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## Culturally Responsive Teaching: Understanding and Embracing Cultural Diversity in the Chinese Classroom

### Cover Page Footnote

I wish to thank the reviewers for meaningful suggestion on improving the manuscript. I also would like to thank Letian Zhang for advice and insights on this topic.

# **Culturally Responsive Teaching: Understanding and Embracing Cultural Diversity in the Chinese Classroom**

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## **Abstract**

Schools and society have become more diverse. Culturally responsive teaching as an effective teaching method has been applied in different school subject areas. This article introduces the concept of culturally responsive teaching and discusses its implementation in the Chinese classroom. This article addresses the establishment of an inclusive, safe, and academically rigorous learning environment, diversification of curriculum content knowledge and instructional strategies, and incorporation of culturally responsive assessment. Culturally responsive teaching in the Chinese classroom provides an opportunity for teachers not only to develop students' language skills and cultural understanding, but also to cultivate students' attitudes and dispositions toward diversity for their attainment of effective intercultural communication.

*Keywords:* culturally responsive teaching, language teaching, culture, diversity

Our classrooms in today's multicultural and global society are increasingly marked by the large numbers of students who differ widely from each other in terms of their languages and cultures. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2021), the percentage of public school students who were White decreased from 54 to 47 percent, and the percentage of students who were minority students increased from 46 to 53 percent between fall 2009 and fall 2018. Minority students include students who are Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and of two or more races. With the demographic shift in U.S. schools and society, more educators have called for multicultural education across school subjects to meet students' different needs, reduce achievement gaps, and prepare all students for success.

ACTFL (2019) advocates for diversity and inclusion across world language teaching and learning contexts with continuous reflection and evaluation of the specific teaching practices to promote diversity and inclusion. A world language classroom is a culture classroom where students learn the target cultural products and practices, understand cultural values and perspectives, and find connections to make meaningful intercultural communication in different contexts. A world language classroom can also be a multicultural classroom where the various cultures that students bring in from their diverse backgrounds are acknowledged, validated, and included in the language and culture curriculum.

In recent years, more schools across the nation have initiated and expanded Chinese programs. The conversations, dialogues, and resources shared on Chinese curriculum, instruction, and assessment have been continuously propelled by language educators and researchers in the field. Besides language and cultural

learning in Chinese classrooms, how to facilitate students' intercultural communicative skills at a deeper level has aroused interest for discussion. NCSSFL-ACTFL (2017) regards intercultural communicative competence as essential in a global society for building up positive and effective relationships among people from different language and cultural backgrounds. Intercultural communicative competence involves self-reflection around language and culture and change of attitudes toward one's own and other cultures. Thereafter, the Chinese classroom can be developed as an inclusive and open learning environment, in which students not only learn Chinese language and culture, but also have opportunities to explore their own cultures and identities, find connections between different languages and cultures, and grow their understanding, respect, and appreciation of cultural diversity for effective intercultural communication.

This article will introduce culturally responsive teaching as a pedagogical framework in the Chinese classroom. This article will also discuss the implementation of culturally responsive teaching in the Chinese classroom with a goal to better understand cultural diversity and facilitate meaningful learning for the development of intercultural communication skills.

## **Concept of Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Culturally responsive teaching as an effective pedagogy affirmed by scholars fosters diverse students' academic achievement, positive social and cultural identities, and socio-political consciousness. Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive teaching as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (p. 31). Culturally responsive teaching uses students' own different cultures as learning resources and bridges the gap between students' school experience and home culture. Students from different cultural backgrounds are cared for, accepted, and respected. They are expected to achieve high academic performance and supported to fulfill their expectations. Students' social and cultural identities are developed in a positive way. The culturally responsive teacher also pays attention to the political realities of minority students. According to Gay (2010), culturally responsive teaching resists the traditional educational practices with respect to minority students and recovers the veil of presumed absolute authority from conceptions of scholarly truth taught in schools. Students are encouraged to engage in knowing and thinking from multiple cultural perspectives, become active participants in shaping their own learning, and gradually grow their socio-political consciousness as a social agency.

Culturally responsive teaching creates an inclusive and safe learning environment and provides culturally responsive practices to meet students' different needs and support them for success. Duran (2019) states that culturally responsive teaching encourages the participation of students in their learning and builds an inclusive environment for sharing their knowledge and experiences. Cuocci and Arndt (2020) discuss Piaget's, Vygotsky's, and Dörnyei's theories about the cognitive, emotional, and sociocultural aspects in the learning and language learning process. They describe the cultural, linguistic, and emotional needs of English learners in detail and propose the culturally and linguistically adapted SEL framework to be implemented in classrooms. Culturally responsive teaching is conceptualized through adapting content both culturally and linguistically and improving English learners' academic skills and social-emotional competence (Cuocci & Arndt, 2020). Sancyk (2020/2021) conducts

a qualitative research study on seven adult ESL instructors teaching at a community college in the southeastern U.S. The study guided by Critical Language and Race Theory (Crump, 2014) explores how instructors adopt culturally responsive teaching. The findings show that the instructors employ various culturally responsive practices that have validated students' diverse backgrounds, established meaningful relationships, and facilitated classroom learning.

## **Culturally Responsive Teaching Practice in the Chinese Classroom**

### ***An Inclusive and Safe Atmosphere***

Culturally responsive teaching establishes an inclusive and safe environment that embraces cultural diversity and equity. In the Chinese classroom, misunderstandings and conflicts happen as the students lack accurate knowledge of Chinese culture and other cultures. The students have limited exposure to and understanding of cultural nuances. The students might interpret Chinese language and culture in a stereotypical and dichotomous way that has been shaped by their background, social media, and past experiences. Culturally responsive teaching in the Chinese classroom can provide more opportunities for meaningful dialogues on stereotypes and racism as it legitimizes inclusion, diversity, and equity in language and culture learning. In culturally responsive classrooms, Chinese teachers can set a positive tone of respecting cultural diversity and caring for one another in the classroom beginning on the first day of school. Teachers can consistently confirm and reinforce expectations of respect for Chinese culture and other different cultures throughout the year. Teachers can explain specific classroom expectations with the students and discuss different options of awards and consequences respectively for positive participation and violations of rules. Teachers can also encourage the students to hold each other accountable as a team in their continuous growth of attitude and behavior toward cultural diversity in the Chinese classroom. In addition, teachers can utilize the teaching moments to initiate conversations for examining the students' perceptions of Chinese culture and other different cultures. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a rise of racial discrimination and violence against Chinese Americans and Asian Americans in U.S. society. Teachers can guide the students with open-ended questions led by what, who, how, and why to facilitate positive and constructive interactions in the teaching moment of the "Chinese virus" blurted out in the classroom. Teachers can engage the students in continuous reflective thinking to go beyond their limited knowledge and indigenous biases on different cultures and cultural groups.

### ***A Rigorous Academic Environment***

Culturally responsive teaching requires a rigorous learning environment that supports the students' academic success. In culturally responsive classrooms, Chinese teachers can provide explicit learning outcomes with high expectations for each individual student based on the local school district, state, and national world language standards. Teachers can encourage students to set their own goals at the beginning of the school year, regularly reflect on their learning progress, and identify additional learning content and the extra effort required to achieve that goal.

Furthermore, teachers can design an effective curriculum, instruction, and assessment that builds on the strengths of diverse students and makes meaningful connections with the students for their academic achievement.

Developed to support students for success in an environment of academic rigor, culturally responsive teaching emphasizes knowing students as essential and validates students' cultures and identities in the legitimized school curricular. In culturally responsive classrooms, Chinese teachers can use surveys and questionnaires at the beginning of the school year to know each student and their cultural background. The surveys can include inquiries on students' racial/ethnic and cultural heritage, family backgrounds, personal interests, language experiences, intercultural encounters, and expectations for the Chinese course. The questionnaires, according to multiple intelligences and learning styles (Armstrong, 2018; Gardner, 2000), can be used to understand students' strengths in their learning. To get to know students better, teachers can also attend students' extracurricular activities such as sports events, concert performances, and school fair showcases. Teachers can participate in community festivals that celebrate students' own cultures and meet students and their families to build connections. Additionally, teachers can continuously develop their knowledge and understanding of cultural diversity by reading literature, watching movies, dining at ethnic restaurants, talking to people, and making friends from different racial/ethnic and cultural backgrounds. By having a good grasp of students' diversity and identities, Chinese teachers can design meaningful and relevant curriculum aligned to academic benchmarks and teach to students' strengths for their success in a rigorous learning environment.

### ***A Culturally Diverse Curriculum***

Culturally responsive teaching requires curriculum and instruction to be more consistent with the cultural orientations of diverse students. Ladson-Billings (1994) states that the way educators teach profoundly affects the way students perceive the content of the curriculum. In culturally responsive classrooms, Chinese teachers can intentionally reflect on culture and content knowledge to construct the existence of diverse cultures in classrooms. Teachers can add on students' own diverse cultures and life experiences to expand the Chinese curriculum and make Chinese language and culture learning more connected and meaningful to the students. For example, in the thematic units, teachers can include students' knowledge and experience from their own cultures on the topics under study such as family, friends, school life, interests and hobbies, and social events, while they are learning those aspects from Chinese society. Teachers can encourage students to introduce and describe the related cultural products, practices, and perspectives from their cultural backgrounds to compare similarities and differences between different cultures. Teachers can also organize school-wide events such as a Chinese New Year show and multicultural art, music, and food festivals. At these events, students are given the opportunity to show their Chinese language skills and cultural understanding along with exhibiting their diverse home cultures to enhance pride in their racial/ethnic heritage. By incorporating students' own cultural knowledge and experience in the Chinese classroom, teachers can help students see themselves and other different cultural groups represented in legitimized school content knowledge and develop their respect for and appreciation of diversity. Teachers can further guide students to uncover their misconceptions on certain topics in different cultures, find commonalities of human

experience in various societies, and view diversity through the lens of world interconnectedness.

### *An Active and Diversified Pedagogy*

Culturally responsive teaching emphasizes cultural congruity in the teaching and learning process. To meet students' different needs and increase their engagement and interests in learning Chinese, teachers can use a wide variety of effective teaching strategies in classrooms. The implementation of visuals, movements, storytelling, drama, plays, games, music, multi-media materials, technology, and cooperative groups can promote students' active language learning experience in the Chinese classroom. For example, teachers can use TPR (Total Physical Response), discovered by Asher in 1960, to facilitate students' language acquisition through coordination of language comprehension and appropriate physical response in culturally responsive classrooms. The students' created gestures and active participation in TPR can bridge the gap between their own cultural backgrounds and classroom learning, which in turn enhances their meaningful and relevant Chinese language learning experience (Gao, 2020). Drawing and acting can also be effectively implemented as culturally relevant story asking and reading strategies in the Chinese classroom. Teachers can facilitate students to co-construct personalized compelling class stories in Chinese language juxtaposed with color images and creative plays to validate the students' prior knowledge and life experiences for cultural diversity. Teachers can encourage students to illustrate and/or perform the stories to better their comprehension and usage of Chinese language while students' various learning styles and cultural identities are being boosted in these accommodating instructional activities.

In particular, cooperative learning exemplifies an active and collaborative instructional approach that embraces students' varied backgrounds and learning styles in the Chinese classroom. As Dörnyei (1997) states, cooperative learning provides excellent and motivating conditions for second language learning as the small group learning format embedded in cooperative learning generates intensive interaction and cooperation with positive interdependence among students. In culturally responsive classrooms, Chinese teachers can design cooperative learning tasks for students to share diverse ideas, connect with one another dynamically, and build up positive relationships. Teachers can utilize small group discussion strategies such as numbered heads together, jigsaw activity, round robin, rally robin, mix-pair-share, and inside-outside circle to develop students' four language skills. Teachers can engage students in exploring knowledge, presenting thoughts, and positioning in social relations through an interactive and communicative task within a specific context. The various cultural backgrounds and abilities that the students contribute to the project also proliferates students' learning resources and grows their intercultural communication skills. For example, on the topic of transportation, teachers can initiate the inquiry questions such as "What are the major transportation tools in China and the U.S.? What do you find similar and different about transportation in China and the U.S.? How has transportation affected people's lifestyles in China and the U.S.? Have you seen any stereotypes or biases on transportation in China and the U.S.? If yes, please explain." Teachers can show students video clips and documentaries and assign them to read the related articles in a jigsaw activity. Students can work on Venn diagrams or bubble maps in groups to compare and contrast the similarities and differences of transportation and its impact on people's different lifestyles in the U.S. and China. They can learn from other group members through gallery walks and write down the

interesting facts, along with the questions they want to ask. Students can also be facilitated with a small group discussion on their knowledge of and experience in different transportation tools in the U.S. and possibly in China, along with critical examinations on how that has affected people's daily life differently. Then students share with the whole class what they have learned. Teachers can debrief at the end of the whole class discussion. Cooperative learning in the Chinese classroom can promote students' intellectual development, understanding of diversity and perspective-taking, and pragmatic interactive experience with others from different backgrounds.

### ***A Culturally Responsive Assessment***

Culturally responsive teaching addresses the alignment between assessment and pedagogical practices in diversity and equity. Culturally responsive assessment fulfills rigorous learning outcomes and objectives of the unit it relates to and holds all students accountable to maintain consistent academic standards. It plays a positive role in shaping students' knowledge and learning experiences based on understanding how students learn and accommodating their different learning needs. In culturally responsive classrooms, Chinese teachers can provide a variety of formative assessments in consideration of students' different cultures and learning styles to make connections with the curriculum and instruction. Teachers can engage the students in self and peer assessments by using explicit rubrics and providing timely and substantial feedback for further improvements. Teachers can also integrate performance assessments that require students to use language in real-life scenarios. Performance assessments are task-based and focus on students' knowledge and skills that are applied and demonstrated in different contexts. It gives students choices that accommodate their own needs. Lee (1998) indicates that culturally responsive performance-based assessments involve the tasks that students draw on their own cultural funds of knowledge from homes, communities, and youth culture, deal with the political dimensions of education for marginalized communities and address the authentic needs in communities to develop a sense of community responsibility within the students who spring from them.

Culturally responsive teachers pay attention to current events and utilize those to develop the students' knowledge, critical thinking, and social justice awareness. According to anti-Asian hate crime events fueled by COVID-19, Chinese teachers can include the topic of Asian Americans in the curriculum and assessment. For the assessment, teachers can assign students individual or group research projects with different inquiry topics on Asian American history, ethnic groups, contributions, literature, holidays, art, music, sports, and racial and sociopolitical issues interwoven throughout U.S. history. Through inquiry, teachers can encourage Asian American students to share their own cultural knowledge and life experiences as validated learning resources. Teachers can invite the parents of Asian American students or collaborate with an Asian American community center to interact with the students and facilitate their learning and understanding of topics. Teachers can also require each student to interview an Asian American about their life story, perceptions, and experiences in anti-Asian racism and write critical responses to the findings as part of the assessment. In the end, students can make visual presentations of their research projects on Asian Americans and create special exhibitions in the classroom, at the school's Asian American festival, and in the Asian American community. Gao (2017) argues that educators need to scrutinize the perpetual existence of racism in society



and help students to critically examine the factors that have shaped people's thinking and worldviews for developing social justice consciousness.

## Discussion

This article discusses the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy in the Chinese classroom. In culturally responsive classrooms, Chinese teachers establish an inclusive and safe learning environment with academic rigor and high expectations. They add students' diverse cultural backgrounds and knowledge into the curriculum and examine students' stereotypes and biases toward cultural diversity. They use various instructional strategies to meet the students' different learning styles and needs. In particular, cooperative learning allows students to interact and collaborate with their peers for intellectual and cognitive development, positive and interdependent relationships, and intercultural communication skills. The culturally responsive assessment also allows students to apply what they have learned in real-life contexts and take actions to make improvements as a social agency.

Culturally responsive teaching opens up the avenue for learning and embracing cultural diversity and equity in the Chinese classroom. Students are encouraged and supported to share and use their own cultural knowledge and experience to make connections to Chinese language and culture learning. Cultural diversity and inclusion are inherently respected and valued in culturally responsive classrooms. Chinese teachers can guide students to further deep and meaningful dialogues on the topics of diversity, racism, and stereotypes. More often, these topics are challenging to be approached for discussion. But the five areas of culturally responsive teaching in the Chinese classroom discussed in this article can be considered and utilized as the places in which the open conversations on diversity and social justice can undergo in a delicate and meticulous way. Supportive learning environments and culturally responsive curriculum, instruction, and assessment all contribute to students' academic success, positive social and cultural identities, and intercultural communication. More importantly, culturally responsive teaching advocates for the development of the students as an agency for better social changes toward diversity and equity.

This article suggests Chinese teachers become life-long learners and reflective practitioners in culturally responsive classrooms. Chinese teachers can continue learning and understanding culture and diversity in schools, communities, and societies to develop their cultural competence. Cultural competence refers to an ability to recognize differences, an attitude to appreciate students' diverse backgrounds, cultural experiences, and knowledge as learning resources, and a communication and language ability among different cultures (Gay, 2000). Moreover, Chinese teachers can continue to take critical reflections with sociopolitical consciousness on their teaching, which includes an examination of their own attitudes and beliefs toward cultural diversity, the purpose of the Chinese curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and the process of pedagogical reasoning and practice. Cummins (2015) indicates that teachers need to know the social, political, economic, and structural inequalities among the students in classrooms and support students' growth as a social agency of change. To be prepared for that, as Ladson-Billings (2001) recommends, teachers need to know a larger sociopolitical context of the school to community and nation to the world, participate in the public good, and implement academic experiences that connect the students to a larger social context.

## **Conclusion**

Culturally responsive teaching is essential. Facing the irreversible tendency of schools and society becoming more diverse, teachers need to teach diversity and equity in the classroom to prepare students for future success. Focusing on Chinese language and culture learning, Chinese teachers can enrich curriculum and instruction by including knowledge and experiences of different racial/ethnic and cultural groups in U.S. society to make learning more relevant and meaningful to all students in the classroom. Culturally responsive teaching in the Chinese classroom allows students to develop their language and intercultural communicative skills through a multicultural and global perspective. It aims at preparing all students for becoming competent, responsible, and humane citizens in today's global society.

This article highlights the importance of culturally responsive teaching to be implemented in the Chinese classroom. In culturally responsive classrooms, Chinese teachers can build an inclusive, safe, and academically rigorous learning environment, diversify content knowledge and instructional strategies, and incorporate culturally responsive assessment. Culturally responsive teaching leads to understanding and embracing cultural diversity in the Chinese classroom, which prepares students for effective intercultural communication.

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