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Danielle Kennedy-LaReau

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**Opportunities for Healing Through Storytelling and Storylistening**

Danielle Kennedy-LaReau

SIT Graduate Institute

EDLG 5699

Dr. Leslie Turpin

April 27, 2023

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Student name: Danielle Kennedy-LaReau

Date: April 27, 2023

## Abstract

In this training material project, I explore the purpose of stories in the English language classroom. How can we use stories to teach and offer healing and catharsis to students who want it? Working with a group of 9 teachers from the YWCA Tulsa, we used Dina Nayeri's memoir *The Ungrateful Refugee: What Immigrants Never Tell You*, to explore how practical it would be to use a story as a source of material for students, and how we could use a story to help others tell their stories. The paper begins with a literature review describing my rationale for this project including information I found showing the vital importance of storytelling and storylistening in the lives and classrooms of immigrants, refugees, and asylees. This is followed by reflection on my experience developing the materials with a group of educators, and finally, the material and outline we produced.

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## **Opportunities for Healing Through Storytelling and Storylistening**

### **Introduction**

This materials project addresses the question of storytelling – its benefits and its pitfalls – and provides a way for teachers to explore this concept in their classroom. How can we, as teachers, put the power of storytelling back into the hands of the students? How can storytelling and storylistening become part of the learning process and an opportunity for healing, awareness, and connection? It is vital to look for ways to use narratives in the classroom and opportunities for students to create narratives. However, as teachers, we also need to learn to listen to the real story instead of the right story. I hope to contribute materials, techniques, and strategies to the discussion around classroom narratives and trauma-informed teaching to create a more equitable and reciprocal relationship between teacher and student: a relationship that, while acknowledging each student's context, also sees the teacher's context and visualizes the broader story.

I have based this program on the memoir *The Ungrateful Refugee* by Dina Nayeri. At the age of eight, Nayeri fled to the United States with her mother and brother, seeking religious asylum because of her mother's conversion to Christianity. Nayeri's memoir details her journey, both physical and mental, of escape, camp, asylum, assimilation, and cultural repatriation. I created this materials development project for teachers, and it was field tested by teachers from the YWCA in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I intend for this project to be flexible enough to adapt to any context or material. This material includes a review of the literature about narratives and storytelling, my rationale for this project, implications for the classroom, reflections on creating and field-testing the program with fellow teachers, and the training program outline and resources.

### Literature Review

There is power in storytelling. Who holds the power? Who gets to tell the story? How do we listen? Students arrive in the English language classroom with a rich tapestry of experiences. Refugees/asylees are multidimensional, yet too often, we view them as a single story. We cannot separate politics and power from how we hear and understand the stories of our students. According to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her TED Talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*, "Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person" (TED, 2010, 10:11). To release control of the story of another, we must look at every facet of a story. We must allow everyone to share the core of who they are. We must offer an outlet for students to express their anger, love, fears, and passions. Not only should we allow students to tell a rich and layered story, but we should also allow students the ability to remain silent. Students are not our entertainment or our projects. A YWCA teacher recalls a student who told her story but, when asked to tell her story on a different occasion, refused, saying, "No, I'm not going to talk about that again" (personal communication, February 17, 2023). Even as we learn to listen to and truly hear others' stories, we should also remember that as educators, our stories matter as well; we need to be authentic and honest to gain the trust of our students. Stories should be a balance of windows and mirrors so that everyone has a chance to see themselves and learn about others through stories. Believing in the power of stories will lead us to opportunities for connection and healing of all participants in an English language classroom.

## Stories in Life

There is a danger that 'western' voices control the narrative and position the refugee as a faceless victim, "turning refugee lives into a 'site where Western ways of knowing are reproduced'" (Rajaram, 2002, as cited in Sigona, 2014, p. 372). Much discourse around refugees/asylees uses 'othering' language, implying that certain aspects of being a refugee are inherent rather than transient. El-Bialy and Mulay dig into microaggressions toward refugees, and in their research, one participant argues that "vulnerability depends on context...and the time..." and that "vulnerability...is not a characteristic of people who are refugees, but rather...a result of hostile environments that refugees inadvertently find themselves navigating" (2018, p. 13). Sonn et al. highlight the importance of allowing young refugees to tell their stories "as counter stories to the hegemonic media narratives about damaged refugees" (2013, p. 105). Caroline Lenette and Jennifer Boddy discuss using visual ethnography as a means for participants who identified as refugees or humanitarian entrants to "represent and understand their experiences through their world view rather than that often depicted in the media" (2013, p. 75). Public discourse often requires that the refugee narrative be sad, hopeless, or pathetic to be acceptable to the native-born. Often there is political influence on the voices of refugees, which only emphasizes the importance of allowing every person to have their unique narrative and story. As we consider the topic of refugees and trauma, we must be careful to avoid anonymizing each individual's story, generalizing and stereotyping, or creating a narrative that 'others' refugees as merely victims in need of assistance.

One important consideration that multiple sources have addressed is the danger of problematizing refugees. The idea of "the ideal refugee" or the difference between a "good" and "bad" refugee permeates humanitarian efforts. According to Sophia Rodriguez, "knowing"



refugees/displaced persons as a category of study creates "a political process of knowing to govern subjects..." (2015, p. 113). When considering the idea of compassion vs. pity and expectations of certain kinds of stories that fit a particular preconceived narrative of the acceptable refugee, educators should challenge "categorical fetishism" (Anderson, 2021, p. 74) and think critically about why we do this and how we can disrupt this dangerous approach (Anderson, 2021, Rodriguez, 2015, Limbu, 2018, Malkki, 1995). Nayeri explains, "[w]e had to turn our ordeal into a good, persuasive story or risk being sent back...Every day of her life, the refugee is asked to differentiate herself from the opportunist, the *economic* migrant" (2019, p. 7). What makes it the right story involves "the bureaucratic parsing of dangers from opportunity" (Nayeri, 2019, p. 9) because "unlike economic migrants, refugees have no agency; they are no threat. Often, they are so broken, they beg to be remade into the image of the native...But if you are born in the Third World, and you dare to make a move before you are shattered, your dreams are suspicious" (Nayeri, 2019, p. 8). Therefore, refugees feel that they should always be careful to tell their stories to people as though they have to defend their very existence where they already feel they do not belong. Curating their stories leads to feelings of distance and disconnection; instead, we should look for moments of authenticity and connection.

Surrendering the narrative to the refugee means not demanding facts but listening for what is true for that individual at that moment. Nayeri's mother always insists on facts, but Nayeri argues that facts are "a tool – that truth requires point of view, as well; it needs to be cobbled *from* facts." She wonders "what our world would look like if refugees were asked, instead of reciting facts, to write a story that shows their truth in another way" (2019, p. 241). According to a teacher from the YWCA Tulsa, after reading Nayeri's memoir, she compared storytelling to a journal, stating that "a journal is not the whole truth...a journal is only part of a

truth that we're telling in a moment. A story is just a part" (personal communication, February 24, 2023). Adichie affirms this view when she says, "[t]he single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete" (TED, 2010). How we listen to stories should not be based on our judgments of the merits or truthfulness of the story but on what the story says about that person. What are they trying to tell us? Are we prepared to listen with open hearts and minds?

According to an article that studied compassion in teachers of school-age refugees in England, we must ensure that our compassion does not become pity, creating victimhood. The authors of the study quote Martha Nussbaum (2001) who says, "moral social judgments of compassion need to be based on a notion that the 'other' who suffers has agency and is only a temporary victim of circumstances" (as cited in Arnot et al., 2009, p. 254). They point out that compassion has two different roots: concern and justice. Concern leads to "compassion as caring," which comes from a personal place and is directed toward the individual suffering. In comparison, justice comes from a place of shared humanity and a sense of community (Arnot et al., 2009, p. 253). The article suggests that both are necessary since individual compassion may not address the root causes of the suffering, whereas community compassion concerned with justice requires "acknowledging our own vulnerability" to avoid "the social distinctions of class and rank" (Arnot et al., 2009, p. 253). Compassion must lead to action and should not only rely on how we feel in the moment but should also depend on facts and reason to be genuinely effective. YWCA teachers, while discussing the differences between compassion and pity, used words like "positive," "empathy," "opening self up," and "causes you to act" when talking about compassion. On the other hand, when they discussed pity they used words like, "negative helping," "feeling sorry for someone," "treating them in a position of brokenness when they are

not broken" (personal communication, February 10, 2023). One teacher suggested that "pity is paralyzing – an emotion we're caught up in. It doesn't stir us to action" (personal communication, February 10, 2023). There are several problems with relying on either compassion or pity as an emotion to lead to action which helps others. Bishopal Limbu shares Kant's conclusion that "sentimentalism provided an inadequate foundation for morality because one might feel nothing before another's suffering..." and also points out that "the suffering of others, instead of promoting empathy, might even provide pleasure" (2018, p. 77). Refugees, understanding that to be accepted they have to stir the emotions of the native citizen, feel that they must create a story to meet expectations rather than having the ability to tell (or not tell) their story. Instead of making refugees a spectacle, we must allow them the freedom to stand out or blend in as needed.

However, while we must be careful not to confine refugees to the most traumatic episodes of their lives, we must also be aware of and acknowledge the significant trauma experienced by many refugees/asylees. Several authors address the trauma refugees suffer, such as threats to their lives, physical abuse, torture, and the pain of leaving behind their homes, family, and livelihoods to start over in a new place, unstable, alone, and without their language or culture. Trauma can leave a lasting impact on a person and change the makeup of the brain. UNESCO Policy Paper 38 discusses the effects of trauma on the brains of children saying, "the events of their departures and journeys can leave scars on those affected – and none more than on children who have witnessed and experienced death, loss, violence, separation from family and prolonged insecurity" (2019, p. 1). This effect on children may be because they are still developing, so the brain changes are significant. Another paper written by Christina Pate claims that "[t]rauma can also negatively affect students' abilities to regulate emotionally, to develop healthy relationships, to pay attention, to engage, and to learn" (2020, p. 1). We should also

acknowledge how greatly trauma can and does change the brains and behaviors of adults. Many articles mention PTSD, which may affect refugees who experience extreme traumatic events. PTSD can negatively impact cognitive development and affect information processing, cognitive function, and language comprehension and production (Taylor, 2017; UNESCO, 2019; Palanac, 2020). Although both refugees and asylum seekers are prone to suffer significant mental health problems, in their article “Post-Migration Life Adversity and Mental Health of Refugees and Asylum Seekers,” Feyissa, Noh, and Yoon show that "levels of mental health problems are higher in asylum seekers compared to refugees with formal refugee status" (2022, p. 1). Their research explores issues as diverse as perceived discrimination, socio-economic strain, anxiety, depression, and resilience, showing that post-migration life negatively affects all these categories (2022). Trauma comes in many shapes and sizes. Students can experience trauma without having PTSD. However, PTSD has specific challenges that can affect the learning process and change how students process information, sometimes suppressing the ability to learn or retain information. By understanding the unique types of trauma refugees, asylees, and evacuees can experience and attempting to avoid or carefully navigate things that may trigger a trauma episode, including the physical space, the subject matter, and the appropriate response to such an episode, a trauma-informed teacher can create an environment of safety. This requires further study and practice, as well as learning from more experienced teachers and others who have worked in the field.

### **Stories in the Classroom**

English language classrooms are often some of the only spaces where a refugee, immigrant, or asylum-seeker can find confidence and safety in an otherwise chaotic, uncertain,

and scary environment. The English language teacher can become a de facto counselor, social worker, advocate, or friend; all roles that, while important, are not roles that the language teacher can or should fill. According to Susan Barduhn's article, "What Keeps Teachers Going? What Keeps Teachers Developing?," teachers generally become teachers because they desire to help. Unfortunately, these 'helping professions' have a high burnout rate, and the question is why, and how can we prevent it (Barduhn, 2006). Looking for opportunities to create safety and stability for both the learners in the classroom and the teacher is a worthwhile endeavor and something that could change lives inside and outside of the classroom. However, well-meaning teachers need more training and understanding of what their students experience to avoid causing more harm than good.

Having experienced and trained educators who understand the mental, social, and political implications of being a refugee is essential to a healing classroom. We can also see the need to begin training the refugees in teaching positions to meet their communities' needs, provide translation, and bring a more understanding perspective to the classroom (Nelson & Appleby, 2014, p. 14). In Thursica Kovinthan's article "Learning and Teaching with Loss: Meeting the Needs of Refugee Children Through Narrative Inquiry," Kovinthan explores how many teachers lack the knowledge to support refugee children in the classroom. Kovinthan says, "due to limited resources, training, and understanding, teachers often lack empathy and do not want refugee students in their classes" (2016, p. 143). Kovinthan shares her own experience as a refugee child in the classroom as she recalls a time she "did not want to share [her] story but was forced to do so" (2016, p. 143). Her personal experience gives her insight into the complexity of the refugee experience. It allows her to have more compassion and understanding as she broaches the subject of supporting refugees in the classroom. Even the most well-meaning, best-

trained teachers, if they do not have personal experience, will never be able to empathize truly and can only imagine the struggles of the refugee, which is why we must elevate refugee voices to become the teachers, guides, and mentors of educators who want to be thoughtful, caring, understanding, and helpful.

Considering the effects of trauma, we understand the importance of mental health, which can be a challenge, even in ideal circumstances. In addition to the situation they have left behind, refugees have found themselves in a completely new and unfamiliar culture where they may or may not speak the language. A study from the University of Manitoba researching how Canadian Muslims seek psychological help shows that although 65% of the participants in the study claimed to have psychological distress, only 48.7% had sought professional psychological treatment (Zia et al., 2022, p. 35). The article points out that some contributing factors to the Muslim population's struggle with psychological distress could be that many of the study participants were immigrants who experienced economic and vocational challenges, acculturation, and Islamophobia (Zia et al., 2022, p. 42). While considering how this population may prefer to seek psychological help, it is essential to note that most participants in the study indicated that they sought help from family and friends first, then mental health professionals, and lastly, religious leaders. We cannot assume we know the best way to help without listening and building trust. We cannot expect that students will ask for or want the kind of help we are familiar with. Helping students make connections to get the help they need is a complicated and difficult task. Creating healthy practices in the classroom is sometimes one of the only ways and times a student feels like they are in a welcoming place where they feel safe and loved.

One common theme throughout all the research into trauma-informed pedagogy and English language learners is the importance of finding and utilizing creative and productive ways

to engage the potentially traumatized language learner to help them learn and offer them resources for their healing process. Some examples include an arts-based program for young refugees, which gives them the "opportunity to tell their story through multiple media such as photos, individual narratives, and embodied performance" (Sonn et al., 2013, p. 95). Lenette and Boddy's article (2013) explores a project of women who identify as refugees creating their stories through visual ethnography, including photovoice, photo-elicitation, and DST (digital storytelling). Palanac's article, "Towards a Trauma-Informed ELT Pedagogy for Refugees," mentions bringing in role models or 'near-peer role models': maybe "former students who have succeeded in their studies" and can now offer new students hope and a goal (2020, p. 11). Several other articles mention art therapy and storytelling. Kovinthan advocates for teaching empathy by using storytelling and picture books saying, "I had provided a classroom atmosphere where my students felt validated enough that they had the agency to voice and share their own experience" (2016, p. 147). Feuerverger interviewed refugee students and claims that "[c]onversation in the interview process became one of the most successful data-gathering tools" (2011, p. 364), adding that after she shared her own story with a student, he opened up and "real dialogue began" (2011, p. 367). Teachers from the YWCA shared their own ideas for allowing students to share and explore their true stories, including art, acting out stories, using the senses, and bringing smells, food, songs, or stories from home (personal communication, February 31, 2023). Many approaches to trauma-informed language classrooms include art-based or creative outlets for healing and establishing identity. These creative outlets can be utilized in any context to serve everyone, regardless of their status or story, including teachers and students.

Considering how our teaching practices should serve the best interest of teachers and students leads us to another important topic addressed in multiple studies: the teacher's mental,

emotional, and physical well-being. Barduhn's article discusses how teachers can remain motivated and fresh (2006). UNESCO points out the importance of having trained and supported teachers (2019). Palanac emphasizes practitioner self-care, saying, "we must not neglect compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma (or secondary traumatic stress)" (2020, p. 10). Referring back, as well, to the article pointing out the danger of taking over the refugee narrative as the "western 'expert'" (Sigona, 2014, p. 372), the teachers, the administrators, the 'authority figures' in the room are not without our own needs and our trauma and that we are not here to heal or to fix, but to create respectful, safe spaces and give opportunities to others and in turn, to pay attention to our narratives. A YWCA teacher says, "We feel torn when we have to acknowledge all the pain... We want to help. That's why we're here; that's why we choose this profession. We're helpers, we're givers, and you have to make your boundaries or you... can't do this job. And it's hard. It's very hard" (personal communication, February 10, 2023). In order to feel supported, teachers also require adequate training and material resources. Many teachers lack "expertise (and professional development opportunities)," especially those working with students in conflict zones or with students coming from conflict zones (Nelson & Appleby, 2014, p. 11). Teachers must be aware of potential issues which might arise in a classroom of refugees, but many may need more training to navigate these concerns.

By being genuine and honest about our lives and experiences, we can demonstrate to others that it is ok to be genuine and it is ok to connect with our core identities. Likewise, we can show students that it is ok to be personal, and they have the freedom to talk about their lives without fear of judgment. In her article "Re-bordering Spaces of Trauma: Auto-ethnographic Reflections on the Immigrant and Refugee Experience in an Inner-city High School in Toronto," Feuerverger admits that "[o]n some unconscious level [she] must have longed to share



their space so that [she] might get a second chance at repairing [her] own unfortunate childhood" (2011, p. 162). Feuerverger closes her article by saying, "Just be there and be a witness to their stories. Maybe we can heal each other" (2011, p. 373). While discussing assimilation, Nayeri suggests, "It's easy – just be you. Let them be them. That's it" (2019, p. 339). Just as teachers make connections with their students after spending time with them over weeks and months to trust us, students also want to feel like they can connect with the teacher, see the teacher as a real person, and hear the teacher's truth as well.

As we can see, there is a wealth of information about refugees and the English language classroom. There are different approaches, but all reflect the importance of stories, autonomy, and identity as part of the healing process. It is important not to make assumptions or categorize too quickly. Refugees, asylees, and immigrants may have experienced or continue to experience trauma, and we must be aware of and informed about what students have been through. Additionally, we must see our students as individuals with depth and feeling, each with a unique story. We must allow students to connect with and share the core of who they are, not just their worst story. As teachers and professionals working with refugees, our often well-meaning but sometimes misguided desire to help can become harmful without study, reflection, and open-mindedness. What we may see as positive, compassionate care could create an environment in which students do not feel autonomous or authentic. Looking at each student with an open heart, actively listening, and giving time and space to allow students to declare their own identities and tell their own stories is the most effective way a teacher can provide opportunities for growth and healing in the classroom. The healing power of stories and the importance of training teachers to practice active listening is why I believe the following training program to be necessary to the success of working with refugee/asylee students.

### **Teacher Training Program Reflection**

I began planning my teacher training program by recruiting teachers from the YWCA to join a book study with me and assist me in creating and constructing this material. After meeting to discuss the details of the project, nine teachers and one teaching assistant agreed to help me so I gave them a copy of *The Ungrateful Refugee* to read. This book gives insight into the perspective of a refugee as Nayeri tells the story of her journey, from her life in Iran before they were forced to flee, to her life in Oklahoma as a refugee expected to show nothing but gratitude, to her struggle to reclaim her identity as an adult. The goal was for participants to read the book together and discuss, reflect on their experiences, and learn strategies and methods for storytelling in the classroom. This course was conducted virtually for one hour a week over five weeks. Each week focused on one part of the book – each part representing what Nayeri describes as the refugee process: Escape, Camps, Asylum, Assimilation, and Cultural Repatriation.

The general structure of the course remained the same for every meeting:

- Pre-class Reading
- Book Discussion
- Reading/Writing/Speaking/Listening Activity
- Reflection on Activity
- Personal Reflection

I planned for each session with them by creating a PowerPoint for the lesson plan and preparing a post-lesson survey. Every PowerPoint included our agenda – which was always the same – and my three guiding questions: "Can (and should) storytelling (fact or fiction) be an effective way to connect and learn in an English language setting? How does our emotional

response to a story produce compassion, and when does that become problematic? What is our responsibility as teachers to respond to our students' personal struggles?" I wanted to be able to take the framework of each meeting and use it for any book we might choose. Rather than focusing the material on the subject matter, I attempted to focus on the approach and methods. The idea was to use each part of the book as the inspiration for a short discussion and activity rather than creating a book club and focusing on the book itself.

I chose specific passages from the book and created discussion questions with at least one activity related to that week's section. Each activity was intended to make the teachers think about aspects of working with refugees/asylees. However, it was also intended to be an activity that could be adapted for their students, so we tried to spend time after each activity thinking about and discussing the implications, drawbacks, and benefits of performing the activity with students. Making real-life applications was one way to differentiate this book study from a book club. Each meeting was intentional and specific: not merely a discussion of the book but an in-depth look at the topic itself. For example, Part One of the book discusses Nayeri's personal story of her childhood in Iran, her mother's conversion to Christianity, and their escape to a refugee camp in Italy, but most of our discussion in the first meeting was about the concept of pity vs. compassion when learning someone else's story. We did not talk about the book as much as we explored the concepts found in the book, but the response from the participants was still positive. I received no feedback that we should have discussed the book more. However, our last meeting was more open-ended and discussion-based, which one participant commented on, saying, "I think it was helpful to have the session be more open as the last one. It allowed for connections to be made and feelings to be shared" (personal communication, March 10, 2023). I understand this desire and also enjoyed the open discussion, but the course structure only lent itself to open

discussion occasionally. If we had had more time, we could have incorporated more open discussion at the beginning or end of every meeting. It was essential to ensure everyone understood that the primary goal of the book study was to explore the underlying meanings rather than the book's contents.

Time constraints was one of the most challenging parts of this materials project. Since each meeting was only an hour, and yet we were discussing several chapters of the book, a lot needed to be covered quickly. I worked hard to focus on only one aspect, specifically the theme of each section. It was hard to say it was time to move on. The participants enjoyed the book and had much to share from their thoughts and experiences, but we needed more time. The pinch of time was among the most common comments I received in my feedback surveys. Something I intend to use in future book studies is a suggestion from one of the participants to send out handouts a couple of days before the meetings. I tried to avoid giving "homework," but I do think that it would be helpful and give more time for other thoughts and activities if any material and discussion questions are given long before the meeting so that participants have time to reflect and prepare while they are reading and before they are on the spot in the middle of the discussion. Many comments about the time constraints of the class also clarified that the organization, the format, and the use of limited time were well balanced, so it was essential to be highly prepared and, while giving everyone opportunities to participate, to stay close to a schedule. Before each meeting, I planned how much time I intended to dedicate to each section. Therefore, if we wanted to discuss more or be more flexible with one section, I still knew when that time was finished and we had to move on to other things. Once or twice, I recognized that what we were doing at the time was valuable, so I allowed the conversation or activity to go long, but I knew that in doing so, I was sacrificing time in another section. Knowing this, I

prepared for what I could cut out if necessary. Some commented, (and I would have wished for it, too) that they would have liked some warm-up or warm-up activity, but I could not incorporate this into the program this time. I have often found, even in my classes, that warm-ups stretch out much longer than desired, so for the sake of time, I avoided them. In the future, can I do some quick warm-ups or check-ins? Yes, there is room for improvement in that area. However, because of the limited time, it was vital to set the expectations of starting immediately, following the schedule carefully, and respecting everyone's time.

It was also important to carefully edit the material and come prepared to dive deeply into one or two subjects rather than rushing through all the things we would have loved to talk about. The book has five parts, each rich with material for thought and discussion, so the most challenging part was knowing where to focus. We all wanted to spend more time discussing the book itself, everything that was said, and what it meant, but I had to continue pulling back and reminding myself that each section of the book was merely the catalyst to get us to a specific idea. Some participants suggested choosing their favorite passages ahead of time that supported what we would be discussing. I did attempt that one week, and I still think there is potential, but even in this activity, I was not able to give everyone enough time to share or participate. Perhaps in the future, some shared platform could be made where participants could add thoughts as they read during the week. As the material is refined and developed, it will be helpful to continue to create opportunities for greater participation, even in a limited amount of time.

One of the themes of this program is active listening. There is no storytelling without storylistening. The goal of this program is not only to give opportunities for storytelling but to make us better listeners. Every element, every activity, and every discussion requires or explores active listening. We began with active listening on day one. Whether consciously or

unconsciously, we incorporated active listening into everything we did. Practicing active listening gave us ideas about how to help our students become better listeners themselves, so we also talked about adapting the activities to the classroom. The participants enjoyed this aspect of the meetings. One participant commented that active listening alone could be a whole workshop. In a way, this *was* an active listening workshop, although it was not framed as such. Several participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to practice active listening in class. When asked on the feedback survey, "What was useful to you from this training segment?" one commented, "active listening, active listening, active listening" (personal communication, February 17, 2023). Even the amount we talked about and practiced active listening only scratched the surface of what we can do to improve our active listening skills. We practiced telling stories and listening to each other's stories. We talked about the right and wrong ways to approach active listening and how this can look different in a diverse group of people with different experiences. I tried to model active listening in our meetings. We can constantly improve on active listening throughout our lives, and we realized that we can only learn and grow in this area through intentional, reflective practice.

One of the activities we used to practice active listening was telling a story about "why we became teachers" or "one of our strongest memories." I wanted to make the stories significant but not overwhelming or too personal. I wanted to model the opportunity to give people a way out of participating in anything that makes them uncomfortable. I put three people in a breakout room and had them rotate roles: one storyteller, one storylistener, and one timekeeper. I gave the storyteller time to tell the story, the storylistener time to give active listening feedback, and the timekeeper time to give any observations on the interaction. One comment about this activity in the feedback survey which stood out to me was, "I felt uncomfortable noting some subtle active

listening 'mistakes' the other participants made. I reflected that this could be due to my assumptions and that I needed to check my judgment. However, I wondered if others might feel the same way (even about my active listening!). It supports the idea that there should be active listening training because I'm not sure I should be teaching it in my classroom if I don't feel comfortable discussing growth with a colleague" (personal communication, February 24, 2023). I suspected that participants would feel uncomfortable giving anything but positive feedback to each other, and I would like to know how I could address this topic. Considering the reluctance to give feedback touches on the most critical aspect of active listening and feedback: trust, which takes time and effort.

In another activity intended to improve our active listening skills, I had them share a story with their partner and practice selective echoing, writing down only the essential words they heard. This activity led to an interaction that spilled out beyond our meeting. When the participants came back to the main group, I asked them to share with the group what they had written about their partner's story. First, I asked anyone who might be uncomfortable with their 'story' being read to the group to let me know. Afterward, I reflected that I had not made a safe space for someone to feel like they could say, "No, I do not want mine to be read," because I asked it suddenly and publicly. Someone may have felt uncomfortable telling the whole group that they did not want their story read. Before the activity, I should have given instructions to let their partner know beforehand if someone wanted to avoid their story being read to the group. This part of the activity could be adjusted to be safer and easier for someone to opt-out. However, no one objected, and everyone read what they had written about their partner's story. Many commented on how beautiful the stories sounded; one participant even compared them to slam poetry. Later, this particular participant felt that perhaps it came across that they had made

light of what was a sad and serious story, so they reached out and spoke to the individuals involved to apologize and clarify. This is a beautiful and perfect example of authentic active listening: listening from the heart.

As we went through our activities every week, a personal struggle of mine, magnified by time constraints, was giving instructions and demonstrating activities. This was continuous feedback for me. Many participants expressed confusion with specific activities and suggested that I take more time to explain, demonstrate the activity, or repeat and clarify. I often talked through instructions quickly and then assumed that participants would figure it out as they went, and the fact that I did not have much time meant that I did not want to "waste" time with instructions. This was not helpful in the end, though, when people felt they needed to understand or could not fully participate. With a group of primarily native English speakers even, there were several times that someone would say they did not know if they had done the activity "right." I tried to reassure everyone that participation was the goal and that there was no right or wrong way. However, if someone feels like they have not understood the activity, they will be less likely to be able to apply it and use it in another context. Someone commented, "At times during this training, I felt confused, which I mostly attribute to my being late to the segment and under-prepared...I did not feel comfortable clarifying that since I was late and tried to catch up on my own, which impacted my ability to engage" (personal communication, February 17, 2023). Another person said, "I believe I would have been less confused if I had read more thoroughly the Active Listening document... I'm not sure how this could be helped except for maybe one additional step of checking for understanding from the group or, for me personally, showing the steps in writing for better processing" (personal communication, February 24, 2023). Although these participants placed the blame on themselves, it was still my responsibility to give space and



time for clarification so that everyone had the same opportunities to participate. One possible solution is asking the participants themselves to model active listening by echoing back what they understand the activity to entail. This gives us all an opportunity to listen, speak, clarify, and understand. I also need to remember the different ways people process information and not only verbalize but also demonstrate and write instructions to help everyone be clear about what they are doing. Offering multiple ways to participate is vital to the success of the program.

As we continued to talk about storytelling, the word "core" became an essential cornerstone of every section we read, and we noticed the idea crop up in meeting after meeting. We began to recognize that when we tell and hear true, authentic stories, we touch on the core of who people are. In Part Three particularly, we noticed the phrase "formative story," which led us to consider what is core to each of us. One teacher noted that in the book, the refugee did not want to lie about who he was because if he lied about the core of his identity, it would be like saying that he was not enough. Nayeri said, "I wonder what our world would look like if refugees were asked, instead of reciting facts, to write a story that shows our truth in another way" (2019, p. 241). We started to explore ways we could allow students to express their core identity and show their truth. One participant mentioned allowing students to draw a picture: expressing themselves in ways more than just words. She talked about art, music, and poetry: giving everyone as many avenues as possible to show their stories. Another participant talked about acting. Someone else recommended allowing students to express subtle details such as talking about the familiar smell or taste of a food: asking them to give the essence of a story. This led to the suggestion of bringing in a smell or a touch or a picture. Nayeri talked about sour cherries, the taste of a cookie, flowering trees, and her grandmother's clothes. We realized that we often ask our students to tell us about their entire culture or their entire country, which is

different from what we would instinctively talk about when asked to tell our core story. One of the activities we did during our meeting was a perfect example of how to give students an opportunity like this. I asked the teachers to go into breakout rooms with a partner, describe one of their favorite foods, and explain why it was their favorite food. Maybe they had a special connection to the food, or maybe it was just their favorite taste or comfort food. I gave them a few minutes and then had them come back to the main meeting. Some ways I would have liked to incorporate this if I had more time, and ways I have incorporated it in my classes in the past, would be to have the participants attempt to write down and recreate the recipe while their partner describes it. This would not only be an opportunity to practice listening and note-taking but would also teach students to hear someone else's true story. Then, when everyone came back together, they would share their partner's favorite food with the group. Unfortunately, we did not have time in the meeting to do this, but it was an important lesson we experienced about sharing, hearing, respecting, and honoring the core identity of every individual.

We also discussed how to offer resources to our students when we were unable to help them ourselves. This discussion coincided nicely with giving students opportunities to express themselves in class because we often do not have the resources refugees need, even in our communities. In the feedback surveys, the participants talked about "the importance of creating connections to our students" (personal communication, March 3, 2023). One participant said that because of the idea of creating connections, they noted "to brainstorm ways teachers can do that." Another participant said, "[I]t seems practical...to involve everyone. It made it feel like we were all on the same page and could brainstorm together" (personal communication, March 3, 2023). Someone else commented, "All these ideas get me thinking about what I can do for my students to help them feel more comfortable in their lives in the US" (personal communication,

March 3, 2023). I was encouraged to see that teachers were reflecting on how to use these ideas in their individual teaching practices.

As we reflected on and connected with the material, we had some fun and light-hearted conversations, but we also had intense moments with each other. Nayeri's book, like many memoirs, is often dark and challenging. When we came to some of the heaviest sections of the book, I tried to warn the participants about the content before they read. I wanted to make sure they knew what to expect, were prepared, and had the option to opt out of reading something that could be triggering to them. This was a reminder to be conscious of how we might unintentionally bring up traumatic events and memories with our students; with this awareness, we can be more careful in our teaching practice. We also had moments of disagreement with each other, which was healthy and to be expected. Some of us had negative reactions to Nayeri's story and personality. These reactions were valid and gave insight into our discussion about the danger of relying only on emotions to stir up compassion. Even unpleasant people or people who seem ungrateful (thus the book title) deserve to be heard and cared for. However, one teacher defended Nayeri passionately, surprised at the negative responses, particularly reacting to the word "bossy," saying, "We're talking about this person who wrote this memoir...and we're calling her bossy...I understand tone in writing, but...that understanding might be one you" (personal communication, March 10, 2023). The discussion was passionate but stirred up thoughts and conversation rather than being a negative experience. The important lesson I learned from this was that spending time together, looking together at personal and essential topics, and connecting with each other and the material leads naturally to more comfort with each other, more depth of discussion, and the ability to challenge each other respectfully and courageously.

By the end of our time together, we had explored needs-based teaching, offering resources, giving opportunities to tell a true story, exploring multidimensional and multisensory stories, allowing silence, and learning to actively listen. We ended our time together for the first four sessions with a quiet 5-minute personal reflection. I encouraged everyone to write their thoughts or just sit quietly and think. For the final session, I asked the participants to reflect a little differently. Instead of a personal reflection, I asked them to reflect as though they were Dina. I asked them to attempt to put themselves in her shoes. They were to write as Dina to her daughter or little sister who remained in Iran. What would she say? What would she want to tell her? What life lessons could she impart (in one short, simple letter)? I do not know what the participants wrote. I did not ask them to share. Each reflection remained private and personal. I do not know if this was useful or not – there was never any mention of it in the feedback surveys. However, I have used this activity with students and given them the option to share if they wanted to, and the results have always been absolutely beautiful. I hope that the participants in my group felt the same way. I hope they felt connected to Dina, her experiences, and the emotions and stories of the refugees we have the great pleasure and honor of working with.

My conclusion about this project is that there are two important elements that must be balanced: The material and the active listening. Regardless of which story is being told or which book is being used, the material can be used as a tool to lead the classroom, the teachers, the participants in experiential learning. But there will be no story powerful enough, no material strong enough if active listening is not at the heart of this program. Therefore, as educators, we must be clear and intentional about exercising our listening skills by giving opportunities and resources for storytelling and by creating an environment in which students can identify and express their core stories.

## Training Program Materials

### Part 1: Escape

#### Discussion:

*Why is it so important that a refugee's story MUST stir compassion?*

Quote: "...we had to turn our ordeal into a good, persuasive story or risk being sent back...we had to relive that story again and again, to earn our place, to calm casual skeptics." (p. 7)

*Discuss the difference between Compassion and Pity.*

- Pity creates victimhood
- Compassion leads to action
- Pity relies on how we feel in the moment
- Compassion considers facts and reason
- Compassion has two different roots: concern and justice:
- Concern comes from a personal place and is directed toward the individual suffering
- Justice comes from a place of shared humanity and a sense of community

#### Activity:

*What are active listening techniques?* Active Listening Handout (see Appendix A)<sup>1</sup>

#### Echoing

- Simple Echo: Repeat the last word or few words - not as a question or with any particular inflection. Shows attention and interest.

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<sup>1</sup> Received in Foundations for Teaching and Learning, MA-TESOL, SIT Graduate Institute, 2021

- Selective Echo: Repeat any charged words from the middle of the talk. This might be content or process (feeling) cues that stand out. This can follow the speaker deeper into the territory they are already in or lead them in a new direction.

Prompt: *One of my strongest memories* or *Why I became a teacher*

(Give options: Nothing overly personal or potentially triggering)

1. Person 1 tells a story for 3 minutes. (Set a timer and stick to it.)
2. Person 2 listens and writes, but only the words that are emphasized or repeated and seem to be important to the story (Selective Echo)
3. After this, switch places.
4. Come back and read what you have written OR Share in small groups (Give options NOT to share)

**Reflection:**

Reflect on stories that were told or on the activity itself. How could the activity be adapted to use with students?

Problematize – what are the potential hazards of doing this activity with students? How can you incorporate something like this into class while still protecting students' rights to privacy and giving them an "out" to participate more safely if they feel unsafe?

**Personal Reflection: 5 minutes**

## **Part 2: Camp (In Between Places)**

### **Discussion:**

Quote: "Americans and British well-wishers apparently are always sending bears... Why weren't the bear donors told to send calculators or tablets or English workbooks, dictionaries, and box sets of Roald Dahl and Beatrix Potter and Julia Donaldson? No one wants a bear. In Iran, bears (like sheep) get decapitated in airports" (133).

*How can we know our students' true needs without making assumptions?*

### **Activity:**

Active Listening Handout Continued: Continue to select parts of Active Listening to practice and focus on. Share the dos and don'ts of active listening.

Prompt: *A personal experience about the needs of your students.*

1. Person 1 tells the story while Person 2 practices active listening (3 minutes)
2. Person 2 tells a story while person 1 practices active listening (3 minutes)

### **Reflection:**

Reflect on stories that were told or on the activity itself. How could the activity be adapted to use with students?

Problematize – what are the potential hazards of doing this activity with students? How can you incorporate something like this into class while still protecting students' rights to privacy and giving them an "out" to participate more safely if they feel unsafe?

**Personal reflection – 5 minutes**

### Part 3: Asylum

#### Discussion:

Asylum Interviews:

For context, share the article *Interviewing Applicants for Refugee Status (RLD 4)* (UNHCR, 1995).

- *What stood out to you? Were there any specific quotes you wanted to share?*
- *Do you have any thoughts about the UNHCR document? Can you make any comparisons to the book?*

Quote: "How to tell a convincing story the *Western* way." (p. 232)

"There are two things to know about your audience (your "enemy," to continue the Sun Tzu analogy): who he is and what he considers truth." (p. 232)

Truth vs. Facts:

- "I wonder what our world would look like if refugees were asked, instead of reciting facts, to write a story that shows their truth in another way" (p 241).
- "...truth requires point of view...it needs to be cobbled *from* facts" (p. 241).
- "The gospels are four versions of the same story. And they are all somehow true" (p. 309).

*How can we help our students show their truth without insisting on facts?*

Making Connections

*What resources can we provide IN class?*

*How can we help make connections to resources OUTSIDE class?*



**Activity:**

Tell a story to your partner:

- Choose a food you love
- Share a picture
- Explain how it is made
- Explain why you love it

**Reflection:**

Reflect on stories that were told or on the activity itself. How could the activity be adapted to use with students?

Problematize – what are the potential hazards of doing this activity with students? How can you incorporate something like this into class while still protecting students' rights to privacy and giving them an "out" to participate more safely if they feel unsafe?

**Personal reflection – 5 minutes**

## **Part 4: Assimilation**

### **Activity:**

#### **Shape Shift** (Korsunskiy, 2020)

1. Turn off your camera
2. Go find a disguise and put it on
3. Change your name on Zoom to reflect your disguise
4. When I say so, turn your camera back on
5. Enjoy each other's silly disguises

### **Reflection:**

How does this activity relate to students?

How can you incorporate it – virtually/in person?

What are some potential problems?

Would this work for different levels?

Could you change it slightly?

How could this give students an outlet for their stories?

### **Discussion:**

*What is assimilation?*

*What are your personal experiences with assimilation?*

*How can we help refugees assimilate without expecting assimilation to look a certain way?*

### **Small Group Discussion:**

*What are some of the things Dina does/values to assimilate?*

According to Dina:

*What is the "wrong" way to look at assimilation?*

Quotes:

"I suggest ways to kick-start her new life, to smooth the way for herself and family. Do the concessions I'm asking of her amount to self-harm?" (p. 301)

"The moment the refugee is welcomed in, he is expected to make just such a quick transformation, to shed his past, to walk through the gates clean, unencumbered by a past self."  
(p. 315)

"Refugees will assimilate just as surely as time will pass...assimilation begins in unseen places. To enforce it is to demand performance" (p. 319).

*What is the "right" way to look at assimilation?*

Quotes:

"They need friendship, not salvation. They need the dignity of becoming an essential part of society" (p. 338).

"...assimilation requires reciprocation. It is mutual and humble and intertwined with multiculturalism, never at odds with it. It is about allowing newcomers to affect you on your native soil, to change you" (p. 342).

"If you love a person, a family, you don't want them to change into you. You want them to be them. You want to know about their tics and foibles, the home they left behind and all its strange flavours, their childhood songs, their bad habits, the music of their every celebration" (p. 343).

**Personal reflection – 5 minutes**

**Part 5: Cultural Repatriation****Discussion:**

*What is repatriation?*

*What tangible ways can you give students tools to "repatriate" in class?*

*How can they reclaim their cultural identity?*

*What if they do not want to?*

*Are we making assumptions about what their cultural identity is?*

**Activity:**

In small groups, practice storytelling and storylistening again

*What are some "sticky" issues that have come up for you or your students in class?*

Three minutes for the storyteller to tell the story and 3 minutes for the active listener to respond.

**Reflection:**

In place of a personal reflection:

Write a letter as Nayeri to her daughter. What would you want her to know? What would you want to say to her?

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## Appendix A

# Active Listening

### The aim

To help the speaker gain self-insight, open new doors, consider new possibilities, make new choices. Through being helped to clarify and reflect on his/her own experience, the speaker discovers that he/she has the capacity to solve (or dis-solve) problems and move forward.

### Active Listening Toolkit

#### 1. Questions

Open: "Could you say more about that?" "What do you remember?" "What are you thinking?"

Closed: "When did you do that?" "What was his name?" "What did you do next?"

#### 2. Checking for understanding

Either because you want to check that you've understood, or because the speaker is confused or contradictory.

"So what you're saying is..... is that right?"

"Is this what you mean?"

"Are you saying that...?"

This also demonstrates that you are listening while not judging, and that you are seeing the client's world from their point of view. Furthermore, it is an invitation to the speaker to develop/elaborate the theme.

#### 3. Summarizing

You rephrase in your own words something important the client has said. This can be related to checking for understanding (2 above). It shows that you are following, and encourages the speaker to explore further.

#### 4. Giving free attention.

Simply paying attention to the client. Creative waiting. Presence. Empathy. Acceptance.

#### 5. Echoing

**Simple Echo** Repeat the last word or few words - not as a question or with any particular inflection. Shows attention, interest.

**Selective Echo** Repeat any charged words from the middle of the talk. This might be content or process (feeling) cues that stand out. This can follow the speaker deeper into the territory they are already in, or lead them in a new direction.

#### 6. Empathic Divining

You divine an implicit feeling or thought or intention lurking between the lines and not fully expressed by the speaker. You give it back as a statement not as a question: "It seems as though..." Be careful that this is not interpretation or your own projected agenda.



## Elements of Active Listening

### 1. Be Attentive

Pay close attention to what is being said. Demonstrate that you are listening through attentive body language.

### 2. Suspend Judgment

Put aside the chatter in your head that is getting in the way of listening. This is perhaps the most difficult of these elements.

### 3. Reflect Back

It is helpful for the listener to reflect the speaker's statements back to him or her for further clarification. By doing this you can help to clarify the speaker's priorities and concerns.

### 4. Summarize

Summarize what you heard back to the speaker to confirm your comprehension and open the door for more dialogue.

## *Roadblocks to Listening*

<b>Comparing</b>	what the speaker says to him or herself or to others.
<b>Rehearsing</b>	what you will really say in response to the speaker.
<b>Mind reading</b>	what the speaker is really feeling or thinking.
<b>Judging</b>	the merits of what the speaker says or how it is said.
<b>Identifying</b>	what the speaker says with your own experience.
<b>Advising</b>	the speaker and providing solutions without being asked.
<b>Diverting</b>	the speaker by changing the subject, distracting him or her from the topic.
<b>Being right</b>	in your position or idea, leaving no room for listening to the other's perspective.
<b>Placating</b>	the speaker by agreeing with him or her without being involved in what is said.

## Elements of Active Listening

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The purpose of active listening is to help you clearly understand what the speaker is trying to communicate, and to let the speaker know that you have understood. In active listening, we listen for both the content and the feeling conveyed in the message.

### **Be Aware of Different Levels of Listening**

#### **Level One**

In this kind of listening we listen only to the content of what the speaker is telling us. Because we only hear the “facts” without knowing the background and context, this level of listening tends to elicit personal reactions and “chatter” in our heads, such as judgment or opinions. These distractions can prevent us from really listening and understanding what the speaker is communicating.

#### **Level Two**

In this kind of listening, we listen for more than the content- we also listen for the speaker’s culture, agenda, values, vision, perspectives, and concerns. In this level of listening, because we are listening for more, we are more likely to develop a deeper understanding of what the speaker is telling us.

#### **Level Three**

In this kind of listening, we listen for an even bigger picture. We consider all of the influences to the conversation and the environment. In this kind of listening we are really listening to all our senses, and we pay attention to tone of voice, body language, and environmental factors that are related to the conversation.

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To

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