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TRAUMA-INFORMED PEDAGOGY IN WARTIME ESP CLASSROOMS: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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The full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine, initiated in February 2022, has fundamentally reshaped the pedagogical conditions under which English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction takes place in Ukrainian higher education. Learners and practitioners alike operate under conditions of chronic stress, displacement, bereavement, and anticipatory anxiety that are clinically recognised as trauma-adjacent or traumagenic. This interdisciplinary theoretical article, situated at the intersection of applied linguistics, critical pedagogy, and trauma studies, argues that trauma-informed pedagogy (TIP) must be understood not merely as a pastoral or psychological add-on to ESP instruction but as a constitutive methodological principle that reshapes content selection, task design, discourse management, and assessment practice. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from trauma-informed education (TIE), critical ESP scholarship, and the professional discourse of social work – a discipline that has long theorised trauma and its social consequences – the article proposes an original conceptual framework termed Trauma-Responsive ESP (TR-ESP). This framework identifies four operational principles – psychological safety, epistemic agency, contextual relevance, and affective scaffolding – and maps each principle onto concrete methodological implications for ESP course design and classroom practice. The article concludes by arguing that TR-ESP constitutes a form of applied humanitarian linguistics: a practice that takes the material and psychological realities of learners as its starting point and regards language education as an act of professional and personal restitution.

Key words: *trauma-informed pedagogy, English for Specific Purposes, social work, applied linguistics, critical pedagogy, professional discourse.*

The statement of the problem. On 24 February 2022, the full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine created one of the most severe humanitarian catastrophes in contemporary European history, displacing millions of people, destroying civilian infrastructure, and exposing the entire Ukrainian population – including the academic community – to prolonged, collective, and compounding trauma. Within this context, the continuation of university education has taken on a quality that is simultaneously an act of institutional resilience and a site of profound methodological challenge.

For ESP practitioners, this challenge is particularly acute. The ESP classroom is a space in which learners engage with professional content – texts, tasks, and discourses drawn from the working world – and in wartime Ukraine, a significant proportion of that professional content, particularly in fields such as social work, public health, law, and journalism, intersects directly with the traumatic realities that learners and their communities are living through. The social work ESP classroom, in which units on crisis intervention, work with refugees, victims of armed conflict, and vulnerable popula-

tions are standard components of the curriculum, may encounter these intersections with particular frequency and intensity.

Despite the scale and urgency of this challenge, the field of ESP methodology has been comparatively slow to theorise its implications. Trauma-informed approaches have been extensively developed in clinical social work (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014), in school education (Jennings, 2019; Terrasi & de Galarce, 2017), and, to a growing extent, in higher education (Carello & Butler, 2015; Imad, 2020). However, their application to language teaching – and specifically to ESP for the social professions – remains theoretically underdeveloped and practically under-articulated.

This article seeks to address that gap. Its central argument is that trauma-informed pedagogy (TIP), when grounded in both trauma studies and the critical tradition in ESP scholarship, yields a coherent and actionable set of methodological principles for the ESP classroom. These principles do not require abandoning ESP's core commitments to professional communicative competence, authentic materials, needs analysis, and genre instruction. Rather,

they require that those commitments be pursued through pedagogical forms that acknowledge and respond to the psychological realities of learners whose professional formation is taking place under conditions of war.

The primary aim of this article is to develop a theoretically grounded conceptual framework for trauma-informed ESP pedagogy, with specific reference to the teaching of English to Master's students in social work under wartime conditions in Ukraine. In pursuit of this aim, the article addresses the following objectives: (1) to review and synthesise the principal theoretical frameworks of trauma-informed pedagogy as elaborated in educational psychology and higher education studies; (2) to locate these frameworks within the critical tradition of ESP scholarship and identify their methodological implications for language teaching; (3) to analyse the specific traumagenic dimensions of social work ESP content and the pedagogical risks they entail; (4) to propose the TR-ESP framework as a theoretically coherent and practically applicable response to these challenges; and (5) to articulate concrete methodological recommendations for ESP practitioners, curriculum designers, and educational policy-makers operating in contexts affected by armed conflict and collective trauma.

Presentation of the main material. The concept of trauma-informed practice originates in clinical psychology and psychiatric social work, where it emerged in the 1990s as a response to growing evidence that standard clinical and social service encounters could inadvertently retraumatise clients whose presenting difficulties were rooted in unresolved trauma (Herman, 1992; Felitti et al., 1998). The fundamental insight – that awareness of trauma's pervasive effects should shape the form, content, and relational dynamics of helping interactions – has since migrated beyond clinical settings into education at all levels.

In educational contexts, trauma-informed approaches are typically organised around a set of core principles derived from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014) framework: safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment, and cultural, historical, and gender sensitivity. These principles, originally designed for service provision, have been adapted for classroom application by scholars including J. Carello and L. Butler (2015), who developed the concept of “trauma-informed teaching” in higher education, and M. Imad (2020), whose neuroscience-grounded approach emphasises the impact of toxic stress on memory consolidation, cognitive flexibility, and learning readiness.

Neurobiologically, trauma disrupts the functioning of the prefrontal cortex – the region most closely associated with executive function, planning, linguistic processing, and the integration of new information – while activating subcortical stress response systems, including the amygdala and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (van der Kolk, 2014; Perry, 2009). In the classroom, this translates into impaired working memory, reduced capacity for abstract reasoning, heightened sensitivity to perceived threat, and diminished tolerance for ambiguity – all of which have direct implications for language learning, which places substantial demands on working memory, metalinguistic reasoning, and the management of communicative uncertainty.

It is important to distinguish between individual trauma, which results from discrete adverse events in a person's life, and collective or historical trauma, which refers to the cumulative and intergenerational effects of mass violence, persecution, or catastrophic loss experienced by a community as a whole (Brave Heart, 2003; Hirsch, 2012). The Ukrainian wartime context involves both dimensions simultaneously: individuals experience personal losses, displacement, and direct exposure to violence, while the entire community shares a collective traumatic experience of existential threat, cultural destruction, and national bereavement. Any pedagogical framework adequate to this context must be able to respond to both the individual and collective dimensions of traumatic experience.

Critically, trauma-informed pedagogy must be distinguished from trauma therapy. The classroom is not a therapeutic space, and the ESP teacher is not a clinician. What TIP requires of educators is not the provision of psychological treatment but the structuring of learning environments, tasks, and interactions in ways that reduce unnecessary psychological risk, preserve the learner's sense of agency and dignity, and avoid practices that inadvertently replicate the dynamics of helplessness, exposure, and loss of control that characterise traumatic experience (Carello & Butler, 2015; Levenson, 2017).

The mainstream tradition of ESP methodology – grounded in needs analysis, genre analysis, and the development of professional communicative competence – has been productively challenged since the 1990s by scholars working within a critical pedagogical framework. Critical ESP scholars, drawing on Freire's (1970) pedagogy of the oppressed, Pennycook's (1997) work on the politics of ESL/ESP, and Benesch's (2001) rights analysis approach, have argued that ESP's traditional orientation toward professional accommodation – teaching learners the language of existing professional

communities as a form of enculturation – risks reproducing existing power structures and marginalising the experiences, identities, and critical voices of learners from non-dominant social positions.

For the present argument, critical ESP is relevant in two interconnected ways. First, its insistence that learner subjectivity – including learners' social, historical, and psychological situatedness – constitutes a legitimate and necessary dimension of the pedagogical encounter provides a theoretical basis for taking learners' traumatic experience seriously as a methodological concern, rather than treating it as an extraneous personal matter that lies outside the scope of language instruction. Second, critical ESP's attention to the ideological dimensions of professional discourse – including how professional texts encode assumptions about power, normality, and legitimate knowledge – has direct relevance to the teaching of social work discourse, a field in which the relationship between language and power is a central professional and ethical concern.

S. Benesch's (2001) rights analysis framework is particularly productive here. Rather than framing academic and professional language education purely as a process of socialisation into existing discourse communities, rights analysis asks what the conditions of possibility are for learners to participate in academic and professional life as agents with rights – including the right to interrogate, challenge, and reformulate the discourses into which they are being initiated. In a wartime context, where learners may be simultaneously being prepared for professional roles in crisis response, human rights advocacy, and international engagement, and living through the very crises they are learning to address professionally, this dimension of critical ESP takes on particular resonance and urgency.

A further dimension of critical ESP relevant to this discussion is its engagement with affect and emotion as constitutive dimensions of academic and professional language use. S. Ahmed's (2004) work on affective economies, A. Pavlenko's (2005) scholarship on emotions and multilingualism, and S. Canagarajah's (2012) translinguistic perspective on academic writing all converge on the insight that language learning and use are irreducibly affective practices – that emotion, identity, and social positioning are not peripheral to the acquisition of professional English but are constitutive of it. This theoretical convergence between critical ESP and trauma studies creates a robust intellectual foundation for the framework proposed in this article.

The social work ESP curriculum, by the nature of the profession it serves, contains a substantial proportion of what may be termed traumagenic content – content that, by virtue of its subject mat-

ter, has the potential to activate traumatic memory, elicit acute distress, or trigger avoidant or dissociative responses in learners with trauma histories. In the Ukrainian wartime context, where the prevalence of such histories among student populations must be assumed to be significantly elevated, the pedagogical management of traumagenic content becomes a matter of methodological necessity.

The Master's-level social work ESP curriculum encompasses several thematic domains that are directly trauma-related in the current Ukrainian context. Units addressing crisis intervention and emergency social services, working with refugees and internally displaced persons, assisting victims of armed conflict, and addressing human rights violations engage directly with experiences that many Ukrainian students will have undergone or witnessed. The clinical social work literature has long recognised the phenomenon of secondary traumatic stress (Figley, 1995) – the vicarious or indirect trauma that can affect professionals who work with trauma survivors' – and its educational equivalent, secondary traumatic stress in training (Badger, 2010), has been documented in social work education programmes internationally.

What distinguishes the current Ukrainian context from the conditions under which secondary traumatic stress in training has typically been studied is the collapse of the boundary between vicarious and primary trauma. Ukrainian students studying crisis intervention are not merely learning about crises that others have experienced: they are, in many cases, studying crisis intervention while themselves in crisis, or in the immediate aftermath of acute traumatic events. The epistemological and psychological implications of this situation – in which the professional knowledge being acquired and the personal experience being lived are in direct, unmediated contact with each other – have not been adequately theorised in the ESP literature.

The linguistic dimension adds a further layer of complexity specific to the ESP context. When traumagenic content is encountered in a foreign language – English – the processing demands on the learner are compounded. The cognitive load of comprehending a difficult text or producing a complex academic argument in L2 is additive with the psychological load of processing potentially activating content. Furthermore, English – as the global language of international humanitarian organisations, NGO reporting frameworks, and academic publication – carries its own ideological and affective freight for Ukrainian learners, representing simultaneously a resource for international communication and advocacy, and a language that

mediates the learner's traumatic experience to a global audience in ways that may feel exposing, objectifying, or politically fraught.

Building on the theoretical foundations established in the preceding sections, this article proposes an original conceptual framework termed Trauma-Responsive ESP (TR-ESP). TR-ESP is defined as an approach to ESP course design and classroom practice that integrates the core principles of trauma-informed pedagogy with the specific methodological commitments of ESP – to professional communicative competence, authentic discourse, needs-based instruction, and genre awareness – in ways that neither subordinate professional learning to psychological safety nor instrumentalise learners' psychological realities in the service of professional curriculum objectives.

TR-ESP is organised around four constitutive principles, which are elaborated below: Psychological Safety, Epistemic Agency, Contextual Relevance, and Affective Scaffolding.

Drawing on A. Maslow's (1943) foundational insight that safety is a prerequisite for higher-order cognitive and social functioning, and on van der Kolk's (2014) neurobiological elaboration of safety as the foundation of trauma recovery, TR-ESP holds that the ESP classroom must be structured as a psychologically safe environment in which learners can engage with professionally necessary but potentially activating content without fear of exposure, humiliation, or involuntary disclosure. Pedagogically, this principle translates into practices such as content advisories before potentially distressing materials, the normalisation of opting out of specific tasks without academic penalty, the cultivation of predictable and transparent classroom routines, and the avoidance of cold-calling or other practices that generate unpredictable public exposure.

Trauma is fundamentally an experience of powerlessness – of the self as object rather than agent (Herman, 1992). Trauma-informed pedagogy, therefore, places particular emphasis on the restoration and cultivation of agency: the learner's sense of themselves as an effective, choosing, meaning-making subject. In the ESP context, epistemic agency refers to learners' right and capacity to interrogate, evaluate, and contest the professional discourses they are acquiring, rather than receiving them as authoritative and fixed. This aligns directly with S. Benesch's (2001) rights analysis framework and with critical ESP's broader commitment to critical discourse literacy. Methodologically, epistemic agency is fostered through task designs that invite critical analysis of professional texts, foreground the constructed and contested nature of professional

knowledge, and create space for learners' experiential and cultural knowledge to be recognised as a legitimate epistemic resource.

The ESP tradition has always insisted on the centrality of the learner's professional context as the organising principle of curriculum design. TR-ESP radicalises this insistence by arguing that in wartime conditions, contextual relevance must extend beyond the professional to the existential: the curriculum must be responsive not only to the communicative demands of the social work profession in general, but to the specific professional and humanitarian demands generated by the conflict context in which Ukrainian social workers are operating and will operate. This means that units on crisis intervention, forced migration, human rights violations, and psychosocial support are not merely thematically appropriate but professionally urgent. Paradoxically, the recognition of this urgency – the acknowledgement that what is being studied matters, that the professional language being acquired has direct application to the learners' own lived context – can itself be a source of meaning and motivation that mitigates the demoralising effects of trauma (Frankl, 1959/1984; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

The concept of scaffolding – providing structured, graduated, and progressively withdrawn support for learners as they develop new competences (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) – is well established in language teaching methodology. TR-ESP extends the scaffolding concept to the affective and psychological dimensions of learning, arguing that when learners engage with traumatic content, the pedagogical management of affective load is as important as that of cognitive load. Affective scaffolding may include: pre-teaching coping strategies and self-regulation skills before encounters with difficult content; sequencing tasks to move from descriptive to analytical to evaluative engagement with traumatic material; providing structured debrief activities following emotionally demanding sessions; and normalising and validating the affective responses that such content may elicit, without inviting or requiring personal disclosure.

The four principles of TR-ESP yield a set of concrete methodological implications, elaborated below in relation to the key dimensions of ESP course design: materials selection and task design, discourse and interaction management, assessment, and teacher development.

In the domains of materials selection and task design, TR-ESP implies a principled approach to selecting and framing authentic professional texts that acknowledges their potential affective impact without sacrificing their professional authenticity.

A trauma-responsive approach does not avoid difficult content – to do so would be to deny learners the professional preparation they need and to enact a kind of epistemic paternalism that is itself potentially disempowering. Rather, it frames such content through tasks that foreground professional analysis and critical thinking, thereby positioning learners as analysts rather than as passive recipients of potentially overwhelming material. Genre-analytic tasks that ask learners to examine how a UN report on forced displacement constructs its subject, for instance, engage learners in the same professionally relevant discourse while maintaining an analytically protective frame (Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2006).

In discourse and interaction management, the TR-ESP framework has implications for both classroom talk and written interaction. The management of discussion of traumagenic topics in a second language raises the question of what A. Holliday (2005) calls the “small culture” of the classroom: the locally constructed norms, expectations, and relational dynamics that determine what can and cannot be said, by whom, and in what form. In trauma-responsive terms, the teacher’s role is to cultivate a classroom culture in which the affective dimensions of professional content can be acknowledged without being dramatised; in which silence and opting out are normalised rather than stigmatised; and in which the teacher models the kind of reflective, bounded professional engagement with difficult content that social work education itself seeks to cultivate.

Assessment in trauma-responsive ESP requires particular attention. Traditional assessment practices in ESP – presentations, role plays, case analyses, written reports – may need to be redesigned or supplemented to accommodate the possibility that some learners will find specific topics or interaction formats psychologically inaccessible at certain times. This does not mean abandoning rigorous professional standards but rather ensuring that assessment designs offer sufficient flexibility – in topic choice, format, timing, and mode of submission – to allow all learners to demonstrate their professional competence without being placed in situations of involuntary traumatic exposure. Portfolio-based assessment, which allows learners to select and frame their best work across a range of tasks, is particularly compatible with TR-ESP principles.

Finally, the TR-ESP framework has significant implications for teacher development. ESP practitioners are trained primarily as linguists and language educators, not as trauma specialists. However, the wartime context places them in a position where basic trauma literacy – an understanding of

the neurobiological, psychological, and social dynamics of trauma and its educational manifestations – is a professional necessity. Teacher development programmes for ESP practitioners working in conflict-affected contexts should therefore include foundational training in trauma recognition, the principles of trauma-informed classroom management, self-care and vicarious trauma mitigation, and appropriate referral pathways to psychological support services. Crucially, such training must be grounded in the recognition that ESP teachers themselves operate within the same traumagenic social environment as their students.

Conclusion. This article has argued that the emergence of large-scale armed conflict as the permanent background condition of higher education in Ukraine creates an urgent theoretical and practical imperative for ESP methodology: the development of trauma-informed approaches to language teaching that are adequate to the psychological realities of learners without sacrificing the professional and linguistic rigour that defines the ESP tradition at its best. The proposed TR-ESP framework – grounded in the intersection of trauma-informed educational theory, critical ESP scholarship, and the professional discourse of social work – offers a principled and practically oriented response to this imperative. Its four constitutive principles of Psychological Safety, Epistemic Agency, Contextual Relevance, and Affective Scaffolding are not external constraints on ESP methodology but enrichments of it: they deepen the ESP tradition’s existing commitments to learner-centredness, professional authenticity, and critical discourse literacy. Three broader theoretical contributions deserve emphasis. First, TR-ESP advances the proposition that trauma-informed pedagogy in higher education must be discipline- and discourse-specific – that generic psychological safety frameworks, while valuable, are insufficient for contexts in which professional content is itself traumagenic, and that ESP methodology has the conceptual resources to develop discipline-specific responses. Second, the article contributes to the emerging literature on ESP in conflict-affected and post-conflict contexts (Benesch, 2001; Canagarajah, 2002), arguing that such contexts require not merely the adaptation of existing ESP methods but the development of new theoretical frameworks that take the political and humanitarian dimensions of language education seriously. Third, by foregrounding the social work ESP context specifically, the article highlights a discipline that has itself developed sophisticated theories of trauma, resilience, and professional self-care, and argues that these theories constitute an underutilised resource for ESP methodology broadly conceived.

Future research should empirically validate the TR-ESP framework through qualitative and mixed-methods studies examining learners' and teachers' experiences in wartime ESP classrooms. Systematic needs analysis of Ukrainian Master's students in social work, attention to the specific intersections of collective trauma and professional

identity formation in L2 contexts, and longitudinal studies of the pedagogical effects of TR-ESP interventions would all contribute to building an evidence base for this emerging field. It is hoped that the theoretical framework proposed here will serve as a productive starting point for that programme of enquiry.

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ТРАВМО-ОРІЄНТОВАНА ПЕДАГОГІКА В УМОВАХ ВОЄННОГО ЧАСУ НА ЗАНЯТТЯХ З АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ ПРОФЕСІЙНОГО СПРЯМУВАННЯ: ТЕОРЕТИЧНІ ОСНОВИ ТА МЕТОДОЛОГІЧНІ АСПЕКТИ

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Повномасштабне російське військове вторгнення в Україну, розпочате в лютому 2022 року, докорінно змінило педагогічні умови, за яких відбувається викладання англійської мови для спеціальних цілей (ESP) в українській вищій освіті. Як студенти, так і практики працюють в умовах хронічного стресу, переміщення, втрати близьких та антиципаторної тривоги, які клінічно визнаються як травматичні або травмогенні. Це міждисциплінарне дослідження, яке проходить на перетині прикладної лінгвістики, критичної педагогіки та досліджень травм, стверджує, що травмо-орієнтовану педагогіку слід розуміти не просто як пасторальне чи психологічне доповнення до викладання англійської мови для спеціальних цілей, а як конститутивний методологічний принцип, що змінює вибір змісту, розробку завдань, управління дискурсом та практику оцінювання. Спираючись на теоретичні основи травмоорієнтованої освіти, критичного вивчення англійської мови професійного спрямування та професійного дискурсу соціальної роботи – дисципліни, яка давно теоретизує травму та її соціальні наслідки, – дослідження пропонує оригінальну концептуальну рамку під назвою Травмоорієнтована ESP (TR-ESP). Ця рамка визначає чотири операційні принципи – психологічну безпеку, епістемічну діяльність, контекстуальну релевантність та афективне скаффордування – та відображає кожен принцип на конкретних методологічних наслідках для розробки курсів ESP та практики в аудиторії. Стаття висновує, що TR-ESP є формою прикладної гуманітарної лінгвістики: практики, яка бере за відправну точку матеріальні та психологічні реалії студентів та розглядає мовну освіту як акт професійної та особистої реституції.

Ключові слова: травмоорієнтована педагогіка, англійська мова професійного спрямування, освіта воєнного часу, соціальна робота, прикладна лінгвістика, критична педагогіка, професійний дискурс.



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