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Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling

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Abstract

When the demographics in American public schools became more diverse, educators have faced the challenge of working with diverse student learners. In the education field, culturally relevant pedagogy has been widely recognized as an effective practice for teaching about diversity and is used across different school subject areas. This article discusses the four aspects in which teachers can implement culturally relevant pedagogy in TPRS language classrooms: a caring learning community, establishing meaning, story asking, and story reading. Teachers can include and empower students by validating them as learning subjects and engaging them in knowledge creation and representation in curriculum and instruction. The goal is to develop academic success, culture and identity, equity, and excellence for all student learners in a multicultural and global society.

Keywords: Culturally relevant pedagogy, TPRS, language teaching, culture, diversity

World language learning embraces and celebrates the diversity of languages and cultures. The World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, ACTFL, 2015) indicates that world language learners are prepared for communicating effectively and interacting with cultural competence in the worldwide community. While studying and comparing with other languages and cultures, students also reflect on their own languages, cultures, perspectives, and traditions. They examine their world views and perceptions of other cultures and understand cultures from global perspectives (Gao, 2019). They recognize the diversity of a multicultural and global society and achieve cross-cultural communication skills to interact with others locally and globally.

CONCEPTS: CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY AND TPRS

With the increase of student diversity in classrooms at American public schools, teachers have faced the challenges of how to make connections with students from racially, ethnically, linguistically, and culturally different backgrounds, meet the needs of all the students, and prepare them for success. ACTFL (2019) advocates for diversity and inclusion across world language teaching and learning contexts with a commitment to continuous reflection and evaluation of relevant practices. Scholars have proposed strategies to assist teachers in teaching about and interacting with diversity found in their classrooms. As one area in multicultural education, culturally relevant pedagogy encourages teachers to validate and include students' different cultural backgrounds and to engage students' learning in the classroom. Culturally relevant pedagogy "empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 18). Student culture is used as an important strength for helping students understand themselves and

others, construct social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1992). Students as subjects rather than objects in the instructional process can be sources and resources of knowledge and skills (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Culturally sustaining pedagogy has to change, adapt, and recreate instructional spaces to ensure that marginalized students are repositioned into a place of normativity (Paris, 2012).

TPRS (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling) has been accredited as an effective language teaching method that creates an entertaining learning environment, utilizes massive target language, and develops students' language acquisition. TPRS was created by a Spanish teacher, Blaine Ray, in the late 1980s. This teaching strategy has been enriched and expanded by other CI (Comprehensible Input)/TPRS teachers and scholars over the years. TPRS emphasizes great amounts of comprehensible, repetitive, and compelling input to language learners. Compelling stories, high-frequency vocabulary, and repetitive questioning are used to help students understand the target language and promote students' interaction and communication in engaging contexts. TPRS involves three steps: establishing meaning, story asking, and story reading. These steps are to facilitate comprehensible input and language acquisition. For the first step, teachers use props, gestures, pictures, and translation to establish the meaning of new vocabulary words and structures. In the second step, teachers guide students to participate in creating and acting out a class story by using new words and structures. The repetitive questions are used to engage students for communicative purposes in interesting contexts. As for the third step, teachers use interesting and comprehensible readers, along with other various strategies to engage students in learning. Circling, as the core of TPRS, is the practice of asking a series of three types of questions, which are yes/no, either/or, and open-ended questions, around the statement sentence. Through circling, students interact with the input in interesting and repetitive ways. PQA (Personalized Questions and Answers) involves fun conversations where teachers ask students questions about their lives and interests using the target vocabulary words and structures. Students can get more relevant and easy comprehensible input in a real and engaging way through PQA.

As a secondary school level Chinese language teacher switching my traditional practice to TPRS four years ago, I have seen and been inspired by how much and how fast my students can understand the language, grow in their language acquisition, and increase their motivation to continue their language learning. In the meantime, implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in my TPRS classroom has helped me respect and include the knowledge, life experiences, and voices of diverse student learners and acknowledge students as learning subjects who have power and influence on our knowledge construction and representation in curriculum and instruction. It creates a community of learners and nurtures a caring, supportive, and cooperative learning environment, which leads to students' academic success. This article is to explore how to use culturally relevant pedagogy to include diverse student learners' knowledge and experiences and foster equity and diversity through positive interaction and knowledge construction in the TPRS classroom.

CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY APPLICATION IN TPRS-BASED CHINESE LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

A Caring Learning Community

Caring for students is an important component in culturally relevant teaching practice. Building a caring learning community with clear and high expectations for academic

performance and classroom behavior creates a safe place for students to take risks, learn, and trust one another and their teachers (Brown, 2004). Getting to know each student and developing a caring and personal relationship with students individually prompts student efforts and achievement and facilitates an effective teaching and learning process. Students are respected for their humanity, held in high esteem, and expected for high performance. Teachers design instruction based on students' culture and learning styles, link curriculum to students, and encourage students to build up positive social and cultural identities.

In a culturally relevant classroom, greeting each student by name as students enter the class, trying to reach out to each student with small talk, and being respectful and genuine to each individual student on a daily basis helps establish a positive, caring, and supportive learning community. Teachers can inquire about students' lives beyond school, such as a student's soccer game last weekend, recognize students' cultural heritage and interests, and use that moment for circling and PQA to make connections between curriculum and students' life experiences. Teachers can set high expectations on students' academic performance and reinforce learning as a goal every day in class. Students are encouraged to set their goal of language proficiency level at the beginning of the school year, regularly reflect upon their learning progress, and take initiative to improve their and others' learning for success. Teachers can also establish, instruct, and model classroom procedures on the first day of school and consistently monitor routines and procedures to hold students accountable for meeting expectations of success. On one hand, teachers should acknowledge and award students for positive classroom participation regularly; on the other hand, teachers should respond to students' misbehavior and deliver consequences calmly and sensitively with consideration of individual student needs and respect of students' dignity.

Establishing Meaning

In the TPRS classroom, teachers establish meaning for guide words through translation, visuals, and gestures. This step is used to help students understand the meaning of target words and structures and process the language faster. In particular, TPR (Total Physical Response), discovered by Asher in 1960, has become an effective and superior comprehension strategy in the language classroom. It develops an understanding of spoken language through students' body movements (Asher, 1993) and requires coordination of language and physical response based on listening comprehension in pleasant ways. Classical TPR exercises include single commands and descriptions and action series that involve actions to be acted out or pantomimed in class (Seely & Romijn, 1995). according to specific statements, students can work in pairs or small groups, speaking and acting at appropriate times.

In a culturally relevant classroom, teachers can share power with students by letting them invent gestures for story guide words or phrases and then making agreements together to adopt a set of class gestures for related words. Teachers can write those words in English and the target language on the board or type them in slides to show on the projector screen. Teachers can have students take the leading roles to perform the action, and have other students call out words in the target language or give commands and let others move in response to them. Students are encouraged to be creative, combine previously learned words, and possibly add action chains in their own ways. For example, before I asked a class story about the main character dining at different places in the classroom, my students created a set of actions for high-frequency words 想要, 吃, 有, 没有, 在, and 去 while revisiting the gestures for 好, 不, 很, 非常, 快快地, and 慢慢地. Students were engaged and even motivated to make gestures of questioning words such as

吗, 还是, 谁, 什么, 哪里, and 为什么. Then students made decisions to select sets of class gestures and act out single commands and descriptions. They also combined and created different words by speaking or doing actions in meaningful ways such as 非常不好吃, 很好吃, 很喜欢吃, 快快地吃, and 慢慢地吃. Students have enjoyed repeatedly using their adopted sets of class gestures in different contexts, which has stimulated them to internalize the relevant vocabulary words and structures thoroughly. Prompting students to make decisions and take charge of their learning acknowledges students as sources of knowledge and validates their culture and experiences as strengths that can be pulled out to contribute to a learning community. Students' created gestures and active participation in TPR also build connections with their own cultural backgrounds and learning styles and enhance meaningful and relevant language learning experiences by frequently using words and gestures familiar to them over time.

Story Asking

TPRS focuses on improvised and co-created class stories. Teachers set up characters, background information, and an obstacle for the main character to overcome. Teachers make general details, constantly check the details with the class and student actor, and add in surprise details by asking a question and encouraging students to guess with a creative and surprise answer during the flow of a constructed class story. The process of story asking involves gestures, performance, dramatization, senses of humor and emotions, repetitive questioning or circling, developing storylines, comprehension checks, and PQA. This highly interactive and negotiated communicative discourse in storytelling as the core of TPRS delivers a large quantity of compelling and repetitive comprehensible input to students.

The nature of storytelling in TPRS is culturally relevant to students. Throughout human history, stories have been shared in all cultures for entertainment, preserving cultural traditions, and teaching knowledge, values, and morals (Nguyen et al., 2016). Storytelling affirms students' cultural identities by encouraging them to express their knowledge (Gay, 2010). In a culturally relevant classroom, teachers give students voices and perceive them as subjects to guide them to create, develop, and perform out the class story. Students can choose and play the role of the main character in storytelling for active participation. Referring to popular culture and talking about students' favorite musicians, actors, actresses, games, and movies links the curriculum to students' real-life and enhances their interest and engagement in learning. For example, when setting up characters at the beginning or in the middle of story asking, I inquired my students about their favorite celebrities by asking "你们喜欢哪个名人？为什么？", and they responded with their different answers such as "我喜欢 Kanye West 因为他酷。我喜欢 Lady Gaga 因为她唱歌好听。". Then I invited the student to play the role of his or her favorite celebrity as the main character or parallel character to make connections and enhance students' engagement. Teachers can personalize the story to all students based on their culture and interests and use circling to confirm or modify to push the story along. Students are engaged in an improvising and comprehensible environment. Teachers can personalize questions and answers to students to make story asking and storytelling relevant to them and build connections in a community of learners. For example, while asking a class story about animals, I utilized PQA to elicit students' answers about their pets, such as "谁有狗？它多大了？它叫什么名字？它是大狗还是小狗？它好看吗？". Students loved to talk about their pets and enjoyed hearing about others' as well. It helps students to build connections and relationships in a learning community. Students' active participation in constructing and producing new knowledge throughout storytelling can be

reinforced as their cultural backgrounds and life experiences are being respected and acknowledged in class. Teachers respect students' decisions, see the world through students' eyes, and go with their imagination for the flow of the story. The affirmation of students' identities, knowledge, and creative work further develops students' positive sociocultural identities.

Story Reading

Another essential component of TPRS is reading. TPRS embraces pleasant and easy readers. The reading can be a written format of the class story co-created between students and teacher in story asking. Students read what they have seen and performed in class to facilitate their comprehension of written language. Teachers can also provide students with interesting and comprehensible stories and novels at appropriate levels and set up a classroom library to encourage students to read extensively. Krashen (2005) indicates the effectiveness of Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) in classrooms worldwide. FVR allows students to select the readings for their own interests and at their levels. It increases students' encounters to comprehend the language and facilitates language acquisition.

In a culturally relevant classroom, teachers get to know more about individual students in more profound ways, including their racial/ethnic, sociocultural, and linguistic backgrounds, learning styles, interests, and needs to include and represent their culture and identity in the language curriculum. Reading the class created TPRS stories can legitimize students' diverse cultural backgrounds and real-life experiences as part of the official curriculum, engage students in comprehending texts, welcome multiple perspectives, and build trusting and positive relationships in a learning community. Teachers can also work on and provide students with age and level appropriate culturally relevant materials. For example, the teachers can introduce to the students the readers written by Haiyun Lu, Terry Waltz, Pu-mei Leng, and Linda Li, as well as Diane Neubauer's read-along videos, based on different levels and certain cultural topics related to students. Readers draw on culturally acquired knowledge to guide their comprehension of text (Gibbons, 2009) and become more engaged when reading culturally relevant books that connect to their lives (Ebe, 2015). Perez (2004) states that "the background knowledge and experiences that students bring to literacy tasks are perhaps the most important elements that influence children's ability to read with high levels of comprehension" (p. 321). The use of culturally relevant text and validating students' cultural experiences lead to reading engagement and proficiency.

In the meantime, more reading practice inherent with diversified activities can include and validate students from different cultural backgrounds and with different needs and learning styles. For example, teachers can use gesturing, physical movements, role playing, reader theatre, drawing, games, dramatization, and story retelling and rewriting to engage students in reading. Through many repetitive, comprehensible, and compelling reading practices, students can actively respond to the texts, gradually build up confidence, and improve language proficiency. Drama, in particular, constructs an avenue where learners choose to play different characters in appropriate stories that are interesting to them. Students can get associated with characters and interpret texts from inside or outside of the characters' social positions. Students can also acquire deeper meaning and understanding by exploring and shaping questions-answers through reflection-on-actions on relevant topics. Teachers can use inquiry to foster students' critical thinking and facilitate dialogue in a caring and supportive learning community. In drama, students are positioned differently relative to the content. Teachers use role, frame, and social

positioning to guide students to think and examine their own indigenous thoughts on people from different cultural backgrounds, gain multiple perspectives, and resist stereotypes while students are framing different roles in certain sociocultural contexts. It further develops students' values of empathy, tolerance, and respect for diversity.

DISCUSSION

This article discusses how to implement culturally relevant pedagogy in the TPRS language classroom. First, nurturing a caring learning community develops diverse student learners' positive sociocultural identities. It creates opportunities for students to see themselves and their cultures being validated and included in curriculum and instruction. It fosters students' interests and motivation in understanding and acquiring language. Second, encouraging students to invent their own sets of class gestures for new vocabulary words and structures and using those for different stories in multiple contexts helps students build meaningful and relevant connections with their cultural backgrounds and internalize language quickly. Third, guiding students to create and perform a dynamic and exciting class story engages students in language comprehension and acquisition and empowers them to construct and represent knowledge in curriculum and instruction. Finally, providing students with culturally relevant reading materials and diversified teaching strategies helps students become more engaged in comprehending texts, improve language proficiency, and develop empathy and respect for diversity. The challenge lies in the lack of Chinese readers that incorporate students' interests and cultural backgrounds for different ages and levels. Future research can add more culturally relevant and meaningful TPRS Chinese readers for diverse student learners in the classroom.

As TPRS gives teachers new insights on language teaching, culturally relevant pedagogy also requires teachers to change their thoughts and attitudes and take action in teaching practices. Ladson-Billings (1994) points out that culturally relevant teachers see themselves as artists and teaching as an art. They believe all students can succeed. They perceive students' diverse backgrounds as strengths, support students to bring their knowledge to school, use different methods to explore their knowledge, and have students use their knowledge for their academic success. Culturally relevant teachers develop an explicit cultural diversity knowledge base (Gay, 2002). This knowledge includes understanding cultural characteristics and contributions of different ethnic groups, acquiring detailed factual information about cultural particularities of specific ethnic groups, and sufficient in-depth analysis of multicultural education. Culturally relevant teachers help students find their own voices, engage in multiple cultural perspectives, and become more active in their thinking and learning. The nature of culturally relevant pedagogy and TPRS both is student-centered. Thus, culturally relevant teachers in TPRS language classrooms are expected to start from knowing our students who they are, to meet them where they are, and to prepare them for who they become.

CONCLUSION

Facing the challenge of teaching about diversity in world language classrooms at American public schools, teachers also can perceive the challenge as an opportunity to affirm and celebrate various cultural resources, knowledge, and life experiences that students bring into classrooms. It opens an extra door for students to be able to learn about themselves and others being part of a multicultural/global society. Culturally relevant pedagogy is used in the teaching

to all student learners for academic achievement, culture and identity, equity, and empowerment in a caring, positive, and supportive learning community. Culturally relevant pedagogy in TPRS classroom prepares language learners for becoming humanized, informed, and capable global citizens.

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