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Lala Hamidli
National Aviation Academy
lala_hamidli@yahoo.com

IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Abstract

Trauma is like an emotional shock – an experience that is too overwhelming to process during or immediately after the traumatic event or situation. Normally, with support and over time the person naturally recovers from the trauma and can integrate their traumatic experience as part of their personal history. The trauma becomes a memory that can be thought of and described. When someone is traumatized as in PTSD, instead of a conscious memory the trauma continues to exist in the present as physical sensations, such as fear, panic, and rage. The person may not be able to connect these feelings to anything that has happened. Such disturbing sensations and feelings become a threat in themselves, so all aspects of everyday life are organised to avoid situations that may trigger them. Trauma during the early years can be particularly damaging because the child's brain is not fully developed. Therefore, the natural development process can also be disrupted and distorted. Trauma alters patterns in the brain. Chemicals such as adrenaline and cortisone are produced in excess, initially as a necessary survival response, i.e. to prepare a person's body to take flight from the threat. Trauma that is repeated over time, often in many different forms, such as physical, emotional and sexual abuse, as well as neglect – becomes what is known as complex trauma. This can have a profound effect on a child's psychological, biological and social functioning.

Keywords: *trauma, language learning, stress, second language, acquisition*

Lalə Həmidli
Milli Aviasiya Akademiyası
lala_hamidli@yahoo.com

Travmanın dil mənimsənilməsinə təsiri

Xülasə

Travma qəza, zorlama və ya təbii fəlakət kimi dəhşətli bir hadisəyə emosional reaksiyadır. Hadisədən dərhal sonra şok və inkar xarakterikdir. Daha uzunmüddətli reaksiyalara gözlənilməz emosiyalar, geri dönüşlər, gərgin münasibətlər və hətta baş ağrısı və ya ürəkbulanma kimi fiziki simptomlar daxildir. Bu hisslər normal olsa da, bəzi insanlar həyatlarını davam etdirməkdə çətinlik çəkirlər. Psixoloqlar onlara emosiyalarını idarə etməyin konstruktiv yollarını tapmağa kömək edə bilər. Travmatik təcrübələr keçirmiş tələbələr öyrənmə çətinlikləri ilə birbaşa əlaqəli olan narahatlıq, zəif konsentrasiya və yaddaş problemləri kimi simptomlarla qarşılaşa bilərlər. Horsman təklif edir ki, pedaqoqlar travmatik təcrübələr keçirmiş şagirdlərin müəyyən edilməsinə diqqət yetirməkdənsə, bütün tələbələr üçün öyrənməni daha təhlükəsiz etmək üçün yollar tapırlar. Aşağıdakı tövsiyələr ESL müəllimlərinə təhlükəsiz və məhsuldar öyrənmə mühiti yaratmağa kömək etmək üçün nəzərdə tutulub.

Açar sözlər: *travma, dil öyrənilməsi, stress, ikinci dil, qavrama*

Introduction

Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea.

While these feelings are normal, some people have difficulty moving on with their lives. Psychologists can help them find constructive ways of managing their emotions (1)

Here are some symptoms that very young children exposed to trauma may exhibit. You can find poor verbal skills, with delayed language or reduced intelligibility. When we talk about trauma - maltreatment, abuse, and neglect - it is important to recognize that the majority of trauma we see with young children is due to neglect. Neglect, of course, plays a very important role in the lack of language skills in these children (Horsman, 2000).

If there is speech or language delay with trauma exposure, there are many things we need to look at. Obviously, we need to look at hearing. But we also see learning disabilities, which I am sure many of you are familiar with. With trauma, children have much more difficulty focusing on learning in school. They have much more difficulty being still and paying attention. And if they experience neglect or maltreatment, they often do not feel very good about themselves. That comes into play in the first four years of life. I know that other speakers in this virtual conference have talked about brain development, which plays an important role. So, how a young child feels about himself is incorporated into cognitive development and language development (Isserlis, 2000).

How does trauma impact a child's development in general? You have heard already, in this conference, about the neuroscience and the neurobiological effects on the brain. One of the references listed at the end of the course is from the Harvard Center for the Developing Child. They have taken on translating the complex science of early childhood development into very understandable material related to stress, trauma, and toxic stress. I am not a neuroscientist, and I depend on their translation of that material, which is really useful for those of us who are not neuroscience specialists (Kerka, 2002).

Trauma obviously impacts the early attachment relationships, and early relationships have an impact on all later relationships; therefore, how attachments develop early on is very important. One of the effects of trauma exposure in a child is dysregulation, both in emotions and in behaviors.

I like to think about trauma impacting young children using the following analogy. I am sure all of you are familiar with the book, *The Little Engine That Could*, where the train is trying to make it up the track. If you conceptualize trauma as an event that can push that train off the track, then our role as clinicians is to help that child get back on track. Essentially, trauma derails the normal developmental trajectory, and can contribute to developmental delays, which is obviously what we are talking about today. It can also contribute to a negative sense of self, and difficulty in forming attachments in both early and later years of life.

Language acquisition is an ordinary process that human beings go through. This cognitive ability that enables us to communicate needs, emotions, and feelings is what differentiates us from other species (McDonald, 2000: 690-696).

Language acquisition occurs early in an individual's life. During the critical period, the child goes through the rapid development of language, and it is a crucial time for the child to acquire the language which would be hard if passed this period, hence the name. In this period, the child may face a few obstacles like a trauma that could affect his/her language acquisition or even his/her second language learning in the future.

In this article, the main focus will be on how childhood trauma or PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder) affects the process of acquiring or learning a language, and what should be taken into account when teaching a student that has had some traumatic experiences in the past.

Language Acquisition is the process through which human beings cognitively pick up their mother tongue through an innate ability.

Language Learning: Scholars have distinguished between language acquisition and language learning as the latter refers to the process of learning another language subsequent to having the native language after acquiring it.

Regardless of race, sex, or religion, all human beings are prone to experiencing stressful events throughout their lives, but what kind of trauma exactly are we talking about? It is not the everyday situations like losing a class competition as a kid, but the type of severe stress situations like

repeated physical or emotional abuse, bullying, neglect, or even more significant tragedies like war. These kinds of recurring traumatic experiences can significantly affect the individual's health to the point of higher risk of chronic diseases and shorter life expectancy.

According to (American Psychiatric Association, 2013: 67), one of the reasons for developing or worsening child onset fluency disorder or commonly known as stuttering or stammering is family dynamics as having high-stress levels at home, high expectations for the child can contribute to a certain level to stuttering and make it harder for the child to communicate properly.

Many studies have been conducted to examine refugee ESL students' process and competency compared to students that have not faced the same traumatic experiences. The study of (Stevens, 2001: 81-98) showed that Cambodian refugees in Australia experienced symptoms that relate to depression and post-traumatic stress disorder and that they experienced symptoms that directly affected their cognitive and learning functions like poor concentration, and loss of memory (Ying 2001: 65-78) also revealed a case of a refugee having poor concentration, severe headache, and nightmares that all ultimately affected his learning ability in general, and not only his language learning process.

English language teachers should take into consideration the social and psychological situations of their students, and not all students have had similar life experiences.

(Medley, 2012: 86) Offered solutions that could help teachers deal with students that have gone through traumatic experiences.

- Firstly, in order to have multiple channels for self-expression and language learning, teachers should include intelligences that may be neglected in traditional language classrooms as a way to address the needs of trauma-affected students.

- Secondly, he stated that teachers should integrate language instruction with self-expression. Thirdly, he also added that teachers should include content-based language instruction that explains the trauma healing process.

These cases and studies only show that trauma not only affects the individual mentally and physically but also that could affect cognitive learning abilities and could slow down the learning process, especially in a language which is the main and most clear way of communication that distinguishes human beings from other species.

Conclusion

Trauma affects the learning brain. Attention, memory, the autonomic nervous system, and other parts of the body all show signs of this type of suffering. Generally, the result in the adult ESL classroom is slower, lower-level language acquisition. Students may get stuck, frustrated, or vanish. Though best practices are still being identified, teacher-led tasks aimed at increasing attention, enhancing memory and developing strategies to improve emotional regulation may assist in aiding students who are experiencing difficulties in the classroom due to traumatic exposure.

Signs of trauma in a child or adult with severe learning disabilities who cannot communicate may be; strange reactions to everyday situations, using actions or words they did not use before, withdrawal from others or clinging to someone, and an increase in challenging behaviour.

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