

# **LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

Fall 2011

Number 6 in a Series of Monographs  
Addressing Critical Issues in the Education of  
English Language Learners

Funded in part by the Federation of  
North Texas Area Universities

A project of the Bilingual/ESL Committee of the  
Federation of North Texas Area Universities

**PHAP DAM, Ph.D.**  
**Texas Woman's University**  
**Series Editor**

**MELINDA T. COWART, Ed.D.**  
**Texas Woman's University**  
**Managing Editor**

# **Refugee Migration Histories and Mental Health: Implications for English Language Teaching and Learning**

**John McGill  
Noorfarah Merali  
University of Alberta**

## **Introduction**

The widespread occurrence of war, civil unrest, and ethnic cleansing around the world has led to unprecedented numbers of refugees in recent decades (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2009). In the year 2009, the global refugee population reached 34 million (UNHCR), with large waves of refugees seeking asylum in North America. The US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (2009) reported in its analysis of data from the World Refugee Survey that Canada has a ratio of one refugee for every 459 residents, whereas the United States ratio is one refugee for every 1,889 residents. As defined in the United Nations Convention on Refugees (UNHCR, 2007), a refugee is a person who is forced to leave his/her country of origin “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political

opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (p. 16). Refugees differ from immigrants in terms of both voluntariness of migration and permanence of their settlement in asylum countries (Berry, 2006). Immigrants make the choice to relocate for improved economic and social opportunities with the intention of permanent residence in the selected host society. In contrast, refugees face involuntary displacement and may have a permanent or impermanent stay in a potential nation of settlement based on the acceptance or rejection of their refugee claims (Berry; Merali, 2008). Refugees have a unique migration history characterized by a long-term lack of control over daily events and experiences and exposure to human rights violations (Bemak, Chung, & Bornemann, 2002; Mollica, 2006; Prendes-Lintel, 2001). The purpose of this article is to describe the stages of refugees' migratory journey and to help the reader understand the potential implications of the mental health impacts of that journey for the teaching process and content in the English as a second language classroom.

### **The refugee career**

The term refugee career describes the uncertain journey a refugee takes towards settlement and acculturation (Prendes-Lintel, 2001). The journey, with a duration from weeks to years, is framed in six chronological stages: (a) the pre-departure stage, (b) the flight stage, (c) the first asylum stage, (d) the claimant stage, (e) the settlement stage, and (f) the adaptation stage (Prendes-Lintel). Like any model that demonstrates human activity and behavior, it

cannot be assumed that every person will progress through all stages, nor can it be assumed that all individuals undertake the journey in a linear fashion.

### Pre-departure stage

This stage is characterized by numerous life-altering events including social unrest, armed conflict, military dictatorship, wars, revolutions, genocide, and ethnic cleansing (Bemak et al., 2002; Mollica 2006; Prendes-Lintel, 2001). Modern day strife tends to involve ethno-political warfare between civilians rather than between armies across nations as in World War I and II. Civilian warfare involves situations where former neighbors, friends, and teachers and students from different groups are pitted against each other by political regimes either claiming cultural or religious supremacy or exclusive ownership to national land, or scapegoating one group for all societal ills (Mollica). Mollica shares stories of refugee families describing pre-migration events in their countries of origin, where their former teachers became snipers during warfare and killed many of their students and family members. Such events erode people's feelings of personal safety and ability to have trust in interpersonal relationships. Mollica (2006) outlined various forms of aggression that groups targeted for persecution may be subjected to by opposing forces in the pre-departure stage: (a) deprivation of food, shelter, and interpersonal contact; (b) incarceration and forced participation in re-education camps; (c) physical and sexual assault and torture; (c) witnessing the torture of other family and community members; and (d) cultural annihilation, involving the destruction of ethnic, religious,

and cultural artifacts, literature, and places of worship in attempt to eradicate a group's indigenous ways.

Unfortunately, in this stage, children are not spared from acts of aggression. In a study of refugee children from Central and South America, McCloskey, Southwick, Fernandez-Esquer, and Locke (1995) indicated that the children reported seeing dead bodies, seeing and hearing bombings, shootings, rape, torture, and having their homes invaded by the police in their homelands. Similarly, in a study of children from Mozambique, 77% of children aged 6-15 had witnessed murder; 88% had seen torture; 51% had been physically abused or tortured; and 63% had witnessed rape (Boothby, 1994).

### Flight stage

Refugees take flight to escape ongoing risks to their safety. Escape may take place on foot, by animal carrier, or boat, with long and rough journeys without food or shelter (Magro, 2008; Mollica, 2006; Prendes-Lintel, 2001). Trauma often continues in the flight stage. Magro describes the example of a Sudanese boy who walked for three days without food or water to get to Ethiopia. After crossing a river in which several children drowned, it was a further two weeks of struggle to get to Kenya. Along the way, wild animals killed some of his friends. Flight in the absence of preparation exacerbates the uncertainty that is characteristic of this stage. The sudden necessity of flight from the home country requires people to leave behind everything they have. Also, during flight, there is the ever-present possibility of family separation, capture, starvation and death (Prendes-Lintel).

### First asylum stage

In this stage, individuals who have been in flight reach the first place of temporary safety, which is usually a refugee camp. Arrival is characterized by initial elation followed by anxiety and depression (Prendes-Intel, 2001). Refugee camps are usually overcrowded, depersonalized tent cities with insufficient food, medical resources, and sanitation, contributing to multiple physical health problems and infectious and parasitic diseases among their residents. They are also characterized by an authoritarian administrative character, a restriction of residents' freedom of movement outside camp parameters into bordering nations, and a persistent threat of crime and violence both from within the camp community and outside military forces (Harell-Bond, 2000; Mollica, 2006). For example, in a study of refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodian border during a one year duration from January 1987 to January 1988, 1165 incidents were tracked; 61 were fatal and 1104 non-fatal. Of those 1165 incidents, 48% were beatings and 16% included knifing or axing. Other acts of violence involved shootings, armed robbery, rape and suicide (Mollica, 1994). Similarly, sexual violence was found to be a common occurrence in a refugee camp in Sudan (Nagai, Karunakara, Rowley, & Burnham, 2008).

Due to a combination of long-standing political upheaval in various countries and exacerbated difficulties in international border-crossing because of heightened post-911 security measures, there is a rise in protracted refugee situations. These are situations where people have been interned in camps for a significant period of their lives before being able to resettle abroad (Loescher &

Milner, 2008). Since 9/11, the average amount of time that refugees have spent in camps is a striking 17 years (Loescher & Milner). Protracted refugee situations may deprive children from obtaining an education in their formative years or may lead to substantial schooling interruptions. In 108 camps surveyed in a UNHCR (2004) study of education in refugee camps, only 23% of children aged 5 - 17 were enrolled in school. Slightly more than half (54%) of these children completed high school. The student-teacher ratio in the camps that were surveyed was 44 to 1, minimizing opportunities for individual attention. However, two-thirds of camp teachers were qualified educators (UNHCR). In refugee camps where qualified teachers are not available, members of the local communities adopt educational roles (Crisp, Talbot, & Cipollene, 2001), limiting the scope of education by their own development of oral and literacy skills.

It is not uncommon for students to face discrimination in refugee schools. Discrimination could be based on gender, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation or socio-economic status, based on the cultural and political tensions that exist in the nearby war-torn regions. It can take the form of "corporal punishment, denial of access or non-recognition of achievement" (Spink, 2006, p. 15). The negative impact of these actions on children already grappling with interruptions in education is obvious.

### Claimant stage

It is in this stage that a refugee applies to a safe country for protection, either from a refugee camp abroad or after having reached a secure country. The essential criteria in adjudicating

refugee claims revolve around ensuring that the individuals' situations are consistent with the definition of a refugee in the United Nations Convention on Refugees (UNHCR, 2007). The adjudication process by the country of asylum most often takes into account: (a) the refugee's membership in a group targeted for violence in the country of origin; (b) the current state of political affairs in that country, such as whether the country has moved into a disarmament phase and the refugee's possible opportunity for a safe return, and (c) the potential that the refugee presents a security threat to the new host country (Loescher & Milner, 2008). UNHCR (2009) data suggests that approximately 50% of refugee claims filed across industrialized countries where refugees seek asylum as political asylees end up being rejected, highlighting the real possibility for deportation at this stage. Prior to actual resettlement, refugees frequently exist in limbo, without access to health or social services, or any financial incentives to assist with educational pursuits.

### Settlement stage and adaptation stage

The settlement stage begins after acceptance into the host country and continues for at least three years afterwards as refugees attempt to initially adjust to their new environment (Prendes-Lintel, 2001). In the settlement stage, activities are those typical of arrival in a new country including learning English if resettled in an English-speaking country, finding accommodation and arranging for utilities, learning how and where to shop for food and clothing, learning how to access transportation, enrolling children in the school system, finding a health care provider,



connecting with religious groups, seeking out home country cultural and support groups, and learning how to obtain employment or to locate job training opportunities for the family. The adaptation stage occurs after this initial period and continues into the second generation of family life, where people try to adjust to differing levels of language development and acceptance of cultural change among family members, as well as factors such as shifting gender roles and changes from the family's pre-migration socioeconomic status (Merali, 2008; Prendes-Lintel, 2001). Learning English is a critical task for effective settlement, acculturation, and long-term adjustment in the new host society across all other life domains including academic, social, and systems-level integration.

### **Impact of the refugee career on English language learning**

Although teachers of English as a second language work with refugee learners when they are in the settlement stage in North America, both the teaching and learning process are inevitably affected by refugees' experiences in the pre-departure, flight, first asylum, and claimant stages (Bemak et al., 2002; Prendes-Lintel, 2001). Therefore, it is imperative that teachers understand the impact of refugee students' migration histories on their ability to learn a second language and process new information, as well as on their emotional reactivity in the classroom, social behavior, and literacy development.

The most common psychological consequence observed in the settlement stage among refugees who have been exposed to human rights violations is post-traumatic stress (Bemak et al., 2002;

Hollifield, Warner, Lian, Krakow, Jenkins, Kesler, et al., 2002; Mollica, 2006). Post-traumatic stress has multiple manifestations, including: (a) re-living or re-experiencing the traumatic event through nightmares or daytime flashbacks accompanied by related sensory input (sights, sounds, smells); (b) a numbing of one's general responsiveness since the event, such as through a restricted capacity to experience emotions, amnesia about specific aspects of the event, or social withdrawal; and (c) symptoms of heightened arousal, such as an exaggerated startle response, irritability, poor concentration, or impaired sleep (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Hollifield et al. reviewed 183 published studies on the health status of refugees obtained through searches of several databases in medicine and the social sciences. They reported that prevalence rates of post-traumatic stress vary from 4% to 86% across different refugee samples, depending on the severity and frequency of the human rights violations encountered, and the measures used to assess distress.

The empirical relationship between trauma and language acquisition is complex. Post-traumatic stress appears to affect the speed of second language acquisition but not the degree of language acquisition difficulties refugees encounter. Söndergaard and Theorell (2004) studied the effects of symptoms of post-traumatic stress on language learning in refugees from Iraq. The researchers found that the number of post-traumatic stress symptoms refugees reported were significantly inversely related to the speed of English language acquisition; refugees with fewer symptoms could acquire English more rapidly, likely due to better information processing capacity and less cognitive interference from intrusive daytime flashbacks or a lack of sleep during

nightmares. A study of 34 Bosnian refugees in New York that examined the relationship between trauma-related mental health problems, language-acquisition difficulties, and economic self-sufficiency found no correlation among these variables (Corvo & Patterson, 2005). Taken together, the findings of these two studies suggest that although teachers may need to be extra patient when assisting traumatized refugees to acquire English as a second language, they do have the capacity to master the language.

Post-traumatic stress has varying manifestations, from extreme emotional reactivity to any situation, person, or other trigger that reminds one of the traumatic events endured to complete emotional numbness (Mollica, 2006). For example, being placed in a North American multilingual and multicultural English as a second language classroom where there are members of a cultural group that one was at war with in the country of origin may trigger an angry outbreak or panic attack that fuels classroom conflicts.

Other aspects of post-traumatic stress may pose barriers for the overall learning process for refugees, which are likely to play out in the English as a second language classroom. Mollica (2006) describes a phenomenon called the "Dummy Personality" (p. 68). The Dummy Personality is a persona that severely traumatized refugees take on to protect themselves from further pain and mental deterioration in the face of multiple, severe, human rights violations in their countries of origin. It involves an unconscious process whereby the refugee divorces himself or herself psychologically from the outside world, becoming an emotionless and passive participant in experience, rather than someone actively engaged in life. This persona often develops among refugees who have lost many family members in political atrocities and who are

experiencing survivor guilt (Mollica). Survivor guilt is an experience of self-loathing for remaining alive while others have perished, accompanied by wishing one's own life was taken instead of other family members or significant others. McDonald (2000) makes the point that feelings of depression, loss of self-esteem and confidence together with survivor guilt are barriers to learning. Such feelings appear as "spacing out, feeling numb, being unaware of what is going on or ... an inability to concentrate, difficulty in listening, distraction, or preoccupation" (p. 691). Similarly, Magro (2008) points out that trauma may reduce a person's identity and self-confidence to the extent that such loss can interfere with learning. In light of the long-term schooling interruptions that many refugee English language learners have experienced and the fact that some will be starting out at a point of illiteracy when they enter North American schools in middle childhood to adolescence, trauma processes may further complicate an already late and difficult learning process. Living for many years with little control over one's situation can have a negative impact on refugees' ability to learn. In terms of behavior, ingrained feelings of helplessness may make some refugees reluctant to take personal initiative to learn (Lucey, Chafree, Terry, Marbre, Stone, & Wiencek, 2000).

### **Implications for the teaching process and content**

A comprehensive framework for teaching English as a second language recently developed by a college in a major Canadian city has tremendous utility for preparing teachers to address the unique learning status and needs of refugee learners. The framework

includes the following strategies: (a) view learners holistically (respect past experiences), (b) view learning as a social activity (encourage a sense of equality and belonging), and (c) teach thematically (Bow Valley College, 2009). In the following sections, each of these strategies will be elaborated upon with concrete recommendations for teachers.

### View learners holistically and teach thematically

Teachers of English as a second language play two interrelated roles in the lives of refugees. One is the more obvious role of provider of time, space, and direct instruction for the difficult task of acquiring English. This task involves facilitating both communicative competence and English literacy. The second role is that of creator of a respite, although temporary, from the continuous and often overwhelming task of dealing with settlement and adaptation together with the lingering impact of trauma. Magro (2008) views the classroom as providing “a critical stabilizing force and safe haven for newcomers who feel displaced or disoriented” (p. 24). Acknowledging refugees’ past experiences places significant responsibility on teachers for creating a safe classroom environment that minimizes the risk of triggering traumatic memories and maximizes the potential for learning.

### *Building trust*

Since trusted authority figures, including teachers, in refugees’ countries of origin sometimes have been found in the roles of perpetrators of mass human rights violations (Mollica, 2006), teachers of refugee English language learners cannot assume that students will automatically enter into positive relationships with

them. Incidents of teacher discrimination against certain subgroups of refugee students in refugee camp schools based on racial/cultural differences (Spink, 2006) also suggest the potential for refugees in the North American classroom to question their teacher's benevolent intent. As an example, the first author, who teaches English as a second language, was privy to an incident where a refugee male adolescent English language learner in another teacher's class became very emotional and fearful when the lights were turned off to watch a movie. The student started sobbing uncontrollably. He apparently had suffered a trauma where he was repeatedly tortured in the dark during nightfall in his country of origin in the pre-departure phase of his migration process. He automatically expected to be victimized by the teacher when the teacher turned out the lights. The teacher wasn't sure what was happening and wanted to approach the student to determine what was distressing him. However, this frightened the student further, as he assumed he was being singled out to be tortured. In this situation, even a seemingly benign act by the teacher was interpreted by a student as threatening behavior. The example highlights the potential lack of trust for teachers that may exist among refugee learners. McDonald (2000) suggested that an explanation should be provided when shutting the classroom door or turning off the lights, as these small actions may evoke memories of detention.

The incident described implies that teachers have to actively take steps to gain their students' trust. Teachers would be well advised to orient all students in their classroom to classroom rules, behaviors, and activities at the outset. An excellent starting point is basic human rights education, since refugees' past experiences

may lead to uncertainty about how they will be treated by others in the new host society and in the classroom setting in particular. Levesque (2001) described key areas of human rights based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948 as cited in Levesque) and subsequent declarations and conventions in the following 50-year period. There are specific rights categories that may be particularly relevant for refugee English language learners, as they may reflect a social reality in North American society that is starkly different from even the pre-war realities in their countries of origin. These include: (a) the right to personal security or freedom from interpersonal violence in every context (home, school, etc.) and from government-sponsored violence, (b) the right to self-determination or personal autonomy, (c) the right to quality education, (d) the right to freedom of association (even among groups that may have not previously been allowed to interact, such as those with a history of gender-segregated schools or schools for only one cultural group in the country), and (e) the right to social and cultural participation and integration, which includes language acquisition in the host society (Levesque). Teachers can link each category of rights directly to the classroom context, focusing on the goal of ensuring everyone's safety and well-being, respecting each students' thoughts, opinions, and unique learning needs, and encouraging cross-gender and cross-cultural interaction in multicultural and multilingual learning environments. Teachers can also work collaboratively with refugee students to identify what actions people can take to indicate when they are feeling unsafe or uncomfortable in class, and what the consequences should be when any member of the class disrespects another's rights.

*Screening thematic content and recognizing signs of student distress*

In addition to the impact of class processes on refugee learners, class content can have unanticipated consequences in light of refugee's pre-migration and flight experiences and their present mental health status. One of the key aspects of the framework presented earlier is teaching thematically. Teaching thematically involves anchoring English language lessons in topics that will generate meaningful dialogues relevant to the daily lives of second language learners to facilitate communicative competence (Bow Valley College, 2009). It is a particularly useful method for learners with a limited or interrupted history of schooling and a passive learning orientation, as it can help to engage them in the learning process. The first author of this chapter learned through his own classroom experience of teaching thematically that manifestations of trauma can appear without warning during the most innocuous classroom activities. The choice of themes to focus on in the classroom context needs to be carefully thought out and evaluated for potential positive versus negative effects. John was teaching vocabulary associated with family structure (mother, father, brother, sister, grandparents) to a mixed group of immigrant and refugee English language learners. It was surmised that the topic of family would be relevant to every student and could encourage rich interaction between students. Students were energetically and often humorously talking about their families. When it came time for a normally cheerful and talkative young man from Iraq to describe his family, a gloomy expression appeared on his face and he fell silent. After what was



probably 15 seconds but seemed like many minutes, he responded with a shaky and panicky voice: "Teacher, all dead. All killed. My sister 8 years old too."

After the student uttered this revelation, the classroom went silent as John and the students realized what this young man had endured. John's response was to call for a break to let the student and the rest of the students in class have a moment to themselves or to talk to him if they felt comfortable doing so. The other response was to not overly react to the circumstances the student experienced. It seemed important to acknowledge the pain but not to make it a focus of the classroom discussion for fear that the student may feel unnecessarily singled out.

What can teachers do to help refugee students who have experienced trauma? Lucey et al. (2000) provide some direction. They suggest that teachers carefully analyze all materials, such as textbooks, authentic texts, reading materials, and thematic lessons for the potential to trigger traumatic events among refugee students. They also recommend that teachers learn to recognize signals of re-traumatization among students, such as absences, withdrawal from participation, lack of attention, sleeping in class, frequent crying, and changes in progress. When a refugee student chooses to share traumatic experiences in the classroom, listeners including teachers and students should acknowledge their courage and strength, while refraining from offering any personal opinions or external perspectives on the stories (McDonald, 2000; Mollica, 2006).

Another step that teachers can take is to facilitate discussion of topics on health and culture that are relevant to learners, such as accessing medical and psychological care, going to the doctor or

school counsellor, and learning conflict resolution strategies (Bemak et al., 2002). In this way, teachers can serve as a liaison or referral source in connecting refugee learners to other supports inside and outside of school that are critical for their optimal development and integration in North American society.

*Responding to the unique needs of learners with educational interruptions*

Refugees' past experiences not only affect their stance towards the learning process and content but also their preparation for language training. Because of the long interruptions in schooling or a lack of schooling, many refugees who arrive in North America are not literate in their first languages (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006; Miller, 2009). The program developed by Bow Valley College (2009) in Canada uses the acronym LIFE (Learners with Interrupted Formal Education) to describe non-literate learners of English as a second language. The interruption in education can have several implications on the amount of support required by a teacher. While reading, learners may have trouble decoding unfamiliar words. They might be unable to make the connection between sounds and symbols necessary to understand words or lack a sufficient bank of words they can recognize by sight. For writing, they may need to learn something as basic as holding a pencil or copying text accurately (Miller). Learners may not have the necessary learning strategies. They may not recognize that print has meaning nor are they able to organize information or recognize patterns (Brown et al.). The Bow Valley College program emphasizes the following steps in teaching these language learners: (a) start with oral learning (teach new

vocabulary orally before using print material), (b) provide sufficient time for writing practice (begin with copying), (c) respect learner's knowledge while providing new understanding (help learners develop cognitive skills), and (d) establish outcomes (accept the inevitable variability in learner's progression), and (e) incorporate technology where possible.

The second author's experience collaboratively designing an English language program for Cambodian refugees who were illiterate in their own language (Khmer) with a local immigration settlement agency illustrates the unique adaptations required for such groups. In the mid-1990s, there was an influx of 300 Cambodian refugees into the city where Noorfarah was living, with all of the children from these families attending a single local school. The refugees had little to no formal schooling due to their long tenure in camps near the Thai border. The regular school-based English as a second language class was too difficult for them, leading to high rates of failure and school drop-out. The local school board therefore asked for the collaboration of an immigration agency in redeveloping the English as a second language program in the school to better meet the needs of this refugee group that had moved into the region. Noorfarah was the program development and evaluation consultant with the immigration agency at that time.

An innovative approach was required for this group where a Khmer-speaking settlement counselor at the immigration agency was seconded as a teaching assistant in the English as a second language classroom to make parallels between each word or concept in the Cambodian refugees' first language and the English language. This provided them with anchors for second language

acquisition. The introduction to literacy tasks involved the most basic activities, such as tracing a path through mazes and connecting dots to make the letter A, B, C, and so on, until words and sentences could be formed and grammar could eventually be taught. These basic language and literacy processes were followed in succession with communicative dialogues around key themes and with copying and minor reading assignments. The new program dramatically improved Cambodian students' success rates in acquiring English, despite their disadvantaged educational backgrounds.

#### View learning as a social activity

Social interaction is essential in English as a second language classrooms for skill practice, comprehension assessment, and eventual development of verbal fluency. Although teachers may work hard to encourage positive social engagement among students, when members of ethnic, cultural, or religious groups who were at war in their countries of origin are in the same class, pre-migration tensions may be re-enacted in the classroom. Individuals from rivaling refugee groups may not be willing to interact with each other, or of greater concern, may spark conflicts in the classroom. In the first author's experience teaching English language learners, an incident occurred in the classroom where two Somali students from opposing sides of the war in Somalia confronted each other about differences in their perceptions of Somali culture and customs. Their confrontation was escalating, requiring intervention by validating both of their unique perspectives as an example of normal variability within each culture and country. Similarly, when working on the Diversity and

Equity Initiative within a provincial school board in Canada, the second author of this article was asked to assist the board in responding to challenging situations emerging in English as a second language classrooms where refugees from Bosnia and Serbia were engaging in open conflict. Bosnians had been targeted for persecution and ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia by Serbian military forces.

In her work with the Diversity and Equity Initiative, Noorfarah recommended the use of cooperative learning techniques (Slavin & Cooper, 1999) for addressing intergroup tensions among English language learners. The cooperative learning approach provides teachers with an indirect way to address intergroup tensions without invalidating the pre-migration experiences of any parties, taking sides, or reprimanding students in the classroom. Cooperative learning is a teaching approach that encourages contact between students from different racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious groups, while also making them dependent upon one another to excel academically. Students are grouped into pairs, triads, or larger units for at least some of the classroom work, and they are given at least some class assignments where they require each other's support to do well (Slavin & Cooper). For example, each member of a pair may have to learn about a particular aspect of a topic or task and then teach the information to his or her partner. A group mark may be assigned by the teacher's evaluation of the summative content each student in the pair learned from the partner who was supposed to master it. This could be a vocal task evaluation or a literacy element evaluation or a grammar evaluation, for example. Such learning tasks place students who may have had unequal status in their countries of

origin on an equal playing field as project partners and encourage cooperation rather than competition, counteracting intergroup hostility. Slavin and Cooper describe various types of cooperative learning models and strategies that English language teachers can consider for use in their classrooms. In evaluating 19 studies on the effectiveness of these programs, they reported that 16 of the studies found improved friendships between students of different ethnicities, improved attitudes towards culturally-different individuals, and corresponding improvements in student achievement levels. The key to simultaneously facilitating positive intergroup relations and good academic outcomes is balancing cooperative goals and tasks with individual accountability among group members.

## **Conclusion**

Knowledge about the refugee career will help teachers understand that much more can be occurring under the surface in a classroom than is visible during the process of learning English as a second language. By viewing learners holistically, teachers can take steps to respect and validate refugees' past experiences while enabling them to re-build trust in both other human beings and the education system. Through viewing learning as a social activity, teachers can facilitate the acculturation of refugee learners in multilingual and multicultural English as a second language classrooms. Placing all learners in equal status interactions can both reduce intergroup prejudice and foster individual achievement. By teaching thematically, teachers can make

instructional content meaningful and relevant to refugee's daily lives, engaging them in the reality of their new host society.

## References

- American Psychiatric Association (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders - Fourth edition, text revision (DSM-IV-TR)*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Bemak, F., Chung, R. C., & Bornemann, T. H. (2002). Counseling and psychotherapy with refugees. In P. B. Pedersen, H. G. Draguns, W. J. Lonner, & J. E. Trimble (Eds.), *Counseling across cultures* (5th ed., pp. 209-232). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Berry, J. W. (2006). Contexts of acculturation. In D. L. Sam & J. W. Berry (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of acculturation psychology* (pp. 27-42). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Boothby, N. (1994). Trauma and violence among refugee children. In A. J. Marsella, T. Bornemann, S. Ekblad, & J. Orley (Eds.), *Amidst peril and pain: The mental health and well-being of the world's refugees* (pp. 239-258). Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- Bow Valley College (2009). *Learning for LIFE: An ESL literacy handbook*. Calgary, AB: Author.
- Brown, J., Miller, M., & Mitchell, J. (2006). Interrupted schooling and the acquisition of literacy: Experiences of Sudanese refugees in Victorian secondary schools. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 29(2), 150-162.
- Corvo, K., & Peterson, J. (2005). Post-traumatic stress symptoms, language acquisition, and self-sufficiency: A study of Bosnian refugees. *Journal of Social Work*, 5, 205 - 219.

- Crisp, J., Talbot, C., & Cipollene, D. (2001). *Learning for a future: Refugee education in developing countries*. Geneva: United Nations Publications. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/pubs>
- Harrell-Bond, B. (2000). Are refugee camps good for children? *New Issues in Refugee Research*, 29, 1-10. Retrieved from <http://www.jha.ac/articles/u029.htm>
- Hollifield, M., Warner, T., Lian, N., Krakow, B., Jenkins, J., Kesler, J., et al. (2002). Measuring trauma and health status in refugees: A critical review. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 288, 611-621.
- Levesque, R. J. R. (2001). *Culture and family violence: Fostering change through human rights law*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Loescher, G., & Milner, J. (2008). Understanding the problem of protracted refugee situations. In G. Loescher, J. Milner, E. Newman, & G. Troeller (Eds), *Protracted refugee situations: Political, human right and security implications* (pp. 20 - 24). New York: United Nations University Press.
- Lucey, M., Chafree, M., Terry, D., Le Marbre, J., Stone, B., & Wiencek, D. (2000). *Mental health and the ESL classroom: A guide for teachers working with refugees*. Boston: International Institute of Boston.
- Magro, K. (2008). Exploring the experiences and challenges of adults from war-affected backgrounds: New directions for literacy educators. *Adult Basic Education and Literacy Journal*, 2(1), 24-33.
- McCloskey, L. A., Southwick, K., Fernandez-Esquer, M. E., & Locke, C. (1995). The psychological effects of political and domestic violence on Central American and Mexican immigrant mothers and children. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 23, 95-116.



- McDonald, S. (2000). A touch of class: Trauma and second language learning. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 56, 690-696.
- Merali, N. (2008). Social conditions and refugee mental health before and after migration. In M. K. Zimmerman (Ed.), *Political refugees: Social conditions, health and psychological characteristics* (p. 1-31). New York: Nova Science Publishers.
- Miller, J. (2009). Teaching refugee learners with interrupted education in science vocabulary, literacy and pedagogy. *International Journal of Science Education*, 31, 571 - 592.
- Mollica, R. F. (1994). Southeast Asian refugees: Migration history and mental health issues. In A. J. Marsella, T. Bornemann, S. Ekblad, & J. Orley (Eds.), *Amidst peril and pain: The mental health and well-being of the world's refugees* (pp. 83-100). Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- Mollica, R. F. (2006). *Healing invisible wounds: Paths to hope and recovery in a violent world*. Orlando: Harcourt Inc.
- Nagai, M., Karunakara, U., Rowley, E., & Burnham, G. (2008). Violence against refugees, non-refugees and host populations in southern Sudan and northern Uganda. *Global Public Health*, 3, 249- 270.
- Prendes-Lintel, M. (2001). A working model in counseling recent refugees. In J.G. Ponterotto, J. M. Casas, L. A. Suzuki, & C. M. Alexander (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural counseling* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 729-752). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Slavin, R. E., & Cooper, R. (1999). Improving intergroup relations: Lessons learned from cooperative learning programs. *Journal of Social Issues*, 55, 647-663.
- Söndergaard, H.P., & Theorell, T. (2004). Language acquisition in relation to cumulative posttraumatic stress disorder symptom load over time in a sample of resettled refugees. *Psychotherapy Psychosomatics*, 73, 320-323.  
doi:10.1159/000078849

- Spink, J. (2006). Education, reconstruction and state building in Afghanistan. *Forced Migration Review Education Supplement*, July 2006, 15 - 16.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2004). *Refugee education indicators 2003*. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org>
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2007). *Convention and protocol relating to the status of refugees*. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/3b66c2aa10.pdf>
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2009). *Asylum levels and trends in industrialized countries*. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/statistics/STATISTICS/49c796572.pdf>
- US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (2009). *World refugee survey*. Retrieved from <http://www.refugees.org/FTP/WRS09PDFS/Resettlementbycountry.pdf>