

*Beyond discrimination,  
beyond special treatment*

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**TOWARDS A BETTER  
UNDERSTANDING OF  
STUDENTS WITH  
APHASIA**

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This brochure is primarily intended for teachers, but is also for anyone likely to work with students with aphasia.

Our goal is to identify the potential challenges faced by these students and suggest the attitudes most likely to be helpful.

Therefore, we hope that the content of this document can help teachers in their work and facilitate the integration of this clientele into the college community. The sooner the institution is notified, the better the chances of putting in place accommodations in keeping with their doctor's or another professional's (speech-language pathologist) evaluation and the student's needs.

The person in charge of the **Special Needs Services**<sup>1</sup> must always consider how the limitation will affect the student's learning process. For this reason, a one-on-one interview will be held with students in order to get to know them, understand their needs and clarify with them the services they will need to alleviate the effects of their disability.

### Aphasia

#### *What is aphasia?*

It is a specific language disorder.

Aphasia is a syndrome of neurological origin that emerges in early childhood. It greatly impairs **communication skills** (including **comprehension** of the message conveyed and verbal **expression** of thoughts).

This disorder is caused by malfunctions of the brain structures involving language and of the neighbouring areas responsible for functions other than language. Therefore, even though one of the main components of this syndrome is a specific language disorder, **aphasia is actually a group of disorders that affects other neuropsychological functions, such as attention, memory, planning and organization, as well as fine and gross motor skills.**

**Aphasia is a permanent learning disability** that is not caused by or related to sensory disorders, an intellectual disability, a deformity of the sound-producing organs, a pervasive developmental disorder (e.g. autism or Asperger's syndrome), a lack of stimulation or a psychoemotional disorder.

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: This generic term is being used throughout the text to designate the cégep's service catering to students with Special Needs. If necessary, please change throughout text to suit your cégep's reality.

## What are the characteristics of aphasia or aphasias?

The severity of aphasia and the nature of its related disorders can vary considerably from one person to another. This is why we refer to *aphasias* rather than *aphasia*, since there is more than one type.

The characteristics of aphasia depend on at least three factors:

- a) the affected language components;
- b) the individual's age; and,
- c) any co-existing neuropsychological deficits.

Because language is a complex activity that makes use of several areas of the brain that are likely to be affected differently, there is a **wide range of deficits and a significant variation in the degree of severity**.

Some aspects of language may be impaired during development:

- the ability to perceive, manipulate and organize the sounds that make up words (phonology);
- the ability to retrieve vocabulary and find the right word (lexis);
- the ability to organize words in order to create coherent sentences (syntax);
- the ability to apply combination rules (e.g. prefix, suffix) in order to create words (morphology);
- the ability to understand the meaning of words and sentences (semantics);
- the ability to understand the links between language and the context of its use (pragmatics).

The different components of language develop at different rates during the normal development of humans from childhood to adolescence. This means that mild aphasia at the age of 5 can develop into a severe form at the age of 12. The opposite may also be true, based on the evolution of the disorder during development.

Aphasia is considered to be a complex disorder. In addition to language problems, people suffering from aphasia may also experience neuropsychological (or cognitive) problems whose nature and degree of severity can vary.

The cognitive or neuropsychological problems that can accompany aphasia may affect:

- attention;
- short-term and working memory;
- verbal thinking (conceptualization);
- executive functions (e.g. mental management, planning, organization);
- organization of events in time and perception of time;

- spatial orientation and visual-spatial integration;
- certain aspects of fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination;
- certain aspects of gross motor skills;
- dyslexia (learning disability specific to reading);
- dysorthographia (learning disability specific to grammar and spelling);
- dyscalculia (learning disability specific to mathematics).

### **The different types of aphasia and their consequences on students' learning**

There is some disagreement in the scientific community on how to categorize the different types of aphasia. A number of authors have proposed category diagrams, but none of these have received general support to date. However, a general categorization structure is provided in some medical diagnosis manuals. The criteria used to diagnose aphasia have been established by the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-IV-TR®, 2000) and by the World Health Organization (ICD-10, 2003). A group of experts made up of researchers and clinicians use scientific data to develop a series of specific diagnostic criteria.

*Therefore, three main categories of aphasia are suggested:*

First, language problems can be expressive in nature (**expressive aphasia**).

The **production and development of speech** are disturbed in large part. Students with **expressive aphasia** can usually understand the information, ideas and concepts conveyed and make the necessary connections to understand. However, **they cannot clearly communicate their understanding or intentions**.

Second, language problems can be receptive in nature (**receptive aphasia**).

This disorder affects comprehension of the verbal message. Students may not recognize words or may misunderstand the idea behind the order of words and their relation to each other. Students with receptive aphasia **do not understand instructions well and do not assimilate verbal information**.

Third, the disorder can be **mixed**, meaning it affects both **expression and reception**.

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## **TEACHING STRATEGIES**

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### **Courses of action**

#### ***Helpful interventions for aphasic students***

Encourage **weekly appointments** with students to determine their comprehension of the material presented in class and to foster exchanges. Having a one-on-one meeting

with their teacher allows students to develop oral communication and comprehension skills. During these meetings, it is important for teachers to speak slowly and to use few words so as to not confuse students. They must also give students as much time as they need to find their words.

Ask aphasic students to speak in class **ONLY** if they are prepared or have asked for a turn. The reason for this is they have problems with oral communication, especially if they are unprepared. They will be fulfilling course requirements by giving an oral presentation in front of the class, but preferably, they should not be forced to do so.

Use visual supports when giving messages or explanations.

Using visual elements to help explain abstract and tangible concepts, and associating messages with tangible objects or situations are effective methods regularly used by resource persons to facilitate comprehension. These methods can also be useful for teachers (e.g. detailed course outline, gestures, drawings, illustrated situation, etc.).

***Key principles to remember (for anyone working with aphasic students)***

These principles will help aphasic persons to better understand (reference point), to know how to anticipate, react and respond adequately, to value their image, to learn new concepts, and to generalize their learning.

## 1. CONSISTENCY

- A regular, stable schedule that students can use as a basis to understand, deduce and anticipate;
- Constant and similar presentation and unfolding of activities;
- Same expectations, consistent interventions.

## 2. REPETITION

- The more a word, sentence, activity or explanation is repeated, the more students are stimulated and assimilate the relevant information. This is an optimal method for developing a person's memory. Rewording is another effective method for communicating with aphasic students.
- The more the material is repeated and reworded, the better students' comprehension. Do not hesitate to repeat concepts several times if you feel that the student did not understand.

## 3. RIGIDITY (framework)

- Rigidity means creating a framework;
- Find a working method that suits both the **resource person<sup>2</sup>** and the aphasic student and stick with it.

## 4. DEMONSTRATION

- Use demonstrations to help students understand what they must do and what you expect of them.

## 5. PLANNING

- Short-, medium- and long-term planning is important, since it allows students to find stability and a reference in time. It also serves as a memory aid.

Sources:

<sup>1</sup> Le trouble du langage, *Les manifestations du trouble du langage*, <http://www.aqeta.qc.ca/FRANCAIS/generale/langage.htm>, April 26, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> FOYATIER, Evelyne (synthesis by), *Dysphasies...une pathologie du langage oral*, DEC Lyon, with the collaboration of several teachers.

<sup>3</sup> Les troubles du langage et les difficultés d'apprentissage (dysphasie), *Grands principes d'intervention en dysphasie*, <http://www.csdufer.qc.ca/srcn/marie/dysphasie.htm>, May 18, 2004.

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<sup>2</sup> Translator's note: This generic term is being used throughout the text to designate the person who provides academic guidance to students with disabilities (French *intervenant*). If necessary, please change throughout text to suit your cégep's reality.

## Accommodations for aphasic students

Accommodations can be offered to students with aphasia in order to compensate for the dysfunctioning that could affect their acquisition, organization, retention, comprehension or processing of verbal or non-verbal information. These can be put into place for the Ministerial Examination of College English based on the recommendations made in the student's evaluation report from a speech-language pathologist, aphasia specialist or doctor.

The services and accommodations can be put in place once the evaluation report or medical certificate has been received and their needs examined. The following can be offered:

**[Translator's note: Adapt the list below to your cégep's reality, if necessary]**

- a letter of explanation to teachers;
- a note-taking service;
- additional time for exams;
- access to an adapted classroom;
- an adapted schedule;
- use of a computer as well as correction and conceptualizing software (WordQ, Read Please, Dragon NaturallySpeaking, Inspiration);
- use of books-on-tapes;
- use of sound productions (MP3);
- preparation for the Ministerial Examination of College English;
- access to a resource person to point out errors;
- course notes in advance;
- a note-reading service;
- adapted teaching aids (homework help service, supervision of assignments, etc.);
- academic support (work methods, organizational skills, time management, etc.);
- adapted evaluations;
- use of an electronic dictionary;
- use of a digital recorder;
- use of an electronic agenda.



Generally speaking, when students have access to **and use** all the necessary services and accommodations, their performance will be similar to that of other students.

Keep in mind that the transition to college for aphasic students comes with additional significant challenges compared to high school (complex material, a great deal of reading, good organizational skills and effective time management needed, competition [R Score], many group assignments, etc.).

### ***Explanations of certain accommodations***

#### ***Role of teachers***

Teachers who have aphasic students in their class can expect to meet with them more regularly outside class. They will also be required to keep in close contact with the resource person in charge of the student (behaviour, integration, exams and conditions, etc.) to ensure that students always have the right services at the right time.

#### ***Role of resource persons***

##### ***Academic support***

- Assist in reviewing material presented in class (brief overview);
- Help plan assignments and exams and manage study time;
- Provide assistance in understanding instructions;
- Help develop new correction reflexes and effective work methods;
- Assist in correcting errors related to the learning disorder on in-class exams;
- Follow up with teachers and make them aware of the student's issues;
- Put in place the services and accommodations offered to students and ensure that these are delivered appropriately.

### **Evaluation: exams and assignments**

#### ***Written exams***

Exams are situations in which adaptations may be necessary, without, however, compromising academic standards. Academic performance must always be measured using standardized, objective criteria.

#### ***Oral exams/presentations***

Depending on the type of aphasia students have, oral presentations may pose a significant challenge for them. It is important to speak with the person responsible at the college's Special Needs Services to consider other ways of having the student take oral exams (exam on cassette, in an electronic file with vocal synthesizer, etc.).

### *Time factor*

In general, it has become standard practice to offer aphasic students **150 per cent** more time to write an exam. However, sometimes they require more time. Teachers are **advised** to talk to students and the resource person about exams and possible accommodations.

Furthermore, the person who signed the letter of explanation to the teacher is always available to provide information on assignments, exams, adapted rooms, sound productions (cassettes, MP3s), text enlargement, and other services.

### **Where to hold exams**

It is preferable for aphasic students to take their exam in a classroom reserved for this purpose (time extensions, technical aids, help with correction, etc.). This is generally discussed with students and their resource person. Please follow the instructions of the Special Needs Services.

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## **CONCLUSION**

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We hope this brochure has provided the basic elements to help you better understand aphasia and aphasic students, and that the measures described will allow you to resolve some of the challenges that may arise.

If your job entails contact with students with aphasia and you have identified certain needs as a result of this interaction, whether they relate to a student or your own role, please do not hesitate to use your college's Special Needs Services.

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## **Learning disabilities, communication disorders, and neurological disorders**

### ***Teaching strategies to benefit all students***

Here are some teaching strategies to promote student involvement in learning, help them assimilate and retain concepts, allow them to develop and improve specific competencies, and provide them with the opportunity to achieve their potential, in keeping with their limitation.

***LD: learning disability***

***ADHD: attention deficit hyperactivity disorder***

***TBI: traumatic brain injury***

### ***Strategies for organizing/planning lessons***

- Write the “agenda” (class content) on the board (e.g. *8:00 a.m.: reading, 9:00 a.m.: discussion on the reading, 10:00 a.m.: break*).
- When writing on the board, use colour codes and different shapes or spacing to differentiate the class content from noteworthy material, supplies needed, etc. (e.g. *Write the title of an activity in green, the objective of the exercise in white and the supplies needed in red.*)
- Repeat or have students repeat assignment instructions, lessons and activities, since repetition is a useful method for memorization.
- Give tangible examples (with supporting documents, if possible) of your expectations for an assignment, activity or formal lesson, along with the assignment criteria. (e.g. *I expect 30 pages double-spaced, with a table of contents and a bibliography. Something that looks like this [hold up a sample].*)
- If possible, use formative evaluation for highly complex lessons or those requiring greater organizational and strategic skills. (e.g. *this is a practice test*)
- Provide access to course and background readings and to lecture notes prior to class.
- Adapt evaluations to each student’s functional limitation. (e.g. *For ADHD: break down the instructions into steps [Step 1: read the text; Step 2: underline the passages where the author mentions...; Step 3: indicate why you think...].*) (e.g. *For TBI: essay questions with access to lecture notes.*) (e.g. *For LD: use few words, keep the vocabulary simple or use only words that have been fully explained when giving instructions and asking questions, put*

*punctuation marks into boldface [e.g. ?, !], use multiple-choice and true and false questions.)*

- Have students write down what they need for their courses, including the supplies and any preparation they need to do (e.g. *for our next class, you'll need the newspaper, a marker, etc.*).
- As much as possible, use time references found in everyday life to help students organize their academic and personal schedules, plan assignments and anticipate exams.  
(e.g. *on October 31<sup>st</sup>, or Halloween, you'll need to hand in...*).
- Remind students of deadlines  
(e.g. *at this point, you should have done this reading, started this assignment, contacted this person, etc.*)
- Give frequent short breaks (2-3 minutes) to help students with attention/concentration disorders.  
(e.g. *change textbooks, take a sheet to the front of the class, hand out a document, hand in an assignment, tell a joke, etc.*)
- Space out reading material.
- Use larger, easy-to-read fonts.

### **Strategies for managing learning**

- Go over the material covered in the previous class and make connections with the current class.  
(e.g. *last week, we discussed... , so today we can talk about...*)
- Explain the lessons and activities of the next class and make connections with the current class.  
(e.g. *in the next class, we will practise using... because today we were able to... so, please practise...*)
- At the end of each lesson or activity, summarize what students need to retain, apply or generalize, and explain why.  
(e.g. *Who can tell me what we covered today? It's important to remember... because when we visit... you will need to...*)
- As often as possible, call upon the episodic memory (memory of events and personal experiences) of students rather than on their semantic memory (memory of abstract concepts, pure knowledge) for all lessons, since students with a learning disability often have trouble with the latter.  
(e.g. *Who can tell me about the last letter they received or wrote? What did it say? How was it structured? Give an example of the content of an information letter...*)
- Explain the importance of a lesson by giving examples or asking students to find examples from everyday life at school or work.  
(e.g. *for those of you who work, the concept of equality allows you to have standardized schedules that are fair for everyone...*)

- As often as possible, use tangible, physical references, point to them and mention them often, repeating the name of that reference (reference work, bibliography, instructional tools, posters in the classroom, maps, etc.).
- To promote learning and consolidate student understanding, use many practical examples related to their age group and everyday reality.  
(*e.g. young people learn better when they can relate to the lesson.*)
- Explain the purpose of the lesson and the outcome of the learning by illustrating with many examples, situation scenarios, role playing, etc., and tell them how this knowledge will be useful in everyday life, how they can generalize it or apply it to their lives, thus making the lesson more meaningful.
- Present assignments and instructions in parts. Defining each step will help students to get a sense of the time they have to carry out an assignment, the work involved and the material they will need.
- When explaining a concept or lesson, avoid excessive verbiage. For students with a learning disability, attention/concentration problems, a traumatic brain injury or Asperger's syndrome, wordy lectures cause them to tune out and lose their focus on the lesson at hand.
- As much as possible, use tables, diagrams and organization charts to consolidate, tie in and summarize lessons.
- As much as possible, use images, pictograms and codes to explain, consolidate or summarize information.  
(*e.g. a pencil = written assignments*)
- Avoid lengthy presentations if there are no visual aids, hands-on activities or breaks. Lectures with no practical applications and long discussions that fail to make frequent references to the initial topic and connect with the subject matter should also be avoided.
- When having students work in groups, emphasize deadlines and the steps involved, as this structures the assignment.
- With their agreement, have students sit at the front of the class in order to be able to capture their attention by occasionally calling on them or making eye contact. This will help prevent them from daydreaming.
- Add intonation when speaking, use a variety of methods to draw students' attention.  
(*e.g. gestures, lighting, jokes, objects, etc.*)
- Hold pop quizzes and ask students to repeat what was just said.
- Open with sensational, surprising statements to capture their attention and improve the retention of new knowledge.  
(*e.g. Did you see the report on ... on the news yesterday? 50 per cent of students are...*)
- Announce the new lesson and let students know what you expect of them.

- Point out noteworthy information and material that will be on the exam.
- Pop quizzes are good for getting students' attention. But do not go into specifics or the finer points of a lesson. Test their understanding of a concept or task or validate this understanding through examples from everyday life, which helps determine their knowledge retention.
- Give students frequent feedback on what they do and say.
- Use a variety of teaching methods (*e.g. the multisensory approach, where all the senses are used for learning*).
- Be consistent in your evaluation methods.
- Allow students to use technological devices (*e.g. laptop computer, electronic dictionary, electronic agenda [Palm], digital recorder, correction tools, etc.*).
- Build a glossary of terms used in the field studied and allow students to refer to it.

### **Strategies and accommodations for evaluations**

- For subjects other than English, use multiple-choice rather than essay questions. Given their poor spelling, essay questions do not adequately reflect students' true level of knowledge.
- Alternatively, students can be evaluated orally, if they wish.
- Allow students to read the questions aloud.

### **Reading strategies for students**

Teachers should go over (repeat) these strategies and even strongly recommend them:

- Anticipate a word or group of words from previous content.
- Identify key words and highlight them with a marker.
- Clarify the purpose for reading and keep it in mind.
- Explore the text structure to help promote understanding.
- Skim through the text to get an idea of the content (title, illustrations, subheadings, sections, etc.).
- Identify the words to which pronouns and substitute terms refer.
- Use the context to clarify the meaning of idioms and proverbs.
- Use punctuation as clues.
- Call attention to the links established by conjunctions and prepositions in the text.
- Assemble various pieces of information from clues found throughout the text.
- For dyslexic students, make textbooks available in audio format, as this can facilitate their learning.

- To increase their reading speed, students should practise reading a short text (200 to 250 words) aloud every night, four times in a row, timing themselves on each occasion. This exercise in “over-reading” should progressively improve their reading time. A different text should be used each night and the exercise should be done five times a week.

### **Writing strategies**

- Recall past writing experiences.
- Use triggers to stimulate the imagination.  
(*e.g. a work of art, an object, a photo, etc.*)
- Clarify the purpose for writing and keep it in mind.
- Think of the audience who will be reading your text.
- Reflect on the possible content (exploring and selecting ideas).
- Think about the structure and organization of the text.
- Produce a web chart, diagram, sketch, plan, etc.
- To maintain momentum and inspiration, write without worrying about making mistakes.
- Read the text aloud.
- Make changes, if needed.
- Correct the text.
- Reread the text (using a software program such as ReadPlease).