



Culturally Responsive Teaching for the New School Year

by [Deniz Toker](#)

The number of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in U.S. schools keeps rising steadily every school year, which warrants assiduous attention to the unique pedagogical needs of these students. The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) clearly states that

Between fall 2000 and fall 2015, the percentage of students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools who were White decreased from 61 to 49 percent. The percentage of Black students also decreased during this period from 17 to 15 percent. In contrast, there was an increase in the percentage of students enrolled in public schools who were Hispanic (from 16 to 26 percent) and Asian/Pacific Islander (4 to 5 percent) during this time period. (para. 1)

These numbers show that education is not “Black” and “White” anymore, and this major demographic change necessitates systematic and proper training of both pre- and in-service teachers. Although new data from the National Center for Education Statistics point to a positive trend regarding diversity in the U.S. teaching workforce, the majority of teachers continue to be predominantly White (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2017).

You may wonder why this diversity gap between teachers and students matters. Research keeps providing evidence to show us how important it is for students to share the same race/ethnicity with teachers because it directly affects their attitudes, motivation, and achievement (Egalite & Kisida, 2018). To bridge the achievement and sociocultural gaps between CLD students and teachers, all subject teachers should correctly understand and then adopt culturally responsive teaching (CRT) practices.

What Is Culturally Responsive Teaching?

First and foremost, we should see culture as a dynamic and complex phenomenon and avoid all kinds of stereotypes. In today’s world, *cultural hybridization* is an essential term to grasp the situation in which most of our CLD students are. Lindholm and Myles (2019) define it as “the blending or fusion of cultural elements, such as forms of behavior, music, food, and language from different cultures” (p. 2).

Of course, our students' multiple cultures go beyond that and define who they are and how they function in society. So, we should be mindful of the fluid and multifaceted nature of culture and its influence on our students' identities and their performances at school. Keeping that in mind, culturally responsive teachers know that they are supposed to go the extra mile to help their CLD students by employing more equitable and culturally sensitive teaching practices.

Having synthesized different definitions of CRT by various scholars, Siwatu (2007) came up with four fundamental pillars to explain it to us:

1. CRT uses students' cultural knowledge experiences, prior knowledge, and individual learning preferences as a conduit to facilitate the teaching-learning process.
2. CRT incorporates students' cultural orientations (e.g., individualistic vs. collectivist) to design culturally compatible classroom environments.
3. CRT provides students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate what they have learned using a variety of assessment techniques.
4. CRT equips students with the necessary tools to function in mainstream culture while simultaneously helping students maintain their cultural identity, native language, and connection to their culture.

I would also like to add that CRT is basically an asset-based approach to education, so it urges teachers to explore the strengths of their CLD students. Valuing and tapping into students' home cultures not only benefits nonmainstream but also mainstream students by fostering an inclusive environment in which everybody is acknowledged and respected.

Last but definitely not least, CRT cannot exist without its social-justice-for-all component. Culturally responsive teachers never shy away from talking about controversial topics, such as immigration or racism, in the class. These teachers pave the way for their students to become critical thinkers by helping them acquire higher order thinking skills ([HOTS](#)) throughout the lesson regardless of the subject.

How Can I Start Applying Culturally Responsive Teaching?

Self-Assessment

The very first step we should take is to conduct a self-assessment. Unfortunately, we all have explicit/implicit biases toward certain groups of people, which plays a major role in forming our opinions and judgments. Therefore, we must critically assess our own biases and assumptions and do our best to be aware of them at all times. Here are some questions you can start with:

- What are my perceptions of students from different racial or ethnic groups? With language or dialects different from mine?
- What are the sources of these perceptions (e.g., friends, relatives, television, movies)?
- How do I respond to my students, based on these perceptions?
- Have I experienced others' making assumptions about me based on my membership in a specific group? How did I feel?

- What kinds of information, skills, and resources do I need to acquire to effectively teach from a multicultural perspective?
 - In what ways do I collaborate with other educators, family members, and community groups to address the needs of all my students?
- (Adapted from Bromley, 1997)

You can also try taking the tests from [Project Implicit](#) to face your implicit biases.

Getting to Know Your Students

When the new school year starts, we spend a fair amount of time learning our new students' names; correct pronunciation can be difficult, especially when we are not familiar with different languages. Also, mispronouncing a student's name is now considered the newest form of [microaggression](#). So, we should make a concerted effort to say our students' names as accurately as possible. We can even record it when they say their names so that we can practice later. Furthermore, we should do our best to learn about our CLD students' home cultures instead of making assumptions. You can hand out simple templates to collect information about them (see Figure 1 for an example) and then this data can lend itself to your lesson material preparation process.

My Culture and Traditions

Languages my family and I speak	Holidays celebrated in my culture What? When? How?
Important people in my culture	
Our family's favorite recipe	Our family traditions

Figure 1. My culture and traditions worksheet.

Current and Relevant Bulletin Boards and Books Corners

Unless our CLD students see their cultures and cultural figures represented in the books they read and the posters they see on the walls (see examples in Figures 2 and 3), it is almost impossible for them to feel they belong in our classrooms. Once we have gotten to know our students, we should include community leaders, newsworthy events, holidays, and so on from

their home countries/cultures; we can even ask them to prepare a poster for the classroom. Likewise, the book corner should reflect the diversity existing in the classroom by offering all students a variety and range of culturally diverse literature.



Figure 2. Malala women's empowerment board. (Senica, n.d.)



Figure 3. Women's history month quote flaps bulletin board. (Lewis, n.d.)

Using a Variety of Instructional Methods and Materials

Needless to say, the more different teaching strategies we use, the better we address the needs of diverse students in our classrooms. CLD students inevitably process new information through their frames of references, which are shaped by their home cultures and languages. If we do not modify our daily teaching practices, some learners, who need more scaffolding and explicit instruction, will always be at a disadvantage. To prevent this, teachers can utilize

- student's first language,
- modeling and gestures,
- visuals and realia,
- [graphic organizers](#),
- intentional group/partner work,
- [sentence structures and frames](#) (e.g., *I know...*, *because...*), and
- connecting new information to background knowledge. (Houser, n.d.)

Final Thoughts

I have recently become a staunch advocate of CRT and have been trying to implement it in my own classrooms. I always strive to learn from my students about their cultures and think of creative ways to incorporate them into my lesson plans. I also benefit from cooperative learning in which students have to work together to complete a task. In addition to standardized tests, I use multiple and ongoing assessments, such as journal writing and portfolio assignments. As well, I never miss a chance to meet their parents and collaborate with them whenever possible.

So far, I have attempted to share the basics of CRT; however, to do justice to this pedagogy, which has the potential to level the playing field for all students, you have to exert yourself. You should see this introductory article as the tip of the iceberg: It is not enough to cover all aspects of CRT. To this end, I've created a [website](#) where you can delve into CRT and familiarize yourself with both theory and practice.

To conclude, we can all benefit from CRT practices and help our students become autonomous and critical thinkers. It is a moral obligation for all educators to adopt more inclusive and diverse teaching practices so that everyone can navigate in this ever-growing multicultural world. So, practice self-reflection, uncover your biases, learn from your students, teach in different ways, and promote equity and diversity at all costs!

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Deniz Toker graduated with an MA in TESOL from Western Michigan University, where he worked as a graduate research assistant in the Special Education and Literacy Studies Department. He earned his BA in English linguistics from Hacettepe University in Turkey and then obtained CELTA. He has been teaching English as a foreign/second language for almost 10 years. His main research interests lie in culturally responsive pedagogy and fair assessment practices for language learners.