# Trauma-informed teaching of adults

**Article** · August 2020

1 author:

Victoria Wilson
The University of Queensland
**3** PUBLICATIONS   **0** CITATIONS

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:

Nothing about us without us: An investigation of trauma-informed teaching of English as a second or other language to adults at universities in South-east Queensland. View project

"Welcome, loved, and proud": Providing English language pathway programs to university for students from a refugee background View project

# Trauma-informed teaching of adults

*by Victoria Wilson*

Having immersed myself in trauma-informed teaching of adults learning English as an Additional Language (EAL) for the past five years, I am often tempted to say that the practice is obvious and common sense. However, recently I was again reminded that treating students like humans, that valuing and respecting their identities and backgrounds, is not obvious and common sense for everyone. If it were, small acts of kindness would probably not be so gratefully received.

As I write this, it is the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. I posted a Ramadan greeting on Facebook, where I am friends with many of my former students from a variety of Muslim-majority countries. As always, I was somewhat embarrassed by their responses to my simple message of "Ramadan Mubarak" (Ramadan Greetings). I was told that I am 'amazing', 'wonderful', 'thoughtful', and even 'compassionate', simply for posting that message.

I admit that I am not that effusive when my students from non-Christian cultures wish me a Happy Easter or Merry Christmas. I can take it for granted, as I am living in a country where I am the cultural and linguistic norm, where I am not subjected to hate speech or violence because of my religious or cultural identity. But I know how it feels to be threatened and fearful, and for many students affected by trauma, prejudice, and chronic stress, even a small gesture of inclusivity can make them (us) feel welcome, valued, and cared about.

## Trauma and learning

In this paper I will outline how trauma and learning interact, especially in relation to teaching adults learning EAL. Based on trauma-informed principles from a range of disciplines, I will discuss what we, as educators, can do to mitigate post-traumatic stress responses that can interfere with the learning process. I will also reflect on my understanding of trauma and learning, from the multiple perspectives of a teacher working with trauma-surviving students, a researcher in trauma and learning, and the experiences of both teaching in a disaster zone and teaching traumatised students while managing my own post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

My initiation into teaching, learning and psychological trauma was somewhat delayed. It was never mentioned in any of the English language teacher training or academic study I completed, and was not something I consciously thought about even while teaching in a disaster zone. In March 2011, I was living and teaching in coastal Fukushima at the time of the 9.0 earthquake, the tsunami that killed approximately 18,000 people, and the nuclear disaster that was triggered by these events.

In the months that followed, my students and I lived through continuous traumatic stress. More than 5000 aftershocks followed the main earthquake in the year that followed, with 82 of these being over magnitude 6.0 (Mustain, 2012). As a reference point, the infamous Christchurch earthquake of that same year measured 6.3 (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2019). Many of my students in Fukushima lost their homes, friends, and colleagues in the tsunami, with our small town holding funerals every week for months. School children wore Geiger counters around their necks, the Japanese self-defence force camped out in the town centre, and thousands were relocated into 'temporary' housing. Families were split up, livelihoods were lost, and uncertainty reigned.

However, the concepts of psychological trauma and PTSD were not widely discussed or acknowledged in the disaster zone at the time, partly because of the ingrained stoicism of the rural Japanese (Kotani et al., 2013). It was only later that the scale of the mental health repercussions for survivors was acknowledged and documented (for an overview, see Wilson [2017]). At a day-to-day level, my students and I were trying to preserve a sense of normality: me by continuing to teach, and my students by continuing to learn English. It has been argued that keeping this sense of continuity is one of the best ways to stave off post-traumatic stress and other destructive effects (Ungar, 2018), but it is not a cure-all.

It was not until I returned to Australia in 2012 that my post-traumatic responses started to develop, and not until 2014 that I began to make a conscious connection between psychological trauma, teaching, and learning. In 2014 I began teaching English language at a university in a refugee-welcome zone in Queensland. Many students were from refugee backgrounds, at that time mostly ethnic Afghans from Iran and Pakistan as well as South Sudanese. In addition, many of my class members were Iraqi professionals who had come to Australia to pursue their PhDs.

My colleagues and I noticed that a small minority of these students – from both the refugee and Iraqi groups – exhibited various difficulties, such as being easily distracted, falling asleep in class, reacting with heightened alarm to seemingly pedestrian events (for example, a maintenance man glancing through the window, an exam ending and being told to put their pens down). Many others told me stories of their lives and losses, such as the chronic trauma that comes from being a child labourer, of having family members killed by Islamic State or the Taliban, of witnessing a suicide attack, of life-threatening illness, family separations, and circumstances that led to exclusion from academic-track schooling.

Of course, not all trauma survivors go on to develop PTSD or other prolonged mental distress (Silove, 2013) and neither is PTSD "fixed or immutable" (Silove, 2013, p. 238). Furthermore, in the post-traumatic environment, certain socio-interpersonal elements constitute risk factors for PTSD while others serve as protective factors (Harris & Fallot, 2001; Maercker & Horn, 2013; Silove, 2013). These factors are especially salient in the teaching and learning environment and will be discussed further below.

## Recognising trauma

As pointed out by trauma specialist and psychiatrist Judith Herman (1997), when PTSD first appeared in the American Psychiatry Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) in 1980, traumatic events were described as "outside the range of usual human experience" (American Psychiatric Association, 1980, p. 236). This definition was changed in later versions of the DSM to reflect the reality that trauma is so common that "only the fortunate find it unusual" (Herman, 1997, p. 33). Given the prevalence of traumatic experiences, our classes are bound to include traumatised students, and educators cannot necessarily judge which students these are. They may have refugee backgrounds or not, be from developed or developing, peaceful or war-torn countries.

Similarly, our students' interactions in class may not necessarily indicate whether or not they have PTSD. They may speak openly about traumatic events in their past, yet experience little mental distress. They may be the class clowns with seemingly not a care in the world, while out of class they self-harm and attempt suicide. They may be intensely quiet or outspoken, genial or gruff. Despite the popular image of the military veteran exploding with rage, PTSD can manifest outwardly in a number of ways. It may also be somatised, appearing as bodily aches and pains,

insomnia, or a general malaise (Silove, Steel, & Bauman, 2007). Furthermore, post-traumatic stress can and does manifest in different ways across cultures. For example, epileptic-like seizures are common amongst traumatised Yazidi women who have been subject to sexual violence but are very rare in other populations (Kizilhan, Steger, & Noll-Hussong, 2020). Nevertheless, there is a strong body of evidence that PTSD is considered a valid concept cross-culturally (de Jong, 2005; Silove et al., 2007).

## Trauma and language learning

Furthermore, even though PTSD is considered to have a social-environmental rather than biological *cause,* it has certain neurobiological markers which affect learning, in particular, verbal processing and learning of an additional language. Stimuli that recall the original trauma cause a spike in memory function and brain activity specific to that trauma (Bryant & Harvey, 1995; Thrasher, Dalgleish, & Yule, 1994; van der Kolk, 2014). When this happens, speech centres in the brain are impaired, meaning that perceptions, feelings and thoughts cannot be verbalised (van der Kolk, 2014). The ability to organise information logically and sequentially is also incapacitated, making it difficult to identify cause and effect and to make long term goals (van der Kolk, 2014).

Flashbacks also trigger the amygdala, the part of the brain responsible for detecting threat and activating fight or flight reactions. Naturally, focus and concentration are impeded while in this state of arousal (Isserlis, 2009; Perry, 2006). Post-traumatic stress can also negatively affect verbal learning, memory and concentration (Brandes et al., 2002; Bustamante, Mellman, David, & Fins, 2001; Jelinek et al., 2006; Johnsen & Asbjornsen, 2009; Lindauer, Olff, van Meijel, Carlier, & Gersons, 2006; Vasterling et al., 2002), all of which play a major role in learning an additional language. Furthermore, research has found that the symptom load of PTSD is inversely correlated with the speed of second or other language acquisition in a sample of resettled refugees (Theorell & Sondergaard, 2004).

This poses a problem for educators, as learning will not take place when the learner is in a state of mental distress. Nor can we "fall into the trap of suggesting that learners can go away and 'heal' from the trauma and come back to class when they are ready to learn" (Horsman, 1998, p. 1). The learning environment can play an important role in either exacerbating or minimising post-traumatic stress and accordingly, whether or not students are in an optimal state to learn.

**Cooperative learning tasks contribute to a supportive learning environment.**

While research on trauma-informed teaching of adult EAL students is scant, the literature is clear on the socio-interpersonal factors that can help or hinder trauma recovery. In psychosocial terms, trauma shatters trust and worldview, and robs survivors of a sense of safety, meaning, connection and identity (Herman, 1997; Silove, 2013; van der Kolk, 2014). Therefore, a sense of security, social belonging, and a valuing of identities and abilities are among the factors required for recovery from trauma and the ability to learn unimpeded (Adkins, Birman, Sample, Brod, & Silver, 1998; Finn, 2010; Perry, 2006; Silove, 2013; van der Kolk, 2014).

### Safety

Just because a trauma survivor is no longer in physical danger does not mean that there is a feeling of safety. Survivors of trauma "feel existentially unsafe, and find the world profoundly and imminently dangerous" (Burstow, 2003). Furthermore, those with more severe symptoms of PTSD tend to have less belief in benevolence of both the world and the people in it (Ter Heide, Sleijpen, & van der Aa, 2017). Educators can create a sense of emotional safety by being transparent and consistent in both the lesson content and their interactions (Perry, 2006). A risk-free space for students to ask questions and make mistakes without fear of humiliation or reprimand is essential (Isserlis, 2009; Nelson & Appleby, 2015).

Students have told me of English language teachers whose unpredictable moods make them too intimidated to ask questions or admit difficulties in understanding. Conversely, students have told me that an emotionally consistent and genial classroom (peers and teacher) allows them to simply focus on learning. Similarly, students have reported to me that knowing the lesson content beforehand, and a teacher's use of simple scaffolding techniques such as pre-teaching vocabulary before a reading, reduces their stress and makes learning easier.

Predictability also relates to lesson materials which may activate some students' traumatic memories. Many commercial EAL textbooks contain chapters on disasters and life-threatening events, which can be distressing to those with first-hand experience of such trauma. Rather than risking such material, educators should find an alternative way to meet the lesson aims. If students raise potentially traumatic topics themselves, this is a different scenario; the educator must find a way to navigate the situation, balancing the needs of students to feel heard with the needs of other students to feel safe. In a classroom of adults, this is usually easily done by explicitly laying out those competing needs to the class members.

My primary research also indicates that treating students like responsible adults, worthy of trust, plays an important role in emotional safety. Students from a refugee background have told me of being subject to unnecessary and heavy-handed surveillance by language centre management in Australia, making them feel like they were once again in the repressive regimes they had fled.

### Social support and belonging

This leads to the closely related trauma-informed principle of social support and sense of belonging. Social support is a well-known protective factor against PTSD and other forms of mental distress (Herman, 1997; Silove, 2013; van der Kolk, 2014). Conversely, marginalisation, which often accompanies the experience of resettlement, can exacerbate PTSD (Rees, Silove, & Kareth, 2009; Silove, 2013). Policies that may not have repercussions for those who are trauma-free – such as separating friends and family members with the same level of English into different classes – can be catastrophic for students who have been forcibly separated from their families and communities.

Educators should also create cooperative rather than competitive learning tasks, and foster supportive relationships between students and with staff. The latter, admittedly, can be fraught in the neoliberal education system of Australia. While advocacy of behalf of students and their families is expected for EAL teachers in the US (Harrison & Prado, 2019), Australian EAL teaching bodies have no such expectation. In fact, many institutions

may explicitly ban communication between students and teachers except in a narrow, official capacity.

## Valuing of identities

My doctoral research as well as my own classroom observations and feedback have shown that valuing students' ethnic, religious, and other identities adds to a sense of belonging and ease in the classroom. The simple act of displaying a poster or wearing a t-shirt that says "Refugees Welcome", or some other act of solidarity with a marginalised group, can make a palpable difference to students. In my classroom, posters of refugees and immigrants who have achieved educational success in Australia have garnered the appreciation of students, as have teaching materials that foreground the students' own cultures in a positive way. My research and informal feedback have shown that such gestures not only make students feel welcome and valued; they take away the fear of rejection so that they are free to focus on learning.

## Valuing of knowledge and abilities

Closely linked to a valuing of identities is paying respect to the knowledge and abilities that students bring to the classroom. Recovery from trauma requires "a culture of justice and human rights that afford survivors and their communities a sense of acknowledgement, dignity, respect and empowerment" (Silove, 2013, p. 243). In this regard, the sharing of expert status in a language learning classroom is vital. Inexperienced or ineffective language teachers may make the mistake of 'teaching' first rather than eliciting what students already know. This robs students not only of the opportunity to practise their language but to contribute knowledge to their peers. Being silenced, patronised, and robbed of legitimacy as a person of knowledge is anathema to both mental health and learning (Chamberlin, 2012; O'Hagan, 2014; Ryan & Viete, 2009), while low self-worth has been correlated with more severe post-traumatic stress responses (Ter Heide et al., 2017).

Especially egregious is when EAL teachers presume to 'teach' students about the students' own culture or country. Unfortunately, this is not just confined to the non-'woke'. I once attended a seminar run by a critical theorist who specialised in decolonising methodologies. Present in the room were a number of Australian Indigenous people; when one of them described building a humpy (an Australian indigenous housing structure), the visiting scholar turned her back on the speaker to ask the White host "What's a humpy?" Just because our English language

students are not experts in the English language does not mean that they are not experts in many other fields, especially their own cultures.

Therefore, teachers should give all students – not just the loudest and brightest – the opportunity to shine. Sometimes that opportunity is related to their non-English-language skills and knowledge. Recognising their strengths and allowing them to demonstrate these to others can bring a boost that often later translates to more confidence with using English and the knowledge that they are capable in the eyes of others.

## Conclusion

When I began writing this paper, it was the Muslim month of Ramadan, and as I am finishing, the festival of Eid has begun. Once again I received heartfelt messages of thanks from former students when I sent them Eid greetings, including one from a young woman I taught for several months some years ago. Four years ago, I had found her on a corridor floor weeping after being retraumatised by the institutional policies of a language centre and being told "You're in the real world now". Distraught, she said that her treatment here was no different from her life before, in the country where she was born but, as a daughter of refugees, had no rights. Now she has almost finished her degree. In reply to my Eid greetings, she posted the picture below with the caption: "When a non-Muslim wishes you Eid Mubarak".



When I asked why it had that effect, she wrote, "I don't know. It is so sweet when I see respect from friends who have different cultures and beliefs."

Ultimately, trauma-informed teaching of adults is about being human, and treating our students as the humans

they are. They know the real world only too well and are not poor victims to be saved, but competent people with strengths and skills who simply need some extra tools to build the next stage of their lives.

## References

Adkins, M. A., Birman, D., Sample, B., Brod, S., & Silver, M. (1998). *Cultural adjustment and mental health: The role of the ESL teacher*. Wheat Ridge, CO: Spring Institute for International Studies.

American Psychiatric Association. (1980). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.

Brandes, D., Ben-Schachar, G., Gilboa, A., Bonne, O., Freedman, S., & Shalev, A. (2002). PTSD symptoms and cognitive performance in recent trauma survivors. *Psychiatry Research, 110*, 231–238.

Bryant, R. A., & Harvey, A. G. (1995). Processing threatening information in posttraumatic stress disorder. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 104*(3), 537.

Burstow, B. (2003). Toward a radical understanding of trauma and trauma work. *Violence Against Women, 9*(11), 1293–1317.

Bustamante, V., Mellman, T. A., David, D., & Fins, A. I. (2001). Cognitive functioning and the early development of PTSD. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 14*(4).

Chamberlin, J. (2012). *On our own: Patient-controlled alternatives to the mental health system* [Kindle version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

de Jong, J. T. (2005). Commentary: Deconstructing critiques on the internationalization of PTSD. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry, 29*(3), 361–370. doi:10.1007/s11013-005-9172-7

Finn, H. (2010). Overcoming barriers: Adult refugee trauma survivors in a learning community. *TESOL Quarterly, 44*(3), 586–596.

Harris, M., & Fallot, R. D. (2001). Envisioning a trauma-informed service system: A vital paradigm shift. *New Directions for Mental Health Services, 2001*(89), 3–22. doi:10.1002/yd.23320018903

Harrison, J., & Prado, J. (2019). Problematizing advocacy: Definitions, alignments, and expansions. In H. A. Linville & J. Whiting (Eds.), *Advocacy in English language teaching and learning*: Taylor & Francis Group. Retrieved from https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.uq.edu.au/lib/uql/detail.action?docID=5631871#.

Herman, J. L. (1997). *Trauma and recovery*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Horsman, J. (1998). *But I'm not a therapist! The challenge of creating effective literacy learning for survivors of trauma*. Paper presented at the Australian Council for Adult Literacy 21st National Conference: Literacy on the line. Conference proceedings.

Isserlis, J. (2009). *Trauma and learning – what do we know, what can we learn?* Paper presented at the Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition: Proceedings of the 5th Symposium, Banff.

Jelinek, L., Jacobsen, D., Kellner, M., Larbig, F., Biesold, K. H., Barre, K., & Moritz, S. (2006). Verbal and nonverbal memory functioning in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). *Journal of Clinical and Experimental Neuropsychology, 28*(6), 940–948. doi:10.1080/13803390591004347

Johnsen, G. E., & Asbjornsen, A. E. (2009). Verbal learning and memory impairments in posttraumatic stress disorder: the role of encoding strategies. *Psychiatry Research, 165*(1–2), 68–77. doi:10.1016/j.psychres.2008.01.001

Kizilhan, J. I., Steger, F., & Noll-Hussong, M. (2020). Shame, dissociative seizures and their correlation among traumatised female Yazidi with experience of sexual violence. *The British Journal of Psychiatry, 216*(3), 138–143. doi:10.1192/bjp.2020.2

Kotani, H., Adachi, T., Nishikawa, M., Nakamura, Y., Hige, K., Hashimoto, K.,... Ogimoto, K. (2013). Struggling with the fourth disaster in East Japan. *Forum, 6*, 79–99. doi:10.3280/FORU2013-006009

Lindauer, R. J., Olff, M., van Meijel, E. P., Carlier, I. V., & Gersons, B. P. (2006). Cortisol, learning, memory, and attention in relation to smaller hippocampal volume in police officers with posttraumatic stress disorder. *Biological Psychiatry, 59*(2), 171–177. doi:10.1016/j.biopsych.2005.06.033

Maercker, A., & Horn, A. B. (2013). A socio-interpersonal perspective on PTSD: The case for environments and interpersonal processes. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy, 20*(6), 465-481. doi:10.1002/cpp.1805

Ministry for Culture and Heritage. (2019). Christchurch earthquake kills 185. Retrieved from https://nzhistory.govt.nz/page/christchurch-earthquake-kills-185

Mustain, A. (2012). Japan quake aftershock tally exceeds 5,000. Retrieved from https://www.livescience.com/20519-japan-earthquake-aftershocks.html

Nelson, C. D., & Appleby, R. (2015). Conflict, militarization, and their after-effects: Key challenges for TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly, 49*(2), 309–332. doi:10.1002/tesq.187

O'Hagan, M. (2014). *Madness made me*. Wellington, NZ: Mary Egan Publishing.

Perry, B. D. (2006). Fear and learning: Trauma-related factors in the adult education process. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 2006*(110), 21–27. doi:10.1002/ace.215

Rees, S., Silove, D., & Kareth, M. (2009). Dua sakit (double sick): Trauma and the settlement experiences of West Papuan refugees living in North Queensland. *Australasian Psychiatry, 17 Suppl 1*, S128-132. doi:10.1080/10398560902948399

Ryan, J., & Viete, R. (2009). Respectful interactions: Learning with international students in the English-speaking academy. *Teaching in Higher Education, 14*(3), 303–314. doi:10.1080/13562510902898866

Silove, D. (2013). The ADAPT model: A conceptual framework for mental health and psychosocial programming in post conflict settings. *Intervention, 11*(3), 237–248.

Silove, D., Steel, Z., & Bauman, A. (2007). Mass psychological trauma and PTSD: Epidemic or cultural illusion? In J. Wilson & C. S. Tang (Eds.), *Cross-cultural assessment of psychological trauma and PTSD* (pp. 319–336). New York, NY: Springer.

Ter Heide, F. J. J., Sleijpen, M., & van der Aa, N. (2017). Posttraumatic world assumptions among treatment-seeking refugees. *Transcultural Psychiatry, 54*(5-6), 824–839. doi:10.1177/1363461517741811

Theorell, T., & Sondergaard, H. P. (2004). Language acquisition in relation to cumulative posttraumatic stress disorder symptom load over time in a sample of resettled refugees. *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics, 73*, 320–323. doi:10.1159/000078849

Thrasher, S., Dalgleish, T., & Yule, W. (1994). Information processing in post-traumatic stress disorder. *Behaviour Research and Therapy, 32*(2), 247–254.

Ungar, M. (2018). *Change your world: The science of resilience and the true path to success.* Toronto, ON: Sutherland House.

van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma.* London: Penguin Books.

Vasterling, J. J., Duke, L. M., Brailey, K., Constans, J. I., Allain, A. N. J., & Sutker, P. B. (2002). Attention, learning, and memory performances and intellectual resources in Vietnam veterans: PTSD and no disorder comparisons. *Neuropsychology, 16*(1), 5–14. doi:10.1037/0894-4105.16.1.5

Wilson, V. (2017). Fukushima and beyond: Teaching trauma survivors. *Transformation in Language Education, 2016.1*, 2013–2210.

**Victoria Wilson is a PhD candidate at the University of Queensland where she is researching post-traumatic stress and pedagogy for adult EAL learners. She has presented widely on trauma-informed EAL at conferences and forums in Australia and in Japan and will be Keynote Speaker at the VALBEC Conference on 2 December, 2020. Victoria has been teaching English as a foreign/second language since 2004 and is a university lecturer in English language and academic communication in Australia.**