

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

It is important that teachers have the same expectations of learning for all students, regardless of any disabilities. Encourage students with disabilities to be as independent as possible.

The following list of challenges and strategies is meant to assist adult educators in providing educational opportunities for individuals with physical disabilities. The problems listed are learning challenges found in many individuals with disabilities, and the suggested teaching strategies can be used regardless of the disability.

How to Better Communicate With Persons Who Have Speech-Language-Cognitive Impairments

1. Give the person your full and complete attention.
2. Make sure you face each other so that you can watch the person's mouth for cues as to the word he/she is saying.
3. Encourage the person to use shorter sentences and /or to use "telegraphic" speech (i.e. to use only the necessary words to get across the message, as one would do in a telegram).
4. Prompt the person to speak louder if necessary. Give them instructions to take in a deep breath and "push the words out."
5. Suggest the person repeat the message. Sometimes a second attempt will result in a clearer production.
6. Ask the person to exaggerate the pronunciation of his/her words.
7. The listener should watch the mouth of the person for cues as to what sound they are producing.
8. Suggest the person say one phrase at a time and allow you to repeat each one after him/her. This allows them to put all of their effort into a few words. Your repetition serves to slow their production and allows immediate recognition when they are not being understood.
9. Interrupt if you do not understand. Repeat any part of the message you did get and ask him/her to go from there.
10. Try having the person say only one word at a time. Again use the echo procedure.
11. Ask the person to spell particularly difficult words. Echo each letter.
12. Try to have the person write responses.
13. A student can spell words out by pointing to letters on an alphabet chart, or on a communication board made up of letters and words.
14. Some persons who are non-readers may use a picture communication system.
15. Occasionally assume some of the responsibility for the communication difficulty by making comments such as "I'm sorry. I'm not understanding you well today."
16. Have the person rephrase their message by using different words.
17. Suggest that they speak more slowly.
18. If the person has difficulty initiating speech, allow the individual ample time to get started without interrupting his/her concentration.
19. Ask the person to "stretch out" the vowels just a little. This should help to slow his/her rate.
20. Give the person feedback such as an affirmative head shake or a "yes" to indicate you understand what he/she is saying.

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21. Don't pretend you understand when you do not. Repeat what you did understand and ask him/her to continue from there.
22. Even though you are trying to simplify the process of communication, try to keep your tone as adult like as possible. Stay away from the tendency to talk very loudly or exaggerate each word.
23. If you are unable to hear or understand someone's message due to distractions (background noise, too many people talking) move to a quieter area and resume your conversation.

Attention Issues

Some students with physical disabilities might also have attention deficits with the same frequency as those students without disabilities. To help them focus:

1. Maintain consistent staff, room arrangement and materials.
2. Redirect the student back to task if he or she wanders.
3. Remove unnecessary distractions. Initially, limit background noise and gradually increase to a normal level.
4. Limit the amount of information on a page or computer screen.
5. Adjust assignments to the length of the student's attention span.
6. Use a multi-sensory presentation of new material. Demonstrate and repeat instructions, and ask the student to repeat the instructions back.
7. Use materials that are meaningful to the adult student.
8. Use short and concise instructions.
9. Provide frequent breaks.
10. Ask the student how he/she would prefer to be reminded to stay on task.

Starting, Changing, and Maintaining Activities

It might take students with physical disabilities longer to begin assignments or make the switch to other assignments or activities. In addition, depending on the disability, a student might become easily fatigued. Changing from one task or subject to another can alleviate the feeling of fatigue. These steps might help:

1. Begin the session by reviewing what was completed in the prior session and what is expected today.
2. Use checklists. List steps to the task and check them off when completed; emphasize where they are in relation to the final step.
3. Give one task at a time.
4. Explain several examples to help the student get started.
5. Praise the student once he/she has begun a task. Assure the student that he/she is capable of completing the activity.
6. End each session with a successful experience. Remind the student of prior success.
7. Consider having a volunteer tutor cue the student to begin activities and redirect the student as necessary.

Processing and Retaining Information

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Some students with physical disabilities have difficulty taking notes or writing math problems. They must rely on their listening skills. To improve them:

1. Provide a scribe or tape recorder for important information.
2. Provide relevant notes following a lesson.
3. Encourage the student to repeat new information as many times as necessary for mastery. Over-learn the information.
4. Begin each session with a review of the previous lesson and end each session with a review of material covered that day. Encourage the student to tell you what he/she remembers in his/her own words.
5. Base new learning on prior knowledge or learning.
6. Use material that is significant and relevant to the adult student.
7. Use verbal rehearsal. After the visual or auditory information is presented, have the student practice and repeat it as they listen to themselves.
8. Limit the amount of new information presented each day. The student should try to attend school during the time each day in which he/she learns best. Have the student take notes or record information on tape.
9. Underline or highlight key words in a passage for emphasis.
10. Use computer-assisted instruction.
11. Use mnemonic devices such as visualization, chunking and acronyms.
12. Use a multi-sensory presentation.
13. Teach compensatory strategies, such as the use of journals and assignment calendars.
14. Provide frequent breaks to prevent information overload.
15. Allow extra processing time.

Language Comprehension and Expression

Students with severe physical disabilities may take longer to complete tasks. As a result, some students may not have had time to reach their learning potential in their K-12 years. A student that is non-verbal might not have learned phonics. Likewise, these students would not have had time to practice new learning, read books and develop their vocabulary skills. To help:

1. Limit the amount of information presented—perhaps only one or two sentences at a time.
2. State information in concrete terms. Use pictures or visual symbols if necessary.
3. Teach the student to ask for clarification. It's okay to have questions!
4. Present verbal information at a relatively slow pace with appropriate pauses for processing time, and with repetition if necessary.
5. Limit the amount of background noise when listening and understanding is critical.
6. Give the students opportunities to increase their vocabulary skills through vocabulary workbooks and software programs.
7. Encourage the student to ask the teacher to say something in a different way if it's not clear the first time.

Visual Perception and Motor Skills

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Visual perception problems are common with some disabilities such as cerebral palsy or MS. Even though students don't need glasses, they might benefit from large print because it provides more space between the lines. Also, some students with physical disabilities have difficulty copying from the chalkboard, and write too slowly or illegibly to take readable notes. Often their writing slants across the paper. Moving quickly from a test booklet or text to an answer sheet can be challenging. To help:

1. Provide longer viewing times or repeat viewings when using visual instructional materials.
2. Limit lines of text on a page or screen.
3. Use line markers.
4. Provide large print materials. Space between the lines is important. Use a copy machine or computer to enlarge the print.
5. Use books on tape and, if possible, furnish large print materials for following along with the audio.
6. Place a colored acetate sheet, of the student's choice, over a worksheet or computer screen to increase the readability of the print.
7. Provide visual clues for the beginnings and ends of lines. Place a colored dot in the left and right margins of the paper or draw a line with a colored marker down the left and right margins. Instruct the student to read to the colored line.
8. Use a multi-sensory presentation of materials—visual and audible.
9. Choose materials and software that provide an uncluttered format.
10. Use paper with black or raised lines.
11. Write with a large pen or marker.
12. Use pencil pillows or grips.
13. Allow extra time to complete written tests and assignments.
14. Alter the length of written assignments when possible.
15. Let the student underline answers on worksheets rather than copying them onto a blank space.
16. Let the student answer questions in one or two words rather than a complete sentence.
17. Teach the student to use a note taker effectively.
18. Schedule instruction during the student's optimum performance time.
19. Pay attention to and make accommodations for the student's physical comfort.
20. Place a sheet of lined paper on a clipboard which has rubber shelf lining glued to the back to prevent slipping.
21. Teach the student to use word processing to record answers.
22. Tape record answers.
23. Provide assistive technology such as a trackball mouse and an alternative keyboard for word processing and computer-assisted instruction.
24. Ensure that tables and monitors are at an appropriate height for the student.

Sequential Processing

Some students have great difficulty planning an essay or determining the steps necessary to complete an assignment. After hearing a story, they would have difficulty repeating the events in the correct sequence. To help:

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1. Limit the number of steps in a task.
2. Present one step of a lesson at a time.
3. Provide checklists.
4. Have the student repeat, in his own words, the instructions he/she has heard.
5. Provide sample items describing how to proceed through parts of a worksheet.
6. Teach the student to refer back to the directions.
7. Teach sequence in reading and writing. Practice putting a story in order. Plan writing activities based on a sequence.
8. Provide part of a sequence and have the student finish the sequence.

Problem Solving/Reasoning

The student might struggle with higher level thinking skills, such as making an inference, finding the main idea, determining a cause and effect relationship or drawing a conclusion. The student might be very concrete in his/her thinking. To help:

1. Teach the structure or format of a task.
2. Maintain a familiar format in materials or software.
3. Have completed sample worksheets serve as models.
4. Develop a problem solving guide to help the student through the stages of problem solving (e.g., identify the problem; acquire relevant information for solving the problem; generate several possible solutions; list pros and cons for each solution; identify the best solution; create a plan of action; evaluate the effectiveness of the plan).
5. Raise questions about alternatives and consequences.
6. Carefully introduce roadblocks and complications to enhance “detouring” skills and to encourage flexibility.
7. Provide ongoing, non-judgmental feedback.
8. Provide concrete dialogue and information.
9. Be certain expectations are clear and understood.
10. Ask the student to explain his/her understanding of what he/she has just heard or understands.
11. Rephrase oral communication if student does not understand.
12. Ask the student to tell what they are thinking before responding to the student.
13. Introduce reading materials by objective. That is, the students should listen or read for the main idea. Then they should listen or read to draw a conclusion etc.

Organization and Planning Skills

Some students with physical disabilities will have difficulty not only finding the topic for a paper, but also planning and organizing the writing of the paper. They may have a tendency to think only in broad terms.

Similarly, determining how to organize daily assignments can be overwhelming. Even the student’s desk might become cluttered. The student may become frustrated and gives up completely before accomplishing much of anything.

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1. Attempt to limit impulsive responses by encouraging the student to take “thinking time” before he/she answers.
2. Have the student organize information by using categories (e.g., who, what, when, where).
3. Focus on one type of information at a time. Teach reading by objective (main idea, details, inference, cause and effect, context).
4. Decrease rambling by directing the student to express a thought “in one sentence.”
5. Limit the number of steps in a task.
6. Structure thinking processes graphically (e.g., with time lines, outlines, flow charts, graphs).
7. Use computer-assisted instruction.
8. Encourage the use of a planning calendar.
9. Practice estimating the time it takes to complete a task. If there are multiple steps in the task, how long will each step take?
10. Encourage the student to develop a list of steps needed to complete a task.
11. Develop checklists.
12. Determine realistic goals.

Impulse or Self-Control/Social Awareness

Sometimes students feel unsure of themselves especially if they have experienced failure in school. Behavior policies should be in place for all ABE programs. To limit behavior problems:

1. Go over the behavior policy for your ABE program.
2. Place unnecessary materials out of sight or out of reach.
3. Discuss rules and their importance at the beginning of the class.
4. Explain how a student’s impulsive acts disturb others.
5. Assure the student that he or she has sufficient time to complete tasks and need not “hurry through” them.
6. Break a large task into smaller tasks and provide a checklist of steps.
7. Allow the student to take a “time out” when feeling stressed.
8. Be sure each student experiences a successful moment each day of class.
9. Encourage the student to recognize when help is needed and how to best get it.
10. Model desired behavior. For example, speak quietly.
11. Review directions.
12. Provide a written sequence to follow to circumvent anxiety.
13. Assure the student that he or she can complete the task.
14. Have the student work with a volunteer tutor. Feedback will be immediate and assistance will be easily accessible.

Achievement of Academic Potential

In order to help your student achieve all he or she can, use the following tips:

1. Assure the student that your program is student-centered. Students will have the opportunity to work on their identified goals.

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2. Assist the students in improving their independence. Empower them to make decisions.
3. Include math and reading materials that relate to the CASAS/TABE Assessments.
4. Use materials that will help students increase their vocabulary skills.
5. Provide activities on employment skills.
6. Provide group activities.
7. Give the gift of time and repetition to students with severe physical disabilities. They need it.
8. Teach students who cannot use their hands to read cursive writing.
9. Teach phonics to individuals that are non-verbal.
10. Teach basic foundational skills in reading, writing and math.
11. Use manipulatives in teaching math.
12. Use materials that are relevant.
13. Emphasize the student's strengths. Point out progress that has been made. Use a learning log to compare past and present work.
14. Chart progress graphically
15. Praise specific learning achievements or behaviors. Be consistent.
16. Expect your student to make progress.

Source: Special Education Evaluation and Services for Students with Traumatic Brain Injury: A Manual for Minnesota Educators, Minnesota Department of Education, Division of Special Education, Revised March, 2004. Adapted for ABE by Linda Strand, 2008.

Additional Miscellaneous Suggestions

1. Repeat, repeat, repeat! Students need to get information into their long-term memories.
2. Begin at a lower level than the formal placement level. Success is vital during the early stages of attending adult basic education.
3. Give students plenty of time to process information. They will do much better if they are relaxed and know they have permission to work at their own pace.
4. Provide materials with a simple format.
5. The structure of lessons in a workbook should be the same for each lesson so the student can focus on new learning rather than how to do the lesson.
6. Begin each lesson with a review of past material, before introducing new learning. Finally, review the day's learning by asking the students to summarize what they have studied and learned.
7. Provide a multi-sensory approach to new learning. See it, hear it, say it and write it.
8. Ask the student how he/she learns best.
9. Ask the student to prepare and teach the teacher or another student an assigned lesson.
10. If a student's speech is difficult to understand, ask the student to repeat the information three times. Then ask if they can tell you the beginning sound of the first word. You can also echo each word as the student says it. You will know if you are hearing the word the student is saying.
11. To assist a student in recognizing fluency problems, have the student highlight the words as he reads them. If the student stops between words, he/she will notice breaks in the line.

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12. Leave writing on a chalkboard/whiteboard so students do not feel rushed when copying the information.
13. Avoid using red or colored ink to correct papers.
14. Post a reference chart of upper and lower case manuscript and upper and lower case cursive letters in each room or provide an individual copy to those students that would find it helpful.