

Teaching ESL to survivors of torture: Responding to special learning needs

Lorena Bekar

Lorena Bekar is an ESL teacher and Coordinator of the ESL Programme at the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture. In this article, she examines the effects of torture on the learning process and how they may be best addressed in the ESL classroom. Sue Glassford, Azza Sharkawy and Mark McGivern, all of whom have taught ESL at CCVT, assisted in the preparation of this article.

While finding housing and employment, as well as getting accustomed to a strange culture create enormous stresses for refugees who have experienced torture, the most daunting hurdle to be overcome in the settlement process is second language acquisition.

Learning English is a goal that can be the most illusive and difficult to attain. Yet fluency in the language of the society in which survivors settle is the most important tool they require. It gives newcomers greater freedom and control over their lives. Without English, the simplest of tasks, such as making a telephone call or asking for directions appear as insurmountable barriers.

There are considerable differences in how individuals progress in second language acquisition. While some learners manage to achieve complete bilingualism, others never advance beyond a low level of proficiency. Linguistic research indicates that a wide spectrum of factors affect the learning of a second language, including age, aptitude, personality, cognitive style and socio-psychological factors. It is this latter category that is of particular importance in any discussion of second language acquisition among survivors of torture. As researcher H. Douglas Brown observes in *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*: "Understanding how human beings feel and respond and believe and value is an exceedingly important aspect of a theory of second language acquisition."

Effects of trauma on language learning

Survivors of torture typically suffer from what the American Psychiatric Association has identified as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Symptoms of PTSD can include memory impairment, depression, loss of self esteem, disruption of normal sleep patterns, recurrent nightmares, and diminished ability to trust other people, particularly those holding positions of authority. Any of these symptoms can both directly and indirectly affect the learning of a second language, and therefore must be addressed by ESL instructors who wish to meet the needs of survivors of torture.

Memory impairment can cause the greatest problems. Survivors of torture are often distinguished from other learners by their shorter attention span, as well as inability to concentrate and remember detail. Students often experience varying levels of frustration as they struggle to overcome these barriers which directly block their ability to learn English, yet over which they have little control.

Several strategies have been incorporated into the ESL programme at the CCVT to respond to these difficulties. The most simple to implement is an abbreviated class schedule. A full-time course load at the CCVT never exceeds 15 hours per week (three hours per day, four to five days per week). This is approximately half what is considered full-time study for ESL classes offered by various boards of education throughout the Metro Toronto area. However, in many instances, individuals who have experienced the trauma of torture cannot function in non-specialized classes simply because the time frame of study is too demanding. The expectation of 25 hours of in-class study together with low levels of self-esteem often experienced by survivors of torture can make them feel they are destined to fail from the outset. A shortened schedule, therefore, is a relatively simple means of immediately alleviating some of the pressure exerted upon the learner.

A slower-paced curriculum with varied activities can be as beneficial as abbreviated class time. Again, due to concentration complications and memory impairment, survivors of torture studying ESL often have been known to experience difficulties absorbing information. Creating opportunities to practice new language structures without resorting to rote learning is an integral part of the approach adopted in the ESL programme at the CCVT. This is accomplished by introducing a structure in the most concrete manner possible, linking the linguistic structure to a life skill, and then following up with activities where the students must use what has just been learned. One "methodology" for teaching the days of the week to survivors in a literacy class is as follows: a fish is purchased at a nearby pet store and then placed in the centre of a table in the classroom.

After some initial vocabulary building and conversation practice using the days of the week, a schedule is set up in which each student is given responsibility for feeding the fish on a different day. Additional language practice includes having students describe

the various steps of feeding the fish: "take the food out of the bag, sprinkle it over the water", and so forth.

Attendance and punctuality

Poor attendance and lateness is not unusual and should even be expected from survivors of torture who attend ESL classes. While it is important to encourage students to attend class regularly and be as punctual as possible, instructors should learn to be lenient. Survivors may miss class or arrive late for reasons unrelated to the ESL class, such as sleep disturbances the night before, or bouts of depression. There are several things that can be implemented, however, to encourage students to do their best with attendance and punctuality. For example, if students are absent two or three days in a row, a phone call is a good way of letting them know that they have not been forgotten and that someone is concerned about their wellbeing. In some instances, a student could even be in need of help but does not know how to access it or may be afraid to ask.

One instructor at the CCVT has attempted to circumvent the attendance/lateness issue by posting a chart with students' names in his classroom so that they can keep track of their own attendance. When students arrive, they fill in a "P" if they arrived on time, an "L" if they are late and an "A" for any day they were absent. The chart is not meant to be intimidating in any way. No attention is ever drawn to it but at the same time when students take responsibility for marking in their own attendance, they become more conscious of these issues.

Addressing issues of self-esteem

The mandate of the ESL programme at the CCVT is as much to contribute to rebuilding survivor's self-esteem, as to provide language instruction. Self-esteem is a necessary prerequisite for successfully carrying out almost any cognitive activity and is a central factor in second language acquisition. Indeed, data from several sources of linguistic research confirms that healthy levels of self-esteem correlate positively with second language performances, particularly in oral production.

Survivors of torture often lack positive self-esteem. Torture by its very nature is an attack on the personality and core of the individual. Torturers often concentrate on the brain function (as well as sexual function) in an attempt to break down the victim's sense of identity. Frequently victims are told that they will never be able to learn normally again and that their memory will be permanently damaged.

Rebuilding lost self-esteem and empowering students should be a central component of any ESL programme for survivors of torture. This means that instructors must be very

conscious of how students feel about themselves and how this affects their learning of English.

A good way to begin is to make the classroom situation as informal and comfortable as possible. At the CCVT, students are not prohibited from coming and going within the period of instruction, if they feel they need a break. Small-sized classes increase the comfort level among students, as well as providing for more individual attention. A ratio of 10 to 12 students for every instructor works very well. If this is not possible, volunteers can be integrated into the programme. Breaking up a large class into groups, led by volunteers, provides students with more opportunities to speak and makes speaking a less intimidating experience than is the case in front of the whole class. Volunteers can also work one-on-one with individuals who require more attention.

At the CCVT, all ESL classes are student-centred. Unlike in traditional, teacher-oriented classrooms, the curriculum is not shaped by predetermined linguistic and affective objectives. Rather, it is negotiated with the students themselves. Students are put in a position of equal partnership with the teacher in determining the content of the course and the methodology. Their interests are solicited in informal group discussions, individual conferences, and questionnaires. In addition, students are asked, on a continuous basis, for individual feedback on all aspects of the course. This facilitates the development of healthier self-esteem since it convinces survivors not only that their personal opinions and preferences are significant, but also that they will be respected. Finally, students are encouraged to become more sensitive to their preferred learning styles and language goals by monitoring their own progress. This increases confidence. It also empowers survivors to control and direct their own learning.

Curriculum ideas

An excellent way of helping survivors in the ESL class feel at ease is to integrate the topic of food early on in the curriculum. Eating is a pleasure that all people share in common. A former instructor of the CCVT started her beginner-level course by integrating a unit on "Getting to know each other" with a unit on "Food from around the world". She found that all her students enjoyed discussing food, as they all had something to contribute. The unit also provided an opportunity for students to bring various dishes to class. Single male students who might not be able to cook were asked to bring a beverage. This is important so as not to make anyone feel uncomfortable with the exercise. However, the sharing of food between people who were just getting to know each other proved to be immensely successful in raising the comfort level of the group and establishing a good feeling for the remainder of the term.

Another means of enabling students to feel more at ease is through music. Used not nearly enough in the ESL classroom, music can have an immensely calming effect, significantly reducing the stress that so often accompanies struggling with a foreign

language. The last day of every week of instruction in literacy and beginner-level classes at the CCVT is set aside for musical activities. Instructors who play musical instruments introduce a song in English and teach the students to sing along with them. Then students take turns singing songs and teaching them to the class. Music can have powerful effect in motivating students. Indeed, CCVT teachers have found that students who had failed to speak in class, were heard singing. Songs can also be used to teach vocabulary, grammatical structures, or prompt discussions in more advanced level classes -- and when used at the end of class, enable students to unwind and leave the classroom humming.

Integrating links to the community and life skills

An important means of establishing confidence is to use the ESL course as a bridge into the community, into which newcomers must integrate. Frequent class excursions are a way to accomplish this. These trips can be of an academic nature such as visiting a museum. However, simple outings such as going to the post office to purchase stamps, shopping for cookies for break time and going to a cafe for conversation will help to familiarize students with their new community.

Integrating life skills into the curriculum is another way of helping survivors become more confident in their new communities. However, it is important to develop relevant curriculum materials for teaching life skills to refugees who have survived traumatic experiences of repression. Many texts present situations which are artificial, unrealistic and overly simplistic. In "The Hidden Curriculum of Survival ESL", Elsa Auerbach and Denise Burgess give the following dialogue from an ESL text book as a case in point:

A: How much is the house?

B: It's \$460 a month.

A: How much is the cleaning deposit?

B: \$200.

A: When can I move in?

B: In a week.

An alternative to using materials which present unrealistic "life" situations involves first talking with students about the realities of their lives and then teaching language and skills that will enable them to feel empowered rather than defeated by situations they are confronting outside the classroom. This is the approach used by Dani McArthur in her excellent book, *English for Living and Working in Toronto*. While integrating such topics as housing, health, and employment into the ESL curriculum, her goal is to give students skills which will enable them to handle real life situations, such as how to take control when they are less than confident about their English language abilities and are confronted by native English speakers' impatience at not understanding what the newcomer is trying to say.

Employment units are a part of most life skills courses. Unfortunately, many do not venture beyond instruction on reading want ads, filling out application forms and interview strategies. Much to her credit, Dani McArthur's book also includes a comprehensive section on employee rights and how to respond if an employer is taking advantage.

In conclusion, an ESL programme designed for survivors of torture should take into account the special needs of its students. Memory impairment, disruption of normal sleep patterns, inability to trust other people, depression and poor self-esteem, which may be experienced as after-effects of torture experiences, can have direct and indirect impact on the learning process. Only when these challenges are addressed through thoughtful, creative, student-centred learning strategies and materials aimed at empowerment will second language acquisition be effectively facilitated.