The Efficacy of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy for Low-Proficiency International Students in Online Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

International students with low academic English proficiency face challenges with reading their course materials and writing assignments. Their challenges are exacerbated during remote learning, as they remain in their home countries, immersed in their home languages, which may be quite distant from academic English. To investigate the effects of culturally responsive pedagogy for international students online, quantitative and qualitative data were collected from a learner-driven, instructor-facilitated (LeD-InF) support program at a large university in southern Ontario. This fully online delivery of the Reading and Writing Excellence (RWE) program was re-envisioned from a long-running co-curricular program that addressed students' academic English reading, writing, and critical thinking needs. Among eight groups (with the total enrolment of 154) in the Fall 2020 academic term cycle and nine groups (with the total enrolment of 226) in the Winter 2021 academic term cycle of the online RWE program, the intervention groups that were additionally supported with culturally responsive pedagogy had the highest volume of writing output and engagement metrics among all groups. The text data (of student voices and experiences) also reinforces the efficacy of culturally responsive pedagogy in facilitating student experience, constructing identities, promoting learner agency, increasing satisfaction, improving students' perceptions of learning, and realizing transformative inclusivity.

Introduction

International students studying in Canada increased by 135% between 2010 and 2020; by the end of 2021, there were 621,565 international students at all levels of study (Canadian Bureau for International Education [CBIE], n.d.). In 2017, international students at the Canadian post-secondary level were from 186 different nations; over 90% of these students came from countries where English is a foreign/second language or that have a regional variety of English (CBIE, 2018). Addressing the magnitude of international students' challenges requires a major mindset shift, from deficit-based negative stereotyping of international students to welcoming them as assets that contribute to internationalization (Andrade & Evans, 2009; Ryan, 2011). Deficit thinking towards international students (Smit, 2012) caused them to feel "isolated and disempowered and even [have] perceptions of prejudice and racist behavior by university teachers, classmates, and community members" (Leask, 2015, p. 92). Common negative stereotypes include perceiving international students as passive rote learners who lack critical thinking skills and original thoughts and as perpetrators of plagiarism (Jones, 2017). These stereotypes impact their class participation (Lee & Rice, 2007), social network development, and well-being (Zhou & Cole, 2017). Students with low academic English proficiency failed in their courses at a significantly higher rate than their more proficient peers (Roessingh & Douglas, 2012), thus raising the ethical question of whether students' quality of educational experience is ignored in the current climate of "competition, commercialization, self-interest and status building" (Knight & De Wit, 2018, p. 4) and the commodification of education programs (Knight, 2013) that have increasingly characterized internationalization. Concern about the gap between internationalization policies and international students' learning experience include students being subjected to racism and discrimination from peers and faculty (Guo & Guo, 2017). Due to the lack of language development support, faculty at a Canadian university who are more empathetic to their students' language challenges felt burdened to have to spend more time editing their students' work in order to help them succeed (Heringer, 2021). Inadequate assistance to support international students in language development and faculty in teaching international students is problematic, as noted by Murphy (2022): "it borders on unethical to keep taking their tuition dollars and de facto promising they can succeed" (p. 85). In fact, given the undue stigmatization of East Asian students, who constitute the majority of international students in Canada, Moosavi (2021) advocates acknowledging the negative impact of such stigmatization and working towards decolonizing approaches.

For many international students from outside of Europe, transitioning from high school in their countries and cultures to a Western university dominated by mainstream Eurocentric values and expectations can be even more alienating than what European international students experience (Lee & Rice, 2007). Their limited language abilities and lack of familiarity with Western writing norms and expectations makes them vulnerable to being accused of plagiarism (Beasley, 2016). Scholars have identified culturally responsive pedagogy as an effective teaching strategy (Eaton & Burns, 2018; Kilburn et al., 2019; Krasnof, 2016) to enable students to have more equitable learning conditions where they can "cultivate their awareness, knowledge and skills so that they can actively make choices to avoid plagiarism" (Eaton & Burns, 2018, p. 353).

This paper will first discuss the relevant literature surrounding the challenges that low-English-proficiency international students face regarding meeting academic expectations. Subsequently, it will describe the addition of culturally responsive pedagogy to the standard pedagogy in an intervention program for supporting students in higher education in developing

their critical thinking, academic writing, and reading skills. Recommendations for supporting international students will be made from the pedagogical insights gained from this study.

Literature Review

International students' challenges

Along with disciplinary knowledge, students need the linguistic capital of academic English to meet university expectations. Since academic English is "concise, precise and authoritative … [and] uses sophisticated words and complex grammatical constructions" (Snow, 2010, p. 450), international students from cultures where English is a second/foreign language need practice opportunities to acquire extensive vocabulary. As much university-level writing is source-based (Cumming et al., 2016), students need to read and think critically about their source texts and make cogent arguments in their writing, acknowledge the sources, distinguish their ideas from those of their sources, and uphold academic integrity through giving credit to original authors.

International students from exam-oriented educational systems may not have the academic writing skills needed for assignments where they are expected to question the texts and write in an assertive or authoritative way. Furthermore, they may be unfamiliar with the "writer-responsible culture" (Wette & Furneaux, 2018) of Western academic writing, where they are expected to exhibit agency in their writing and to express their thoughts in alignment with Western traditions for knowledge construction (Tang, 2012).

Culturally responsive pedagogy

Culturally responsive teaching is the pedagogy that acknowledges the value of learners' "cultural references" in every dimension of teaching/learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The prototype of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP)—culturally relevant pedagogy has three key tenets: student attainment, cultural competence, and critical/socio-political consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009, 2021a, 2021b). "Student attainment" originally focused on African American students' academic achievement as well as the gap experienced by them (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). Teachers who applied culturally responsive pedagogy in their teaching helped Black learners attain higher achievement than counterparts who did not experience the approach (Ladson-Billings, 2009). The notion of student attainment was later extended to the academic development of marginalized students of colour (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999). "Cultural competence" refers to teachers' capabilities of helping students use their cultures in their learning (Ladson-Billings, 2021b) and students' sense of security "in their knowledge and understanding of their own culture—language, traditions, histories, culture, and so forth" (Ladson-Billings, 2021c). "Critical/socio-political consciousness" is to critique social injustice (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021b).

Culturally responsive pedagogy denotes the "teaching to and through personal cultural strengths, intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments" (Gay, 2010, p. 26). Being "inclusive," "empowering," "transformative," "emancipatory," and "humanistic" (Gay, 2018, pp. 38-44), culturally responsive pedagogy challenges deficiency models (Ladson-Billings, 2006) that view minority students as underachievers (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Instead of "fit[ting] students into neat boxes and categories like, 'basic,' 'general,' 'regular,'" culturally responsive pedagogy empowers students (Ladson-Billings, 2021c, p. 353) and maintains learners' cultural identity and critical lenses (Ladson-Billings, 2021a). Recognizing individual learner strengths

and capabilities counters negative stereotypes of othered students imposed by deficit models, which have been discussed in various contexts, such as in Ontario (Huo, 2020; Yasin, 2021) and Canada (Surtees, 2019).

Built on culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012) has developed and enriched the former understanding of CRP and situates minority students in a new "place of normativity," being "subjects" instead of "objects" in their schooling (Ladson-Billings, 2021a). Culturally sustaining pedagogy has been expanded from African American students to multiple ethnic groups through emphasis on "global identities" (Ladson Billings, 2021a). The strength of culturally sustaining pedagogy resides in its "dual responsibility of external performance assessments as well as community-and student-driven learning" (Ladson-Billings, 2021a).

However, Ladson-Billings(2014, 2021a) noted that despite the wide recognition and application of her works, many researchers have misunderstood or misused her theories. First, those researchers have narrowed down the terms of "culture" and "culturally relevant," treating them as being fixed, stable, and unchanged. Second, those authors fail to draw on critical lenses to problematize social structure to tackle real-world problems from the socio-political perspective. This is an integral dimension of culturally relevant pedagogy, which advocates for a critical pedagogical approach to educating disadvantaged students. Besides the misinterpretation of culturally responsive and relevant pedagogies in research, when implementing culturally responsive pedagogy, teacher candidates are reported to be ignorant of social injustice and reluctant to accept its existence. Additionally, the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy is often neither theory driven nor theorized in a rigorous way (Ladson-Billings, 2021c). As a result, many teachers were unable to fulfil their roles to raise students' social-political awareness or encourage students to critique the unjust society. Furthermore, teachers seldom put this pedagogy in their teaching practice. The marginalization of culturally responsive pedagogy is also echoed by Sleeter (2012). Very often, authors have confounded Ladson-Billings' original tenets of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies with the adapted conceptual framework in other researchers' works (Jabbar & Hardaker, 2013; Kilburn et al., 2019). In pluricultural Canada, census data portray a seemingly racially inclusive society, giving the illusion of inclusion (Egbo, 2012), which sadly distracts from the necessity of applying culturally responsive pedagogy that can support students from immigrant, indigenous, and other raciolinguistically minoritized backgrounds.

Given limited studies on culturally responsive pedagogy in higher education focusing on international students, particularly those with low English proficiency levels, this study contributes to the field effective pedagogical support for international students. Moreover, despite a growing body of literature on culturally responsive pedagogy, the approach is not usually applied to postsecondary empirical studies, especially in the online teaching and learning environment concerning student voice. This study adds these pedagogical lenses to existing research and thus helps close such gaps.

Methodology

In this mixed methods study, data triangulation using the quantitative approach ensures "validity, reliability, and objectivity" (Breen, 2007, p. 169), while and the qualitative approach guarantees "Trustworthiness, Auditability, Credibility and Transferability" (Daniel, 2019, p. 118); these infused the research with richer interpretation, deeper meaning, and more diversity.

Research questions

1. How useful is culturally responsive pedagogy for supporting low-English-proficiency international students in online teaching and learning?
2. What are international students' perceptions of the changes in themselves from engaging with the program?

Research site

The research site is located at the Center for Teaching and Learning at a large comprehensive university in Ontario, Canada, where students come from racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse groups all over the world. This co-curricular program addresses students' needs by developing their critical thinking, academic reading, and writing skills to meet their course needs. As international students' challenges were exacerbated by remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Eaton & Turner, 2020; Scurr, 2020), the formerly eight-week program was pivoted to fully online delivery, shortened to four weeks (to serve more students), and incorporated an academic integrity component. In the Reading and Writing Excellence (RWE) program, students are matched to a writing instructor to receive personalized support. Students are expected to read their course materials for 40 minutes daily, then write for 20 minutes to their instructor and meet their instructor one-on-one for 30 minutes every fortnight. The suggested structure for the daily journal entry is a summary of what students have read, coupled with their reflections on their chosen topics. The instructor provides customized responses two to three times a week in a way that develops students' critical thinking skills rather than correcting their grammatical errors. The focus is to improve students' confidence and fluency in writing in English for academic purposes so that they are well-prepared for their course assignments.

CRP Instructor

The CRP instructor is an international faculty who has taught international students for over two decades in Canada and China. As someone who is bilingual with pluralist perspectives and an international lens, the CRP instructor has conducted extensive research in intercultural competence, diversity, and equity. The instructor has previously worked with several thousand racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students across disciplines and helped them to thrive in academia.

Participants and data sources

This newly online one-month program enrolled 154 students in Fall 2020 and 226 students in Winter 2021. All groups followed the standard program pedagogy (SPP), with one group each semester enhanced with the culturally responsive pedagogy on top of the SPP. The samples analyzed in this study were extracted from these two semesters' learner engagement datasets downloaded from the learning management system and were anonymized following Research Ethics Board approval for a retrospective analysis. Only the cases meeting the following three criteria were included: (a) international students, (b) non-native speakers of English, and (c) low level of Academic English as measured by the DELNA screening test (Elder

& von Randow, 2008). This subgroup is of special interest because international students who have limited language resources are greatly challenged in higher education. These criteria were set because during the pandemic when countries restricted travel, international students, especially those students with low English proficiency, often struggled to cope remotely with limited support (if any) with their courses. In the Fall 2020 cohort, students were assigned to eight groups, each with a different instructor. In the Winter 2021 cohort, there were nine groups. One group did not have students who met these three criteria and thus was not included in the analysis. Altogether, 100 students met the three criteria.

Data collection and analysis

Data from the following three sources were analyzed:

- DELNA screening test: This test identified "linguistically at risk" (Elder & von Randow, 2008) students as Band 1 status (lowest level of proficiency)
- Learning engagement data: Learning engagement data were downloaded from the Canvas Learning Management system to study the frequency of writing and the volume of language produced (based on word count).
- Students' end-of-program reflections: Students were asked to reflect on the program's impact on their critical thinking, academic integrity, changes, or progress that they have noticed.

Since the focus is investigating the usefulness of culturally responsive pedagogy in supporting students, the CRP-enhanced groups, where CRP principles were incorporated into the SPP, are compared with the SPP groups. The SPP is based on a learner-driven, instructor-facilitated framework. Learners drive their learning processes, with agency in deciding which course materials they choose to read daily, summarizing their readings, presenting their critical perspectives, and relating the learning to their lived experiences. Instructors respond in an encouraging and thoughtful manner to the ideas that students present in their writing in order to develop their critical thinking and motivate them to sustain daily writing. In this risk-free, inclusive space, learners gain competence and confidence in communicating their course topics with the writing instructors.

Consistent with the three criteria (i.e., student success, cultural competence, and critical conscious) raised by Ladson-Billings (1995, 2009, 2021a, 2021c), the CRP instructor worked to bridge academic and cultural gaps with these linguistically disadvantaged students and helped them succeed in this program. The instructor's cultural competence with motivation, learner-centeredness, care, and empathy provided students with a safe, equitable, and reciprocal space to construct knowledge and identities and helped them become competent in using their distinctive cultures in learning. In the CRP-enhanced group, the instructor helped students learn how to link the real examples in their lives, current events, and social issues in the contemporary world to think, read, and write critically and to challenge social problems and injustice related to the topics they summarized when writing their daily journals. Also, incorporating Gay's (2002, 2010, 2018) culturally responsive teaching principles, the CRP instructor used students' cultural strengths to help them become agents in transforming deficit thinking and education.

Positionality

The two researchers in this study are between insiders and outsiders, aligned with Dwyer & Buckle's (2009) proposal for a "dialectical" rather than a "dualist" stance (p. 60). One researcher is the CRP instructor (as detailed in the Methodology section). The other researcher is the program coordinator and a trilingual professor, who founded and designed the program and who has extensive experience teaching international students. Situated between insiders and outsiders, both researchers heightened their awareness and adopted reflectivity by rigorously examining their positionality in the research design, data collection, and data interpretation processes (Berger, 2015).

Findings

Research Question 1. How useful is the culturally responsive pedagogy for supporting low-English-proficiency international students in online teaching and learning?

Researchers conducted an evidence-based study to examine the link between culturally responsive pedagogy and learning results. This link is often absent in the research on culturally responsive pedagogy (Sleeter, 2012).

Source-based written language practice

Getting students with low English proficiency to practice their use of English in meaningful communication is the key to helping them become more competent users of English. The more they write to articulate their thoughts coherently when discussing their course topics, the more prepared they are to work on their upcoming course assignments.

The output produced by students in the program provides an objective measure of the amount of students' written language practice (Table 1). The average total number of words per student written during the month in the program was higher in the CRP-enhanced group (5,369 words) as compared with that produced by the SPP groups (4,444 words). This difference suggests that the use of culturally responsive pedagogy to enhance SPP was effectively drawing out from students what they thought about their chosen topics. Therefore, despite initially having low language proficiency (Band 1, DELNA Screening), these international students wrote an extraordinary volume of 4,444 words within one month. Through this unique, positive experience of communicating their ideas about their course topics to their instructor, these low proficiency students have prepared themselves for their course assignments, which range from 250 words to 2,000 words, depending on their year of study. The CRP-enhanced group generating a greater writing output suggests that culturally responsive pedagogy helped international students with low English proficiency levels feel more comfortable expressing themselves and that students had many ideas to communicate and share with their CRP instructor (see Student G's comments later). This high volume of substantive voluntary writing related to course readings indicate students were thinking more deeply than just reading course texts (see comments from Students A and B later). As instructors in this program facilitate and support learning but do not grade students' work, this high volume of writing across all groups suggests that students value this reading-into-writing task without being judged. From the perspective of language development, daily immersion in reading followed by writing engages students in meaningful language practice (e.g., summarizing ideas and generating reflections). Turning receptive vocabulary into productive vocabulary that can be utilized in students' academic

writing moves English language learners to the level of language fluency that enables them to write with competence and confidence (see Student L's comments later). Hence, the more students can be encouraged to write about their course materials, the more linguistically equipped they are with the disciplinary content knowledge for writing their assignments later in the semester.

Table 1: Comparison of volume of one-month word count.

	CRP-enhanced Groups	SPP Groups
Number of groups	2	14
Number of students who matched the three criteria to be included: international students, low proficiency (Band 1 on the DELNA Screening), and non-native speakers of English (n=100 students)	22	78
Average total number of words written per student in the one-month program	5,369 words	4,444 words

The total number of words produced by students in one month in the program is evidence of their language practice. Table 1 shows the average of the sum of words produced by each student in the respective groups over the four weeks (28 days) in the program. From the perspective of being able to motivate students to engage in such a high volume of practice, the CRP-enhanced groups produced a higher volume of writing.

Frequent language use

Achieving the level of critical thinking, academic reading, writing, and effective communication skills required at the university level requires a great deal of practice, involving "specific activities in the second language, engaged in systematically, deliberately, and with the goal of developing knowledge and skills in the second language" (DeKeyser, 2007, p. 1). The challenge, however, is how to engage students in practice that they find meaningful and useful.

Ideally, students would engage in this practice through reading academic texts, thinking about them critically, and communicating their thoughts in daily journal entries as much as possible. Table 3 shows that 31.5% of the students in the CRP-enhanced group compared to 26.9% of the students in the SPP groups wrote at least for 25 out of the 28 days in the program. When students who wrote at least half the time they were in the program (i.e., 13–24 days) were compared, the CRP-enhanced group had 18.2% of its students in this category while the SPP groups had 12.8% of their students.

Table 2: Frequency of student writing.

	CRP-enhanced Groups	SPP Groups
Number of students who wrote almost every day during the one month (i.e., at least writing for 25 out of 28 days in the program)	7 (31.5%)	21 (26.9%)
Number of students who wrote at least half the time during the one month (i.e., at least writing 13 days but less than 25 out of 28 days in the program)	4 (18.2%)	10 (12.8%)

Becoming fluent users of English

Supporting students to become fluent users of English has empowered them to feel that they are successful participants in their academic environments (see comments by students E, G and J later). Their expanded vocabulary acquired though the high volume of writing that they had engaged in during this one month would enable them to participate in future academic activities. Many students appreciate developing this almost-daily writing habit (see student F's comment later). To address the long waiting list to get a spot, students who were not writing much are required to give up their spot to enable a waitlist student to be supported.

When learners use English every day, it becomes a part of their L2 identities. It is not a separate hurdle that they need to jump over when they need to write their assignments. The value of daily small steps in helping low-proficiency students become fluent users of English cannot be underestimated. Using English every day or almost every other day makes students feel it is a natural way for them to communicate with others, and they internalize the positive experience of the supportive, intellectually stimulating exchanges with their instructors. The practice transforms how students perceive their capabilities in English (see comments from students J and L later).

To put into perspective the magnitude of students' level of engagement and output, students were divided into two categories for analysis: those who wrote at least 25 out of the 28 days in the program and those who wrote at least half the time in the program (i.e., 13–24 days out of 28 days in the program). As students were expected to write a minimum of 250 words per day, the minimum for writing for 25 days was 250 x 5 = 6250 words while the minimum for writing 13 days was 250 x 13 = 3250 words. In both these categories, the CRP-enhanced groups wrote more than the SPP groups.

Table 3 shows that students who wrote at least 25 days in the CRP-enhanced groups wrote on average 10,456 words in one month (i.e., 67.3% above the minimum word count expected) while students in the SPP groups wrote on average 5,646 words within one month (i.e., 38.3% above the minimum expected). For the category of students who wrote 13–24 days in the program, the CRP-enhanced group wrote on average 6,064 words (i.e., 86.6% above the minimum) while the SPP groups wrote on average 5,646 words (i.e., 73.7% above the minimum)

Table 3: Average word count of students who wrote at least half the time in the program.

	CRP-enhanced Groups	SPP Groups
Average number of words written by students who wrote at least 25 out of 28 days	10,456	8,645
Average number of words written by students who wrote at least half the time i.e., at least 13 days but less than 24 out of 28 days	6,064	5,646

Research Question 2: What are international students' perceptions of the changes in themselves from engaging with the program?

Since the common deficit view of international students is that their lack of critical thinking or original thoughts causes them to be overrepresented in academic violations, students' perceptions of their experience in the program related to these areas are presented below. While the positive

impacts of active participation were found in all groups; these excerpts of students' reflections are from two CRP-enhanced groups to speak to the particular effect of CRP.

Critical thinking

Students' comments illustrate their awareness of the importance of practice that enabled them to develop their critical thinking skills for their academic studies at university. The development of their critical consciousness is also in line with both Ladson-Billings' (2021a) and Gay's (2000) tenets of culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies:

> I get used to think critically and express my ideas instead of solely accepting ideas from scholars. I think that I am still in the process of academic writing, but I have made some process in the past weeks. (Student A)

Another comment indicates the student's understanding of the significance of generating original ideas while writing:

> Through participating in the program, I understand the importance of critical thinking in writing. I began to add more of my own ideas to my articles. The quality of my writing has also improved significantly. The advice that the instructor gave me is not to write long and difficult sentences that are too complicated, because it is easy to make readers not understand. (Student B)

Academic integrity

Generally speaking, most international students' previous educational experience may not have included exposure to the concept of *intellectual property* and the need to distinguish one's original thoughts from those presented in their reading materials (Adhikari, 2017; Heng, 2018; Murphy, 2022; Parnther, 2022). In this program, students' reflections indicate their appreciation of the CRP instructor's scaffolding and guidance to develop their skills in practicing citations:

> [Instructor's name] did not just say I should pay attention to academic integrity. She gives me specific examples like which word you should add intext citation and which segments when you use in your journals, you should include the author or the material both in the in-text citation and reference list. I have benefited from these suggestions a lot from that day to now. (Student C)

Another student's reflection indicates students' understanding of the value of developing new ideas for writing:

> I have learned more about how to do correct citation and in-text citation. I also have more different and wider points of view that I did not think about it before. The feedback helps me to brainstorm and develop different ideas, which inspires my critical thinking. (Student D)

Positive learner identity

Being culturally responsive to individual students and providing each learner with the unique balance of support that best addresses the dynamic changes in students' specific needs helps these low-English-proficiency students establish their confidence and feel motivated to persevere in their practice to form and develop their positive identities as L2 learners despite starting the program being linguistically at risk. This is evident in the following student's quote:

> I am more confident at constructing and writing long essay, rather than being stressful. I also have more patience and willingness to read and keep practice. I consider that I have developed a positive mind on academic writing. (Student E)

An indication of the emphasis in culturally responsive pedagogy that has amplified the caring and two-way friendly relationship is noted by the student articulating her comfort of "talking like friends" with her CRP instructor. The CRP instructor's patience and daily encouragement contributed to students' positive learner identities and allowed them to feel the connection to their new postsecondary community despite being physically distant from their institution during the pandemic remote learning:

> Every day when I read over the feedback, I feel motivated, and all the things which I have done so far are just a kind of the beginning of my university writing journey. Also, I feel fortunate to be one of [instructor's name]'s students, I have learned a lot of things from her own experience and suggestions. She makes me feel like we are talking like friends, I really appreciate her patience and every day's encouragement. (Student F)

The following comment indicates that the student values this communication opportunity with the instructor as a means of addressing the difficulties in communicating with others. Therefore, this current opportunity for communication serves as a longer-term goal of developing students' capability for social integration moving forward:

> I am not a very outgoing person who likes to communicate with others.… This project gives me an opportunity to communicate with instructor for 30 minutes at a time. In this way, I can not only exercise my ability and courage to communicate with others but also learn a lot through communication. (Student G)

Learner agency

Students' quotes reveal their appreciation of the specific personalized instructor responses that exactly addressed their needs. Students have also attributed their vocabulary expansion to their writing practice. For example, Student H said, "[B]y keeping writing journals, my vocabulary has increased. With the help of tutor, the structure and sentence pattern of my article have been corrected and improved." Another student expressed:

> I think not only my writing ability has improved, but also my sense of time has improved.… There were many problems in the structure and wording of my articles, but now I feel that I can express my ideas more fluently. (Student I)

Sense of transformation

The impact of daily practice had positive affective impact, such as assisting students in overcoming their fear of writing and thus becoming confident. One student said, "I used to be a student who was very afraid of writing. After participating in this project, I became more confident and tried to correct some deficiencies in writing after following the advice" (Student J).

The example below was written by a student who learned from the CRP instructor's comments to incorporate the expected features of academic writing into her subsequent daily journal entries:

> After I had the meetings and read the comments that my tutor gave to me, I tried to combine her every comment on my next following journals. For example, my tutor advised me to explain the academic words when they occurred first time since the readers did not read the articles. After that, I started to give definitions for these words. (Student K)

This following excerpt shows the noticeable transformation in students' academic writing abilities:

> I have improved my ability to express myself clearer now, before joining the program, when I explain or state my ideas both in writing and speaking. I feel others might lose their attention since my explanation was too long and didn't catch the main point sometimes. But after the training in the program …. I am happy to see all these changes that I have made under [instructor's name]'s help, she drives me to be a productive "writer" I should say. (Student L)

Discussion and Conclusion

Students' willingness to engage in high-impact language practice in the program and their perceptions of significant transformation show the benefits of the personalized support amplified by the application of culturally responsive pedagogy in online teaching and learning settings (Baron & McNeal, 2019; Nussli et al., 2019). From this, there are five pedagogical insights.

Pedagogical insights

Informed by the culturally responsive pedagogy, educators may proactively counter the deficit thinking and discourse about international students by empowering them in five key areas: (a) accelerated academic language proficiency development, (b) opportunities to be effective communicators, (c) inclusivity and sense of belonging, (d) facilitated learner agency, and (e) greater intercultural competence.

Accelerated academic language proficiency development. For students with low English proficiency, language challenge is the greatest barrier to their academic success. English language learners are expected have at least "8,000–9,000 word families … if they wish to read a wide variety of texts without unknown vocabulary being a problem" (Schmitt, 2010, p. 7). A word family refers to a "stem word plus all closely related affixed forms" (Coxhead, 2000, p. 218). As an example, for the word *interpret*, other members of the same word family are interpretation, interpretations, interpretative, interpreted, interpreting, interpretive, interprets, and so on (Coxhead, n.d.).

Vocabulary expansion efforts need to be strategic, as choice of text would determine the types of vocabulary that students are exposed to and opportunities for incidental uptake. Reading and writing about disciplinary texts helps students use language most relevant to their courses. As such, the volume of reading and writing that students engaged in has expanded students' vocabulary and linguistic repertoire.

Opportunities of being effective communicators. Effective academic communication skills take a great deal of practice, as communication has to be purposeful, concise, and present the topic in a logical sequence. However, since communication styles vary in different cultures, with some non-Western traditions seeming to be "circular, and their communication sounds like storytelling" (Gay, 2002, p. 7), students need the opportunity to express their ideas in a more direct and linear manner in the host culture. Therefore, receiving feedback on their practice through meaningful interactions enables learning and generates meaning (Mackey, 2007). The data in this study point to the value of students' daily supportive interactions with their CRP instructor focused on practicing the academic language and critical thinking skills expected in higher education. Therefore, the communication of disciplinary topics relevant to students as a daily practice was appreciated by students, resulting in willing investment of time and efforts.

Inclusivity and a sense of belonging. International students with limited English language proficiency are "subject to racism" (Eaton & Burns, 2018, p. 345) in the educational system, which privileges Eurocentric values and "punishes the cultural orientations of others (Vavrus, 2008). Thus, students who are unaware of expectations and do not possess the language skills to meet Western conventions and norms face the risk of being accused of academic integrity violations. Gay (2002) depicts the diametrically different Western communication style as being "topic-centered" (p. 112) in that it involves direct, precise, objective, and linear logical argumentation as opposed to the shared non-Western "topic-chaining" style (p. 112), which is more context dependent and indirect (Vavrus, 2008). Thus, students need to be given risk-free opportunities to notice these differences in styles through their reading and to switch between two cultural styles of communication. The results of this research shows that culturally responsive pedagogy made students feel included and helped them develop a sense of belonging in their new academic environment with the newly acquired academic abilities to freely and bravely express their own thoughts on their topics, without being evaluated negatively.

Facilitated learner agency. As a contrast to students' high school experiences in their previous educational contexts, the university setting expects students to be self-regulated and take responsibility for their own learning. This study shows that students welcome the opportunity to acquire agency in learning, with the instructor's support in this learning process. This was evidenced by students' investment in their (nearly) daily reading of their course materials, eagerly sharing their thoughts, and incorporating the instructor's feedback to improve their subsequent writing. It is proposed that this emphasis on learner agency can "influence students' motivation to act on feedback information and plan further improvement … [and be] an opportunity for students to reflect on their learning journey as it is highly personal" (Malecka & Boud, 2021, p. 2). Giving students the chance to engage in such an active process leads to positive learner identity, as students feel they are managing their own learning situations effectively despite their initial low proficiency.

Greater intercultural competence. Intercultural competence refers to "an individual's effectiveness in drawing upon a set of knowledge, skills, and personal attributes in order to work successfully with people from different national cultural backgrounds at home or abroad" (Johnson et al., 2006, p. 530). Intercultural competence is reported to be conductive to helping students overcome their challenges in the cross-cultural environment and is essential to students'

success (Thom, 2010). The CRP instructor helped students develop intercultural and pluralist lenses (Clifford, 2009) through using their strengths and helping them bridge cultural gaps, so students learn that they do not need to reject, negate, or abandon who they are or their previous experiences. Instead, students' ability to express their voices confidently in the academic conversations with their CRP instructor improved their intercultural competence in their new cultural and academic community.

Limitations

This study was conducted with the sample of students who joined the program voluntarily, either because they had completed their DELNA screening test and thus were referred for support based on the scores they received or because they might have learned about the program from their professors. Consequently, it is possible that a large proportion of the students self-selected as willing to invest in developing their academic writing skills. As such, this high output volume may not be representative enough of the general student population. However, the results are still valuable, as this study indicates what students' possible outputs and transformations are when students are highly motivated to invest in their own development at their own pace.

Recommendations

In this study, there has been compelling evidence to show the great changes on the students' part (e.g., agency, empowerment, and transformation) when CRP was incorporated into the SPP. As teachers' own attitudes (Mellom et al., 2018) and teaching strategies (Smith, 2020; Smith et al., 2019) influence student achievement and student satisfaction, teachers' assumptions about low-English-proficiency international students need to be addressed first. In turn, the integration of culturally responsive pedagogy with teachers' instruction will assist teachers in changing their attitudes in a positive way (e.g., challenging the deficit models and regarding international students' cultures as resources) (Mellom et al., 2018). As informed by Warren (2018), to better incorporate the CRP approach into the curriculum and instructors' teaching practices, professional development training is important for identifying teachers' own "subjective social location" that affects their beliefs and behavior (p. 179). This new "perspective taking as a process of knowing" (p. 174) mentality will consequently enable teachers to effectively help international students construct and navigate their multiple identities, make transitions, make reflections, and become fluent and successful L2 learners in cross-cultural settings.

Author Bios

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Xiangying Huo, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor at University of Toronto Scarborough. She was a professor of English in China for over a decade and a visiting scholar at Michigan State University. She has taught academic writing across the curriculum at the University of Toronto, York University, and OCAD Art and Design University in the past ten years. Xiangying's research interests include writing studies, applied linguistics, ESL/EFL policy and pedagogy, Writing Center studies, anti-racism education, language ideology, World Englishes, intercultural and cross-cultural teaching and learning, and internationalization in higher education. She has presented her research widely at national and international conferences and is the author of *Higher Education Internationalization and English Language Instruction: Intersectionality of Race and Language in Canadian Universities* (2020, Springer). Xiangying is passionate about discovering students' strengths, voices, and agency and customizing her pedagogy to help her students thrive on their academic journeys.

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