Instructional Practices of High School English Language Teachers in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Classrsooms: A Case Study

Dr. Jane A. W. Rosenow
Kansas City Kansas School District

Abstract

Grounded within the tenets of culturally responsive education, this qualitative case study examined the culturally responsive instructional practices of teachers working with linguistically, ethnically, and culturally diverse students in sheltered English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms that mainly serve English language learners in an urban high school located in the midwest United States. Three teachers participated in the study through interviews and observations. The findings of the study indicate that the inclusion of culturally and linguistically affirming and familiar tasks, including translanguaging, led to greater student engagement and academic gains in the ELA classroom.

Keywords: Culturally responsive, translanguaging, cultural reference, culturally relevant education, cultural affirmation, English language learner

Introduction

A look at the English language learner population at schools in the United States provides a clear indication of how culturally and linguistically diverse students have become. There are about 5 million English learners in the United States, the majority of whom, about 71 percent, were born in the United States (Sugarman, 2018). Generally, most English learners are Spanish speakers, but speakers of other languages are also becoming prevalent (Hoover & deBettencourt, 2018). Although the percentage varies from state to state, the nationwide number of parents who speak a language other than English at home is 59 percent (Park et al., 2018).

Therefore, given the growing numbers of English learners, especially in urban schools, there is a need for teachers to become knowledgeable about not only the cultural backgrounds of students (Allison & Rehm, 2007), but also their religious, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds (Hansen-Thomas & Chennapragada, 2018; Lenski et al., 2006). In other words, teachers need to be cognizant of all components of diversity in all classrooms, especially in English learner classrooms (Johnson & Chang, 2012). To accomplish that, teachers have to consider what influences student learning and what students bring into the learning spaces as they walk into schools. Unfortunately, current teaching models are inadequate for dealing with culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms; therefore, teachers do not leverage the lived experiences and home languages of their students (Migration Policy Institute, 2018). Often, teachers intent on leveraging their students' backgrounds, cultures, and languages must find ways to work around school policies that may be a hindrance (Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2019).

Language transmits culture, and one of the ways teachers can leverage their students' multiple languages is through translanguaging, an approach that values additional language learners as individuals “having a bilingual language system that affords them more tools, richer resources, and more flexible ways to learn a new knowledge, to express themselves, and to communicate with others” (Osario, 2020, p. 127). This approach gives equal value to all the languages represented in a classroom and allows students to bring their whole selves into the learning experience. In addition, translanguaging helps students “make broader connections between language, identity, and race” (Morales, 2019, p. 243).

Another way teachers can incorporate culturally responsive teaching strategies is through the tasks they assign students. Since learners are constantly actively constructing knowledge, providing students with culturally familiar tasks helps them to bridge the gap between what they know and what they need to know (Kelley et al., 2015). Using culturally affirming and familiar tasks not only increases student motivation, confidence, and academic achievement, but it also propels the student to transfer similar learning strategies to multiple subjects following success in one subject area (Kelley et al., 2015). In addition, the tasks allow students to engage with the curriculum meaningfully and authentically (Honigsfeld & Giouroukakis, 2011).

In language learning classrooms when students can make personal connections to what they are learning in class through culturally familiar tasks, it leads to greater gains in comprehension and vocabulary acquisition (Sheridan, Tanaka, & Hogg, 2019). Furthermore, when teachers proactively embed their students' culture(s) into their instructional strategies, it creates a safe and inclusive learning environment where the students can thrive academically (Au, 2005; Chen & Yang, 2017; Gay, 2010; Lee, 2010; Linan-Thompson et al., 2018; Yuan & Jiang, 2019).

The research question guiding this study is: How does working with ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse students influence teachers' instructional decisions and actions in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms?

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed within the tenets of the culturally relevant education (CRE) framework. Aronson and Laughter (2015) adopted the term culturally relevant education (CRE) to refer to the synthesis of Ladson-Billing's (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy and Gay's (2002) culturally responsive teaching. Dover (2013) asserts that the CRE approach "integrates critical pedagogy's emphasis on socio-political consciousness with multicultural education's commitment to culturally diverse content" (p. 5). While CRE aims to connect students' lives to their learning in order to empower them, it also endeavors to fight oppression so that all people can have a chance to access societal resources and opportunities (Aronson & Laughter, 2016).

According to Aronson and Laughter (2016), culturally relevant educators have markers that correspond to the main features of culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching. Table 1 shows how the markers are distributed.

Table 1

Synthesizing Gay (2002) and Ladson-Billings (1995)

Culturally Responsive Teaching	Culturally Relevant Pedagogy	Culturally Relevant Education
Social and academic empowerment Multidimensionality	Academic achievement	Academic skills and concepts
Cultural validation Social, emotional, and political comprehensiveness	Cultural competence	Critical reflection Cultural competence
School and societal transformation Emancipation or liberation from oppressive educational practices and ideologies	Sociopolitical consciousness	Critique of discourses of power

The four markers identified by Aronson and Laughter (2015) are further explained below:

a) *Academic skills and concepts: Culturally relevant educators are inclusive and use their students' cultural knowledge to help them to connect to academic knowledge.*
b) *Critical reflection: Culturally relevant educators provide students with opportunities for critical reflection on their own lives and societies. In addition, the curriculum makes room for the analysis and study of all cultures represented in the classroom.*
c) *Cultural competence: Culturally relevant teachers provide students with opportunities to learn more about their own cultures and those of their classmates and take pride in their cultural heritage and that of others.*
d) *Critique of discourses of power: Culturally relevant educators are not content with the status quo and seek to effect social change within and without the classroom.*

The culturally relevant education tenets of academic skills and concepts, critical reflection, and cultural competence were utilized to guide, frame, and analyze this study.

Methods

A qualitative case study approach to understanding teacher practices in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms was deemed to be suitable for this research. By examining answers to why and how questions provided by the participants, the researcher gathered in-depth knowledge of teacher practices. The teachers' practice was current and ongoing and was, therefore, conducive for observation and ensuing discussions through interviews. These multiple data collection methods bear rich, descriptive data (Yin, 2017).

The length of the study spanned a semester, because the participating school utilizes the semester system whereby teachers only work with most students for four months before the students proceed to another class and a different teacher. The number of cases was limited to three English Language Arts teachers who mainly teach English learners. The same concepts were investigated in each case to represent different perspectives on the same issue (Jacob & Fergusson, 2012). The participants were purposefully selected and analyzed in order to underscore any commonalities or differences that might exist among them to gain a deeper understanding of their culturally relevant education practices through the use of the logic of replication (Creswell, 2012).

Research Context

This study was conducted at an urban high school in the midwest United States. The school is situated in a school district whose population hovers above 22,000 students. The distrcit student population is linguistically and culturally diverse, boasting a demographic breakdown of 55.6% Hispanic, 24.2% African-American, 9.1% White, and 6.9% Asian (Kansas Department of Education, 2022).

The urban high school that is the focus of this study has a student population of over 1,800 students. The student body composition estimates are as follows: 69% Hispanic, 22.4% Black and African American, 4.7% Asian, 2.1% White, 1.7% Native American, and people of more than one race (Kansas Department of Education, 2022). In the process of data collection, the researcher learned that the teachers participating in this study had students who hailed from countries such as Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Mexico, Honduras, Uganda, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ukraine, Guatemala, and others. Some of these students were either refugees, immigrants, or children of immigrants.

Participants

For this qualitative case study, purposeful sampling was utilized because it allowed the researcher to select "individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem" (Cresswell, 2012, p. 156). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) argue that for purposeful sampling to be effective, the researcher should "seek out groups, settings, and individuals where (and for whom) the process being studied is most likely to occur" (p. 245). Bearing this in mind, the three participants in this study were selected because they have experience teaching English Language Arts to linguistically and culturally diverse English learners using culturally responsive teaching practices. In addition, they had worked at the research site for not less than three years each.

To protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms were used in lieu of their real names. All the teachers taught sheltered English Language Arts classes. Sheltered English instruction is defined as "an instructional approach used to make academic instruction in English understandable to ELL students" (US Department of Education, 2020, para. 17). The teachers in this study based their curricula on the English Language Arts standards provided

by the state's Department of Education. Typically, both sheltered English classes and traditional English Language Arts classes at the school use the same state standards. However, sheltered English classes differ from traditional English Language Arts classes in that they serve English learners who need a lot of support in learning English, so teachers tend to blend content instruction with explicit language instruction (Sugarman, 2018). The participants included two females (Mary and Lucy) and one male (Andrew). Their students hailed from countries such as Uganda, Nepal, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guatemala, Honduras, Argentina, Rwanda, Uganda, El Salvador, Mexico, Burma, and Eritrea.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection methods included interviews and classroom observations over the course of one fall semester (16 weeks long). The semi-structured interview format was utilized for it allows for flexibility in the order of questioning as well as the manner of questioning; uses broad, open-ended questions; and takes advantage of opportunities for probing and follow-up questions that seek clarity (Jones et al., 2014). This interviewing method offered a level of structure that ensured coverage of all the necessary topics that needed to be investigated and, at the same time, provided an opportunity for flexibility and probing. Each participant participated in at least four interviews and two classroom observations. Observations facilitated the verification of data gathered through the interview process.

As a participant-observer during the observations, the researcher performed the dual roles (to varying degrees) of collecting data and participating in the day-to-day activities at the site (Creswell, 2013). The observations were recorded in writing and audio. The audio recording was preferred instead of videotaping to avoid causing any discomfort for students who would have been made nervous by video recording. The nervousness could have arisen from sensitivity about students' immigration status or that of their parents. Therefore, to maintain the classroom environment and level of engagement the students were accustomed to, the researcher elected to audio-record and take extensive notes.

Data from interviews and observations were analyzed. This involved line-by-line within-use analysis (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014) and open coding. Thereafter, individual cases were compared and contrasted against each other for an across-cases analysis (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014) to capture the overall picture of the phenomenon under study.

According to Maxwell (2013), identifying similarities and differences is a form of coding and serves to "define categories and to group and compare data by category" (p. 106). During coding, data were broken down into broad categories within which emerging themes were noted.

One of the study's limitations is the small sample size, which limits the generalizability of the results. Other limitations include the study's focus on teachers' voices and the lack of students' voices. These are limitations that further study in the field can address. In addition, since the study was conducted in an urban high school, similar studies can be conducted in various educational settings to determine if the findings are replicable.

Findings and Discussion

Enhancing Reading Experiences

Teachers participating in this study discussed how they enhance their students' reading experiences by using students' cultural backgrounds to activate prior knowledge, introduce new content, predict events in a story, relate their experiences, and establish connections with their own lives. According to Mary, in an English Language Arts class, the use of cultural knowledge through personal connections to what is being read in class is one of the easiest and quickest ways that students can connect to new academic concepts. Andrew concurred with Mary when he talked about his teaching experience. He went further to explain how reading predictions and connections are made using culture:

> I do talk about culture a lot when I introduce the unit. Before we even read, I begin to ask social-moral questions about choices that people make or possible themes that will be relevant in the story. For example, in my English 3 class, we are reading a story called "The Mirror," and in the story, when [the character] looks in the mirror, she starts to look younger and younger. Before we read the story, we talked about, like, in movies, in advertisements in your culture, is the idea of beauty really important? So, they would give me testimonies from what they remember, what they don't remember. There is even a question like: Is there a celebrity that you wished that you looked like? And of course, with my group of students coming from all countries, they have celebrities that I don't know about, and, maybe for fun, we look up some of them and we make comments about them and stuff.

During one of the observations in Andrew's classroom, the teacher informed the students that they would be reading an informational article about Burma, Nepal, and Bangladesh and the Rohingya refugee crisis. There were students from both Burma and Nepal in the classroom. In addition, some of the students in the room had either been refugees themselves or had come from one of the countries mentioned in the article. To activate schema and build background knowledge, the teacher went over the map of the world that hung on the wall and pointed out the locations of the three countries. Some of the students from the geographical region corrected the teacher's pronunciation of the names of the countries. The correction was centered around vowel sounds, which differ from English ones. The teacher practiced the sounds as instructed by the students and promised to continue practicing in his own time. The class then discussed what it means to be a refugee and how people become refugees. Though none of the students shared their personal experiences of being refugees, they shared their knowledge of the geographical region and applied that knowledge to the article of the day. When the teacher asked the students if they knew of the Rohingya refugee crisis, a few students said they had heard about them but did not elaborate further.

Through the pre-reading exercise described above, the teacher drew on the students' funds of knowledge and experiences. Using students' backgrounds and experiences builds on other research studies (Smith et al., 2021) that show the importance of activating schema to enhance students' reading and learning experiences. A culturally relevant educator is inclusive and uses background knowledge to lay the foundation for making meaning and processing new information. When students can connect what they already know with the new content they are learning, they can make comprehensible connections to the text and the new information. In addition, cultural background knowledge provides an equitable entry point for accessing learning because it validates students' prior knowledge and renders it valuable enough to facilitate learning.

Lucy also uses students' cultural experiences and knowledge before, during, and after reading with her students to predict events and evaluate outcomes in a story. She provided the following example:

> When we were reading *Gaby: A Girl in Pieces* [by Isabel Quintero], when we read the first piece—when this girl gets pregnant, I asked the students: "Is this expected or

> allowed in your culture?" By doing that, I also have them predict the future content. I also ask: "How do you think the parents of the girl will take the situation?" Also, there is another boy in the story who revealed to his friend that he is gay. I asked the students: "Do you think the boy's parents will accept him? What about his friends?" So, definitely, by using different cultural backgrounds, I can help them predict the content of the story. That is a good prediction practice for them.

Lucy's example demonstrates that using cultural references in sheltered English Language Arts class helps English learners predict content and relate events in a story to events in their lives as they connect with various themes. This practice aligns with culturally relevant education, which advocates for critical reflection and the inclusion of diverse perspectives and experiences when engaging in academic skills and concepts. When students utilize a cultural lens to evaluate outcomes in a text, they use their knowledge and experiences as the point of reference. This approach allows them to tell their own stories, affirm their cultural experiences, and reflect on how their experiences compare to other people's experiences. In addition, this approach leads to cultural affirmation, which can lead to an increased sense of pride in students' cultures. Finally, including multiple culture-infused perspectives in text analysis and providing a platform for sharing those perspectives increases students' cultural competence and creates a classroom environment that natures cultural awareness.

This finding is consistent with studies that advocate for inclusive texts (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017; Kesler, 2011), texts and resources that create opportunities for students to make connections with (Cook-Sather & Des-Ogugua, 2019), identify with (Linan-Thompson et al., 2018), and relate to (Chen & Yang, 2017; Honigsfeld & Giouroukakis, 2011; Sharma & Christ, 2017) the themes.

Use of Native Languages

Speaking in one's native language is a culturally familiar practice. Even though all the study teachers allowed the use of native languages in their sheltered English language arts classrooms, they held differing opinions on how much of a role the native language should play. Andrew, who taught sheltered English 3, acknowledged that students tended to use their native language to help other students understand an assignment. However, he argued that unless the students are at the beginner level of learning English literacy skills, he does not

encourage them to use the native language often in class. Andrew suggested that instead of students translating texts into their native language to comprehend them, teachers should teach them the equivalent of sight words (as happens in the lower grades), reading strategies, and problem-solving skills. Andrew further explained:

> Students need to be taught the tools they need to figure out the meaning of words on their own. That is what I see my job as being mostly…. Using their native language to look up words defeats the purpose of learning how to read in a new language…. I think each language has a different tool kit. They have to be taught that tool kit in English - how to read, and if they are using their native language too much or translators too much, then they are not learning to be problem solvers on their own.

On the other hand, Lucy, who taught sheltered English 1 to beginning English learners, saw the importance of her students using their native language in class, mainly because they have minimal English proficiency. During one of the classroom observations, the students were reviewing vocabulary that they had learned the previous day. Lucy told the students that she would say the word, and they would work in pairs to figure out the spelling of the word and write it down on a teacher-provided dry-erase board. As the teacher dictated the vocabulary, some students would discuss the word's spelling in their native language before writing it down (most of the students were Spanish speakers). Many of the students struggled to determine which vowels to use when spelling the words because some Spanish vowels are pronounced differently in English.

Thereafter, the students read a short story about a visit to the doctor. When the teacher asked the students to read the word *patient*, both the Spanish-speaking and the Burmese-speaking students relied heavily on their native languages to try and determine the meaning of the word. Most of her students spoke and read Spanish, so when she saw students struggling to understand the story because of limited English vocabulary, she first translated the words into Spanish because she speaks the language, then she encouraged the Burmese and Swahili-speaking students to use Google Translate as a tool to help them better comprehend the story. Later, when discussing the lesson with me, Lucy explained that she usually asks her students to use Google images and Google translate to help them understand new words. The visuals and the familiar language contribute to comprehension and understanding of assignments.

I observed Mary's sheltered English 2 class when the students were writing a critical analysis essay about *The Great Gatsby*. One of the Spanish-speaking students was not proficient in written English and was more comfortable expressing her thoughts in Spanish but not in English. Therefore, she would first write her thoughts in paragraph form in Spanish using Google Translate before copying and pasting the English translation into her document.

The student's actions demonstrated the essential and assistive role technology plays in helping students who otherwise would be excluded from the learning process, participate in relevant and meaningful ways. Writing out one's thoughts in a familiar native language empowers students because it demonstrates that they understand the content. Using assistive technology to first complete assignments in one's native language is significant because it divorces language proficiency from content knowledge. In many instances, students know the content and can explain it in their native languages. However, they are rendered incompetent because of language barriers when they have to demonstrate their learning in an unfamiliar language. When that happens, a teacher can assume that the student is not learning when, in fact, the student is learning but does not know enough of the target language to use it to complete an assignment.

The use of native languages in the classroom validates and affirms students' identities and languages. This study's findings indicate that all the participants supported translanguaging for English learners, especially those still in the beginning stages of English language development. In addition, the findings indicate that English learners translanguaged when learning and reviewing new vocabulary, when they worked on projects with their peers, when they communicated with a teacher who spoke their native language, when they consulted peers in an effort to understand new concepts, and when translating texts online. This finding aligns with previous studies showing that students use their native language to make meaning of new content, communicate with their peers or the teacher, learn new vocabulary and decode reading assignments (Creese & Blackledge, 2015; Linan-Thompson et al., 2018; Pacheco & Miller, 2016; Symons & Ponzio, 2019).

However, one of the participants believed that students with higher English language proficiency should refrain from relying on their native language to decode reading texts. He suggested that, instead of students translating reading texts into their native languages to comprehend them, teachers should equip the students with the tools they need to

comprehend and decode texts in the target language. These tools can include learning how to apply context clues, explicit instruction of the equivalent of sight words such as those taught to students in the lower grades, general reading strategies, and problem-solving skills. This participant's views do not go so far as to claim that the use of the native language interferes with the learning of a new language as others have. Nonetheless, they do join other voices that are critical of native language use in the classroom (Mellom et al., 2018).

Including minoritized voices and languages in the classroom disrupts the status quo and brings social change to the learning space. In addition, when culturally relevant educators include native languages in the teaching and learning process, they give prominence to languages that would otherwise be marginalized. This practice is linguistically affirming for students as it gives relevance and value to their native languages. In addition, the practice disrupts the status quo and elevates othered languages in spaces previously reserved for languages spoken by the dominant group in society.

Conclusion

The application of cultural knowledge and the use of native languages is beneficial for students at every instructional and learning stage. They are also helpful for processing new content and demonstrating learned concepts. How teachers craft assessments and evaluations should take into account students' native languages and cultural points of reference and allow their inclusion when students are demonstrating their learning. Such considerations give students a greater chance of success and an opportunity to showcase their perspectives, thus affirming their cultural experiences. Cultural and linguistic affirmation can lead to an increased sense of pride in students' culture and language, thus enhancing their motivation and engagement with learning.

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Dr. Jane A.W. Rosenow works as an instructional coach with the Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools district. She has been an educator in the K-12 space for more than ten years and has also taught college-level classes. Dr. Rosenow completed her PhD studies at the University of Kansas. Her research interests include culturally responsive learning and teaching, global education, and classroom action research. Other professional interests include academic writing, editing, coaching, and consulting.