

Traumas Suffered by Refugees Can Impair Their Learning Abilities

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### **Introduction**

Refugees are forcibly displaced individuals who had to flee their countries of origin due to religious oppression, war, brutal conflicts, and losses. These people are forced into places they did not choose to live in; they are unsure of their future. They face traumatic experiences that result in lack of trust and hope because of their past experiences.

Trauma is defined as the “emotional response to a terrible event” (APA, 2009, para.1). Traumatic experiences, either physiological or psychological may affect our ability to function for the rest of our lives. Excessive stress causes the body to release an unusual amount of cortisol that may end up damaging the hippocampus. Consequently, cognitive difficulties ranging from memory loss to an impaired ability to learn new things may occur (Gromish, 2010, para. 5).

According to statistics provided by the Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, 5.96% of refugees arrived in Washington State, from October 2018 to February 2019. Washington is only behind New York that received 6.15% (RCP, 2019). Finn (2010, p. 586) states that shortly after arrival, many non-English-speaking adult refugees enroll in low-cost community-based (English as a second language) ESL programs. However, by the time they are placed in their new community, they have faced an amount of psychological and physiological trauma that may impair their ability to learn. Understanding what this population has gone through and how these experiences can affect their learning processes will provide instructors with directions on which learning strategies should be included in their practice to help these students succeed. Thus, the aim of this research is to review the literature available on mental illness caused by traumatic experiences suffered by refugees, focusing on finding answers to the following question: How can emotional trauma impair adult refugees’ ability to learn? In

addition, this review aims at finding alternatives in teaching methodologies that may help adult ESL refugee students to learn the new language more successfully.

To fully understand emotional trauma and its effect on refugees' mental health, this research will review three major topics: (i) an overview of the past, present, and future of refugees settled in Washington state, (ii) understanding trauma and how it can impair learning abilities, (iii) English Learning Acquisition (ELA) approaches for this target group.

### **An Overview of Refugees' Past, Present, and Future**

Refugee is defined by The United Nations High Commissioner of Refugee (UNHCR) as a person who has been forced to flee his or her country as a result of persecution, war or violence. Refugees dream about a new life far from persecutions, violence and conflicts. The worldwide number of refugees has increased substantially exceeding 60 million. This means that a person is displaced every two seconds, making it the highest number ever seen since World War II (UNHCR, 2017).

Washington is the 10th place of all states in the number of refugees. The state mostly receives refugees from Iraq, Myanmar, Somalia, Bhutan, and Ukraine" (Mcdermott, 2016, par. 4,7).

More than 2.6 million Iraqis have been forced from their homes but remain inside of their country. 220,000 are refugees in other countries. There are also 300,000 refugees in Iraq from neighboring countries – the vast majority escaping violence and persecution in Syria (UNHCR, 2018).

The Rohingyas, considered the 'world's most persecuted minority', are a Muslim group in Myanmar who are not recognized as citizens by their government. They have been systematically attacked leading authorities to consider it an example of ethnic cleansing

(Gibbens, 2017). Myanmar does not allow the UN to proceed with investigations in the country. Most of the reports are based on satellite images or interviews and information gathered when refugees arrive at the border in Bangladesh. According to these reports, the Rohingyas suffered from gang rape, mass killings, brutal beatings to villages being burnt down. More than half of the women interviewed reported having been a victim of sexual violence (Gibbens, 2017).

According to the Supplementary Appeal Report published by the UNHCR (2017), an estimated 900,000 Somalis were refugees who fled their country due to internal conflicts that have lasted over two decades and environmental conditions. Drought and famine have devastated the country and approximately 75 per cent of their children are affected by acute malnutrition and illnesses caused by drought-related factors (UNHCR, 2017).

In the early 1990s, about 100,000 ethnic Nepalis in Bhutan were expelled or fled from the small Himalayan kingdom. Schultz (2016) noted that The Human Rights Watch report of 2003 cited cases of imprisonment, torture and loss of property. These refugees were placed in camps in Nepal and many remained there for over two decades. About 18,000 refugees were still in those camps of late 2015, according to the United Nations. Of the nearly 100,000 Bhutanese refugees resettled around the world, 85 per cent came to the United States, according to the U.S. government. More than 3,000 Bhutanese refugees were originally settled in Washington state and about 2,000 remained according to Schultz (2016).

Ukraine has lived more than three years of conflict resulting in over 2 million Ukrainians displaced from their homes. The most vulnerable population such as single parents, the elderly and people with disabilities or chronic illnesses have been impacted. They first seek asylum in neighboring countries, fleeing their country with barely anything. Before escaping, refugees near the front lines of conflict, lived with shelling and gunfire almost every day and night. The ones in

more distant towns lived in inhuman conditions in war-damaged buildings that lacked heat and electricity (UNHCR, 2015).

Although refugees are grateful when resettled in the US, the difficulties they face do not end upon their arrival. “Once resettled in the US, refugees may face stressors in four major categories: Traumatic Stress, Acculturation Stress, Resettlement Stress, and Isolation” (NCTSN, 2018, para. 7). The resettlement process can be as traumatic as the experiences faced by refugees in their countries. Some were undereducated in their countries; many have to learn our alphabet and how to write. Others possessed higher degrees and may never be in the same social status they used to be. Molsa (2017, p 829) noted that refugees deal with racism, discrimination and cultural exclusion when trying to adapt to their new home, and, in many cases, studies have reported a link between perceived discrimination and elevated levels of mental health among adolescents and adults.

After arrival, refugees experience challenges that may cause severe distress such as learning their host country’s societal and cultural habits, and how to fit in the new community they have to live in (Bhugra & Jones, 2001). Wessels (2014, p. 12) stated that the causes of post migration distress include social isolation, identity confusion, loss of cultural community and family members, the loss of important life projects, a lack of environmental mastery, poverty, and the loss of valued societal roles (Keyes & Kane, 2004; Khawaja et al., 2008; Miller, Worthington, Muzueovic et al., 2002).

Refugees face frustration and hopelessness when it comes to their future. Many believe they will never have the same status they used to have. They often have little to no familial or social support, and may not receive adequate resettlement information, making them vulnerable to informational barriers. Many try to go back to school, but the educational system can be a big

challenge when they try to navigate through it. Refugees often report receiving unclear and conflicting information, which reduces their access and results in disappointment and anger (Bajwa et. al, 2017).

### **Understanding Trauma and How It Can Impair Learning Abilities**

Trauma, the emotional response to a terrible event, may affect our ability to function in a variety of ways depending on the kinds of trauma suffered and how victims respond to it. What is traumatic for some, may not be for others. What may trigger physical or mental reactions or not is a question hard to answer. Psychologically, there may not be a correct answer to how traumatic events can impair individual's ability to have a normal life. Wilbur (2017, p. 6), citing (Horsman, 1999, p. 33), noted that traumatized individuals lose their sense of control, connection, and meaning. The author explained that the events suffered by refugees are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror and evoke the responses of catastrophe. Murakami & Allden (2014, p.3) stated that "the severity of violence, the types of losses, the level of disruption, and the meaning given to the experiences will shape a person's reaction". Physiologically, however, there have been several studies that address the issue. Osuch et al (2010, p. 310) noted that extreme stress of traumatic events can alter both neurobiology and behavior. In addition, excessive stress causes the body to release an unusual amount of cortisol that may end up damaging the hippocampus. The hippocampus assists with the storage of long-term memories and is also responsible for the memory of the location of objects or people. As a result, individuals under a lot of stress may suffer of memory loss or an impaired ability to learn new things. In a studied that used magnetic resonance imaging to measure the volume of the hippocampus in 26 Vietnam combat veterans with Post

Traumatic Disorder (PTSD) and 22 comparison subjects selected to be similar to the patients in age, sex, race, years of education, socioeconomic status, body size, and years of alcohol abuse, showed that the PTSD patients had a statistically significant eight per cent smaller right hippocampal volume relative to that of the comparison subjects (Bremmer et al., 1995, p. 980). In another study, Scheiner et al. (2014, p. 192) explained that verbal learning deficits are a common neurocognitive finding associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Kerka (2002, p.2) in her study *Trauma in Adult Learning*, explained that

Adults experiencing the effects of past or current trauma may display symptoms as difficulty beginning new tasks, blame, guilt, concern for safety, depression, inability to trust (especially those in power), fear of risk taking, disturbed sleep, eroded self-esteem/confidence, inability to concentrate, or panic attacks (Mojab and McDonald 2001). Some people may manifest no symptoms; at the other end of the spectrum is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, characterized by flashbacks, avoidance, numbing of responsiveness (including substance abuse), persistent expectation of danger, constriction (dissociation, zoning out), and memory impairment (Isserlis 2001).

### **English Learning Acquisition (ELA) Approaches for This Target Group**

Trust and safety are key when establishing a relationship with students. Unfortunately, those are the first elements lost by refugees in their traumatic experiences. The learning impairments that these individuals might have may be unknown by teachers at first contact. Students may not even be aware that they may be mentally sick. Being aware of the symptoms and behavioral aspects of refugee students is a big step in the process of establishing a relationship and building trust with these students.

Fuller & Ogilvie (2017, p. 94) noted that refugee students in ESL classrooms are unique in that they must not only grapple with the content and linguistic requirements, but issues associated with acculturation and the negotiation of one's identity in a new cultural setting. Consequently, curriculum and pedagogy should be adapted to better serve them. The authors suggested integrating restorative justice principles into the fabric of the ESL classroom to foster a caring environment. This theory is founded in the idea that there is a strong relationship between everything in the universe and we are not autonomous beings. Indeed, we are closely connected with each other and their environment. "This belief is rooted in an understanding of the inherent worth of all beings (plant and animal life as well) and the important contributions they make to the general well-being of the community" (Fuller & Ogilvie, 2017, p. 94).

Kleinmann (1984, p. 214) proposed the Monitor Model by Krashen (1976) to be considered when teaching refugees. The author quoted Krashen (1976) who defended the idea of distinguishing acquisition from learning.

Clayton (2015, p. 11) in her literature review on the same subject noted that "Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (AFH) offers excellent potential for research because it suggests that affective factors, including stress and self-esteem, influence second Refugees, PTSD, Language Learning language acquisition by acting as a barrier that obstructs comprehensible input and the language". Moreover, the author suggested that effective methods for creating safe, encouraging, and productive learning environments such as a quiet area available, windows and doors open are effective approaches when teaching refugees.

Respecting students' culture, giving them the time to reencounter their identity and empowering them through the language are key for refugees' success. "Constant exposure to the dominant language fosters resilience in communication and optimal language development".



Tadayon & Khodi (2016, p. 133) pointed out that through language we manifest our “self” and that gives us the opportunity to be the subject differing from “the other”.

Wilbur (2017) conducted a study in Canada in which ESL instructors were interviewed and the focus of that study was to bring about answers on how to make ESL classrooms more inclusive to newcomers (refugees). Here are some of the answers:

- The importance of having supportive colleagues and managers;
- The value of creating a supportive community for instructors working with vulnerable populations, including students who have experienced trauma;
- Concepts of listening, social justice, and connection important aspects for inclusive classroom practices;
- The importance of creating community in the classroom through openness and relationship building;
- An important relationship besides that of colleagues and supervisors as the connection to settlement workers and other resource people in order to develop links with various services outside the classroom;
- The English language and its global role in promoting economic and social dominance as a key piece of ELA provision.

### **Conclusion**

Refugee resettlement is not a new issue and there have been various studies on how they are affected in their countries, after resettling, and how they either adapted or not in their new lives. Although the literature brings strong contributions on PTSD suffered by refugee after the traumatic events they face, there is little conclusive literature on how one’s mind can be affected, considering we are all different and may be affected in different ways.

In spite of uncertainties, educators should have an overall knowledge of the traumas faced by refugees. The first step should be to have an awareness of demographics and the types of traumas those students might have suffered. Secondly, to have knowledge of symptoms and signs these students might present based on the literature. Teachers may rely on a medical model that provides lists of indicators of trauma and based on that think of strategies to use in the classroom. However, Wilbur (2017, p. 16) pointed out that focusing medical terms that offer predetermined understanding of oppression can limit the imagination on how to make classrooms more inclusive. Some students may have been facing ongoing oppression such as homophobia, sexism, racism for instance. Therefore, open-mindedness and creativity are important aspects to have in mind in creating an inclusive environment.

Although there is a range of strategies and practices to be used in an adult ESL refugee classroom all of them have the importance of building relationship and trust as their core. Furthermore, a student-centered approach in which their prior knowledge, culture and values are emphasized is crucial for the students' success. Content should be relevant, students should be offered opportunities and encouraged to keep moving on.

ESL instructors are top in the list of refugees' first contact in the new culture. They are the bridge to a new language, a new life, and resources. They might be the first ones to navigate in these people's minds and realize what these students really need. Hence, they had better be equipped with information to handle the situations they might face properly. For this reason, further research on the psychological effects of trauma on second language acquisition must be carried on.

### **Action Research Project Proposal**

This action research project will investigate the impact of emotional trauma in adult refugees on their ability to learn a new language. The subjects of this research will be adult refugees settled in King County, located in central west Washington, who are enrolled in English Language Acquisition (ELA) classes at Renton Technical College. The subjects for this study are originally from Iraq, Myanmar, Somalia, Bhutan, and Ukraine, male and female and their ages range from 25 to 55. The purpose of this study is to determine which ways emotional trauma can impair the refugee's ability to learn a new language. In addition, the study will identify methods that can be implemented in ELA classrooms to help these subjects to succeed.

### **Method**

A literature review is the approach selected for this action research project for its unique ability to not only demonstrate the researcher's understanding of the field, inform, and conduct to an effective action but also to prepare future readers to better understand the issues discussed. The investigation will identify findings related to three major topics: (i) emotional traumas suffered by refugees from the above-mentioned countries; (ii) how trauma can impair their learning abilities; (iii) English Learning Acquisition (ELA) approaches that have been successful when attending this population.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The main goal of this research is to provide instructors with useful information on how to identify symptoms and signs that their refugees might present in the classroom and suggest approaches and methodologies applicable to this population. Therefore, the initial literature review is intended to provide guidance for further investigation. Based on the findings, the researcher will partner with local refuge centers and local mental clinics. This partnership will help the researcher to understand the refugee from different lenses and provide information on

how these students function socially, out of the classroom. Furthermore, it will help the researcher to understand and identify symptoms in the classroom and compare the data with the findings in the literature review. After collecting these data, the researcher will develop for and conduct an anonymous survey with ELA instructors focused on symptoms and signs identified in the classroom and current practices adopted in ELA classrooms at Renton Technical College, and the results will be contrasted with the literature and field investigation. The researcher will become a member of NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illnesses), take specific classes on refugee mental illnesses and become a certified trainer for the state of Washington. Ultimately, the researcher will develop a series of workshops and online classes for faculty and staff focused on teaching ELA refugee students from pre-literacy levels to college and career transition classes. These classes and workshops will provide participants with resources that will help refugees function in and outside the classroom. This project will be accomplished in the timeline in figure 1:



Figure 1. Timeline of research and action plan

### **Discussion and Reflection**

I started EDU 690 – Capstone Education seven weeks ago and I did not know what to expect. When the capstone project was proposed, the first thought that came to my mind was that I was not going to succeed in this class and that accomplishing that project in eight weeks would be impossible. However, like all the courses I have taken at Post University, the aspect that most impresses me is how classes and content are scaffolded. I was not only able to identify a problem, review literature and propose an action to the problem identified but also able to complete my action research project in seven weeks instead of eight. This project signals the end of my journey at Post University; however, it opened a new door in my career in which I see new opportunities, challenges and the possibility to help students, faculty and staff in my area, in a meaningful way. The main purpose of my research is to provide faculty with tools and information that will help them identify refugee ELA students who are struggling to learn because of emotional traumas they have suffered. My proposed action research project clearly met the following Med Outcomes:

#### **Program and Concentration Learning Outcomes**

- Compare theories of teaching and learning and apply them in a variety of educational contexts.
- Identify and critically evaluate research-based education strategies and practices.
- Identify problems of practice and craft effective solutions that demonstrate the application of content knowledge.
- Examine and interpret a variety of educational data, resources, and research to support and inform decision-making practices.

- Demonstrate critical thinking skills, personal reflection, and professional growth and development in the field of education through the creation of a digital portfolio.
- Analyze theories of second language acquisition in order to identify inhibition factors in advancing language proficiency and implement informed recommendations.

### **Concentration in TESOL Outcomes**

- Determine and develop needs-based, quality content ESL curriculum and appropriate assessment measures.
- Analyze and evaluate how culture, race, and ethnicity affect student learning and achievement.

I am fortunate to have the support of the administration in my college and my plan is to follow my timeline closely. Once I complete my project, I can envision myself starting a PhD program.

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