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Practical Strategies for Culturally Relevant Lessons for ELs
by Chih-Hsin Hsu

As one in four U.S. K–12 public school students will be an English learner (EL) by 2025, culturally relevant teaching (CRT), which values and builds on every student's culture, knowledge, experience, and interest to make learning more relevant and meaningful in the real world, becomes a paramount pedagogical approach. CRT not only ensures ELs have equal access to educational opportunities but also provides a positive learning environment and engaging, authentic lessons that connect with students' prior knowledge and cultural experiences. Research reports that CRT lessons increase students' learning motivation, engagement, and academic success (e.g., Kim et al., 2019, an example of incorporating home culture in a middle school science curriculum). Teachers should see students as cultural informants (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, p. 182) and their existing funds of knowledge as a driving vehicle for learning.

Though CRT competence is now seen as a required skill of educators (Kea & Trent, 2013), teachers still experience challenges in integrating CRT into lessons and often lack such training in their teacher preparation programs. The following will provide teachers practical steps and research-based strategies to develop their CRT lessons.

Four Steps for Developing Culturally Relevant Lessons

Step 1. Engage in Self-Reflection

To begin with uncovering your implicit bias, take Harvard University's Project Implicit online test; it will help you reflect on your "own cultural roots with a different, critical eye" (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, p. 180).

In order to establish an inclusive classroom, it's critical that you explore your attitudes and beliefs via in-depth group discussions and reflective questions. Riley et al. (2021) further suggested critical race media literacy for teacher education, asking preservice teachers to view YouTube videos, such as the movie clip *Freedom Writers* (2007), and the diverse YouTube user comments about diversity and equity that accompany it. In that way, you can learn about and discover stories and experiences of other cultural groups, reflect on your perspectives compared to others, and ultimately raise your sociocultural consciousness and begin to work toward

dismantling inequitable and biased systems. Here are a few prompts adopted from Riley et al. (2021) when you select videos and engage in the comments:

- Do the users support your opinion, and how?
- Do the comments help you consider an important takeaway?
- Do the comments represent diverse opinions, and how?

Step 2. Rethink Curricula and Lesson Plans to Present Diverse Voices and Positive Interactions

When assessing culturally and linguistically diverse ELs, it's important to examine your lessons and your sociocultural preferences, such as the low-context or high-context talk and your linguistic style (using rich, expressive, and embellished language instead of being indirect or quiet). Linguistic styles (the way you speak) are often bound up in the dominant preferences of a society, and these preferences reflect hierarchical social standards involving how we perceive and evaluate others.

When you reflect on your own linguistic style and learn about the value of linguistic elements, you're more able to recognize, act upon, and use other linguistic styles—those that may be better suited to and more comfortable for your students. For example, teachers may mark down points because of a lack of academic language use in ESL writing; however, a culturally relevant assessment might aim to see ELs' creative writing and novel ideas.

Step 3. Establish a Positive Learning Environment and Address Various Cultural Needs

Before you can shape your students' learning environment and address their cultural needs, you'll need to know things about them. The following three areas are good places to start:

- Basic facts about the student
- Their previous schooling and preferred learning/performance styles
- Features of their home culture
  (Peregoy & Boyle, 2017, p. 14)

To get to know your students on a more personal level, you can try classroom activities that allow them to tell their stories, such as having them write and illustrate their autobiography using a tool like Storybird, which allows users to create their own stories and make them into books. See Figure 1 for more ideas on how to get to know your ELs.
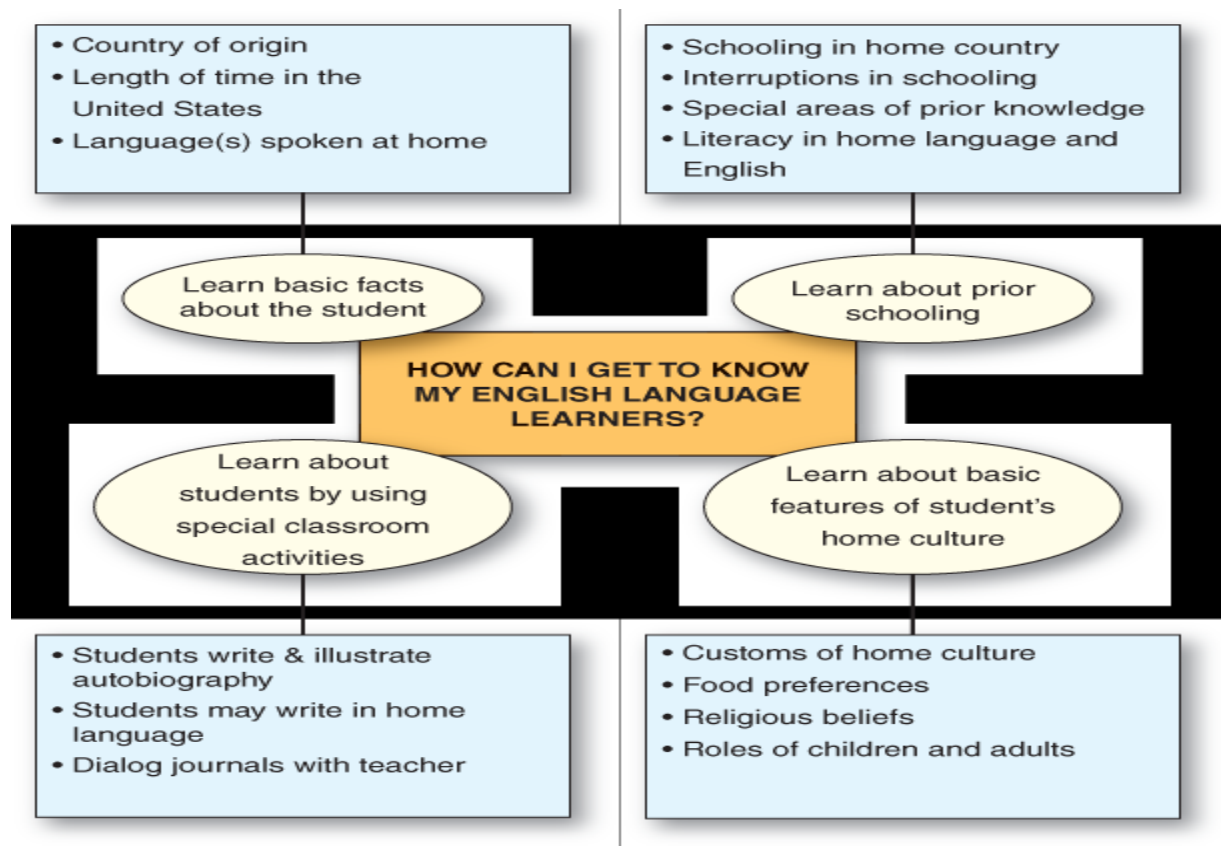
Figure 1. Getting to know your English learners. (Peregoy & Boyle, 2017, p. 14; reprinted with permission)

Step 4. Empower Students to Take Ownership of Their Learning

ELs who take ownership of their own learning usually stay motivated and build knowledge from their existing experiences. The KWHLAQ chart—what do you already *know*, what do you *want* to know, *how* will you find out, what have you *learned*, what *action* will you take, and what further *questions* do you have—is a scaffolding tool to help ELs make connections between their background and new content. To deepen the learning via the chart, ELs should explore three dimensions: text to text, text to self, and self to the world. Also, learning strategies to find answers, such as conducting interviews with their relatives or getting to know their roots through mirror stories, are fundamental for success.

Four Research-Based Strategies

1. Correspond Content and Language Objectives

If you are a content teacher, you should base your instruction on content objectives and corresponding language objectives to ensure ELs' linguistic, cognitive, and academic

development/achievement. For students to engage with the subject content, language objectives in a subject need to cover knowledge and skills of

- communicative language (e.g., using sentence frames such as "Looking at the ___, I think there are ___.");
- academic language (e.g., *estimate* and *predict*); and
- technical, or subject-specific, language (e.g., *observe* vs. *infer*).

Check out this guide (starting p. 11) to help you write language objectives to align with your content objectives: *Framework for English Language Proficiency Development Standards corresponding to the Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards*.

2. Use Multicultural Literature or Media

Consider multicultural literature books to supplement your subject teaching and increase students' motivation. ELs, especially beginning readers or students with reading risk, need to make meaningful connections with the texts they're reading. *K–12 Reading Resources* lists "Ten Tips for Selecting Multicultural Books for Reading Instruction." Also, consider great book recommendations, plus advice from top educators and writers on how to spot literature that transcends stereotypes: "Culturally Relevant Books in the ELL Classroom."

You may wonder how to engage your students and help them grasp a deeper understanding of multicultural literature. Consider using the following principles by Belinda Louie (Suzuki, 2010):

1. Assess the story's perspective.
2. Realize cultural differences.
3. Realize characters' motives and reactions.
4. Identify values.
5. Relate self to the text.
6. Use variants of the same story.
7. Talk, write, and respond.

Creating a Venn diagram via a site like Canva allows ELs to explore and collaborate in creating mind maps for virtual visualization.

Additionally, CultureGrams provides rich cultural information on more than 200 countries (try the free trial or see if your library subscribes to it). On the LibGuides CultureGrams page, you can find supplemental resources and handouts for your CRT lessons.

3. Simplify Language on Subject Tests/Tasks

To make subject content comprehensible and obtain accurate assessment outcomes on students' subject knowledge, simplify the language you use. Take the following math problem from the 2015 PARCC Grade 3 assessment (New Meridian Resource Center, 2019) as an example:

Rick keeps his trading cards in a box. Rick's uncle gave him 6 packs of 8 trading cards to add to his box. Rick found that 29 of the trading cards from his uncle were different than any of the cards he already had in his box. The rest of the trading cards from his uncle were the same as those he already had. How many of the trading cards from his uncle were the same as those Rick already had in his box?

A linguistically simplified version looks like this:

Rick has 6 new packs of cards. Each new pack has 8 cards. Rick found that 29 of the new cards are different from his old cards, but the rest are the same. How many of the new cards are the same as his old cards?

Consider using the list of tips from "Preparing ESL-Friendly Worksheets and Tests" as a checklist to ensure you're providing comprehensible tasks or tests for your ELs. (Note that language assessments such as ACCESS aim to test ELs' language proficiency, so linguistic simplification or accommodations often skew assessment reports on their language levels.)

4. Emphasize Authenticity and Culture in Assessments

Authentic assessments emphasize real-world problems or applications that are relevant to ELs and their community. Authentic assignments provide students opportunities to utilize their learned knowledge, skills, and cultural experiences in a task. See examples from a CRT science lesson (Kim et al., 2019). In a virtual context, such HomeFun assignments (such as the one shown in Figure 2) go well with VoiceThread, which allows ELs to comment orally (audio or video), in writing, via drawings, or through a combination of comment types on various types of media.
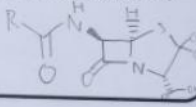
| Day 1. HomeFun Assignment | Day 4. HomeFun Assignment |

Figure 2. Example HomeFun assignment. (Kim et al., 2019, p. 256. Reprinted with permission.)

Final Tips

Consider using this Culturally Responsive Teaching checklist to examine curricula or prepare CRT lessons. To address unchecked items on the list, you may find quick strategies here, from University of Los Angeles, California, Professor Dr. Howard. If you are an elementary classroom teacher or English language teacher who wishes for interdisciplinary lessons, you may find CRT lesson samples in subject areas to be inspiring.

CRT is definitely neither an easy task nor a quick "fix" for every teacher. This year, let us continue to build our capacity to better serve ELs through CRT steps and research-based strategies that will profoundly impact student learning outcomes.

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