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Overcoming Barriers: Adult Refugee Trauma Survivors in a Learning Community

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# TEACHING ISSUES

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The *TESOL Quarterly* publishes brief commentaries on aspects of English language teaching. For this special issue, we asked contributors to address a key aspect of adult immigrant language learning and teaching in their context.

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## ***Overcoming Barriers: Adult Refugee Trauma Survivors in a Learning Community***

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■ In 2007, approximately 48,000 refugees resettled in the United States, more than half of whom were over 18 years of age (Jefferys & Martin, 2008). Due to denigration and, in many cases, torture, refugees have either experienced interrupted education or have never received a formal education in their home country. Shortly after arrival in the United States, many non-English-speaking adult refugees enroll in low-cost community-based English as a second language (ESL) classes in order to bridge the gap in their education and to build the language skills necessary to secure employment. ESL classes provide a welcoming community within which this marginalized population can actively participate in language learning as they adjust to a new environment.

Yet participation in ESL classes is not always feasible, even in New York City, the most populous city in the United States with one of the largest immigrant populations. In 2006, the number of individuals in need of adult ESL courses in New York City was estimated to be 1 million, yet far fewer were able to enroll in these courses because of the lack of availability and wait times ranging from several months to 2 years (Tucker, 2006). In light of the lengthy wait time to enroll in citywide ESL classes, refugee resettlement agencies, which provide ESL instruction primarily for their clients, become an invaluable resource. For refugees who are trauma survivors, there are few ESL programs in the United States designed specifically for them; however, the Urban

Hospital<sup>1</sup> Program for Survivors of Torture (UHPSOT) in New York City is one program which prioritizes English language learning for its clients.

Utilizing Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice framework, this article explores teaching issues within the UHPSOT ESL classes, a unique community of learning which has not been previously studied. In this community, refugees, who have a shared history of trauma, participate in language learning in ways that are often not possible outside the classroom. Yet for this population, there are hidden barriers to learning stemming from the effects of trauma. I argue that a key issue for instructors of adult refugees is a basic understanding of how common psychological diagnoses like posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) influence second language learning and, subsequently, pedagogy.

## Trauma and Second Language Acquisition

Adkins, Birman, and Sample (1999) cite three types of stress in the resettlement process: migration stress, acculturative stress, and traumatic stress. Migration stress is the result of a move from one's home in a sudden, unplanned situation; acculturative stress is the attempt to function in a new culture or society, and traumatic stress results from willful harm committed by another human being. Many refugees who have experienced traumatic stress have been diagnosed with PTSD. According to the American Psychiatric Association (2009), symptoms of PTSD include flashbacks, nightmares, headaches, difficulty concentrating, and memory impairment. Past or current trauma symptoms may include difficulty beginning new tasks, blame, guilt, concern for safety, depression, inability to trust those in power, disturbed sleep, eroded self-confidence, and an inability to concentrate (Kerka, 2002).

Research shows that stress and, in particular, PTSD, can negatively influence academic achievement and, more specifically, language acquisition (Saigh, Mroueh, & Bremner, 1996; Sondergaard & Theorell, 2004). The literature from the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (2002) notes the connection between trauma and language, explaining that language learning demands control, connection, and meaning, and adults experiencing effects of past or current trauma are particularly challenged in learning a new language. They may be affected by symptoms of PTSD, be clinically depressed, have repressed memories of previous abuse, or display visible signs of emotional distress. Victims of trauma may also experience concentration and memory loss (Kosa & Hansen, 2006). When a student not only experiences memory loss, but is also distracted by repressed memories, his or her ability to learn a second language may be dramatically hindered.

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<sup>1</sup>Pseudonym.

## **English as a Second Language and the Urban Hospital Program for Survivors of Torture**

UHPSOT was established in 1995 in order to provide psychiatric, psychological, and medical care to refugees and asylum seekers who have survived torture and war trauma and who are living in the New York metropolitan area. Currently, UHPSOT serves individuals from more than 80 countries, though the majority of clients come from West African countries and from Tibet (D. Bedrosian, personal communication, 2007).

Shortly after its inception, UHPSOT established a volunteer-run ESL program with the objective of helping students to get further acclimated to life in New York. The official emphasis in the classes is on conversation skills, though many of the UHPSOT administrators and volunteer teachers view the language classes as a social group that allows for all aspects of language learning. Although the classes started with just three levels of ESL (beginner, intermediate, and advanced), the program now additionally offers classes that focus on obtaining a Graduate Equivalency Degree (GED) as well as basic literacy skills.

There is no uniform content to the ESL classes; instead, teachers are encouraged to utilize their own materials or pull from a small library of ESL workbooks. The emphasis in all levels of ESL classes is primarily on speaking, though reading and writing are also incorporated into class lessons. Although many students attend classes during both of the weekly sessions, the teachers of each level only teach once a week. Thus the students have a different instructor on the two nights of class, reflecting an unstable teaching environment, a point that will be taken up later in this article.

The English language learners (ELLs) in the UHPSOT ESL classes have typically been in the United States for fewer than 3 years, though several students have been living in the United States for up to 5 years. Many students within the program are still seeking psychological and medical treatment at Urban Hospital; however, this is not the case for all students. In fact, UHPSOT administrators note that the ESL classes are often one of the last steps in the recovery process for its clients. The recognition that English is critical to surviving in the United States comes from one who has finally accepted that they cannot return home; they must create a life for themselves in the United States. UHPSOT facilitates that process by providing language training and the moral support of a learning community.

### **UHPSOT as a Community of Practice**

ESL classes that consist exclusively of refugee trauma survivors reflect a specific community of practice or context for language learning. While Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice framework has been

utilized to explore how marginalized populations learn, no study has used a community of practice lens to explore language learning among refugee trauma survivors. Yet the community of practice literature is particularly important when understanding the learning needs and challenges of this population, especially when the emphasis in this classroom is on how learners participate and socially engage with other members of the group. As Wenger (1998) notes, learning is “participation” and “participation here refers not just to local events or engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities” (p. 4).

Participation in social contexts can be challenging for refugee trauma survivors, whose marginalization is often perpetuated by their depression, isolation, and unfamiliarity with the language of their new home. As Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) argue, “the process of becoming a competent member of society is realized to a large extent through language, by acquiring knowledge of its functions, social distribution, and interpretations in and across socially defined situations” (p. 168). Since opportunities for language socialization influence how learners come to understand language (Zuengler & Miller, 2006), the UHPSOT ESL classes play a critical role in providing refugee trauma survivors with a social context for language learning.

Within this context, learners’ shared histories help to shape the language learning process (Barton, Ivanic, Appleby, Hodge, & Tusting, 2007; Swain & Deters, 2007). While social and emotional support are often key components in any ESL classroom (Adkins, Birman, & Sample, 1999), this is especially true in the case of UHPSOT, where classmates frequently come from the same region in the world and perhaps have even witnessed the same kind of violence. Thus the classes help re-teach collaboration and trust, qualities that may have been lost as a result of traumatic experiences (Kerka, 2002). Collaboration among students is reinforced by the open enrollment policy in ESL classes, where the revolving door of students reflects a community of learning with students who take on shifting roles as experts, or those who are knowledgeable and experienced, and novices, or those learners who are just entering the community for the first time (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This expert/novice dynamic creates a nurturing environment where trust can build rather than one which highlights power differentials and pushes novices to the periphery (Swain & Deters, 2007).

## **Teaching Challenges in UHPSOT ESL Classes**

Within this unique community of practice, there are many challenges. However, there are two primary issues that the ESL program at UHPSOT

faces on an ongoing basis: the transience of both teachers and students, and the influence of students' current emotional state and prior psychological issues on the structure of the ESL classes.

As mentioned above, the fluidity in student attendance may have some positive effects for students by allowing them to serve as experts for newcomers; however, the instability in attendance of both students and teachers impacts the program in a negative way. Students grow to trust and rely upon teachers, but because the program can only hire teachers on a volunteer basis, the door is one that constantly revolves. As soon as a teacher leaves, there is a significant drop in student attendance. Further, the ongoing cycle of classes is problematic. There is no beginning or end to courses; new students can join at any point. This inconsistency in the classroom is what Sticht, McDonald, and Erickson (1998) describe as attendance turbulence. In the authors' study of adult basic education and ESL classes, they found that absenteeism and open-enrollment policies presented an environment in which other students were less inclined to attend class and teachers had greater difficulty maintaining a sense of continuity in instruction. Thus in the case of UHPSOT, students would perhaps respond better to a concrete ending of one cycle, evaluation, and the beginning of another, but the program is hesitant to turn away clients who are eager to begin classes for fear that the "rejection" may result in a recovery setback.

This leads to the second critical problem in UHPSOT's ESL classes, which is the delicate, and often difficult, balance between the students' emotional and psychological state and the structure of the community and classroom. As a result of the current revolving door policy, attendance ebbs and flows, and there are no formal evaluations to give a student a feeling of accomplishment when they progress from one level to the next. Because there are no formal evaluations, true beginner English speakers will join a pre-existing class, thus slowing down the other students' progress. Moreover, there is the constant feeling among teachers that they should not pressure students and create a stressful environment. As Krashen (1982) explains in his Affective Filter Hypothesis, students will be better able to learn a second language when they are relaxed, uninhibited, motivated, and free of anxiety. However, the result of this stress-free classroom is that students' progress is difficult to track and teachers are consistently burdened with the task of lowering students' already heightened anxiety.

## **Solutions**

### **Fostering Trust and Building Confidence**

Teachers in programs with refugee trauma survivors can take measures that will help to foster trust without altering the ways in which an ESL

program is structured. Baier (1986) argues that a trusting relationship is often dissolved by an imbalance in power and the subsequent feelings of vulnerability. Refugee trauma survivors, in particular, feel disempowered because of their prior experience with violence and the fact that they were forced from their home countries. Thus a slow, sustained effort to rebuild trust in this population is crucial. By doing so, students will come to see themselves as equal members of the classroom, and teachers will create a more effective community of practice.

In order to create an environment in which students feel empowered, teachers should be mindful of the physical space within the classroom. Rooms with few windows and a tightly shut door may make a student feel that he or she has a lack of control. Leaving the door ajar or pointing out a nearby bathroom or water fountain will help the student experience a greater sense of agency rather than vulnerability (Isserlis, 2000). The constant reinforcement of trust among both students and teachers is critical in creating an environment open to learning and lowering students' anxiety levels, particularly when working with individuals who have experienced trauma.

Once students feel less vulnerable, teachers can focus on helping students to develop greater confidence in the classroom. Seufert (1999) points out that when creating lesson plans, teachers should ask themselves how an activity might not only help learners develop language skills to survive, but also give students the confidence to thrive in the United States. Teachers within UHPSOT have found that one must incorporate both long- and short-term goals into lessons. Students will feel an immediate sense of accomplishment as well as a commitment to achieve future goals. Further, students become more active members of a classroom community when teachers provide them with clear academic expectations (Ennis & McCauley, 2002). Thus curriculum that enables teachers to track individual students' progress and allows students to gain a heightened awareness of their own learning trajectory will help to instill confidence in learners who have survived trauma (Adkins, Birman, & Sample, 1999). Finally, the inclusion of a diversity of activities, like both individual and group work, will enable students who suddenly feel withdrawn to still feel valued in the classroom (Kerka, 2002). In UHPSOT, teachers try to pair students who are the "experts" in the classroom to work with the incoming "novices." While these pairings are common in many adult ESL classrooms, in the UHPSOT context these relationships take on even greater importance. Students are motivated and inspired by their more advanced peers, who have managed to balance their psychological, physical, and emotional challenges with the process of learning a new language.

Moreover, students may become more engaged in the learning process when instruction is authentic and reflects students' real-life

needs. Authentic materials, as defined by Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, and Degener (2004), differ from those used in the context of school:

Authentic texts [are] defined as texts used outside of school by people reading and writing in the world... authentic texts [include] such texts as signs, coupons, newspapers, magazines, novels, information books, forms, leases, bibles, and song lyrics. School only texts [include] such texts as worksheets, comprehension questions following a short story, literacy tests, and spelling lists. (p. 184)

Many adult ESL programs strive for authentic instruction by using student-generated texts and topics chosen by the students themselves. Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, and Soler (2002) note, however, that too often authentic materials used in adult education “become increasingly distanced from the lives of individual students” (p. 74). To ensure this authenticity, particularly when working with adult refugees, Weinstein (1984) argues that one must examine learners’ daily lives in order not only to understand from where second language input comes, but also to gain a greater understanding of the learners’ literacy needs.

In the UHPSOT ESL classes, authentic instruction is interpreted as instruction that is culturally relevant and meaningful for the students. Rather than utilize materials that have little relevance to students’ lives, teachers strive for a learner-centered approach that incorporates learners’ linguistic interactions outside the classroom. Students are encouraged to discuss issues of importance like family and also more pragmatic topics like employment. Teachers then respond accordingly to students’ needs. For example, because many students in the UHPSOT ESL classes are interested in becoming taxi cab drivers in New York City, teachers have developed lessons around city maps and common questions on driver license exams.

Yet teachers in UHPSOT are mindful of the ways in which they utilize authentic instruction. As Hodge, Pitt, and Barton (2004) note in their research with asylees and refugees in ESL classes in England, students may wish to discuss highly emotional topics in class, the ramifications of which many teachers may not be equipped to handle. Thus the teachers in UHPSOT have found that focusing on competency-based approaches helps to keep students in the present rather than returning to a painful past. Teachers hope that by helping students to focus on their present circumstances they will gain the confidence to thrive in their new environment and their frustration and anxiety will not serve as a barrier to language learning.

### **Addressing Cognitive Difficulties**

Whereas there are resources to aid teachers in the establishment of a safe classroom environment as well as to assist teachers in incorporating



students' needs when designing curriculum, it is difficult to address how teachers can help students to cope with cognitive difficulties. Since both short- and long-term memory play a crucial role in language acquisition, teachers should primarily be aware that students' difficulty recalling information or comprehending text is not the result of a lack of preparation for class, but rather the result of memory impairments, which are often the result of PTSD. Teachers in the UHPSOT ESL program continue to explore various teaching methods that help students with the retention of new information. While many of these techniques are common in mainstream ESL classes, they are of particular importance when teaching students with cognitive difficulties.

For beginner-level students, repetition is a key factor in fostering second language acquisition. Review of the same terms in each class give students a sense of consistency and help reinforce the material. Further, providing students with flashcards that they can utilize at home will also help students to memorize key terms and phrases. Thus teachers not only have to exhibit patience but also have to motivate students to keep working hard to commit new vocabulary to memory.

When teaching reading and writing to advanced ESL students, cognitive difficulties will make reading comprehension more challenging (Harrington & Sawyer, 1992). Lesaux, Lipka, and Siegel (2006) explain that ELLs are required to use their working memory to first decode, then recall what has been read, and finally, retrieve the information. However, the ELLs' task is made even more complex because they are required to draw on cultural and linguistic schema to understand text, which requires increased memory function and cognitive skills. To aide in students' comprehension, students can be given several different prereading strategies. For example, the teacher can help students to brainstorm on a particular subject before they read. This will activate students' schema and help them to begin to think about a topic so they can better comprehend the text (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999). Additionally, students could bring in their own reading material at an appropriate level to help familiarize them with the subject as well as further encourage their enthusiasm in the topic.

### **Teacher Training**

In UHPSOT there is rarely the time or the resources for specialized teacher training, so training for this group has been expansive enough to address the various educational and professional backgrounds of the teachers. However, in an organization with more abundant resources, training that is specifically tailored to the teachers' individual needs may be beneficial. For example, many of the volunteer teachers in UHPSOT have experience in the field of human rights rather than in TESOL.

Thus teachers who do not have extensive ESL teaching experience need basic training in second language acquisition. Teachers who do have prior teaching experience but little experience with traumatized populations have expressed that a rigorous teacher training that discusses the possible implications of trauma on learning would be highly beneficial. Further, all teachers in UHPSOT, regardless of prior experience, are trained to reach out to other refugee and social service agencies to share ideas and even obtain the opinion of a mental health professional. UHPSOT emphasizes that its ESL teachers are not trained therapists and therefore should seek the input of a professional if faced with student issues that appear to be medical or psychological in nature. Overall, UHPSOT administrators have found that training can better equip teachers to design lessons that are realistic for their students' needs and can aid in volunteer retention. Many volunteer teachers have felt more committed to the program once they have gained a richer understanding of their students' background and history.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is still much research to be done in the field of trauma and second language learning. As more refugees arrive in the United States and continue to enroll in ESL classes, teachers must become aware of the intricate histories that students bring to the classroom and the unique community of practice that develops. As evidenced by the research, there are clear cognitive and psychological challenges that result from trauma. Disorders like PTSD can result in memory impairment that affects language and literacy acquisition. Teachers will have to be flexible in their pedagogical methods and learn to incorporate repetitive lessons and prereading exercises to address cognitive challenges that have affected short- and long-term memory.

Further, as a result of students' memory loss and heightened anxiety in the classroom, they may feel defeated. Teachers, then, must learn to motivate students by creating curriculum that values the students' needs and cultural identities. Moreover, teachers will have to be cognizant of how to foster a learner-centered classroom environment that helps to reinforce students' confidence and trust. By creating this community of practice, refugees who have experienced trauma will thrive.

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## THE AUTHOR

Heather Bobrow Finn is a doctoral candidate in TESOL at New York University in the United States. She was a volunteer with the Urban Hospital Program for Survivors of Torture in New York City from 2004 to 2007. Her research interests include the cognitive and sociocultural factors that influence the second language literacy learning of adult refugees and immigrants.

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## ***Teaching English to Refugees in Transition: Meeting the Challenges in Cairo, Egypt***

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■ In this article, we examine certain English language learning and teaching issues pertinent to refugees who are in transition, by which we mean refugees who are waiting for, but have not received, permanent resettlement. Such transitional refugees live in political, physical, and psychological conditions that are in many ways different than those of