- Re-teach and review materials consistently and in a variety of different manners.
- Make your student feel comfortable asking for repetition. When you do repeat, make sure you use the exact same language so that you do not defeat the purpose of the repetition.
- Break learning down into small, sequential tasks and issue instructions for each part one at a time.

- To check for understanding, have the student tell you what they are going to do after instructions have been given.
- Give the student time to process the instructions given to him/her before beginning a task.
- To check for accuracy, provide the student with opportunities at the end of each activity to express what has been taught in their own words.
- Give the student extra time to complete in-class assignments, homework and tests.
- Try using alternative formats for tests and assignments, such as on the computer.
- If the student has access to a word processor, encourage him/her to use it. Students who have fine motor, sequencing and spelling problems will be less frustrated when writing with a word processor to help them rewrite and revise.
- Give the student short-term tasks with short breaks in between the tasks.
- Provide plenty of pre-discussion, pre-writing and pre-reading for students to think about items that will be covered in class.
- Reduce the level of visual and auditory distraction in the learning environment.
- When presenting new topics and tasks, do so in a very structured, concrete manner. Don't jump from one topic to another, and always move from easy to more difficult and from concrete to abstract. Relate new materials to daily life.
- Provide physical demonstration of abstract concepts whenever possible.
- Build on what the student already knows, and make learning developmental.
- Teach new concepts by relating them to practical applications.
- Whenever possible, organize new material in clusters by category.
- Help the student organize his/her notebooks on a regular basis.
- Establish a routine to promote organization and consistency.
- Look for the student's learning strengths. Build on these strengths and eliminate the weaknesses. Provide the student with lots of praise and reinforcement.

- Talk to the student about how they think they learn best and make a chart with them outlining what they think are their strengths and challenges in each area of learning (reading, writing, listening, memory, attention, etc.) You can learn a lot from his/her perception of how he/she learns.
- Make eye contact frequently to maintain attention and encourage participation.
- Encourage the student to review their work before completing a task and to check for errors.
- Encourage a student with visual problems to use a marker or their finger to keep their place when reading.
- When building a sight vocabulary, have the learner practice visualizing a new word by closing their eyes and trying to see it flashing on a screen in their mind.
- Read together with the student. Have them follow along visually while you are reading, and then give them a turn reading while you follow along.
- Make new material easier to understand by using pictures, charts, maps and diagrams.
- Encourage the learner to use context clues to self-correct errors when reading.

While this handout does not focus on assessing modalities, when working with learning disabled learners a key technique is to watch for strengths and weaknesses in the individual's learning pattern. Focus on these strengths to help the learner capture what is being taught. If you notice your student's learning strengths and weaknesses, you could employ some of the following strategies presented in the National ALLD center's article: *The Adult Literacy ESL Student and Learning Disabilities* to help him/her:

Techniques for students with visual learning problems:

Visual learning problems will make it difficult for the student to detect differences in forms, letters, and words and to retain a full mental image of what he/she has seen.

- Help the student see his/her progress using checklists, graphs, or other visuals.
- Use simple drawings to clarify new terms.
- Use colour for visual impact.
- Use visual aids: overhead projectors, films, videos, slides, chalkboards, flip charts, computer graphics, or illustrations.
- Use assistive technologies such as colour coding, calculators, computers, graph paper, etc.
- Teach visual patterns in words, numbers, pictures.
- Be sure print is large enough.
- Select materials with simple visual layouts.

Techniques for students with auditory learning problems:

Individuals with auditory learning problems often have difficulty recognizing differences between sounds and storing and recalling what they have heard.

- Reinforce main ideas and concepts through rephrasing rather than through verbatim repetition.
- Ensure clear pronunciation of complex or difficult words.
- Encourage the student to repeat verbal information.
- Have the student use a tape recorder as a self-checking device for pronunciation.
- Use games, songs, and rhymes to help the student listen to and repeat sounds.
- Repeat words that may be ambiguous or have unaccented syllables in them.
- Repeat blended sounds over and over again to help the student differentiate among them.
- Encourage the student to repeat verbal information.

Techniques for tactile kinesthetic learning:

Tactile learning is learning by touching and kinesthetic learning is learning by doing. Some students need to feel and manipulate objects to understand a concept. If the instructor wants to teach the difference between hard and soft, he/she could use props such as a cotton ball and a brick to illustrate each concept. To teach up and down, the student may need to actually go up and down the stairs.

- Use various types of writing tools – pencils, soft felt tip pens, large markers.
- Draw or cut out words and letters learned.
- Use clay to make letter shapes.
- Trace letters.
- Play charades for comprehension.
- Act out action verbs written or pictured on cards.

{Green, Susan, Ed. (1996). *The Adult Literacy Student and Learning Disabilities*. National ALLD Centre.}

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