



# Good practice guide

## Teaching learners from highly oral cultural backgrounds

In recent years, many new arrivals to Australia through the Humanitarian Migration Program have been refugees from African countries.

Their indigenous languages, like many other indigenous languages, do not have a written form. All social transactions, ceremonies and religious practices are conducted using spoken language. This means that members of highly oral cultures—like the new arrivals from Africa—have fundamentally different understandings from those of highly literate cultures.

One of the biggest challenges for members of highly *oral* cultures entering a highly *literate* culture—like that of Australia—is understanding how written language is used in these cultures. An additional challenge for many members of highly oral cultures is a lack of experience of formal education.

This guide aims to assist teachers by providing ‘good practice’ strategies and advice for designing effective English language, literacy and numeracy programs for all adult learners from highly oral cultural backgrounds.

### Teacher awareness

Teachers should actively seek to extend their understanding of:

- ▣ how people operate successfully in a highly oral culture
- ▣ how people learn language in a highly oral culture.

One way teachers can accomplish this is by discussing these issues with community representatives from the target group. Teachers are also advised to refer to the publication, *The kaleidoscope of adult second language learning*:

*Learner, teacher and researcher perspectives*, published by the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (Wigglesworth 2003).

### Meeting learners’ needs

For all learners from highly oral cultures, teachers need to:

- ▣ recognise that the learning task for these learners is different from and often greater than the learning task for other learners of English as a second or additional language
- ▣ develop teaching strategies that tap into the learning strategies used by people from highly oral cultures when learning their own language
- ▣ provide many opportunities for imitation, repetition and meaningful practice of language learned
- ▣ provide an induction into formal learning by ensuring that all instructions are understood, and by establishing predictable classroom routines
- ▣ provide opportunities to make cultural expectations explicit, especially those relating to the learning setting, including explanation of teacher and learner roles, punctuality and attendance, and assessment
- ▣ provide real-life and simulated opportunities to learn the language associated with numeracy and to practise all four mathematical operations (that is, addition, subtraction, multiplication and division), with a focus on group performance
- ▣ use real objects, videos or DVDs, or photographs, rather than drawings to illustrate meaning, as people from highly oral cultures may not share Western understandings of pictorial representation.

For learners with very limited spoken and written English and very limited or no schooling:

- ▣ place initial emphasis on the development of oral skills so that learners have some grasp of spoken English before tackling reading and writing



This good practice guide, is based on the report *Classroom management strategies to address the needs of Sudanese refugee learners* by Ursula Burgoyne and Oksana Hull and is available from the NCVER website at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1804.html>.

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- ▣ build on learner strengths by developing teaching strategies which do not rely on the written word, including activities using songs, rhymes, chants, hand-clapping and other 'musical' devices that can be applied to teaching language
- ▣ limit the class size to ten learners for reading and writing tuition for pre-literate learners
- ▣ provide small group opportunities for learners to develop the fine motor skills of handwriting.

For learners with more advanced spoken English:

- ▣ draw attention to the use of written texts for personal and business matters, for example, receipts, signatures
- ▣ teach explicitly the layout of written English texts
- ▣ recognise that writing 'original' texts for learners from oral cultures is a completely new concept
- ▣ place initial emphasis on guided writing tasks and gradually introduce 'free' writing
- ▣ teach explicitly how to read timetables, maps, flow charts, bar charts, and line graphs
- ▣ ensure that filing and organising learning materials is an integral part of each lesson
- ▣ use comprehension-checking techniques to ensure that learners have understood exactly what others are saying; good spoken skills may mask a disparity between learners' speaking and listening skills.

## Useful references

### Publications

- Adult Migrant Education Services with Victoria University (forthcoming) *Into learning: A professional development kit for teachers and trainers of adult literacy learners from aural/oral learning cultures*, Adult Migrant Education Services, Melbourne.
- Herrington, M & Kendall, A (eds) 2005, *Insights from research and practice: A handbook for adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL practitioners*, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, Leicester.
- McPherson, P 1997, *Investigating learner outcomes for clients with special needs in the AMEP*, National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research, Sydney.
- Pittaway, E 2003, *Roads to refuge: Refugees in Australia* (video and text-based training kit), Centre for Refugee Research, University of NSW, Sydney.
- Wigglesworth, G (ed.) 2003, *The kaleidoscope of adult second language learning: Learner, teacher and researcher perspectives*, National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research, Sydney.

### Websites

- Adult Migrant Education Services West Coast, Perth, publications <probes@ames.training.wa.gov.au>.
- National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) <<http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/pdamep/factsheets.html>>, <<http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/publications/Catalogue.pdf>>.
- Sudanese Online Research Association, <<http://sora.akm.net.au/>>.

## Successful programs

- ▣ Programs are likely to be more successful if they link English language, literacy and numeracy tuition with relevant practical content, for example, to immediate settlement concerns such as childcare, children's schooling or driving. Alternatively, content can refer to prior experience such as gardening, or to acquiring new work skills such as using computers.
- ▣ Investigate the availability of appropriate support services for learners from oral cultural backgrounds within your organisation. Good and appropriate services mean that learners have less to worry about when they're learning.

## Community consultation

- ▣ Consult with local representatives of the target community at key stages of delivery to identify immediate concerns and the general needs of the learner group.
- ▣ Consult informally with participants of the program and adopt suggestions for improved delivery options (for example, timetabling English language classes to provide an opportunity for learners to attend vocational training).
- ▣ Consider developing partnerships with local organisations (local councils, other educational providers) to provide additional resources and expertise.

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