

Beyond Language: Culture, Identity, and Learning



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ABSTRACT: US schools today serve students with a wide range of linguistic backgrounds and cultural experiences, making it essential for teachers, administrators, and schools to understand and value the unique strengths learners bring to the classroom. By implementing culturally responsive practices that focus on students' individual experiences rather than specific curriculum, lessons, assignments, and standardized test performance, schools can create equitable learning environments that support academic success for all students. Although students may appear academically similar because they speak the same language and are placed in the same classroom, they bring diverse prior knowledge, learning experiences, and cultural perspectives that shape how they engage with school. When these differences are acknowledged early in a student's academic journey, educators are better positioned to support students' adjustment to new learning environments and promote long-term achievement. Schools must approach instruction with cultural sensitivity, recognize students' assets, and focus on the whole child.

Keywords: culturally responsive, equitable learning, culturally sensitive, linguistic needs

Introduction

The students in US schools today hail from a variety of countries, cultures, and situations, therefore the students enter classrooms with many personal, emotional, physical, and linguistic needs that must be met for the students to achieve success (Johnston & Verna, 2025). Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) addresses inequalities for Emergent Bilinguals (EBs) by valuing their cultural identities, incorporating their linguistic assets, and eliminating barriers that prohibit access to equitable instruction, which extends beyond language development. The EB population is increasing and so are the diverse needs these students are bringing with them to the classroom (Shin, 2018), therefore we must ensure teachers are provided with the most relevant education and training available. To meet the academic and social needs of the EBs properly, teachers must be trained and introduced to strategies, skills, resources, and techniques that will promote learning (Mader & Keillor, 2025). These tools should be incorporated into the lessons and activities to meet the needs of the students to ensure academic success is attainable. This necessary training can be implemented in teacher preparation programs, school and district in-services and trainings, mentors assigned to new teachers, and hands-on teaching (Durham, 2018).

It is also very important for administrators at schools to support the teachers and the EBs to ensure the best strategies and practices for teaching, learning, and building community within the school and the classroom are implemented (Zoch, 2017). Administrators and teachers must find the best tools and

resources to teach the students in an environment that will promote learning as well as build community (Mader & Keillor, 2025). The EBs must be provided with opportunities to speak and interact with one another, to learn about their peers, their new school, and the education process in the United States, which may be very different from their past experiences (Ndemanu & Jordan, 2018). This can be established by implementing qualities of Sociocultural Teaching into the lessons to ensure the students can learn and develop academically in a stress-free environment that promotes and supports socializing and peer interaction. This is imperative for the students' development both academically as well as socially. If stress and anxiety are reduced from the classroom, EBs will feel more comfortable taking risks and stepping outside of their comfort zone when learning.

If the students' backgrounds are taken into consideration when they are being taught, the teacher will have a deeper understanding of the students, and the students will become comfortable with their new community of learners (Zoch, 2017). This relationship that develops between the students and the teacher will build the trust that is needed and the empathy the students deserve, especially when they have so many new obstacles to face in their new school and home community (Mahfouz et al., 2025). If the unique needs of the students are taken into consideration when they are being taught, their educational career will be accomplished with confidence, and a positive attitude will be developed throughout their learning journey (Mader & Keillor, 2025). For this to happen teachers must understand the answer to the following question, how does Culturally Responsive Teaching address inequalities for Emergent Bilinguals beyond language instruction?

Culturally Responsive Teaching

There have been many approaches to teaching EBs in the general education classroom, but the approaches have not always been consistent or successful. Much of this has to do with the lack of consistency in teacher education programs as well as the lack of school and district resources, varied state requirements, and teachers' expectations teaching students from diverse backgrounds (Mader & Keillor, 2025). For the students' needs to be met, teachers must understand where the students come from and they must encourage EBs to learn in a new, unfamiliar environment, which may be challenging and scary for the learners, especially the youngest learners (Ross & Chan, 2023). Teachers must understand the students' previous situations and experiences, not just geographically but also emotionally, culturally, and linguistically (Zoch, 2017). This is very important because many students come from devastating or difficult situations and environments, which will make their past educational experiences very different from their peers. In these situations, and environments, education may have been the least important matter because the students and their families may have simply been focusing on survival and a safer destination.

To best meet the linguistic and cultural needs of the students in the classroom it is imperative for teachers to integrate Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and sociocultural theory into the classroom, lessons, and activities. CRT allows teachers to teach to the students' cultural needs and to better understand their past educational experiences (Bottiani et al., 2018). Teachers can build on previous knowledge and close gaps in learning that may be present due to the shift or change in the students' education if they are aware of the students' past educational experiences.

When students' customs, characteristics, experiences, and perspectives are integrated in a meaningful way into the classroom, lessons, and activities Culturally Responsive Teaching is an integral part of the learning process (Gay, 2002). Teachers can implement CRT into the daily learning in the classroom to ensure the students can develop lived experiences that will make learning meaningful and relevant. When Culturally Responsive Teaching strategies are implemented into the classroom, the students will strengthen their sense of identity, and the classroom will automatically become equitable and inclusive,

and all students will be actively engaged and develop their critical thinking skills (Gay, 2000). The positive learning environment that is established due to CRT can benefit all students in the classroom.

CRT-Related Theories and Concepts

Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory stresses the importance of meaningful activities to influence human consciousness and development (Schnuk, 2020). Sociocultural Theory allows students to interact with one another while developing critical thinking skills and knowledge, which are very important to develop cognitive development along with community building. This will allow all students to have the opportunity to develop their language skills through peer interactions in an informal setting while collaborating and learning, which in turn will make it possible for academic success and motivation (Wetzel et al., 2019). Teaching through the lens of Sociocultural Theory will allow students to learn from one another and to build on the new experiences in the classroom through collaboration with peers while the teacher is present and is modeling and encouraging positive interactions and dialogue.

The students' learning experiences and interactions will provide the teachers with the opportunity to observe and gather informal data on the students' experiences and prior knowledge whether it is educational, social, or emotional interaction because the students will be more comfortable interacting with one another. The positive interaction that is occurring due to embedding Sociocultural Theory into the classroom and lessons will also help bridge the home school connection and relationship, which is just as valuable and meaningful for the students' success as their academic success is in the classroom. The home school connection is needed to help parents and families learn and understand where they fit in during the new school process, which may be very different from their previous experiences in their native country (Durham, 2018). If teachers take the time to understand the students, the school experience from their native country, and the parental role in the previous school, they may be surprised and gain a deeper understanding, or at least new understanding, of the students' prior educational experiences.

Translanguaging

For teachers to successfully integrate CRT with Sociocultural Theory, they can introduce literature from the students' native culture and language or incorporate and encourage translanguaging as students share and interact with one another. Translanguaging will allow the students to communicate and interact in both languages, their native language and English, to deepen their understanding of the subject or content (Treffers-Daller, 2024). The literature that is written by authors from the student's native country will help the students understand not only quality literature, but also the native culture, a culture that does not have to be ignored or forgotten just because of the new location (Zoch, 2017). This will also incorporate the value the students' native country has for learning in a new country. The students can make personal connections to the native literature as well as understand that the two cultures can be integrated into one (Ross & Chan, 2023). This will promote bilingualism and native language development because the students will understand and see the importance of both languages and cultures.

Translanguaging will allow the student to gain the confidence that is needed to communicate orally without focusing on a specific word if it is unknown in English. If students are allowed to incorporate their native language into the classroom there will be greater interaction between the teacher and the students. The more comfortable the students are with speaking the less anxiety they will encounter because they will feel more comfortable and accepted, when it comes to learning in a new language in a new culture (Nogueron-Liu et al., 2018).

Culture and Identity for Academic Success

EBs and Academic Success

Teacher preparation programs, administrators, and teachers must find the common link that is necessary to achieve the greatest success with EBs when it comes to academics (Ross & Chan, 2023). They must receive proper training and be culturally aware of students' needs as well as to be culturally sensitive. (Bottiani et al., 2018). Once teachers consider the individual needs of the students, they will gain a deeper understanding of the cultural needs of the students. If teachers understand the cultural differences among students, they may eliminate the difficulties in learning when it comes to students and cultural boundaries (Hansen-Thomas & Chennapragada, 2018). This can be accomplished if teachers take time to build a community within the classroom and if they focus on the needs and experiences of the students, rather than on specific assignments, test scores, and the results of high stakes testing (Ross & Chan, 2023). If teachers provide explicit instruction and allow extra time for the students, especially EBs, to answer, they will be more likely to understand and participate (Johnson, 2019). This may provide the information needed to determine whether the students understand the content or not. Teachers can also adjust their instruction to ensure they are scaffolding the content and providing choices for the students to demonstrate their understanding instead of only accepting answers presented in one way (Johnson, 2019).

Recognizing the cultural differences may also help eliminate behavior problems, and obstacles in learning will be better understood by teachers (Plowman et al., 2024). The students will be able to learn from one another more effectively and efficiently once they are aware of the cultural differences and the past experiences of their peers. If students understand where their peers come from and develop a deeper understanding of the different cultures that are represented in one classroom, they will have a better understanding of the reasons why their peers may or may not be doing something in a specific way or acting in a specific manner. It is erroneous to expect the students to understand a different culture within the classroom if they have never encountered it before.

Academic Vocabulary

Many times, students are unsuccessful completing assignments, activities, and tests because they do not understand the terminology and vocabulary. This is why it is imperative for teachers to build a word bank and establish a deeper understanding of academic vocabulary and word problems (Dang et al., 2020). Teachers can accomplish this along with developing conversational vocabulary to set the students up for success in all subjects and activities (Driver & Powell, 2017). This is especially important in subjects such as mathematics and science, where the content and vocabulary may be challenging for most students, let alone for students who are speakers of a language other than English (Plowman et al., 2024). For the EBs to be successful when conquering new terminology in word problems, teachers must find an instructional approach that enables and contributes to academic achievement and builds on a positive attitude to promote learning. If this is accomplished the students will be able to complete the assignments and answer word problems, even if there are cultural and linguistic factors that may have made their initial learning difficult (Driver & Powell, 2017). Teachers must ensure the students understand the terms that are being used, and they are not receiving low scores because they are unfamiliar with a word because it is not in their native language.

Discussion

There are many ideas, approaches, and studies when it comes to the best way to teach students. There is a gap in the research when it comes to how to teach students that come from diverse backgrounds by recognizing and celebrating their unique backgrounds, cultures, and experiences. Test scores and literacy comprehension are discussed and the desired outcome is explained, which is achieving an acceptable or passing score on a high stakes test, but there is limited information on taking the time to know the students' specific needs to ensure success and build community within the classroom in a new country. To assess if the students are truly successful or unsuccessful in American schools, they must be given the opportunity to build upon past experiences, and teachers need the opportunity to identify the gaps in their learning. The scores on tests and assignments tend to determine the knowledge the students have when in fact the scores may be skewed because the students were unable to complete assignments or answer questions because of the vocabulary that was used. Teachers assume students can understand English once they are introduced to new vocabulary and learn the language, but in fact they tend to forget the variety of words that are interchanged when native English speakers speak and when regional words and dialects are utilized. All these interferences in the language may in fact be what does not allow the student to be successful.

Conclusion

Incorporating the needs and culture of the students into the classroom and lessons teachers will address inequalities for Emergent Bilinguals through Culturally Responsive Teaching. These needs must be met beyond simple language instruction, and all activities must be centered around the Sociocultural Theory to ensure the students' needs and voices are understood, accepted, and appreciated in the classroom. Once teachers take the time to get to know their students, they will be more successful because they will understand that they do, in fact, fit into the new community, and they can contribute to this new society they are now part of, even if they speak a different language. Once students build their confidence and feel a sense of belonging in their new community, they will be more successful in school and in the community.

By helping students understand their past experiences are important and they have formed them into the individuals they are today, they will understand that they do not have to lose their native culture and language. Teachers can help the students develop and include their past in a way that will be beneficial for all that are involved. Teachers must encourage students to be proud of who they are and where they come from as well as learn new content and embrace new experiences that will help them become productive citizens in their new community. If schools and communities work together, the students and their families will have the greatest amount of success possible and will thrive in their new environment.

The Author

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