

Title: Trauma-informed English Language Teaching

by Aung Kyaw Phyo

The importance of being a trauma-informed teacher

With the ever-increasing occurrence of natural disasters, pandemics, and economic and political instability, many students are now at a higher risk of experiencing traumatic events than ever before. Although English language teachers are not psychotherapists, they can play a crucial role in mitigating the impact of trauma and fostering post-traumatic growth in their students. Teachers serve as the first line of defense in providing psychosocial first aid, as they often spend more time with children and students than doctors, parents, or relatives do. In addition, language classrooms can offer safe spaces and meaningful opportunities for psychosocial support. Trauma-informed English language teaching can help reduce the negative effects of trauma and support students in growing beyond their experiences.

The Impacts of Traumas on Language Learning

Trauma can have detrimental effects on learning as a whole. Students who have experienced traumatic events may withdraw from the world and avoid social relationships, which play a vital role in learning in general and language learning in particular. Traumatic experiences can also diminish learners' motivation to study a new language. Furthermore, such students may struggle to remember new vocabulary and grammar and may perceive new information or ideas as potential "threats."

Practical Ideas for Trauma-Informed ELT

1. **Create a safe space.** The first and foremost step of helping traumatized students is to create a safe space for them. It is important for them to know that your classroom is a physically and psychosocially safe space for them where they can be themselves and their feelings and identities are welcomed.

2. **Be predictable.** Learners who have had traumatic experiences may perceive new and unexpected things as “threats”. It is helpful to communicate the schedule and lesson plans in advance instead of keeping them as surprises. Use **routines** and **rhythmic chants** so that the learners feel safe and calm.
3. **Integrate mind regulation practices into your lessons.** Traumatized students tend to live in the constant fight or flight mode and overuse their survival brain. If their mind and body are not regulated and their affective filter is high, it will be difficult for them to socialize or to think. Simple activities like **Body Scan** enable them to connect them with their bodies again.
4. **Include movements.** Many experts in the field of trauma-healing point out that using body movements like exercises and dances can be helpful in dealing with traumas. ELT methods like **Total Physical Response (TPR)** can serve that purpose and is also suitable for young learners.
5. **Avoid traumatization.** Personalization plays a very important role in ELT classrooms, but it can, however, lead to re-triggering the traumatic memories in our students as they talk about their lives and loved ones. Giving them choices on the topics and the ways they talk are found to be helpful.
6. **Encourage positive relationships.** As we all are social animals and having positive relationships is important for us all. Having empathetic and calm social presence can be really helpful in the face of traumatic events and in coping with the emotions during the flashbacks. Include activities that promote positive interactions and collaboration such as **pair works, group discussion and dictogloss tasks**.
7. **Build resilience.** Resilience is what keep us afloat in the midst of uncertainties and in the face of adversities. Having positive self-awareness and having determination and goal can help our students become more resilient. Engage them in the activities that bring out the best skills and talents in them and understand themselves better, which will eventually lead to self-actualization.