



CCVT Strategies for Promoting a Positive Atmosphere in the Language and Skills Training Classroom

The Canadian Center for Victims of Torture has been helping refugee survivors of torture and warfare for the past 20 years. We are the oldest organization of the kind in North America. We have many integrated services and programs for our clients, women, men, children and seniors, who come from almost 100 different countries worldwide. They are scarred mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually, by brutal acts of torture, genocide, civil war and other traumatic events. For the past decade, we have offered our clients specialized adult English language classes, which are designed to help them overcome some of the extreme barriers to language acquisition which are the result of trauma. Following are some of the modifications we have made at the CCVT approaches to teaching and practical activities we employ to promote a positive atmosphere in the classroom.

1. The classroom environment

***Class size:** 10 to 15 people. Keep it small to maximize individual attention and minimize noise, which will improve concentration. At the CCVT, our maximum is 13 students per class.

***Class length:** many survivors find three hours of instruction per day the maximum they can handle. Concentrating for longer periods may be exhausting frustrating and unproductive. Students may become discouraged when they realize they cannot recall material taught in long classes. We provide a 20-minute break in the middle of our classes.

***Class times:** be aware that some, not all, survivors prefer afternoon classes. Those who suffer from insomnia, nightmares often cannot fall asleep until the early morning hours, and will not be able to concentrate in a nine o'clock class.

* **Minimise outside noise and other sensory distractions.** Classrooms ideally need windows, natural light, live plants, and sufficient space to move freely.

* Set a quiet corner, with table, sofa, some ESL materials (even an atlas or coffee-table photo books), for students who need time-out. This provides choice for those with migraines, concentration overload, severe depression, etc., who wish an intermediate safe place to be, while maintaining contact with the learning environment. Let students know under which circumstances they may go to the



quiet corner and that they are welcome to join class when the “crisis” passes. If space does not allow in your classrooms, designate one area for the whole school.

* Post lots of vocabulary, idioms, projects, etc. on the walls, to aid memory. Refer to it often to reinforce language components

* Try to set up the room so students face the door. (Backs to the door guarantee swiveling heads with each arrival.) Remember, many refugees suffer from fear and chronic anxiety.

* If possible, paint, wallpaper, carpets and lighting should provide a calm, warm, soothing atmosphere, not harsh or sterile.

2. Lateness, absenteeism, and school rules

Allow flexibility. Never promote a punitive environment. Many refugees have legitimate reasons for distrusting those in authority, and are sensitive to rules and regulations. Remember, many refugees suffer from insomnia and nightmares, and find it difficult to function on a strict schedule. Most lack self-esteem and find it hard to get motivated. Commendation, praise and encouragement are vital, so praise students when they attend, make them aware of their academic progress is negligible, commend them simply for attending and persevering, and for the personal qualities they have which make the class better (their humor, sensitivity to other students, bravery to have made it this far, etc.) They must feel you are on their side, and have faith in their abilities, even if they don't. In general, you should advocate for and accommodate traumatised refugees the same way we would for any disabled students. Make allowances for individual circumstances.

3. Teaching family and feelings

Often, family members have been killed, or left behind in peril, and are a source of constant concern or pain to our students. Nevertheless, we must cover the family at some point in our classes. Try initially to “depersonalize” the theme. Rather than having students discuss their own families, try making a photo collage of some fictional (and even racially mixed) family tree.

Get your students to give names to each member. Then cover the terms for family relations. If your class has bonded well. You may try assigning family roles to the students, Playing liberally with ages and backgrounds, even handing out false mustaches (a la Grouch Mark) to the woman if you want to pray men, or scarves to the men who are assigned as grandma or auntie. Roleplaying, especially involving humour, is an excellent teaching tool for refugee learners. The physicality of it, and



the chance to someone else, engages the students more fully than traditional “sit and study” exercises.

- * *Eventually, some students may want to share experience from their real families. If these are painful or linguistically challenging to relate, try getting the students to draw them, perhaps in a simple comic book format, with basic written bubbles or captions. Use a registered art therapist if you have access to one. If the students can relate family stories orally to the class, it may be very personally affirming. Watch the reaction of those listening. Is anyone overwhelmed by the story? If the class can handle it, they’ll often bond further. Family photos, keepsakes and anecdotes can enrich the class, but be aware of the emotional fragility of your students.
- * * **Feelings and emotions:** Again, try to provide material and activities which don’t put the students in an emotional corner? Do dialogues which use relevant language components. If you work with intermediate or high level adults, try idioms like I’m blue / you’ve got guts/ Take it easy / I can’t take this anymore or terms of emotion like anxious, exhausted, depressed, jumpy, upset, frustrated, relieved, thrilled, and mad. They are more likely to recall and use terms which are of immediate use to them. To depersonalize this unit initially, try showing videos or photos of people in various situations, and then ask the students to choose the appropriate expression as illustrated by the action. Eventually, you may want to give them the opportunity to share personal situations which evoke these feelings. Remember, these students had full lives before traumatic events brought them to our country. Many emotional situations, including positive or humorous ones, can be discussed, written down, or acted out.

4. Teaching health and the medical system

*Relevant languages are crucial. The words **insomnia, nightmare, constipation, indigestions, vomit and migraine** are indispensable to many refugees. These terms many are introduced in a depersonalized setting to avoid embarrassment. Remember that many refugees have chronic health problems which may be related to severe trauma and stress. Provide information about community services, including mental health services, dental, medical, physiotherapy and alternative medicine, as part of a unit on health, perhaps an exercise using the phone book or directory assistance.



- * Give the students language that empowers them when they are confronted by the medical system. They need to know their rights, and have language
- * to obtain the kinds of services which will make them feel comfortable.

Language like I'd like my sister to accompany me/ why is that product necessary? / could you please explain it more slowly? English is my second or third language/ I'm feeling very nervous, I need a moment to myself can provide a barrier of comfort which allow the refugee some sense of control. Remember, medical personnel often assist tortures in their open discussion of experiences with the medical system in this country can be illumination. What kind of personality or qualities do the students look for in their doctor, and ask the student to select a practitioner based on appearance, experience or personality? Remember, in many cultures the issue of mental health is sensitive or taboo. You may want to bring in several kinds of therapists as guests and let the students ask questions about this avenue of therapist quest and the students. Try to find partitions from ethnic or racial minorities. Always prepare your visitors for the kind of class they will encounter (shorter attention spans, emotional vulnerability, culture taboos), and prepare your students well in advance so everyone knows what to expect when visitors arrive. This minimizes anxiety when strangers enter the "safe" classroom environment.

- * **5. Teaching the human body**

This area requires great sensitivity and good planning. Survivors of torture and warfare almost invariably have experienced extreme physical pain, and this creates long – lasting anxiety around the issue of their bodies. Still, as teachers we must eventually cover this area. It goes without saying that we should never touch a student when demonstrating body parts, nor plan any activity which requires students to touch one another. Teachers may use themselves as models, or use photographs or drawings. Keep bodies whole- in other words, don't show body parts in isolation. Many refugees have seen actual severed body parts, and may react negatively to this. Show real people, labeling body parts accordingly. Eventually you may wish to play games or sing songs to reinforce vocabulary such as Simon Says or the hokey pokey dance. Still students will only act things out with their own bodies, without touching others. (Songs, dances, jazz chants and other more physical activities are excellent teaching tools; they engage the students more fully, employing the senses, and reinforcing language components.



This can help to overcome the difficulties most traumatized refugees have with concentration and memory.)

6. Improving self-esteem

Low self-esteem is one of the greatest barriers to the daunting task of learning a new language. Victims of torture and warfare have often been systematically stripped of their dignity, identity and self-worth. As instructors, we must take every opportunity to nurture our students' self-esteem.

***Praise, commend, complement and encourage your students** on a daily basis.

At the end of each class, give specific praise to the group. For refugees, particularly adults, it is often an accomplishment just to make it to school and attempt to learn the language. Be aware of all varied things you can praise, not simply the more obvious academic progress. Praise your students' courage if they share an emotional story. Praise their sensitivity when they support each other through a difficult period. Tell them you appreciate the special qualities they bring to your class, be it a sense of humour, the wisdom of age, an optimistic attitude or simply patience. Remember to praise their intelligence. Often, refugees are well-educated and will have mastered challenging tasks prior to becoming refugees. They may not understand why learning English is so difficult, or takes so long. They may be confused and frustrated because they have great difficulty remembering simple vocabulary or grammatical structures. Things mastered one day will often be forgotten the next, compounding their depression and sense of hopelessness or futility. Even you, as a teacher, may become impatient or assume your students are incapable of mastering the language. You may feel they aren't taking the class seriously or doing their homework regularly. Both you and your students need to understand the effect trauma (specifically Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD) can have on the learning process. Self-esteem is partially tied to seeing evidence that are reaching your goals. Help students set realistic short-term goals in the classroom. Remind them periodically why they have trouble remembering what they've learned. Point out any signs of progress. Help them see the big picture, perhaps by comparing their language skills now to how they performed when they first arrived. Reassure them that they are progressing, you have confidence in their abilities, and you believe they will succeed. These are things we need to say out loud, to individual students and to the whole class, on a regular basis. Encouragement needs to be genuine and specific. This will go a long way to promoting self-esteem, resulting in better performance.



*Try a unit called **I'm An Expert in...** where students prepare a presentation on a subject or a skill with which they are already very familiar. It could be tailoring, baking, singing, drawing, aerobics, skipping, carving, carpentry, or task as common as diapering a baby, finding great sales, or doing home repairs. Even making a perfect cup of coffee, as done in their country of origin, can be beneficial. These presentations should be done for the whole class, with the emphasis on the Student as an expert, someone who has not lost all their skills simply by virtue of becoming a refugee. At the CCVT, Students have acted as teachers, lecturing us about the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the history of the ancient town of Mostar in Bosnia, the art of Calligraphy in the Afghani language, Dari, and how to become the black belt in Karate (demonstration included.) This kind of activity greatly improves self-esteem, as students reclaim of themselves, and share this with the group. Many follow-up language components can be taught, using the presentation as a base.

*Trying assigning a specific lesson to be taught by one or two students, who will take over from the teacher for an hour. Give those students advance help or suggestions, but let them experience what it's like to be a teacher, and let them try to answer questions from the class. Commend them for their preparation and effort.

***Make a Thank You Board.** This could be a large bulletin board visible in the class. At the end of each week or month, have the students write thank-you messages to other students for anything(help with my homework, cheering me up, a presentation in class, getting me a coffee, making me laugh during a roleplay) they appreciated during that time. Give them suggestions about the kind of things they could write. (They shouldn't constantly thank the teacher, but rather one another.) This also may improve self-esteem and help the group to bond.

***Make a skill's Exchange Board.** This board, posted in a common area, should contain Help Wanted and Help Available ads. Students should be encouraged to think about what skills they have to offer, or what help they need, and the board is used to connect them to each other. Babysitting, sewing, plumbing, locating discount stores, finding social services and other common needs can be exchanged or simply offered. Students thus provide each other with practical help. Self-esteem improves when they see they are useful and capable.

7. Adjust expectations

Students who've experienced torture or warfare, and who suffer from PTSD, may need two to three times longer to master specific language skills. We need to make



adjustments in our programs to account for this. Tell students what they can realistically expect in terms of their progress, and watch for signs of increasing frustration or discouragement. Do not promote students before they are actually ready for the next level. They will need extra praise and reassurance if their peers are promoted but they are not. When possible, provide individual tutors to help students keep up.

8. Memory and concentration problems

These are major challenges to you /your students caused by many factors, including stress, lack of sleep (due insomnia or Nightmares), anxiety over the safety of loved ones, and side-effects of prescription, such as anti-depressant.

* Make classroom activities shorter (20- 40 minutes.) Attention spans are shorter due to **PTSD**.

* Constant repetition is required, to aid memory. Try teaching the same basic language components using three different activities, on three successive days. Try varying the activities so that different senses are involved. For example, when doing a unit on food, take a trip to a local market and locate specific foods, noting colours, shapes, size smells and tastes. The next day, write or try out recipes using the same foods. The next day, try a spelling or “cloze” exercises with related vocabulary. All this should reinforce the language components, using repetition and the senses to aid memory and concentration.

* **Music, singing, dances**, jazz chants, TPR (Total Physical Response) activities, drawing, painting, scavenger hunts, photographs and mind-teasing riddles can help students concentrate and recall language more effectively, by reducing the distractions caused by severe stress and depression. Remember, memory isn't only in the brain; it's also in the body, so use the whole body and all the senses to improve your students' odds.

* The atmosphere in your class should be informal, safe, relaxed and friendly. If you give tests, be careful your refugee learners don't become overly anxious or discouraged if they do poorly. Their concentration and memory problems often prevent them from progressing quickly, and they may not realize why they now find themselves struggling with basic skills, having been successful, independent and respected in their countries of origin, and having mastered complex subjects, including other languages, previously.



* 9. Field trips

Know the environment well before you go. Confined spaces may produce claustrophobic or panic attack reactions. Anything resembling a weapon can increase anxiety: knives, scissors, rifles, chopping blocks, cannons. These items are frequently found at historical sites like pioneer villages. Dark, enclosed spaces, like planetariums, theatres or cinemas, where the exits aren't accessible, may produce fear and the need to flee. Fire alarms, sirens, barking dogs or even a car backfiring may produce panic or, in extreme cases, a flashback to the torture or war experience. These things cannot all be avoided, nor should we seek to shelter the students from any potential triggers. Rather, we should carefully prepare the students for the types of environments they may encounter. Tell them that they may refuse to enter certain places or leave if they become uncomfortable. At the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, most students

Preferred not to enter the Bat Cave. It is dark, with strobe lights flashing and stuffed bats "flying" overhead. As long as students are well-informed and feel in control, field trips can be excellent. They demonstrate that the world can be trusted, that the outside environment is safe, especially when first experienced within the context of the familiar school group.

10. Selecting appropriate books, videos, software, etc.

*Materials should be visually uncluttered. Too much information impedes concentration. Three simple, clear handouts are better than one "busy" one. This is especially important when choosing ESL software, which tends to be overly busy, packed full of information, graphics and control panels. Try to design your own, "clean" programs, or select products with this in mind.

*Pre-screen all videos and other classroom materials. Watch for any blood, weapons, electrical shocks, confinement (cages, pits, prisons) or intense aggression. You may be surprised how frequently TV programs like Star Trek or videos from Disney actually shows scenes of torture, mutilation or violence. Even many "family" films and educational videos feature the occasional bloody or violent scene. (The Secret Garden, a recent children's film, contains one brief scene in which a "crippled" boy is treated with electroshock therapy on his legs, which jerk rapidly, though he is unhurt. A documentary film on the Arctic contains one graphic scene of a hunter killing and skinning a seal, blood spilling out in the snow.) You need not eliminate such materials from your classrooms altogether, simply be aware when these scenes will come, and either fast forward through



them or alert the students that they may want to look away briefly. Always prepare the class and your students well in advance so there are no nasty surprises.

*Books, too, need to be screened for negative triggers. Even apparently harmless things like home repair manuals may contain drawings of someone receiving an electrical shock from improper installation. Watch for scenes of car accidents, emergency and operating rooms, even visits to the dentist. Again, these need not be avoided altogether, but you should be able to find alternate methods of teaching the language skills you have planned, without increasing the anxiety of your learners. Classroom games should be handled carefully, as in the spelling game Hangman, where, where instead of drawing a hanging corpse, you might select a home or garden scene.

11. Coping with Stress and helping with laughter

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In Conclusion

These observations and suggestions are by no means exhaustive, nor should they be taken as rigid rules. They are meant to serve as guidelines and as springboard for further discussion among language instructors who are increasingly encountering traumatized refugees in their classrooms. Although the language and skills training program at CCVT serves survivors of torture and war trauma exclusively, many of the principles and suggestions mentioned in this document may be applied to all refugee learners, and even incorporated into more traditional language classes. In our experience, these strategies have promoted a positive atmosphere in the classroom, significantly improving the ability for traumatized students to learn, remember and use English effectively. We hope you will find this information helpful for your students.

If you would like further information about the work of CVT or assistance developing your own specialized language training program, please

free to contact us in Toronto. The CCVT has assisted in the establishment of similar centres in various locations in North America and across the world our phone number, e-mail and postal addresses are listed on as is our website.ccvt.org



Forms of Torture

Our students were deliberately subjected to some of the following:

- Sensory and/or sleep deprivation
- Use of psychotropic drugs
- Electric shocks
- Burning
- Mutilation
- Extreme psychological abuse including threats
- Isolation and solitary detention
- Beating to body and head
- Sexual violence and rape: women and men
- Starvation
- Exposure to extreme heat or cold
- Mock executions
- Near-fatal immersion or suffocation
- Being forced to maintain crippling positions for long periods
- Forcing victims to watch their loved ones being raped, brutalized or killed



LONG TERM PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF TORTURE AND WAR TRAUMA

WATCH FOR SOME OF THESE IN YOUR STUDENTS:

- DEPRESSION _____
- DIFFICULTY CONCENTRATING _____
- LOW SELF-ESTEEM _____
- MEMORY PROBLEMS _____
- INSOMNIA (SEVERE FATIGUE) _____
- ANXIETY, NERVOUSNESS _____
- HYPERSENSITIVITY _____
- FEAR OF AUTHORITY FIGURES _____
- GENERAL FEAR _____
- DIFFICULTY TRUSTING OTHERS _____
- IRRITABILITY _____
- PARANOIA, SUSPICION _____
- FLASHBACKS _____
- SEXUAL DYSFUNCTION _____
- NIGHTMARES _____
- FEELINGS OF GUILT _____

***HOW DO THESE FACTORS
INTERFERE WITH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION?***

***SOMWHAT ** SIGNIFICANTLY ***GREATLY**



Suggested Reading/Resources:

1. www.ccvt.org

2. LIP websites[Ⓢ] ([Local Immigration partnership](#))
 - a) <http://www.torontolip.com>

 - b) Resources for Syria refugees
<http://www.torontolip.com/Home/SyrianRefugees-Copy.aspx>
<https://www.porticonetwork.ca>
<https://www.porticonetwork.ca/web/rmhp/toolkit/syrian-refugee?intcid=search-results>

3. IMMIGRATION, REFUGEES AND CITIZENSHIP CANADA IRCC
(formerly C.I.C)
<http://www.cic.gc.ca>

4. Fact sheet Syria : <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

5. Global affairs Canada
<http://www.international.gc.ca/cip-pic/search-recherche.aspx?q=Syria&lang=eng&gcwu-srch-submit=Search>