

Trauma-Informed Social Emotional Learning (TI-SEL) Starts with You

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"Like it or not, English teachers stand at the very heart of the most crucial educational, cultural, and political issues of our time." (Pennycook, 2001, p.19)

This quote resonates deeply, especially today, where we often feel overwhelmed yet compelled to take action. Our profession is facing unprecedented challenges, unlike any I've experienced in my 30 years of teaching. However, I know that TESOL educators are an extraordinary community—compassionate, caring, and dedicated. In recent years, many educators have begun integrating Trauma-Informed Social-Emotional Learning (TI-SEL) into their classrooms, recognizing that supporting our students' well-being is essential for their academic success and life beyond school. While we've long understood the value of teacher self-care, it often took a backseat as we focused on helping others. Today, though, we must prioritize our own well-being. After all, leading a TI-SEL class can only be effective if we truly embody these practices and experience their benefits ourselves.

Through my experiences teaching newcomers with refugee backgrounds in the United States and Canada, as well as conducting virtual training for English teachers in Ukraine and Afghanistan, I've come to realize that many of us are neglecting our own mental and emotional health while navigating our busy and, for some, dangerous lives. Many individuals fear connecting with themselves, worried about confronting difficult emotions. However, I've found that when a safe space for self-care is created, both students and educators are open to growth and transformation. When educators focus on their own wellbeing, they foster an environment that allows for healing and change.

Our Role as Educators

"You should not diagnose your students; you are not a therapist." - [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)], 2021, p.3)

As educators, we are not therapists, nor are we expected to serve in that capacity. However, many of us enter this field driven by compassion and a genuine desire to make a meaningful difference in our students' lives. We often go beyond our roles to support students—listening to their challenges, offering guidance, and helping them navigate difficulties. How could we not? I have been that teacher, and I do not regret the support I've provided. Yet, such dedication must not come at the expense of our own health.

"You don't need to be a therapist to be a healing presence." — Canadian Center for Victims of Torture

The Rising Need for Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in Schools

One widely adopted approach in education is social-emotional learning (SEL), which focuses on developing the skills individuals need to be healthy, happy, successful, and responsible (Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba, 2021). The acronym "SEL" was established in 1994 (CASEL, 2020b), although practices related to SEL can be traced back to the early 1900s (Osher et al., 2016). Numerous frameworks exist, such as the CASEL framework, but educators can customize these frameworks to suit their teaching

environment, the needs of their students, and their personal teaching philosophy.

Moreover, educators are not only responsible for teaching these competencies; they must also model them. How can we authentically support our students' emotional needs if we are not in tune with our own? Without self-awareness and effective self-management of our emotional states, we risk struggling to support students effectively and may even experience burnout or secondary trauma. As the Center for Victims of Torture aptly states, "You don't need to be a therapist to be a healing presence." By prioritizing our own emotional well-being and practicing self-care, we become better equipped to serve as co-regulators for our students. In this role, we can provide a calming, grounding influence that supports their emotional growth and resilience.

Trauma-Informed Teaching: What Is It and Why Is It Important?

Trauma-informed education is an approach that acknowledges the impact of trauma on students and fosters a supportive, safe environment to help them heal, learn, and thrive. TI-SEL is a concept that has evolved over time, drawing on the fields of trauma-informed care, education, and social-emotional learning. While no single individual can be credited with coining the term, various educators and organizations have contributed to its development. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has also played a significant role in promoting and integrating trauma-informed practices into social-emotional learning frameworks.

In the adult ESOL classroom, as in many others, we often have students who have experienced trauma in the past and continue to face stressors related to life post-COVID, financial instability, the resettlement process, and more. Trauma can be difficult to detect, but understanding how it manifests in individuals allows us to recognize it in both ourselves and our students. Dr. Gabor Mate's definition of trauma resonates deeply with me: "Trauma is not what happens to you, it is what happens inside you" (p.22). If trauma is what happens within a person, it underscores the importance of self-awareness in connecting with our bodies and recognizing how stress and trauma are stored. This understanding can empower us to explore ways to release it.

Trauma-Informed Teaching: A Personal Evolution

My journey into trauma-informed teaching and later trauma-informed training was gradual, rooted in personal experiences that shaped my perspective. For years, I worked with Afghan women in Southern California who had experienced profound trauma. The complexity of their emotional and psychological state manifested in health issues, difficulty focusing, and, at times, strong emotional outbursts, such as crying or needing to leave class.

In this context, I was fortunate to have a psychiatrist join our class nine times over nine months, offering a space where the women could share their challenges and learn coping strategies. Later, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a psychologist supported the class via Zoom, providing valuable insights and several somatic activities that we continued to integrate into our classes and that the students reported using outside the classroom.

The significance of having professionals alongside us—those who understood the psychological and emotional impacts of trauma—was eye-opening. I learned how to ease my own autonomic nervous system, and I saw how much more at ease the women became, opening up and being receptive to learning. It was during this time that I knew I had to continue integrating these strategies into my own life and in all my classes.

While the women were opening up during these sessions, often crying and always fully engaged, it wasn't until they started informally sharing situations outside of the classroom that I truly began to understand the effectiveness of the strategies. For example, one woman in my class had recently gotten her driver's license but lost control of her car and crashed into a restaurant. She was under tremendous stress, and when I asked how she was coping, I expected her to say she was praying. Instead, she responded, "I'm breathing." When I asked her to explain, she said, "Like Dr. Mary Ann taught us." Another woman shared that she now starts her days by stepping out onto her balcony and taking 10 deep breaths, and that it really helps her through the rest of the day.

I incorporate TI-SEL strategies into my class in various ways. For instance, we often begin with a circle format to foster a sense of community and check in with our feelings. For my beginner-level students, I might draw five emojis on the board representing different emotions: happy, sad, angry, tired, and stressed. Each student can then share how they feel and why, providing me with insight into their emotional state and creating an opportunity to shift the class energy. If most students express feeling tired or stressed, we might engage in some stretching or movement exercises to help them relax and become more prepared to learn. For students with a higher level of English, I may introduce a feelings wheel, allowing them to better identify and articulate their emotions.

Teaching in Conflict Zones: A New Challenge for Educators

When I had the opportunity to work with the Department of State as an English Language Specialist, I conducted workshops on SEL for Ukrainian educators. This experience deepened my understanding of the educator's role, especially in high-stress, high-trauma environments. The Ukrainian educators I worked with were teaching students who, like them, were living through an ongoing conflict. For many of these teachers, the situation was not just difficult—it was life-threatening. The idea of creating a trauma-sensitive learning environment seemed superficial, as the educators couldn't exactly create a safe space for learning.

In this context, I quickly realized that SEL could not be separated from trauma-informed teaching. The workshop I provided—"Educator Self-Awareness: Restoring Safety in Ourselves"—reflected this focus. We explored what trauma is and how our bodies and minds react to it. Teachers in these settings, living through immense stress and trauma, were often expected to provide emotional support without being given space to process their own feelings.

At the end of one session, a professor, nearly in tears, asked how she could motivate her students. One of her students had shared that he would be going to the front lines, possibly not to return, and was uninterested in learning English. To me, the question wasn't about the student—it was about her. I asked her to draw a circle and list everything she could control in her classroom. She wrote things like: my lesson, how I show up, and so on. Then, she drew an outer circle for things she couldn't control. That's when she realized she couldn't control her students' motivation, how they showed up, or what was happening in their lives. I also reminded her to take care of her own well-being. It is in times like these that we must be compassionate while also being mindful of our limitations.

Starting with Us

Creating a trauma-informed Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) classroom isn't just about implementing strategies for students; it's also crucial to apply these principles to our own lives as educators. The following list includes ideas and approaches I've learned over the years through reading and personal practice. Drawing from insights shared by numerous researchers, coaches, and transformational leaders, these strategies have had the most profound impact on me. While this may not be an exhaustive or

revolutionary list, these approaches have greatly enhanced my well-being and have become integral to both my classes and training:

1. **Practice Gratitude:** Cultivating gratitude for yourself and encouraging your students to do the same can create a positive atmosphere. Take a moment each day to reflect on what you appreciate about yourself and your journey. This is especially impactful at the end of the day.
2. **Engage in Activities You Love:** Make time for activities that bring you joy, whether it's enjoying tea with a friend, going for a walk, or listening to your favorite music. These moments of self-care can recharge your energy.
3. **Be Compassionate with Yourself:** Treat yourself with the same kindness and understanding that you offer to others. Pay attention to your inner dialogue—challenge negative thoughts and replace them with affirming ones.
4. **Incorporate One-Minute Meditations:** Taking brief moments throughout the day to meditate can significantly improve your mental clarity and emotional stability. Even a minute of mindfulness can make a difference.
5. **Listen to Your Body:** Tune into your physical sensations. When you notice feelings arise, pause and ask yourself: 1) What am I feeling? 2) Where in my body am I feeling this? 3) How can I breathe into this sensation? 4) What message(s) is my body communicating? 5) What do I need at this moment?
6. **Set Boundaries:** Learn to say "no" gently but firmly to tasks that are not essential or fulfilling. Establishing boundaries is crucial for maintaining your mental health and ensuring that you have the energy to support your students.
7. **Build a Supportive Community:** Surround yourself with people who uplift and encourage you. Whether it's friends, colleagues, or a professional network, having a support system can provide invaluable emotional resources.
8. **Seek Professional Help:** If you find yourself struggling, don't hesitate to reach out to a therapist or coach. Professional guidance can offer you the tools to navigate challenges more effectively.
9. **Focus on What You Can Control:** Regularly remind yourself of the aspects of your life that you can influence. This practice can help reduce anxiety and increase your sense of agency.
10. **Stay Active:** Incorporate movement into your daily routine. Whether it's dancing, walking, playing a sport, or skipping rope, physical activity is a powerful way to boost your mood and energy levels.
11. **Infuse Joy and Laughter:** Make it a priority to bring joy and laughter into your life and your classroom. Share funny stories, engage in light-hearted activities, and foster an environment where positivity thrives.

By integrating these practices into our daily lives, we not only enhance our own well-being but also create a more nurturing environment for our students. Self-care is not a luxury; it is a necessary foundation for effective teaching and learning.

Conclusion: Embracing Self-Care in the Teaching Profession

Educators are lifelong learners. While attending professional development to improve our teaching strategies is necessary and exciting, we must also prioritize our own self-care. This means finding the time and space to nurture ourselves. By prioritizing our emotional well-being, we can rise to the challenges of our time and show up for our students in a healthy state of mind, ultimately co-creating a more resilient and empathetic educational community.

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An Invitation: Join our Transformative Circle

Transformative Circle is a monthly, one-hour virtual gathering hosted by Sherry MacKay and Tarana Patel. It's a safe and supportive space where educators can explore their identities in today's challenging world. Through Social Emotional Learning (SEL), self-care, reflection, and practical strategies, these circles help participants grow personally and professionally while focusing on well-being and positive change. Whether you want to reconnect with yourself, gain new insights, or find actionable ways to make a difference, this space is for you.

Monthly Meeting Date, Time, and Location:

The second Tuesday of each month via Zoom at 07:00 a.m. Pacific Time (US and Canada).

Register here: <https://esolwithtlc.com/transformative-circles>

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