

A Practical Guide for the Teaching of Literacy to Adults With Learning Difficulties

Part XII

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A Practical Guide for the Teaching of Literacy to Adults With Learning Difficulties

Diagnosis and Intervention Strategies

**XII — Cognitive Field
Module: Expressive Language**

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XII—COGNITIVE FIELD

MODULE: EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE

INTRODUCTION

“The cognitive field includes the cognitive skills that make learning possible. The existence of learning problems indicates a strong possibility of deficiencies at the cognitive level; if there is dysfunction at the level of cognitive skills, there is a strong likelihood of learning problems.”¹

As this passage makes clear, cognitive skills have a major impact on learning. Skills such as attention, language, perception, memory as well as planning and executing tasks are a part of daily, ongoing learning, and are all directly related to learning basic subjects. During workshops, it is important to encourage adult learners to speak, to think, to use their memory and attention span, and so on.

Although the development of cognitive skills is an ongoing process, specific activities and exercises can help foster these skills. It is important to present the adult learners with the objectives of each activity, to help them make the connection between cognitive skills and learning and to repeat these activities as often as possible.

Activities should be varied in order to stimulate different cognitive skills. Special attention should also be paid to the immediate environment (the organization of physical space), to the ground rules established within the group, to the kinds of work habits being fostered among the adult learners, and so on. Organize workshops in such a way as to encourage participation, responsibility, cooperation and mutual assistance—remember, interaction and the development of cognitive skills go hand in hand.

In short, the suggested intervention strategies for the various aspects of the cognitive field are designed to incite adult learners to interact, not only with the other members of the group, but also with the specific object of learning (a text to read, a problem to solve, etc.). This way, the adult learners’ efforts to grasp the object of learning—through mastery of the necessary cognitive skills—will enable them to gradually understand the purpose of the activity and to successfully complete it.

¹ Translated from J. Jasmin, *Guide d’utilisation de la grille de dépistage de problèmes d’apprentissage chez les adultes* (Montréal: Commission des écoles catholiques de Montréal, 1990).

COGNITIVE FIELD

EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE

1.	In terms of motor skills, is the adult learner able to pronounce words without difficulty?
YES:	The adult learner can pronounce words without difficulty.
NO:	The adult learner has great difficulty pronouncing certain words. Some are barely comprehensible, while others are distorted.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS

- Ensure that the learner does not have a hearing problem and that the causes of the language problem are not related to dentition, the vocal apparatus or any other physiological problem. When in doubt, recommend that the adult consult a specialist.
- Determine if the learner is able to distinguish sounds and words: difficulties pronouncing certain sounds or words may be linked to a problem in auditory discrimination. If this is the case, see the interventions suggested in section 3 of the “Receptive Language” module.
- Identify the sounds and words that the learner has difficulty pronouncing and focus interventions on these elements.
- Determine if the problem is constant or if it only occurs under certain circumstances (when the learner is speaking in front of several people, is trying to speak quickly, is tired, etc.). If the problem only arises in specific situations, help the learner become aware of these contexts and provide the necessary support.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

- Have the adult learners do numerous exercises involving repetition, articulation and auditory discrimination:
 - ◇ repetition by the learners of sounds and words that pose difficulties; suggest that they record themselves and correct their own work, if necessary
 - ◇ preparation with the learner of:
 - ⇒ series of words that contain the sound or sounds that pose difficulties
 - ⇒ short phrases made up of words containing a sound that poses difficulties. For example: Sheila sells seashells by the seashore
 - ◇ use of written material and the division of words into syllables, if possible, to help the learners identify and pronounce sounds and words that cause difficulties. Seeing the written form of some words may improve pronunciation, for example: E-LEC-TRI-CI-TY
 - ◇ verbal presentation of a series of words that are similar in pronunciation, and request that the learners identify the word that corresponds to a given illustration
- Point out to the learners the importance of listening attentively in order to hear words properly and acquire the correct pronunciation.
- Encourage the learners to participate during group discussions.
- From time to time, ask the learners to repeat words that are pronounced incorrectly. Make sure, however, that this type of intervention does not make the learners feel embarrassed or incompetent, as this could hinder their willingness to speak.
- Act as a role model for the learners:
 - ◇ Use correct pronunciation.
 - ◇ Speak at a normal speed.
 - ◇ Use clear and simple language.

2.	In terms of motor skills, does the adult learner have a problem with:	
2.1.	articulation?	
YES:	The adult learner has a problem with articulation.	NO: The adult learner does not have a problem with articulation.

2.	In terms of motor skills, does the adult learner have a problem with:	
2.2.	stuttering?	
YES:	The adult learner stutters.	NO: The adult learner does not stutter.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS

- Ensure that the learner’s articulation or stuttering problems are not caused by a physiological (dentition, vocal or cerebral) or psychological disorder. When in doubt, suggest that the learner consult a specialist.
- Determine if the learner is able to discriminate between different sounds and different words: difficulties pronouncing certain sounds or words may be linked to a problem in auditory discrimination. If this is the case, see the interventions suggested in section 3 of the “Receptive Language” module.
- Identify the sounds and words that the learner has difficulty pronouncing and focus interventions on these elements.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

- Have the learners do articulation exercises:
 - ◇ Ask them to repeat sounds or words that pose difficulties; suggest that they record themselves and correct their own work, if necessary.
 - ◇ Make them aware of points of articulation (lips, tongue, teeth, palate, etc.) and movements (inhaling and exhaling) that play a role when pronouncing various sounds.
 - ◇ Introduce exercises that involve repeating noises and sounds produced through the vocal apparatus. For example: blowing, clicking the tongue, swallowing or gargling.
 - ◇ Use a mirror so that learners can see the position of their lips and tongue when different sounds are produced.
 - ◇ With the learner, prepare:
 - ⇒ series of words that contain the sound or sounds that pose difficulties
 - ⇒ short phrases made up of words containing a sound that poses difficulties; for example: Sheila sells seashells by the seashore
- Suggest that the learners perform exercises involving the mouth and tongue for a few minutes each day, such as various facial expressions, opening and closing their mouth or puffing out their cheeks.
- Point out to the learner the importance of listening attentively in order to hear words properly and acquire the correct pronunciation.
- Encourage the learners to participate during group discussions.
- From time to time, ask the learners to repeat words that are pronounced incorrectly. Make sure, however, that this type of intervention does not make the learners feel embarrassed or incompetent, as this could hinder their willingness to speak.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

- Determine if the stuttering or problem with articulation is constant or if it only occurs under certain circumstances (when the learner is speaking in front of several people, is trying to speak quickly, is tired, etc.). If it arises in specific situations, help the learner become aware of these contexts and provide the necessary support.

- Act as a role model for the learners:
 - ◇ Use correct pronunciation.
 - ◇ Speak at a normal speed.
 - ◇ Use clear and simple language.

3.	Is the adult learner able to formulate a short message?	
YES:	The adult learner is able to formulate a short message using one or more short sentences to express an idea.	NO: The adult learner has difficulty formulating a short message. To avoid losing face, the learner uses set responses (yes, no, I don't know, oh, really!, etc.).

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS

- Make sure the learner has a good understanding of English as well as a good vocabulary. See the interventions suggested in sections 1 and 2 of the “Receptive Language” module.
- Take advantage of everyday situations to encourage learners to express themselves; for example: to express their needs or opinions, request or communicate information or carry on a spontaneous conversation.
- Help learners to express their ideas clearly and precisely, for example:
 - ◇ by encouraging them to complete sentences, if necessary
 - ◇ by asking them questions, when there are ambiguities or the message is unclear
 - ◇ by asking them questions, without suggesting an answer
 - ◇ by showing a genuine interest in what they have to say
- Determine the topics that interest each adult learner, and encourage him or her to participate during discussions on these topics.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

- Have the adult learners do numerous activities (structured or spontaneous) in which they express themselves in one or more sentences on a topic of interest to them. For instance, ask them to:
 - ◇ describe their weekend or a day off
 - ◇ take part in brief daily discussions on a current event
 - ◇ re-create a situation that will serve as the basis for a writing exercise
 - ◇ explain why they were late, absent or had to leave early

- Promote the development of language skills used in everyday life through various activities. For example:
 - ◇ Present written scenarios, such as: “Explain to your partner the route you take to get to the training centre.”
 - ◇ Use role-playing to re-create “everyday situations”: at the grocery store or bank, using public transportation, etc.

- Then place the adult learners in real-life communication situations to promote their use of acquired knowledge. For instance, ask them to:
 - ◇ communicate a message to a person from another group and relate the answer
 - ◇ go and get something from the training centre’s administration office
 - ◇ request information, make an appointment or order something by telephone

- Encourage learners who have strengthened their ability to formulate short messages in real-life situations to express themselves in role-playing or fictitious situations where they will not only have to formulate a message clearly, but also use their imagination. For instance, help them to:
 - ◇ improvise based on familiar situations in which two or more people must take part in a verbal exchange
 - ◇ describe an object or person that the other learners must identify on the basis of the clues provided

4.	Is the adult learner able to actively participate in a conversation in a logical manner?	
YES:	The adult learner is able to follow and carry on a conversation involving an exchange of opinions or ideas.	NO: The adult learner is silent and seems to lose the thread of the discussion. The conversation is too fast and the learner is unable to follow.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS

- First make sure that the learner is able to focus on his or her conversation partner and on the content of the verbal exchange. As the other speaker, use various means to help the learner focus. For example:
 - ◇ Use the learner's name and make sure he or she is "mentally prepared" to participate in a conversation.
 - ◇ Position yourself within the learner's field of vision.
 - ◇ As much as possible, eliminate background noise and visual elements that could be distracting (for instance, find a quiet setting if there is too much noise).
 - ◇ Use vocabulary that the learner can easily understand.
 - ◇ Refer to concrete situations that the learner is familiar with and about which the learner has something to say.
 - ◇ Refocus the learner's attention if it begins to stray during the conversation.
- Make the learners aware of the various aspects of a verbal exchange (other than words):
 - ◇ nonverbal communication: gestures, facial expressions, etc.
 - ◇ tone of voice (varies depending on the speaker's feelings)
 - ◇ intonation, depending on whether the speaker is asking a question, making an assertion, trying to convince, etc.
- Help the learners develop strategies that will enable them to understand the meaning of a conversation. For example, encourage them to:
 - ◇ use the context and their personal experience to determine the meaning of unknown words
 - ◇ observe nonverbal language
 - ◇ ask questions when something is unclear
 - ◇ ask the other speaker to repeat, if necessary
 - ◇ reformulate in their own words what has just been said: "If I understood correctly,..."

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

- Expand the learners' active and passive vocabulary through various activities in which they listen to information, process it to understand what is being said and comment. For example:
 - ◇ Set aside a few minutes every day for a group discussion on a subject of interest to the group, such as current events or a topic suggested by the group.
 - ◇ Conduct short improvisation activities using everyday situations during which the learner must listen to, understand and respond to what has been said.

- Help the learners develop an open mind with regard to the people and things around them, by arousing curiosity in various ways (texts, audio-visual material, workshops, conferences on themes related to their interests or concerns) and encouraging interaction between individuals in a group.

- Help the learners develop the skills needed to express and defend a point of view through various role-playing activities. For example, have the learners:
 - ◇ debate a current event as a group; each side must try to convince the other side of the validity of its position
 - ◇ play a game of *devil's advocate* in which each party sets out to convince a jury by presenting arguments to justify its position on a particular issue. There are various board games on the market which enlist verbal skills (for example, *Scruples*). These games can be adapted to meet various objectives and respond to the characteristics of the learners

5. 5.1.	For the most part, does the adult learner engage in conversation by responding and communicating using: isolated words?
YES:	The adult learner uses set responses: yes, no, I don't know, oh, really!, etc.
NO:	The adult learner does not have this problem.

5. 5.2.	For the most part, does the adult learner engage in conversation by responding and communicating using: sentences?
YES:	The adult learner uses sentences.
NO:	The adult learner uses set responses: yes, no, I don't know, oh, really!, etc.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS

- Make sure the learner has a good understanding of English as well as a good vocabulary. See the interventions suggested in sections 1 and 2 of the “Receptive Language” module.
- Take advantage of everyday opportunities to encourage learners to express themselves in various situations; for example: to express their needs or opinions, request information, carry on a spontaneous conversation, etc.
- Help learners to express their ideas clearly and precisely, for example:
 - ◇ by encouraging them to complete sentences, when necessary; let them find the words to finish a sentence, rather than finishing it for them
 - ◇ by asking them questions when there are ambiguities or when their message is unclear
 - ◇ by asking them questions, without suggesting an answer
 - ◇ by showing a genuine interest in what they have to say

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

- Make the learners aware of basic sentence structure (subject, verb, complement) through oral and written exercises. For example:
 - ◇ Ask them to answer different types of questions using a complete sentence. For example:
 - ⇒ “Do you know where my book is?”
Answer: “No, I don’t know where it is.”
 - ⇒ “Who needs help?”
Answer: “I need help.”
 - ◇ Recommend that they use words from the question being asked to formulate their answer.
 - ◇ Present them with questions in written form, if possible, accompanied by an answer to be completed.
- Have the learners perform drill-and-practice exercises that approximate real-life communication situations, to prevent them from losing their spontaneity and using learned artificial formulations.
- Have the learners do numerous activities (structured or spontaneous) in which they express themselves using sentences instead of isolated words. For instance, ask them to:
 - ◇ describe their weekend or a day off
 - ◇ take part in brief daily discussions on a current event
 - ◇ re-create a situation that will serve as the basis for a writing exercise
 - ◇ explain why they were late, absent or had to leave early
- Promote the development of language skills used in everyday life through various activities. For example:
 - ◇ Present written scenarios, such as: “Explain to your partner the route you take to get to the training centre.”
 - ◇ Use role-playing to re-create “everyday situations”: at the grocery store or the bank, using public transportation, etc.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

- Then place the learners in real-life communication situations to promote their use of acquired knowledge.
For instance, ask them to:
 - ◇ communicate a message to a person from another group and relate the answer
 - ◇ go and get something from the training centre's administration office
 - ◇ request information, make an appointment or order something by telephone
- Make the learners aware of the importance of expressing ideas clearly and completely, with the nuances required to avoid errors of interpretation by the listener.

6.	Is the adult learner's speech marked by:	
6.1.	missing words?	
YES:	The adult learner never uses the correct word or uses a descriptive phrase (that is, several words) to describe the object in question rather than the correct word, for example: "the square box that rolls on four wheels" for "car." Sometimes, the learner does not know the right word even though it is part of everyday usage.	NO: The adult learner does not have this problem.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS

- Take advantage of everyday opportunities to encourage the adult learners to speak, recognize objects, observe similarities and differences and to communicate them. Learners with limited vocabulary may be reluctant to speak and therefore should be encouraged gradually to express themselves.
- Pay particular attention to language skills and vocabulary related to the themes covered during the training:
 - ◇ Find out what the adult learner knows about the subject, and use this knowledge and everyday language to promote the acquisition of key words.
 - ◇ With the adult learner, develop a reference tool containing vocabulary related to the themes covered: vocabulary book; index cards containing images; etc.
 - ◇ Use scenarios and role-playing to develop language skills related to everyday situations: making an appointment, requesting information, etc.
- Suggest various exercises or activities (oral or written) to help the learners improve their vocabulary. For instance, ask them to:
 - ◇ match words with illustrations
 - ◇ identify as many elements as possible in an illustration or a photograph
 - ◇ identify a person from the group or a famous person on the basis of the verbal clues provided
 - ◇ describe an object based on its characteristics. For example: The table is low, round, red, etc.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

- ◇ complete a series of words: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, etc.
 - ◇ identify as many elements as possible from a given category, beginning with a generic term, such as “furniture”
 - ◇ use synonyms and antonyms
 - ◇ observe the many pictograms common in our everyday surroundings and describe what they represent: road signs, instructions, etc.
 - ◇ recognize an object based on its typical characteristics. For example: it’s yellow, it’s long, you eat it, it’s a fruit, etc.
- Encourage the adult learners to use clear, simple and precise vocabulary to express an idea:
 - ◇ Help them to find the right word (or provide the word, if necessary), rather than using expressions such as “the thing” or “the thing you use to...”
 - ◇ Encourage them to complete each sentence and to avoid expressions such as “y’know what I mean!”
 - In a reading context, draw the learners’ attention to certain key words essential to understanding: words that provide nuances, words that alter significantly the meaning of a sentence, etc.

A good English vocabulary will enable the adult learner not only to communicate with greater ease and effectiveness, but also to enhance their reading comprehension.

6. 6.2.	Is the adult learner's speech marked by: errors in syntax?
YES:	The adult learner makes many errors in syntax, such as: "don't never call me that," instead of "do not ever call me that."
	NO: The adult learner does not have this problem.

6. 6.3.	Is the adult learner's speech marked by: absence of syntax?
YES:	The adult learner speaks English like someone who has a poor grasp of English as a second language. These cases are quite rare.
	NO: The adult learner does not have this problem.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS

- Make sure the learner has a good understanding of English and a good vocabulary. See the interventions suggested in sections 1 and 2 of the "Receptive Language" module.
- Take advantage of everyday situations to encourage the learners to express themselves in various situations; for example: to express their needs or opinions, request or communicate information, or carry on a spontaneous conversation.
- Help the adult learners express ideas clearly and precisely, for example:
 - ◇ by encouraging them to complete their sentences, if necessary
 - ◇ by asking them questions, when there are ambiguities or the message is unclear
 - ◇ by correctly reformulating sentences containing errors in syntax
 - ◇ by serving as a role model at all times

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

- Have the adult learners do numerous activities (structured or spontaneous) in which they express themselves using sentences rather than isolated words. For instance, ask them to:
 - ◇ describe their weekend or a day off
 - ◇ take part in brief daily discussions on a current event
 - ◇ re-create a situation that will serve as the basis for a writing exercise
- Make the learners aware of basic sentence structure (subject, verb, complement) through oral and written exercises. For example:
 - ◇ Ask them to answer different types of questions using a complete sentence; “train” them to use certain structures, beginning with the most basic. For instance:
 - ⇒ “Do you know where my book is?”
Answer: “It is on the table.”
 - ⇒ “Who needs help?”
Answer: “I need help.”
 - ◇ Recommend that they use words from the question being asked to formulate their answer.
 - ◇ Present them with questions in written form, if possible, accompanied by an answer to be completed.

The *Canadian Adult Reading Assessment* (see bibliography) can be a helpful resource.

- Have the learners perform drill-and-practice exercises that approximate real-life communication situations, to prevent them from losing their spontaneity and using learned artificial formulations.
- Promote the development of language skills in everyday life through various activities. For example:
 - ◇ Present written scenarios, such as: “Explain to your partner the route you take to get to the training centre.”
 - ◇ Use role-playing to re-create “everyday situations”: at the grocery store or the bank, using public transportation, etc.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

- Then place the adult learners in real-life communication situations to promote their use of acquired knowledge. For instance, ask them to:
 - ◇ communicate a message to a person from another group and relate the answer
 - ◇ go and get something from the training centre's administration office
 - ◇ request information, make an appointment or order something by telephone
- From time to time, ask the learners to correct an error in syntax, by providing the correct form. Make sure, however, that this type of intervention does not make them feel embarrassed or incompetent, as this could hinder their willingness to speak.
- Have the adult learners do numerous transformation exercises (oral or written). For example, ask them to:
 - ◇ transform sentences by replacing a word with a synonym or a word from the same grammatical category
 - ◇ provide the opposite of a sentence, by using the negative form
 - ◇ formulate a question based on a given sentence

7.	Does the adult learner use nonverbal language to communicate (gestures, facial expressions, etc.)?	
YES:	The adult learner uses nonverbal language to communicate.	NO: The adult learner does not use nonverbal language to communicate because he or she is unaware of it or does not understand its meaning.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS

- With the adult learners, list the gestures that are used in everyday life to convey messages, for instance:
 - ◇ waving
 - ◇ nodding to convey “yes”; shaking of head to convey “no”
 - ◇ pointing a finger in order to draw attention to an object or person
 - ◇ pointing the index finger upwards to convey “just a minute” or “come here”
- Conduct various activities that will enable the adult learners to understand the importance of nonverbal language and how to use it effectively. For example:
 - ◇ Showing the learners photographs of people’s faces expressing a variety of emotions, ask the learners to describe these emotions.
 - ◇ Using comic strips without text, ask the learners to create a dialogue by observing the context, that is, the characters’ gestures and facial expressions, the setting, etc.
 - ◇ Using mime that is acted out by the instructor or the group, encourage the adult learners to identify or mime:
 - ⇒ actions: running, dancing, sewing, etc., using the whole body
 - ⇒ emotions: joy, pain, impatience, using mostly the face, hands and feet
 - ⇒ a complete message conveyed without words, such as: “Be quiet”; “Come here”; “Go away”
 - ◇ Have the learners listen to recorded sounds, such as laughter, sighs, crying and groaning, so that they learn how to identify various emotions.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

- ◇ If possible, show a short silent movie (or an excerpt from a film with the sound muted) and ask the adult learners to reconstruct the sequence of events, describing the emotions and actions, or imagining the characters' script.
 - ◇ Ask the learners to read short dialogues aloud or to recite them using nonverbal language that is generally used in this context; then repeat the exercise using nonverbal language that contradicts the message (for example, saying "I feel great" while wincing in pain). This type of exercise underlies the importance of language in relation to words.
 - ◇ Convey messages through mime.
- Take advantage of everyday opportunities to draw the learners' attention to facial expressions and gestures that almost always accompany verbal exchanges.

XII—COGNITIVE FIELD

MODULE: EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE

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