

Torture and War Coping Strategies: Considerations for TESL

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The following is a list from Wilson et al. (62) and Mossallanejed (139-141) of the various coping strategies that survivors might employ during torture and imprisonment. We can safely assume that victims of war also employ many of these strategies. In a previous study [unpublished, "Coping Strategies of Torture Victims: Applications in the ESL Classroom", 2013], I compiled two sets of strategies (positive transferable coping strategies and negative non-transferrable coping strategies), which might be employed by victims of torture and/or war.

Although victims/survivors rely on both positive and negative coping strategies to withstand war and – more particularly – torture, for the sake of greater relevance within the TESL context, only positive strategies will be listed below. The transfer of positive coping strategies from the hostile environment into the friendly host environment and ESL classroom empowers the survivor, demonstrating what Bryant-Davis calls the transition from "survivor to thriver" (11). A sample sketch of a relevant lesson plan is supplied on page 3.

Positive coping strategies employed by victims of torture and war:

- Differential focus on the good;
- Survival for a purpose;
- Companionship;
- Will to live;
- Split between self as victim and self as observer;
- Smuggling items into camp;
- Giving and sharing;
- Focusing on day-to-day survival;
- Attention shift;
- Projection;

- Exercising choices -- making some decisions;
- Hope (active and passive);
- Group affiliation;
- Creating a “new family” to share attitudes/necessities;
- Belief in God;
- Hope for survival;
- Development of support groups (friendships);
- Physical activity (any amount), which allows for greater capacity to withstand torture;
- Task setting (any kind) and inventing distractions in order to avert idleness and subsequent madness;
- Looking for creative alternatives as a means of expressing feelings and creating therapy;
- Aesthetic appreciation -- art, songs of love/courage/resistance as ways to find goodness;
- Repeating words of self-determination to “never give up” in order to encourage will power;
- Limiting the exchange of information to a practical purpose with an eye to potential informers;
- Telling humorous stories that make torture and the oppressors look ridiculous as a particularly powerful survival mechanism.

Above all, Mossallanejed acknowledges love as being the ultimate survival mechanism, declaring: “you transcend your “self” and anxiously seek unity with the subject of your love” (141). Our awareness of these positive coping strategies as being embedded in and reinforced through our classroom materials and activities can help with the choosing, designing and planning of our lessons, with the result that we are better prepared to take on a more conscientious and effective approach to our work. I recommend further discussion, field research, and field-testing, as well as documented feedback from educators and learners.

LESSON SKETCH WITH UNDERLYING COPING STRATEGIES: *CASTAWAY*

It is not necessary for a teacher to tell the learners that they are employing coping strategies in the classroom that are often employed by victims of torture and war. In fact, this should be avoided. A classic ESL lesson of this type is the “desert island” activity – a lesson supported by maps and film clips. Underlying coping strategies are set in parentheses.

Part 1: Present the idea that the learners are going to collectively learn some new vocabulary (group affiliation). Explain that the learners are to imagine that they are going to spend a little while on a desert island (task setting/projection) with a small group (companionship), and that the resources on and about the island are limited, so they will need to take a few small items for their comfort and survival (smuggling in). The learners work in small groups (group support), with each group deciding what three things they will most need on this island (exercising choices/will to live). The groups report their choices to the whole class (exchange information). List the choices on the board as the learners share them with the class (giving and sharing) and draw the images on the board (art/inventing distractions).

Part 2: Tell the class that they are going to watch a film-clip. Present the movie *Castaway* with Tom Hanks (aesthetic appreciation). Play the scenes from when the castaway lands on the island through to his escape. Skip over any shock scenes, e.g. dead pilot floating in water, driftwood in hanging noose. As the castaway picks up pieces of debris and natural objects on the island, ask the learners to note the use of the items. Ask if these items serve the same purpose as their own choices (identification). Ask, for example, what interesting uses the castaway found for the ice skate (alternatives) – mirror, etc.

Part 3: Ask what motivates the castaway (love/the will to live). Ask what stories and songs the learners would suggest for his amusement until the castaway escapes (music/story telling). Close by requesting written and/or verbal feedback from the learners re the lesson and activities. Document and date the session.

Mossallanejed, Ezat. *Torture in the Age of Fear*. Seraphim Editions: Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, 2005.

Wilson, John P; Boris Droždek, eds. *Broken spirits: the treatment of traumatized asylum seekers, refugees, war and torture victims*. New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2004.

Bryant-Davis, Thema. *Thriving in the Wake of Trauma: A Muticultural Guide*. Praeger Publishers: Westport, CT, 2005.

Castaway, Director: Robert Zemeckis. Twentieth Century Fox/Dreamworks: USA, 2000.