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ABSTRACT

These four newsletters focus on issues related to adult basic education and the challenges faced when teaching adult learners. The first issue introduces the LDA (Learning Disabilities Association) Learning Center, a private, nonprofit agency intended to maximize the potential of all people with learning disabilities or related learning difficulties so they and their families can lead more fulfilled and productive lives. It also examines proposed activities for the grant received during 2001-02. The second issue describes the screening and evaluation process for adult learning disabilities provided by LDA. This process is based on recommendations from "Bridges to Practice: A Research-Based Guide for Literacy Practitioners Serving Adults with Learning Disabilities," a project of the National Institute for Literacy. The third issue shares appropriate instruction for teachers or tutors of people with learning disabilities, also based on "Bridges to Practice." The fourth issue reviews the literature on the topic of diagnosing learning disabilities in the English as a Second Language population. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education.) (SM)

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LDA Learning Center

ABE Net News

Vol. 2 No. 1

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Vol. 2 No. 4

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ABE NetNews

Welcome to the second volume, first edition of **ABE NetNews** written by LDA (Learning Disabilities Association) Learning Center and funded through an ABE Supplemental Services Grant. Each issue will feature a different topic related to Adult Basic Education and the challenges we face teaching adult learners. The purpose of this issue is to introduce LDA Learning Center and the proposed activities for the grant received during 2001-2002.

Introduction to LDA Learning Center and Proposed Grant Activities

LDA Learning Center is a private, nonprofit agency whose mission is to maximize the potential of children, youth, and adults with learning disabilities or related learning difficulties so that they and their families lead more fulfilled and productive lives. LDA has partnered with ABE for over fifteen years and has provided information, resources, and services to thousands of adult learners in Minnesota since 1967.

Recently, Margaret (Marn) Frank, was hired by LDA from the ABE Supplemental Services Grant as Adult Learning Disabilities Specialist. Her primary responsibility is to coordinate the proposed grant activities and will be supported by other LDA managers and staff members. Marn has training and experience in both Special Education and Adult Basic Education and was a member of both ABE/LDA Advisory Boards last year.

The current supplemental services funding will allow LDA Learning Center to continue sharing their knowledge, skills, and resources in the area of adult learning disabilities with ABE programs and providers. It is estimated that there as many as twenty-five to forty million adults with a learning disability in our country and ABE providers work with a significant number of these adults. LDA is proposing to continue activities such as this online newsletter, phone/fax/email consultation, coordination of a statewide Advisory Board and metro Resource Board, and provide up to fifteen learning disabilities diagnostic evaluations for ABE learners. LDA also proposes to complete training and distribution of the resource *Now What? Discovering Your Potential in Work and Life* and initiate a statewide screening and referral resource guide in response to frequent questions ABE providers have about learning disabilities and the evaluation process. Finally, LDA plans to expand its web site with links to *NetNews* and an online learning style evaluation. The following articles will tell more about these proposed activities and how interested ABE providers can be involved.

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➤ ***ABE NetNews***

LDA Learning Center plans to publish five issues of *ABE NetNews* during the grant cycle. The goal of this newsletter is to provide the latest information and research as well as instructional strategies for working with adults challenged by special needs. Publication will be every other month and will be distributed online as well as posted on www.ldalearningcenter.com and www.MNLINC.org.

Proposed topics for future issues include screening and pre-referral interventions for a suspected learning disability, learning disabilities in the ESL population, and nonverbal learning disabilities. LDA welcomes other suggestions from ABE providers along with additions or updates to the distribution list. Please submit any ideas or changes to abe@ldalearningcenter.com.

➤ ***Phone/Fax/Email Consultation***

LDA Learning Center's staff is available to answer questions from the field in regard to adult learning disabilities. Questions can be submitted by calling Marn Frank at (952) 922-8374, ext. 36, faxing to (952) 922-8102, attn. Marn, or sending an email to abe@ldalearningcenter.com. If necessary, Marn will research for the answer and send you information, refer the question to another staff person, refer you to an appropriate website, or include the question and answer in *ABE NetNews*. This consultation is provided free to any ABE provider in the state of Minnesota.

➤ ***Statewide Advisory Board***

LDA Learning Center is organizing a statewide Advisory Board with the goals of opening communication and sharing information between LDA staff and ABE providers. Participants will be involved in reviewing, revising, or piloting any new resources or training for the present and following year. Involvement is voluntary, but the grant will pay a stipend for your time, pay for lodging if necessary, and reimburse you for mileage. The first meeting is scheduled for Thursday, November 1, 2001 at LDA Learning Center from 10 AM to 2 PM. We will be reviewing the *Now What?* materials and discussing plans for the next resource guide. Past participants have already been invited, but any other interested persons may call Marn Frank to RSVP by October 29, 2001. Our goal is to increase membership to fifteen participants from around the state. A second meeting will occur in the spring of 2002.

➤ ***Metro Resource Board***

LDA Learning Center is also organizing a metro area Resource Board to plan and pilot the learning disabilities screening and referral resource guide for 2002-2003.

We are seeking metro area participants interested in the area of adult learning disabilities and also intend to invite members from other educational fields. Involvement is again voluntary, but a stipend for your time and reimbursement for mileage will be paid. The first meeting is tentatively scheduled for November 29, 2001, from 10 AM to 2 PM. Contact Marn Frank or Barb Geisel at LDA if you are interested in being involved in the Resource Board. (The name "Resource Board" is replacing the name "mini-Advisory Board" from last year.)

➤ ***Metro Area LD Diagnostic Evaluations***

LDA Learning Center will again offer up to fifteen free evaluations for ABE learners who have a diagnosed or suspected learning disability. LDA recognizes that many adults who experience learning problems may have an undiagnosed learning disability and could benefit from a formal evaluation. This evaluation can only be administered by staff with qualifying credentials and training in the areas of psycho-educational evaluation. The documentation of a learning disability is required to access support and accommodations for the GED, in post-secondary settings, and in the workplace.

An evaluation by LDA may include a comprehensive or basic LD diagnostic evaluation, a written diagnostic report, recommendations designed to improve educational or employment planning, and consultation or follow-up with the referring instructor. This service will be limited to ABE participants who meet the eligibility criteria, do not have access to third party funding, and can travel to LDA Learning Center for the evaluation.

Barb Geisel, Manager of Instruction and Assessment Services for LDA, requests that you call her at (952) 922-8374 before making a referral for this evaluation to discuss screening and pre-referral interventions and to determine eligibility.

➤ ***Now What?***

Discovering Your Potential in Work and Life

LDA Learning Center is excited to share the program *Now What?* with ABE professionals and volunteer staff during the grant cycle. This consumable workbook and accompanying Instructor Guide provides activities to help adult learners discover their potential in work and life.

Workbook activities involve:

- Learning styles
- Learning difficulties and accommodations
- Dreams, hopes, hobbies, and needs awareness
- Work styles, behaviors, and skills
- Job interests, values, and training
- Employment or educational plans for the future

The workbook is easy to use, step by step, and includes checklists, short answer, or rating activities written at approximately a fifth grade level. *Now What?* was designed for special education transition students, but was revised for adults by the Advisory Boards last year.

As learners work through the activities with an instructor or tutor, they conclude each section with a report that is summarized into a written plan at the end of the workbook. This final plan is very useful for the learner, the instructor, his/her family, or career counselor. The content and reading level is appropriate for Basic Skills, GED, Family Literacy, or intermediate/advanced ESL learners.

At this time, *Now What?* is available in English but is being translated into Spanish. The Instructor Guide is also in process and will be reviewed by the Advisory Board in November. LDA hopes to have the Spanish version and the Instructor Guide available by January, 2002.

ABE providers will receive the *Now What?* materials following training sessions being planned statewide in collaboration with the Minnesota Literacy Council (MLC) and Literacy Training Network (LTN). These trainings will introduce you to the materials and provide practice in completion of the workbook activities, reports, and final plan. Participants will receive multiple copies of the workbooks and an Instructor Guide to bring back to their programs. Further questions and testimonials following the training can be submitted to Marn Frank by phone/fax/email.

Conclusion

We hope this issue is helpful in understanding the proposed activities to be provided by LDA Learning Center during the 2001-2002 grant year. LDA intends to use a team approach to provide these activities to ABE providers across the state. We respect your commitment and expertise in the field of Adult Basic Education and encourage your participation and involvement.

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ABE NetNews

Welcome to the second volume, second edition of **ABE NetNews** written by LDA Learning Center (Learning Disabilities Association, Inc.) and funded through an ABE Supplemental Services Grant. Each issue will feature a different topic related to Adult Basic Education and the challenges we face teaching adult learners. The purpose of this issue is to describe the screening and evaluation process for adult learning disabilities provided by LDA. This process is based on recommendations from Bridges to Practice, A Research-based Guide for Literacy Practitioners Serving Adults with Learning Disabilities, a project of the National Institute for Literacy, 1999.

Introduction

Learning disabilities is a general term referring to psychological processing disorders resulting in significant difficulties in the achievement and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, or math. Learning disabilities are one of the leading causes of low-literacy level in adults. Many of these adults attend ABE programs and appear to be able and bright, work hard at studying, experience academic strengths as well as weaknesses, but make slow or irregular progress. They may also report difficulties in their workplace, home, or community.

The screening and evaluation process described in this issue provides the ABE community with pre-referral or screening tools for determining the possibility of a learning disability and the referral steps for a limited number of formal GED or Specific Learning Disability (SLD) evaluations funded by the ABE Supplemental Services Grant.

Please share this important process with other ABE instructors in your consortium or program!

Screening

Bridges to Practice recommends that all literacy programs have access to a screening tool for determining the possibility of a learning disability. "Screening alone does not identify whether a person has learning disabilities. Screening is simply the first step in a much longer testing process" (Guidebook 2, page 15).

LDA Learning Center has recently adapted several screening tools into a **Screening Checklist for Adult Learning Disabilities** available to all ABE providers. The screening checklist can be requested by calling LDA at 952-922-8374 or by emailing a request to the ABE mailbox at abe@ldalearningcenter.com. A copy of the screening will be mailed, faxed, or emailed as a file attachment.

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This informal screening checklist is intended for ABE teachers to discuss and complete with their adult learners as needed during ongoing planning and instruction. It is easy to administer, of reasonable length, inclusive of characteristics experienced by adults with a learning disability, and considers other relevant educational information.

The screening initiates discussion of academic strengths and weaknesses and the reasons for learning difficulties. It can help establish appropriate goals and objectives for further pre-referral planning and instruction. "In fact, the information gathered through an informal process can be as useful in planning instruction as scores from standardized testing." (Riviere, Adrienne, (Screening for Adults with Learning Disabilities, NALLDC, 1998)

Finally, the screening can help the instructor and learner decide if specific and frequent patterns of difficulty indicate the need for referral and formal evaluation of a learning disability. If so, the screening and a request for an evaluation application can be referred to Marn Frank at LDA Learning Center, 4301 Highway 7, Minneapolis, MN 55416 or faxed to 952-922-8102.

Another screening tool that LDA Learning Center is providing is called the Brief Intellectual Ability or BIA from the Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Cognitive Abilities. This is a formal screening administered at LDA to estimate cognitive or intellectual ability. It includes three sub-tests from standardized cognitive testing and requires approximately a forty-five minute appointment. It can be used to screen whether the learner's ability falls within the average criteria range established for diagnosis of a learning disability and if further evaluation is appropriate. ABE instructors can request a BIA application and schedule an appointment by calling Emily, LDA Client Administrator, at 952-922-8374. Results will be shared in a short written report or follow-up phone call to the referring ABE instructor.

Evaluation

Formal evaluations for adult learning disabilities provided by LDA Learning Center are considered "psycho-educational". They assess psychological processing, intellectual ability, and academic achievement and are conducted by a qualified professional such as a psychologist and learning disabilities specialist. The standard scores and percentile ranks are compared and interpreted in order to determine a processing disorder and a significant discrepancy or difference between the adult learner's intellectual ability and academic achievement in reading, writing, or math clusters. A written summary report documents the diagnosis and nature of the learning disability according to established criteria and makes recommendations for instruction and/or accommodation.

According to Bridges to Practice, “the primary advantage of an official LD diagnosis is that the learner can obtain accommodations and protections necessary for success in instructional, work, and testing settings” (Guidebook 2, page 19). Another advantage is that the adult learner can finally begin to understand the reasons for their difficulties and how to cope with them. Finally, adult learners can identify the signs of a learning disability in others-especially in their children.

The two formal evaluation packages provided through the ABE Supplemental Services Grant are described below. They differ in purpose, the version of achievement testing required, time for administration, criteria, and reporting. Completion and referral of the **Screening Checklist for Adult Learning Disabilities** to Marn Frank is *required* before applying for a SLD evaluation, but not the GED evaluation.

GED Evaluation

This evaluation package follows the GED Policy and GED Model for documenting learning disabilities established by the GED Testing Service in Washington, DC. Using the guidelines from Form-15, LDA Learning Center professional staff will provide the required standardized cognitive and achievement assessment, scoring, interpretation, and completion of Form-15. The purpose of this evaluation and reporting (completion of Form-15) is to request appropriate accommodations for GED testing. Form-15 is submitted to the local GED Administrator by the adult learner for approval of accommodations due to learning disabilities.

It is important to understand that the GED Model establishes unique criteria for ability, achievement, and discrepancy. The criteria *does not* match LDA Learning Center’s criteria adopted for the diagnosis of specific learning disabilities in adults. The diagnosis of a learning disability and approval of accommodations specifically for GED testing may not transfer to post-secondary or workplace settings.

Some examples of appropriate referrals for this evaluation would include the following the situations:

- ◆ The learner was previously diagnosed with a learning disability but documentation is unavailable or out-of-date (before high school).
- ◆ The learner has adequate reading ability and comprehension to pass the tests, but seems to process written information slowly.
- ◆ The learner demonstrates significant differences in achievement: good in math, but struggles with reading and comprehension; excellent in reading and has adequate writing skills, but has great difficulty with math problem solving.
- ◆ The learner seems able, is motivated, and has worked hard over time, but is still struggling to achieve passing scores on the five tests.

The GED Evaluation requires two testing appointments totaling about four hours. The first will always be for intellectual ability and takes about two hours. If the learner meets the GED criteria for ability level, another two-hour appointment for achievement testing will be scheduled. An optional third appointment for a feedback conference can be scheduled OR a brief written report and completed F-15 can be sent to the learner to submit to the GED Administrator for review.

Specific Learning Disability Evaluation (SLD)

The purpose of this evaluation is to diagnose a specific learning disability according to criteria adopted by LDA Learning Center for ability level, achievement, and discrepancy. It is more extensive than the GED Evaluation as it requires additional achievement testing to identify and document specific academic strengths and weaknesses, information processing deficits, and includes recommendations for instructional strategies and accommodations for school or the workplace.

This evaluation would be most appropriate for adult learners working on basic skills who seek a learning disabilities diagnosis for personal reasons, further training, education, or in the workplace. These learners demonstrate specific areas of difficulty rather than general performance problems. They have both strengths and weaknesses in the areas of listening, speaking, reading, writing, or mathematical skills. They may have other strengths in oral vocabulary or expression, general knowledge, hands-on ability (building, repairing, designing), social skills, motivation, or study skills identified through observation or discussion.

The SLD evaluation requires three separate appointments at LDA Learning Center. The appointments include intellectual ability testing, achievement testing, and a feedback conference. The total testing time is five hours and the feedback conference is an additional hour. The learner will also receive a written summary report during the feedback conference.

Conclusion

If you have any questions on the screening tools, the evaluation process, or adult learning disabilities, please call Marn Frank at 952-922-8374 or email her at abe@ldalearningcenter.com.

We are still welcoming participation in our ABE/LDA Advisory or Resource Committees. A second meeting of each committee will be scheduled for spring of 2002. The grant provides a stipend for your time and reimbursement for any necessary lodging and transportation. Contact Marn if you are interested in joining these partnership opportunities between LDA Learning Center and Adult Basic Education.

ABE NetNews

Welcome to the second volume, third edition of **ABE NetNews** written by LDA Learning Center (Learning Disabilities Association, Inc.) and funded through an ABE Supplemental Services Grant. Each issue features a different topic related to Adult Basic Education and the challenges we face teaching adult learners. The purpose of this issue is to share **LD Appropriate Instruction for Teachers or Tutors**. These strategies are based on recommendations from Bridges to Practice, A Research-based Guide for Literacy Practitioners Serving Adults with Learning Disabilities, a product from the National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center.

Introduction

Bridges was created for adult literacy providers to increase awareness about learning disabilities (LD) and recommend changes in programming that are more responsive to the needs of adults with LD.

“Many adult learners may have learning disabilities that have not been diagnosed, and they may be struggling to learn. By enhancing teaching practices to be more responsive to the needs of adults with learning disabilities, literacy programs can improve instructional outcomes for all learners.” (Guidebook 4, page 5).

In other words, the strategies from this newsletter will help many adults attending ABE programs, not just those identified with LD. Many ABE teachers and tutors already use similar strategies according to “best practices” or “ABE quality indicators” and offer an individualized, learner-centered environment. Therefore, another purpose of this issue is to reinforce the appropriateness of those strategies in Adult Basic Education.



Principles and Activities

According to Bridges, all teaching and tutoring sessions for adults with learning disabilities should follow eight principles. These principles are briefly described on the following pages with bulleted examples of opening, instructional, and closing activities for LD appropriate lesson planning.

1. During all stages of instruction, the learner must be given choices on what, how fast, when, and where he or she is learning. Help them set realistic short and long term goals and talk about environments and strategies that work or do not work for them.
2. The learner must be regularly informed as to how they are progressing towards his or her goals.

Opening Activities

- Check on “happenings” since the last class or session that may need to be addressed in the lesson. Revise the lesson if necessary.
 - Review educational goals and progress towards those goals. Share progress charts that visually display accomplishments.
 - Review previously taught skill, the use of that skill, or homework assignments.
 - Share the current lesson plan, activities, and the application to real-life situations.
 - Discuss and agree on the use of accommodations (i.e. tapes, tape recorder, calculator, color-coding, highlighters, large-print materials, flash or cue cards, word processing). Appropriate accommodations take into account the adult’s unique learning style and minimize the likelihood of failure.
3. Instruction must be explicit, direct, and systematic to ensure understanding and mastery.
 4. Each instructional session must follow a similar structure so that the learner knows what to expect and becomes comfortable with the learning process.
 5. Sessions planned for **skill/strategy mastery** (word attack, basic math skills, spelling, writing sentences) must be structured differently than sessions planned for **content mastery** (reading and comprehending of information or forms).
 6. The instructor must be familiar with and know the skill, strategy, or content to be taught.
 7. The instructor must use a variety of methods and accommodations to maintain interest and improve learning.

Skill/Strategy Instructional Activities

- Explain and describe the new skill or strategy.
- List the steps for performing the new skill or strategy. Provide a visual information sheet of the steps or ask the learner to take notes.
- Model the steps. Talk out loud and describe your thinking and actions as you demonstrate use of the steps or strategy.
- Provide the learner with rehearsal of the steps or strategy leading to memorization.
- Have them review and co-model the steps. Create a remembering system such as a mnemonic or cue card.
- Provide supported practice with easier examples or materials. Encourage them to think aloud as they practice. Evaluate progress with the learner.
- Provide varied and advanced practice with more difficult examples or materials.
- Assess and acknowledge progress through frequent checking of assignment or questioning.
- Encourage daily practice of the new skill or strategy.

Content Instructional Activities

- Introduce the new content. Survey the material by looking at the titles, headings, subheading, boldface words or phrases, key vocabulary.
- Determine what the learner already knows about the content.
- Determine what the learner would like to know about the content and create a list of terms or questions for review later.
- Present the content (read together) with explicit use of a graphic organizer such as a story map, outline, diagram, table, chart, or list of key words or main ideas.
- For every three statements made in teaching, ask for one response from the learner(s).
- Check and expand understanding by asking the learner to summarize, make comparisons, explain cause and effect, or give other examples.
- Plan the assignment to be completed independently or outside of class in a real-life situation (such as on the job).
- Provide support if necessary with the assignment. Model and talk aloud as you assist with the task.
- Provide informative feedback during practice.
- Decide if more practice is necessary and list the goals to be reviewed at the beginning of the next lesson.

8. The learner must learn to view the teacher or tutor as an ally or mentor in their struggle to learn.

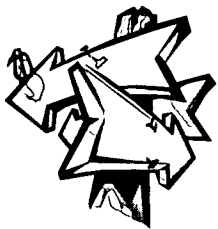
Closing Activities

- List three successes or accomplishments from the lesson.
- Check on the use of accommodations from the lesson and for future learning.
- Check on plan and concerns for next lesson or class.
- Confirm day and time of the next lesson or class.

Ideas from the Experts

The following ideas for LD appropriate instruction are based on literature review and LDA staff experience.

- Recommend adults with learning difficulties be tested for vision or hearing problems.
- Make eye contact frequently to maintain interest, monitor understanding, and encourage participation.
- Be sure print type is large enough and page format is not too busy.
- Use language experience and “authentic reading materials to stimulate interest.
- Question incorrect responses to discover thought processes.
- If teaching basic reading skills, provide experiences with pleasure reading such as companion reading, books on tape, interactive software.
- Share your own strengths and weaknesses in learning.
- Select material at the learner’s instructional level rather than at the easy or frustration level.
- Keep the environment free of auditory or visual distractions.
- Provide short breaks between tasks.
- Incorporate a sense of humor into the learning process.
- Remind the LD adult that certain learning tasks will always be a challenge, but they are a capable person in many ways. Stress their strengths in other areas.



Partnership Opportunity

In response to the needs of ABE teachers and tutors, LDA intends to focus the next issue of NetNews on English as a Second Language and Learning Disabilities. We would appreciate questions, concerns, and resource ideas from the field. Please send your ideas to Marn Frank at mf@ldalearningcenter.com. for this May issue.

ABE NetNews

Welcome to the second volume, fourth edition of *ABE NetNews* written by LDA Learning Center (Learning Disabilities Association, Inc.) and funded through an ABE Supplemental Services Grant. Each issue features a different topic related to Adult Basic Education and the challenges we face teaching adult learners. The purpose of this issue is to share a brief review of literature on the topic:

Diagnosing Learning Disabilities (LD) in the English as a Second Language (ESL) Population.

LDA Learning Center has received many questions on diagnosing LD in the ESL population during the past year. Although there are no easy answers to the questions, we recognize the need to review the literature, consult with the experts, share information, and begin working on a process of identifying the possibility of LD in the ESL population and providing recommendations for instruction. This issue is only the beginning of our "quest" to become more informed about "LD in ESL" and to share that information with ABE providers throughout Minnesota serving a variety of ESL learners.

Introduction and Potential Prevalence

According to the **OVERVIEW OF ADULT BASIC EDUCATION (ABE) IN MINNESOTA** by Dr. Barry Shaffer, MN State Director of Adult Education, in a Legislative Update for November of 2001, **34,778** adults enrolled in ESL programs during the reporting year 2000-2001. This was 44% of the total enrollment for ABE.

According to the **2000-2001 Performance Report Summary** by Todd Wagner, who is responsible for Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting at CFL, **21,877** adults were considered ESL program "participants" because they attended class twelve or more

hours. This figure was 52% of the total ABE participants and ESL learners contributed 62% of the hours reported by ABE programs throughout the state!

Most metro and greater Minnesota programs reported over 50% of enrollment as ESL participants. Examples of exact percentages for ESL participation include: 75% for Adult Options in Hopkins, 57% for Alexandria, 77% for Burnsville, 74% for St. Cloud, 91% for Lakeville, 87% for Moorhead, 69% for Rochester, and 81% for Willmar.

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Prevalence figures for learning disabilities in the general US adult population range from as low as 3% to as high as 15%. Applying this range to the number of ESL participants in Minnesota, it is possible that from 656 ESL learners to 3281 ESL learners attending ABE programs may have a learning disability that causes “significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical

abilities” (a definition for LD according to the National Joint Commission of Learning Disabilities, 1988).

In summary, many ESL adult learners are not only enrolling in ABE programs, but are attending many classroom hours in order to improve language or literacy skills. It is very possible that some of these learners are experiencing learning disabilities or learning difficulties that interfere with successful acquisition of the English language.

A Brief Review of Literature

LDA Learning Center along with many experts in the field feel that we must be cautious in the identification and labeling of ESL learners as LD. There are many reasons for learning difficulties in the ESL population. In addition, being identified as learning disabled can be misunderstood in this population (as well as in the English-speaking population.)

In the article *ESL Instruction and Adults With Learning Disabilities* (June, 2000) by Robin Schwartz and Lynda Terrill, the authors state:

“Learners may show learning disabilities in a second language when they do not in their first. A learning disability may be so subtle in a first language that it is masked by an individual’s compensatory strategies, e.g., getting general information through overall context when specific words or concepts are not understood, and substituting known words for words that

cause difficulty. These strategies may not be available to the learner in the new language.” (page 1)

Additionally, they point out that:

“Unlike native speakers in adult education programs, many ESL learners were not unsuccessful in their previous educational experience. Rather, they are enrolled in programs to learn to speak, read, and write in a new language.” (page 1)

“Before testing and labeling an adult ESL student as learning disabled, other reasons for lack of expected progress should be considered.” (page 2)

Examples of other reasons for a lack of progress listed in the article include:

- Limited academic skills in the native language
- Lack of effective study habits
- Interference of a learner's first language-especially if they use a different alphabet
- Stress or trauma that refugees and other immigrants may have experienced, resulting in symptoms such as difficulty in concentration or memory
- Factors such as age, physical health, stressors, diet, problems with family or work
- Sporadic attendance
- Lack of practice outside of the classroom

In other words, we must recognize the difficulties of learning English as a second language for adults who are often feeling stress and pressure not only with the language, but also with adjustments to a new culture and set of expectations.

Judith Rance-Raney in her presentation *Unlocking the Mysteries of Learning Problems with ESL Adult Students (April 2000)* supports this by stating that:

“The profiles of many ESL students suggest multiple causes for learning deficits which may include linguistic differences,

economic hardship, cultural disharmony with the educational environment, or perhaps even cultural bias in ability testing among other causes.”

Another problem in the identification of LD in ESL learners is the limits of the standardized diagnostic assessment tools we have available. Most involve a certain level of English listening comprehension and vocabulary in order to be reliable and are normed using English-speaking individuals only.

Schwartz and Terrill list three problems with standardized tests used to diagnose LD:

“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 being tested may have no direct translation, the validity of tests translated into the native language are questionable. Third, most tests are primarily designed for and normed on younger students and may not be suitable for adults.” (page 2)

Rance-Raney thinks that “definitive identification of an LD learner who is also a second language learner may be nearly impossible.” (page 10)

Alternatives to Diagnostic Assessment of LD

As an alternative to a diagnostic LD assessment, a comprehensive assessment of learning difficulties or the possibility of a learning disability could be reliably accomplished in the adult ESL population. This assessment would provide the instructor and learner with a profile of academic strengths and weaknesses and recommendations for instruction or accommodation. Often this information is of more value than a label or diagnosis to both the instructor and adult learner.

Schwartz and Terril feel that screening should precede any referral for assessment. They suggest that teachers answer the following questions about any learner they think is in need of a more comprehensive assessment:

- “ 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 a life activity in some way to a significant degree?” (page 2)

If answers to the questions above are yes, then they suggest an alternative to diagnostic assessment that includes the following procedures:

- Interview learners (with the help of an interpreter) to document educational and language history, social background, learner’s strengths, and the learner’s perception of academic problems.
- Collect a portfolio to include measures of progress, samples of reading and writing, other classroom work, attendance data, teaching methods and materials used with the learner and a report of their success (or lack of success), and autobiographical information.
- Results of recent vision and hearing testing to rule out sensory problems.

This alternative assessment is consistent with LDA’s mission and philosophy and would provide a valuable learning profile, but would not provide documentation of a learning disability according to the discrepancy model and criteria typically used for diagnosis. In reality, it would not satisfy county or MFIP caseworkers who require documentation of low intellectual functioning or a specific learning disability in order to make decisions about financial support services.

Rance-Raney thinks that assessment of an ESL learner for learning difficulties should also include “checklists of behaviors which may be indicative of LD students” (page 11).

The **Screening Checklist for Adult Learning Disabilities** created by LDA during this past grant year could be an appropriate tool as it lists characteristics

that tend to be displayed in varying degrees by persons with learning disabilities. A primary purpose is to determine individual instructional needs for program planning for ABE learners. You may request a copy of the screening checklist by calling LDA at 952-922-8374 or emailing Marn Frank at mf@ldalearningcenter.com.

References:

Rance-Raney, Judith (2000). *Unlocking the Mysteries of Learning Problems with ESL Adults*. ESL at Lehigh. Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University.

Schwartz, Robin, Terrill, Lynda (2000). *ESL Instruction and Adults With Learning Disabilities*. ERIC Digest. Washington, DC: National Center for ESL Literacy Education.

What's Next?

LDA Learning Center proposes to look more closely at this important issue during the next grant year by reviewing more literature, interviewing LD/ESL experts in the field, developing a resource guide or assessment package for the ABE community, and pilot testing this “product” for broader dissemination in FY 2004.

If you would like to be involved in this proposed 2003 grant activity as an Advisory Committee member, please email Marn Frank at mf@ldalearningcenter.com or call her at 952-922-8374. You will receive a stipend for your time, lodging if necessary, and reimbursement for your mileage...not to mention the benefits of increased knowledge and professional interaction with other ABE providers!

Have a great summer!

**You will be hearing more from
ABE NetNews in August!**



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