

## 10 Tips for Groups Where Language May Be a Challenge

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*From time to time we work with a group where language is a challenge (e.g. dementia, low-literacy, different languages of origin). It is important to understand learners' language abilities (expression and comprehension) when planning for an education event. During the learning needs and resources assessment (LNRA) process, find out what you can about learners' comfort and abilities related to reading and writing. Then carefully and intentionally design your event. Here are a few things to keep in mind when language may be a challenge.*

1. **Use visuals.** Where possible use visual aids to teach the new content or to make a point i.e. video clip, role play, pictures, cartoons, etc. When you need/ want to share words visually, support them with a visual representation as well. In general, limit written text.
2. **Offer choice.** Adult learners will choose wisely according to their needs and comfort level. For this reason, when you offer choice about how to do an activity (drawing or writing) or receive information (follow along in the brochure or with the drawings), adults will engage in a way that is most helpful for them. Be sure to create safety (“it’s okay to do it different”) and give reminders about the options for a task. Remember that too much choice can also be overwhelming for learners living with dementia.
3. **Use props.** Whether as a metaphor or a concrete example of what you are explaining to a group, demo objects can be helpful in learning or understanding a complex or new concept or skill. The key is to find props that communicate clearly and simply. You can also SHOW rather than, or perhaps as well as, TELL to explain a new concept or skill.
4. **Engage learners by DOING.** The best way to learn something is to *do something with new content* to test, challenge and/or practice it. If you ensure that this activity does not involve much writing OR that there are options for how to do the task, learners will be successful regardless of language abilities.
5. **Use language that is familiar to the group.** As a general rule of thumb, everyday language is more easily understood compared to academic or professional language.

Listen to the words used by learners when you speak with them as part of your assessment process and during the course. Check with others within the community or others who are familiar with this group about what language is most appropriate and is most likely to be understood. Make sure that this

language is reflected in your design *and* facilitation. This will not only aid the learning but also shows respect for the learners.

6. **Reading aloud.** By asking for *volunteers* to read instructions aloud and at times reading aloud yourself, ALL learners will have the chance to know what is expected of them. This increases safety for learners that have difficulty reading because they know they will not have to read in order to participate in the group.
7. **Be clear and simple.** You may think that this goes without saying, but all too often professionals get caught up in jargon or the complexities of their field. Teach as if you are having a casual conversation – keep it down to earth.
8. **Use stories.** Story is a powerful thing for all human beings. When written text is a challenge to read or understand, oral text is often helpful. Stories are personal and often come from or touch the heart – this is why they are so powerful.
9. **Use role play.** It is a form of storytelling, but can also help learners experience how it must *feel* to be in a particular role. Get learners to act out a role they are not normally in to gain empathy and new insights into another person’s reality. It is critical that this is done with safety (e.g. in small groups or pairs, with those who would like to volunteer or use a demonstration role play with facilitators).
10. **Ask learners to retell or summarize.** We sometimes assume a nodding head means understanding. This is not always true. You can help learning and assist in the personalizing of new concepts when you ask learners to retell or summarize their understanding of what has been presented or explained. This can be done with a partner or small group, with a question attached to discuss together. Frame this so that learner safety is ensured (e.g. no wrong answers, affirm, and respectfully clarify as needed).

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