As the number of countries systematically using torture and repression to control their citizens continues to grow, the task of assisting refugees in countries of resettlement also increases. In the case of English language education the issues are even more important because these services are near the first contact new arrivals will have with the Australian education system and involve one of the fundamental skills of successful resettlement. This paper will provide some background to common refugee experiences and aims to highlight ongoing needs in relation to training and curriculum development relevant to the refugee client group.

The Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) was established in 1988 to work with refugees and those from refugee-like situations in assisting their recovery from traumatic experiences prior to resettlement in Australia. The service uses individual and group counselling as well as strong community development with refugee communities in pursuing its goals. We have also worked for many years with providers through the Adult Migrant English Programme (AMEP) and NSW Institutes of Technical and Further Education in seeking to assist those services in providing tuition which is sensitive and effective in relation to the special needs of refugees. We are currently engaged in a training program with new AMEP providers which aims to raise awareness of refugee issues and assist in education with all new teaching staff.

Organisations with like aims now exist in each State and Territory in Australia and can provide valuable local expertise to AMEP providers outside New South Wales.

### 1. Background

While there are strong similarities between the migrant and refugee experience in relation to issues faced on settling in Australia, there are also major differences which have an effect on how English language tuition should be tailored to the needs of refugees. The differences relate primarily to why refugees are seeking resettlement in Australia. The very essence of the refugee experience is one of forced exile and flight, including disconnection from one’s culture and adaptation to a new one.

Between 1996 and 1998 the largest source countries for refugees and those from refugee-like situations settling in New South Wales were:

- Iraq
- Bosnia-Herzegovina
- Serbia
- Afghanistan
- Sudan

Showing that repression continues world wide, Australia accepted refugees from 86 different countries during this period.
While there are various refugee and humanitarian visas available it is notable that a person must demonstrate a genuine risk of persecution, gross violations of their human rights or substantial discrimination in order to be granted any of these visas. We also know that in 1997, 30 per cent of those receiving tuition through the AMEP arrived in Australia as the holder of one of these visas. Given that the humanitarian intake during this period represented approximately 14 per cent of the total intake of new residents, this indicates that humanitarian entrants are far more likely to be in need of English language tuition than arrivals under other categories of entry.

2. The impact of torture and trauma

Amnesty International estimates that over 100 countries routinely practice torture throughout the world in an effort to control their citizens. Common forms of reported torture include:

- sensory and sleep deprivation
- use of psychotropic drugs
- electric shocks
- burning
- mutilation
- debilitating psychological abuse
- isolation and solitary detention
- beatings to the body and head
- sexual violence and rape
- starvation
- exposure to heat and cold
- sham execution
- near fatal immersion and suffocation
- being forced to maintain crippling positions
- being forced to watch loved ones raped, killed and brutalised

Serious research into the implications of working with survivors in ESL tuition commenced in the 1980s. This research demonstrates a range of psychological, psychosocial and physical variables which have an impact on the individual’s ability to acquire a new language. Broadly speaking these go to the ability and motivation to learn a new language.

Ability to learn

Physical symptoms which are frequently exhibited by survivors include:

- chronic pain
- fractures which have not healed correctly
- injuries to eyes, teeth, ears, genitals, urinary tract, rectum and reproductive organs
- cardio-pulmonary disorders
- brain damage
- diseases arising from starvation, extremes of heat and cold
- arthritis

These symptoms can arise from physical harm inflicted during torture. In some cases, physical pain is a manifestation of psychological difficulties being experienced by the individual because of their experiences. Because severe trauma is outside the range of normal human experiences it has a profound impact on the survivor’s ability to integrate those experiences in their
understanding of the world. It is this lack of integration which causes symptoms that interfere with the survivors' ability to function in a new society. The most common psychological symptoms which can be observed in survivors include:

- depression
- severe anxiety
- panic
- sleep interruption (especially nightmares)
- survivors' guilt
- loss of self-esteem
- lack of trust, particularly of those seen as authority figures
- severe memory and concentration problems
- intrusive thoughts and flashbacks
- difficulties in social functioning and relationships
- family conflict

As can be imagined, many of these symptoms will have a direct effect on the survivor's ability to attend to learning of a new language. In particular physical pain from injuries, lack of sleep and intrusive recollections affecting memory and concentration will all make the learning process far more difficult. Likewise treatment in individual cases may involve medication which affects the learning process. Furthermore, in confronting the significant obstacles inherent in the resettlement process individuals may experience high levels of frustration and feelings of failure.

Motivation factors

Our experience also suggests that some of the psychological symptoms referred to above will affect the survivor's motivation to acquire English language skills, even where they recognise there is considerable benefit in doing so.

The forced nature of resettlement for refugees may see expressions of hostility towards the Australian system. This can extend to learning English because it is seen as a further disconnection from one's culture. It is also important to bear in mind that the very persecution of some communities in their home countries was directed at destruction of their culture. Examples of this can be found in relation to Kurdish communities and the Berbers of Algeria. The official oppression of these communities includes denying the community the ability to use their traditional languages and the banning of important cultural expressions, including religious beliefs. In these circumstances, the fact that a resettled refugee will need to learn English in Australia can be interpreted as a further oppressive act and destruction of the survivor's connection to their culture.

Some communities may also see resettlement in Australia as a temporary need until they are able to return to their country of origin. In these cases low motivation can result from a belief that learning English and establishing themselves in Australia amounts to an admission that situation is much longer term than anticipated and that they may never be able to return in safety.

Low self-esteem will affect motivation as people become frustrated with the difficulty of learning English and can perceive this as a confirmation of their lack of competency in many areas of their lives.

3. Implications for AMEP providers
Working with survivors therefore requires the ability to anticipate that a proportion of students will be experiencing some or all of the difficulties referred to above and a commitment to developing strategies to assist them in overcoming these barriers.

**PREP programs**

As part of the recognition of the difficulties faced by refugees the PREP program was established to allow for an additional 100 hours tuition for those identified as having been significantly affected by torture and war related trauma.

It is therefore imperative that staff involved in assessment of students are aware of the indicators of past torture and trauma experiences. This would ensure that assessments are made accurately. It is also the case that most services similar to STARTTS in each state and territory undertake assessments in relation to the psychosocial functioning of survivors soon after entry and there may be some scope for increasing the liaison between AMEP providers and those services in order to avoid duplication.

Because of the diverse nature of refugee intake, some colleges will be able to establish full PREP classes and in some cases have gone to some effort to ensure that teachers working with those classes have additional training.

In other cases, where the intake of affected survivors is not so high the ability to establish PREP specific classes is limited and therefore students are not placed within specific classes. In these cases, teachers will need to be aware of the impact of torture and trauma to effectively manage the learning environment, even where the number of affected students may be low.

It is our view that the fundamental principle which should underpin whether a student is placed in a specific PREP class or in mainstream classes should be student choice. There is sometimes a reluctance among people resettling in Australia to be perceived as a refugee and this may influence their choice. This is also important because one defining characteristic of oppression is the limiting of control over one’s life. As a result, those who have survived this will often react to any sense of loss of control over their lives and the more that a sense of control can be re-established the better the prospects of successful recovery.

**Curriculum development and presentation**

Our work in training AMEP providers is directed largely to understanding the impact that curriculum can have on the survivor. It is the case that many of the standards of ESL education can have unintended and dramatic consequences on survivors. These consequences also affect management of the learning environment, both for the survivor and other students.

Remembering the past, links with families, comparative analysis of life in Australia and life overseas all feature heavily in material used by a large number of teachers. In each instance these can take survivors back to experiences they have had in the past that they have strong feelings about or an inability to completely comprehend. This can result in involuntary recall of past events and very strong emotional responses.

Some teachers, particularly those working with large numbers of survivors, have themselves developed specific strategies for overcoming these problems. For example, some teachers will not require students to refer to their own family but will construct a family which is used for reference by the whole class.
Likewise, some teachers are aware of the importance of allowing student choice in how they pursue their learning and are very flexible in requiring attendance and in allowing students to move in and out of classes at will. Allowing flexibility in the contribution expected of students in discussion is also important as the revelation of personal details or opinions may have negative connections for students in some circumstances. Often these simple strategies have been effective in minimising the level of anxiety felt by students and have seen behavioural changes in a very short time.

The issues which we emphasise in our work with teachers are:-

- the ability to assess whether a student has been exposed to trauma which will affect their learning;
- how to deal with disclosure in a learning environment, including managing crisis situations;
- the identification and elimination of potential stimuli for flashbacks;
- the importance of allowing for student choice in their learning, and;
- strategies for reinforcing materials to deal with memory and concentration difficulties, such as repetition and flexible assessment.

One area for further development is building into ESL curriculum some psychoeducational approaches which would benefit survivors. One important aspect of the survivor’s experience is that they may not understand the symptoms they are exhibiting and this can increase the level of anxiety. The normalising of symptoms simply indicates to students that most survivors of similar experiences exhibit similar symptoms.

It is possible to develop materials and place these in the curriculum in a non-threatening way which both alerts survivors to the possibility of symptoms and provides them with some strategies for managing them, for example relaxation techniques and anger management. It is also sensible for this approach to include information about available services in a general way. This would avoid the difficulty faced by teachers and counsellors in seeking to provide referral information to students only when a crisis has developed.

4. The impact on workers

One further feature of work in this field is the personal impact that exposure to those who have experienced trauma can have on the educator. As noted above our training is not directed to turning teachers into counsellors. It is, however, unavoidable that teachers are seen by students as a very important social resource and classes can become an important support mechanism.

As a result of this process teachers can be exposed to disclosure of past experiences and behaviours arising from these experiences in the classroom environment. The potential for this is appears to be extremely high for teachers working with a large number of students from their own cultural background, where the chance of transference is high. Likewise, home tutoring schemes can have a similar impact where the relationship develops elements which extend beyond the learning process.

Relationships formed in this way can be extremely beneficial to learning but must be closely monitored for their impact on the educator. Common responses to exposure to recounting of traumatic experiences can include:-

- a sense of a lack of safety
- questioning of basic assumptions about how the world and other people function
- intrusive thoughts and feelings related to the other person’s experience
feelings of frustration, anger and guilt when realising that not all problems can be solved quickly and easily.

Allowing these responses to build over time can begin to mirror responses to direct trauma, in severe cases producing similar symptoms. It is therefore extremely important that educators are aware of these possible impacts, monitor their own responses and have in place strategies to acknowledge but minimise the impact on them.

Furthermore, the implications of student disclosure can extend beyond the classroom. It is our experience that staff not directly involved in education provision can be quite severely affected by the experiences of students. This can occur, for example, where administrative staff share a language with students and become a support point for them. In these cases, staff may be exposed to the experiences of students in some detail and may have been through similar experiences themselves.

Therefore, managers need to ensure that all staff are aware of the importance of establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries in their work with students and are able to effectively refer students to other services where that is appropriate.