

Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture

CCVT Approaches to language learning: Best practices/ Do's – Don'ts

How is learning affected for survivors of Torture and war trauma: Major Challenges to learning are: problems with memory(difficulty retaining information gathered from verbal sources vs. visual , difficulty learning new things, remembering facts or lists); Difficulty sustaining focused attention

Feeling nervous/anxious/panic attacks/always in a state of alert

Fatigue, nightmares , insomnia, , medications, distress, lack of confidence, motivation

- 1. Interrupted learning due to early age, war/conflict/exile**

SECTION I

- 1. Create Positive Teaching Environments; Always reassuring, comforting, trusting**
- 2. Implement CCVT's specialized teaching and learning approaches designed to meet the needs of our students.**
- 3. Classes are smaller in size thus giving students the necessary attention and time to learn according to a differentiated pace of progress. Smaller class sizes promote calmer, safer environment, but always based on Student-Centred group or Individualized Learning principles.**
- 4. Lessons are designed to aid memory and concentration and reduce anxiety in a relaxed environment.**
- 5. Additional support is provided by CCVT trauma counsellors, volunteer tutors in class and outside class, as well as computer assisted on-line as well as off line learning.**

SECTION II: Recovery goals for language instruction/educators

- 1. Restore control & safety in a supportive, positive environment where students progress at their own pace.**
- 2. Reduce fear and anxiety and restore attachments , connections and community**
- 3. Build trust, restore identity, meaning and purpose**
- 4. Overcome loss and grief and restore value, validate , increase self-esteem and confidence**
 - **Informal settings:** Holding classes and sessions in a less formal environment where students sit around a table.
 - **Time allotment:** Make sure that there is sufficient time for the students to participate in discussions, and to become comfortable with one another, if they wish to do so.
 - **Class size:** Keep class sizes small (10-15 people) in order to maximize individual attention and minimize noise, which will result in improved concentration.
 - **Class length:** three hours of instruction per day may be the maximum that some survivors may handle. Concentrating for longer periods may be exhausting, frustrating, and unproductive.
 - **Class timing:** Many survivors prefer afternoon classes. Those who suffer from insomnia or nightmares often cannot fall asleep until the early morning hours, and will not be able to concentrate if classes are held early in the morning.
- **Minimize** outside noise and other sensory distractions. Classrooms ideally need windows, natural light, live plants, and sufficient space to move.
- **Set up a quiet corner** with a table, a sofa, and some resource materials for students who need a time-out. This provides choice for those with migraines, concentration overload, severe depression, etc., who wish an intermediate safe place to be, while maintaining contact with the learning environment.
- **Post lots of vocabulary** such as idioms, projects, photos etc., on the walls to aid memory.

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Best practices What to Say/Do's – Don'ts

1. Create a safe, warm, welcoming and relaxed environment,
2. Initiate change in how everyone speaks and relates;
3. Insure an environment where everyone is treated with respect and dignity
4. Understand the individual as a whole person
5. Strike rapport, trust, Attuned to student's need, and support in way she/he wants.
6. Avoid unrealistic assurance such as "everything is alright", do not pry
7. Motivate, Radiate hope, seek the best and success
8. Avoid unwelcome expressions of sympathy such as "I feel sorry for you"
9. Be guided by what the client wants to talk about
10. empathetic/care/love , put yourself in their shoes
11. Good Knowledge of service providing agencies for referral purposes
12. Quick learning of Individual strength and weakness
13. The best gift we can offer newcomers is student success
14. Unwind

Room set-up: try to set up the room so that students are facing the door (backs to the door guarantee swiveling heads with each arrival), and many refugees suffer from fear and chronic anxiety.

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Flexibility: Allows for flexibility and do not promote a punitive environment. Many survivors have legitimate reasons for distrusting those in authority, and are sensitive to rules and regulations.

Praise the students when they attend and make them feel aware of their academic progress as it relates to their attendance. Encourage them to come as often as possible. Show them how they contribute to the class, and how other students are benefitting from their presence.

Welcome them back to class after a long absence.

Advocate for and accommodate traumatized survivors in the same way you would for any person with disability.

Make allowances for individual circumstances.

Culturally Responsive Classroom Communication

Effective teaching begins with an understanding that the teacher and the student(s) may be from different cultures and backgrounds. This introduces an amount of uncertainty from both sides, making effective communication even more complex. Without getting into cultures and sub-cultures, it is perhaps most important for teachers and tutors to realize that a basic understanding of cultural diversity is the key to effective cross-cultural communications. Without necessarily studying individual cultures and languages in detail, we must all learn how to better communicate with individuals and groups whose first language, or language of choice, does not match our own.

As volunteer tutors and teachers, we must make sure to implement culturally responsive teaching as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for all. This method teaches to and through the strengths of these students. For not only does it acknowledge the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum, but it also builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and classroom experiences.

Moreover, effective culturally responsive communication uses a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles. It teaches students to know and praise their own and each other's cultural heritages, as well as incorporate multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in classrooms.

Using these characteristics to improve culturally responsive teaching would involve considerations to the classroom environment. Literature in the classroom would reflect

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multiple ethnic perspectives and literary genres. Furthermore, in order to teach to the different learning styles of students, activities would reflect a variety of sensory opportunities (visual and auditory).

Avoiding Unconscious Racist Behaviour and White Privilege in Classroom Settings:

Anti-Racist Behavior	Why does it work?
Identify and remain aware of one's own assumptions	It enables the belief that equality is applied to each and every one of us to the exact same extent.
Share with and encourage leadership and initiative by everyone	It allows students to begin to take charge, provide solutions, and make decisions. It enables students to regain control of their lives.
Listen; hear what a person is saying	Teacher/tutor acknowledges the student's presence without placing judgement. It also allows teachers/tutors to learn from their students. It develops our respect for difference.
Be sure that solutions are appropriate culturally as well as pragmatically	Helps build educational strategies that honors students' heritage and personality,

Culturally Responsive Teaching is empowering

Culturally responsive teaching enables students to be better human beings and more successful learners. Empowerment can be described as academic competence, self-efficacy, increased self-esteem, and motivation. Students must believe they can succeed in learning tasks and have motivation to persevere. Teachers must demonstrate ambitious and appropriate expectations and exhibit support for students in their efforts toward academic achievement.

Culturally Responsive Teaching is Transformative

Culturally responsive teaching does not incorporate traditional educational practices with respect to students of color. It means respecting the cultures and experiences of various groups and then uses these as resources for teaching and learning. It appreciates the existing strengths and accomplishments of all students and develops them further in instruction. For example, the verbal creativity and story-telling that is unique among some African Americans in informal social interactions is acknowledged as a gift and contribution and used to teach writing skills. Other ethnic groups of students may prefer to study together in smaller groups.

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SECTION IV

Adjusting Expectations

Students who have experienced trauma and torture or war, or who suffer from PTSD need longer than average periods of time to master specific language skills. As volunteer teachers and tutors, we need to make adjustments in our programs and curriculums to account for this. Watch for signs of increasing frustration or discouragement. Do not promote students before they are actually ready for the next level. They will need extra praise and reassurance if their peers are promoted but they are not.

You may need to adjust your own expectations as well. Survivors of torture generally work much more slowly than others. Many activities that are successful with a regular class will simply not be effective for a survivor. Try to be as flexible as possible.

Be self-reflexive. While carrying on your day-to-day routine, you should be aware of the symptoms of stress and burnout. You may become numb and cynical while attempting to distance yourself from the experiences being described to you. Or on the contrary, you may feel even more vulnerable and reactive to your own past traumatic experiences.

Care for the Caregiver. It is important for teachers to have support. Talk to co-workers, and share experiences. Monitor your stress levels, whether you are over-identifying or avoiding your students. Make sure that you have support network outside of work as well. Be aware that what you are doing is ultimately optimistic, hopeful, and life-affirming in spite of the despair and sometimes desperate circumstances that encompass the lives and personal experiences of the survivors with whom you are trying to help.

Adjusting Classroom Activities

Survivors of torture and trauma often experience major challenges with memory and concentration problems, stress, and/or lack of sleep (due to insomnia or nightmares, anxiety, side-effects of prescription medication such as anti-depressants). Having said this, volunteer ESL teachers and tutors may be required to:

Adjust classroom activities. Reduce the possibility of flashbacks: screen all of your material and vet all of your field trips for factors that can trigger re-traumatization in your students. Prepare both your students and guest speakers before they come into the safe environment of the classroom.

Repetition. Constant repetition is required to aid memory. Try teaching the same language components using different activities on three successive days. Try a multitude of activities so that the difference senses are involved. For instance, when doing a unit on food, take a trip to the local market and locate specific foods, noting colors, shapes, sizes, smells, and tastes.

Tests. The atmosphere in your class should be informal, safe, relaxed, and friendly. When you give tests, be careful that your survivor students do not become overly anxious or discouraged if they do poorly. A weekly informal quiz or spelling test is a great way to help with memory problems and also helps combat absenteeism as students realize that they have missed an opportunity to learn. Do not make tests too difficult. Include works or questions

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you know are easy for them as well as some that are more challenging. Use games to make vocabulary learning fun.

Coping with Stress: The Do's and Don'ts

Music, singing, dances, art, jazz chants, photography, drawing and mind teasing riddles are all different ways that help students cope with stress. Remember, memory isn't only in the brain: it's also in the body, so use the whole body and all the senses to improve your students' odds.

Do a unit on stress (what causes it? Worsens it? Relieves it? What places, music exercises or other factors help?) You may want to bring in a Public health Nurse to do a workshop on stress. Additionally, staff members also need to develop strategies to cope with work-related stress, including the participation of therapists if possible. Art therapists can be excellent in this regard. Work with practitioners who are familiar with refugee issues.

Don't underestimate the importance of laughter and humour in the classroom. Jokes, skits, dances, funny anecdotes, and humorous videos can all create a fresh and positive atmosphere. Nothing reduces stress like a good laugh!

Do have fun! Ask students to bring music of their own and have a party. At the CCVT we have parties on an average of once a month. Students can bring music and food. Some people can bring instruments, some sing, and almost everyone enjoys dances. If the weather is nice we may go out for picnics. These parties are absolutely essential. It is necessary to celebrate a student's triumph: getting his/her landed papers, becoming reunited with family, a birthday, or just some time to unwind.

Improving Self-Esteem Self-esteem is an important component to almost everything we do. Not only will it help with academic performance, it supports social skills and makes it easier for survivors of torture to have and keep friends and social relationships. Relationships with peers and teachers are usually more positive with a healthy dose of self-esteem. Students are also better equipped to cope with mistakes, disappointment and failure; they are more likely to stick with challenging tasks and complete learning activities. Self-esteem is needed life-long and we need to remember the important role we play to enhance or damage a student's self-esteem.

Low self-esteem is one of the greatest barriers that prevent the advancement and progress of a student learning a new language. Survivors of torture and war have often been systematically stripped of their dignity, identity, and self-worth. As volunteer teachers and tutors, we must take every opportunity to nurture our students' self-esteem.

Here are a few examples that you may find useful:

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Always accentuate the positive. Do you ever notice those suffering from a low self-esteem tend to focus on the negative? You'll hear statements like: 'Oh, I was never any good at that. I can't keep friends'. This actually indicates that this person needs to like themselves more.

Give students the opportunity to tell you 10 things they like about themselves. Prompt them to state things they can do well, things they feel good about. You will be surprised at how many students suffering with low self-esteem have difficulty with this task - you'll need to provide prompts. (This is also a great beginning of the year activity).

Avoid criticism. Those suffering with low self-esteem struggle the most when given criticism. Be sensitive to this.

Always remember that self-esteem is about how much students feel valued, appreciated, accepted, loved and having a good sense of self-worth. Having a good self-image.

Understand that as a teacher and tutor, you play one of the biggest roles in how good or bad a student can feel about themselves - again, avoid criticism. Influence from a teacher can make and break a child's sense of self-esteem.

See the learning in errors or mistakes. Turn mistakes inside out and focus on what was or will be learned from the mistake. This helps students focus on the positive, not the negative. Remind students that everyone makes mistakes but it's how those mistakes are handled that makes the difference. We need to see them as learning opportunities. Powerful learning can often be the result of a mistake made.

Both you and your students need to understand the effect trauma (especially PTSD) can have on the learning process. Self-esteem is partially tied to seeing evidence that you are reaching your goals. Remind them periodically why they have trouble remembering what you've learned. Point out any signs of progressing. Help them see the bigger picture, perhaps by comparing their language skills now to how they performed when they first arrived.

Student presentations are great for improving self-esteem. The presentations should be done for the whole class. Students of a higher level can prepare a topic of their choice – their home country or city, food, culture, music, hobby, or any other topic they may wish to talk about within the perimeters of the class.

Sometimes students will reveal personal experiences of traumatic events. This can be a positive experience for the student, but could be traumatic or difficult for others. Make sure everyone knows that they do not have to listen to anything that makes them feel uncomfortable and that they can leave at any time.

If students do not have the language ability to do a presentation, try role playing. Focus on a specific language component. They can be written down or performed. Again, remember not to over-correct, and to praise all attempts at participation.

Conversation circles, and question & answer session are a great way to practice English, bond and share information. At the CCVT we have had great success with topics such as employment, shopping, education, and child rearing. Each student starts by sharing experiences and a discussion soon begins.

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At a lower level students can help each other by doing translations in controlled exercises. Students who are stronger in English can help classmates who share the same native language.

SECTION V

Teaching Family & Feelings

Many survivors of torture have had family members killed or left behind in peril. This creates a source of constant concern or pain. Nonetheless, we must cover the family at some point in our classes.

How do we go about doing this?

You can initially start by 'depersonalizing' the theme. Instead of having students discuss their own families, try making a photo collage of some fictional (and even racially mixed) family tree. Get your students to give names to each member. Then cover the terms for family relations.

Eventually, some student will want to share experiences from their real families. If these are painful or linguistically challenging to relate, try getting the students to draw them, perhaps in a simple comic book format, with basic written bubbles or captions. Use a registered art therapist if you have access to one. Watch the reactions of those listening. Is anyone overwhelmed by the story? If the class can handle it, they'll often bond further.

Teaching Feelings & Emotions

Try to provide material and activities which don't put the students in an emotional corner. Do dialogues, which use relevant language components. If you work with intermediate or high level adults, try idioms like *I'm blue/you've got guts/Take it easy/I can't take this anymore*. They are more likely to recall and use terms which are of immediate use to them.

To depersonalize this unit, try showing videos or photos of people in various situations, and then ask the students to choose the appropriate expression as illustrated by the action. Effects of Trauma on Learning

"[Traumatic events] can overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (Herman, 1992, p. 33). Since language learning demands control, connection, and meaning, adults experiencing effects of past or current trauma are particularly challenged in learning a new language. They may be affected by symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder, be clinically depressed, have repressed

memories of previous abuse, or display visible signs of emotional distress. Victims of trauma

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may also experience concentration and memory loss (Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture, 2000).

Implications for Practice Regardless of an individual's experience with violence, torture, or abuse, being an adult learner is intimidating for many. The following are suggestions for making the classroom safer for all. Listen to learners and allow their concerns about violence to surface in one form or another. A class in which a learner-centered approach is used enables community to develop among the learners. It is important not to compartmentalize violence or to frame trauma as a medical issue, but rather to understand its many forms. Offer content and activities that allow learners to share as much or as little information about themselves as they want, particularly when they are just beginning to study together. Let learners know that while they are invited to share information about their lives, they are not obliged to do so (Isserlis, 1996). Validating learners' strengths is critical, especially for adults who have received negative messages about themselves or their learning abilities. Using learners' native languages for content learning, activities, and discussion can help build trust and community (Florez, 2000; Rivera, 1999). Allow learners to choose their own level of participation in classroom activities. Horsman describes learners' abilities to attend to and participate in classroom activity as "relative states of presence" (2000, p. 84). She suggests discussing with learners what it means to be present in the class and giving permission for them to be less than totally involved in all class activities. One way to do this is to set up a "quiet corner" for learners who feel unable to take part in particular classroom activities (Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture, 2000). Find out about community resources. While teachers do not need to become counselors, they should be aware of appropriate services. Find out what happens when one calls an emergency hotline-what information will be asked for, what language assistance is available, what assurances of confidentiality exist-so that learners will know exactly what to expect when they call. If appropriate, create a class activity using the language and communication skills needed to call a hotline and ask for assistance. Knowing that many hotlines aid victims of crimes (both men and women) can lessen some of the anxiety for female victims of domestic abuse by shifting the focus from them to the

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broader community. Allow learners to pursue the topic, if they choose, by investigating community resources and by reading accounts of the experiences of other learners. (See, for example, *Not by Myself*, Literacy South, 1999, and *If I Were a Door*, Landers, 1994.) Klaudia Rivera (personal communication, June 2000) notes that staff at the El Barrio Popular Education Program in New York City created collaborations with other community agencies dealing with the issue of domestic violence by providing information about their services and offering workshops to teach learners to become peer counselors. She adds, "For many, the abuse began after the students enrolled in classes. Their partners could not deal with them becoming independent through learning English. In most cases the spouse had not been abusive in the past." Do not assume that all immigrant learners have experienced trauma. Neither do teachers necessarily need to know who among their learners has experienced abuse. However, educators should understand that certain topics generally discussed in adult ESL classes (e.g., family and health) can cause learner discomfort because of past and present abuse (Horsman, 2000). For English language learners who have faced loss of one sort or another (status, employment, family members, or homeland), being able to view the classroom as a safe and predictable place is key to building community among and safety for learners and practitioners. In one Massachusetts class, students decided to meet together outside of class to form a support group after they realized that they shared histories of abuse. They subsequently produced a videotape and guide to document for others their experiences and the information they gained about domestic violence (Hofer, Haddock, Swekla, & Kocik, 1998).

Conclusion

Although strides have been made in raising public awareness about the prevalence of violence in all forms and its effects upon learning, work remains to be done in the areas of teacher education, policy, and increased awareness among learners and practitioners in ESL programs. State plans for adult education might support development of ancillary services for learners attending classes for whom violence is a factor in learning. This, coupled with teachers' understanding of the effects of trauma on learning, should help to make the classroom a safe place and learning more possible for adult language learners.

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The role of teaching staff

Strategies for teachers Traumatic experiences can affect the capacity for learning in a number of ways. Some common learning issues for refugee students include:

Blocks' to learning caused by the disruptive effects of trauma on cognitive, emotional and social functioning, which affect the ability of students to participate in the classroom

- culture shock of being in a new country with unfamiliar systems
- concentration, lethargy and retention problems caused by poor sleep and nightmares
- learning difficulties caused by factors such as malnutrition and deprivation
- sight and hearing problems
- deficits in education caused by disrupted schooling
- learning a new language without prior literacy skills

There are many strategies that can be used in schools and the classroom to overcome

