

## CHAPTER TWO

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# *Abbreviated Literature Review*

## *The Case for Culturally Relevant and Linguistically Responsive Pedagogy*

*“A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience and all that gives him sustenance.” —James Baldwin (1979)*

**T**he cultural and linguistic diversity of ELLs and SELs who populate the large, urban cities of America creates significant educational challenges for educators. Language and cultural differences in ELL and SEL students, and how teachers perceive and respond to those differences, are key variables impacting diverse students’ access to core curricula, to college preparatory course work, to postsecondary educational opportunities, and to career success. Negative attitudes toward the language and culture of ELL and SEL students shape, to a significant degree, the educational and instructional practices that often result in denial of opportunities to learn at high levels. Teachers with a good understanding of the language, learning styles, and cultural strengths ELL and SEL students bring to the classroom, are in a much better position to positively impact their learning. The more knowledge they have about the language and culture of English learner (EL) and SEL populations, the more positive their attitude is toward the students as learners

and the greater their willingness to negotiate identities in the classroom to facilitate learning (LeMoine, 2003).

### **WHAT IS CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING (CLRT)?**

Geneva Gay (2000) provides one of the most definitive definitions of culturally responsive pedagogy; she writes

Culturally responsive pedagogy . . . uses ways of knowing, understanding, and representing various ethnic groups in teaching academic subjects, processes, and skills. It cultivates cooperation, collaboration, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility for learning among students and between students and teachers. It incorporates high-status, accurate cultural knowledge about different ethnic groups into all subjects and skills taught. . . . [It] validates, facilitates, liberates, and empowers ethnically diverse students by simultaneously cultivating their cultural integrity, individual abilities, and academic success. (pp. 43–44)

We draw upon Gay’s definition in this text and additionally consider it essential to highlight the importance of incorporating “accurate linguistic knowledge” about different ethnic groups into the curriculum and cultivating students’ “linguistic integrity” as a means of academic empowerment.

The culture and language a student brings to the classroom matters and has vast implications for how the learning environment should be structured if learning is to occur. “Culture is to humans as water is to fish,” Nobles (2015) asserts, inferring its all-encompassing nature. It is, he contends, “the invisible medium in which all human functioning occurs,” thus it cannot be separated from the educational environment or the curriculum. According to the research, when we incorporate into instruction the cultural referents that influence the social practices of students, the result is enhanced academic performance (Bailey & Boykin, 2001; Boykin & Cunningham, 2001; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy

(CLRP) maximizes learning for diverse students, including ELs and SELs. CLRP acknowledges the importance of including students' cultural referents in all aspects of the learning experience and increases learning opportunities by making critical connections to who students are and to their history, culture, language, prior knowledge, experiences, and learning styles and, by using that knowledge, to bridge new learning experiences.

### **WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS AND WHY CLRT MATTERS IN THE EDUCATION OF ELs AND SELs**

According to the research, cultural discontinuities can and do exist in classrooms in language, cognitive learning styles, work habits, and problem solving (Boykin, 2001; Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2000; Hollins & Oliver, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2009), and these gaps can represent significant hurdles to successful teaching and learning in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Cultural discontinuity is defined as a cultural disconnection between students' home environments and that of the school (Boykin, 2001). Differences in the functional use of language have been found to account for a large percentage of this discontinuity. All too often the languages of ELs and SELs are delegitimized in instruction, with the languages of SELs regularly viewed as aberrant or as corruptions of the dominant language. The cultural experiences, prior knowledge, and learning and interacting styles of culturally and linguistically diverse students are viewed as deviant, and many teachers believe it is their job to purge diverse students of any traces of their culture and language.

There is consensus in the research that CLRP is an effective antidote for the incongruence experienced by diverse learners in the classroom (Cummins, 2001; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Gay, 2000). According to Ladson-Billings (2009), "It transcends the negative effects on diverse students of not seeing their history, culture or background represented in textbooks or curriculum and it allows them to choose academic excellence yet still identify positively with their culture" (p. 17). Studies show that when minority students have positive attitudes toward both their own culture and the

dominant culture, school failure does not occur (Cummins, 2001). Ladson-Billings (2009) reports that teachers who practice culturally relevant teaching know how to support learning in diverse students (ELs and SELs) by consciously creating social interactions to help them meet the criteria of academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. These teachers, Ladson-Billings asserts, demonstrate a connectedness with students, develop a community of learners rather than competitive individual achievement, and encourage students to learn collaboratively, teach each other, and be responsible for each other's success. Teachers who develop culturally consistent ways of interacting with students from different cultures adapt instruction so that diverse learners feel accepted and affirmed in the classroom.

Every child deserves a competent, qualified teacher, one who has the capacity to transform the classroom into a safe place where all students are accepted and affirmed and where genuine relationships are built, seeds of knowledge are planted, minds are awakened, and lives are transformed. Learning occurs in social environments and is heavily influenced by the cultural experiences, linguistic proficiencies, and funds of knowledge both students and teachers bring to the learning environment, and when there is alignment between students' cultural experiences and the culture and language of school, learning is accelerated (Cummins, 2001; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Because an individual's culture and language are central to his or her existence, it is virtually impossible to separate the influence of culture from the learning experience. Gay (2000) corroborates this assertion; she states, "When instructional processes are consistent with the cultural orientations, experiences, and learning styles of marginalized . . . students, their school achievement improves significantly" (p. 181). Baldwin (1979) agrees; he says, "A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience and all that gives him sustenance." For ELs and SELs this interrelationship of culture and learning infers instruction that validates and accommodates the home language and culture in the acquisition of school language and literacy and thus affirms CLRT as appropriate pedagogy.

Traditional instructional approaches may not provide the same benefits for ELL and SEL students as it does for their more

“mainstream” peers. They may experience barriers to accessing core curricula because of the culture and language differences they bring to the learning environment. The research supports the contention that students are able to access core curricula more easily when their culture and language matches the language of school (Cummins, 2001; Irvine & Armento, 2001), thus assuring equity in opportunities to learn. Increasing academic achievement in ELs and SELs will require more culturally relevant and linguistically responsive methods of instruction.

The concept of “culturally responsive” teaching is not new. Traditional education in America has always been culturally responsive, although primarily to middle class Europeans; it makes critical connections to European history, culture, and language, to their canons of literature, learning styles, and their life experiences which are infused into the very fabric of instruction. Indeed if we need validation that CLRP works, we need only look at the effectiveness of America’s educational institutions with the population whose needs it was originally designed to address. However, America has now opened the doors of education to all of its residents, and for some students, the Eurocentric paradigm for teaching and learning is not a good fit. Culturally and linguistically diverse students who bring different cultural experiences, histories, languages, and canons of literature are not always well served in European-centered learning environments, where their culture, language, and experiences are devalued or viewed through deficit lenses. Gay (2000) contends “cultural variables” often explain school failure in diverse student populations. EL and SEL students’ academic performance is frequently viewed apart from their culture, language, ethnicity, and personal experiences and is decontextualized in ways that do not serve them well in the learning environment. EL and SEL students whose home and community environments differ from the Eurocentric norms of American schools may, because of the “culture-specific” ways in which they were socialized, display language and behaviors that are different from their more mainstream peers and may acquire knowledge and demonstrate learning in diverse ways. As educators it is our responsibility to assure the efficacy of the learning experience, thus we have an obligation to better the congruence between the culture of school and the cultures of our ELL and SEL students.

Incorporating elements of diverse students' cultures and life experiences into the learning environment will help affirm diverse students as members of the learning community and acknowledge their contribution to the learning process.

## WHO ARE SELS?

*“There is no reason to believe that any nonstandard vernacular is itself an obstacle to learning. The chief problem is ignorance of language on the part of all concerned.”*

—William Labov (1972)

All too often teachers lack even rudimentary knowledge about the cultural and linguistic histories of SEL populations and about methodologies for helping them acquire the culture, language, and literacies of school. SELs are one of the most overlooked, misunderstood, and underserved language-different populations in American educational institutions. It is for this reason that a brief discussion about SEL populations is provided. It is hoped that this overview will help teachers gain a better understanding of the language and learning needs of our SEL populations.

SELs are part of a larger language minority population that can be referred to as standard language learners or those students for whom the standard language—that is, the standard language of the dominate group in the society and thus of its institutions—is not native. The standard language, for example “Standard American English,” “Standard Australian English,” or “Standard Canadian English,” is not the language intuited by the standard language learner in the first four to five years of life. The languages they acquire in the home during the early language acquisition period from their primary care giver are languages that incorporate the vocabulary of the dominant language group, but have maintained much of the structure and form (grammars) of their respective indigenous languages.

The SEL populations whose needs are addressed in this text include African American speakers of “African American language,” a language referred to in the research by many names and that has its linguistic base in indigenous West African, specifically Niger Congo, languages; Native Indian speakers of “American Indian

language,” often referred to as “American Indian English” (Leap 1993), and which is heavily influenced by ancestral American Indian languages; Hawaiian American speakers of “Hawaiian American language,” sometimes referred to as “Hawaiian Pidgin English,” which draws a considerable amount of its grammatical structure from indigenous Hawaiian languages; and Mexican American speakers of “Mexican American Language” also known as “Chicano English,” which is based grammatically in Spanish. None of the SEL groups delineated here were indigenous speakers of English, but as a result of contact with English-speaking populations, their languages were re-lexified with vocabulary (lexical) borrowings from English, creating new languages that incorporate English vocabulary but do not mirror “Standard English” grammar.

The acquisition of language in children is a species-specific phenomenon; as humans we have a biological predisposition to acquire an oral-spoken communication system unique to us as a species. All normally developing human children have this innate propensity to acquire language and, by the age of four or five, have mastered the language of the home or primary caregiver. SELs are no exception. Although the language of their home may differ from the language of school in form and structure, SELs are not deficient language learners; they have successfully accomplished the task of intuiting complex linguistic rules from a model and perfectly matching that model in how they construct and generate language. For the SEL this means the child’s language mastery or “linguistic competence” is in a language other than standard American or academic English and therefore does not match the language of school or meet teacher expectation. Because English lexicon (vocabulary) predominates their languages, they are considered “English only” students. The English vocabulary they have in common with “standard English speakers” effectively veils the significant differences in structure and grammar that characterize the languages of SELs and that are traceable to indigenous language grammars. These linguistic differences are often viewed through a deficit lens and perceived of as language deficiencies as opposed to language differences. This incorrect view of SELs as students in need of language remediation instead of second language acquisition has resulted in the widening of proficiency gaps between SELs and their monolingual standard English-speaking peers.

Quality teaching for SELs and ELs will require more than mastery of the academic content to deliver effective instruction in the

classroom. Effective teaching of SELs will require educators to increase their knowledge and awareness of the cultural and linguistic capital these students bring to the learning environment, and it will necessitate developing caring relationships, making connections to their prior knowledge and experiences, and fostering positive beliefs relative to their ability to learn at high levels. Educators must draw upon instructional pedagogy that builds on the unique cultural and linguistic background of EL and SEL students and use that knowledge to scaffold access to rigorous college preparatory curricula. Failure to accommodate the culture and language of our EL and SEL students in instruction in culturally and linguistically responsive ways will result in minimal opportunities for these students to meaningfully engage with content area knowledge.

### **CLRT AND DIVERGENCE IN LEARNING STYLES**

The research on learning styles extends at least four decades. How students learn, the methods they use, and the resulting outcomes are important dynamics in the classroom that significantly impact instruction. Important questions in the learning-style research are how to explain variation in learning outcomes for different students and whether learning style theory is an effective pedagogical basis for making instructional decisions. The position taken in this text is that ELs and SELs do bring different cultural orientations to the task of learning, and how they process information and construct knowledge may differ from their more mainstream peers. Their cognitive, communication, interaction, and response styles are often at variance with traditional, European-centered styles of processing information that is often viewed as normative in American educational institutions.

Learning styles have been defined as “characteristic cognitive, affective, and physiological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact, and respond to the learning environment” (O’Neil, 1990). Much of the research affirms that cultural and ethnic groups have distinct ways of processing information, interacting, communicating, and learning (Gay 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Pritchard, 2014). Although there have been many



recent challenges to learning style theory, this text takes the position that it is axiomatic that humans, consciously or subconsciously, apply their cognitive styles (their characteristic approaches to perceiving, thinking, and solving problems) to learning situations and that one's cognitive style is very closely aligned with how one is socialized culturally. Thus, if ELs and SLs are to benefit from traditional American school experiences, their cognitive, communication, and interaction styles must be considered in designing instruction.

Palmer (2007) suggests that the best way to teach a student is in the way that he or she learns. It is important that traditional public schools acknowledge and affirm the cultural, linguistic, and learning style differences EL and SEL students bring to the learning environment and that teachers are able to contextualize instruction in the ways these students learn. When teachers fail to consider cultural learning styles in their instructional design, it can create major barriers to learning, and if these barriers to accessing core curricula are to be removed, and the high rate of failure experienced by ELs and SELs in traditional classrooms reversed, instruction must accommodate cultural learning style differences. However, the best way to address these concerns may not be in attempting to build instruction around students' individual learning styles; it is suggested herein that multiple-modality approaches to instruction—the presentation of new material in many different ways—take precedence over the traditional single-modality method of teaching when instructing ELs and SELs. Teachers who incorporate multiple-modality instructional approaches increase the likelihood that the modes of instruction most culturally compatible with SEL and ELL students will be accessible to them and learning facilitated.

Ladson-Billings (2009) suggests that culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogy that “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20). To assure equity for all students in accessing rigorous core curricula, we must examine the instructional methodologies and pedagogies utilized in the classroom and other learning environments relative to whether or not they are culturally and linguistically responsive, that is, whether they “validate, facilitate, liberate, and empower ethnically diverse students” as learners.

**REFLECT AND APPLY**

What does the Baldwin quote that follows mean to you? How does it connect to your students?

"A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience and all that gives him sustenance."

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