Common Characteristics of Tutoring Target Populations

Tutor target populations are those student populations most likely to require tutoring assistance. These individuals include but are not limited to students at-risk due to learning disabilities, students who have English as a second language, adult learners returning to school after a period away from an educational setting, and first year students. While these students are distinct in their learning needs there are some characteristics common to each population and their specific learning needs. Knowing the characteristics common to each population will aid you in helping tutees on the road to success in their college experience.

Upon reviewing these characteristics we will look at each target population and identify some practical solutions for tutoring these students.

Written Language Skills
- Frequent spelling errors that include single letter omissions, substitutions, reversals and transpositions. Word endings may also be regularly dropped.
- Difficulty with sentence structure (e.g., incomplete sentences, run-on sentences, poor use of grammar, missing inflectional endings).
- Slow writing, including the inability to copy correctly from a book or from the blackboard.
- Poor handwriting (e.g., poorly formed letters, incorrect use of capitalization, trouble with spacing, overly large writing).
- Noted difficulty in the organization of content.
- Oral expression may be better than written expression.

Oral Language Skills
- Apparent understanding of a concept, but extreme difficulty in expressing ideas.
- Inability to concentrate on information presented orally or to comprehend oral language. Frequent misunderstanding or incomplete understanding of information presented verbally.
- Difficulty in relating ideas or information in the proper sequence.
- Problems in speaking grammatically correct English.
- Poor topic maintenance in conversational situations.
- Writing skills may reflect these difficulties.

Reading Skills
- Poor comprehension and retention of information.
- Slow reading rate. A one-hour reading assignment may take the individual with processing difficulties two to three hours to complete.
- Poor vocabulary skills that includes confusion of similar words as well as difficulty in learning new vocabulary.
- Difficulties identifying important information or main themes.

- Substitution or omission of whole words within a text when asked to read aloud.
- Poor phonetic decoding or inability to "sound out" new words.
- Tires easily or eyes begin to hurt when reading.

Auditory Processing Skills
- Problems in auditory memory, which affect learning new information as well as following directions.
- Difficulty in hearing small differences between words or speech sounds (which appears to affect spelling as well as social skills).
- Reduced level of concentration in a lecture setting.
- Difficulty following what is said in a noisy situation.
- Extreme difficulty in learning a foreign language.

Mathematical Skills
- Incomplete mastery of basic math skills, such as the multiplication tables.
- Transposition of numbers (e.g., 498 to 489).
- Confusion of operational symbols (especially '+' and 'x') or failure to switch operations when called for.
- Difficulty recalling the sequence of an operational process.
- Frequently copies problems incorrectly from the board or book and has difficulty copying from line to line when working on the solution to a problem.
- Inability to understand and retain abstract concepts.
- Deficits in logical reasoning.
- Difficulty in comprehending word problems.

Organizational and Study Skills
- Difficulties in starting and completing tasks.
- Continuous problems with time management.
- Difficulty in understanding and following oral or written directions.
- Poor organization of ideas in note taking or in written composition.
- Demonstration of short attention span while studying or during lectures.
- Poor recall of new information.
- Inefficient use of library resources.

Social Skills
- Some students may have social skills problems due to their inconsistent perceptual abilities. For the same reason that a person with visual perceptual problems may have trouble discriminating between the letters 'b' and 'd', he or she may be unable to detect the difference between a joking wink and a disgusted glance.
- Individuals with auditory perceptual problems might not notice the difference between sincere and sarcastic comments, or be able to recognize other subtle changes in tone of voice. The difficulties in interpreting nonverbal messages may result in lowered self-esteem for some students. Processing

difficulties may cause them to have trouble meeting people, working cooperatively with others, and approaching faculty with questions or requests for help.

Guidelines for Tutoring Students with Disabilities

Although there are some special considerations in working with disabled students, the most important thing you can do is to treat them like everyone else.

1.   Encourage students whom you suspect of having a learning disability to talk to you about past school performance, needs they identify, and ways that they know you can accommodate their learning differences. However, keep in mind that not all students are comfortable talking about their disabilities. If your interest seems unwelcome, don't push.

2.   Look disabled students directly in the eye when you talk to them….Always talk directly to the disabled student and not to his companion.

3.   When speaking to hearing-impaired students, always keep your face turned toward them.

4.   A wheelchair, a walker, a cane, or crutches – all become an extension of the user's body. Just as you wouldn't grab a tutee's leg, so you should never grab any device that helps someone walk.

5.   Use dual channels to deliver information, both speaking and writing.

6.   Use visual organizers for information processing assistance, e.g., semantic mapping charting, colored pens.

7.   Give feedback frequently so the student can improve performance.

8.   Give extra time for information processing
                -Insert more pauses during your discourse
                -Don't begin speaking immediately when student pauses
                -Give permission for requests for repeats

9.   Encourage verbal rehearsal (sub audibly repeating what one hears) by direct instruction and by modeling.

10.   Present information in "concept blocks," i.e., paragraphing your discourse.

11.   Request feedback frequently to test comprehension
                -Request a paraphrase of tutor's explanation
                -Ask questions

    -Request student to work a problem
    -Ask student to create a specific writing construction.

12.   Give feedback frequently so the student can improve his or her performance, e.g., "I noticed you omitted the middle step."

13.   Observe body language for nonverbal signs of confusion.

14.   Rephrase explanations and give permission for requests for rephrasing.

15.   Encourage question asking.

16.   Be aware that sequencing difficulties can occur in a variety of activities; some sequencing strategies are:
    -Delineate the specific steps, e.g., by numbering
    -Breakdown step into sub steps

17.   An important aspect of information processing is organization; some organization strategies for helping others to receive information are:
    -Plan a logical sequence of presenting information
    -Give advance organizers, e.g., "first, we will…., then,…"
    -Summarize material covered

18.   Teach, model, encourage, and praise self-correction as learning strategies. This is a behavior used by successful LD students and is evidence of self-monitoring and self-regulating.

19.   Encourage students with special needs to:
    -Prepare for lectures by asking instructors for lecture notes, outlines, or lists of key terms prior to lectures
    -Plan in advance for tests, papers, or projects to give themselves extra processing time
    -Tape lectures and class discussions
    -Obtain notes from a classmate or notetaker. An instructor soliciting a volunteer notetaker has the advantage of obtaining a "skilled" notetaker and anonymity for the student.
    -Use yellow acetate sheets for reading purple ditto copies.
    -Use dictionaries to correct spelling errors.

20.   Teach LD students to compare their performance in a class with a classmate who has approximately the same abilities. It allows for more optimum viewing of weaknesses. Often a low area is low for others too, but the LD student feels it's part of the disability.

21.   Always check understanding of task or assignment, i.e., what does the instructor expect.

Tutoring Students Who Have English as a Second Language

Obstacles to Tutoring ESL Students
- **Cultural differences** – customs, religion, history of a people, social and gender roles, etc.
- **Linguistic challenges** – international students who attend college find that their English is inadequate both for classes and for social purposes. They may speak with a heavy accent and have trouble understanding casual speech. As a result they often feel isolated and homesick.
- **Culture shock** – when conditions that we assumed were normal are suddenly out of place.

Get to Know Your ESL Students by asking them:
- Your education in your native country
- How long have you been in the United States?
- How long do you plan to stay?
- Why did you decide to come to the United States?
- Why did you decide to come to this college?
- Travels in the United States and elsewhere
- General impressions of life here
- Did you speak English before you came here?
- Did you read or write English? If so, how did you learn it?
- Has English been a problem for you? In classes? Socially? Other?
- Have American customs been a problem for you? Please explain.
- What do you like about America?
- How would you change America if you could?
- What do you miss about your country?
- How can other students help you to have a good experience here?

Practical Suggestions for Tutoring ESL Students
- Work with the student and, if possible, with the classroom teacher to establish reasonable goals and priorities.
- Examine the subject matter, text, and other material for cultural information which may be unfamiliar to the student.
- Using appropriate course material, teach important study skills such as previewing, skimming, formulating questions to aid comprehension and note taking.
- Give your students lots of realistic practice in following directions precisely and completely.
- Beware of the side-by-side or "cooperative" position at the tutoring table.
- Be alert to non-ESL difficulties that a student may experience.
- Make ample use of resources and personnel: do not attempt to satisfy needs or solve problems that aren't within your own area of assignment.
- Be open-minded and slow to judge behaviors and motivations.
- Know your own limits.

Creating a Positive Tutorial Environment with ESL Students

- Be alert to the physical distance and amount of eye contact that you should maintain with someone from another culture.
- Not all students have been exposed to writing essays, taking certain kinds of tests, or participating in class. If students seem totally ignorant about university practices, their problem is probably just that – ignorance, not stupidity.
- Thinking patterns -- Other cultures prefer to arrive at conclusions indirectly and through inference; still other cultures us a back and forth approach; etc…All these approaches are valid, but American professors are probably looking for a linear, beginning-middle-end format, and you can sometimes help foreign students by explaining this concept to them.

Speaking Tips for Tutoring ESL Students

- Use simple, precise words, but do not over simplify.
- Avoid slang, jargon, buzz words, idioms and figurative expressions (analogies.)
- Speak clearly and pronounce your words distinctly.
- Organize what you say.
- Avoid distortions of truth in all forms.
- Whenever helpful, use numbers or graphics to supplement words.
- Correct errors by modeling correct form naturally.

Listening Tips for Tutoring ESL Students

- Ask students to repeat what you've just said to show understanding.
- Don't interrupt students; let them finish what they are saying, even if you are having difficulty understanding.
- If you can't understand what the students say, ask them to write it down or ask if another student can interpret/restate the information.
- Encourage students to take an active part in tutoring sessions. Thank them; tell them they've asked good questions or raised good points.

Reading Tips for Tutoring ESL Students

- People apply what they know in their native language to what they encounter in a new language; there is a wide margin for misinterpretation or new interpretations of materials we take for granted.
- Encourage students to read without looking up every word.
- Let tutees know that reading English is the best way to learn English vocabulary.

Writing Tips for Tutoring ESL Students

- Give lots of practice. ESL students are good at learning grammar rules, but giving them a blank piece of paper and a time limit helps them learn how to use the rules and where they need to study for self-improvement. Thus, they present a challenge in the writing classroom when mainstreamed with native English speakers. The native usually need the grammar brush-up; the ESLers need the constant writing/revising/conferencing practice.

- Have students read their papers aloud. Often they don't see what they later hear is incorrect.

Tutoring Adult Learners

Reasons for Returning to School
- Home life transition (children leaving, separation or divorce from spouse)
- Mid-life transition (change in career or employment)
- Workplace transition (skill challenges mandated by technology implementation)
- Self improvement

Three types of Adult Learners

 Goal Oriented – They have a realization of a need or an identification of an interest. They satisfy this identification of a need by taking a course, reading a book, going on a trip, etc. but always along the lines of a well-defined interest. These people see the need to learn when they realize what they do not know.

 Activity Oriented – They take part in learning primarily for a reason unrelated to the purpose or content of the activities in which they engage. People who fall into this group include those who are lonely or looking for companionship. Others are primarily seeking escape from a basic personal problem or an unhappy relationship. Another would be those taking the course to credit themselves toward a degree or diploma.

 Learning Oriented – These learners could be called a constant rather than a continuing learner. What they do has continuity—they may have a purpose, but the activity to achieve the purpose goes beyond the actual goal. Avid readers join groups and classes and organizations for education reasons. They select and choose to watch educational films and serious TV shows. They have a desire to learn. (Cyril Houle, The Inquiring Mind: A Study of the Adult Who Continues to Learn)

Characteristics of the Adult Learner

1. The adult learner is self directed.
2. The adult learner has had numerous experiences.
3. The adult is ready to learn.
4. The adult is oriented to learning.
5. The adult is motivated to learn.

Factors Affecting Adult Learning
- Adults are timid with others who have more education; therefore they lack confidence in their own learning.
- Adult learners have a fear of being rejected and hurt, therefore they tend to make friends from their own age group.

- Adult learners dislike being hurried or rushed in a learning situation, so be patient with them and allow them more time to answer questions.
- Adults fear competition with others in a learning situation, so try to tutor one-on-one.
- Adults are easily discouraged if success in learning is not immediate, therefore, it will be beneficial to give immediate feedback.

Strategies Needed by Adult Students
- Time Management
- Note Taking
- Test-Taking Skills
- Positive Attitude Application
- Awareness of Learning Style