

“IS YOUR PROGRAM RESPONSIVE TO ESOL STUDENTS WITH LD?”

By

Robin L. Schwarz, M.Sp.Ed:LD, Ph.D. (Candidate), Lesley University, Associate Lecturer, Curry College PAL Program

Few ESOL learners have been formally identified with learning disabilities because so many of their problems resemble normal language learning problems and because of the difficulty of securing an appropriate clinical diagnosis for non-native speakers of English. Nonetheless, we can be sure that quite a few of the learners in our ESOL classes are struggling with some type of learning disability. Therefore, programs need to be prepared to respond to the ESOL learner with LD in the same way that they respond to the English-speaking learners with LD.

What does a responsive program look like? According to Ashley Hager, who has been exploring this question in and around Cambridge, MA, such a program would have staff and teachers who are well versed in LD. It would also have procedures and practices for screening and working with learners with LD systematically included in the policies and operation of the program.

Ms. Hager’s findings echo the recommendations of a Maryland task force of nearly 50 experts in LD, adult learning, literacy, reading, and other fields that was assembled a few years ago to envision an adult education system responsive to persons with LD. Having a system that is prepared for persons with special needs was the strongest communication. This means that recruiting literature is available in several media and even other languages, that in-take personnel at centers have training in sensitivity to LD and other needs, that the intake procedures of the programs include initial screening for LD; and that programs have a system for referring learners with special needs to relevant experts. Gradually, requiring that all teachers would have LD training as part of a certification appropriate instruction and provision of effective accommodations. With such a system in place, the group felt that programs would not be unduly burdened by students with special needs. Rather, they will be able to receive and support such students as a matter of course. This is essential since students with LD are now a majority in adult education.

Though neither the Maryland task force nor Ms. Hager was focusing on ESOL learners with LD, the recommendations would not be very different for a program to respond to these learners adequately. Acknowledging the very presence of ESOL learners with LD is the first big test. Then, since learning disabilities affect ESOL learners in almost exactly the same ways as they affect non-ESOL learners, requiring ESOL teachers to have as full training in LD as ABE teachers or GED teachers is the next.

Having in place a procedure for informal screening of ESOL students for LD would be another important aspect of a responsive program. Because there is no LD screening tool appropriate for all ESOL students (still being field tested), the effectiveness of screening at intake is highly dependent on the English level of the learner and on the cultural and linguistic sensitivity of the interviewer and the questions being asked.

What commonly happens is that evaluation begins after the learner has manifested problems. Using observation to obtain qualitative information to answer the five questions formulated by this author and mentioned in Vol 1, Issue 4, can be a way to make the decision about whether a student should be referred for further testing. One main purpose of this screening is to help programs differentiate between problems caused by the low literacy, culture shock, health or other issues, and those actually caused by LD. Screening helps develop a learning profile and plan for students judged to be at risk.

A responsive program also anticipates the instructional challenges that arise for ESOL learners with LD. While it is true that effective ESOL teaching is generally good for such learners, this alone will not be sufficient help for those with significant challenges.

The most responsive program would find a way to provide specialized instruction in separate classes to those ESOL students with the greatest challenges. The lack of appropriate materials for adult ESOL learners with LD is another part of the instructional challenges. Specialized materials, such as those for literacy instruction for English speaking adults with LD or even beginning ESOL, would create a problem for the ESOL learner with LD. For all these measures to happen, a coordinator would need to be designated. Then we can ensure that all possibilities are attempted to educate learners.