

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR VICTIMS OF TORTURE



ADDRESSING THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF THE TORTURE VICTIM

IN THE ESL CLASS

The modern ESL class should provide a welcoming learning environment for all second language students. The emphasis today in second language teaching is away from rote repetition, competitive testing and relentless grammar translation, and instead towards a creative language environment where learners can progress at their individual speeds, using real situations to express their language needs, with friendly encouragement and guidance provided by instructors to inspire students to discover for themselves their own levels of competency, and to strive for self-made goals.

Immigrants should discover a learner-oriented programme awaiting them upon entry into their first ESL class, which should lessen the stress experienced with 1) learning a new language as an adult; 2) adjusting to a new and different culture; and 3) dealing with everyday problems such as financial concerns, employment difficulties, immigration problems, and so on.

Those who have suffered torture, however, may have very special needs which the average ESL class may not be able to accommodate. As well as bringing with them all the typical problems of new immigrants, those who have endured torture can carry with them a myriad of psychological roadblocks to the acquisition of a new language. Their individual experiences, however far away in time and place, have left physical and/or emotional scars which may affect the victims for the remainder of their lives.

The trauma of the torture experience may produce a set of learning barriers, emanating from a lack of concentration, distrust of strangers, fear of groups, fear of authority figures, and the disintegration of the individual's sense of "self". These are symptoms of a condition known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which often afflicts torture victims and consequently inhibits their learning progress.

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The act of speaking itself - responding to questions, talking about oneself - can be especially intimidating to survivors of torture. Torture, besides being a form of punishment, is primarily used to elicit information. Thus the fear of speaking and conversing, to be expected in all second language learners, is compounded in the torture victim. Memories of action taken as a result of the spoken word, or as a result of not speaking, may arise in the survivor's mind, and further complicate his or her attempt at communication.

An ESL programme conscientiously devised particularly with the requirements of the torture victim in mind can help to eliminate or at least reduce many of these learning roadblocks. Specifically, the programme should take into consideration the following:

- 1) size of class: large classes can be intimidating; numbers should be kept lower than average classes if possible. A group of 10 students is very workable.
- 2) location and surroundings: a quiet and pleasant learning environment is desired. Survivors of torture in particular may find loud noises stressful, and small, cramped quarters may affect their concentration.
- 3) volunteer component: trained volunteers are of special value in assisting students needing one-to-one attention. They must be specially briefed beforehand on dealing with the possible problems that may arise with students on an individual basis, and in group situations.
- 4) outreach: persistent effort must be made to encourage new clients to come to class for the first time, and for regular students to keep attending, so that learners don't succumb to their fear of failure.
- 5) curriculum and its approach: lifeskills should be stressed in order to help students deal with the immediate needs of newcomers to a new city.

Instructors and volunteers must be aware that some themes commonly used in modern language teaching should be handled carefully, as they may provoke painful memories (e.g., "the family": clients may not wish to talk about their own families; family members may have been killed, or still be missing; mothers and fathers could be separated from their children, and so on; "personal information": students at no point in a lesson should be pressed for personal details about themselves they do not wish to divulge.)

If recently arrived refugees, clients may prefer not to talk about their immediate pasts. Instructors

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can instead encourage students to tell about their lives before their personal traumas occurred, or to relate a story from childhood.

Lessons incorporating history and politics should be handled with great tact, in view of the fact that the class will likely consist of people from quite diverse political backgrounds and situations.

With patience and planning, the ESL class can be an oasis of hope for those who have suffered torture. Perhaps it will be one of the few social environments wherein the torture survivor will not feel alone and isolated because of his or her traumatic experience. The knowledge that others have suffered equally and are trying to overcome their pasts can give emotional support and encouragement to each individual. That others in the mainstream of Canadian society, such as teachers and volunteers, recognize and are knowledgeable of the clients' suffering, should give them assurance that what they suffered was real, and, as with any form of abuse, that it was wrong.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Elaine Parks".

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