

# A Role for English Language Teachers in Trauma Healing

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Because English language teachers should take into account the social-psychological situation of the students they teach, they must be sensitive to the effects of traumatic stress among learners. Refugee and immigrant children are frequently survivors of trauma, along with their peers in crisis-torn English as a foreign language settings around the world. Without experiencing some measure of healing from trauma, children will be frustrated in their language learning. This article explains how what we know about trauma can be aligned with effective language instructional practices. The author first provides information about the effects of trauma and then identifies teaching approaches that are sensitive to the needs of those affected by trauma. The author suggests ways that teachers can (a) include intelligences that may be neglected in traditional language classrooms as a way to address the needs of trauma-affected youth in order to have multiple channels for self-expression and language learning; (b) integrate language instruction with self-expression and exploration of social relationships; and (c) incorporate content-based language instruction that explains the trauma healing process. Although further investigations are needed, English language teachers can play a role in trauma healing for learners because artful acts of instruction are therapeutic, promoting both wholeness and effective instruction for all learners.

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**Hussain** (not his real name) is a 17-year-old placed in an intensive English program at his U.S. high school. Having fled Iraq 4 years ago, his family managed 10 months ago to reach the United States. Hussain's father was kidnapped in Iraq and has not been seen or heard from. When asked to share anything about his

experience of coming to the United States, Hussain begins by mentioning what happened to his father. In almost every discussion, the topic of his father arises. Hussain likes to play soccer, which prompts him to share the memory that he played soccer with his father and his father's friends when he was only 6 years old.

One thing that Hussain never mentions is that when his father was kidnapped, Hussain also was taken by the kidnappers. He was tortured and eventually released and reunited with his mother and siblings. He never mentions such things, but his sister has told me that he still wakes up sometimes screaming in the night.

While his English lesson is in progress, Hussain often blurts out remarks to other students in English or Arabic—even sometimes in Spanish because he has many Latino/a classmates. When it is his turn to do computer-assisted learning, he often pesters those sitting near him. He rarely remains focused on his own computer screen for more than a couple of minutes—in sharp contrast to many others in this class.

Hussain is not a rare case. Many language learners around the world suffer the after-effects of trauma induced by natural disaster (tsunamis, earthquakes, etc.) or human cruelty (war, civil unrest, displacement, gang or domestic violence, etc.). Even decades after a disaster or crisis has ended, the trauma responses persist in the minds and behavior of these people. The aftermath of trauma is carried to countries of refuge, where those who have fled from horrific situations are sometimes overwhelmed by the experiences of immigration. Many of these sufferers are children enrolled in schools where English is a required subject or the medium of instruction.

## **FILLING A GAP**

Many valuable resources are available for those working with traumatically stressed adult language learners (e.g., Finn, 2010; International Institute of Boston, 2000), but to date very little research and almost no special resources for trauma-affected younger language learners have been published. General resources provided by Cole et al. (2005) and Levine and Kline (2007) are a

great help for those working with trauma-affected children, but they do not focus on language and literacy acquisition.

Just as culturally and linguistically responsive teaching approaches are necessary (e.g., Gibbons, 2002; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010; Santamaria, 2009), it is also necessary to address the special needs created by learners' past traumas. Young learners are not disembodied cognitive devices for processing language input, but persons with histories. They are the products of what they have seen, heard, smelled, touched, acted on, and been subjected to—as well as the products of their ancestors' experiences. Through stories passed down over generations, they have absorbed and processed interpretations of who they are, how they have become what they are, and what they have the potential to become. Their personal histories have profoundly affected their psychological states and their stakes in the classroom.

This article suggests that (a) without experiencing some measure of healing from trauma, most language learners will be frustrated; (b) teaching approaches that are sensitive to the needs of the trauma-affected comprise good instructional practice for all learners; and (c) artful acts of instruction in themselves can be therapeutic and build resilience in all language learners.

## **TRAUMA AND ITS EFFECTS**

The opening anecdote about Hussain illustrates several important points about trauma. His case shows us that trauma from the infliction of torture can be overwhelming and long-lasting. Hussain's behavior, cognition, and emotions all manifest some effects of trauma. Like Hussain, victims sometimes suppress memories of their trauma or conceal information from others as a mechanism for coping with pain or because they feel shame or guilt for being victimized. As Levine and Kline (2007) emphasize, however, trauma lies not in the event itself but in the response of the person. This means, for example, that the trauma does not have to involve physical harm. And certain events can overwhelm one person's capacity to cope, but leave others relatively unscathed. Even though it was traumatic for Hussain's sister to lose her father, she appears not to have been overwhelmed in the same way that Hussain has been.

## What Is Trauma?

According to Cole et al. (2005), trauma is “a response to a stressful experience in which a person’s ability to cope is dramatically undermined” (p. 18). For learners who are 18 and younger, it is also worthwhile to note Terr’s definition of “childhood trauma as the impact of external forces that [render] the young person temporarily helpless and [break] past ordinary coping and defensive operation” (as cited in Cole et al., 2005, p. 18).

Trauma has both physical and psychological dimensions (Levine & Kline, 2007). Cole et al. (2005) describe the three broad classic symptoms of traumatic stress as “hyperarousal, re-experiencing (i.e., involuntarily ‘reliving’ the traumatic experience), and avoidance (i.e., avoiding traumatic reminders and/or emotions associated with the initial traumatic event)” (pp. 93–94).

The key point to remember is that traumatic stress is relatively unpredictable: Its effects lie not in the traumatizing event itself but in the capacity of the individual to cope—in that individual’s level of resilience (Levine & Kline, 2007).

## Responses of School-Aged Children and Youth

Responses to trauma exhibited by children vary with age and oscillate between acting out (engaging in socially disruptive behavior) and acting in (engaging in withdrawal or self-destructive thought and behavior; Hart, 2007b; Levine & Kline, 2007). Kerka (2002) refers to these as *forms of learning*, what the trauma has taught the child to do as a way of coping with the overwhelming pain or loss. The learned responses of school-aged children most relevant to classrooms include those suggested in Table 1 (Hart, 2007b; Levine & Kline, 2007).

Many of the trauma responses listed in Table 1 relate directly to issues of classroom management and methods of lesson delivery. A teacher who responds to behavior problems simply by clamping down on learners with tighter discipline ignores the child’s inner wounds from which the behavior emanates. Clamping down will probably not erase the behavior problems, and the student will still face difficulties learning (Hart, 2007b).

TABLE 1. Responses of School-Aged Children to Emotional Trauma

Emotional	Cognitive	Behavioral
Fear, moodiness, anger, depression	Loss of interest in school Trouble with memory and poor concentration Possible desire to understand why the trauma occurred or thoughts about death	Aggressiveness toward others Hypervigilance/hyperarousal Withdrawal/isolation Attention-seeking behaviors Difficulty trusting others or loss of trust in others Participation in high-risk or illegal behaviors (e.g., substance abuse)—adolescents

What is needed, rather, is a consistent pedagogical strategy that aspires to the following goals:

- including intelligences that may be neglected in traditional language classrooms, such as bodily-kinesthetic, musical, spatial, interpersonal and intrapersonal, and naturalist intelligences as a way to address the needs of trauma-affected youth and to help them access multiple channels for self-expression and language learning
- integrating language instruction with self-expression and exploration of social relationships in order to build a community that will be a safe environment for mourning traumas and considering nonviolent options for transforming conflict
- incorporating content-based language instruction that explains the trauma healing process and indirectly addresses local violence by examining similar but geographically distant conflicts

## INCLUSION OF MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

The theory of multiple intelligences provides a compelling response to the several competing discourses about educational methods that disadvantage “special learners” of any kind, including trauma-affected learners. Kerka (2002) identifies four detrimental discourses. One is the familiar discourse of deficit, which claims there is something wrong with the student; the institution is blameless and doesn’t need to change. The medical discourse, a variation of the deficit discourse, stipulates that trauma victims first need therapeutic treatment, and then they can be taught. Another perspective is what Kerka calls the *discourse of*

*educational practice*, which explains trauma-affected learners' taciturn withdrawal or chronic inattention or disruptive acting out as a lack of motivation or self-discipline instead of viewing these behaviors as learned responses to trauma. Finally, there is the discourse of standards and accountability, which places simplistic demands for achieving certain outcomes on learners without understanding how their complex condition affects their negotiation of the drill-and-test regime.

A fifth discourse type could be added to the list. This is the discourse of teacher despair, which says, "You are adding another kind of special learner to my classroom and expecting me to make special accommodations for this learner? You're asking me to deal with mental health issues when I'm a teacher and not a therapist!"

One response to these discourses is to embrace the theory and practice of multiple intelligences (Christison, 1999; Gardner, 2006; Haley, 2010). This perspective demands an end to unwarranted assumptions that language must be learned mainly through linguistic and logico-mathematical approaches and that "good" language learners must be strong in these forms of intelligence. A multiple intelligences approach to language teaching assumes that the full range of intelligences is represented in every classroom—with most children having strengths in more than one intelligence. It assumes that most learners acquire a language best by accessing multiple avenues for input. In short, this perspective affirms that trauma-affected learners are like all the other learners in the classroom: They can process new language better if they are able to draw on the intelligences that work the best for them.

Because linguistic intelligence itself is of paramount importance in a language classroom, the teaching profession sometimes neglects incorporation of other intelligences identified by Gardner (2006), such as bodily-kinesthetic, musical, visual-spatial, naturalist, intrapersonal, and interpersonal, although most classrooms that are moderately communicative make some use of the last two in this list in providing for journaling and pair or group work. Intentionally planning for multiple intelligences offers learners multiple channels for self-expression,

such as music, journaling, art, drama, and movement (Yoder, 2005).

## INTEGRATION OF LANGUAGE STUDY WITH SELF-EXPLORATION AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Earl W. Stevick (1998) pithily identifies “what goes on inside and between” (p. 4) people as foundational for understanding successful language teaching and learning. Trauma-affected language learners need a safe place in community with others where they can do the internal work that brings healing.

### Safety

Victims of trauma must believe that their lives are no longer under threat. For healing to begin, they must live in a safe environment (Hart, 2007b; Yoder, 2005). Language classrooms are inherently risky places, but they can also become sanctuaries for the traumatized. We know that learners who stick their necks out and try using the new language are more likely to attain some measure of proficiency, but the risks that a language teacher proposes need to be measured by the capacity of the learners.

Making a language classroom safe for trauma-affected youth creates a healthy environment for *all* members of the class. Steps that can be taken include maintaining a predictable routine, posting the daily schedule on the board and notifying students ahead of time if there will be a major deviation from the schedule (Cole et al., 2005), not introducing too many new task types too quickly, using elicitation techniques that do not expose students to high risk, engaging students in choral practice, using correction techniques that do not expose learners to embarrassment, and having students participate in small-group work as a way of avoiding situations in which the whole class focuses attention on one learner.

As standard advice for creating a safe classroom environment given in methods textbooks (e.g., Brown, 2007), these measures are crucial for language learners recovering from trauma. Take, for example, the maxim “maintain a predictable environment.” As Cole et al. (2005), Hart (2007b), and others point out, children suffering from traumatic stress have lived in unstable

environments; whether through abuse, social violence, or natural disaster, their expectations about how the world operates have been turned upside down. As Cole et al. note, “children living in circumstances that do not allow them to make connections between their actions and the responses they trigger can be left wary of the future, which feels to them both unpredictable and out of their control” (p. 27).

This loss of connection between causes and effects can also create problems for managing behavior, as motivation wanes and children lose the will to persevere in academic tasks. To help learners restore the link between cause and effect, the teacher needs to build rewards into the system so that children can see that effort results in positive effects. However, the rewards need to be intrinsic, if possible, based on forming positive relationships with the instructor who works to personalize the learning process while building the learner’s self-confidence.

## **Community**

Traumatized children need to redevelop trust with adults, peers, and the world (Hart, 2007b). Teachers must work on community building in a classroom, such that the teacher and learners increasingly become more deeply acquainted with each other as whole persons. Community building is part of the work of creating a safe space for language learners. Community flourishes as people grow to know, understand, and respect each other.

Hart (2007a) emphasizes the importance of playing ice-breaker games as a way of building and sustaining rapport. She points out that these games serve the multiple functions of increasing trust and caring, evoking laughter, increasing ability to focus, and bringing multiple intelligences into play. These activities attenuate hypervigilance as children relax in the game setting. They also serve multiple language learning functions, allowing for repetition in listening and speaking and for practicing a wide range of vocabulary. The *Greeting Game*, for example, practices the names for body parts using total physical response (Hart, 2007a). The teacher gives commands such as “Greet each other with a handshake (a fist bump, an elbow bump, a pat on the back, etc).” The teacher begins with the



least embarrassing commands first, and participants have a right to challenge what they think is an inappropriate greeting. This game adds critical as well as interpersonal dimensions to a total physical response technique in which language is wedded with movement.

Another way of building community among class members is to integrate language instruction with self-expression and exploration of social relationships. The United States Institute of Peace's (USIP; n.d.) *Peace Education for English Language Learners* presents many activities that promote interpersonal knowledge. Through these activities, learners put English to use at levels appropriate to their proficiency. For example, in the *Name Game* participants share the meaning of their names, how they got their names, and how they feel about their names. The language required in this communicative activity is easily accessible for intermediate-level learners and above, but those whose English is more elementary could be supported with sentence frames.

Another activity, *We Belong to Many Groups* (USIP, n.d.), allows learners to explore those groups that play a role in shaping their identities (e.g., family, clubs, teams, religious affiliations). It can be done as a total physical response activity based on reading or listening. The teacher either shows or says a series of statements such as "One of the most important groups I belong to is \_\_\_\_\_," filling in the blank with various group names. Learners respond by standing or perhaps by grouping themselves in different areas of the room that bear labels for the groups. Students may respond positively to more than one of the statements, signifying that they "belong to many groups."

Building a classroom culture in which all class members learn how to encourage and affirm each other is a good goal for all language classrooms, but is especially important to trauma-affected learners. Hart (personal communication) stresses the importance of including, in addition to reflective types of learning, actions that build healthy relationships, giving children opportunities to "fill one another's bucket" with happiness and gratitude by doing acts of kindness or uttering kind words. Resources available on the Bucket Fillers website

([www.bucketfillers101.com](http://www.bucketfillers101.com)) suggest ways for teachers and learners to say and write simple words that build up others and integrate language practice with caring deeds.

## **Mourning**

Victims of violence need to mourn their traumas. They need to acknowledge that a trauma has occurred and be willing to talk about it instead of hiding or suppressing it. Of course, teachers should never force the trauma-affected learner to mourn, and sometimes should even steer classroom topics away from reminders of the trauma. But choosing not to mourn locks the wounded person in a cycle of victimhood and potential violence (STAR, 2008; Yoder, 2005). By contrast, Yoder (2005) points out that “when all of the story is acknowledged and mourned—the valor, heroism, sacrifice, pain, fear, resilience, betrayals, humiliations, shortcomings, atrocities, and guilt—then shame and humiliation can be shed, forgiveness sought, courage celebrated, and reenactment ended” (p. 54).

ELT professionals working among trauma-affected populations must learn to strike a balance between language learning goals and sensitivity to the learners’ environment and their emergent needs. In the English teaching that she did in postwar Kosovo in 2000, Paula Huntley (2003) learned the importance of creating space for sharing stories. She flexibly allowed learners to tell their stories even though that was not the direction she had planned for the lesson. She devised writing assignments that allowed these students, mainly adolescents, to document the horrors of their war experiences. As Huntley learned to do, teachers can elicit stories from learners related to their traumatic experiences. While working on specific tenses or narrative structures, the teacher can ask students to remember the routines they had while in the environment where the trauma occurred: What was a day like in a refugee camp? What was life like while they endured weeks of bombing? What happened on the train journey? The teacher becomes a learner in this situation, discovering what topics to avoid for the moment because they might trigger trauma responses, what additional content to integrate, and what to recognize and affirm about students’ experiences. Healing can

begin when others stop pretending that a traumatic experience never occurred and acknowledge the pain that is felt.

Hart (2007b) provides a structure for story sharing by asking learners to create a dust cover for their biography. Learners identify three or four defining moments in their life. They invent a title for the book and design a picture for the cover. Then they narrate one of the defining moments for the front inside flap. They write a brief bio statement for the back inside flap and provide quotations from reviewers or important persons in their lives for the back cover. This assignment makes space for, but does not force, sharing about traumatic experiences. In providing a chance for learners to use their new language to (re)construct the meaning of their experiences, this activity encourages intrapersonal intelligence. It also exercises visual-spatial and kinesthetic intelligences in the design of the cover and interpersonal intelligence as the developing writers consider how best to attract and communicate with their audience through the covers.

Integrating language instruction with self-expression and exploration of social relationships addresses three issues important for trauma healing to take place: creating a safe environment, building trust among class members, and acknowledging traumas so that they can be properly mourned. The self-exploration piece also focuses learners' attention on recovering meaning in their lives. *How* language teachers deliver such lessons is as important as the content focus.

## **INCORPORATION OF TRAUMA HEALING CONTENT**

As already mentioned, responses to crises, catastrophes, or chronic stressors are highly variable. The power to traumatize lies not in the event itself, but in the individual's inability to endure the stress. Some individuals are more resilient than others. How did they become resilient? If their secrets can be taught to children who have been traumatized, then this might act as a road map leading them out of the cycles of violence onto a path toward complete healing (STAR, 2008). There are many stages in the healing journey toward greater resilience for trauma-affected youth. The two highlighted here are conflict transformation and movement toward forgiveness.

## **Conflict Transformation**

Because many traumatized children have witnessed or experienced violence being used to solve problems, they need another model for resolving interpersonal and social conflicts. Teaching about nonviolent ways of handling conflict can become language course content as suitable as any other topic that often appears in English language curricula—food, fashions, marriage customs, environmental sustainability, and so on. But the most powerful way of integrating language teaching and conflict transformation is through providing children with the language to solve practical problems in the classroom.

Students should be invited to work collaboratively in establishing class guidelines for behavior, arranging special events, co-constructing the curriculum, and settling small conflicts and matters of discipline in the classroom. Learning and experiencing new ways of resolving conflicts takes learners several steps forward in the healing journey. Related steps include developing a concern for the truth about who harmed whom and for what reasons, a concern for justice that brings restoration of right relationships, and a concern for forgiveness that releases the victim or survivor from the “dark ruminations that erode health and enjoyment” (STAR, 2008, p. III. 9). This approach will have immediate as well as long-term benefits for all learners.

## **Movement Toward Forgiveness**

Arriving at the ability to forgive the perpetrators of violence is a point far along in the trauma healing journey; it is nothing to be rushed, and not something that can be demanded from the victim. Although the act of forgiving may be supported by an active faith, religion is not needed to justify forgiveness as “an act of great courage” through which survivors of violence gain “freedom from the power [and] control the offender or another group has over” them (STAR, 2008, p. III. 9; see also resources provide by the Forgiveness Project, <http://theforgivenessproject.com>).

Teachers from outside the conflict area must tread very delicately in working with the traumatized on this issue. For example, when Paula Huntley (2003) broached the issue of

negative stereotypes of “the other” (i.e., Serbian perpetrators) held by the Kosovar Albanian students in her Hemingway book club, she realized, “I am in way over my head. Who can read another’s heart? Who am I to try to teach tolerance to these who have suffered so much so recently?” (p. 114). Yet, as Yoder (2005) argues, forgiveness is one of those desirable steps that a traumatized person may take to escape the survivor/victim cycle, achieve freedom from self-harm, and avoid the perpetuation of violence through revenge.

One way that I have tried to raise awareness of the need to forgive is through developing a unit of material on the horrors of apartheid in South Africa and how South Africans responded through the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee to the traumas they had collectively suffered. The most powerful experiences I have had with this material have occurred when students read brief excerpts adapted from Desmond Tutu’s (1999) book *No Future Without Forgiveness*. Learners recast the excerpts into dialogue and acted them out. It was a moving experience to hear students who had suffered voicing the sufferings of South Africans, requesting and granting forgiveness. Collaboratively preparing the script and then physically staging the scene draws on class members’ linguistic, interpersonal, visual-spatial, and kinesthetic intelligences.

## CONCLUSION

This article invites English language educators to exchange their discourse of despair about trauma-affected learners for a discourse of multiple intelligences that not only meets the needs of all learners but offers an opportunity for healing to trauma-affected youth by opening up alternative avenues for expression. Integrating language instruction with self-expression and exploration of social relationships creates a safe environment and supportive community in which all learners thrive and the trauma-affected among them learn to trust others and regain self-efficacy. Incorporating content-based language instruction related to conflict transformation and forgiveness can fortify students’ resilience while facilitating language learning.

Many teachers may feel that none of this matters to them because they aren't aware of any trauma-affected learners in their classrooms. But what about that child whose attention continually wanders? We should not let ourselves be fooled by learners' silence about their past traumas. Neither should we squander the chance to build resilience proactively by following the approaches suggested here. As teachers, we might also consider how we have successfully weathered traumatic events and become wiser and more compassionate persons. In so reflecting, we may become better equipped to walk beside students and build them up.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, in Australia, has produced some comprehensive materials for welcoming and orienting refugee children and families that take into account the effects of traumatic experiences. These materials contain lesson plans and activities that could be adapted by an English language or mainstream classroom teacher. The publications *The Rainbow Program for Children in Refugee Families* and *A Guide to Working With Young People Who Are Refugees* may be downloaded from the foundation's website ([www.foundationhouse.org.au](http://www.foundationhouse.org.au)).

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