

**E L L** Training Network

# Strategies for Teaching Adult Refugees in the ELL Classroom



**BOWVALLEY**  
COLLEGE

Centre for Excellence in Immigrant  
and Intercultural Advancement

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## Strategies for Teaching Adult Refugees in the ELL Classroom

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# Refugee Learners

Canada began accepting some refugees during the Second World War. Since that point, more than one million refugees have arrived in Canada. The resettlement of refugees is now one of the three broad objectives of Canadian immigration policy and numbers of refugees in Canada are increasing. In 2016, approximately 59,400 refugees arrived in Canada. They bring to our classrooms a wide range of experiences and a unique set of learning needs.



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Refugees come from many different countries and their experiences are diverse. It is important not to make assumptions about refugee learners, but it is also important to recognize common experiences and needs and how these impact the language classroom.

A refugee, according to the Geneva Convention, is someone who cannot return to their country of nationality “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted” (UNHCR, 2007, as cited in B.C. Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 7).

This is something that all refugees have in common: they did not leave their countries by choice. Many refugees today have also had traumatic experiences, including violence, sexual violence, torture, and imprisonment; the witnessing of these events; or the occurrence of these events to family or friends.

Refugees have also experienced a complete disruption of life – work, home, education, community – a lack of medical care, a lack of access to basic necessities, and long periods of waiting, sometimes for many years.



*Their escape may seem to them like the beginning of a long journey to nowhere.*

*(B.C. Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 8)*

Refugees can have different needs in the classroom than other learners. They frequently have very urgent settlement needs; they may or may not have literacy needs due to interrupted education; and they have often experienced trauma. Trauma can have lasting effects on learning that can include:

- difficulty concentrating
- difficulty with memory
- difficulty sleeping and nightmares
- exhaustion
- headaches, stomach aches, vomiting
- hyper-alertness and exaggerated startle reflexes
- pervasive fear or anxiety
- flashbacks and memories of traumatic events

Meeting the learning needs of refugees can be challenging. Instructors can use **trauma-informed practice**, by creating a safe classroom environment and using a variety of approaches to teach effectively.



*Trauma-informed practice is categorically different than trauma treatment.*

*(Miles & Bailey-McKenna, 2016, p. 118)*

# Creating a Classroom Environment

The classroom environment is especially important when teaching refugees or learners who have experienced trauma. In order to be able to learn, we need spaces that feel safe and welcoming. We need to be able to take risks and take in new information. We need to be able both to focus and relax.



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When you are thinking about the learning environment, consider:

- how you feel in the space
- what you can see
- how you can move
- what you can hear
- what you can learn



*For refugee students, a predictable, safe environment with clear rules and consequences is important to their resettlement process.*

*(QPASTT, 2007, p. 17)*

Think about creating a space that reduces anxiety; if possible you would like a classroom with windows and access to the outdoors, uncluttered space to move around, and access to learning materials, including a print-rich environment, books for pleasure and information, and technology.

The classroom environment also includes your expectations and attitudes to learners. When you create an environment:

- promote respect, dignity, and humanity
- use gentle humour
- collaborate with learners to create a classroom agreement
- consider standard classroom rules and when to break them

Respect, dignity, humanity, and gentle humour go a long way to establishing trusting relationships with learners and restoring value to the world. Working together to define a space allows learners a voice and control over their own lives. Adjusting standard rules around punctuality, attendance, and cell phones recognizes learners as dedicated, hard-working adults with many responsibilities and challenges beyond school.

Effective classrooms also avoid predictable triggers to trauma. When it is not possible to completely eliminate environmental triggers, work to explain them. Prepare learners for the sounds they will hear or the things they will see. Also plan for predictable positive experiences in the classroom that lower anxiety, build community, and allow for learning.

## Predictable Triggers and Positive Experiences in the Classroom

	Triggers	Positive Experiences
Environmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• dark hallways</li> <li>• windowless rooms</li> <li>• uniforms</li> <li>• fire drills</li> <li>• evacuation procedures</li> <li>• bells and alarms</li> <li>• sounds of boots in the hallway</li> <li>• unexplained noise</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sense of community and belonging</li> <li>• predictable schedule and routine</li> <li>• minimal changes</li> <li>• control over your own space</li> <li>• familiarity with sights, sounds, and smells</li> </ul>
Behavioral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• shouting or yelling</li> <li>• people acting out of control</li> <li>• racism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• being treated with respect, humanity, dignity</li> <li>• connections with others</li> <li>• people acting calmly</li> </ul>
Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• individual-focused questioning</li> <li>• being asked about to talk about yourself, your past, or your family</li> <li>• certain themes and topics (family, how I came to Canada)</li> <li>• discussing current events</li> <li>• overly authoritative manner</li> <li>• too many instructions</li> <li>• signing forms</li> <li>• a change in teacher</li> <li>• field trips</li> <li>• abrupt changes or lack of transitions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cooperative learning</li> <li>• gentle humour</li> <li>• creativity</li> <li>• differentiated instruction</li> <li>• transparency in learning</li> <li>• goal-setting</li> <li>• following through on plans and promises</li> </ul>

# Teaching Strategies

When teaching refugee learners, choose approaches that create a safe classroom environment, emphasize a respectful development of skills, return control to learners over their lives and education, and meet the needs of learners as individuals. Effective approaches:

1. Create routine
2. Build community
3. Differentiate instruction
4. Connect learning
5. Encourage creativity
6. Choose themes, topics, and materials that engage
7. Assess fairly

“*Creating a classroom that feels safe is essential for students who have experienced trauma. Routines are the easiest way to communicate safety. Routines offer the opportunity to know what will happen next, and to relax in the feeling of being safe now.*”  
(CBE, 2017)

There are many activities that support these approaches and different activities will be effective for different levels and groups of learners.



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## 1. Create routine

The use of consistent routines works with refugee learners because it reduces anxiety and returns a sense of control and predictability. Learners know what to expect; there are no surprises and they have advanced warning for transitions.

There are many ways to establish routine:

- create a consistent time for activities (reading, journal writing, computer lab)
- write the daily agenda on the board
- establish consistent ways to start and finish the class (greetings, review daily learning goals)
- hold weekly management meetings as a class
- recognize that changes to the routine may upset learners and give advanced warning

## 2. Build community

Building community helps to break down barriers, establish trust, and encourage connection. The most important part of building a community in your classroom is to foster a learning environment of respect, dignity, and humanity. Treat learners as respected individuals and insist that they treat each other this way as well.

“*Students who have experienced trauma face isolation on a daily basis. We can help them overcome this feeling by facilitating positive classroom practices. This requires us to build community and create positive connections in the learning environment that create a sense of belonging.*”  
(LISTN, 2016, p. 113)



### 3. Differentiate instruction

Differentiating instruction works for refugees – and for many other learners – because it respects and promotes:

- decision-making → allowing learners to regain control and be responsible for their learning
- goal-setting → allowing learners to think toward the future again
- well-being → allowing learners choices if they are feeling anxious, tired, or scared
- connection → allowing learners to be treated as individual humans

Differentiating instruction can seem overwhelming to instructors, but there are ways to make it achievable in the classroom. When differentiating instruction, try to keep as many things consistent as possible. All learners can be working on various stages of the same learning goals and can be working within the same theme; they just might not be working at exactly the same thing at the same time.



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Possible approaches to differentiated instruction include:

- focused reading: create small reading groups with similar skills and needs
- individualized writing: choose tasks that are appropriate for each learner and work together to identify one or two things to improve

- station work: create learning stations that are organized by skill, task, language, or simply allow for choice and curiosity
- project-based learning: work in groups or as a class to create a larger project that requires a variety of skills



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### 4. Connect learning

When working with refugees, as with all adult learners, learning should be connected, relevant, and transparent. Respect learners as busy adults with multiple commitments and many challenges. Make all learning goals transparent, explain the purpose of activities, collaborate with learners to set goals, and listen to feedback, needs assessments, interest, and curiosity. Activities that connect learning include:

- language experience approach
- learner-determined criteria for tasks
- goal-setting

Goal-setting can be particularly important for refugees because it:

- encourages learners to think beyond the immediate present
- affirms that the future will be different than today
- returns power to learners to impact and shape their own lives
- lays the foundation for a realistic understanding of pathways in Canada



## 5. Encourage creativity

Creativity works because it allows learners to process the world and it values expression. Creativity also lowers affective barriers to learning, engages different parts of our brains, encourages problem-solving, and emphasizes process over product. Learners also experience and use language in a different way. There are many ways to include creativity in the classroom:

- dialogue journals
- drawing, painting, or sand trays
- photography and collages
- music
- models, clay, paper mâché, salt dough
- reading stories, fiction, and poetry
- telling or writing stories, fiction, and poetry



*Creating art can be motivating and fun because it takes the focus off accuracy. Instead, it emphasizes language fluency and provides an alternate means for students to express their thoughts and ideas ... Art-based strategies are particularly useful for students who have experienced trauma.*

*(LISTN, 2016, p. 24)*

## 6. Choose themes, topics, and materials that engage

Materials for refugees should be engaging and target the specific language, skills, and strategies for the class. Instructors must also be aware of topics or themes that have predictable triggers for trauma, such as family, how I came to Canada, or comparisons between the past and the present. Learners may not feel comfortable answering questions about themselves and may not want to share their stories.

## 7. Assess fairly

As with all learners, it is important to assess fairly and in multiple ways in order to accurately measure learning and celebrate success. Consider what an assessment really measures and tells you – how are you asking learners to demonstrate their skills? An assessment should be run like a good science experiment: only one variable should shift from the classroom activities to the assessment of learning. You should also think about cognitive load, or how much a learner has to process at one time.



*At the time of the assessment, consider the student's emotional state. Do not demand that your student participate in the assessment if they are unwell or under stress.*

*(LISTN, 2016, p. 12)*

When assessing refugee learners, it is also important to consider how your learner is feeling and practice ways to lower stress around assessment. Shift the focus away from grades and onto learning; similarly, make sure portfolios are celebrating what has been achieved, not highlighting deficits.



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Above all, respect learners as individuals with diverse experiences, skills, needs, and goals. These approaches, combined with an effective classroom environment and trauma-informed practice, can help support refugee learners.

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## Appendix 1: Fear and Learning

How does fear affect learning? Learning can only take place when we are feeling calm. Recognize what fear looks like and work with learners to develop calming strategies.

		Calm	Arousal	Alarm	Fear	Terror
What does this state look like?	<b>body</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>relaxed</li> <li>open body language</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>wider eyes</li> <li>restless</li> <li>body language changes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>even wider eyes</li> <li>aggressive or closed body language</li> <li>may leave room</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>tense or limp</li> <li>closed body language</li> <li>violent responses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>shaking</li> <li>non-responsive</li> <li>running</li> <li>violent responses</li> </ul>
	<b>breathing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>calm, even breathing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>faster/slower</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>faster/slower</li> <li>erratic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>too fast or too slow</li> <li>erratic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>rapid and shallow</li> <li>erratic</li> </ul>
	<b>face</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>open expression</li> <li>eyes focused</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>flushed</li> <li>eyes fixed or unfocused</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>flushed or pale</li> <li>eyes fixed or unfocused</li> <li>clenched teeth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>flushed or pale</li> <li>snarl or grimace</li> <li>eyes unfocused</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>flushed or pale</li> <li>eyes glassy or blood shot</li> </ul>
	<b>voice</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>calm voice</li> <li>matches volume of the group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increase/decrease in volume</li> <li>out of sync with group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increase/decrease in volume</li> <li>out of sync with group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>loud or no voice</li> <li>change in pitch (higher or lower)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>screaming or no voice</li> </ul>
	<b>social responses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>takes direction</li> <li>awareness of others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>less responsive to cues and direction</li> <li>missed social cues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>less responsive to cues and direction</li> <li>missed social cues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>little response to cues and direction</li> <li>aggressive or frozen</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>unaware of social group</li> </ul>
	<b>attention and focus</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>able to focus</li> <li>can reason</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>scattered thoughts</li> <li>unclear language</li> <li>increased alertness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>less processing</li> <li>unclear language</li> <li>focus on threat</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>focus on threat</li> <li>no attention on group</li> <li>very unclear language</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>focus solely on threat</li> <li>very little language</li> </ul>
Types of thinking?	<b>What part of brain is used?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>neo-cortex/cortex</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>cortex/limbic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>limbic/midbrain</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>midbrain/brainstem</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>brainstem/autonomic</li> </ul>
	<b>How far forward can you think?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>extended future</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>days/hours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>hours/minutes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>minutes/seconds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>loss of sense of time</li> </ul>
	<b>What kind of thinking can you do?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>abstract thinking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>concrete thinking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>emotional thinking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>reactive behaviour</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>reflexive behaviour</li> </ul>
	<b>What kind of learning can you do?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>new learning</li> <li>make connections</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>return to the familiar</li> <li>calming strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>no new learning</li> <li>calming strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>no learning possible</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>no learning possible</li> </ul>
What helps?	<b>Strategies for helping someone reach calm</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>use this time to develop calming strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>use a calm voice</li> <li>change environment</li> <li>return to safety and predictability</li> <li>use shorter responses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>use a calm voice</li> <li>change environment</li> <li>remove trigger</li> <li>use short responses</li> <li>allow movement</li> <li>give something to hold</li> <li>regulate breathing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>use a calm voice</li> <li>change environment</li> <li>remove trigger</li> <li>use short responses</li> <li>allow movement</li> <li>give something to hold</li> <li>regulate breathing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>bring in safe, calm, familiar people</li> <li>change environment</li> <li>remove trigger</li> <li>use very few words</li> <li>give something to hold</li> <li>regulate breathing</li> </ul>

(Adapted from CBE, 2017)