Improving Active Classroom Participation of ESL Students: Applying Culturally Responsive Teaching Strategies

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Abstract—The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of implementing culturally responsive teaching strategies in an adult ESL classroom. Prior research indicated that ESL students were not interested in instructions that ignore or isolate their home culture or targeted language culture. Three adult students from Asian countries with intentions to improve their English learning participated in the study. Using an ABAB design, students' participations in the class discussions were recorded and counted. The results showed that the implementation of culturally responsive teaching strategies increased the frequency of students' classroom participations. The instructions employing culturally responsive teaching strategies were more likely to increase students' involvement in communication and enhance their communication skills.

Index Terms—ESL, culturally responsive teaching, instructional strategies, single subject research

I. INTRODUCTION

"Culture is all knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, values and emotions that we, as human beings, have added to our biological base. Culture is a social phenomenon; it is what we as a society, or a people, share and which enables us to live as a society in order for humanity to survive, it is necessary that we learn our culture" (Jarvis, 2006, p.56). Consequently, as instructors, we need to know, understand, and value different culture to better help students achieve and grow; as adult learners, they need to know and respect the diversified backgrounds of their peers or their students if they are teachers. Culture can serve as a way to enhance the motivation of learners because it can create culturally responsive teaching, which is characterized by respect for diversity; engagement of the motivation of all learners; creation of a safe, inclusive, and respectful learning environment; teaching practices that cross disciplines and cultures; integration of culturally responsive practice into all subject areas (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995), and the promotion of justice and equity in society (Phuntsog, 1998). Also, as Tomal (2007) argued, one of the bases for understanding student motivation may rest with a student's personal cultural value system. By understanding student culture, teachers can develop a classroom culture that provides incentives for good motivation that may be the foundation for academic success. Moreover, it is clear that globalization and rapid social change have affected the nature of society. The socioeconomic and cultural diversity of today's adult population and nontraditional classroom settings presents special cultural challenges to adult educators. Therefore, culturally responsive strategies are important for any instructors who intend to pursue the ways of teaching adult learners in a motivating and effective way in their ESL teaching setting.

The goal of applying culturally responsive teaching strategies in adult ESL (English as Second Language) classrooms is to provide a way to create an inclusive, safe, and interacting learning setting to engage ESL students in meaningful communication exchanges by recognizing and weaving students' cultures into classroom learning and teaching. Since most adult students in the ESL classroom have experienced isolation, discomfort, and insecurity in a new learning setting that is different from his or her mother culture, culture can be applied to motivate these students (Tomal, 2007). Instructors, by recognizing students' culture, can integrate the teaching materials with students' cultural experience and respect their cultural diversity to enhance their positive participations in the class and to motivate them to learn.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies and strategies have investigated effective ways to teach ESL students from rich cultural backgrounds (Marria, 1998; Thmpson, 2004; Zhang, 1992). In the field of ESL teaching, Zhang (1992) investigated the effects of four different strategies on the English reading comprehension of 29 ESL students of varying language backgrounds from eight countries in an academic English program. The strategies involved cognitive, memory, compensation, and test-taking strategies. The results showed that the introduction of reading strategies, particularly memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies, helped students make gains in reading comprehension. Instructions in test-taking strategies did not improve comprehension. Zhang's study contributed to ESL teaching by suggesting the

failure of test-oriented instruction. However, Zhang's study also showed that effects between the strategy and language proficiency level were not statistically significant, which indicated that when instructing students with cultural backgrounds, new instructional procedures needed to be created.

Historically, researchers and scholars have been working on new instructional strategies to enhance the ESL learning abilities of students from rich cultural backgrounds. Thompson (2004) recommended "colortalk" which suggested that all the teachers in classroom settings be aware of students' cultural diversity and develop a curriculum to address these students' cultural needs. Besides "colortalk" recommendation, he also recommended the use of *culturally responsive caring-in-action.* This type of instruction enabled ethnically and culturally diverse students to be open and flexible in expressing their thoughts, feelings, and emotions, as well as being receptive to new ideas and information. The features of caring-in-action instruction were patience, persistence, facilitation, validation, and empowerment for the participants. Uncaring instructions were distinguished by impatience, intolerance, dictations, and control. The results showed that teachers who genuinely cared for students generate higher levels of all kinds of success than those who did not. This type of instruction contributed to the culturally responsive teaching literature by claiming that educator must care "enough to abandon our willed ignorance and political blindness" (p. 37). But this justice-based and authentic caring must be an integral part of all students' entire educational careers, starting from their learning in kindergarten classrooms all the way to their life and learning in colleges and universities. Therefore, it needs consistent collaborative efforts from all educators and practitioners at all educational levels, which usually is not done easily.

In addition, the research conducted by Su (2011) examined the effects of a cultural portfolio project on (1) students' specific opinions of development of cultural knowledge and change in understanding of native English speakers and their cultures; (2) students' self-awareness, recognitions, assessment, and adjustment of stereotypes toward the English cultures; and (3) students' change in perception and outlook toward cultural learning. The findings showed an understanding of how cultural portfolio projects help students develop greater awareness and understanding of the English culture, what specific cultural knowledge they developed and modified, and how their perceptions of target cultures and people and cultural learning changed. It contributed to the field of cultural responsive teaching in EFL and ESL teaching instructions by providing an effective model of project.

Moreover, Marria (1998) conducted an experimental study to investigate the effects of regular use of communication games in monolingual EFL classrooms and observed where and how these games fostered language learning. The results suggested that communication games fostered students' language learning: "I have found this game extremely relevant to everyday situations the language learner is likely to face, and highly adaptable to numerous speech situations. It has always encouraged them to use structures and vocabulary they have learned in other contents" (p.15).

More importantly, a study conducted by Collier (1992) and a collective research study from Garcia-Vasquez, Vasquez, and Lopez (1997) suggested that proficiency in heritage or indigenous languages correlates positively with higher academic English performance, especially when the former is used as a vehicle to facilitate the latter. The findings suggested that the effects of bilingual education can be attributed to the strong interactive relationship that exists among language, culture, and learning, rather than language alone. These findings suggested that culturally responsive teaching strategies should be applied in the ESL classroom.

Considering the increasing application of different culturally responsive teaching strategies in the ESL classroom, more research needs to be conducted on the efficacy of the strategies in improving adult students' active participations in the classroom. Most of the current research is being conducted with participants at lower grades (Collier, 1992; Garcia-Vasquez, Vasquez, & Lopez, 1997). There is a need to see the effectiveness of the strategies with adult learners. The purpose of this study was to look at the effects of culturally responsive teaching strategies with adult learners in the ESL classroom setting from different countries such as China and Korea. The primary goal of using culturally responsive teaching strategies was to increase students' positive participation in class to enhance their skills to pass the required university entrance test (Iowa ESL Placement Test).

III. METHOD

The purpose of this study is to provide practical experiences where language instructors can actually get useful strategies and lead to better evidence-based models and tools to be replicated in future experience. Single subject research fits the intentions of this study well. First, single subject research is experimental rather than correlative and descriptive, and its purpose is to document causal or functional relationships between independent and dependent variables which has a good control of major threats to internal and external validity (Martella, Nelson, & Marchand-Martella, 1999). Second, single subject research is a rigorous, scientific methodology used to define principle of behaviors and establish evidence-based practices, therefore, educators can establish individualized educational and supportive strategies benefited from the systematic form of experimental analysis that single subject research allows (Shavelson & Towne, 2002). Third, single subject research allows replication to examine whether the same phenomenon that the researchers observed will happen when others enter the same situation (O'neill, McDonnell, Billingsley, and Jenson, 2011).

Participants

There were three participants in this study. Two of the participants were from China and the other one was from Korea. They were all adult precollege students who were in the program to prepare for the required university entrance test (Iowa ESL Placement Test).

King was the first student in the study. He was from Korea and was struggling to pass the test in order to study at the university level. He thought the class was boring because the instructor lectured them about grammar and vocabulary. He ignored the lectures and talked to the other students during the class.

Li was a Chinese female in her second month in the program. She showed great interest when the instructor talked about something that related to her culture. However, since the class was mostly about grammar and vocabulary, she usually fell asleep at her desk. When the researchers visited the classroom the first time, she thought they were the program supervisors and complained to the researchers.

Zhang was a Chinese male in his first university year. He was older than other students in the class because he completed the training in the ESL program. He had to repeat the program because he did not meet the university academic standards. He was frustrated because he paid the money to go through all the requirements and tests in the program, but his communication and writing levels did not meet university professors' requirements. In classroom, he always sat in the back row and was reluctant to read even when his instructor asked him to read the given materials. One time he just stood up and told the instructor that the session was over.

The researchers chose those three individuals for this study for two reasons. First, based on literature, the researchers believed that a culturally responsive teaching strategy could help the instructor make the classroom more active and inclusive to the students. Second, the researchers chose the three students because they were all from Asia, and two of them were actually from the same country as the researchers. Therefore, the researchers had enough knowledge base in their culture.

Setting

The study was conducted in a regular classroom. The introduction of culturally responsive teaching strategies was carried out in the hallway outside the teacher's office. All the 10 students in the classroom were from three different countries and were required to attend the class from 8:00 to 9:20 in the morning. The ESL center was located in a less diverse state where people were relatively conservative and not open to outside culture.

Dependent Variables

The student's dependent target behavior was his/her active participation in the class activities. The frequency of student's responses was measured during different class sessions. Since all the participants showed up for class every day but were not involved themselves into class activities, the instructor intervened with culturally responsive teaching strategies to motivate them to participate in class.

Data Collection

The observations of on-task behavior occurred before and after the culturally responsive teaching strategies were implemented during the ESL class sessions. Two types of recorded forms were developed to monitor the frequency of instructor's implementation of the strategies and its effects on students' active classroom participations before and after the introduction of the culturally responsive teaching strategies.

To collect data, observations were conducted in the classroom two times every week for five weeks with self-designed forms. There were two sessions, and each lasted 30 minutes. There were seven columns in the form. The first two columns were the date and session time. The third column "what the instructor will do" provided room to indicate what the instructor would do during each 30 minute class session before the intervention. The fourth column, "is it a desired behavior – Instructor" indicated that the skills used by the instructor belonged to the culturally responsive strategy. The fifth column "is it a desired behavior- students" indicated the actual occurrence of the targeted behaviors to prove the effects of the implementations of culturally responsive teaching strategies. Then columns of "percentage of responses" followed to indicate the quantities of the behaviors.

Observer Training

Two observers visited the classroom. Both observers had been trained on data collection prior to the implementation of the study to establish the reliability of the data.

Observers was first trained and agreed on what activities identified as culturally responsive teaching strategies and what were the effects of the implementation. Then, they were trained to how to read and fill in the forms with correct information. Thirdly, observers then assessed during practice sessions using role-plays to see if the correct numbers were placed in the related columns based upon the agreements and to see if they could identify the target behaviors. Moreover, the researcher calculated the agreement, which was 91%. Lastly, the consistency of observers' data recording was regularly assessed using interobserver agreement procedure (O'Neill, McDonnell, Billingsley & Jenson, 2011).

Interobserver Agreement

Since there were multiple observers in the study, the researchers collected interobserver agreement to determine agreement. Following practice sessions, the observers compared results for each and every occurrence or measurement of the target behavior (dependent variable). A point-by-point agreement ratio was used to establish the concordance between the observers. Point-by-point agreement was established by dividing the number of agreements by the number of agreements added to the disagreements and multiplied by 100. The agreement was across all training and independent work sessions.

Experimental Design and Conditions

The experimental design used for the current study was an ABAB withdrawal design. The design had four conditions: Baseline (A), Intervention (B), a second Baseline (A), and a second Intervention (B).

The researcher chose this design for several reasons. First, this withdrawal design allowed for two replications and thus provided clear evidence of experimental control and showed a systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of the intervention. Second, only one variable was changed at a time. Third, the ABAB design is a more powerful and convincing design than just the ABA design because it allowed the study to end with the intervention condition proven to be the most beneficial for changing the target behavior. Fourth, this design suggested a simple but strong investigation of causality. This control helped establish that the behavior change occurred because of the dependent variable and not another variable.

The study lasted a total of five weeks, with two times and four sessions per week. Two weeks of observation took place to collect data for the initial baseline, one week of intervention data collection, one week of second baseline data collection, and another week of second intervention.

Experimental procedures

Baseline- The purpose of baseline was to observe the ESL students' typical classroom participation behaviors without introducing any interventions. Initial baseline consisted of two instruction sessions. Each session lasted 30 minutes. The classroom procedures were typical with ESL instructor's lectures on grammar and vocabulary which was the same as the rest of the semester. During each session, students were involved in their regular textbook reading and classroom notes-taking. The researcher used frequency counts to tally the target behaviors- active classroom participations- by using the four column forms mentioned in the above recording procedure part. The instructor and students were not given any information to prevent changes in their normal classroom behaviors.

Intervention- This condition lasted for one week. Monday and Tuesday were dedicated to introducing cultural responsive teaching strategies to the instructor and then designing a class with the strategies. Wednesday was for collecting data on the intervention.

Prior to the intervention, researchers met individually with the instructor to explain the study. The instructor was told what the two clusters on culturally responsive teaching strategies would be and was asked to use the strategies as many times as she could. Together with the instructor, a class session was planned for implementing the culturally responsive teaching strategy. The frequency of the instructor's implementation of culturally responsive teaching strategy was observed in a class period based on the strategy clusters developed from the review of different resources (See Table 1), and the frequency of students' responds (active participations) to the implementation were recorded. Students needed to show active participations such as frequency of showing eagers for answering the questions, pay attention to instructor's explanations, being respectful when someone is talking, and actively involved in the classroom activities, etc.

TABLE 1
CLUSTERS OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES

Clusters	Instructor's role and activities	Student's role and activities	Supporting resources
Cluster A: Knowing student culture	Be aware of students' culture, its value, and beliefs by • Asking students to share their culture and beliefs on the discussion topics • Accepting all answers without judgments • Charting student ideas	Sharing their ideas related to their culture by • Self-introduction • Poem writing • Drawing pictures	Phuntsog (1998), Geneva Gay (2000)
Cluster B: Creating inclusive, safe, and supportive learning settings	Incorporating culture into classroom by • Related cultural stories, concept, and vocabulary to past or future experience. • Use culture appropriate activities to emphasize sentence structures. • Show the academic differences among cultures. • Encourage sharing and communication	Sharing their understanding and confusions by • Group discussion activities • Presentations • Weekly Journals	Garcia-Vasquez, Vasquez, & Lopez (1997), Wlodkowski & Ginsberg (1995)
Cluster C: Go beyond	Stimulating students to expand their learning and thinking beyond the scope of the lesson and their own culture by • Asking students if they have new questions or ideas on how to use what they learned to explore in a real practice	Continue assessing how new information relates to further English learning and exploring by • Putting the new sentence structures and essay writing skills in the future learning	Schmidt, Siago, Stephan (2011), Sleeter & Cornbleth (2011)

During the first session, the instructor was asked to teach with the designed class using culturally responsive strategies. The instructor first introduced the session. After the introduction, instead of lecturing on the grammar, she asked the students to introduce the current situation in their own country about the pollution by using one or two sentences they learned from the textbook. If there were more active participations from the students, then it showed that the strategies worked. Also, the instructor invited the students to compare the different policies and stories they heard or experienced on pollution and environment protection. The application of different culturally responsive teaching

strategies were designed and practiced on Monday and Tuesday for the four sessions. It showed that students' attention was aroused and there were more active participation from the observed three students. No data were collected during the training on the dependent variable. During the intervention session data were collected.

Second Baseline (withdrawal) - A return to baseline was carried out for two sessions after two weeks of the intervention phase. The purpose of this condition was to establish control and analyze the effects of withdrawing the intervention. In this session, the instructor was no longer asked to applying the culturally responsive teaching strategies. Actually, the instructor went back to the grammar and vocabulary lecturing. Frequency counts were recorded in the same manner as the previous baseline session. Data were collected without any intervention.

Second Intervention- A final return to the intervention was conducted for one week with four consecutive sessions. Again each session lasted 30 minutes. The intervention started up again and data were recorded on the first day. The instructor was again encouraged to implement the culturally responsive teaching strategies in her explanations of the smoking phenomenon. Students' active participations were recorded and counted. Data were again collected on the effects of the intervention.
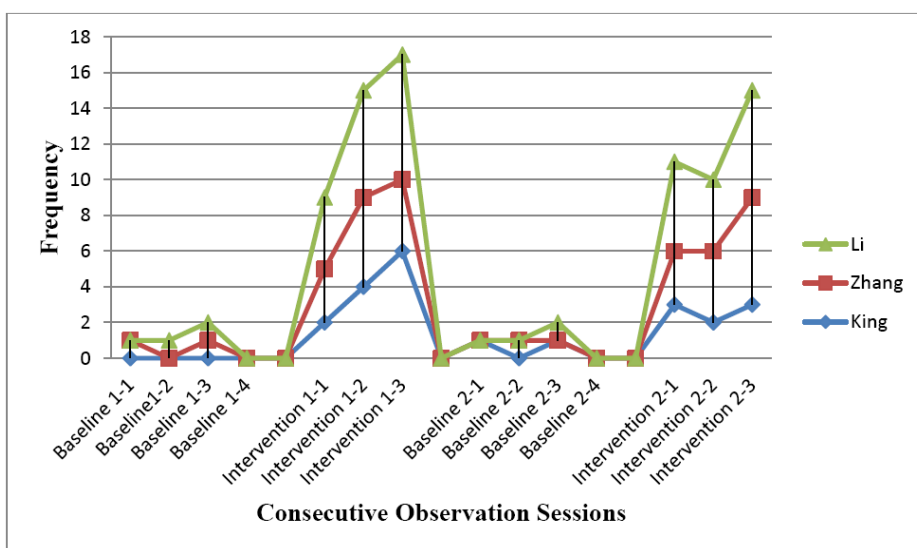
IV. RESULTS

Table 2 Graph Generated from the Data

The graph (See Table 2) showed that there was a significant change in level and slope across three students, and the implementation of culturally responsive teaching strategies increased the frequencies of participants' classroom participation (See Table 2). A stable baseline was established for each student. Baseline data showed that the average number of times that each student participated was 0 (King), 0.5 (Zhang), and 0.5 (Li). These data supported the assumption that the students needed new teaching strategies to modify their behavior to enhance their learning. The intervention of CRT was introduced in week three, and it lasted for a week. During the intervention, the average number of times the students actively participated in the class activities increased from 0 to 4 (King), 0.5 to 4 (Zhang), and 0.5 to 5.3 (Li). At the beginning of week four, the intervention was withdrawn, and data were collected for one more week. During this condition, the average number of the student's participation decreases back to 0.5 (King), 0.25 (Zhang), and 0.25 (Li). The number of participation was eight times (King), 16 times (Zhang), and 21 times (Li) lower than the average during the intervention. When a second stable baseline was established as shown in the graph, the average participation was 0.5 (King), 0.25 (Zhang), and 0.25 (Li). Then a second intervention was introduced. Again, the three participants displayed a significant increase in participating in class activities: the students increased their performance from an average 33% to 90 % or above.

Based upon the data (See Table 2) obtained in this study, experimental control was established between the independent interventions and the dependent variable. The data showed that culturally responsive teaching strategy interventions resulted in significant changes in the three students' classroom participation behaviors. When the culturally responsive teaching strategies intervention was removed, all students' behaviors returned to a pre-intervention level.

V. DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to show that adult students in the ESL classroom can benefit from the implementation of culturally responsive teaching strategies. The data collected from the study confirmed that culturally responsive teaching strategies are effective which was echoed by the literature that culturally responsive education can enhance

student's learning and academic achievement through strengthening student connectedness with school and reducing behavior problems in classroom community (Gay, 2000; Kalyanpur, 2003). Instructors who have students fall into this category (ESL or EFL students) can apply the strategies in their ESL teaching.

In this study two types of instructors appeared in classroom observations before and after the training of culturally responsive teaching strategies: (a) instructors who do not recognize the culture of learners, and (b) instructors who do recognize the culture of learners but do not have it reflected in their teaching. After the training one instructor differentiated her teaching strategies by adopting culturally responsive teaching strategies and started to be aware of her students' culture background. This result means that understanding a learner's culture to become culturally competent is not a skill that comes naturally to some instructors. Instead, many instructors need professional development opportunities and training to enhance their ability and awareness.

Moreover, the study showed that a new strategy in ESL teaching needs support from educational leaders. Although the above instructor understood and observed the benefits that her students gained from culturally responsive teaching strategies, she as an instructor could not reform and change the traditional, test-oriented teaching methods because she had no other choice than to follow the current non-culturally-responsive curriculum at the ESL center. Thus, lack of support from current curriculum leaders and test-oriented instruction are the primary obstacles that have inhibited teachers to adopt cultural responsive teaching strategies.

Additionally, as Tomal (2007) argued based on Maslow's theory (1943) and Alderfer's needs models (1969), leaders and instructors in education must recognize that the degree of satisfying a need may vary from one person to another and take cultural differences among students into account. In this study, it showed that culturally responsive teaching strategies embedded student's culture into the teaching instruction and therefore, created a safe and inclusive learning setting to motivate students and help further the academic performance of the students.

Culturally responsive teaching strategies are proactive. They provide motivating tools that can enhance students' motivation and behaviors in the ESL classroom through recognizing and weaving students' unique culture into classroom instructional practice. The following recommendations are provided to help instructors develop their skills and strategies in being culturally responsive:

1. Being culturally competent through knowing students

Cultural competence, also referred to as cultural sensitivity or cultural proficiency, means a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals that enable them to work effectively in cross-cultural situations and has been recognized as the most important characteristic of working with students from different racial, ethnic, religious, or social groups (Brown, 2004; Gay, 2000; Guerra & Nelson, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The basic assumption of cultural responsiveness is that instructors cannot teach or lead what or who they do not know.

Based on the researchers' experience, there are three ways to know a student's culture as shown in the clusters in Table 1. First, instructors can encourage students to introduce themselves through self-introduction essay, poem writing, and picture-drawing. Also, to be culturally competent, instructors should allow students to share their culture and beliefs in the various classroom discussion topics. Third, instructors should be active in incorporating culture into classroom activities by relating cultural stories, concepts, and vocabulary to students' past or future learning experience.

2. Stimulating students to expand their learning and thinking patterns beyond the scope of the lessons and their own culture

Good instructors will not be satisfied by just knowing their students' cultural backgrounds. Instead, they will facilitate and challenge students to expand their learning and thinking patterns beyond the classroom and their own culture. In this way, students will easily cross cultural barriers and recognize the differences among cultures. Since language is the carrier of culture, English learning will be a fun and satisfying experience both for instructors and students.

ESL instructors can facilitate students to be aware of other languages and cultures through continuing to assess how students' cultures relate to further English learning and exploring. Also, this thinking-beyond approach will help students to learn about other languages and cultures, learn about other people -- how they see life, what they have to cope with, what they think is important. It gives students a better perspective on their own life. It teaches them more tolerance for ways not their own, and the ability to be friendlier to many different kinds of people. Eventually, this culturally responsive teaching approach will benefit society because it produces citizens with multicultural perspectives and appreciation.

3. Participating in professional development to enhance culturally responsive teaching approaches

As Guskey (2009) argued, "It is probably safe to say, in fact, that no improvement effort in the history of education has ever succeeded without thoughtfully planned and well-implemented professional development activities designed to enhance educators' knowledge and skills" (p. 226). The results and discussion sections of this study have revealed that to implement successful culturally responsive teaching strategies, both instructors and education leaders need to develop their awareness and skills through professional development. To this end, the educational leaders should skillfully guide their institutions' development towards a culturally responsiveness approach. When leaders consistently communicate a commitment to academic achievement through culturally responsive teaching approaches for all students and maintain a

similar commitment to continuous, life-long learning for themselves and their schools' faculty and staff, English learning will no longer a painful experience for students from other cultures.

VI. CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

The findings of this study should be of interest to both practitioners and researchers. The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of implementing culturally responsive teaching strategies in an adult ESL classroom. The results showed that the implementation of culturally responsive teaching strategies increased the frequency of students' classroom participations. Teacher instructions incorporating culturally responsive teaching strategies were more likely to increase students' involvement in communication and enhance their communication skills.

While this study contributes to the literature in ESL teaching, specifically culturally responsive teaching approaches, this study has its limitations as with any research. The first limitation lies in the fact that only three participants were involved in the study. Future research should replicate this experimental study with more individuals. Also, this study was conducted in a short period of time due to the fact that the instructor did not have enough time to interrupt course schedule. Future researchers need to expand the study for a longer period of time to increase data collection. Finally, this study was carried out in an ESL language learning context; future research should seek additional data from Foreign Language (FL) learning contexts that would help fill this research void and enable better understanding of the culturally responsive teaching strategies.

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