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Culturally Responsive Teaching with Adult Language Learners (Empirical Research Paper)

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Keywords: English as a second language, adult learning, motivational framework for culturally responsive teaching

Abstract: This study examined how frequently adult education English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers in Florida used specific culturally responsive teaching practices and how important they believed those practices were to their teaching. Using Ginsberg and Wlodkowski's Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching, an online survey of 17 teaching practices was developed, validated, and administered to 143 adult ESOL and EAP teachers in Florida. This article describes the findings of this study, examining which practices were used with the highest and least frequency, as well as the practices described as most and least important to their teaching.

Introduction

The adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classrooms are culturally and linguistically diverse learning environments. Amidst this diversity, ESOL and EAP teachers face challenges in the creation of a learning environment that addresses the needs and learning styles of individuals from such disparate backgrounds (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). According to multicultural education scholars, the most effective learning environment is one which most closely reflects the students' learning preferences and ways of knowing (Collard & Stalker, 1991; Gay, 2000; Guy, 2009, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1995). However, as the ethnic and racial backgrounds of these students often differ from the background of the teacher, it can be challenging for ESOL and EAP teachers to incorporate the learners' native cultures into the classroom environment (Collard & Stalker, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The influence of culture on the classroom is a foundation of multicultural education (Banks, 2006; Bennett, 2001) and is exemplified by the assumption that both students and teachers bring their cultural identities into the classroom. As described by Guy (2009):

Adult learners bring to the learning environment a range of experiences grounded in communicative and interaction strategies. Given the cultural basis of these strategies, they may or may not serve learners well depending on the way in which the educational activity itself is framed. (p. 10)

In *Culturally Responsive Teaching*, Gay (2000) elaborates on this tenet and asserts that culture is "at the heart of all we do in the name of education, whether that is curriculum, instruction, administration, or performance assessment" (p. 8).

While a growing body of literature has focused on the culturally responsive teaching practices which are effective with specific cultural groups, such as African-Americans (Archie-Booker, Cervero, & Langone, 1999; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007; Sheared, 1999) or Latinos (Gault, 2003; Heaney, Sanabria, & Tisdell, 2001), there have been limited studies of the teaching practices used to create a culturally responsive environment for students of multiple and varied cultures. This void has presented a challenge to various stakeholders who want to assess and guide programs and practitioners toward the use of a culturally responsive approach in adult ESOL and EAP classrooms. It was the purpose of this study to add to this growing body of knowledge by describing the culturally responsive teaching practices of adult education ESOL and EAP teachers in the state of Florida.

Theoretical Framework

Culturally responsive teaching is an equity pedagogy (Banks, 2006) that encompasses a variety of approaches such as culturally relevant, culturally sensitive, culturally congruent, and culturally contextualized pedagogies (Gay, 2000). Culturally responsive teaching places student culture at the center of the learning process in order to eradicate the differences, known as cultural mismatches, between the students' home cultures and the culture of the school (Lee & Sheared, 2002). This approach is based on the four pillars of "teacher attitude and expectations, cultural communication in the classroom, culturally diverse context in the curriculum, and culturally congruent instructional strategies" (Gay, 2000, p. 44).

The Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009; Wlodkowski, 2004) is a model of culturally responsive teaching that was designed for the higher education classroom and does not specify practices specifically designed for the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the adult education ESOL and EAP classrooms. It describes norms and practices appropriate to an adult learning environment in which "inquiry, respect, and the opportunity for full participation by diverse adults is the norm" (Wlodkowski, 2004, p. 161) and is grounded in the assumption that culturally responsive teaching enhances the motivation of students from minority cultures. The model's norms and practices are categorized by four elements: *establishing inclusion*, *developing attitude*, *enhancing meaning*, and *engendering competence* (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009; Wlodkowski, 2004). This four-element model served as the theoretical foundation for culturally responsive teaching practices applicable to the adult education ESOL and EAP classrooms.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to describe the culturally responsive teaching practices of adult education ESOL and EAP teachers in the state of Florida. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent do adult education ESOL and EAP teachers use specific culturally responsive teaching practices?
2. How do adult education ESOL and EAP teachers rank the importance of using specific culturally responsive teaching practices?

The first stage of this study was the development of an online survey of culturally responsive teaching practices relevant to the adult education ESOL and EAP classroom based on the Motivational Framework of Culturally Responsive Teaching (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski,

2009). The development, modification, and validation of the survey consisted of two phases: the generation and validation of an item pool and the validation of the draft survey. The second stage of this study was the administration of the survey of culturally responsive teaching practices.

Data Collection and Analysis

The survey included 34 items of culturally responsive teaching practices and was administered to 143 teachers over a four-week period in 2012. Participants were presented with 17 items which they assessed by *how frequently* they used each teaching practice and *how important* they believed each practice was to their teaching. Frequency of use was assessed through a 5-point frequency scale with levels of: *never, rarely, sometimes, usually, and always*, while perception of importance was assessed through a 5-point frequency scale with levels of: *not at all, somewhat, moderately, very, and extremely*.

To establish the reliability of the scores, the Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of the two sub-groups of items related to *frequency of use* and *perception of importance* were calculated and high levels of internal reliability of .781 and .848, respectively, while their construct validity was analyzed through the use of exploratory factor analysis, which yielded inconclusive levels of factorability. Various descriptive analyses were utilized to examine the primary research questions based on mean item scores.

Findings

RQ 1. To what extent do adult education ESOL and EAP teachers use specific culturally responsive teaching practices?

The first section of the survey contained 17 items requiring respondents to indicate how frequently they used each practice. Item means ranged from 2.51 to 4.26 with nine items falling in the moderate range of 3.02 to 3.91 corresponding to the frequency category of *sometimes*. There were four items with high mean scores between 4.0 and 4.5, as well as four items with mean scores ranging from 2.5 to 3.0 corresponding to the frequency level between *rarely* and *sometimes*. Results indicated that the most frequently used practice was “*provide rubrics and progress reports to students*” ($M = 4.26$), followed closely by “*elicit students’ experiences in pre-reading and pre-listening activities*” ($M = 4.24$). The least frequently used practice was “*include lessons about anti-immigrant discrimination or bias*” ($M = 2.51$), followed by “*students work independently, selecting their own learning activities*” ($M = 2.76$).

RQ 2. How do adult education ESOL and EAP teachers rank the importance of using specific culturally responsive teaching practices?

The second section of the survey contained the same 17 items requiring respondents to indicate how important they perceived each practice was to their teaching. Item means ranged from 2.58 to 4.13 with 10 items falling in the moderate range of 3.21 to 3.76 corresponding to the frequency category of *moderately* important. Results also indicated that the two most important practices were “*provide rubrics and progress reports to students*” ($M = 4.13$) and “*elicit students’ experiences in pre-reading and pre-listening activities*” ($M = 4.13$). Five culturally responsive teaching practices were perceived to be the least important. They were

“include lessons about anti-immigrant discrimination or bias” ($M = 2.58$), *“learn words in students’ native languages”* ($M = 2.89$), *“ask for student input when planning lessons and activities”* ($M = 2.90$), *“students work independently, selecting their own learning activities”* ($M = 2.91$), and *“encourage students to speak their native language with their children”* ($M = 2.96$).

Discussion

There is limited discussion in adult education of culturally responsive teaching in ethnically and linguistically diverse classrooms. The findings of this study add to the body of knowledge of culturally responsive teaching by describing the practices of teachers in these environments. By measuring the frequency and perceived importance of these practices, this study offers a limited, yet foundational depiction of a unique learning environment.

This study revealed a trend of adult education ESOL and EAP teachers’ use of a variety of practices to respond to the ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous learning environment by reaching out and incorporating students’ learning styles and ways of knowing into their teaching (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), instead of establishing classrooms which represent only mainstream American culture.

However, this study also found that some culturally responsive teaching practices are not regularly used, nor are perceived to be important, and thus, provide an area of potential growth for the field. Three of the four least frequently used practices related to the teacher’s use of student input into the learning process. These practices *“students work independently, selecting their own learning activities”*, *“ask for student input when planning lessons and activities”*, and *“use student surveys to learn about students’ classroom preferences”* share an emphasis on the individual and learner autonomy and self-directedness. Significantly, promoting critical inquiry and addressing real-world issues are tenets of culturally responsive teaching. However, this study found that adult education ESOL and EAP teachers did not support or include lessons about anti-immigrant discrimination or bias on a regular basis. Better understanding of why ESOL and EAP teachers do not engage in lessons that examine bias and discrimination toward immigrants is necessary to improve or change this practice.

Implications

The survey used in this study provides an easy-to-use tool for practitioners to assess the cultural responsiveness of their teaching. However, it is still in the early stages of development and should not be used prescriptively. In addition, this 17-item online survey is also a tool for researchers to establish patterns of self-reported behavior among adult educators in English language classrooms.

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to add to the body of knowledge of culturally responsive teaching by describing the practices of teachers in linguistically and ethnically heterogeneous environments of adult ESOL and EAP classrooms. By measuring the frequency and perceived importance of these practices, this study offers a limited, yet foundational depiction of a unique learning environment. However, there remains much left to explore in order to expand our understanding and practice of culturally responsive teaching.

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