ATESL Best Practices Checklist for Supporting Learners with Diverse Learning Needs

Instructors are supported as they design instruction to be accessible to all learners, ensuring multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression. The learning environment is safe and welcoming, and supports positive mental health. Learners with disabilities are welcomed, valued, supported, and accommodated to ensure their full participation.

Use the ATESL Best Practices Checklists:

For Individuals

- To identify areas to consider when taking on a new, unfamiliar responsibility
- To reflect on your own practice
    - What am I doing well?
    - What am I doing that could be improved?
    - What am I not doing that I could or should be doing?

For Professional development and teacher training

- To identify goals to aspire to and specific steps to take to meet those goals
- To focus discussion after class observations
- To focus team meeting discussions
- To develop workshops/presentations

For Programs

- To identify strengths that distinguish your program (e.g., to justify the worth/value of the program to the broader institution, to funders, to learners, to community stakeholders)
- To identify gaps in a program or practice (e.g., to identify constraints to address, to identify initial and ongoing actions, to determine a focus for professional development, to justify requests for funding)

86. The program accommodates learners with disabilities to ensure their full participation in education.

- ☐ Accommodations are made to ensure the institution's environment and practices do not have a discriminatory effect based on a learner's hearing, mobility, vision, learning, mental health, or developmental (etc.) disability.
- ☐ The program ensures that policies, rules, and admission standards (etc.) minimize discriminatory effects and hardship for learners with disabilities.
- ☐ There is a recognized accommodation policy with procedures for requesting accommodations, determining appropriate accommodations, developing and implementing accommodation plans, and/or refusing accommodations.
- ☐ Learners are involved in these procedures as they communicate needs and information, collaborate with the program to identify and evaluate options for reasonable accommodation, and implement the plans.
- ☐ Sample accommodations include the following:
  - — Steps to ensure the accessibility of the building, classroom, labs, etc.
  - — Accommodations in cases of appointments, attendance, and other related issues
  - — Modifications to classroom physical arrangement (use of ergonomic chairs, movable tables/desks, etc.)
  - — Provision of assistive technologies, for instance:

    - — Magnifiers
    - — Large-print keyboards
    - — Large-print materials
    - — Lighted-tip pens
    - — Roger pens (pair with hearing aids)

    - — iPads/tablets (and various apps)
    - — Mics/pens that pair with hearing aids
    - — Stylus pens
    - — Pencil grips

  - — Online accommodations, such as text-to-speech, immersive readers, built-in accessibility features for changing font size, recordings of the instructor accompanying written instructions, transcripts, audio books, etc.
  - — Provision for classroom support (e.g. tutorials, educational aide, first language support worker, interpretation/translation support)
  - — Evaluation accommodations, such as extended time and distraction-reduced settings for tests/exams
  - — Modified tasks (e.g., reduced numbers of questions, reformatted documents)
- ☐ When a program cannot accommodate a learner's needs, the learner receives help and referrals to access resources available in the community (see below).
- ☐ Where offering accommodations may be viewed as "undue hardship" for a smaller program, that program may make an effort to collaborate with other organizations to organize overarching service (e.g., by supporting a mental health or learning support specialist to provide services for a number of smaller programs or non-profits in a region).

87. The program ensures that learners who require accommodations or supports are connected with support services.

☐ Instructors identify early signs of learning difficulty, record observable behaviour that is not addressed by teaching interventions, and make necessary referrals of learners to learning support services where available to address learning difficulties.

☐ Learners are offered help to fill in forms to apply for support services.

☐ Privacy of information related to a learner's disabilities is considered when providing additional support or intervention.

☐ There is a clear process for connecting struggling learners with support services, whether within the organization or within the community.

☐ There are clear processes and/or point people to contact for emergency situations (e.g., if suicide or abuse is mentioned).

☐ Services for learners with disabilities are presented in the same way that any other service is presented.

88. The program works with disability organizations in the broader community and promotes their services to learners.

☐ The program searches out funding for assistive technologies, classroom support, and accommodations, such as educational assistants, interpreters (sign languages and first language), scribes, as well as ergonomic chairs, keyboards, etc.

☐ The program supports learners with disabilities to connect with relevant support and funding: AISH; transportation (Calgary Transit Access, CTA, or Edmonton Disabled Adult Transit Service, DATS); low-income eye and dental assistance programs, etc.

☐ The program builds connections with experts and relevant organizations in the community, such as Cerebral Palsy Association, Access Mental Health, the Trauma Informed Network, CNIB, Arthritis Society, Southern Alberta Brain Injury Society (SABIS), Developmental Disabilities Resource Centre of Calgary (DDRC), VECOVA, and the Alberta Brain Injury Initiative.

☐ Instructors are made aware of the services offered by relevant organizations.

☐ Learners are made aware of the services offered by relevant organizations, through for instance:
   — Guest speakers (See Community Resources)
   — Flyers
   — Emails
   — Classroom announcements
   — Posters
   — Individual referrals from instructors and/or settlement counsellors

89. The program builds the capacity of staff to promote mental wellness and support learners with diverse needs.

☐ Organizations create positions to provide in-house expertise, consult with area experts, and offer opportunities for instructors to develop knowledge and skills to support learners with diverse needs. This may be done in the following ways:

— Identifying "point people" who are willing to be consulted in certain areas

— Mentoring

— Team teaching

— Developing an in-house "Speakers' bureau"

— Encouraging teachers to take turns in rotating support role positions.

☐ The program supports instructors and staff in taking courses and gaining certification in topics such as psychological first aid, trauma-informed practice, learning disabilities, etc.

☐ The program supports instructional staff in taking part in professional development opportunities addressing a selection of the following:

— Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles and practices

— Learning preferences

— Learning disabilities

— Pre-referral strategies to support learners

— Strategies for teaching reading and writing skills, including the 5 components of reading instruction (i.e., phonemic awareness, word recognition/decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension)

— Psychological first aid

— Trauma-informed practice

— Zones of regulation (teaching learners to be more aware of managing their emotions and impulses and helping them improve their problem-solving skills)

— Signs of trauma

— Stresses and challenges faced by learners who have had to flee their country as a result of war

— The experience of living in a refugee camp (e.g., first person accounts; virtual reality and 360-degree videos)

— Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

— Mental health first aid

☐ The program supports instructors who may experience vicarious trauma as they support their learners.

90. Instructors apply the principles and practices of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)[1] to maximize the potential for success of all learners:

Provide multiple means of **Engagement**

☐ Learner engagement is maximized through, for example, allowing for collaborative learning, gamification, choosing topics that are intrinsically interesting for that group, peer learning, etc.

☐ Learners have opportunities to make choices in the following:
— What to learn (participating in setting classroom and individual goals)
— How to learn
— How to demonstrate learning (choices in assignments, choices in procedures, role-plays)

☐ The instructor, as an encouraging voice in the classroom, provides guidance as learners set and achieve individual goals.

☐ Classroom routines provide predictability in the classroom.

☐ Class set-up is flexible and allows opportunity for movement and the creation of safe learning spaces.

☐ Throughout the day, activities transition between whole class, group, and individual learning to accommodate different learning preferences.

☐ Instruction is carefully sequenced to promote mastery of skills with varying amounts of support, review, and practice for different learners. For example:
— Tasks may be highly scaffolded for some learners, with multiple opportunities for practice.
— Other learners may work through a task independently with less scaffolding.

☐ Instructions for activities and assessments are clear, step-by-step, presented in language the learners can understand (plain English), and accompanied by visuals when possible.

Provide multiple means of **Representation**

☐ Information is offered in multiple formats to appeal to different ways of learning (text, audio, video, visuals aids, exploratory learning, field trips).

☐ Options are included that make materials accessible for everyone (e.g., text-to-speech, text enlargement, screen colour/contrast, captions for videos, transcripts for audio).

☐ Support and scaffolding is provided through, for instance, highlighting patterns, using graphic organizers, explaining symbols, etc.

☐ Course, lesson, and activity goals and outcomes are clearly communicated to encourage reflection and self-assessment.

Provide multiple means of **Action and Expression**

☐ Learning is demonstrated in a variety of ways (tests, projects, presentations, individual and group work, creation of a video/podcast).

☐ Learners are provided with alternate ways to present ideas and communicate (e.g., small-group presentations, class presentations, role-plays, forums, blogs, wikis, videos, visuals).

☐ Learners receive regular feedback on, and are encouraged to reflect on, their progress in meeting their individual learning goals.

☐ Self-directed activities encourage independence and autonomy in learning.

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[1] CAST (2018). *Universal Design for Learning guidelines*, version 2.2. Retrieved from http://udlguidelines.cast.org

91. Instruction aims to reduce stress, anxious feelings, and isolation for learners while creating a safe, welcoming, and supportive community of learning.

- ☐ Learners have a sense of what will happen next through the development of predictable routines and cues (e.g., a daily schedule written on the board; repeated beginning and ending activities; timers).
- ☐ In face-to-face contexts, learners have the opportunity to move around and collaborate and interact with others.
- ☐ In online courses, technology is used to promote engagement, collaboration, and a sense of community; learners have the opportunity to get to know their instructor and classmates.
- ☐ Teachers build trust as they demonstrate sincere concern for the wellbeing of the learners through consistent, respectful, compassionate, and non-judgmental communication.
- ☐ Classroom instruction includes ground rules for confidentiality and respect, for example, through setting "no judging" and "be kind to everyone" expectations.
- ☐ Common stressors faced by learners are addressed in classroom activities, providing opportunities for learners to share their own stories. These stressors/stories may include the following:
  - — Stories of migration
  - — Experiences of isolation
  - — Feelings of helplessness
  - — Barriers to education and training opportunities
  - — Resilience in the face of adversity
  - — Role reversals (both parents, spouses are working)
  - — Culture shock
  - — Parenting across cultures
  - — Barriers to employment and financial stability
  - — Current crises (e.g., Covid-19)
  - — Classroom activities that are perceived to be "high stakes," such as timed activities and PBLA assessments
- ☐ Self-care practices, with a focus on relieving tension, managing fear, and building concentration, are incorporated into class activities.
- ☐ Instructional approaches give learners an opportunity to demonstrate their strengths and highlight accomplishments.
- ☐ Learners are encouraged to recognize and label their own emotional reactions as a strategy for regulating emotions.

92. Instructors both provide trauma-informed instruction and promote positive mental health.

☐ As far as possible, triggers (themes, content, and materials that are likely to remind learners of past traumatic experiences) are avoided.
— Common triggers include war, family violence, sexual abuse, talking about family, and more.

☐ Learners are given a choice in whether and how much to share of their past experiences. For example:
— Learners share pictures of "someone you like" rather than "someone in your family."

☐ When learners are distressed, instructors follow learner preferences to provide the flexibility, safe spaces, time, and privacy needed for learners to recover composure. This may include, for example:
— Connecting the learner with someone they have rapport with in the organization
— Following up with the learner, while not making a big deal out of the incident

☐ When instructors notice signs of psychological distress, they check in with the learner to find out if any supports are needed or desired. For example:
— They talk with the learner about what they have observed using non-judgmental language and open-ended questions ("I noticed… How can I support you?")
— They avoid taking on the role of counsellor.
— They focus on issues related to academic performance and connecting the learner with ongoing mental health support.
— If suicide is mentioned, instructors follow the organization's protocol for what to do in this situation.

93. Learners with disabilities (mobility, vision, learning, mental health, developmental, etc.) are equally welcomed, respected, and valued in the classroom, and they *know* that they are equally welcomed, respected, and valued.

- ☐ Clear expectations are set out for respectful interactions and inclusion of *all* learners in the class.
- ☐ Instructors model respect and support for learners with disabilities or mental health challenges, for instance, in the following ways:
  - — Demonstrating patience and encouragement in interactions
  - — Validating and encouraging learners' ideas, attempts, communication styles, etc.
  - — Ensuring all learners have opportunities to share through strategies such as Think-Pair-Share, offering turns, clarifying
- ☐ Comments that stereotype or discriminate against people with disabilities are addressed in a timely manner.
- ☐ People with disabilities see themselves reflected in posters, messaging, and advertising, as well as in the content and curriculum of the class.
- ☐ The voices, perspectives, stories, and contributions to the community of people with physical disabilities, learning differences, and mental health-related conditions are incorporated into class content, including, for example:
  - — Inspiring accounts of people in the above categories (e.g., Terry Fox, Rick Hanson, Joey Moss, Robert Munsch, Leonard Cohen, and many more)
  - — The voices of ordinary people with disabilities (e.g., CBC's *You Can't Ask That* series)
  - — Accounts of people with disabilities with whom learners can relate on other dimensions (e.g., immigrants and refugees, parents of children with disabilities, students, members of professions, job seekers, teachers, etc.)
- ☐ Inclusion of persons with disabilities in Canada is embedded into classroom themes, for example:
  - — Rights: reading about the Duty to Accommodate (Alberta Human Rights Commission)
  - — Employment: reviewing online tools and resources for people with disabilities, such as the Government of Canada Accessibility Resource Centre and the Alis Alberta resource guide for persons with disabilities
  - — Transportation: listening to a TED talk on why design of transportation should include everyone
  - — Education: watching a TED-Ed video on educating a neurodiverse world; completing a web search based on the Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta website
  - — Study skills: listening to a podcast on ADHD; participating in a workshop on test-taking anxiety
  - — Smalltalk: Reading the CBC article by Taylor Katzel titled *The problem with making small talk about my big disability*
- ☐ Stereotypical portrayals of people with disabilities are avoided or are addressed from a critical perspective.