

'BEYOND BEING NICE': A STUDY OF TRAUMA IN THE ADULT ESOL CLASSROOM IN WALES

A great number of people who were forced to flee their homes and seek sanctuary in the UK, join the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes to learn a language, an essential tool for integration and community cohesion.

Lora Agbaso & Dr Gabriel Roberts, Cardiff Metropolitan University
agbasolora@yahoo.com

I AM SELF model

For someone who has been traumatised, it is vital to re-connect with others, but most importantly, to the self. Therefore, we suggest the following trauma-informed teaching model 'I AM SELF':

Identify the signs of trauma, its detrimental impact on the brain and second language learning.

Accept that some 'bad behaviours' can be symptoms of trauma. Integrate this into teaching practice to assist learners.

Manage the following concepts as central in planning a course

Safety (physical, psychological, social and moral)

Emotions (educate about emotions, trauma and the brain, body reaction and its management)

Loss (value a shared experience, meaning, a space for stories and learners' voice, boundaries, cultural aspects)

Future (meaningful activities, the vision of the future, skills in daily lives, participatory pedagogy (Byrers et al., 2013))

The research also points to a potential value of the I AM SELF - model for creating a space for trauma healing and, as a result, better conditions for learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Training. Participants showed an interest in receiving training on trauma that would provide practical ways to support learners. This training should be tailored to the specifics of the adult ESOL classroom and possibly designed by specialists in both areas, trauma therapy and teaching. This training should be integrated and delivered as in-service teacher training or as a part of teacher education in TESOL-related courses.

Reshaping ESOL courses. To create better conditions for second language acquisition, reflect learners' immediate needs and help learners regain control over their lives, the ESOL classroom needs to be trauma-informed. Where possible, learners can be involved in co-producing the ESOL course content (e.g. through consultations) as equal participants with lived experience and real-life demands. This can benefit all learners, not only those who experienced trauma but also those impacted by their peers who had been traumatized.

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INTRODUCTION

The process of acquiring a new language can be negatively affected by migrants' mental health and experiences of traumatic events, intensified by forced migration stressors (Hollifield et al., 2018). In some cases, for those who found their way to become ESOL learners, teachers become the main, and sometimes the only, connection to the host community and culture. Thus, in addition to good teaching skills and specialist knowledge, the emotional health needs associated with trauma can require ESOL teachers to deal with complexities beyond the normal scope of other language teachers.

METHODS

This mixed-methods study focuses on the experiences of ESOL teachers and their responses to the effects of trauma in the adult ESOL classroom.

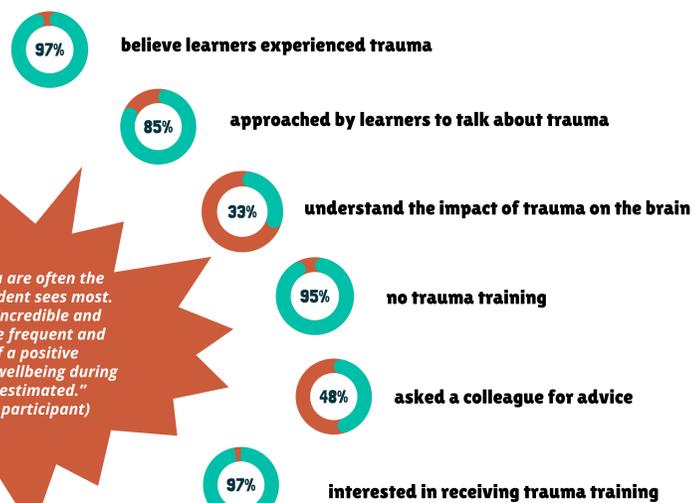


ESOL teachers working with adult forced migrants in Wales

- online surveys (n = 62)
- semi-structured interviews (n = 4)

RESULTS

TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF FORCED MIGRANTS IN THE ESOL CLASSROOM

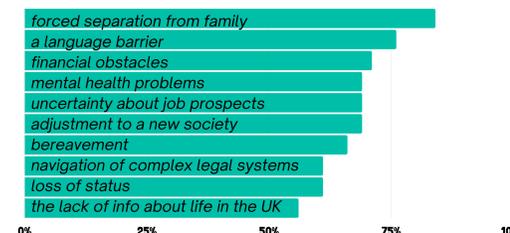


"As a teacher, you are often the person that a student sees most. The trust built is incredible and disclosures can be frequent and the importance of a positive environment for wellbeing during this time is underestimated." (an interview participant)

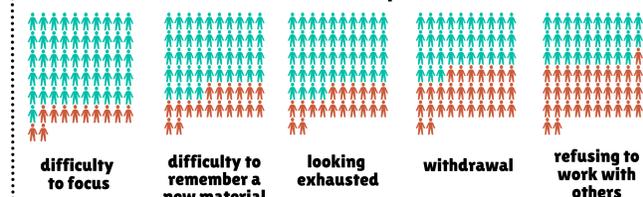
A significant correlation exists between successful language acquisition and traumatic past (Iversen et al., 2014). The findings of this study show that trauma-related signs (Perry, 2006; van der Kolk, 2015) exhibit themselves in the ESOL classroom. The majority of the participants, despite being highly qualified ESOL teachers find it challenging to identify the signs of trauma and its impact. Teachers also experienced more difficulties with newly arrived learners and those with low language levels. ESOL teachers invest in creating a safe environment in the classroom by relying on moral values and showing concerns about sensitive topics. They choose practices intuitively or rely on personal life experiences. Therefore, there is a need for a more flexible approach that more closely reflect learners' immediate needs and actual lives and apply evidence-based practices.

PRESENCE OF TRAUMA IN THE CLASSROOM

Discussions about frustrations



Behaviours as the response to trauma



"I have experienced students running out of the school building, as loud noises have reminded them of their school being bombed and have struggled with how to support them whilst teaching 20 other learners' (a survey participant)

CONCLUSION

The process of acquiring a new language can be negatively affected by psychological trauma. However, the topic of trauma is generally overlooked in language teaching education. The study reveals that teaching ESOL is inextricable from mental health. ESOL teachers are on the frontline dealing with the aftermath of learners' trauma. They are likely to encounter the effects of trauma in the classroom, and the lack of trauma awareness may prevent them from best meeting the needs of the students who experienced trauma. Shared experience makes the ESOL classroom somewhat close to a like-minded community, and there is an opportunity to create a space for trauma healing. However, the evidence-based practices that could have facilitated it further are not widely applied. Although not obliged, ESOL teachers could support these learners by introducing a trauma-informed approach and integrate I AM SELF model into their teaching practice.

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