



Culturally Responsive Teaching

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What Is the Topic

Culturally Responsive Teaching is an approach that acknowledges and honors diversity in racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. [Different studies](#) show that culturally responsive teaching promotes an inclusive pedagogy that empowers all students, including current and former English language learners (ELs) at intellectual, social, and emotional levels, while at the same time, it broadens educators' knowledge and pedagogy around equity perspectives (Ladson-Billings, 2009). The significance of culturally responsive teaching [in today's classrooms](#) goes beyond including students' first language and/or celebrating holidays and traditions related to their cultures. Instead, it involves tailored instruction aimed at fostering the growth and success of all students within a culturally responsive environment. [Preparing culturally responsive educators](#) has become essential to better meet the needs of ELs (Piazza and Protacio, 2015), as this approach helps leverage the diverse strengths of ELs. In this brief we highlight [why use culturally responsive teaching](#). The content and resources presented below, offer educators and school leaders culturally responsive and practice-based recommendations that have been proven to be effective.

What Is the Evidence Base

In an extensive review of literature, Johnson, Baker, and Viveros (2024) advocate for the need to reframe assessment in K-12 for ELs to make it more culturally responsive. Such reframing in assessment practices are based on principles of culturally responsive teaching with a particular focus on promoting the inclusion of content materials that provide a variety of perspectives and include the values, norms, and traditions of ELs. As a result of such changes, educators as well as school leaders might experience multiple [benefits](#). Literature based on empirical evidence at [national](#) and [international](#) levels demonstrate the positive impacts of culturally responsive teaching for ELs, which include:

- Educators and students are more actively contributing to the classroom environment and culture.
- Students get to learn from more interactive, collaborative and culturally conscious activities.
- Fostering a sense of belonging for students of all backgrounds is increased.



Research based evidence demonstrates the effectiveness of different models and frameworks grounded in best practices to efficiently develop and implement culturally responsive teaching approaches for ELs, for instance:

- **Translanguaging:** Theory that explains how people naturally use multiple languages in real life, for example, when a student mixes languages to communicate or when they interpret information from one language into another. Multiple scholars and practitioners propose the use of translanguaging as a method that allows ELs to use their linguistic abilities to enhance learning. This method can be applied in interactions between educators and students or among students themselves. It is worth noting that a teacher does not necessarily need to be multilingual or bilingual to use translanguaging in the classroom (Palmer et al., 2014).
 - In a study conducted by Langman (2014), describing the experiences of a teacher who primarily spoke English, this teacher welcomed her students' use of both English and Spanish to grasp her instructions. Her communication remained clear and understandable, and by endorsing their use of Spanish, she acknowledged and respected the linguistic diversity of her students, granting them the opportunity to better comprehend the content of the lessons.
 - Deroo and Ponzio's (2019) found that translanguaging fosters collaboration between students and educators by utilizing students' first language, while embracing their cultural backgrounds. Translanguaging was also noted as an effective strategy for enhancing language skills, enabling learners to express complex ideas in both oral and written forms.
- **Constructivist Approach** in the context of English learners (ELs) and culturally responsive teaching: A constructivist approach emphasizes learner-centered strategies that encourage active engagement in the learning process. This approach views students as active constructors of knowledge, drawing on their prior experiences and cultural backgrounds to make sense of new information (Glaserfeld, 1995; Piaget, 1977). Through the implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices, educators create learning experiences that resonate with students' diverse backgrounds, fostering a sense of inclusion and belonging and a deeper understanding and connection to the content. The principles of this approach (Figure 1) concentrate around a learner-centered approach that encourages learners to take an active role in their learning process, rather than passively receive information. The possibilities for constructivist activities are limitless. It is important, however, regardless of subject area, to provide enough activities for student choice and to encourage student-generated activities.
 - Drawing from a constructivist approach, [this study](#) on teacher candidates demonstrates their ability to integrate professional, content, and pedagogical knowledge to craft learning experiences that resonate with their diverse learners (p. 75). Findings of this study show that when a constructivist approach is used to enhance culturally responsive teaching, educators develop more familiarity with their students' readiness levels, gleaned from classroom scenarios, and use cultural and linguistic knowledge from ELs in lesson planning.
 - This [case study](#) describes how a special education teacher supports Latinx ELs with learning disabilities in an urban elementary school. Situated within a social constructivist research framework, the study examines how the teacher's understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy influences special education methods. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of special education for ELs hinges on the teacher's adept integration of culturally responsive instruction tailored to their cultural and linguistic requirements.



- **Funds of knowledge** refers to the wealth of cultural, linguistic, and experiential knowledge that students bring with them from their homes and communities (Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg, 1992). The Funds of Knowledge literature emphasizes the importance of educators tapping into students' background knowledge and experiences to enrich learning. Different studies, such as the one below, indicate that utilizing the diverse experiences students have gathered within their households, from interactions with siblings, peers, friends, parents, elders, and communities, can not only enrich students' lives but also help educators understand how to meaningfully connect these experiences with classroom curriculum.
 - This [study](#) illustrates the application of principles of funds of knowledge in a 9th grade English Language Arts class. This study showcased how students engaged with broader lesson goals by sharing their lived experiences. Findings show that ELs demonstrated agency in choosing what to share, drawing from their cultural backgrounds, and engaged with peers in a more empathetic manner, acknowledging and connecting with their experiences beyond typical school interactions.

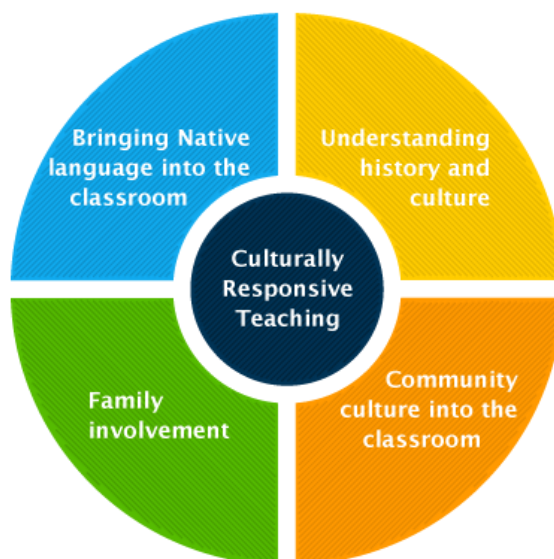


Figure 1. Principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Summary

Review of relevant literature: Theoretical basis	Review of relevant literature: Support of identified research and practice	Empirical evidence on how it serves students and promotes systemic change
Constructivist Approach emphasizes learner-centered strategies that encourage active engagement in the learning process.	As an example, this case study shows that the success of special education for ELs depends on how well the teacher integrates culturally responsive instruction that meets their cultural and linguistic needs.	Empirical evidence shows the positive impact of a constructivist approach to foster culturally responsive teaching for ELs. This approach enhances student engagement and understanding while fostering systemic change



		by promoting inclusivity and equity in education.
Translanguaging allows ELs to use their linguistic abilities to enhance learning. This method can be applied in interactions between educators and students or among students themselves.	By encouraging the use of both English and students' native languages, educators create a supportive and inclusive environment that improves communication and comprehension (Langman, 2014).	This method contributes to systemic change by recognizing and valuing linguistic abilities of ELs throughout the educational system (Palmer et al., 2014).
Funds of knowledge (FOKn) refers to the wealth of cultural, linguistic, and experiential knowledge that students bring with them from their homes and communities.	This study showcased how students engaged with broader lesson goals by sharing their lived experiences and social understandings. Findings show that ELs demonstrated agency in choosing what to share, drawing from their cultural backgrounds.	This approach acknowledges students' diverse backgrounds and knowledge, enriching school activities by making them more meaningful and aligned with students' identities. By incorporating students' experiences, educators support the holistic development of students while still achieving academic goals, thus contributing to systemic change in education towards more inclusive and effective practices for ELs.

Equity Considerations

Culturally responsive teaching has become an essential approach to improve the learning experiences of EL students with and without disabilities. A study by Orosco and O'Connor (2014) looked into how

special education educators' understanding of culturally responsive teaching affected their instruction. The results indicate that when educators combined effective reading methods, such as explicit instruction through the use of relevant readings and incorporation of students' native language, there were noticeable improvements in oral language skills and reading comprehension. Storytelling has become a useful method in K-12 education to inform culturally responsive teaching practices for students who are current or former English learners with the goal of encouraging them to use their cultural and linguistic backgrounds and their own stories in their learning

Example from the Field

"I found that teachers who received professional development and coaching on how to use culturally and linguistically responsive practices saw an increase in reading scores among their English language learners (ELLs) and racially diverse students within a school year."

<https://www.edutopia.org/article/foundations-culturally-and-linguistically-responsive-teaching/>



experiences. For example, this resource offers a set of lesson plans to teach the stories of immigrant diasporas, with a focus on the Asian American experience. Below, we describe two research-based studies that show how storytelling can support learning for immigrant students who are English learners, other ELs, and educators as well.

- Rodriguez (2014) conducted a [study](#) to identify Latinx ELs' perceptions and responses to culturally responsive books. She found that students were eager to share their personal stories as they identified with character traits. Students also empathized with the character's emotions, indicating a comprehensive understanding of the narratives and their ability to establish personal connections while deriving meaning from the stories.
- Similarly, this [study](#) explored the ways in which one digital storytelling project that required 20 clinical hours working with ELs, engaged preservice educators in learning about immigrant issues. Results showed that preservice teachers were able to establish meaningful interactions through planning sessions, producing digital stories, gathering information about immigrant students and, using the time to develop their language skills.

Considerations for Local Context: Strategy Selection

As we consider the optimal next steps for supporting educators in using principles of a culturally responsive teaching approach, a valuable source of information lies in the local context of the district and/or school. In this brief, by local context, we refer to the specific factors within the community that may impact the ways in which educators use culturally responsive teaching (Figure 2). To support educators in developing and establishing effective ways of using this approach with ELs the questions below can serve as a guide:

- How can strong partnerships with student services staff be built to monitor the needs and progress of ELs?
- How do I seek out knowledge of my students' cultural backgrounds?
- How do I use knowledge of students' cultural and familial background to plan instruction?
- How do I leverage my students' diverse experiences and abilities when I scaffold their learning?
- How can I use the resources in the local community to inform culturally responsive teaching practices in my classroom?

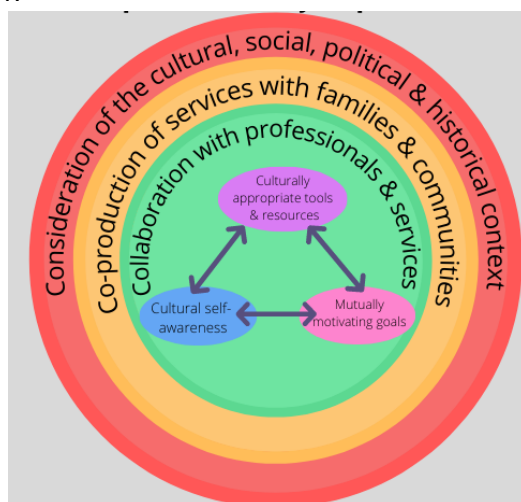


Figure 2. Factors for Local Context



What Can Educators and School Leaders Do: Strategies for Success in the Implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching

There isn't a universal step-by-step process for introducing culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010). One essential aspect to keep in mind is that ELs bring their cultural backgrounds, values, experiences, and language diversity to the classroom and it is critical to prioritize these as their strengths when using culturally responsive teaching (Almuhailib, 2019; Klingner et al., 2014).

- When looking at areas of improving communication with families of ELs using culturally responsive perspectives, educators and school leaders can use this [resource](#).
- Another resource includes checking these [ten examples](#) of culturally responsive teaching in the classroom.
- This [document](#) titled: "Culturally Responsive Teaching: A 50-State Survey of Teaching Standards" also offers perspectives on how to communicate in linguistically and culturally responsive ways (pp. 34-35).
- The Association for Middle Level Education offers a [summary](#) of culturally responsive and sustaining approaches based on best-practices and research-based evidence to support student identity development and sense of belonging in ELs. Besides describing such practices, this resource also provides valuable information about:
 - Identity Development and Support for Young Adolescent ELs.
 - Cultural and Linguistic Identity.
 - Identity as an Immigrant for Students with Immigrant Status.
 - Supporting Identity Development in the School and Classroom.
 - Honoring and Leveraging Language and Culture in the School and Curriculum.
- Bonner et al. (2018) also offers some strategies to enhance educators self-efficacy in promoting culturally responsive teaching:
 - Develop positive home-school-teacher-student communication and relationships.
 - Implement strategies to make learning meaningful.
 - Use culturally responsive instructional materials.
 - Be knowledgeable about students' home life.

The strategies below serve as examples of potential options rather than a definitive set of recommendations. Suitable approaches could support and key in on various factors associated with the school or district, such as the already in place methods or programs that encourage the use of culturally responsive teaching. The resources below can provide educators with a better understanding of how to identify, adapt, and implement strategies according to the demographics and backgrounds of their families and students.

Strategy 1: Using Storytelling to Foster Culturally Responsive Practices

Primary Audience: teachers, students, educators

Description: [Storytelling](#) has emerged as a potent tool in empowering young ELs. Incorporating ELs' personal stories into social studies lessons proves beneficial, enabling these students to perceive themselves as valued members of the school community (Lin, 2018). For example, Harman and Varga-Dobai (2012) worked with a group of middle school students on a series of co-constructed learning experiences focused on storytelling and sharing "[cultural narratives](#) that highlighted their social identities" (p. 6). Authors found that through storytelling students could share their own stories and express their various identities.



How to use it: Educators can incorporate storytelling into various subjects, such as social studies, literature, or language arts. They can encourage ELs to share (orally or through writing) their own stories or those from their cultural backgrounds. Recommended implementation steps:

- Introduce the concept of storytelling and its importance in honoring native languages and cultures.
- Encourage ELs to share their personal stories or cultural anecdotes in class.
- Organize storytelling sessions where students can share their stories with their peers.
- Provide support and guidance for students who may feel hesitant or uncomfortable sharing their stories.
- Reflect on the impact of storytelling on students' sense of belonging and identity development, and continue to integrate it into the curriculum as a regular practice.

How is it beneficial and who benefits from it? This strategy fosters a [sense of belonging](#) and importance within the school community. It helps ELs in their identity development by allowing them to share their cultural heritage and personal experiences. Furthermore, it promotes interactions between different student groups, educators, and the wider community, creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment for ELs.

How does it support changes in the systems? By integrating storytelling into the curriculum, schools can acknowledge and celebrate the linguistic and cultural diversity of their EL population.

Known or potential cautions? What not to do? Educators should ensure that this activity is done in a respectful and culturally sensitive manner. They should avoid tokenizing or stereotyping students based on their cultural backgrounds.

Strategy 2: Cultural Knowledge Interviews for English Learners

Primary Audience: educators, teachers

Description: This strategy involves structured conversations between educators and students aimed at uncovering the rich tapestry of cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives that each English Learner brings to the classroom. These interviews serve as a platform for ELs to share their unique stories, traditions, and beliefs, allowing educators to gain profound insights into their students' cultural identities. Catalano et al. (2020) explores the schooling experiences of nine K-12 multilingual students through the use of "deep interviewing" to show how language can create racial differences. They also look at how words and symbols can show this, and how some ideas get left out and how students' backgrounds affect their ideas about language and school. This study concluded that these interviews can help students take charge of their learning and make things fairer for themselves. Before implementing this strategy, educators could consider [this resource](#) that includes a set of questions (focus on the section titled: "In-depth questions") that can help educators reflect on their own perceptions about culturally responsive teaching and ELs.

How to use it: Through open-ended questions and active listening, educators can encourage students to delve into their cultural heritage, immigration experiences, language journey, familial traditions, and personal interests. By engaging in dialogue, both parties foster mutual understanding and respect, building meaningful connections that transcend cultural barriers.

Implementation Steps:

- Establish a welcoming atmosphere for interviews.
- Invite ELs to participate voluntarily.
- Prepare thoughtful interview questions.
- Conduct interviews with genuine interest and respect.
- Reflect on insights gained and integrate them into classroom practices.

How is it beneficial and who benefits from it? Interviews grounded in [cultural responsive](#) approaches benefit ELs by providing them with opportunities to share their cultural knowledge and



experiences, promoting a sense of belonging and validation of students' diverse identities within the school community. Additionally, educators benefit from gaining a deeper understanding of their students' backgrounds, enabling them to potentially create better culturally responsive teaching practices.

How does it support changes in the system? Through this strategy, educators can contribute to a more culturally sustaining pedagogy within and outside the classroom, and contribute to systemic change by fostering a more inclusive learning environment. This shift towards culturally sustaining pedagogy supports equity in education and empowers ELs to succeed academically, ultimately leading to positive changes in the broader education system.

Known or potential cautions? What not to do? It is essential to avoid making assumptions or stereotypes based on students' cultural backgrounds, as this can undermine the trust and rapport between educators and students (Gay, 2010). Additionally, educators should ensure that participation in interviews is voluntary and confidential, respecting students' autonomy and cultural differences.

Implementation Considerations

As we embark on creating a plan and proceeding with implementation, it is useful to consider topic-specific aspects as well as general factors and guiding questions that can increase the likelihood for successful implementation. The Oregon Department of Education [Integrated Guidance for Student Success](#) offers multiple resources on equity and various tools (p.111) to help educators engage in equity practices and they develop strategies that are culturally responsive. The questions below are grounded in best practices to assist educators and school leaders in navigating the process of identifying and integrating strategies aimed at fostering culturally responsive teaching and learning, with a particular emphasis on supporting the academic success of English learners (Donley, 2023; Gay, 2010; Irvine & Armento, 2001):

1. How can I adapt assessment practices to be more culturally responsive specifically for English Learners (ELs), ensuring that content materials include a variety of perspectives and values that resonate with their cultural backgrounds?
2. What specific support can I, as a school leader, provide to educators to facilitate the creation of culturally responsive classroom environments tailored to the needs of ELs?
3. How can I, as an educator, go beyond surface-level cultural celebrations to foster a deeper sense of belonging for ELs within my classroom, considering their unique linguistic and cultural identities?
4. In what ways can I integrate interactive and collaborative activities to enhance the learning experiences of ELs, promoting their academic and social development within a culturally responsive framework?



Local Context

Consider answering the following questions to determine how the local contexts of the school, district, and community may impact the implementation of the strategies and approaches discussed in this brief:

- To what extent is the implementation plan sensitive to the unique local challenges and opportunities in promoting a culturally responsive school environment?
- What measures are in place to ensure the sustainability of the plan over time within schools and across the district?
- How consistent is the implementation of the plan—both within individual schools and across the entire district?

Consider as well:

- Geographical Factors: How do the location and size of the district/school impact the practical aspects of plan implementation?
- Learning Mode: What considerations are needed based on the learning mode (in person/remote/hybrid/other) prevalent in the local context?
- Duration: How long is the plan designed to last, and what measures are in place for its continuous effectiveness?
- Reliability: Is the implementation plan reliable and realistic given the local context, and what factors contribute to its sustainability?

Implementation Plan and Process

The following questions can further enhance clarity and provide practical guidance for educators and school leaders as they navigate the implementation process and monitor progress effectively:

- **What is our capacity for implementation?**

Capacity for implementation involves looking at several key factors: First, evaluate the expertise of educators in culturally responsive teaching practices and determine if they require additional training or support. Second, ensure that there is access to appropriate instructional materials that align with culturally responsive approaches. And third, establishing support structures, such as professional development programs and mentoring opportunities, is also essential for fostering a culture of continuous improvement and growth among educators (Donley, 2023).

- **How are families involved in the implementation of the plan?**

Family involvement is integral to the success of implementation. Educators and school leaders need to actively seek to engage families through regular communication, parent workshops, and involvement in decision-making processes to better understand the cultural values, preferences, and aspirations of their children and tailor teaching approaches to meet their needs effectively. This collaborative partnership between educators and families fosters a sense of shared responsibility for the academic success and well-being of the students (Orosco & O'Connor, 2014).

- **How will we know if the implementation is successful?**

We recommend regularly assessing academic performance data (if possible), monitoring levels of student engagement, and gathering feedback from both students and educators. By collecting and



analyzing this information, educators and school leaders can identify areas of strength and areas for improvement to make informed adjustments to the implementation plan.

- **What resources do we need to implement the program, plan, or strategies?**

Although funding is generally not required in the implementation of the strategies offered in this brief, we suggest educators and school leaders explore what funding opportunities may be available that could be useful. While funding may not always be readily available within school budgets, educators and school leaders can explore external funding opportunities. For instance, Oregon's Department of Education offers [grants and funding opportunities](#), and organizations like [the Spencer Foundation](#) may provide additional financial support. Additionally, fostering financial stewardship and involving [District Equity Committees](#) in the budgeting process can help prioritize resources based on student and community needs. Consider reviewing the Oregon Department of Education's [Guideline](#) to spending funds responsibly.

- **Are accessibility supports in place?**

Ensure that formative assessments are accessible and responsive to the diverse needs of ELs. Provide language supports, accommodations, and scaffolds to remove barriers to participation and understanding. Incorporate [culturally responsive materials](#) and instructional approaches to promote inclusive learning environments that honor students' linguistic and cultural assets. Collaborate with colleagues to identify and implement effective strategies for supporting ELs' language development and academic achievement. Monitor the effectiveness of accessibility supports and adjust as needed.

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Learn More

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