



Trauma-Informed and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Adult English Language Education: Addressing Affective Barriers and Supporting Educator Wellbeing

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Abstract

This concept paper explores the intersection of trauma-informed and culturally responsive pedagogy (TICRP) in adult English language education within adult tertiary education contexts. Many adult learners bring experiences of trauma, displacement, and cultural dislocation into their learning journeys while also negotiating identity and belonging. Traditional pedagogies may inadvertently reproduce trauma and foster negative affective experiences; feelings of inadequacy or exclusion, that undermine participation and wellbeing. Drawing on international frameworks [1, 2] and adult learning principles [3], the paper argues that embedding trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices is indispensable for equitable and ethical provision. Through reflective discussion and practitioner insights [4, 5], it contrasts classrooms that lack these principles with those that affirm learner identity, validate multilingual repertoires, and foster emotionally safe environments. Educator wellbeing and vicarious trauma are also foregrounded [7, 8, 20] as critical dimensions of sustainable practice. By conceptualising trauma-informed and culturally responsive pedagogy as a unified framework, the paper advocates for dignity-affirming, inclusive English language classrooms and outlines practical strategies for lesson design, communication, assessment, and institutional alignment.

Keywords: Trauma-informed pedagogy; Culturally responsive teaching; Adult English education; Educator wellbeing; Teacher agency; Affective learning, English Language Teaching (ELT)

1. Introduction

In the evolving landscape of adult and tertiary English language education, the need for approaches that acknowledge both emotional and cultural dimensions of learning has never been more pressing. Adult learners frequently bring complex histories shaped by migration, displacement, trauma, and adaptation. Within such classrooms, learning English is not purely linguistic; it is deeply intertwined with identity formation, belonging, and emotional safety.

When teaching approaches fail to recognise these dimensions, learners can experience shame, inequity, frustration, anxiety, or self-doubt, inhibiting participation and progress. For some, the classroom itself may evoke past experiences of exclusion, loss, or judgement recreating the heaviness of emotional baggage.

In response, trauma-informed and culturally responsive pedagogy (TICRP) offers an integrated framework for equitable and ethical English language teaching. Grounded in safety, inclusion, and relational trust, TICRP seeks to create environments in which learners can engage meaningfully and confidently. Trauma-informed practice emphasises predictability, empathy, and emotional regulation, while culturally responsive teaching centres learners' cultural identities and experiences as pedagogical resources, but not deficits [1–5].

This paper conceptualises TICRP as a unifying approach that benefits learners and sustains educator wellbeing. Drawing on international frameworks [1, 2], adult learning theory [3], and practitioner reflection [4, 5], it argues that affective and cultural responsiveness are fundamental to learner empowerment and teacher sustainability. Such an approach is particularly relevant in adult education systems shaped by migration, mobility, and multilingualism, where learners' emotional and social wellbeing directly intersect with national settlement, employment, higher educational opportunities, and participation goals. By recognising language learning as a transformative social process rather than a purely instrumental one, educators and policymakers can reimagine the English classroom as a microcosm of social inclusion, economic advancement, social connectedness and empowerment.



2. Theoretical and Policy Foundations

2.1 Trauma-Informed Education

Trauma-informed education adapts insights from health and psychology for learning contexts. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) outlines six principles; safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural/historical/gender sensitivity that translate into structured routines, compassionate communication, and predictable environments in classrooms [6]. Trauma disrupts attention, memory, and executive functioning-key processes for language acquisition, thus, ELT practitioners who use clear instructions, explicit modelling, patient repetition, and supportive feedback help stabilise learning and build self-efficacy [7, 8].

2.2 Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) asserts that effective teaching integrates students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and learning preferences [9, 10]. In adult English Language Teaching (ELT), CRP challenges the assumption that linguistic proficiency is neutral or culture-free and recognises multilingual, intercultural repertoires as strengths. Failure to validate learners' linguistic identities reproduces deficit thinking and linguistic hierarchy, intensifying shame and disengagement [4, 5].

2.3 Policy and Global Frameworks

Global frameworks increasingly frame wellbeing, inclusion, and equity as foundations of quality education. UNESCO [1 (p. 10–13)] calls for a “new social contract” grounded in solidarity and collective care; the OECD positions learner wellbeing and social inclusion as indicators of system excellence [2]. Aligning practice with these frameworks means recognising emotional safety and cultural validation as prerequisites for academic success. In parallel, the post-pandemic global context has further illuminated the emotional dimension of learning. UNESCO (2021) and OECD (2022) both urge a reorientation of education toward resilience, empathy, and wellbeing; principles that strongly align with the ethos of TICRP. This convergence between international frameworks and practitioner realities reveals the growing recognition that trauma-informed and culturally responsive teaching are not niche innovations but essential components of worldwide quality education.

3. Manifestations when Practice is not Trauma-Informed or Culturally Responsive

Trauma-unaware and culturally unresponsive teaching can reproduce inequities and affective harm. When learners' experiences and identities are overlooked, shame, fear, and disempowerment may result, compromising trust and participation. These consequences manifest across multiple dimensions such as emotional, cultural, and pedagogical each revealing how the absence of trauma-informed and culturally responsive principles can undermine learning relationships and educational equity.

3.1 Emotional Disconnection and Affective Risk

In classrooms where learners have experienced war, displacement, or marginalisation, practices reliant on public comparison or high-stakes performance can retrigger stress responses. Unmodulated feedback or unexpected change may be perceived as threat [7]. A trauma-informed alternative offers choice, affirms effort, and prioritises agency.

3.2 Cultural Disregard and Linguistic Hierarchies

When only “standard English” is legitimised and materials ignore linguistic diversity, education risks assimilation rather than empowerment. Culturally unresponsive classrooms can enact “symbolic violence” by disregarding learners' worldviews [9]. Prompts and tasks should be reframed to honour present belonging as well as past memory.



3.3 Deficit Framing and Linguistic Shame

Deficit framing, treating difference as shortcoming, produces persistent inadequacy and self-censorship. Adult learners judged for accent or “non-standard” usage may internalise the belief that their English is not “good enough,” leading to silence or avoidance [4, 5]. TICRP counters this by validating bi/multilingualism and using asset-based language. Moreover, deficit framings can subtly infiltrate institutional practices through assessment rubrics, placement procedures, or even the implicit hierarchies of teacher language ideologies. When English varieties are valued unequally, both learners and educators internalise notions of linguistic inferiority. These hierarchies can perpetuate cycles of self-censorship and reduced willingness to communicate (WTC), constraining not only language acquisition but also learners’ sense of belonging and identity negotiation within the broader social context.

3.4 The Cost of Educators

Trauma-uninformed practice also affects educators. Repeated exposure to trauma narratives without support elevates risks of vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue and faster burn-out [8]. Sustaining TICRP therefore requires reflective practice and systemic support for teacher wellbeing. The following table contrasts traditional language teaching approaches with trauma-informed and culturally responsive pedagogy, highlighting their differing assumptions about learning, identity, and care.

Dimension	Traditional Pedagogy	Trauma-Informed and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (TICRP)
Focus	Academic performance and linguistic accuracy	Emotional safety, inclusion, and relational trust
Teacher role	Knowledge transmitter	Facilitator, co-learner, relational guide
View of learner	Passive recipient of instruction	Whole person with lived experiences and agency
Feedback tone	Corrective and evaluative	Reflective and strengths-based
Assessment	High stakes, standardised	Formative, flexible, and dialogic
Cultural stance	Assimilation into target culture	Validation of multilingual and multicultural identities
Emotional context	Often disregarded	Central to engagement, retention, and wellbeing

Table 1. Comparison between traditional and trauma-informed culturally responsive pedagogical principles in adult English language teaching.

4. Core Principles and Framework for TICRP

TICRP integrates affective safety, relational trust, and cultural validation across adult ELT. It is less a set of techniques than a mindset: seeing the whole person in every learner and educator. The strength of this framework lies in its adaptability: it can be applied across diverse program types, from vocational English to higher education and community-based literacy settings. By embedding these principles in curriculum design, assessment, and institutional policies, TICRP offers a scalable model that links emotional intelligence with academic rigour and social justice in education. Figure 1 illustrates the interconnected principles of Trauma-Informed and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (TICRP), showing how safety, trust, agency, reflexivity, and systemic alignment operate as a continuous cycle of relational and pedagogical renewal.

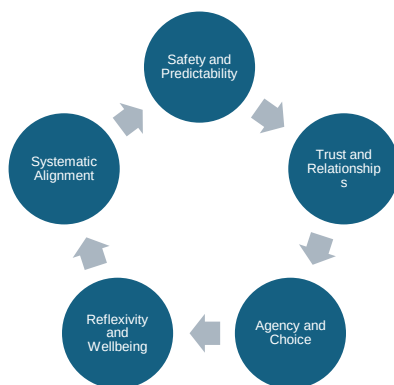


Fig. 1. The six interconnected dimensions of Trauma-Informed and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (TICRP) in adult English language education

4.1 Safety and Predictability

Consistent routines, transparent expectations, clear goals, and flexible modes of participation reduce anxiety and enable focus. Physical comfort and emotional safety are equally vital. Predictability in lesson rhythm and teacher response not only fosters trust but also supports emotional regulation, a crucial precondition for sustained cognitive engagement in trauma-informed classrooms [26].

4.2 Trust and Relational Pedagogy

Relational pedagogy positions learning as co-constructed through dialogue and mutual respect; trust is rebuilt through consistency, follow-through, and empathy [11]. Genuine trust emerges when teachers model vulnerability and care, transforming classroom relationships from hierarchical instruction to shared human connection—an essential foundation for affective recovery and learner confidence [11, 17, 24].

4.3 Agency and Choice

Restoring agency counters learned helplessness. Offering choices in tasks, texts, grouping, and topics communicates respect and fosters intrinsic motivation. Agency is intertwined with identity and emerges through negotiated participation [12,13]. Agency in trauma-informed and culturally responsive classrooms also involves redefining success. Rather than focusing solely on linguistic accuracy, teachers can recognise moments of courage, participation, and persistence as evidence of learning. This approach nurtures self-efficacy and reinforces that language growth is a process of becoming, not a test of perfection. Over time, this shift from outcome to process empowers learners to see themselves as capable communicators within and beyond the classroom.

4.4 Identity Affirmation and Cultural Safety

Culturally safe classrooms recognise language learning as identity work [9, 14]. Avoiding deficit language and using asset-based descriptors repositions learners as competent multilinguals. This reframing counters language shame and decolonises language education by recognising multilingual repertoires as resources [12, 4, 16].

4.5 Reflexivity and Educator Wellbeing

Continuous self-reflection helps educators recognise how positionality and emotion shape interactions. Reflective journaling, collegial dialogue, and supervision support resilience; educator wellbeing is a prerequisite for sustaining trauma-informed environments [8, 17].



4.6 Systemic Alignment

Embedding TICRP depends on supportive institutional culture. Policies that integrate wellbeing indicators, culturally inclusive curricula, and flexible assessment pathways legitimise relational care and cultural responsiveness. A “new social contract” for education values emotional intelligence and diversity as core competencies [1].

5. Strategies for Implementation and Classroom Practice

TICRP becomes meaningful when translated into concrete practice that supports emotional and cognitive engagement. Implementation requires rethinking lesson design, communication, materials, assessment, and reflection [6, 9]. Effective implementation also depends on educators’ capacity to balance emotional atonement with pedagogical structure, ensuring that classroom routines support both academic progress and psychological safety [17, 26].

5.1 Lesson Design and Structure

Lesson rhythm should prepare gently, engage collaboratively, and close with affirmation. Predictable environments reduce anxiety and foster stability [8]. Trauma-informed sequencing grounded in regulation and connection enhances both safety and cognition [18].

5.2 Classroom Communication

Intentional phrasing, positive framing, and active listening model inclusion. Storytelling and humour humanise instruction when used sensitively. Non-verbal cues such as calm posture, steady eye contact, encouraging gestures signal safety and emotional tone mediates cognitive engagement [17, 7].

5.3 Cultural Responsiveness in Learning Materials

Co-creating materials that reflect learners’ lived realities (e.g., local community events, intercultural narratives, multilingual glossaries) repositions identity as pedagogical capital and counters deficit discourses [9, 12]. Integrating culturally sustaining materials also validates plurilingual identities, aligning with current calls in applied linguistics to view learners’ linguistic repertoires as dynamic resources for meaning making rather than obstacles to standard language mastery [27].

5.4 Embedding Indigenous Pedagogies: the 8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning

The 8 ways: Story sharing, learning maps, non-linear learning, symbols and images, land links, non-verbal, deconstruct/reconstruct, community links offer relational, place-based approaches that resonate with TICRP and benefit all learners through narrative, connection, and visual mapping [19].

5.5 Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment should become dialogue rather than judgement: low-stakes formative tasks, strengths-based feedback, and flexible modes acknowledge diverse literacies. Encouraging self-assessment cultivates agency and reflective awareness [12, 13].

5.6 Practitioner Reflection and Peer Sharing

Reflective journals, peer debriefing, supervision/observation, and professional learning in trauma awareness and cultural humility enhance pedagogical resilience and ethical practice [8, 17]. When teachers are encouraged to reflect collectively on both challenges and emotional triumphs, professional learning becomes a form of community care. Peer mentoring and structured reflection sessions allow educators to exchange strategies and reaffirm shared values of empathy and inclusion. In this way, reflection functions as both self-



care and professional growth, thereby sustaining the moral and emotional core of trauma-informed and culturally responsive practice.

5.7 Systemic and Program-Level Strategies

System-wide commitment embeds wellbeing and inclusion in induction, curriculum design, and professional development. Partnerships with community organisations strengthen intercultural understanding. A whole-of-organisation approach affirms emotional and cultural safety as integral to quality and learning success [1, 2]. Furthermore, integrating TICRP at the institutional level contributes to sustainable educational ecosystems. When teachers, leaders, and learners co-construct an ethos of care, the classroom evolves into a relational space where wellbeing and learning reinforce each other, building a foundation for lifelong learning and civic participation beyond the classroom walls.

6. Educator Wellbeing and Sustainability

TICRP's success relies on practitioners' emotional sustainability. Teachers in linguistically and culturally diverse settings encounter stories of trauma and displacement; empathy deepens, but exposure introduces risks of vicarious trauma. For CALD educators, students' narratives may reactivate personal histories of trauma or linguistic shaming, affecting identity and practice [4, 12]. Without systemic support, compassion fatigue and burnout increase [8].

6.1 Understanding Vicarious Trauma in Education

Vicarious trauma arises when prolonged exposure to trauma narratives leads educators to internalise distress and shifts in worldview or sense of safety [20, 8]. Operating in "high empathy zones" without recovery time risks compassion fatigue, undermining professional efficacy and wellbeing [7]. Recognising signs and providing reflective supervision, mentoring, and counselling help restore perspective.

6.2 Reflexivity and Emotional Literacy

Educators should examine how identities, biases, and emotions shape interactions. Emotional literacy: the capacity to notice, name, and regulate emotions supports navigation of complex classroom dynamics. Structured reflection (e.g., Gibbs' cycle) and peer coaching transform tension into growth and align with transformative learning theory [17, 21, 22].

6.3 Building Collective Care and Collegiality

Communities of practice (COP) foster collaboration, knowledge exchange, and mutual care. Regular staff reflection, CPD, and wellbeing check-ins reduce isolation and strengthen collective efficacy [23]. Embedding such collegial structures within institutional culture also reinforces the principle that educator wellbeing is a shared responsibility, not an individual endeavour, aligning with trauma-informed frameworks that centre collective resilience and relational repair [26].

6.4 Institutional Responsibility

Systemic structures determine whether TICRP thrives. Institutions should balance workloads, integrate wellbeing in performance frameworks, offer sustained professional learning in trauma awareness and cultural safety, and partner with community and mental-health services. Teacher wellbeing is foundational to student wellbeing; emotionally regulated teachers are more likely to create safe, inclusive environments [24]. Embedding Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) principles in policy and teacher education enhances emotional competence, relational capacity, and classroom climate [25]. In addition, access to Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) providing confidential counselling and wellbeing support can further strengthen educators' emotional resilience and mitigate the effects of vicarious trauma. Alongside policy, teacher identity and agency, co-constructed through relationships and participation, must be recognised as legitimate professional knowledge to sustain TICRP [12, 13].



6.5 A Culture of Hope and Renewal

TICRP is sustained by a culture of hope. Presence, empathy, and continuous renewal, not perfection, anchor practice. Honouring both emotional and intellectual dimensions reimagines teaching as care, connection, and collective transformation. Recognising wellbeing as pedagogical capital redefines professional development itself. Instead of focusing solely on technical upskilling, or staying current, professional learning communities can cultivate reflective dialogue, peer care, and emotional resilience; qualities that sustain educators through the ethical complexity of trauma-informed, intercultural work.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

TICRP bridges affective, cultural, and cognitive dimensions in adult ELT. Safety and predictability underpin risk-taking; trust and agency transform dynamics; cultural validation disrupts linguistic hierarchies; educator wellbeing and reflexivity sustain ethical practice. Integrating TICRP requires alignment among practice, professional learning, and policy and thereby care, inclusion, and emotional literacy become hallmarks of quality. The following table synthesises the key dimensions of TICRP, outlining their pedagogical focus and intended outcomes in adult English language education.

TICRP Dimension	Pedagogical Focus	Intended Outcome
Trauma Awareness	Creating emotionally safe and predictable learning environments through empathy, routine, and relational trust	Reduced anxiety, improved attention, and greater learner engagement
Cultural Responsiveness	Validating learners' cultural identities, experiences, and multilingual resources as assets	Enhanced motivation, belonging, and intercultural competence
Relational Pedagogy	Building mutual respect, active listening, and trust between educators and learners	Strengthened collaboration, learner agency, and classroom cohesion
Educator Wellbeing	Promoting reflective practice, peer support, and emotional literacy for teachers	Sustainable practice, reduced burnout, and improved teaching presence and professional energy
Institutional Support	Embedding wellbeing, inclusion, and professional learning in policy frameworks	Long-term implementation and systemic equity in adult education

Table 2. Core dimensions of Trauma-Informed and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (TICRP) and their intended outcomes in adult English language education.

8. Limitations and Future Considerations

While this paper offers a conceptual and practice-based synthesis, it does not include empirical data or longitudinal classroom observations. Future research could therefore adopt mixed-method or participatory approaches to explore how trauma-informed and culturally responsive pedagogies (TICRP) affect learner outcomes, teacher identity formation, and institutional wellbeing. Additionally, comparative studies across settlement, higher education, ELICOS, and vocational contexts could illuminate how differing policy frameworks and professional cultures enable or constrain the sustainability of TICRP practices in adult English language education.

At its essence, TICRP affirms human dignity and relational ethics. As UNESCO's "new social contract for education" suggests, equitable learning rests on compassion, cultural humility, and shared humanity [1]. Reimagining language education as a site of safety, empowerment, and mutual respect brings us closer to an educational paradigm that honours the voices, complexities, and strengths of all participants. Ultimately, TICRP embodies a paradigm shift toward humanising education. By centring dignity, empathy, and equity as non-negotiable pedagogical values, it reminds us that effective language teaching is as much about cultivating relational depth as it is about building linguistic competence.



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