



Fostering ESL Students' Cultural Competence in 2022

by [*Mahjabeen Hussain*](#)

Throughout the 2020-2021 academic year, many higher education institutions worldwide have shown flexibility in pivoting to a virtual or hybrid model of instruction to support international students with instructional continuity. This trend is likely to continue with more effective approaches to facilitate language learning. However, these approaches must also focus on sustained development of cultural competence (CC).

Intensive English programs and English as a second language (ESL) programs help international students acclimatize with an environment marked by diversity and cross-cultural interactions. Making cultural awareness an essential part of language teaching helps students achieve language proficiency (Merrill, 2021). ESL college students' unique learning experiences expose them to diversity in various forms and help them nurture skill sets central to cultural competence

1. as a nonnative speaker of English taught by fluent English-speaking instructors;
2. as an international student sharing personal cultural heritage with others; and
3. as a nonnative speaker of English interacting with multicultural, diverse members both inside and outside the classroom.

Each sphere of learning includes different combinations of people and contexts and demands different roles from ESL college students in the learning process (see Figure 1).

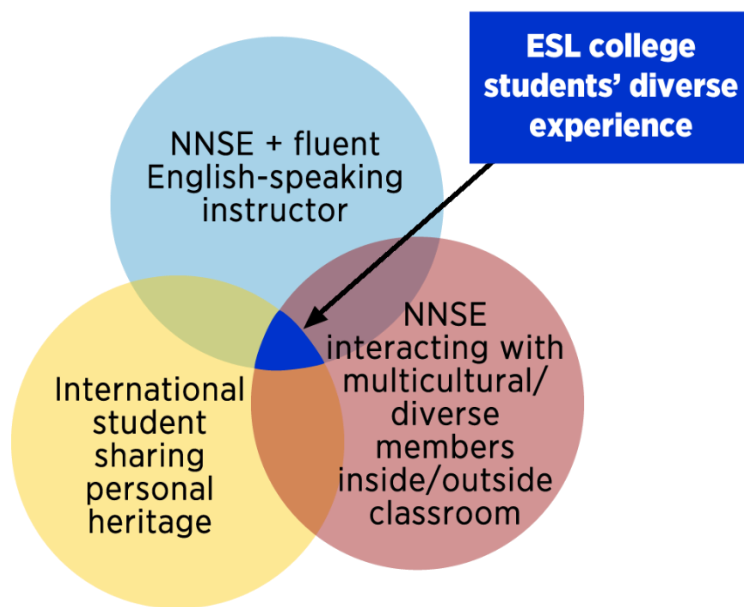


Figure 1. ESL college students' unique learning experiences.
NNSE = nonnative speaker of English

Defining Cultural Competence

Instructors facilitating development of ESL students' CC need to have an understanding of CC. Cultural competence refers to

the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each (Child Welfare League of America, n.d.).

The definition implies that an individual's behavior and manner should indicate evidence of cultural awareness and sensitivity. Note that central to this broad definition is the experiential process involving interaction and response to people of other backgrounds and diversity factors.

Learner-Centered Principles

Learner-centered principles (LCPs; American Psychological Association, 1997) that define and support what it means to be learner centered from a reliable and research-validated perspective can form a framework for promoting sensitivity toward diversity and enhance cultural awareness. Fourteen [learner-centered psychological principles](#), categorized into four domains (cognitive and metacognitive, motivational and affective, developmental and social, and individual differences), define a research-validated knowledge base about learning and learners (APA, 1997). The definition of *learner centered* is considered from an integrated and holistic approach to the principles:

“Learner centered” is the perspective that couples a focus on individual learners – their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs – with a focus on learning the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs and about teaching practices that are most effective in promoting the highest levels of motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners. This dual focus then informs and drives educational decision making. Learner-centered is a reflection in practice of the *Learner-Centered Psychological Principles* – in the programs, practices, policies, and people that support learning for all (McCombs & Whisler, 1997, p. 9).

According to this definition, the principles

- apply to learners of all ages both in and outside of school.
- clearly indicate what is required to create positive learning contexts and communities.
- can form the basis of selecting methods for implementing and evaluating any program and practices to support the teaching and learning process.
- can shift instruction toward a more learner-centered perspective that is designed on a variety of complex emotional and psychological factors inherent in an individual’s learning process.
- can recognize how environmental factors interact to affect learning.

Based on the aforementioned definitions of *learner centered* and *cultural competence*, here are three recommendations for enhancing sensitivity toward diversity and developing CC.

Recommendations for Developing Cultural Competence

Recommendation 1: Use the Learner-Centered Principles as a Framework

Cognitive and Metacognitive Factors

Attentive and active engagement eases processing of new sensory input.

- Explain how students will be working independently and cooperatively with diverse group members to optimize learning and help students understand how a learner-centered environment *is* different.
- Provide opportunities for students to discover the purpose of their learning activities; this makes activities more meaningful.
- Engage students and unleash curiosity through interactive sessions with others, technology, and cultural activities new to them:
 - Teach with YouTube or other videos.
 - Convert traditional printable worksheets to “interactive worksheets” with self-correction using [Liveworksheets](#), or use shared worksheets from the site. Instructors get an email notification if students select the “send my answers to the teacher” option.

- Make exercises more dynamic. Use recorded video introducing a popular figure highlighting *personal adjectives*. As a follow-up activity, use [Jamboard](#) to have students add a personal picture and jot down words describing themselves on sticky notes.

Motivational and Affective Factors

Students must learn more than just facts about other cultures in order to gain cultural understanding; students must engage with learning materials. Utilize multisensory approaches:

- Allow opportunities for personal opinion when selecting learning activities on diverse cultures and communities.
- Promote discussions/debates on stereotyping/power/discrimination/racism/prejudice as reflected in learning materials students choose.
- Motivate students to explore their interest in other cultures to ensure a safe environment.
- Introduce topics like body language, gestures, etiquette, or tourism and travelling for debates and discussions to elicit a variety of interpretations. Alternatively, students can choose topics from online resources like [National Geographic](#), [CNN](#), [The Conversation](#), [BBC](#), or [Science Alert](#).
- For individual or pair activity, introduce upbeat, fun topics, such as sports, customs, festivals, and traditions.
- Students can create comparison infographics using programs like [Crello](#), [Adobe Spark](#), or [Canva](#) for oral presentation of similarities and differences they find as they learn about their classmates.

Developmental and Social Factors

Mingling among an inclusive student population can create two-way intercultural development and permit cultural exposure and greater cultural understanding.

- Prompt students to think about their level of interaction with people of different races and ethnicities in their community.
- Encourage opportunities to share stories with individuals belonging to diverse groups and nationalities.
- Include community engagement activities to allow opportunities for interactive, firsthand encounters that will empower students to learn via different means.
- For a storytelling activity, students can engage in interactive storytelling utilizing digital mediums like [Storyjumper](#), [Storymap](#), or [Google Earth](#). With these, they can provide their narratives with a stronger sense of place and add visual appeal and credibility to their cultural presentations.
- Students can discuss with community members similarities and differences between U.S. cultural beliefs and their own on a topic (e.g., holidays and celebrations, food habits, wedding, music). They can use Canva's comparison infographics to present this out-of-the-classroom activity's findings.

Individual Differences Factors

View learners holistically as human beings. Positive interpersonal interactions developed through multiple venues help overcome fear.

- Initiate activities that require students to express their preferences/styles of learning, or that identify skills they have.
- Take interest in students' linguistic/cultural/social background. Motivate them to independently learn about other cultures.
- Accept multiple modes of expression to help nurture a diverse and inclusive learning community. Provide ways for students to assess how culturally competent they are; support them in their developmental process.
- Initiate discussion on topics like learning a language, language and losing identity, or cultural beliefs. Such topics stimulate interactions among students and instructors.
- Ask students to prepare a video collage in response to questions instructors have about their linguistic/cultural/social background using Canva or [Google Slides](#).

Recommendation 2: Use a Program Monitoring Tool to Identify Learner-Centered Principles in Action

Apply twofold use of a program monitoring tool (see Table 1) in a learner-centered program: as a self-assessment tool, to help monitor the ESL instructor's change process, and as a program assessment tool to share with others.

In university settings, being learner centered means that to nurture comprehension skills and attitudes that foster diverse cultural understanding, instructors have to model culturally competent instructional practices. The benefits of learning a foreign language are at a cognitive and an emotional level. ESL students need to have meaningful immersion experiences that will open them to doing things differently from their own—which is cultural competence. To thrive in a learner-centered environment, students need to understand why and how they have to change their learning practices.

The LCPs have the potential to facilitate deeper and more meaningful learning for all students. As an assessment tool, the program monitoring tool is crucial for determining whether LCPs are actually being used to facilitate ESL students' language learning processes, which essentially involves developing new ways of understanding target culture.

Table 1. Program Monitoring Tool for Determining LCPs in Practice (Adapted from McCombs & Vakili, 2005)

Program Features	Learner-Centered Factors	Learner-Centered Principles
Students decide to present a few of their customs and traditions to get to know about each other and their teacher.	Motivational and affective Developmental and social Individual differences	Principle 8: Intrinsic motivation to learn. Principle 10: Developmental influences on learning. Principle 11: Social influences on learning. Principle 13: Learning and diversity.

Recommendation 3: Use a Survey to Understand Students' Cultural Competence Experience

Provide students with a validated survey instrument developed exclusively for the college context (see [the one by Lopes-Murphy](#), 2013, p. 18), at the beginning and end of the program. CC is viewed as a continuous process of developing knowledge, awareness, and skills for effective intergroup interactions; therefore, ESL students must assess their own progress. For collecting information, use Survey Monkey or Google Forms. The collected information can help you understand the nature of your students' cultural competence experiences, which in turn can help guide your lesson planning and materials choices.

Conclusion

Student composition in college campuses is becoming more international. Teachers and students alike must learn to understand each other to reach an optimal level of learning, and it takes more than language proficiency to understand each other. Culturally integrated classrooms promote inclusive learning environments (Merrill, 2021) and inevitably involve developing new ways of understanding and learning about different cultures. The recommendations I've made in this article are aimed at enabling programs to build communities of learners through a developmentally appropriate framework and to support the ongoing process of cultural competency among international students.

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