

Narrative Review of Trauma-Informed Approaches in Teaching English to Young Learners

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Abstract

This narrative review has gathered some of the most recent studies and research available that focus on the trauma-informed teaching of English to the youth. The search for these studies as well as the method applied here seem to parallel the best practices of the past studies. The approach of this study is multidisciplinary, having at its core the findings in either psychology, education, or linguistics. The result of all this is a better understanding of how a child's cognitive, emotional, and linguistic development may be affected by being exposed to trauma-like, for example, when children witness violence, or when they are neglected, forced to leave their homes, or live in chronic stress. The review points out that such traumatic experiences can lead to the impairment of basic cognitive functions such as attention and memory, as well as language acquisition, and consequently, negatively impact the performance and participation of children in EFL/ESL classes. The study takes into account existing literature and theoretical perspectives, such as the SAMHSA model and the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), in order to bring out the basic components of trauma-informed schooling, which are safety, trust, empowerment, collaboration, and cultural responsiveness. Academic articles report that teachers who know about trauma and are able to structure their lessons and achieve a positive and inclusive climate are in fact major factors in fostering students' robustness and initiative. Yet, the majority of the currently reported literature has been carried out in Western countries or in countries with limited financial and material resources, and the studies on young learners in low-resource and multi-lingual settings have been very scarce. The review ends with the remark that, as traumas differ depending on the culture and the socioeconomic setting, trauma-informed teaching remains one way for educators to help traumatized students.

Keywords: Trauma-informed education; young learners; English language teaching, multilingual classrooms; emotional safety.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is well established in the scientific literature that trauma and post-traumatic stress can significantly affect learning and educational engagement. Trauma is defined as any experience that "impairs the proper functioning of the person's stress-response system, making it more reactive or sensitive" (Supin, 2016, p. 5). Such experiences often lead to an erosion of trust, loss of feeling in control, disconnection, and a breakdown in meaning in one's life (Herman, 1997). When trauma responses become prolonged, intrusive, and disruptive, they may be classified as disorders; a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) may be appropriate under these conditions. From a learning perspective, trauma and PTSD have been shown to disrupt attention, memory, and verbal learning (Wilson et al., 2024). Young language learners who have experienced trauma are particularly at risk of cognitive, emotional, and social difficulties. Empirical studies indicate that exposure to trauma can negatively impact children's language and social development, underscoring the need for trauma-sensitive educational interventions (Wilson et al., 2024). In addition, the severity of PTSD symptoms has been found to have an inverse relationship with the rate of second language acquisition (Theorell & S ndergaard, 2004). Thus, teacher awareness and understanding of post-traumatic stress is essential in language teaching contexts. The prevalence of trauma is nontrivial in ESL/EFL classrooms. In a large study sampling nearly 70,000 people from 24 countries, over 70% of respondents reported experiencing some form of psychological trauma (Kessler et al., 2017). Although many individuals do not go on to develop full PTSD, approximately 4% of the world's adult population will experience PTSD at some point in their lives (Koenen et al., 2017), with elevated rates among women, refugees, and veterans (Wallace, 2020). It follows those students from these populations are likely to be present in English language classrooms and may thus

require different pedagogical approaches. Trauma-Informed Education (TIE) is an approach in which the effects of traumatic experiences are recognized, and learning environments are designed to accommodate them. The concept is grounded in evidence that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) can have long-lasting negative effects on cognitive, emotional, and social growth (Mason et al., 2021). Despite growing recognition of TIE, many ESL/EFL teachers have not received formal training in trauma-informed teaching (Kostourous et al., 2023). Consequently, some classroom practices and policies, though well-intentioned, may unintentionally exacerbate post-traumatic stress responses and hinder learning (Wilson et al., 2024). While teachers are not therapists, they must draw on psychological research in curriculum design, pedagogy, and assessment to reduce psychological stress in educational settings (Baik et al., 2017). Existing research has focused on relational factors such as teacher-student rapport, physical classroom layout, and avoidance of triggering materials (Wilson et al., 2024). Several studies consistently find that building trust, demonstrating empathy, and fostering individual connection between teachers and young learners are critical to successful learning outcomes (Bajwa et al., 2020; Ilyas, 2019). Attention to learners' emotional well-being and offering practical, non-academic support (e.g. addressing out-of-school stressors) are also associated with increased motivation, confidence, and sense of belonging. However, there remains limited detail in the literature on how such strategies are operationalized: how, exactly, these supports are structured, under what conditions they work best, and what components are most effective.

More recent evidence also sheds light on resilience among multilingual learners facing high traumatic stress. A cross-sectional study of Latinx English language learners revealed that in contexts of high traumatic stress, these learners often showed relatively higher skills in self-awareness, internal resources for problem solving, and stronger perceptions of school support compared to their non-ELL peers (BMC Public Health, 2025). Such findings suggest that school context and support mechanisms play a moderating role in how trauma affects learning (BMC Public Health, 2025). Nevertheless, gaps persist. There is scant empirical research focusing on young learners (children) in primary school settings in non-Western and low-resource contexts. There is also a paucity of studies that include the direct voice of young learners themselves about how trauma-informed practices affect their learning. Moreover, few studies disaggregate which elements of trauma-informed pedagogy (teacher training, classroom routines, curriculum adaptations, emotional supports) make the greatest difference in learning outcomes for English language acquisition. Thus, this narrative review examines trauma-informed approaches in teaching English to young learners, with the following aims: (1) to synthesize current empirical evidence on what trauma-informed practices are used and how they are implemented in English language classrooms for young learners; (2) to identify the mechanisms by which these practices influence language learning, emotional well-being, and classroom engagement; and (3) to

illuminate research gaps and propose recommendations for future research and practice, especially in under-studied cultural contexts and with young learner voice.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A. *Definition of trauma and trauma-informed practice*

In the nineteenth century, trauma was often interpreted as a manifestation of personal moral weakness, particularly among soldiers fatigued by combat. This perception persisted for nearly a century before trauma was formally recognized as a clinical condition with debilitating symptoms and effects by the American Psychiatric Association in the 1980s (Thomas et al., 2019). The understanding of trauma's lifelong effects, particularly the prevalence of young people in education who have experienced significant adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), originated in the seminal work of Felitti et al. (1998). Subsequent research by Anda et al. (2006) contributed to the development of the concept of trauma-informed practice (Hickey et al., 2020). Early studies on ACEs, which surveyed thousands of adults, revealed that early adverse experiences had enduring negative effects on health, employment, and educational attainment, with consequences that extended across generations (Felitti et al., 1998; Anda et al., 2006). Specific studies examining the cognitive and educational consequences of abuse demonstrated a complex combination of negative effects on concentration, cognition, and learning capacity, as well as impairments in essential social and emotional relationship skills (Perkins & Graham-Bermann, 2012). Further investigations analyzed the number of ACEs individuals had endured, finding a direct causal relationship between these experiences and later mental and physical health, as well as educational and occupational outcomes (Bellis et al., 2016). The original definitions of ACEs included experiences of sexual, physical, or emotional abuse; witnessing domestic violence; household substance abuse; mental illness or suicidal behavior within the family; and the incarceration of a family member.

Findings from these studies consistently demonstrated that adverse childhood experiences have profoundly detrimental effects on long-term health and wellbeing. Negative life outcomes such as substance misuse, poor housing and employment conditions, and elevated rates of depression and suicide were directly associated with the number, intensity, and duration of ACEs experienced during childhood. Later research offered a more nuanced and contextualized understanding, emphasizing that trauma must be examined within the individual's broader social and environmental circumstances. As Gorski (2020) notes, "The best trauma-informed educational practices are rooted in anti-racism and, more broadly, in the struggle against all forms of oppression—not simply in helping students cope with discrete traumatic events, nor in assuming that every student living in poverty has necessarily experienced abuse at home. If I am not actively anti-racist, I am, in fact, not trauma-informed." Recent studies in resilience research highlight that an exclusive focus on individual competence or deficits is

limited. Instead, the broader effects of intersectionality on individuals must be acknowledged (Romero et al., 2018). Within this framework, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs have received increasing attention for their role in fostering positive development and reducing negative experiences among learners (Taylor et al., 2017). The notion of “widespread trauma as a public health crisis” further underscores that unresolved childhood trauma, when carried into adulthood, can exert substantial negative impacts at the societal level (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). Research has shown that living in conditions of extreme poverty, neglect, abuse, and addiction has devastating consequences for children and families a finding consistently recognized by major institutions (Radford et al., 2013). A significant shift has occurred from viewing such issues merely as matters requiring “social service” or “medical” intervention toward a broader understanding of the pervasive levels of trauma within marginalized communities. This paradigm shift has been extensively discussed by Nadine Burke Harris, who, in her well-known TED Talk, described her experience as a pediatrician working in one of San Francisco’s most deprived neighborhoods (Burke Harris, 2014).

B. Principles of trauma-informed education

Trauma-informed education is an approach that emphasizes understanding the psychological, emotional, and behavioral impacts of adverse experiences on students’ learning and development. It seeks to create a safe, supportive, and empowering learning environment that minimizes retraumatization and promotes a sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and psychological well-being (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016; Thomas et al., 2019). The first foundational principle of this approach is the establishment of physical and emotional safety. Educational environments should be structured to ensure that learners are free from judgment, shame, or threat. Teachers can enhance this sense of safety through predictability, consistency, and transparency in rules, expectations, and consequences (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). The second principle focuses on trust and transparency. Trust is cultivated through honest communication, mutual respect, and behavioral consistency. Educators can build students’ trust when they demonstrate integrity in decision-making and reliability in their commitments (Brunzell et al., 2016). Moreover, positive and supportive relationships between teachers and students, as well as among peers, play a crucial role in restoring a sense of belonging and social acceptance. Supportive interactions from teachers and peers can help mitigate the negative effects of trauma and foster emotional recovery. Within this framework, collaboration and empowerment are also central. Providing students with choices, listening to their voices, and respecting their autonomy foster a sense of control and self-efficacy. Empowerment helps rebuild self-worth and autonomy, both of which are often compromised by traumatic experiences (Carello & Butler, 2015). In addition, trauma-informed

education emphasizes cultural, historical, and gender sensitivity. Recognizing and respecting students’ cultural and identity backgrounds not only enhance their sense of acceptance but also prevent the reproduction of exclusion or discrimination within the learning environment (Chafouleas et al., 2021). Finally, flexibility and responsiveness are essential features of trauma-informed pedagogy. Educational systems must be capable of adapting to the diverse needs of students, and teachers should be able to identify signs of stress or atypical emotional responses and respond appropriately. Developing resilience skills among students is an integral part of trauma-informed teaching (Brunzell et al., 2019).

III. TRAUMA AND YOUNG LEARNERS

A. Common sources of trauma in childhood

Childhood adversities have increasingly drawn attention and are recognized as a significant public health concern. Exposure to psychological trauma may include “actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence,” which may be directly experienced, witnessed, learned to have happened to a close other, or repeatedly exposed to the details of traumatic events. Estimates of the prevalence of psychological trauma experienced during childhood or adolescence vary depending on the type of traumatic event (e.g., physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, witnessing violence, natural disasters) and the method and timing of trauma assessment, ranging from 4% to 71% (Bosqui, Marshoud, & Shannon, 2017). Moreover, prevalence rates vary depending on sociopolitical contexts, as some countries affected by war, political instability, or natural disasters report substantially higher levels of trauma exposure. Beyond individual effects, childhood trauma has intergenerational and societal implications, impacting mental health, educational attainment, social relationships, and career opportunities across the lifespan (Felitti et al., 1998; Anda et al., 2006). Therefore, understanding and identifying childhood trauma is of critical importance for teachers, educational practitioners, and policymakers, particularly in second language learning contexts. Such awareness facilitates the design of trauma-informed learning environments, which can prevent retraumatization and enhance resilience, motivation, and academic engagement among language learners (Mason et al., 2021; Kostouros et al., 2023).

B. Impact of trauma on cognitive, emotional, and social development

Exposure to traumatic events can disrupt brain development and exert immediate as well as lifelong adverse effects on social, emotional, and physical health, including deficits in executive functioning, developmental delays, behavioral health problems, difficulties in emotional and behavioral regulation, academic performance, IQ, school-related behavioral issues, delinquency, substance abuse, and psychiatric disorders (Anda et al., 2006). A systematic review specifically examining school-related outcomes associated with exposure to traumatic events identified 44 studies

investigating cognitive functioning, 34 studies examining academic performance, and 24 studies assessing socio-emotional-behavioral functioning (Perfect et al., 2016). Their findings indicate that youth who have experienced trauma are at significant risk for impairments across various cognitive domains, including IQ, memory, attention, and language/verbal skills; exhibit poorer academic performance and school-related behaviors such as discipline issues, absenteeism, and dropout; and show elevated rates of behavioral problems and internalizing symptoms. Exposure to different types of traumas has been associated with varying and complex adverse outcomes. For instance, Kira et al. (2012) examined African-American and Iraqi refugee youth and found that distinct trauma types differentially affected specific components of cognitive functioning, including perceptual reasoning, working memory, processing speed, and verbal comprehension. Similarly, another study investigating the effects of various trauma types reported that exposure to violence was associated with depression, separation anxiety, and behavioral problems, whereas exposure to non-interpersonal traumatic events was linked to phobic anxiety (Briggs-Gowan et al., 2010). Moreover, evidence suggests that the effects of trauma are cumulative, such that youth experiencing a greater number of traumatic events are at higher risk for adverse outcomes and more complex symptomatology in adulthood (Hodges et al., 2013). Duke et al. (2010) analyzed the 2007 Minnesota Student Survey data and identified a “significant positive relationship between each adverse event and delinquent behaviors for both girls and boys” (p. e782). The impact of cumulative trauma extends beyond frequency, as the type, severity, and duration of trauma also play a critical role. For example, childhood sexual abuse has been shown to be more strongly associated with negative adult outcomes compared to other forms of abuse and neglect (Bosqui et al., 2014).

C. Specific challenges for second/foreign language learners

Traumatic experiences can significantly affect executive functioning, working memory, attention, and language abilities. These cognitive difficulties may lead to academic underachievement, disruptive classroom behaviors, and challenges in social interactions. For instance, research has indicated that children exposed to traumatic experiences often exhibit impairments in attention, concentration, memory, and language skills, which in turn can result in lower academic performance, behavioral difficulties in class, and problems in establishing peer relationships (Eastman, 2024). Trauma exposure can also induce anxiety and stress in language learners, further impacting their linguistic abilities, memory, and focus, thereby disrupting the learning process. Studies have shown that heightened anxiety levels can directly reduce language performance, complicating acquisition and classroom engagement. Moreover, young learners who have experienced trauma may encounter difficulties in communication and social interaction. These challenges can lead to social withdrawal and negatively affect language learning outcomes. Evidence indicates that such learners are

particularly vulnerable to deficits in attention, concentration, memory, and language skills, with subsequent consequences for academic achievement and classroom behavior (Eastman, 2024). To support language learners affected by traumatic experiences, implementing trauma-informed educational approaches is essential. Such approaches include the creation of safe and predictable learning environments, fostering learner trust, teaching emotional regulation skills, and employing positive and supportive language. Empirical studies demonstrate that trauma-informed pedagogy can enhance academic performance and mitigate behavioral challenges among learners (Eastman, 2024). Teachers may encounter several challenges when working with students who have experienced trauma. These include limited awareness and training in trauma-informed practices, insufficient resources and time, resistance to pedagogical change, and difficulties in identifying and responding to the diverse needs of learners. Research highlights those educators often face obstacles in recognizing and addressing the specific requirements of language learners affected by trauma, which can compromise the effectiveness of classroom interventions (Eastman, 2024).

IV. TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES IN EDUCATION

A. Core elements of trauma-informed teaching

Childhood adversities have increasingly garnered attention as a widespread issue with profound and long-lasting consequences for children’s psychological, emotional, and educational development (Munyadziwa & Makhado, 2025). Elementary school teachers are often at the frontline, observing the impact of psychological trauma on children’s behavioral and academic outcomes. However, many educators lack the necessary knowledge and resources to respond effectively to such cases (Jennings, 2018). This challenge is particularly pronounced in contexts where socioeconomic pressures exacerbate trauma exposure. Poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse, and collective violence are major contributors to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), placing children at risk for developmental delays. Childhood trauma is increasingly recognized as a public health concern with significant educational implications (Lloyd, 2018). In response to these challenges, countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom have implemented trauma-informed educational policies, encouraging schools to integrate trauma-sensitive practices within their curricula (Palluotto, 2023). Such practices typically involve the creation of safe and predictable environments, fostering student trust, and teaching emotional regulation skills (American Psychological Association, 2014). These approaches have demonstrated positive impacts on student engagement and academic performance, particularly among at-risk populations. The effectiveness of trauma-informed training for educators has been well documented, with evidence showing that teachers equipped to understand the effects of trauma are better able to respond with empathy and create supportive learning environments (Koslouski, 2022). Despite the success of these

policies in the U.S. and the U.K., their direct application in developing countries particularly in rural and resource-limited settings requires careful consideration. Educational systems in these contexts are shaped by unique historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors that differ markedly from those in developed nations. Limited resources, large class sizes, and insufficient access to psychosocial support services pose significant challenges to the direct implementation of Western models. Consequently, adapting these frameworks to local contexts, incorporating community-based perspectives, and culturally responsive practices is essential (Kazdin, 2017). For example, childhood adversities in South African schools are deeply intertwined with broader community-level traumas. The legacy of apartheid continues to shape systemic and structural inequalities, with poverty, unemployment, violence, and social instability remaining prevalent in many communities (Tsheole et al., 2024). These factors not only expose children to heightened risks but also normalize trauma within social environments, leading to complex behavioral and emotional challenges in schools. School-based violence perpetrated by peers, teachers, or other school community members further exacerbates the difficulty of creating safe and supportive learning environments (Sibanda, 2025). In this regard, Munyadziwa and Makhado (2025) employed a hybrid theoretical framework combining the SAMHSA trauma-informed model with a transformative approach. SAMHSA identifies key principles understanding, recognition, response, and prevention of re-traumatization that shape trauma-informed practices. The transformative perspective emphasizes empowerment, cultural responsiveness, and stakeholder collaboration, ensuring that curriculum development fosters systemic change rather than superficial interventions (Tsarkos, 2024). Consequently, teachers who receive trauma-informed training report greater confidence in managing classroom challenges and are more likely to employ strategies that prevent re-traumatization (Allen, 2025; Boggs-Lopez, 2025). Additionally, trauma-informed educational programs have been associated with enhanced teacher well-being and retention, as educators who feel equipped to address students' emotional needs experience lower stress and burnout (Reddig, 2025). Research also indicates that when teachers are unprepared to manage trauma-related behaviors, classroom environments can suffer, leading to disrupted learning and a sense of insecurity among students (Voelz, 2024).

B. Creating Supportive Classroom Environments to Foster Emotional Safety and Resilience

The study by Munyadziwa and Makhado (2025) indicated that teachers often lack comprehensive knowledge regarding childhood trauma and its impact on learning. Evidence from the reviewed studies suggests that trauma-informed practices are rarely integrated into teacher education programs. This is particularly concerning, given that teachers' understanding of trauma significantly influences the success of trauma-informed interventions. Adequate training enables teachers to recognize and respond effectively to trauma, while comprehensive programs enhance their capacity to implement

supportive strategies (Jennings, 2018; Koslouski, 2022; Reddig, 2025; Voelz, 2024). Consequently, it is recommended that teachers possess a clearer and standardized definition of childhood trauma and a thorough understanding of its various forms, including physical, emotional, sexual abuse, and neglect. Furthermore, teachers require guidance on identifying early signs and indicators of trauma, encompassing behavioral, emotional, and academic markers.

Curriculum content should include a dedicated module defining childhood trauma, highlighting its diverse forms and effects (e.g., abuse, neglect, witnessing violence). This ensures that teachers develop a coherent and comprehensive understanding of the concept, which is essential for the early identification of students at risk. Equally important is the inclusion of a module focused on recognizing early trauma indicators, emphasizing behavioral signs (e.g., aggression, withdrawal), emotional signals (e.g., crying, anxiety), and changes in academic performance (e.g., declining grades, reduced school engagement). Teachers trained to identify these signs in their students are better equipped to facilitate timely interventions.

C. Trauma-Informed Approaches in English Language Teaching (ELT)

When working with multilingual learners who have experienced trauma, establishing strong and foundational relationships is essential. Building a solid base of trust between teachers and students plays a crucial role in shaping the student's overall learning experience. Many students who have experienced trauma may have had prior negative experiences with teachers or other adults associated with the traumatic event. Therefore, it is critical for educators to acknowledge this dynamic and actively work to mitigate these negative associations. By doing so, teachers can first invest in creating a safe classroom environment that addresses students' social and emotional needs before expecting substantial academic learning and growth to occur (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016; Thomas et al., 2019). Students with trauma histories often have minds operating in a continuous state of fight, flight, or freeze, which can hinder engagement and learning. A safe and supportive classroom community is therefore vital for these learners, allowing them to lower their guard, take risks without fear of judgment, and be receptive to new learning experiences (Carello & Butler, 2015; Chafouleas et al., 2021). Importantly, creating such connections does not necessarily require a shared spoken language. Teachers can demonstrate attention, empathy, and responsiveness through nonverbal cues, consistent routines, and culturally responsive practices that signal care and safety. In addition, teachers must recognize that trauma responses can be triggered by everyday classroom interactions, transitions, or reminders of past experiences. As such, it is essential to monitor students carefully and consult with on-site professionals, such as school counselors or psychologists, when concerned about a student currently experiencing trauma or reacting to a prior traumatic experience. Collaborative support ensures that

interventions are appropriate, sensitive, and effective while maintaining the student's dignity and emotional safety (Jennings, 2018; Reddy et al., 2021). Moreover, recent research highlights that trauma-informed approaches in multilingual classrooms should integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) frameworks, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and restorative practices. These approaches not only support emotional regulation and resilience but also enhance engagement and academic outcomes for learners with complex trauma histories (Hernandez & Hodges, 2022; Dorado et al., 2016). Emphasizing relationship-building as a core instructional strategy enables teachers to respond to the cognitive, social, and emotional needs of multilingual learners, ultimately fostering both well-being and academic success.

V. EXERCISES FOR THE CLASSROOM

A. *Fostering Mutual Respect and Cultural Understanding*

Establishing a shared understanding of respect is a foundational principle in trauma-informed and culturally responsive pedagogy. For multilingual learners, conceptions of respect may differ significantly due to the intersection of national, linguistic, cultural, and faith-based identities. Educators are encouraged to initiate discussions with learners to explore what respect means within their individual and cultural frameworks, while also sharing their own perspectives and experiences. Such dialogical exchanges cultivate mutual understanding, reduce potential misinterpretations, and promote smoother communication during both positive interactions and moments of conflict (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2020). This approach reinforces inclusivity and relational safety, two key dimensions of trauma-informed education (Brunzell et al., 2018).

B. *Humanizing the Teacher–Student Relationship*

In trauma-informed classrooms, authentic human connection between educators and learners is vital for emotional trust and engagement. Teachers who share aspects of their personal journeys including passions, challenges, and growth experiences model vulnerability and resilience. This openness signals to students that imperfection is a normal part of learning and personal development, thereby normalizing struggle as part of the educational process (Jennings et al., 2019). Research demonstrates that when educators display authenticity and empathy, students are more likely to reciprocate openness about their difficulties and develop greater emotional regulation and classroom participation (Souers & Hall, 2019; Craig, 2021). By humanizing classroom relationships, educators create psychologically safe environments that facilitate both linguistic and emotional development among trauma-affected learners.

C. *Recognizing and Responding to Student Triggers*

Trauma-exposed learners may experience emotional or behavioral activation when confronted with certain triggers—stimuli associated with past distressing experiences. These triggers are highly individualized and may include loud

noises, perceived authority-based reprimands, or references to family structures that differ from their lived realities. Effective educators systematically observe and document these triggers to maintain classroom safety and predictability (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). Understanding students' emotional and behavioral cues allows for proactive planning, such as implementing de-escalation strategies and adaptive classroom routines that prevent retraumatization (Dorado et al., 2016). This trauma-informed attentiveness enhances learners' sense of control and stability, both of which are crucial for sustained language acquisition and academic engagement (McInerney & McKlinton, 2017).

D. *Patience and the Gradual Development of Trust*

Building authentic and trusting relationships with trauma-exposed multilingual learners is a gradual process that requires patience and consistency. Learners' readiness to engage, adapt, and express themselves varies widely depending on their personal histories, prior schooling, and sociocultural adjustment. Educators who exhibit patience and maintain supportive communication foster an atmosphere of safety that allows learners to progress at their own pace (Bath, 2015; Alisic et al., 2020). Over time, this trust-based dynamic contributes to improved self-regulation, academic resilience, and willingness to take linguistic risks essential for language learning. Therefore, patience should be viewed not merely as a personal virtue but as a professional competency in trauma-informed pedagogy (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016).

E. *Managing Emotional Responses in Trauma-Exposed Learners*

Educators working with trauma-exposed learners should recognize that students may express their emotions in diverse and sometimes challenging ways. Learners who have experienced trauma often struggle with a combination of psychological, emotional, and behavioral difficulties that can affect their language learning process. Emotional dysregulation, including anger or frustration, may manifest as defensive or disruptive behaviors during classroom activities. Maintaining a nonjudgmental attitude and approaching each day with a renewed perspective can help teachers provide consistent emotional stability and avoid perpetuating negative behavioral cycles among students (Cole et al., 2020; Jennings et al., 2019).

F. *Preventing Secondary Trauma and Teacher Burnout*

In trauma-informed educational contexts, educators themselves are at risk of developing secondary traumatic stress (STS) due to constant exposure to students' distressing experiences. Sustained exposure without adequate self-care practices can lead to emotional exhaustion, compassion fatigue, and burnout (Hydon et al., 2015; Osofsky et al., 2021). Therefore, implementing strategies for emotional self-regulation, setting healthy boundaries, and engaging in professional supervision or peer support is essential. Teachers' well-being directly influences their capacity to create

emotionally safe environments for students and to sustain effective pedagogical engagement (Brunzell et al., 2018).

G. Collaboration with Family and Community Systems

A trauma-informed approach to language education emphasizes the importance of collaboration with learners' home and community systems. Families provide valuable contextual insights regarding learners' lived experiences, preferences, and socio-emotional backgrounds, which can inform personalized educational interventions. Building strong partnerships between educators and families facilitates shared goal-setting and helps align classroom practices with learners' individual needs (Perry & Daniels, 2016; Chafouleas et al., 2021). This collaborative framework enhances both academic outcomes and emotional well-being among multilingual and trauma-affected learners.

H. Sensitivity to Custodial and Familial Contexts

Working with trauma-affected students requires awareness of their custodial and familial circumstances, which may be complex or unstable. Educators must identify the student's trusted and legally responsible adult to ensure appropriate communication and support. Since multilingual learners often come from diverse family structures—sometimes extended, reconstructed, or nontraditional—it is crucial to recognize and validate these configurations rather than impose normative assumptions about family composition (Alvarez et al., 2022). Understanding each learner's domestic context allows educators to prevent retraumatization and provide consistent emotional safety within the school setting.

I. Engaging in Restorative and Reflective Communication

When behavioral conflicts arise, restorative dialogue rather than punitive discipline is recommended. For trauma-exposed learners, public criticism, raised voices, or confrontational language can trigger defensive responses and escalate emotional distress. Instead, private one-on-one discussions that focus on the behavior's impact, recognize the learner's strengths, and propose alternative coping or communication strategies foster self-awareness and accountability (Gregory et al., 2016; Minahan, 2019). Moreover, adopting "I-statements" instead of accusatory language promotes empathy and mutual respect, allowing learners to process feedback without perceiving it as personal attack. Such interactions cultivate a classroom climate grounded in trust, safety, and emotional growth.

VI. CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS

A. Teacher training and awareness gaps

One of the fundamental challenges in implementing trauma-informed educational approaches is the significant gap in teacher awareness and training. Recent research indicates that many teachers, particularly in the context of second or foreign language education, have not received formal, structured training in identifying and responding to the effects of trauma. Eastman (2025) emphasizes that teachers' level of

trauma literacy and professional experience are key predictors of their use of trauma-informed strategies in the classroom. Nevertheless, a substantial proportion of educators lack sufficient training or resources to implement these approaches effectively. A similar study conducted in the Limpopo Province of South Africa revealed that primary school teachers in rural areas possessed limited knowledge about trauma and its impacts on students' academic performance and behavioral outcomes. The research highlighted that the absence of standardized, sustained professional development programs represents a major barrier to the realization of trauma-sensitive education. In response to this need, a trauma-informed curriculum was developed, comprising modules on recognizing trauma indicators, employing responsive classroom strategies, and fostering collaboration between teachers and mental health professionals. This curriculum has been proposed as a model for enhancing teachers' capacity to support students with traumatic experiences (Munyadziwa et al., 2025).

existing studies identifies several core gaps in teacher training and awareness:

1. Lack of practical, experiential training in teacher education programs, leaving educators underprepared for real-world classroom situations.
2. Limited understanding of the diverse forms of trauma and its multifaceted impacts on language learning, behavior, and social interactions.
3. Fragmented and inconsistent access to workshops, continuing education, and support resources, which constrains the development of professional competencies in trauma-informed practices.
4. Heavy workload and administrative responsibilities, which reduce opportunities for professional development and participation in refresher courses.

Overall, enhancing teacher training and awareness in trauma-sensitive approaches requires systemic reforms in teacher education, sustained investment in professional development, and the provision of localized, culturally responsive educational resources. Such measures enable teachers to engage effectively and compassionately with students from diverse, multilingual backgrounds who have experienced trauma, fostering learning environments that are both supportive and academically productive (Jennings, 2018; Dorado et al., 2016; Reddy et al., 2021).

B. Understanding and Expressing Trauma Across Cultures in Language Learning Contexts

The perception and expression of trauma vary considerably across cultures, shaped by each community's unique belief systems, social norms, and communication patterns. This issue becomes particularly salient in second or foreign language learning environments, where students often come from cultural, linguistic, and familial backgrounds that differ significantly from those of their teachers (Chen, 2024). Consequently, teachers must develop heightened cultural sensitivity regarding how students express emotions, interpret

psychological distress, and seek support, to prevent misunderstandings and inadvertent negative responses. Rahman and Abdullah (2023) emphasize that bilingual teacher education must go beyond recognizing clinical trauma indicators. It should encompass an understanding of everyday social and cultural experiences—such as poverty, bullying, and family instability that shape students' responses to learning environments. Their study highlights those experiences considered traumatic in one cultural context may be perceived as normative or even educational in another, directly influencing students' behavior and emotional reactions. Similarly, O'Toole and Simons (2022) report that teachers implementing trauma-sensitive approaches in classrooms frequently encounter intercultural challenges. Differences in family structures, gender roles, and emotional expressivity can lead to misinterpretations of students' behavior; for example, behavioral withdrawal or emotional silence may be erroneously perceived as disengagement or resistance to learning. These findings underscore the importance of integrating intercultural competence into teacher training programs.

Li and Kwon (2023) further note that variations in emotional expression, interactions with authority, and family norms influence not only how trauma is displayed but also how students seek help and engage in learning. In some Asian cultures, for instance, directly expressing emotional distress may be viewed as a sign of weakness, whereas in many Western cultures, it is encouraged as a demonstration of self-awareness and emotional honesty. Understanding such cultural differences is therefore a prerequisite for effectively implementing trauma-informed language teaching. Only with a deep appreciation of cultural contexts can educators create inclusive, safe, and learner-centered environments for students with traumatic experiences.

Based on a synthesis of current research, several recommendations emerge for effectively addressing cultural diversity in trauma-informed language education:

1. Integrate cultural competence training into teacher education programs to enhance teachers' ability to recognize nonverbal and culturally specific signs of trauma (Rahman & Abdullah, 2023; Li & Kwon, 2023).
2. Avoid imposing Western-centric therapeutic and educational models, and instead adapt interventions to the cultural, social, and linguistic contexts of the students (Chen, 2024).
3. Collaborate closely with families and community leaders to gain a nuanced understanding of cultural backgrounds and to develop contextually appropriate support strategies (O'Toole & Simons, 2022).
4. Localize instructional strategies and design responsive curricula based on each community's communication norms and cultural values, ensuring that trauma-informed practices resonate with learners' lived experiences.

By adopting these approaches, language educators can foster learning environments that are not only academically effective but also emotionally safe and culturally affirming, supporting students in overcoming the lingering effects of trauma while engaging fully in language acquisition.

VII. DISCUSSION

The synthesis of the reviewed literature reveals that trauma-informed approaches in English language teaching (ELT) are emerging as a critical framework for supporting young learners who have experienced adverse life events. Across multiple contexts, trauma is shown to exert pervasive effects on children's cognitive, emotional, and linguistic development, influencing not only how they process information but also how they engage socially and emotionally in classroom settings. These findings align with the broader psychological literature demonstrating that trauma can impair executive functions, working memory, and attention—core capacities essential to second language acquisition (Perfect et al., 2016; Kira et al., 2012).

A central discussion point concerns the intersection between trauma, cognition, and linguistic competence. Young learners with trauma histories often exhibit delayed verbal development, difficulties with comprehension and retention, and heightened anxiety during language production. The evidence suggests that these manifestations are not primarily motivational or attitudinal issues but neurobiological consequences of prolonged stress exposure (Anda et al., 2006; Eastman, 2024). Therefore, traditional behaviorist or performance-oriented language teaching methods—such as repetitive drilling or punitive correction—can inadvertently worsen emotional distress and disengagement. This underscores the need for pedagogical flexibility grounded in social-emotional learning (SEL) and humanistic educational psychology.

The reviewed studies further highlight the importance of relational pedagogy in trauma-informed ELT. Relationship-building—through empathy, transparency, and authentic communication—emerges as the strongest predictor of both emotional safety and academic success (Brunzell et al., 2018; Souers & Hall, 2019). For trauma-exposed learners, relational trust functions as a psychological anchor that regulates fear responses and enables participation. Teachers who humanize their interactions, share aspects of their own learning journeys, and practice non-judgmental listening create an environment where vulnerability and curiosity can coexist. Such environments are conducive to both emotional recovery and language acquisition.

Another key discussion theme is teacher training and professional development. The majority of studies reviewed agree that many ESL/EFL educators lack formal preparation in recognizing trauma indicators and implementing trauma-sensitive practices (Munyadziwa & Makhado, 2025; Kostouros et al., 2023). Training gaps include insufficient understanding of how trauma manifests behaviorally, how to

balance academic rigor with psychological safety, and how to prevent secondary trauma among teachers themselves. Empirical evidence demonstrates that even short-term professional development programs significantly improve teachers' confidence, empathy, and classroom management skills (Jennings, 2018; Koslouski, 2022). However, without systemic support—such as institutional policies, mentoring, and access to mental health professionals—these gains often remain short-lived.

The cultural dimension of trauma-informed pedagogy also warrants attention. Trauma and its expression are deeply mediated by culture. Behaviors interpreted as resistance or disengagement in one context may represent respect or emotional restraint in another (Rahman & Abdullah, 2023; Li & Kwon, 2023). Thus, applying Western-centric models of trauma-informed education without contextual adaptation risks cultural dissonance and pedagogical ineffectiveness. For example, collectivist cultures may prioritize group harmony and indirect emotional communication, whereas Western trauma frameworks emphasize verbal expression and individual emotional awareness. Teachers must therefore integrate cultural competence and localized understandings of well-being into their trauma-informed practices. Collaboration with families, community leaders, and culturally attuned professionals enhances both authenticity and sustainability of interventions.

Moreover, teacher well-being and secondary trauma emerged as recurring concerns. Sustained exposure to students' distress can evoke empathic strain, compassion fatigue, or burnout (Hydon et al., 2015). Trauma-informed education must therefore extend beyond student support to include mechanisms that safeguard educators' emotional health—such as reflective supervision, peer debriefing, and self-care training. Teachers who feel emotionally supported are better able to sustain empathy and patience, which in turn strengthens classroom stability and student engagement.

Finally, methodological limitations in the existing literature must be acknowledged. Most studies employ qualitative or cross-sectional designs, focusing on teacher perceptions rather than longitudinal student outcomes. Few studies systematically disaggregate the effects of specific trauma-informed interventions (e.g., SEL integration vs. teacher training vs. classroom design). Additionally, research disproportionately represents Western and high-resource educational systems, leaving significant gaps in our understanding of trauma-informed ELT in multilingual, low-resource, or conflict-affected regions. Future studies should adopt mixed-methods and longitudinal designs to explore not only short-term outcomes but also sustained impacts on learners' academic trajectories and psychological recovery.

In summary, the reviewed literature collectively suggests that trauma-informed pedagogy represents a paradigm shift in language education—from a focus on linguistic performance to an integrated concern for emotional safety, relational trust, and human development. However, realizing this potential

requires systemic commitment, teacher empowerment, and cultural adaptation rather than isolated acts of compassion or goodwill.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This narrative review establishes that trauma-informed approaches are indispensable for effective and equitable English language teaching among young learners. The evidence demonstrates that trauma profoundly influences learners' cognitive functioning, emotional regulation, and classroom behavior, which in turn affect their language acquisition and academic engagement. Trauma-informed English language teaching (TI-ELT) provides a holistic response by emphasizing empathy, safety, predictability, and cultural inclusivity.

The review concludes that implementing trauma-informed pedagogy requires three interdependent layers of change:

1. **Teacher Competence:** Educators must be trained to recognize trauma manifestations, design emotionally safe classrooms, and use reflective, strengths-based strategies.
2. **Institutional Support:** Schools should embed trauma-informed frameworks into policy, teacher evaluation, and student support systems.
3. **Cultural Adaptation:** Pedagogical models must be localized, integrating indigenous and community knowledge to ensure contextual relevance and cultural integrity.

When these layers align, trauma-informed classrooms evolve into spaces of healing and empowerment, where linguistic and emotional growth reinforce each other. Beyond improving academic performance, such environments nurture resilience, agency, and belonging qualities essential for lifelong learning.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal, cross-cultural, and intervention-based studies to clarify how trauma-informed strategies influence measurable learning outcomes. Additionally, including the voices of young learners themselves can deepen our understanding of what “safety” and “support” mean across diverse contexts.

In conclusion, trauma-informed English language teaching redefines pedagogy as both an act of education and an act of care. By integrating psychological insight, cultural awareness, and relational practice, educators can transform classrooms into inclusive spaces that not only teach English—but also rebuild trust, hope, and humanity.

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