

Teaching Senior EAL Learners

Alberta Routes

Tip Sheet 22

Geragogy: the theory and practice of teaching older adults, recognizing their unique physical, psychological, and social realities

Strengths they may bring to learning	Challenges that may impact learning
Life experience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wealth of historical and cultural knowledge • Wisdom and personal stories 	Physical <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Declining hearing and vision • Mobility issues
Motivation and purpose <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internally motivated (e.g. independence, seeking connections) • Targeted, goal-oriented learning 	Cognitive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slower memory and recall • Longer processing time
Appreciation for learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More time and willingness to learn • Process feedback more easily 	Emotional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety over failure • Fixed on stereotype of “can’t teach an old dog...”
Collaborative spirit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eagerness to learn from others • Initiative to communicate 	Social <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolation • Dependence on family

Teaching Considerations for Supporting Seniors

- **Acknowledge and leverage life experience.** When topics resonate, memory retention is better.
- **Allow more processing time.** Appreciate slowness. New vocabulary and grammar require more time to learn.
- **Use multisensory and repetitive techniques.** Recycling new language in varied contexts and with audio-visual-kinesthetic tools strengthens memory and accommodates different ways of learning.
- **Foster a respectful and supportive environment.** Encourage peer support and a positive atmosphere. Guard against ageist assumptions.
- **Adapt materials for accessibility.** Large print, clear fonts, high-contrast visuals, and slower audio playback accommodate vision and hearing challenges.
- **Encourage metacognition.** Explicit teaching of strategies like using memory aids, summarizing, and self-testing supports retention.
- **Prioritize communication over perfection.** Focus on practical language and fluency not grammar accuracy to reduce anxiety and build confidence.
- **Offer consistent encouragement and feedback.** Celebrate even small wins. Positive reinforcement helps maintain motivation and a growth mindset - “I can still do this!”

Originally created by Alberta Routes Team
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