Adult Learning and Retention: Factors and Strategies

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When working with adults, keep in mind that adults

- Are self-directed
- Are practical and problem solving
- Need to know why something is being learned
- Need adult-appropriate content
- Have previous experience as a resource
- Need to demonstrate background knowledge and abilities, and
- Need to be able to apply learning immediately to real-life situations

Many factors affect adult learning. These include the learner's

- Age
- Language background
- Level of prior education
- Degree of first language literacy
- Cultural background and related views regarding adult learning
- Individual learning preferences and styles
- Emotional and psychological issues
- Disabilities
- Motivation, and
- Personal situation and stressors

Research by the National Training Laboratory (World Bank, n.d.) shows that the amount of new information learners retain depends on how the information is presented. Here are retention rates for seven common ways of teaching new information:

- Lecture 5%
- Reading 10%
- Audio-Visual 20%
- Demonstration 30%
- Discussion 50%
- Practice by doing 75%
- Teaching others 90%

In other words, learners learn best when they are actively engaged in their own learning. As Confucius said nearly 2,500 years ago,

I hear and I forget.
I see and I remember.
I do and I understand.
(Moncur, n.d.)

The theory of multiple intelligences was first proposed by Howard Gardner (1983), a Harvard psychologist. According to this theory, there are at least eight different types of intelligence that people possess to different degrees:

- Spatial intelligence (picture smart)
- Linguistic intelligence (word smart)
- Logical-mathematical intelligence (number/reasoning smart)
- Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence (body smart)
- Musical intelligence (music smart)
- Interpersonal intelligence (people smart)
- Intrapersonal intelligence (self smart)
- Naturalist intelligence (nature smart)

Because people have different kinds of intelligence, they learn in different ways, and teachers are most effective when they engage all of their students' learning styles (Carver, n.d.). (For more information on different intelligences, **visit here**.)

To capture participants' interests and to touch upon the different ways they learn, we recommend the following strategies for adult learners:

- **Activate background knowledge.** For example: Before discussing homes in the United States, have participants share with a partner what their homes in their countries of origin were like.
- **Use variety.** For example: Follow a brief lecture with a small-group discussion, then a role play.
- **Change the pace of the class as needed.** For example: Move from a short lecture to a longer small-group session.
- **Use active learning.** For example: Take participants on a field trip to the bank after they have learned about opening a bank account.
- **Touch upon all learning styles.** For example: Show a PowerPoint presentation with pictures, cue words, and sounds; have participants come up and describe what is on the slide; discuss.
- **Use an interpreter.** For example: While explaining a topic, use a trained interpreter to ensure that participants understand.
- **Encourage learner participation.** For example: Ask questions, use feedback, and encourage participants to learn from each other.
- **Review, review, review.** For example: Ask questions, check for understanding, and have participants explain what they have learned in their own words.
- **Use authentic (or authentic-looking) materials.** For example: Show samples of a check, a bill, a lease, and a paycheck when discussing budgeting and financial management.

References

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Resources

Center for Applied Linguistics. (2006). *Cultural orientation for refugees: A handbook for U.S. trainers.* Washington, DC: Author.

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