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Reaching a Culturally Diverse Immigrant Population of Adult English Language Learners

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Abstract

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is a framework to help adult English as a second language (ESL) educators renovate their practices into effective, culturally responsive programs, readily accessible to adult learners. Four CRT strategies that can be used include (a) validation through caring, (b) valuing cultural experiences, (c) creating a safe learning environment, and (d) integrating the learner's native language skills. These instructional strategies can be used to incorporate adult students' cultures and cultural identities in a second language learning environment.

Introduction

In a time when our country's immigration policies are at the forefront of the news, vital English literacy instruction for the growing immigrant population has, oddly, taken a back seat. One specific government literacy program entitled *Even Start* was recently cut from federal funding in lieu of individual state control (Smith, 2012, p. 1). The program, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2012) website, provided English literacy instruction to low-income parents to assist them with the basic skills necessary to teach their children and earn a living wage. With such sweeping budget cuts, instructors who teach English as a second language (ESL) are challenged with how to adapt their instructional strategies and availability to meet the needs of our marginalized adult immigrants.

While the field of Adult Education has emphasized

the individual in the learning process, it has been criticized for not addressing the sociocultural aspects of learners in the teaching-learning process (Alfred, 2009a, 2009b). In *Providing Culturally Relevant Adult Education: A Challenge for the Twenty-First Century*, Guy (1999) noted the need to incorporate culture into adult education, calling upon adult educators to reflect upon aspects of their own culture, to learn about their students' cultures, to critically examine curriculum and materials for stereotypical misrepresentations, and to develop inclusive strategies and instructional methods that represent not only the educator's but also the learners' backgrounds and preferences. Guy's (1999) challenge can be directly applied to instruction of adult immigrants or ESL populations.

One means to help educators renovate their practices into effective, culturally responsive programs, which are readily accessible to as many adult immigrants as

possible, is through Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). “Culturally responsive teaching is distinguished by its emphasis on validating, facilitating, liberating, and empowering minority students by cultivating their cultural integrity, individual abilities, and academic success” (Gay, 2000, p. 44). It is based on the four pillars of (a) teacher attitude and expectations, (b) cultural communication in the classroom, (c) culturally diverse context in the curriculum, and (d) culturally congruent instructional strategies (p. 44).

CRT is defined as drawing upon “the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (Gay, 2002, p. 106). CRT encourages educators to integrate the cultural knowledge and prior experiences of their diverse English language learners (ELLs) to increase meaningful learning and appeal in the classroom. Incorporating a few culturally responsive techniques can revolutionize English language instruction with a view “towards educating diverse learners, especially minority and marginalized students who usually come from different social, cultural and economic backgrounds” (Al-Amir, 2010, p. 103). Strategies exist that can be used to incorporate adult student’s cultures and cultural identities in a second language learning environment. Specifically, this article will present strategies that can help instructors more effectively transform the destinies of students and their families, to include (a) validation through caring, (b) valuing

cultural experiences, (c) creating a safe learning environment, and (d) integrating ELLs’ native language skills.

Validation through Caring

The starting point for validating diverse students comes through seeking a culturally responsive and caring mindset, which “is one of those things that most educators agree is important...but they are hard-pressed to characterize it in actual practice” (Gay, 2010, p. 48). Such consideration in the classroom begins with caring “*for* instead of *about* the personal well-being and academic success of ethnically diverse students” (p. 48). Al-Amir (2010) paints a portrait of this supportive teacher:

Teachers have become no longer perceived as a behaviorist, positivist and top-down knowledge carrier, but a *reflective, flexible facilitator* who is sensitive to students’ different needs and previous experiences which they have acquired in their homes and communities and which cannot be dismissed in the process of teaching the target language. (p. 103, italics added)

He adds that through this sensitivity and cultural appreciation of others different from us, learning can become “more inviting, characterized by activity, discovery, and surprise which stimulate students’ curiosity and creativity and get them more involved” (p. 106).

Research informs us those students who perceive their teacher as caring and supportive are more engaged in the learning process. Instructors can set the tone by greeting students at the door with a smile and a welcoming comment, expressing admiration for a student’s bilingual ability, and commenting enthusiastically about the number of different languages represented among the class members. Another strategy that can be used to stress caring among class members is to set up a “kindness box” where students can drop brief notes about acts of kindness that they do or witness and to periodically share these acts among the group. Culturally responsive teachers can also use collaborative and cooperative learning activities such as jigsaw



readings or peer teaching to build trust and mutual respect among learners (Chartock, 2010) .

When students are validated by caring instructors, they “develop the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become social critics who can make reflective decisions and implement their decisions in effective personal, social, political, and economic action” (J. Banks, 1991, as cited by Gay, 2010, p. 36). Culturally responsive caring also places “teachers in an ethical, emotional, and academic partnership with ethnically diverse students, a partnership that is anchored in respect, honor, integrity, resource sharing, and a deep belief in the possibility of transcendence” (Gay, 2010, p. 52).

Incorporating Cultural Experiences

Culturally responsive teaching is demonstrated to adult ELLs via creative and practical classroom strategies which help transform an ESL classroom “into a community in which its members attempt to understand and empower each other” (Al-Amir, 2010, p. 104). Chartock (2010) stresses that the objectives of CRT are not merely meant to educate about diversity but also to build a supportive body of people “both within the school and beyond based on mutual respect, justice and truth” (p. 27). While many ESL instructors may be aware of the importance of incorporating CRT in their classrooms, they may lack the tools of “how.” Chartock (2010) provides a plethora of useful lesson plans, all readily adaptable to adult ELLs with objectives and activities that guide teachers to “open the minds and hearts of their students and inspire them to reach their full potential” (p. x).

One such lesson taken from (Chartock 2010, p 124), entitled *Ladder of Prejudice*, was modified for adult learners. The K-12 activity was used within a lesson on the Holocaust to address issues of diversity, bullying, and community building. The *Ladder of Prejudice* provides a useful visualization of the prejudice that occurs in schools, communities, and the world. At the same time this image challenges student of all ages to consider ways in which they can help to change their

world for the better by beginning to address acts of prejudice they see in their own communities. The lesson’s objective is for students to work together in defining the terms on the ladder and decide on the hierarchy of the terms from least to most severe (i.e., speech, avoidance, discrimination, attack, and extermination). An additional norm associated with creating an environment of respect and empowerment is ensuring that all students are treated equitably and are comfortable voicing their opinions about discriminatory actions and classroom policies. Teaching practices such as the use of focus groups and reframing activities to explore non-dominant perspectives and to elicit opinions are recommended.



This empowering instruction transforms a traditional teacher-centered classroom into a vibrant, active, student-centered one where language learning becomes relevant to one’s culture, home, and very life. A recent family literacy case study conducted with Chinese immigrants in Toronto (Zhang, Pelletier, & Doyle, 2010) found that “it is imperative that family literacy practitioners provide *culturally relevant* programming for minority communities” (p. 413, italics added). Similarly, Al-Amir (2010) affirms the importance of CRT curriculum to ensure “ESL/bilingual learners maintain their identity and cultural integrity while learning a second language” (p. 108).

Creating a Safe Learning Environment

Adult learners “enrolled in family literacy programs have significant life pressures exacerbated by financial struggles that negatively affect their full participation” (Smith, 2012, p. 11). The preferable means to reach such strained learners is to encounter them right where they are; regardless of whether they are beginning learners or advanced or if they are motivated or lost, they need an instructor who will take the time to learn about them and subsequently to maximize their potential. Tomlinson (1999) says to do “whatever it takes to ensure that struggling and advanced learners, students with varied cultural heritages...all grow as much as they possible can” (p. 2).



Welch-Ross and Lesgold (2012) discuss the incredible differences that adult learners bring into the classroom: they possess “diverse instructional needs, varying motivations for acquiring greater literacy, and diverse

educational, economic, linguistic, and cultural background” (p. 239). Al-Amir’s (2010) discussion is consistent with this, maintaining that when diverse learners are taught in such a “supportive and non-threatening environment,” they will “feel secure enough to practice the target language and to make and correct their own errors without embarrassment or anxiety” (p. 106).

One way to establish a safe environment for these diverse adult learners is through differentiated instruction where students can learn through “*their* varied points of readiness, interest, and learning preference” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 3). In differentiated classrooms, the teacher is solely seeking what is good, or best, for the students. This implies that teachers should *value*, not ignore, student differences by integrating such differences throughout course objectives and lessons.

One size does not fit all. Tomlinson (1999) equips instructors to reach these learners by (a) provoking them to pay attention to students’ needs; (b) provide ongoing and varied assessments; (c) integrate modification in content, process, and products; (d) in-corporate student-centered activities; and (e) encourage goal-setting between student and teacher (p. 16).

In the case of ESL instruction (as opposed to differentiation for gifted students, students with learning disabilities, or students with particular learning styles), decisions on how to differentiate are based on language proficiency. This level of proficiency might be determined by local or state tests, in-class diagnostics, and one-on-one conferencing. From there, the teacher can then review the material and the task required for native English speakers and “tier” the activity to meet the ELLs at the appropriate level.

For the adult ESL instructor, modification of printed materials may be of special relevance as a differentiation strategy. For example, the ESL teacher may offer support by (a) providing an enlarged text that is read aloud, (b) setting up structures for paired oral reading, or (c) providing audiotaped versions of text (Drucker, 2003). With these modifications, the ELLs may be able to independently read printed material that would otherwise be beyond their reading proficiency level. Print modifications might include (a) selecting an abridged or adapted version of a text, (b) providing a word bank or glossed text, (c) re-writing the text in language at the student’s level, (d) adding visuals to illustrate text, or (e) using a graphic novel or comic book version of a text.



A less-discussed means of reaching adult ELLs can be explored through the availability of safe home or tutorial environments. When the Even Start Literacy Program (ESLP) was federally funded, home-visits to parents of ESL students were part of the norm (Smith, 2012, p. 2). With the advent of budget cuts, Prins and Gungor (2011) note that “most programs stopped or reduced home visiting which...simultaneously weakened relationships with families” (p. 20). They quote one teacher as saying, “when we were required to do home visits I think we knew more about the families and we did more. The families form a better bond with the teachers when they have them come into their homes” (p. 20). A home-instruction option also saves the learners time when commuting, finding babysitters, or juggling home responsibilities such as meal preparation. From a CRT perspective, it also allows those whose cultures are strongly guided by hospitality to open and display the warmth of their home to the instructor.

Incorporating Adult Learners’ First Language Skills

Developing culturally responsive lessons requires building bridges in the classroom and acknowledging “legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups” (Gay, 2010, p. 29). Various studies have shown that encouraging native language use in the classroom

not only validates adult ELLs culturally but also can actually enhance their English acquisition skills. In an illuminating article about bilingual ESL instruction, Lukes (2009) concluded that “effective programs provide a combination of high-quality resources in the native language, ESL instruction, trained bilingual teachers, instructional technology, and culturally responsive and committed volunteers” (p. 170). She found that bilingual courses for adults had “retention rates of nearly 95%, with students at the lower levels persisting much longer than in traditional low-level ESL classes” (p. 170). Welch-Ross and Lesgold (2012) concur, stating that students “who can read fluently in their native language often can use some of their first language and literacy skills to facilitate learning to read and write in their second language” (p. 211).

Adult ESL instructors should not dismiss the positive influence of bilingual instruction in order to reach the “growing group of adult immigrants who are not well served by English-only approaches and who are at risk for being marginalized by limited literacy and interrupted education in their native language” (Lukes, 2009, p. 170). It is certainly understood that many or most ESL instructors may not be fluent in their students’ native language, and it may be formidable to do so in classrooms representing diverse languages. However, the culturally responsive instructor can make an effort to learn *with* the students and create avenues where native language use is encouraged, shared, and validated. Chartock’s lesson plans (2010) were specifically developed with this in mind to create opportunities for students to “share their native languages with their peers” (p. 156).

Conclusion

Research about the effectiveness of English literacy programs for adult immigrant ELLs has shown that, all too often, ELLs stop short of completing their courses for a variety of reasons, many of which are unknown (Welch-Ross & Lesgold, 2012, p. 243). There is a concern with “completion rates for developmental education courses in college, lack of persistence in adult



education programs, and high rates of attrition from research studies on instructional effectiveness for adults with low- to intermediate-level skills” (p. 243). While instructors cannot force student attendance, they can make every effort possible to reach adult immigrant ESLs with “widely differentiated levels of language and literacy instruction” (Batalova & Fix, 2010, p. 530).

When Smith (2012) contemplated the future of immigrant language learners impacted by Even Start budget cuts, she concluded that “to retain adults in family literacy programs, more culturally sensitive and supportive approaches to family literacy are needed” (p. 11). It is to that end that educators should resolve to be more innovative, creative, and transformative with their instructional strategies in order to reach our country’s marginalized adult immigrants who are a group in need of compassion, validation, and empowerment to learn and grow in their brave new world. This can be achieved through culturally receptive teachers who implement CRT strategies, develop differentiated lessons according to students’ needs, are open to learning another language, and faithfully reach out to meet diverse learners where they are in the classroom, their communities, or even their homes.

Culturally responsive teachers have unequivocal faith in the human dignity and intellectual capabilities of their students. They scaffold their instruction and build bridges between the cultural experiences of ethnically diverse students and the curriculum content of academic subjects to facilitate higher levels of learning. Communication is strongly culturally influenced, experientially situated, and functionally strategic.

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