

What Happens when Culturally Responsive Teaching is implemented in the  
English Language Learning Classroom as Part of Instruction?

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This work is dedicated to all English Language Learners who, because of being lost between two different cultures, struggle to find who they really are and to realize the value of their personal contributions to their learning. Your funds of knowledge are valuable and appreciated. I will never abandon you but will always embrace you. Do not let anyone make you feel less than who you are and be proud to share it with the world.

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Marisella Sacarello Ruiz

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING IS  
IMPLEMENTED IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING CLASSROOM  
AS PART OF INSTRUCTION?

Recent studies have shown that the proportion of English Language Learner (ELL) students in our school systems has increased significantly. Chabot (2021) stated that “ELL students make up one of every 10 students in the public-school classrooms in the U.S.” In this article, Chein Li, Associate professor of school psychology at Northeastern, is quoted as saying that “ELL students are often left behind due to the linguistic, cultural and economic hurdles that can derail their education and their life-long potential.” In other words, ELL students are being neglected by school systems that do not have the resources, qualified personnel, or commitment to help ELL students be included.

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and capabilities of an ELL student in a classroom in which the teacher established positive and authentic relationships with students by using culturally responsive teaching (CRT). The primary data in this qualitative researcher-practitioner study were drawn from video-recordings of sessions in which CRT was implemented. Another data source was the practitioner’s reflective journal documenting observations of daily classroom activities and conferences with individual students. It was found that exposing ELL students to rich academic language through topics in which they were interested helped them improve their academic performance. Practicing culturally responsive teaching (CRT) also helped ELL students to feel included and valued while learning similarities and differences among cultures. The lessons created by the practitioner promoted language

learning and critical thinking by emphasizing collaboration among students and providing positive reinforcement.

Overall, it was concluded that CRT can help ELL students develop a sense of belonging in school and promote their language learning through collaboration and the use of the funds of knowledge they bring to the classrooms.

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## INTRODUCTION

To be abandoned is to be nobody; to be accompanied is to be honored, a person. The people's accompaniment symbolizes a new honored status as a full human being.

-R.S. Goizueta

As the number of ELL students in school continues to increase dramatically, scholars have documented the issues they face in terms of inclusiveness and accommodation of their needs. In her article, "English Learners in Public School Classrooms are Often Left Behind. What can help them catch up?" Chabot (2021) reported that "ELL students make up one of every 10 students in the public school classrooms in the US," and quoted Cheih Li, Associate professor of school psychology at Northeastern University, who stated that "ELL students are often left behind due to the linguistic, cultural and economic hurdles that can derail their education and their life-long potential". As their numbers increase and resources become more limited, ELL students are in danger of being underserved by school systems which lack qualified personnel or simply the commitment to fully include ELL students and meet their needs.

How can ELL students be helped to become successful and productive members of society when they are not provided with an education adapted to their needs and strengths? Although the term English Language Learner (ELL) is used in the literature, the terms Emergent Bilinguals (EB) or Multilingual Learners (ML) would be more appropriate because they highlight the student's ability to learn another language rather than the deficit of not yet having fully mastered the English language. Nevertheless, to keep this research consistent with the literature, I use ELLs as the term commonly used by the U.S. federal government agencies to refer to students entering K-12 schools with different English language proficiency levels.

DeLollis (2021) describes the high-stakes challenge of learning a second language while trying to learn academic content within other subjects faced by the population of multilingual students in the United States. Parents who want to see their children flourish are also challenged in finding ways to help them, as are educators increasingly in charge of teaching this diverse population. It is a given that learning a new language takes time. In a study of the length of time needed to learn a new language, Hakuta et al., (2000) found that it takes three to five years to acquire oral proficiency and four to seven years to master academic language. As DeLollis (2021) demonstrated, students' aptitude for learning English impacts their ability to learn other subjects.

Overall, being able to function in a second language takes time, raising the issue of how this need is particularly problematic for ELLs. Quintero & Hansen, (2017) reported an achievement gap between native English speaking and ELL students of about 40 percentage points in fourth grade reading and in eighth-grade math. Also, fewer EL students take advanced courses, and at the time only about 59% were graduating from high school.

Even when there is an acknowledged need to help ELL students to bridge the academic gap, there are not enough ELL teachers with sufficient expertise to significantly improve the educational opportunities of ELL students. Teacher education programs are not adequately preparing teachers to help ELLs acquire the literacy skills they need for school learning. For her study, "Where Do I Start? K-12 Mainstream Teachers' Knowledge about Differentiating Instruction for ELLs in One U.S. School District," Stairs-Davenport (2021) surveyed teachers in this district regarding their experiences with and knowledge about serving ELL students and found that they were not prepared to teach ELL students. They expressed many uncertainties regarding curriculum, assessment, instruction, building community, and even how to start

working with ELL students. But despite the increasing number of ELL students across the United States, teachers are not required to have ELL training. Therefore, it is urgent for researchers to find and share ways for teachers to help ELL students overcome the language gap expeditiously, succeed academically, and achieve high school graduation and postsecondary studies.

In this research project, I explored how culturally responsive teaching (CRT) strategies can help ELL students feel acknowledged and included in the classroom community even when they are still developing English language proficiency. CRT practices are based on the premise that if teachers learn about the cultures and experiences of the ELL students in their classrooms and use what these students bring as learning resources, they will foster inclusion and support critical thinking learning, thus providing an excellent opportunity for all students in the classroom to learn about the world around them by learning about each other.

# Chapter 1

## 1.1 Statement of the Problem

The National Education Association (NEA, 2020) has reported that by 2025, one out of every four students in classrooms across the nation will be an English language learner (ELL). But even as the numbers are increasing, teacher education programs do not require pre-service teachers to take courses that address the needs of ELL students unless their goal is to obtain an ELL endorsement stating that they are capable of helping ELL students to become successful while in the public education system. Indiana, along with other states, has started a program for teachers to obtain an English as a New Language (ENL) license. According to Katie Jenner, the state's Secretary of Education at the time of this writing, the number of ELL students in Indiana has grown by more than 50% in the past five years to comprise more than 6% of the total student population. The number of Indiana teachers with an ENL license grew by 38% from 2019-2021, but that rate is not enough to serve all the ELL students in the public school systems, and such training is not mandated in Indiana (Smith, 2022). More needs to be done now to help ELL students to become successful while they are in public school systems.

Many of the students identified as ELLs are newcomers to America or second-generation offspring of parents who had immigrated to the states. They both face difficulties adapting to the U.S. school system among other challenges, one of which is that faced by ELL students whose teachers lack the knowledge of strategies to help them become successful students.

Mellom et al. (2018) observed that many teachers have misconceptions about the abilities of ELL students which negatively impact the students' behaviors and academic achievements. Their data included questionnaires administered at the beginning and end of the study and teachers' log data documenting their impressions and treatment of ELL students, and

their pedagogy and practices. The researchers concluded that teachers held negative attitudes towards ELL students and were prejudiced against their home cultures. However, the teachers' logs also presented evidence that training in culturally responsive pedagogies can change teachers' attitudes in the long term. This finding indicated that teachers had not been prepared to address the needs of ELL students and that their biases distorted their perceptions of students and got in the way of effective instructional practices, but these problems could be addressed by providing training in culturally responsive pedagogies and ways to use students' funds of knowledge as part of instruction.

Ogletree and Griffin (2023) asked pre- and in-service educators to write their opinions about why ELL students performed lower in NEAP reading assessment during the years 2015-2017. Analysis of their responses showed that ELL students were being seen from a deficit-oriented perspective, rather than in terms of the assets the students bring with them. Some considered the students' native language as inferior and hindering their English language acquisition. Others stated that families did not care about their children's education, and that parents did not want to get involved (p. 395). Teachers were actively concerned about their students' success, but they were focusing on what they considered the students and families lacked instead of highlighting the strengths they both have (p. 396).

This research emphasized the importance for teachers to gain knowledge about other cultures, develop cultural competencies and to get to know their students well enough to create a safe classroom atmosphere in which they felt comfortable and included.



## 1.2 Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore how English Language Learners (ELLs) feel and what they can do when the teacher creates positive and authentic relationships with them by using culturally responsive pedagogies. I also wanted to investigate ways to create the kinds of relationships that enable ELLs to increase their language proficiency while experiencing a sense of belonging in the classroom and expressing their cultures. As mentioned previously, although other terms are more descriptive of the assets that multi-lingual students bring to their English learning, I use the commonly accepted term ELL for consistency.

Howard et al, (2020) explained that “significant learning really cannot happen without a strong, positive relationship between the teacher and the student.” (p. 4). If teachers do not take time to learn about their students, their cultures, and their family traditions, then it is hard for the students to feel that they belong. This point matters to me because I believe that all students deserve appropriate education no matter what native languages they speak, where they are from, or what traditions they have at home. I also aim to be the voice of the unheard while giving ELL students the opportunity to be heard through the outcomes of this research. A classroom community should include all students regardless of their languages, racial identities, and nationalities. In fact, educators should take those characteristics as learning opportunities in a classroom in which all members benefit by learning from each other. Teachers can capitalize on the ELLs’ funds of knowledge as resources for all students to be able to understand and respect each other. These funds of knowledge reflect their traditions, their countries and their families and make education relevant and interesting to all students. As Palmer and Martinez (2013) advised, “If the teacher sees the cultural and linguistic background of each student as a resource and an advantage in the educational setting, students may find the curriculum more accessible.”

I learned English when I was in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. I was grateful to my teacher, because he went above and beyond the call of duty to help me feel that I belonged. Thus, my own experience taught me that if teachers get to know their ELLs as individuals and use what they bring to their classroom as resources, they will create inclusive classrooms in which critical thinking is promoted, and all students learn to value the diversity in the world around them.

### **1.3 Personal Significance of Study**

For 15 years, I have been an ELL teacher in a rural elementary school in which 13.8% of the students are Hispanic, 2.4% Black, 4% multiracial, and 79% White. Within this diverse student population, 7.8% are ELLs, and 53.2% qualify for free and reduced lunch (IDOE Compass 20-21). Most of the teachers are White and local to the area, many having attended the same school to which they have now returned to teach. In this setting, I have noticed how ELL students feel in my classroom compared to their mainstream classrooms. I have also seen how ELL students perform when they are in a classroom with a teacher who provides an enriched environment in which they feel accepted as legitimate members of the class.

Throughout the years, I have also observed that ELL students develop language proficiency at different rates. I have noticed that ELL students who feel that they belong and have formed genuine friendships are learning English at a faster rate than ELL students who feel like outsiders at school. As I have observed various classrooms, I have noticed that many ELL students struggle not only with learning subjects but also with trying to fit in and become part of the classroom culture. I would like to find a way to make learning a positive experience for all students.

When I go to parent-teacher conferences, it is a common refrain for teachers to state that ELL students struggle in the classroom and that their grades are not up to par because of their

lack of English language proficiency. I see this claim as a problem, because rather than focus on ELL students' deficits, teachers should look for ways to help them learn content and language at the same time, which will transfer to better grades and more successful language acquisition.

My hope is that with this study I have been able to demonstrate concretely what other scholars have argued, that ELL students deserve instructional approaches that assure them that they are valued as part of the classroom community and as human beings, including their culture and funds of knowledge.

### **Significance to the Field of Language Education**

#### **Importance of Cultural Responsiveness**

In the United States, 40% of the population belongs to racial and ethnic minorities (Gosh, 2020). The children of this diverse racial and ethnic population, many of whom are in homes where a language other than English is spoken, are attending the nation's schools. They also bring traditions and cultural perspectives that are often different from the cultural assumptions taken for granted in the U.S. classrooms. Teachers therefore need to be prepared to help students from different cultural backgrounds to achieve academic learning at level appropriate to their grade level, which requires helping students from different cultural backgrounds feel emotionally comfortable and acknowledged in the classroom. It is a given that prospective teachers will bring beliefs about teaching and learning derived from their own school experiences and upbringing to their teacher education programs (Feiman-Nemser, 2018). What is at issue is whether they will become open to helping diverse students, including ELLs, or believe that students from backgrounds different from theirs are else's responsibility.

## **Importance of Positive Relationships**

As discussed previously, Howard et al. (2020) stressed the importance of “positive relationship between teachers and students.” But how can teachers create such relationships with students from diverse backgrounds, in particular ELL students? To begin, teachers should endeavor to find out their students’ interests and hobbies so that they get to know them at a personal level. Also, teachers should make concerted efforts to interact with ELL students and learn what these students bring to the classroom that could be beneficial for everyone. To explore ways in which these positive and productive relationships can be developed between a teacher and her ELL students, as researcher-practitioner, I posed the following research questions:

### **1.4 Research Questions**

1. How do I, as a practitioner, help ELL students feel connected and included during instruction using Culturally Responsive Teaching strategies?
2. How do ELL students react when I use Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) strategies in my classroom?
3. What are the outcomes of using Culturally Responsive Teaching strategies?

### **1.5 Local Contexts**

This research was conducted in a public school in Indiana. This grade school has 370 students between the fifth and sixth grades. At the time of the study, 7.8% of the students were considered ELL students, 53.2 % were economically disadvantaged, and 24.6% were students with disabilities (IDOE-Compass, 20-21). The teachers in the school were 99% White, most of whom had been raised in the area and attended the same elementary school. As the ELL teacher, I was (and currently remain) the only teacher of Hispanic descent.

My day consists of pulling out ELL students according to their level of English proficiency as determined by the World-class Instructional and Assessment (WIDA) screener, to work on language development, reading comprehension, and writing conventions. I implement lessons modified to accommodate the language proficiency of the students and adapted to the culture and traditions of the ELL students for the purpose of creating a classroom of inquiry where everyone will learn from and about each other in a non-judgmental environment, enriched with the history of the students and their funds of knowledge.

### **1.6 Theoretical Framework: Culturally Responsive Pedagogies**

While working at an elementary school, I noticed that teachers are prone to focus on what they perceive as ELL students' deficits instead of celebrating their strengths and the learning opportunities they bring (Lopez, 2017). DeCapua and Marshall (2015) stated that often these students are evaluated and judged by what they do not know and what they cannot do to meet curriculum standards and school expectations. In contrast, culturally responsive pedagogy is a method for focusing on students' assets and the positive contribution they make to the classroom, including cultural and language diversity. Research has shown that teachers have tended to view learning English as a new language in a monolingual classroom as an impediment that delays academic learning (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020). Culturally responsive pedagogies, on the other hand, call for teachers to discard views of language and cultural diversities as barriers and establish positive relationships with students to open pathways for their learning (Hecht, 2022). This approach, including Culturally Relevant Pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995), Culturally Responsive Pedagogies (Gay, 2002), and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (Paris, 2021), takes advantage of students' assets. Although these methods may differ on some points, they concur

on the importance of creating positive relationships with students and helping students both develop cultural competence and achieve academic success.

Ladson-Billings (as cited in De Silva et al., 2018) asserts that “culturally relevant ... teaching helps students understand that there can be and should be learning connected to everyday problems of living in a society that is deeply divided along racial, ethnic, linguistic, economic, environmental, social, political, and cultural lines” (p. 27). That is, a culturally relevant learning approach helps students to recognize, understand, and critique social inequalities. Through culturally relevant pedagogies, teachers can help students to develop their academic capabilities by cultivating cultural competence and developing a critical consciousness. I agree with Ladson-Billings that culturally relevant pedagogies provides opportunities for students to connect with teachers and learn academically while affirming their cultural identity and learning about socio-political inequalities that exist in the educational system, which they may challenge in school and in other institutions (p. 28).

Gay (2010) defined culturally responsive teaching as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference and performance style of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for students.” In other words, teachers use what students bring to make education more salient and interesting to them and to empower them as experts in their cultural domains. Abduralthim and Orosco (2020) stated that for Culturally Responsive Teaching to be effective it is necessary for teachers to help build strong relationships among students, leverage their linguistic and cultural identities in order to make instruction meaningful, connect home with school, respond to issues that are important to students, and prepare and empower them to critically analyze and respond to social issues.

English Language Learners benefit from CRT because it deepens their cultural and literacy competence in multiple sociocultural contexts. To inform the curriculum and pedagogical practices, Decapua (2016) posited that students with limited or interrupted formal education can benefit from the creation of deep cultural knowledge and chose CRT as a method of instruction because, unlike a deficit approach, it encourages teachers to embrace and build on what the students bring into the classroom to minimize the cultural dissonance they face and to support their academic achievement (p. 229). Overall, it includes the development of cultural understanding that goes far beyond such surface features as local holidays, festivals, and food.

Culturally Responsive Teaching also takes into consideration the funds of knowledge that students have, which is often devalued and considered unimportant U.S. classrooms because it is not included in the literacy curriculum. Funds of knowledge include the social practices and understandings with which people make sense of their everyday lives, including their historical knowledge and the strategies developed over generations for survival and prosperity (Gonzalez et al., 2005). Teachers can allow students to experience being experts by sharing their funds of knowledge with others.

Farinde-Wu et al, (2017) conducted individual, semi-open-ended interviews with a group of teachers about their culturally responsive classrooms and strategies, and what made them successful. The teachers in this research have shared an educational philosophy that promoted learning opportunities for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language proficiency or socioeconomic class. All the teachers described strategies that they used to build rapport with their students and show that they cared, respected, and valued them as a means of supporting their learning processes.

The participants reported that their students succeeded because of the safe, democratic environment intentionally created in their classrooms. These teachers valued the students' funds of knowledge and created cooperative learning environments that encouraged students to critically analyze the world around them. Farinde-Wu et al. (2017) concluded that CRT promotes meaningful relationships central to helping students develop academic capabilities by giving them opportunities to learn from others, themselves, and their world around them.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy is an umbrella approach, based on decades of asset-based research, that includes Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2021), Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2014), and Linguistic Pedagogy (Hollie, 2015). Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy explicitly identifies White privilege as the problem and aims to give to students what had been denied them for socio-political and racist reasons, resulting in exclusion and oppression. According to Paris and Alim (2017), "Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster - to sustain - linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for a positive social transformation." (p.1). In other words, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies acknowledge the history behind the situations of oppressed ethnic groups, their languages, and the disparities inflicted on many by European colonization and the privileging of the White race.

In my teaching, and specifically for the purposes of this study, I have chosen to practice Culturally Responsive strategies because they foster the development of positive relationships among teachers and students, the use of the students' cultural knowledge as part of lessons, and students' sharing of their funds of knowledge. Culturally Responsive Pedagogies encourage group interaction and validate all cultures while connecting school learning with students' real-life experiences. Therefore, students from different cultural backgrounds feel included and are



recognized as experts on the topics relevant to their and their families' experiences, which help them feel acknowledged and have a sense of belonging. This acknowledgement in the classroom helps the students value their own and each other's cultures and learn about the world while seated in their own inclusive classrooms.

### **1.7 Background & Positionality of Researcher**

I am a native Puerto Rican bilingual teacher who, at the time of this writing, has lived in Indiana for 24 years, during the last 15 of which I have been a teacher in a school system in the state of Indiana. I am the older of two daughters and a first-generation college student. Other than my immediate family, consisting of my husband, who is also Puerto Rican, and my four children (ages 23, 20, 16, & 14), all born in Indiana, I do not have relatives in this state or any other part of the United States. I consider myself an English Language Learner because I started learning the language in the 10th grade. My English literature teacher made me feel that I belonged and respected my knowledge and background. Therefore, I felt valued, regardless of the language I spoke or my academic level.

My husband and I made the decision voluntarily to move to the United States where our careers were valued. It was difficult to leave our families behind, but it was the only option we saw to benefit our own family. When we first moved, I was not a teacher but in fact had another career. We were able to both be transferred to Indiana, but with time I realized that the work I was doing was not something I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I found teaching to be meaningful and so I chose to go back to school. I also decided to become an ELL teacher because in my previous job I saw how many employees who did not speak English struggled at work or were taken advantage of. I wanted to make a difference.

As a teacher, I believe all students can learn and deserve to be in classrooms where they feel they belong and are valuable to the classroom community. Because of my own personal experiences, I highly value my ELL students, and I want them to be treated with respect and receive opportunities that are appropriate for them to succeed, just like any other student.

### **1.8 My Roles as Researcher and Teacher**

7.8% of the students in the school where this research was conducted have been identified as ELL students. This school is a 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade level building where all students are divided into classrooms to give teachers a variety of students with different needs and learning capabilities. ELL students are pulled out from their mainstream classroom daily for 30 minutes to receive English language development instruction. I divided the students in small groups according to their language proficiency levels to make it more homogeneous for instruction. My goal is to help them improve their English language through different interventions including culturally responsive teaching lessons to help close the academic gap between native students and English language learners. Even though, they have a time assigned for daily language development instruction, they are welcome to come to my classroom when they have questions regarding to what they are learning in their mainstream classrooms or when they need help communicating with teachers or staff.

As both teacher and researcher, I juggle two complementary roles. As a teacher, I plan and teach culturally responsive lessons to English Language Learners. At the same time, as a researcher, I collect data by video recording my lessons and keeping a reflective journal in which, I document my daily classroom observations and reflections. As the only bilingual person on the staff of my school, I am always on call for interpreting phone calls and other cross-language communications and translating at parent-teacher conferences and Special Education

meetings. In other words, I am also the liaison between the school and families and a classroom teacher. It can be very frustrating to have to interrupt a lesson to take care of a parent, but at the same time, it is my duty to help parents to understand the school system and its expectations so they can help their children be successful (Christenson & Reschly, 2010). These interactions also provide valuable insights into the people and circumstances in my students' lives. I am also the only person available to help ELL students with any issues they have during the school day, which provides a critical perspective of the necessity of having bilingual staff. It is a little overwhelming to have to take care of my students, parents, and other students, but hopefully doing this research will open doors to understanding the importance of caring for all students and valuing the cultures and languages they bring to their classrooms and the importance of including their cultures in lessons.

In my role as a teacher, I connect with my students and discover their interests, what they know, and what they like which helps me to create lessons that are appropriate and culturally oriented. I am also the connection between the student and the teachers which I use to share my knowledge about the students, what students like and how they feel when they are in their classrooms. This is the part of my role that is not easy because sometimes teachers take personally the constructive critiques that I can share with them. An important advantage of being a bilingual person on staff is that parents are comfortable sharing their concerns with me and entrusting me with their children. I can advocate for them when there is something they do not understand. For example, parents come to me for advice not only regarding their children but also to have questions answered about how to navigate the services available in the community. I have helped families buy houses, understand situations with law enforcement, get lawyers, and understand the medical system. Working in the school system has helped me understand that

many of my Spanish speaking families are at a disadvantage compared to me. For example, difficult situations in their home countries have driven their decisions to move to other places where they can feel safe, find jobs, and build a future. Many of my ELL families are undocumented and have to live “in the shadows” in order to stay in U.S. territory.

Given the sensitivity of their situations, as a teacher and researcher, I want to make sure I can understand and portray the feelings my students have when they are with me and when I include them in lessons. It is also important that they feel confident asking when they have questions about a topic and can collaborate on researching the answer. Conducting this study has helped me systematically collect data regarding the students’ emotions, their growth, and their involvement in class during lessons. My role as a researcher has helped me understand their strengths and needs for learning support. For example, many struggle with reading and reading comprehension, but they are very strong in math. These insights help me develop ways to reinforce their strengths and help with their needs. Collecting data has also helped me focus on whether and how to help students feel included, answer their questions, encourage them to learn from other cultures, and identify similarities and differences among different cultural groups.

### **1.9 Definitions of Relevant Terms**

ELL - English Language Learners

WIDA – World Class Instructional Design and Assessment – English language proficiency assessment for grades k-12.

### **1.10 Organization of the Study**

The study was conducted for six consecutive weeks. The participants were fifth grade ELL students, who were pulled from other classrooms daily for 30 minutes of guided reading instruction and language development. Culturally responsive strategies were integrated into the lessons, along with modifications to instruction according to the students' language proficiency levels. The lessons were video recorded to capture the interactions of the ELL students during the lessons. At the end of the six weeks, students were interviewed in a semi structured format to gather information about what they noticed regarding the lessons during the 6 weeks of this research compared with what they normally did in the ELL room previously and in the mainstream classrooms. The focus was on how ELL students react and perform when they are in a classroom which is comfortable and inclusive and that their funds of knowledge are valued.

This study was a practitioner's inquiry employing qualitative thematic analysis. Once data was collected, codes emerging from the data were examined to identify repetitive themes and patterns. These themes were triangulated with findings from similar research on the same topic.

## **Chapter 2**

### **2.1 Introduction**

If asked who your favorite teacher was when you were in school, you would probably remember a teacher because of what he/she did for you. However, you might not remember the teaching strategies he/she used. I do not remember my English teacher's method of instruction, but I do remember that he was always available to help me learn and to be part of the class. He believed in me and made sure I was acknowledged and included. I consider that treatment as a defining mark of positive relationships between teachers and students. This research is about how positive relationships combined with Culturally Responsive Teaching strategies can affect the cultural dynamics of a classroom and the language learning of the ELL students in it. ELL students can be defined as newcomers to the United States or the children of immigrants (dubbed second generation) from countries in which English is not the native language and so is not the primary language spoken in the home. These students are being raised in a social and cultural environment, different from the native culture of their parents. They all deserve an education that encourages them to keep their cultural heritage and strengthen its roots. Accordingly, Culturally Responsive Pedagogies use students' cultural frames of reference to teach curriculum content, so it is relevant to their personal experiences, intellectual readiness, and prior learning. This approach breaks the stigma attached to teaching ELL students in the mainstream classroom. This research posits the question: Can ELL students and their teachers be successful in the classroom through Culturally Responsive Pedagogy strategies?

This review is an exploration of what the literature reveals regarding the use of Culturally Responsive Pedagogies to support the ELLs' language development. The following strands of inquiry are covered in this review: Teachers' knowledge about ELL students, the use of

Culturally Responsive Pedagogies, ELL students' funds of knowledge, and positive teacher-student relationships.

## **2.2 Teachers' Knowledge about ELL Students**

Teachers play a major role in the language development of ELL students. Varghese et al. (2005) stated that,

In order to understand language teaching and learning we need to understand teachers; and in order to understand teachers, we need to have a clearer sense of who they are: the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which they claim, or which are assigned to them (p.22).

Like anyone, teachers are individuals with their own values and cultures, many of whom chose this career mainly to make a difference in the lives of their students. Also, like anyone, teachers need to self-assess their own biases and prejudices to better understand how they portray themselves to their students. Many teachers have not been prepared to teach emergent bilinguals in mainstream classrooms (Suarez-Orozco, 2009) and do not know how to use students' diverse cultural and linguistic abilities as assets (Percy et al., 2019), as strategies for teaching ELL students were not included in their teacher education programs (Villegas, Saiz de la Mora, Martin & Mills 2018). In a recent study of teachers' knowledge of ways to help ELL students to learn, Stairs-Davenport (2021) found that many teachers have legitimate questions on how to support ELL students in their mainstream classrooms. Working with these students is not only a matter of identifying or extrapolating from pedagogical practices that are appropriate with mainstream students. Teachers must renegotiate their professional identities with students and colleagues within the professional community (Stairs-Davenport, 2021). In other words, teachers can be prepared to teach, but their professional identities must be expanded to meet the

challenges of helping students who struggle to cope with unfamiliar language and academic expectations. Even having appropriate pedagogical strategies is not sufficient to teach these students successfully; teachers must feel a commitment to do so and embrace the constant evolving of their identities. Gunn et al. (2013) analyzed the autobiographies of 24 pre-service teachers, who were instructed to write all they could about their cultures and the reasons why they decided to become teachers. This assignment encouraged many of the teachers to reflect critically on components of their cultures and express their understanding of what needs to be done to help teachers become culturally responsive. Such “snapshot biographies” can help teacher educators to start conversations with students about culture, teaching and learning (Singleton & Linton, 2006). Students in U.S. public schools increasingly come from other countries, and the differences between their former and current education can impact their literacy skills and ability to learn (Snow, 2002).

Adams and Marshal (1996) described identity as a transactional process, stating that “An individual’s personal and social identity not only is shaped, in part, by the living system around the individual but the individual’s identity can shape and change the nature of these living systems.” Thus, teachers’ values and beliefs are continually shaped by their upbringing, education and environment, these in turn affect the space where they are as well as those around them. I am who I am because of experiences that shaped me. I have evolved from being an ELL student who was fortunate to have a teacher who created a relationship of trust and kindness with me. I may not remember what I learned from him, but I do remember that he tried to help me feel included in his class even when the lack of language prevented me from forming ties with my peers. Now in the learning environment I create I reflect this kindness in my work with students like I was.



Haneda and Monobe (2009) stated that “the cultural, linguistic and educational diversity of students in the same classroom has been viewed as a particular pedagogical challenge.” Teachers who do not know how to help ELL students learn are likely to view them as a burden. Lee (2004) found that teacher preparation programs were not updated to include training focused on teaching ELL learners, but rather related topics were scattered across several courses, and concluded that “Instructional congruence requires that teachers integrate academic disciplines with students’ linguistic and cultural experiences to promote academic achievement” (p.69). All students need an equitable environment where they can achieve their best potential. Despite the number of options in teacher education programs, there is insufficient preparation for teaching the diverse student population in today’s schools (Pettit, 2011). As a result, many mainstream teachers believe that teaching ELLs is solely the responsibility of the ELL teacher (Yoon, 2008). I remember a first grade teacher who had a new ELL student in the classroom. It was evident that she did not know how to help him learn. One day she left me a note stating, “He is lost right now!” No ELL-friendly strategies were implemented with this student, who was happiest when he was pulled out for language development. Many students spend their days in school that way because teachers do not know what to do to help them acquire a language or learn.

Schrodt et al. (2007) observed that “The power teachers possess is evident when a teacher communicates and behaves in ways that influence students’ achievement. Such influence is positive when teachers encourage students, relate to them, take time to listen, and provide step by step guidance (Diaz et al., 2016). In turn, ELL students respond positively to teachers who strive to understand, motivate, and encourage them by being sensitive to the needs of language learners, slowing down their speech, and writing what they say on the board for students to have visual as well as aural access to their words.

### **2.3 Culturally Responsive Strategies within the Asset-Based Context**

Hetch (2022) analyzed the effects of several culturally responsive strategies on student's academic growth, such as allowing the use of home language and attending to emotional as well as cognitive development. Incorporating ELL students' cultural practices into lessons was found to result in higher reading scores (Lopez, 2017; as cited by Hetch, 2022). Also, school leadership was found to be a critical factor in the success of ELL students (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; as cited by Hetch, 2022). In this study, the school principal acknowledged the value of the ELL students' languages and cultures and worked with teachers on ways to use these as assets to support bilingualism, biliteracy and biculturalism. Valuing ELL students' cultures and languages created a positive spin that validated the use of culturally responsive teaching methods.

Newcomer et al, (2020) found that students whose cultures, traditions, and languages were viewed as strengths had a sense of belonging to the classroom community and saw the importance of contributing to the whole group by sharing their personal experiences. In this study, teachers focused on creating relationships with ELL refugee students, all of whom showed academic growth and improved socio-emotional wellbeing due to the personal teacher-student personal connection, which enabled them to feel a part of the classroom community.

Ogletree & Griffin (2023) conducted a comprehensive study in which pre- and in-service teachers provided their explanations of why Latinx students and bi/multilingual learners' English reading scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) were significantly lower than those of English dominant peers. They found that while many teachers expressed having the best intentions to teach Latinx or bi/multilingual students, they lacked knowledge of how to do it, but still attributed the lower reading scores to the students' general academic deficiency. Others understood that in English the test was weighted in favor of native speakers.

This study indicated that teachers often wish to help ELL students, but they do not know how to implement strategies that will benefit all students in a diverse classroom, suggesting that training in Culturally Responsive Pedagogies and the development of a safe space for ELL students can promote all students' academic growth. ELL students deserve this kind of pedagogy, and teachers need to be culturally mindful about the assets these students bring, which will support the cultural understanding and critical thinking all students need to be prepared to live in a globalized world. From this perspective, rather than a challenge, student diversity is viewed as a valuable opportunity for all students to learn from each other in the comfort of their own classrooms.

As Gay (2010) explained, Culturally Responsive Teaching entails “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) while enriching the learning of all students in the classroom (Gay, 2002). In their exploration of the effects of teachers' beliefs and Latino students' academic achievement, Matthews, and Lopez (2019) found that honoring and integrating students' culture through heritage language while setting high academic expectations resulted in improved academic achievement. Teachers need to study themselves and their practices to avoid biases that could impede the students' academic achievement. It is a constant mediation between teachers and reflections on their practice using culturally responsive pedagogies and using their students' cultures as assets for their learning.

#### **2.4 The Role of ELL Students' Funds of Knowledge in Asset Based Pedagogies**

A basic strategy of Culturally Responsive Pedagogies is tapping into students' lives for knowledge that enriches instructional content. Recognizing students' knowledgeability fairly won from experience is an effective way to engage them and promote their agency as learners

(Gonzalez et al., 2005). Students can sense when they do not belong in a group, including the classroom, and are likely to resist institutional manipulations of their behaviors, choices, goals or values that threaten their identity (Langhout, 2005). Endorsing funds of knowledge derived from their experiences and home language and cultures, and of students strengthens students' identity (Gonzalez et al., 2005). Students are not in particular school classrooms by choice, to which they have come with their own views of the world influenced by cultural expectations and traditions that may differ from those of others. These should not be stripped away from them through assimilation. On the contrary, it should be valued, respected, and shared to help all students to become acculturated to the rich diversity of humanity.

Bacon (2017) stated that it is vital to create opportunities for ELL students to “voice their feelings” and develop an understanding of the political nature of social contexts and cultural practices by incorporating socio-political discussions in the classroom. The focus of this study was on exploring ELL students' reactions to and understandings gained from culturally responsive teaching. As a practitioner-researcher, I determined that opportunities to be active participants and providers of knowledge helped students begin to develop as empowered, social and politically aware global citizens. This identity formation was supported by lessons that included issues that mattered to ELL students. Such strategies enable them to use their unique identities and cultural experiences to open the eyes of other students to the world, thus creating a globalized classroom open to new cultures in which everyone is learning legitimate content while practicing critical and creative thinking.

Moll (2010) argued that “when students witness the validation of their culture and language, hence of themselves, within the educational process, when they “see themselves” in their schooling, they combine their home or community identities with an academic identity.”

(p.456). When teachers use authentic materials in which students can see themselves, they validate students' sense that they are acknowledged and are legitimate members of the school community.

### **2.5 Positive Teacher-Student Relationships in Culturally Responsive Classrooms**

Claessens et al. (2017) asserted that "The ability to create and maintain positive, one on one relationships with students is of major importance for teacher job satisfaction and wellbeing." When teachers show respect for their students, they will reciprocate, promoting a positive environment. This environment will in turn influence the students' motivation to learn.

In a study that involved semi-structured interviews with ELL students, Diaz et al. (2016) learned that they wanted their instructors to try to understand them, to motivate them by encouraging their learning, and to provide support. They wanted the instructors to try to relate to them on a personal level, to slow down their speech and to write what they say on the board. The researchers also found that ELL students felt that they did not belong in their classrooms and that they were perceived as slow. On the other hand, when the students received encouragement, they were more likely to succeed, showing the importance of positive reinforcement and encouragement in motivating ELLs.

ELLs also said they struggled to maintain their cultural identity and stay true to their roots. Others often felt that they were not capable of succeeding academically, but, when teachers acknowledged their abilities and were open to learning about their cultures, ELL students became more positive.

During follow up interviews, ELL students stated that instructors who were caring and shared control, trust, and intimacy with students, cultivating interpersonal relationships, helped

them feel good about themselves and motivated them. They wanted to please such teachers, whom they were likely to recommend to others.

Rimm-Kaufman et al., (2010) argued that positive relationships between teachers and students have long lasting implications for both students' academics and their social development. Klem and Connell (2004) found that teachers who experienced close relationships with students reported that students were less likely to avoid school and were more cooperative and engaged in learning. McCormick and O'Connor (2015) reported that positive student-teacher relationships were directly linked to increases in elementary school students' reading achievement. Yunus et al. (2011) supported previous findings that positive teacher-student relationships improved management as well as the ambiance of ELL classrooms, making them conducive, comfortable, and safe for self-learning and self-discovery teaching in classrooms. They concluded that positive teacher-student relationships improved learning. Adjusting to school is based on a student's ability to form a positive relationship with the teacher (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Teachers also need to broaden their thinking and be open to learning about their students' backgrounds and prior knowledge.

Baskerville (2011) studied a drama class in New Zealand composed of 13- and 14-year-old boys and girls of different ethnicities, between the ages of 13 and 14, students and teachers were able to open up and share their stories without being judged or criticized. It was concluded that this method helps understand each other and tolerate and respect differences. By sharing their stories in a safe environment, teachers and students developed trust in each other and were able to make sense of their own and others' experiences. This approach developed a positive atmosphere of respect and empathy toward each other, and it built positive relationships in a culturally inclusive classroom.

Yoon (2008) conducted a series of interviews with three 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teachers, to learn about how they approached ELL students in their classrooms. One teacher stood out by actively getting to know students, using culturally relevant teaching strategies, and meeting the students' cultural, social, and academic needs. This approach helped build trusting relationships as teachers and students celebrated differences and ELL students positioned themselves as active participants, because they felt accepted as part of the community. Yoon observed that "When the teacher employed multicultural and globalized activities and accommodated the ELL's cultural differences, the students felt more at home, experienced a sense of belonging, and participated in an active manner." (p. 23). Koca (2016) also found that positive teacher-student relationships can lead to a warmer classroom environment that facilitates students' adaptation to school and increases their motivation to learn. Similarly, Davis (2003) reported that "positive teacher-student interaction enhanced classroom learning and student motivation by building a safe and supportive context for students to become motivated for learning and take intellectual risks." (p. 220). These findings provide evidence of the power of positive relationships with teachers to increase students' motivation and perseverance to learn. As Davis argues, what makes the difference is teachers' willingness to put effort into communicating with ELL students, to interact with and learn from them, and to include their realities in lessons.

## **2.6 Conclusion: Implementing Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Strategies**

Focusing on the strengths ELL students bring into the classrooms through a culturally responsive approach is crucial for achieving equity in education. Teachers and students should be valued for what they bring to the classroom rather than marginalized for what they may lack or need to work on. Culturally Responsive Teaching unlocks students' potential by focusing on their talents. One way of doing this is through positive relationships in a safe environment where

students can be themselves without being judged due to their heritage or culture, where their language is used for instruction and/or learning, and where communication exists to clarify meaning, clear up confusions, and bridge differences. Those are the reasons why I chose this topic for my research. It is well established in the literature that many teacher programs do not require courses specific to teaching ELL strategies (Villegas et al., 2018; Stairs-Davenport, 2021). It is hoped that this research can help mainstream teachers who lack such training to analyze their practices and their pedagogy themselves and seek ways to enhance inclusion and communication in their pedagogy. The ideas and examples provided may help them consider ways to make their classrooms more student and inquiry oriented and to utilize their students' experiences in their teaching to help students relate to the content being learned and achieve their best potential.

I have personally witnessed how the identity of ELL students is threatened, making them feel that they do not belong, or that their heritage has no meaning. Endorsing funds of knowledge, the use of home language, culture and experiences can help strengthen students' identity (Gonzalez et al., 2005).

Through this research I hope to demonstrate how the use of Culturally Responsive Teaching validates ELL students' cultures, languages, and funds of knowledge so they can realize that they are important and their contributions in the classroom are valued. As their teacher, I want them to realize that I “see” them, meaning that I acknowledge their uniqueness and worth. It is my duty to help them grow in an environment where they can feel included, and their opinions are valued. Also, it is important for me to open their eyes to the world around them and to help them improve their critical thinking and make well thought out decisions about their world around them. Rashid et al. (2021) discussed the inseparable relationship between



language and culture and how culture enhances students' language acquisition. They stated that "language is a part of culture, and culture is a part of language. The two are strongly depended on each other and should be taught that way as well." (p.49). In other words, culture and language go hand in hand, not only because they reflect each other, but because culture is a social act which supports shared warm feelings and solidarity among speakers. Therefore, whenever possible, it is important to incorporate students' uses of their native languages in their learning processes. I have observed changes in my students' identity when their cultures and funds of knowledge are used as resources in their language development.

Last, concerning the relationship between students and teachers, this study addressed how my ELL students react when I try to understand them, make myself vulnerable in situations, and correlate my experiences with theirs. Yunus et al. (2011) interviewed pre-service teachers about how student-teacher relationship was a factor affecting ESL students' motivation and academic achievement in their classrooms. Based on their responses, teacher-student relationships contributed significantly to both.

In conclusion, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, along with positive teacher-student relationships, can create a safe place where students feel comfortable about themselves and who they are. This sense of well-being will in turn improve their critical thinking while learning from others. I hope that through this research, I can demonstrate what ELL students can do in a safe environment where they feel that they are valued, not only as students but because of their life experiences, cultures, and language, which they bring as resources to the class.

I also hope that my representation of my ELL students' responses to my culturally responsive practices has shown how they feel when they are included and acknowledged despite their levels of language proficiency as well as how they feel in the role "experts" on topics that

are important to them and their peers as members of today's emerging generation in a world in which globalization will bring people together. By sharing what they know about themselves, their countries, and families in the classroom, they are preparing to be citizens who strive to promote understanding and peace in a converging world. I am a firm believer that ELL students will learn to work for all of humanity even as emergent bilinguals in classrooms in which they feel acknowledged and included.

## Chapter 3

### 3.1 Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

My purpose in conducting this practitioner inquiry was to understand how my ELL students responded to my culturally responsive teaching, in particular with regard to how it affected their motivation to learn and their identity as included and valued members of the classroom community. This research documents ELL students' responses to culturally responsive practices in my 5th grade ELL classroom, to which students from different cultures and English language proficiencies are pulled out daily from the mainstream classrooms. My goal was to examine how positive relationships with ELL students can be developed, not only with me as the teacher but also among each other. Using qualitative methods, I observed how students interacted and how their behavior (e.g., willingness to share, happiness) changed when they were in a classroom environment where they felt welcome and acknowledged and where their funds of knowledge and culture were valued. According to Kena et al. (2016), "It is already known that English Language Learners (ELLs) come from different places, and they bring myriad complex experiences with poverty, oppression, and interrupted schooling." It is imperative that teachers are well prepared to address the needs of this continually growing population. During any particular day, ELL students grouped according to grade and language proficiency level, are pulled out for 30 minutes daily to work on language development instruction. They are also welcome to stop by my classroom any time they have questions regarding assignments from their main classroom or any issue that they might have. As I mentioned previously, during pull out times I provided culturally responsive lessons to track how their behavior to learning changed compared to what they normally do in a mainstream classroom.

## **Research Questions**

This qualitative study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do I, as a practitioner, help ELL students feel connected and included during instruction using Culturally Responsive Teaching strategies?
2. How do ELL students react when I use Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) strategies in my classroom?
3. What are the outcomes of using Culturally Responsive Teaching strategies?

## **Connecting Research Methods to Research Questions**

This is a qualitative study based on data collected from observations of English Language Learners when they were in a classroom where they felt wanted and included. The data, which comprised video recordings of classroom lessons during their 30 minutes guided reading/language instruction in which I applied culturally responsive teaching strategies, my daily reflective journal and classroom notes, and notes from a semi structured interview conducted as a group at the end of the research, were collected during six weeks of research. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I documented codes and identified the themes and patterns in the data to see how the students reacted to lessons that integrated their cultural backgrounds in a space where their funds of knowledge were valued.

### **3.2 Role of the Researcher**

In my roles as teacher and researcher, I taught culturally responsive lessons to English Language Learners (ELLs) while video recording lessons to be used as classroom observation data. I also kept a log of reflections about lessons and each day's events as data. I included the use of Total Physical Response (TPR) to increase the understanding of ELL students with lower language proficiency level as a method to help students to memorize commands or some

vocabulary easily through physical movement and without the use of their native language. This language teaching method has been implemented for a long time because it gives emphasis to listening comprehension before language production. After six weeks, I held a group semi structured interview to determine whether and how culturally responsive strategies helped ELL students feel valued. Once all data were collected, I looked for codes emerging from the data to find recurring themes and patterns, which I then triangulated with similar research on the same topic.

### **3.3 Context of the Study**

This study took place in an elementary school in Indiana. At the time of the study, the population of this school, according to the IDOE Compass, totaled 360 students, of whom 60% were economically disadvantaged students, 7.8% ELLs, and 24.6% students with disabilities (IEP). The fifth-grade ELL students in this study had different English language proficiency levels and cultural backgrounds. They were pulled out of the regular classroom to receive enriched English Language instruction for 30 minutes daily.

### **3.4 Study Participants**

The participants in this research study were fifth-grade ELL students, age 10 or 11, four boys and five girls. (See Table 3.1)

Table 3.1 Ages and Genders of Participants

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Nora	10 years old	Female
Clara	10 years old	Female
Bryan	11 years old	Male
Dora	10 years old	Female
Maura	10 years old	Female
Jovani	11 years old	Male
Daniel	11 years old	Male
Damian	10 years old	Male
Joan	10 years old	Female

Bryan was a newcomer student from Haiti; Damian was a newcomer from Chile from Haitian parents; and Joan was a newcomer from Puerto Rico. Clara and Nora were first generation children of Haitian immigrants. Maura and Jovani were first generation children of Mexican immigrants. Daniel was a first-generation child of Guatemalan immigrants. They were all in different mainstream classrooms with different teachers, but they came together daily in my classroom for language development. I chose this grade level for this study because at this stage, students are more interested in learning and finding information than those at younger grade levels. Also, they are more knowledgeable about education and outspoken when expressing their feelings and responses.

Although they all come from different places and different backgrounds, they all have the same goal, to become proficient in English. Many bring with them their experiences from other countries, which should be taken into consideration and incorporated into their daily lessons as a good way to teach all students about the world while learning from each other. Unfortunately, this sharing usually does not happen. Teachers feel increasing tension because they do not know what to do with the ELL students in their classrooms. Most of the time, bilingual students have to carry the responsibility of helping the teacher. I think this is okay if the student likes to help, but the teacher must not impose that responsibility onto a student who is there with the same purpose of learning as any other student in the classroom. If a bilingual student does not receive guidance and help with the interpretation, that student is abandoned to try to do what the others are doing on his/her own. Many ELL students who experience this situation feel discouraged, their attendance suffers, and their English language development takes longer. But when the ELL student feels classroom connection within the school in any way, whether it is because of participating sports or forming a friendship with another student, then the ELL student's language development flourishes. I have observed this with many of my ELL students. I can see that when ELL students want to learn, their attitudes change, their abilities become evident, and their WIDA scores improve. Those who have a friend from the beginning of the year or are embraced because of a sport; are more inclined to improve their language at a rapid rate than ELL students who cannot find their way to fit in.

All ELL students take the WIDA Access test yearly as a measure of their English language development on a six-level scale: 1-Entering, 2-Emerging, 3-Developing, 4-Expanding, 5-Bridging, and 6-Reaching). Indiana, under law, requires that ELL students reach a level 5 to be considered English proficient. For example, because Damian and Joan, who had been in the

United States less than six months, tested at the Entering level, they would need more assistance than the other students. Clara and Bryan both tested at the Emerging level, but while Clara was open to speaking the language, she still struggled with reading and writing. Bryan had become very confident in speaking even though he had been in the United States for only a year. Nora, Daniel, Maura, and Jiovani were in the developing stages. They could speak eloquently but still needed help with thinking critically to answer questions related to the text. They were a very significant group for this study because they had different language proficiency levels and diverse cultural backgrounds.

### **3.5 Data Collection Procedures**

In my daily reflective journal and ethnographic notes, I documented what happened with my students as I implemented culturally appropriate lessons with my class of nine English Language Learner students for six weeks during September and October 2022. The classes were video recorded so I would later be able to observe the students' responses and actions during the lessons. At the conclusion of the research, I held a semi structured conferences with the group of ELL student included in this research to learn more about the students' reactions to the lessons and to get their feedback about how they felt then and were feeling now after the lessons were taught.



## Research Timeline

Activity	Data	Methodology	Findings
Daily Reflective Journal 2 hours daily Sept. 2022- Oct. 2022	My daily routine and actions as an ELL teacher were recorded	Journal entries provided a complete record of all class activities and events.	Information was coded to identify themes and patterns regarding lessons, students, and daily events.
Video recording of sessions Total of 5 videos per week for 6 weeks were recorded	Data was collected in the form of Videoant.com video recordings.	Videos were used to observe the performance of students during the lesson.	Information from videos was coded to identify themes and patterns regarding the performance of the students, and the outcomes from the lessons.
ELL students' interviews	ELL students were interviewed as a group at the end of the six weeks to find out more about the lessons and how they felt when lessons were implemented.	Interview data in the form of teacher's notes.	Data from the students' interviews were collected and coded to find patterns and themes regarding students' experiences during the culturally responsive lessons.

### 3.6 Data analysis procedures

For this research, data included video recorded lessons, my journal of notes and reflections on each day's lesson and my interviews with individual students. Video data of the students' responses and my observations of students' behavior were analyzed to find themes that indicated student engagement with the lessons and willingness to participate in class activities.

I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide to analyze data. I first examined my notes and the video recordings until I became very familiar with all the data. I then analyzed and grouped initial codes to determine emerging themes. As I organized the data in a meaningful and

systematic way, more codes came to light, facilitating my interpretation of the data in relation to my research questions. I reviewed the themes that emerged and identified sub-themes according to the codes that surfaced from the video recorded lessons and field notes. When I had captured themes and sub-themes in relation to the research questions, I triangulated these results with the relevant literature to find similarities and differences in the results I obtained from the data. My results enabled me to identify recommendations for teachers to create nurturing and language rich environments for English Language Learner students where they feel acknowledged and appreciated and can develop their identities while expanding their critical global awareness.

**Table 3.2. Methods of Data Collection and Analysis**

<b><i>What happens when Culturally Responsive strategies are implemented in the English Language Learning classroom as part of instruction?</i></b>			
<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Theoretical Framework</b>	<b>Data</b>	<b>Approach to Analysis</b>
1. How do I, as a practitioner, help ELL students feel connected and included during instruction using Culturally Responsive Teaching strategies?	Culturally Responsive Teaching (Gay, 2002)	Video recorded observations.  Field notes.	Contextualizing the findings in the literature-based framework (Braum & Clarke, 2006)
2. How do ELL students react when I use culturally responsive teaching (CRT) strategies in my classroom?	Culturally Responsive Teaching (Gay, 2002)  Funds of Knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005)	Video recorded observations.  Field notes	Contextualizing the findings in the literature-based framework (Braum & Clarke, 2006)
3. What are the outcomes of using Culturally Responsive Teaching strategies?	Culturally Responsive Teaching (Gay, 2018)  Funds of Knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005)	Video recorded observations.  Field notes  Reflective journal	Contextualizing the findings in the literature-based framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

### **3.7 Strategies for Validating Findings/Trustworthiness/Assessing Quality**

Data included video recordings of class sessions and my reflections as the practitioner. I created a codebook to keep a log of codes until the data was saturated. I organized codes into patterns to find themes, and then triangulated these with prior related research to identify similarities and differences in findings.

#### **Ethical Provisions**

##### 1. Protection of participants from harm

A. I used pseudonyms to protect students' identity and privacy.

B. I avoided disclosing information that could harm participants.

##### 2. Power

A. I maintained an equitable research-participant relationship.

B. I was mindful when interviewing participants to avoid positions of power other than that of teacher.

C. I was vulnerable by being open to any questions from participants.

##### 3. Disclosure of comprehensive findings

A. I sided with participants by disclosing only results that positioned them positively.

## **Chapter 4 Existing Problem in Community and School Contexts**

In my 15 years of working as an ELL teacher, I have observed my ELL students in their mainstream classrooms and when they are in small groups and wanted to document the problem in schools when teachers are not prepared to have ELL students in the classroom. As is well documented, the numbers of ELL students in U.S. school systems are climbing (Chabot, 2021). It is also stated in the literature that ELL students need not only to learn a new language but also, to keep up with the academic requirements of their grade levels and achieve academic success, and to find ways to fit in socially with peers and be part of the school community (Quintero & Hansen, 2017). I find this to be a lot for a student to accomplish without being provided accommodations and differentiated instruction that are appropriate for ELL students and that promote the sense of belonging that every student deserves and should have in every classroom.

### **4.1 The Community and School Context**

#### **Family Work Activities**

According to the Daviess County Economic Development, the county has a growing percentage Hispanic population as well as the second largest Haitian population and the seventh largest Amish settlement in the nation (Competitive Advantage, 2023). As previously mentioned, the community is not that big, but there are many employment opportunities in this area, including a large turkey processing plant, where many of the parents of ELL students work. The area also has a furniture plant, a plastics plant, and many restaurants for work placement. In addition, some parents commute to other towns for work but remain living in this area.

Governmental offices are also a source of employment. However, there are not very many Hispanic employees in these kinds of white-collar jobs. Most of the time, Hispanic residents work for processing plants and restaurants. There have been instances where Hispanic

individuals begin work for small businesses or banks, but for some reason, their employment does not last.

### **Youth Leisure Activities**

For leisure activities, the county has a park open to everyone as well as a 4H club and a Soccer Federation, in which many ELL students participate recreationally though there is still room for more to participate. 4H, a farming-focused youth club, is not as appealing to Hispanic families, perhaps because they perceive it as exclusive to those involved in livestock agriculture and not open to everyone who might want to participate. My perspective is that 4H here in Daviess County has intentionally not been selling their program to attract participants beyond their traditional membership, so others do not know all procedures for getting involved in 4H. There is a YMCA with sports programs for students and an after-school program, but lower income families do not get involved because of the high fees charged. Even though this area is very diverse, this diversity is not visible in the businesses or the events that this community celebrates during the year. There are no cultural centers or activities representing the diverse population. Surrounding areas do have events to include families from other cultures, but this area declines to host events to help all local families feel welcomed.

As an ELL teacher, I look for opportunities to get my students involved in activities in the community. Many ELL students of different ages play soccer for the Soccer Federation. ELL students tend to be very skilled in soccer, and because of that, there are some who have been sponsored by other families because of the high cost to be part of the program. This participation provides a fantastic opportunity for ELL students to continue their language development outside of the classroom.

Many of my ELLs' families opt for going to the park when the weather is pleasant. Other than that, on weekends they mainly take care of chores and spend time at home with family members and friends. In general, there are not very many options available for things to do unless families are willing to drive to the nearby cities. Thus, extracurricular activities provided by schools are an important source of recreation but do not serve all students' needs.

### **Youth School-Based Leisure Activities**

After school extracurricular activities, like basketball, volleyball, soccer, football, the Just Say No club, and Robotics are for all students. Although there is after school tutoring, there is no social program designed specifically to help ELL students to continue developing their language skills. Part of my role as the ELL teacher is to get the students involved in many of the activities available so they can have something to do after school and have opportunities to practice using English, but there are often obstacles. In particular, lack of transportation prevents ELL students from participating in certain activities and services. For example, transportation for sports activities is provided only for players to attend away games. Therefore, many of my ELL students cannot take advantage of tutoring services or any extracurricular events.

## **4.2 The Research Context**

The school in this research is a public school in a rural county with a total population of 12,000 (Census, 2020) in Indiana. The last census listed the population as almost 85% White, about 12% Hispanic, and under 5% Black African American. The year of the study, the school district switched to grade level buildings, and all fifth and sixth grade students were assigned to my school, which has special enrichment classes like physical education and art. Also, for the first time the school provided band/choir classes for fifth and sixth grade students.

## **The School's Physical Structure**

The school operated a modified classroom-switching schedule to get the students adjusted to changing classes when they eventually go to junior high. The building was organized into three pods, each of which had three classrooms and a cohort of students, who took classes within the pod and had recess and lunch together. Students within a pod rotated among three teachers who taught subjects along with Language Arts. Due to time and space constraints, there was little interaction among pods.

Three special education teachers were available to provide extra support for students in all pods who had learning disabilities. Students were pulled out from regular classrooms for the extra instruction. I pulled out ELL students daily to supplement what they were doing in the subject classrooms with language/vocabulary instruction using culturally responsive teaching strategies.

## **The Teachers and School Routine**

In this school, all the teachers but me were White. Many of the teachers in this corporation had once been students within it. Only 2 of the 13 teachers in this school were not native to this area. Each classroom had a view board in the classroom and every student was assigned a computer. Students spent most of the school day on their computers. The platform for students' work was Google classroom. Classrooms were generally quiet unless students were working on cooperative learning assignments.

Students started the day in their home classrooms, where they also ate breakfast. There was a constant movement of students in the hallways as they circulated among classrooms throughout the day. Teachers were very welcoming to students and seemed to be happy with the arrangement. They were willing to have students pulled out from their classrooms for special



education and English language learning. Most taught to the middle range of learners and relied on special education teachers to help fill the gaps in their students' understanding. The same was true of work with ELL students. Teachers taught to the middle, and ELL students who were not doing well were sent to me to go over their work or do other work that was not included in their grades. I believe that the teachers wanted to support students' learning, but they were overwhelmed with everything they had to do, including standards-based instruction, and managing students' behaviors and the different students' levels in their classrooms.

### **Literacy Curriculum and Language Learners**

To measure students' growth in reading and math three times annually, this school used i-Ready (I-Ready Reading: Achieving Growth for All Students, nd). Students also worked on lessons adapted to their levels throughout the day. Students took the state-mandated test at the end of April. As a K-6 school, this school had received a grade of B for its state mandated test performance, while the other elementary schools in the district received grades ranging from C to F, and one school was assigned to the school improvement program by the state of Indiana. The grade level building rearrangement provided the opportunity to start anew as the students were redistributed among elementary schools.

Teachers work very hard to try to get students to understand the importance of the state mandated test for our district. Due to state regulations, teachers are expected to use and teach repository tests to help students prepare to take the state-mandated test and be successful. This is one of the reasons why language proficiency is seen as an issue by many teachers. They want their students to be successful, and it is often difficult for them to understand that learning a language takes time and that there are many reasons why progress in language development varies among ELL students.

### **4.3 Approaches to Teaching ELL Students**

At the time of the study, the number of ELL-qualified teachers in the state was not sufficient to serve the number of ELL students. On a positive note, however, teachers were being proactive in obtaining ELL certification. Mellom et al. (2008) observed that many mainstream teachers have erroneous beliefs about ELL students' negative behaviors and low academic achievement. Many teachers have focused on the deficiencies that ELL students bring to the classrooms, instead of taking advantage of ELL students' funds of knowledge from their experiences, their cultures, and languages to enrich instruction in their classrooms. To address this issue, I aimed in my research to explore how the power of positive relationships together with Culturally Responsive Teaching, which Gay (2013) described as a technique for improving the performance of underachieving ethnically and racially diverse students," (p.67) could be beneficial for both students and teachers. Farinde-Wu et al, (2017) interviewed seven award-winning teachers about strategies they used to cultivate a culturally responsive classroom environment. They mentioned the importance of building relationships, respect and communication with students while celebrating small successes and frequently encouraging students' efforts. In these ways, culturally responsive teaching strategies enable teachers to create a safe environment where students from diverse backgrounds have the opportunity to share their funds of knowledge without their language proficiency or ethnicity being judged. During this research, several of the techniques mentioned before were implemented. The results of the implementation of culturally responsive strategies are elaborated in chapter 5.

#### **Survey of Classroom Teachers' Perspectives and Practices with ELLs**

At the beginning of the research, I surveyed the classroom teachers of the students included in my research to get an idea of what they knew about the ELL students in their

classrooms and what they do to help. One of the teachers stated, “each of my students is different from the others; one volunteers all the time, another is quiet, but will answer questions when she feels confident, another one does not answer questions at all.” Another teacher attested that “one of the six ELL students in my classroom will talk and share ideas. The others are quiet and reserved. They hope not to get noticed or called on in class for academics.” This teacher also said, “One of the new ELL students is showing disruptive behaviors in the classroom, like making noises and bothering other students.” The three teachers surveyed agreed that their ELL students were performing below grade level.

Another question included in the survey was what they thought was causing the achievement gap. One of the teachers answered, “Some are doing well, but others not as well” which could be attributed to “lack of English language skills/reading ability.” Another teacher observed, “Most of the time the achievement gap seems to be caused by a lack of content-specific vocabulary. Lack of confidence within the content area is sometimes also an issue.” These responses go along with Ogletree and Griffin’s (2023) analysis of teachers’ responses to a survey in which they focused on ELL students’ deficits instead of paying attention to the cultural, language, and funds of knowledge assets that each ELL student brings to the classroom. One of the three teachers I surveyed reported that she explains content specific vocabulary to each student, that she treats all students the same, that she pairs ELL students with other students willing to help, and that she frequently checks during a lesson to ensure students are understanding. One of the teachers surveyed modeled a lot, going over academic vocabulary, teaching context clues, providing STEM activities, teaching the use of websites, and reading books in English to the students. These testimonies show that teachers were trying to do their

best with what they knew to support ELL students, but still ELL students were behind peers in the same classroom.

My last question was what to do to help ELL students improve academically. One of the three teachers stated, “I try to give ELL students more time during English language instruction and have adults [in the classroom] who speak the students’ language.” Two of the teachers suggested providing as much integration of language and content learning as possible while also finding time for students to learn the language first and then the academics. Again, many of the responses show that teachers were doing what they could with what they knew and that they also felt pressure to close the achievement gap as soon as possible so students could perform well on the annual standardized test at the end of the school year. Teachers live under time constraints trying to teach their students what they need to know before end-of-year high stakes exams are administered, which takes the fun out of learning because students are not satisfying their curiosity about the world and their future but just cramming for the test.

After reading all the responses from teachers in this particular school, I can argue that they had not received enough preparation for teaching ELL students (Villegas et al., 2018). Many of the responses show that the teachers had the best intentions to help ELL students, but they did not know how to implement strategies that would benefit all students.

As I observed my ELL students in their mainstream classrooms, I have seen that some were listening but not understanding what they were doing. Others were accessing websites on computers to learn the English language, but the computers often ended up as babysitting devices, or abandoned those websites for games of their preference. I also observed that in some cases in which ELL students were paired with mainstream students, my ELL students seemed to

be content because someone was helping them. Some ELL students were willing to learn and do their best to keep learning, but the lesson was not meaningful to their cultures.

### **My Approach to Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Culturally Responsive Teaching gives ELL students the opportunity to learn about their world, to build cultural competencies applicable in the classroom and beyond, and to feel empowered by a more balanced educational experience. Moll (2010) argued that when students witness that their culture and language are validated within the educational process, they can combine their home or community identities with an academic identity, leading to improvement in their academic performance, which in turn results in more active engagement and motivation to learn.

In my classroom, ELL students know they are in a safe environment to talk about anything about which they have questions. I validate them and answer their questions to the best of my ability, or we will look up needed information together. I keep current on upcoming events at school in case they have questions about them. I also create lessons compatible with their language proficiency, and I explain grammar and vocabulary within a text. I intentionally pose questions that help clarify what they are reading. We may spend a few days on a text because of everything I include before, during and after reading. I always start with background knowledge about a topic in the form of a conversation, videos, or objects to get them ready to learn more. Then, we read together and stop every so often to monitor comprehension and vocabulary knowledge, which informs me of how well the students understand the content. If necessary, I take the time to go back and find where their comprehension failed and build their knowledge from there. In this way, I demonstrate what to do when they have difficulty understanding what they read, where to find answers, and how to approach the text. I relate the

text to them by asking them what they know about the topic in the context of their cultural backgrounds, bringing out their funds of knowledge and encouraging their independent research. I like to show what I do not know because that empowers them to be the expert on a topic and gives them the sense that what they know is important and that I am interested in what they want to share about themselves, their experiences, and the different situations that they have encountered.

I also included the use of Total Physical Response (TPR) to help low English proficiency level students to listen and learn English without the use of their native language. This approach has been used for a long time to help students comprehend language until they reach the production stage. Nuraeni (2019) stated that “TPR makes it possible to integrate physical movements, games, songs, and mimics naturally to enhance not only linguistic knowledge but also speaking skills in children” (p.27). Moreover, the use of TPR to communicate through movement and gestures can help ELL students feel included in activities and able to understand and gain language knowledge without translation.

### **ELLs’ Perspectives on Their Learning Experiences Across Classrooms**

I also interviewed my students to find out if they see differences among their mainstream classrooms and how our ELL classroom differs from them. Dora, one of the nine ELL students, responded “You spend a lot of time on the story and help us learn how to remember the story, learn new words and find what a word means in the text.” With a smile on her face, she added, “My head hurts sometimes.” In my classroom, we piece out stories to study story elements, monitoring meaning and retelling. Bryan stated,

Here we practice all subjects when we are reading. We learn from other countries, and we are allowed to express our opinions. In my other classroom, we only read.

Sometimes I don't understand, but I am afraid of asking because I don't want to make my teacher mad. I also don't feel comfortable talking about what I think about the topic.

These differences are what Culturally Responsive Teaching is all about. Students learn from each other's backgrounds and experiences and add new content to lessons from different places. Daniel shared, "I am not afraid of talking here. I can make mistakes and we work together." My classroom is a safe place where students know they are not judged for speaking English with an accent or for speaking their native languages. Joan observed, "Here, you make us review our work and fix our own mistakes. I can also be me and say what I feel." Clara stated, "I like to learn about other countries and what is the same and different. I have learned a lot from my country." Bryan commented "it is interesting to have a conversation with each other and hear their opinions. I like to learn from everybody." Jovani simply stated, "I don't feel dumb here. We work together." Regarding their experience with me as their teacher, Nora said "you always answer our questions." Damian said, "you are always nice and help me to understand. You help me understand why I get in trouble and how to fix the problem." He was referring to an incident when he got into trouble for fighting during recess and was suspended. I explained the reason for the suspension when, in his mind, he was just retaliating because the other student was talking about his girlfriend. In his country, students fight for what they think is right. I helped him understand that here the student should tell an adult if there is a problem and avoid fist fights at all costs. In this exchange I also learned something about Haitian culture.

All the students said they enjoyed being open and speaking their native languages. One benefit that I have as an ELL teacher is that I speak the same language as many of my students, which helps them feel more comfortable. As for students with other languages, like Haitian Creole, I ask questions that help me learn something in their language, showing that I am ready

for them to teach me. It is amazing how proud they feel when they teach their language to me. I do my best to maintain what I learn, and if I do not remember, I ask them to repeat it just to let them know that I value what they are teaching me and that it is okay to forget and ask questions. It is particularly important for students to know that they are valued no matter where they come from or what language they speak. If I show interest, I demonstrate that I respect what they know and value their knowledge. I ask the same in return. Gonzalez et al., (2005) stated that endorsing students' funds of knowledge, including their home languages, cultures, and experiences, can help strengthen students' identity. Through the students' responses I see that I am validating and strengthening their sense of who they are, so they do not forget themselves and feel comfortable sharing their funds of knowledge and languages while learning from each other in a place where they feel safe and included.

Overall, ELL students are here to stay. They had no choice when their parents made the decision to move from their native country to the United States. Because they are here, they need to be educated in ways that provide consistency with their past learning and experiences in culturally responsive classrooms in which they feel comfortable and included. They may have deficiencies in terms of mainstream standards, but they also bring new knowledge about the wider world to local classrooms. Why not give ELL students the opportunity to shine and use that knowledge to the advantage of all students? It will generate questions and on something they know. If a student lacks the English proficiency to keep a conversation going, my answer is, encourage another student to be the voice of that student at that moment? Students can be each other's allies in the effort to convert their meanings into a less familiar language. Newcomer et al, (2020) stated that students who felt connected and had a sense of belonging to the classroom community saw the importance of contributing to the whole group by sharing their personal



experiences and helping each other learn. In this study, the focus was on how teachers can create relationships with ELL students. Students who felt a strong sense of belonging also felt valued and comfortable sharing personal stories. All the students in this research showed academic growth and improved their socio-emotional wellbeing by being included in the classroom in which personal connection between teacher and students and culturally responsive teaching prevailed. This study shows that every teacher can help ELL students feel included in the classroom and share what they know, which will support their academic growth. Teachers just need to be more open, less biased, and more inclusive toward the ELL students in their classrooms.

## **Chapter 5 Culturally Responsive Practices**

For six weeks, I observed the responses of nine 5th grade ELL students to my culturally responsive English language teaching to determine what practices were effective for them to be interested, motivated and enjoy their learning. In this process, I recorded 75 video sessions for qualitative thematic analysis, of which 25 were with students at the entering level (level 1) of proficiency. This point is important to note because of significant differences between students who are beginning to learn a new language and students at higher language proficiency levels.

### **5.1 Culturally Responsive Teaching Fostering Belonging and Positive Relationships**

Martinez et al. (2023) has argued that while Culturally Responsive Teaching has been a popular topic in literature for a while it has often not been implemented as it should be. For example, Martinez points out that it has been misunderstood as differentiated instruction, which involves providing different assignments and activities appropriate to students' proficiency levels, when in fact it involves providing content activities relevant to students' diverse cultures as well as proficiency levels so that their interests and identities are recognized. A culturally responsive teacher has a deep understanding of cultural diversity incorporated into culturally relevant curricula and teaching practices. A culturally responsive teacher also conveys high expectations and validates students' cultural identity, understands different communications styles, and forms meaningful relationships with students as individuals (Will & Najarro, 2022).

According to Hammond (2015), "culture is the way that every brain makes sense of the world." It is more than the food one eats, holidays one celebrates, and music one dances to. Culture includes often unspoken rules for social interactions and nonverbal communication that builds rapport and trust between people, establishing norms the violation of which can create

levels of distrust. It also includes the deep knowledge with which the brain interprets what is a threat or a reward (Hammond, 2015). This is the level at which schemas are formed based on experiences and beliefs. Moll et al. (2005) introduced the concept of *funds of knowledge*, referring to “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p.133). Howard et al. (2020) stated that “one important aspect of Culturally Responsive Teaching instruction is that school curriculum, instruction, and learning are tied to students’ experiences, realities, identities, histories, and in many ways their expertise.” (p.21). ELL students are more inclined to learn and interact when they feel included within lessons and in the classrooms. They are considered the “experts” of certain topics that pertain to their life experiences and culture. When ELL students feel included in the curriculum, they feel safe to share what they know, receptive to others, and learn language from the curriculum content. Teachers who adhere to this kind of learning promote positive relationship in the classroom among peers because students are learning from each other while improving inclusion and understanding in a non-judgmental environment where every student feels empowered and willing to share what they know (funds of knowledge).

Teachers who incorporate asset-based teaching practices, have an awareness of the socio-political content of students’ realities, understand cultural competencies, and they are open to cultivate relationships with students of different racial backgrounds (Howard et al., 2020). In other words, teachers who are aware about their students’ lives and are willing to learn from them, create positive relationships with their students that will transpire to the classroom and promote content and language learning for ELL students, in particular.

During this study I observed my practice and what I implemented to help ELL students learn language and content through culturally responsive practices. I also observed how students

reacted when I used Culturally Responsive Teaching in my classroom and how I could use the findings to help mediate students' language development and create a sense of belonging in students.

## **5.2 How do I, as a Practitioner, Help ELL Students Feel Connected and Included During Instruction Using Culturally Responsive Teaching Strategies?**

### **Opening Access through Total Physical Response**

As I observed the 25 video sessions with my level 1 (entering) students, I noticed the use of Total Physical Response (TPR) in 17 of the videos. TPR is a method proposed by Dr. James J. Asher based on the understanding that children will develop their ability to listen before they start to speak (Carruthers, 2010). This is a method in which physical enactment of meaning is used to help ELL students understand the target language without the use of the native language (Gulsanam & Farangiz, 2021). For example, Damian, a newcomer from Haiti with level 1 (entering) language proficiency, was able to respond to physically simple questions by looking at my body language and signs. Pablo & Rosero (2023) stated that when teachers follow all steps correctly to teach with this method, students acquire knowledge inductively, which promotes engagement and helps ELL students build confidence. Shin (2023) stated that creating a supportive learning environment promotes students' positive perceptions and attitudes and increases their sense of belonging in school, which will positively impact the ELL students' academic success and motivation, as I observed with Damian. When students are fully involved in their learning, even those with low language proficiency levels, they feel that they are part of the class, and their opportunity to become successful academically increases. Damian was always happy and enjoyed being in the classroom, acquiring language skills while listening to me and peers mimicking, reading along and writing sentences modeled for him while using his

native language, as necessary. I observed that I used TPR more with level 1 (entering) students than with ELL students with higher language proficiency levels. This is just a step to help students feel comfortable when learning and eventually, once ELL students start learning English and learning reading strategies to understand text, TPR will fade away.

Within the process of language learning, the reduction of stress is imperative. The lower the stress the greater the learning (Asher, 1988 in Gulsanam & Farangiz, 2021) (p.57).

Therefore, positive relationships among teachers and students along the usage of TPR help increase language learning when students are immersed in a stress-free environment where they are involved and part of their learning process.

### **Use of Native Language as Part of the Learning Process**

The use of native language was observed in 20 of the 25 videos session for students in lower proficiency levels (entering) to help ELL students understand a topic and to help students felt as ease when they were in small group settings. With the group comprising Damian, a newcomer to our school system, and Joan, who was originally from Puerto Rico, I used my native language to help Damian to feel comfortable learning a new language, a new culture, and a new environment. He worked hard for me when he was in his group, but he had behavior problems. His main classroom teacher attributed these to his English language limitations, but the language learning strategies where limited in the main classroom, which created a barrier for Damian to learn language turning into behavioral issues. To accommodate his English proficiency level, I used TPR for communication and I gave him the opportunity to answer questions by choosing one of just two options. He also used his native language, but he was more reserved than Joan. I used the ELL students' native language to reinforce what ELL students were learning and as a way for ELL students to understand that their native language is

valuable and important during the learning process and to me, as their teacher. It is a benefit when the teacher speaks the native language of their students, but it is not necessary. Students like Joan always came into the classroom talking in Spanish, her native tongue, but she was able to understand what we were doing when I was using TPR to help her move from her linguistic comfort zone into English. I observed in the video how I turned her Spanish conversation into English by just saying “But in English we say...” and Joan would repeat the phrase. It took a few weeks for Joan to understand that even when her native language was important to me, that my purpose for her was to learn English. Through CRT lessons and collaboration among peers, Joan started to switch languages when she knew the content and developed the confidence to share.

Joan knew more English than Damian, but she preferred to speak Spanish to me. We worked together to communicate in English using text as a method for her to formulate answers but using her native language as reassurance for her responses. Because Damian was in this group, we started by learning about topics that were accessible to him, for example, weather and its changes because while reading he was also experiencing the weather we were having at that time. While reading we stopped to monitor comprehension, clarify meaning, and discuss similarities and differences between our weather and the weather in his country. Newcomer et al. (2020) stated that students who felt connected and have a sense of belonging to the classroom community saw the importance of contributing from past experiences and felt the value and place of personal culture in that environment. In other words, ELL students who felt connected through comprehensible input or native language are more open to share their experiences when they feel that they are important. Once Joan and Damian understood the text, it was easier for them to answer questions and use words from the text to say their responses. I also helped them by modeling how to answer questions with complete thought and clear meaning.

Gay (2000) in Gay (2002) stated that “when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference for students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly.”(p.106) Moreover, when academic knowledge relates to learners’ experiences and likes, they see themselves as part of the classroom community and feel a sense of belonging in the school community. Therefore, when ELL students feel included, they develop interest in learning and interacting with others.

### **Recognizing Participation with Positive Reinforcement**

The use of positive reinforcement to help with motivation is another element to help students get involved with their learning. Positive reinforcement was observed in 30 of the 75 video sessions. There were some students that struggled for different reasons to understand the importance of learning. One way I use to help students get involved and participate is the use of intentional rewards. Clara, a fifth-grade student from Haiti who brought many issues with her from home, enjoyed being rewarded for participating because she knew that her contribution was on point and important, which, not only made her happy for a job well done but also helped her stop thinking about her issues at home over which she had no control over. Uddin et al. (2017) found that English language teachers’ use of positive reinforcement in their teaching-learning activities at the primary level enhanced students’ mental growth and boosted their learning behaviors. Students learn when they feel motivated. They need to know that they are doing well or are supported in their efforts to reach a learning goal. Shohimin (2014) in Kusumawati et al. (2023) stated that “rewards [serve] as an educational tool are given when a child does something good, has succeeded in reaching a certain stage of development, or achieves the desired achievement.” (p.189). I intentionally rewarded my ELL students with positive feedback, candy,

game time, bookmarks, etc... when they accomplished a goal or as a method to keep them motivated. It is not easy to learn a new language while trying to keep up with academics; therefore, I give my students little rewards to let them know, in a tangible manner, I recognize how hard they have been working. It is also my way of keeping them motivated and interested in learning. At times when keeping the students involved was difficult, positive reinforcements were essential for helping students get engaged and understand their purpose in learning.

Bryan and Nora were always expecting some sort of incentive when they participated or did well during a lesson. They were rewarded by praises, raised thumbs, stickers, or a piece of candy just to continue promoting language learning and achieving learning goals. Kusumawati et al. (2023) stated that “giving rewards is intended to make children more active in their efforts and do even better” (p.190). During this research, positive reinforcement was observed in 30 of the 75 videos from ELL students in entering, beginning, and developing language (language levels 1-3, according to WIDA framework). I argue that ELL students need to see in the form of a reward what they have accomplished to motivate them to continue language acquisition.

### **Using Literature and Personal Experiences to Connect to ELL Students**

This theme was included in all the video sessions. I introduced a lesson to a group about what it is like to be new to a place and how to avoid being afraid of the unknown with the story *El Cucuy*. In response, Jovani mentioned that when he was growing up, his parents used the story of *El Cucuy* as a method of discipline to make their children obey the rules. This story was different for him than for Dora, who connected with the text because she remembered fearing the unknown during the first day of school and how that changed when she met new and old friends. Maura mentioned that she felt like *El Cucuy* when he felt fear the first time the family traveled to Mexico to meet family that she did not know or remember, but everything changed after she had



spent time with them. The students were very engaged and talkative when I read the story to them because they had already known about *El Cucuy*, they felt connected to the story in different ways and had a schema of what *El Cucuy* stood for, which was fear of the unknown. Because they felt connected through the story, I took the opportunity to be vulnerable and tell them about my experience with warnings about *El Cuco*, which my parents also used to scare me in case I was thinking about not following the rules. Akrofi et al. (2008) stated that when we explore explicitly the cultural aspects that are implicit in the mainstream text, it gives opportunity for ELL students to explore and understand culture around them. In other words, it gives the opportunity for students to learn the culture of others and authors within books and have conversations regarding differences and similarities in values and customs compared to other cultures. All students will benefit of teacher read aloud about other culture and places because it will give the opportunity for students to learn about other cultures and places and share similarities and differences when compared to them while learning that it is okay to have differences as long as we respect what others do that are different than what we do.

### **Supporting ELLs' Reading through Background Knowledge and Vocabulary Instruction**

This theme was also included in all the video sessions. I introduced another group to an informational text based on the history of Machu Picchu in Perú. This group was a little reluctant at first because they did not know what the topic was about. My purpose for using this text was not only for them to learn about the world but to connect the content to what they already knew about earthquakes tied to places around the world. I started the lesson by asking questions and creating background knowledge about the topic to make the text understandable and incorporated pictures and videos of the historical site. Background knowledge helps make connections and bridge the gap across content. Individuals make connections to new material regarding their

experiences and because students come from different backgrounds and cultures, they have a difficult time making connections to different topics (Burmakow, 2016). I also provided vocabulary instruction to prepare students for reading the text, during which I paused every few sentences to monitor their comprehension and clarify meaning. I read along with her or helped her with phonics while she was reading. At the end of the six weeks, Clara was more independent in reading and showed better behavior than at the beginning. While many of the students had a hard time interacting with the text, once we got started, they did not want to leave. It was because they were understanding the topic, learning about earthquakes and what caused them, and learning about the world. The use of background knowledge, vocabulary instruction and pause at reading to clarify for understanding helped students understand and connect with the text. Web & Chang (2015) in their study about how vocabulary knowledge affect reading found that ELL students with extensive vocabulary knowledge in their native language have a large impact in the amount of vocabulary learning they will have in their second language. Continued reading practice is the key to improving vocabulary learning and reading.

I connect to ELLs' experiences when introducing a lesson and pause their reading every so often to monitor students' understanding and clarify the text. Donovan and Bransford (2005) stated that "new understanding occurs when there is a foundation of experiences already in place" (p. 4). Building background knowledge on what the students already know influences how they organize and interpret what they are learning. Therefore, in classrooms with students with various levels of language proficiency and learning backgrounds, instruction must explicitly while activating each learner's prior knowledge and provide further background knowledge when needed.

## **Building Comprehension**

This theme was included in 60 out of the 75 video sessions. Teaching reading comprehension to ELL students poses unique challenges due to language barriers, cultural differences, and background knowledge. It is important to consider each ELL student's language proficiency to know where to start building vocabulary, improving grammar, and writing skills. Diyora (2023) stated that building ELL students' foundational skills is crucial for developing their reading comprehension skills. To do that, according to Diyora (2023), teachers need to activate the student's prior knowledge, build background knowledge, and establish a purpose for reading. In the videos of my practice, I observed how I introduced text by building background knowledge using conversations, videos, pictures, slides, or authors' comments (Wang, 2023). I also provided explicit instruction of comprehension strategies for students to understand how to make meaning of text. I observed that using these strategies also helped students when they struggled with phonics or syllabication. By stopping students' reading periodically to monitor comprehension I modeled a strategy for them to make sure they were understanding what they read, not simply decoding words, and were reading not only the literal meaning of the text but also the implicit messages within the text. Li et al. (2016) stated that to have a thorough comprehension of a text, one needs to construct meaning by analyzing the primary information, making connections with one's background knowledge, and synthesizing sources of information and reflecting on meanings.

I wanted my students to understand that reading is not only decoding words but delving between the lines to decipher implicit meanings in a text, which was hard for ELL students to do without my help. It is one of the most difficult strategies for ELL students to learn, and it takes time. A particular schema may not exist for ELL students because it was not developed in their

home cultures (Jialing, 2023). Therefore, involving students' background knowledge as part of reading comprehension helps them learn from their new culture and develop new schemas to help them understand the contents of texts.

### **Mutual Understanding between Teacher and Students**

Another theme that surfaced from this thematic research was the importance of being caring, focusing on the students' needs, and answering their questions. This code surfaced in all of the video sessions. Joan was disturbed because her father had flown to Puerto Rico to visit family, and she heard there was a hurricane nearby. She wanted to know about hurricanes and the possibility of one hitting the island of Puerto Rico. I guided her learning about how hurricanes form and their different trajectories. She was able to go to the map and find the location of hurricane Fiona at that time and know when the hurricane was close to the island. I had observed that the students were more interested in learning about topics that related to them than passages chosen by the teacher. One day, I had picked a fantasy story for students to learn vocabulary related to fantasy adventures and practice reading strategies for different genres. They did not like the story, which they found boring. I explained that there are some things one does not like but must do. I gave an example of cooking. I do not like cooking, but I must. They consented to work on reading the story, but when it was time for them to go back to their regular classroom, they did not want to leave.

Other codes that emerged from the data were: being a trustworthy teacher, taking time to build rapport with the students, and validating and valuing their experiences. I learn with them, and I am a better teacher because of them. Not everything is easy along the way. There are days when I must remind myself to keep my biases in check to be impartial and able to understand where each student is coming from. One thing I learned is that they all need someone who will

listen to them and guide them to decide on their own without intervening or making a decision for them. Other times, I share something about myself with them, making myself vulnerable to help them to realize that they are not alone, that it is okay to struggle because in this way they learn coping strategies that make them stronger, and that there could be something to learn from any situation.

### **High Expectations**

I set high expectations by letting the students know in advance that they were placed in my classroom to succeed, and they are all capable of success, no exceptions. They know that we are there to learn from bell to bell and that all our discussions involve learning. Shin (2023) stated that “teachers who have higher expectations for ELL students are likely to set challenging goals, provide supported feedback, and create positive learning that encourages students to do their best.” (p.9). In short, teachers who set higher expectations for their students are more likely to motivate their students to learn. Teachers’ beliefs and attitudes can influence the language development of ELL students (Shin, 2023) and shape their beliefs about and attitudes toward learning (Toliver, 2019). Therefore, setting high expectations, avoiding biases, and communicating the belief that students are capable of learning while providing appropriate support and resources are some instructional strategies that will help ELL students to become successful. In my classroom, everyone works, no matter his or her language proficiency level or academic ability. This theme surfaced in all the video sessions.

For example, Clara, who is of Haitian descent, has low reading proficiency, and has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), tried to avoid work with the excuse that it was hard for her. I worked with her on her reading. I read along with her and helped her learn how to write complete well thought out sentences along with me. I built her confidence because she knew that

I was there to help her when needed. I also challenge students by exposing them to different genres and I have them read passages aloud, so they learn to read with intonation, and I catch what students need help with. I used their “silly mistakes” as part of learning, and we celebrate the learning. Then we go back and retell or summarize what was read. In a study about the effect of lack of inclusion on ELL students’ behavior and motivation, Barreiro (2018) showed that students who feel a sense of belonging in their educational environment are more likely to be engaged and motivated to learn. Setting high expectations, being present, and letting students learn together in a safe environment help create the sense of belonging they need to be engaged and motivated to learn. I have seen teachers who do not know how to help ELL students simply let the students do what they can or expect ELL teachers to address the students’ language issues to prepare them for regular classrooms. Wolf and colleagues (2023), in their study about the language of Common Core Standards and the performance of ELL students, found that classroom teachers were unfamiliar with language development standards because they focused on content standards and instruction and left it to ELL teachers to address language standards when students were with them. Classroom teachers want all students, to succeed but they do not have the tools to help ELL students due to lack of relevant courses in teacher education programs and lack of professional development on strategies to support ELL students’ language acquisition within regular content classrooms.

### **5.3 How do ELL Students React When I Use Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) Strategies in my Classroom?**

#### **Increase Motivation**

Understanding students is essential to form connections and build respect among students and teachers (Farinde-Wu, et al., 2017), but accomplishing this goal depends on discovering what interests the students, what they bring to learning, and how they learn (Nieto, 2013). I noticed that on days topics we were covering interested the students, they were motivated and willing to participate and collaborate with peers on research. When we were learning about Galettes, a particular type of food from Haiti, the students from that country were actively participating because it was something that they knew about, and they wanted to share their experiences in Haiti with other students. So, they researched topics like Haitian foods, housing, and schools to share the knowledge with others. The students all wanted to learn and share more about their countries. This example shows that motivation increases when students are interested in what they are learning as well as when the teacher explains the “why” of what they are learning together and provides positive reinforcement. These elements complement culturally responsive teaching pedagogies, in which classroom instruction is based on the students’ experiences and cultural backgrounds (Gay, 2010) and makes significant connections between students' home and school lives (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

#### **Spark Conversations and Collaborations**

I observed conversations and collaboration among students in 57 of the 75 video sessions. These communicative activities help students develop their language abilities and validate what they want to share. While I was collecting data, I conducted a culturally responsive lesson based on the children’s book *El Cucuy is Scared Too* by Donna Barbara Higuera, which is about a

monster, El Cucuy, who is supposed to scared children who do not obey their parents, a familiar folklore figure to many ELL students. In this story, however, the monster is also scared of the tiny humans he visits. This story evoked an immediate discussion regarding the different names the students' parents had for the monster, such as "El Cuco " or "El Coco," and the similarities and differences among their versions of him, and speculations on where they thought he lived. Damian spoke in his native language, while Joan tried to use what she knew of English. Damian said, "El Cuco vive en el árbol afuera." (El Cuco lived outside in the tree). Maura remembered that when she was living in Mexico, she was always in a state of fear that she would be kidnapped by "El Cuco." They did not know that U.S. culture had a "monster" like that named the "Boogeyman." The principal of our school was observing us that day. He shared his experiences with the "Boogeyman" and how his brothers scared him by telling him that the "Boogeyman" was coming to get him. At the end, we all came to realize that it was just a story to discourage children from misbehaving and that there was a possibility that the monster, whether named "EL Cucuy, El Cuco, El Coco, or The Boogeyman," were also scared of us. From this story, we concluded that even though our experiences and understandings are different, we have stories that are the same. Though the use of literature, teachers can expose ELL students to different topics where they can see themselves or they can learn from other cultures and build the acceptance among cultures through building questions, background knowledge and personal experiences to help ELL students understand that it is okay to share their experiences and that they are valued by those who want to know more about other cultures and way of lives. Throughout reading students can compare what they do that is different from others and what is the same.



There were conversations about topics related to the lessons and about issues around the world. Reading the book, *The Proudest Blue: The Story of Hijab and Family* by Ibtihaj Muhammad, we learned about how people dress differently in other parts of the world and the importance of the Hijab. In this story, a Muslim girl learns new ways to be strong when the other students made fun of her Hijab. Jovani shared that he had seen women dressed up completely in black with their faces covered up. This sparked speculations about why the woman was dressed this way and a conversation about other sightings of unusual phenomena, which provided the opportunity to create background knowledge about the cultures and traditions of countries overseas. Jovani and Maura thought that such garbs were intended to protect women from the sun. This book led the class to learn about religion in the Middle East and other places where women wear that kind of dress, such as India. Dora compared these customs to those of the Amish community in the area we live in. This background knowledge led to the conclusion that there are people in other countries and even close to them who wear different clothing to express their beliefs. They also learned that all people have their own cultures and traditions, and that they and their values should be respected. The students applied what they learned by creating silhouettes of themselves, writing who they are on the inside, but showing what they think others see about them on the outside. This activity helped them understand that what a person feels may have a different meaning from what another person sees.

As an example of a lesson in which students used their background knowledge to develop their understanding of a topic, a group consisting of Dora, Maura, Jovani and Daniel responded to a text by comparing and contrasting their experiences in their home countries and the United States. In the book *All Around Us*, Xelena González described different family traditions and what some cultures do that are different from others, which led the students to share differences

between what they did at school and in the neighborhood and what they did at home and with their families. Dora mentioned that her mother had a picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe in her room for protection. Jovani shared that his dad always blessed him when he left the house. Maura stated that when she visits Mexico during Christmas time people are all out in the streets singing and having parties, which is different from the private home celebrations here. Through such discussions, the students learned that people's traditions were different, and all were unique in our own ways and that it was okay to share their authentic selves and ways of doing things with others. These culturally related differences define who one is, which should be valued by others. Thus, a basic tenet of Culturally Responsive Teaching pedagogy is that teachers should understand racial and ethnic groups' cultural values, traditions, and rules and incorporate that knowledge into their instruction while connecting it with new knowledge (Gay, 2010).

### **Unfold New Learning and Critical Understanding**

The group consisting of Nora, Clara, and Bryan wanted their classmates to know about Haiti, so they enthusiastically described how ladies in Haiti make and sell Galettes to survive. As a class we searched together for information about Haitian Galettes and learned these types of cookies are actually made with dirt from a certain region and other simple ingredients. But while the students were happy discussing this common Haitian food with their classmates, they understood that they were revealing the other face of Haiti, its dire poverty, that everyone knows is there but that nobody talks about. This focus on the face of poverty redirected us to search for more information about Haiti and find reasons why the people of this country live under such conditions. This research led to further conversations about life in the United States and in Haiti and the reasons why they are here. All the ELL students realized that they are here because their parents sought a better future for their children. The Haitian students shared how their families

sent money and goods to Haiti. By encouraging such conversations, which led us to seek deeper understanding of students' own experiences, I validated their funds of knowledge and affirmed that it was important for us and everyone else to know how other people live, often in extreme circumstances different from ours.

Through the students' funds of knowledge and research, they were able to scaffold their knowledge regarding topics that they knew some but not enough for a complete understanding. Gozalez, Moll and Amanti (2005) stated that funds of knowledge are about 'using' students' knowledge as prior experiences as a scaffold for new learning (p.135).

#### **5.4 What are the Outcomes of Using Culturally Responsive Teaching Strategies?**

##### **Developing Critical Thinking by Connecting Literature to Daily Challenges**

Through conversations and collaborations, including research, ELL students were able not only to learn more about their own and each other's cultures but also to question why things are the way they are around the world including their own countries and, in this way, to develop their critical thinking. Ennis (2018) stated that "Critical thinking is one of the fundamental 21st century skills that should be incorporated in pedagogical environments." ELL students need to be conscious and reflective and work with others to cope with the challenges they encounter in their daily lives (D'Alessio et al., 2019). During this research, I observed many instances in which students collaborated to understand and reflect on situations around the world. They were able to talk about and research different topics and develop their own opinions about them. Mukhamedow et al., (2023) stated that collaborative learning not only facilitates language use and practice but also encourages students to evaluate what they read critically and understand different points of view. In a lesson about character traits, we were reading texts to understand how characters acted in different situations and why and tie what we learned to our daily lives

and world events. For example, Jovani expressed great interest in the war between Russia and Ukraine and why it was going on. In response to his questions, we started to learn by looking at the locations of both countries and the characteristics of their leaders of those countries. The ELL students were able to identify character traits of the people in power and realize that situations like that are happening not only in that part of the world, but also in their parents' countries. Clara mentioned over and over that "People in Haiti kidnap children. I ran one day because I heard the guns." In her facial expressions, I was able to see her fear of being kidnapped in Haiti. Damian then stated, "Haiti is bad." Olsen & Kagan (1992) found that "incorporating collaborative learning strategies into English language instruction empowered ELL students to become active and engaged learners, capable of analyzing, evaluating, and communicating their thoughts effectively in both academic and real-world contexts." Sharing their opinions and what they learned and being able to incorporate it into real-life situations also helps ELL students to feel a sense of belonging.

In another instance, I wanted the students to learn about how they could be advocates for change. We read Amanda Gorman's poetry book, *Change Sings: A Children's Anthem*, in which she advocates for children to be the agents of change. I picked this book to encourage the students to understand that they could help make changes at school and in the world. I posed the question: What would they like to see changed? They all drafted their own poems about what they want to see changed. Dora wrote about wanting a volleyball net so they could play the game during recess. Marlenn wrote about having Wednesday early release so she could spend more time at home helping her mother, who worked a lot. Jovani wrote about listening to music while working in the classroom. I invited the principal to the next class to hear their poems. The principal was very grateful to hear their ideas and their voices. And Dora got her volleyball net.

Overall, I could see that investment in culturally responsive strategies returned a lot of value in students' learning, not only academically but socially as well. I was able to learn what they liked and disliked when they were with me. They liked me to find topics that they had suggested and topics involving learning about the world. We spent a lot of time conversing while I facilitated with questions to make them think critically about topics that affect them or the world. All these elements along with positive relationships between me as teacher and the ELL students created an atmosphere in which students cooperated, felt safe to share experiences, and held positive attitudes towards learning (Wang et al., 2020).

### **Embracing Cultures**

When ELL students are exposed to content that is of interest to them, they will be engaged, and their self-efficacy will thrive. Culturally Responsive Teaching helps promote students' self-efficacy because they feel included when their funds of knowledge are valued. In one of the lessons, I conducted with my ELL students we studied famous people from many different cultures. One of the famous persons we studied was the life of Mexican American singer Selena Quintanilla-Perez, with the purpose of encouraging my students to embrace their own multicultural identities and learn that it is enriching to belong to two cultures. They shared what their families do that is different from other cultures, for example, the tradition of Posadas at Christmas and celebrating holidays that are different from those in the United States, like Three Kings Day and Mexico's independence. Through lessons like this, ELL students could mirror themselves and appreciate being able to embrace two or more cultures. and embrace them all. The outcome of this lesson was that one of my ELL students wanted to be Selena Quintanilla-Perez for a wax museum presentation, which would not have happened without the exposure to Culturally Responsive lessons like this. Farinde-Wu et al., (2017) stated that student

centered learning helps students thrive academically and socially and that it is imperative to make students' interests, backgrounds, and strength an integral part of the daily curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2023). In return, students will exhibit higher levels of self-efficacy and achieve academically (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017).

Overall, the use of Culturally Responsive Teaching strategies helps make ELL students feel included and understood, so they can develop a sense of belonging, which everyone needs to get involved, understand others, and develop a new language. When I started this project, I wanted to find out how positive relationships help ELL students to develop a sense of belonging as well as language proficiency. I learned that positive relationships do not develop unless I show my students how important they are in the educational process. The only way to achieve that is to learn from them and create lessons that are culturally appropriate for the students. I can testify that doing so is not easy. I had to train my ELL students to understand their purposes for being in my class and that we were learning from each other. It took a while for them to realize that they were included in the lessons and that their funds of knowledge made the lessons more meaningful and interesting. For ELL students whose language proficiency was entering (level 1, WIDA), I used Total Physical Response (TPR) and their native language to help them understand and create a schema to bridge one language to another. The fact that all students worked together to help each other understand the topic made the lessons more interesting and rewarding. For ELL students whose language proficiency level was emerging to advance, all it took was learning new vocabulary appropriate for the lessons and how to use context clues and background knowledge, including their funds of knowledge, which helped them learn from each other and apply their learning. Nieto (2013) stated that to help students learn teachers need to understand their students' interests and what they bring to their learning. The findings of this

research reinforce that feeling included and the use of funds of knowledge of students are important. When we understand each other's differences and similarities with the purpose of growing in knowledge, it helps students learn the word and the world while promoting belongingness, being open to new cultures and the development of a new language.

## Chapter 6

In this chapter, I provide a summary of my practitioner's research study and what I do in my practice as an ELL teacher to create positive relationships with ELL students to help them learn in an environment in which they feel that they belong.

### 6.1 Key Understandings from Culturally Responsive Teaching

1. Students' language learning improved when ELL students were involved in an academically rich language environment in which ELL students were happy, were included and felt comfortable. When ELL students were exposed to rich academic language with guidance and support and through topics they felt interested in and enjoyed, ELL students were more open to learn, scaffolded their learning to reach to conclusions and improved critical understanding.
2. ELL students felt validated and valued when their cultures were included in the content of lessons. They were given opportunities to share their stories and listen to the stories of others, which enabled them to compare and contrast why they do things they do and learn from each other. ELL students developed their sense of identity while learning the language because of their involvement in Culturally Responsive lessons that made sense to them.
3. Many times, ELL students feel that they do not belong in a school, not only for being the kid who does not speak the language, but because of the mainstream culture's practices and traditions that differ from what they do and know. In a classroom in which their perspectives and experiences were confirmed and the lessons were relevant to what they knew, ELL students felt validated and included while, at the same time, they learned from each other's differences. They felt recognized and valuable because they were able to contribute their knowledge and be heard,



which positively affected their language development because ELL students who feel accepted by teachers and embraced for who they were tend to be much more engaged in school learning than those who just treated as part of the mainstream without accommodations and modifications appropriate to their situation (Diaz et al., 2016).

4. Teachers who have a better understanding of who are their students, where they come from and what they know and need are more open to find ways to help ELL students to have an accessible education where they can learn a new language feeling included by being part of the lessons and have the opportunity to share what they know by being the “experts.”

## **6.2 Reflections**

This study took place in a fifth-sixth grade level building in a public school in Indiana. The population in this town is 86.4% White. 12.7% Hispanic and 4.2% Black African American. At the time of this study, all the teachers were White graduates from colleges and universities within the area and had themselves attended schools within this corporation. I was hired initially as a teacher’s assistant, primarily to serve as a Spanish-speaking interpreter to avoid miscommunications with the Hispanic community, but I earned the qualifications to be a teacher with the intent of helping students from other languages and cultural backgrounds to feel they were fully a part of the school and community. I sought to help them feel important as legitimate members and to assure them that, whatever their families’ distinct reasons for relocating in this area, they were entitled to an education that helped them learn about themselves and others and grow as human beings who could embrace other cultures as well as their own. Throughout the years, I have observed various teachers and their teaching practices. Many have come from teacher education programs that have failed to prepare for the realities of classrooms today. In my position as the expert on ELL in the school, I have had the opportunity to provide

professional development for teachers and to individually collaborate with them about what to do to help ELL students learn in their classrooms.

I have to say that it has not been easy. Many of the teachers displace the full responsibility for “bilingual students” learning on the ELL students themselves, making them responsible for understanding what is happening in the classroom and finding ways to comply with requirements. I consider this a huge burden to put on ELL students, who are just there to receive an education just like any other student in the classroom. Some teachers just let the ELL students work together and do what they can on their own because they do not understand the teacher and the teacher does not understand them. All students deserve a teacher who cares about them and is there to help them learn. That is the main reason I wanted to do this research project. I wanted to observe and write about what I do to support ELLs, both academically and affectively, which I have learned through research and experience learning what works and what does not work to help ELL students to learn a new language. In this process I have confirmed that the most fundamental factor is to provide an environment where the teacher has positive attitudes toward students struggling to learn a new language and meet academic expectations simultaneously and is willing to be vulnerable by sharing personal experiences and being open to learn from others.

Many prospective teachers bring beliefs about teaching and learning from their own schooling and upbringing to their education program (Feiman-Nemser, 2018). They also bring beliefs they have formed regarding race, class, gender, and language. Therefore, it is hard to change the course of learning if teachers do not take their time to understand biases and avoid their interference in lessons. Villegas et al. (2018) stated that “when prospective teachers learn strategies for teaching ELLs and become confident in their abilities, they may also become more

open to having these students in their classrooms.” (p.143). Prospective teachers should be taught effective strategies for helping ELL students close the learning and language gaps that many experience in U.S. schools, as well as how to identify those gaps and the strategies that work best for each student. Studies have shown that when new and prospective teachers spend time observing methods used in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes or shadowing an ELL student in his/her content area classes, they develop deeper understanding of ELL students (Villegas et al., 2018). Some teachers are more accepting of a diversified community of students in their classrooms; others still believe that teaching non-traditional students like ELLs is not the responsibility of the mainstream teacher (Wade et al., 2008); and many feel that they are not equipped with the right instructional tools to help the ELLs in their classroom to learn like every other student.

### **How can teachers be helped to understand English Language Learners more deeply?**

Professional development may provide strategies for helping ELL students learn, but sometimes, those strategies are not implemented because teachers have not created relationships with their students to know their needs, expectations, and how they feel when they enter the classroom. Diaz et al. (2016) interviewed ELL students regarding their perceptions of teacher power and its influence on their self-perceptions of learner empowerment. Their research showed that teachers who gave encouragement and took the time to listen to students, helped them understand, provided step by step instructions, and demonstrated strictness were perceived as “good teachers,” compared to those who needed more knowledge about how to help ELL students learn. Teachers who are more open minded and willing to help and create positive relationships with their students foster a better atmosphere for learning in which ELL students feel safe asking questions or making mistakes. The researchers concluded that,

ELL students want their teachers to try to understand them, motivate them by encouraging them and provide support, slow down their speech and write what has been said on the board. For ELLs, motivation made a difference in their lives. It helped in understanding and showed their instructors believed in them. (p.5).

During this research project, I created different lessons according to the language proficiencies of the ELL students in my classroom, and along the way I learned more about how what I do correlates with Culturally Responsive Pedagogies. I learned more about the topic I was teaching and created lessons that were both appropriate for their language proficiencies and relevant to their cultural backgrounds. I collected data in videos and field notes for six weeks observing nine fifth-grade ELL students in my classroom. I decided to work only with fifth graders because it is a grade level with which I work daily and because it is a crucial juncture at which students begin to make decisions about their learning and their future.

Before that data collection started, I interviewed the three teachers of the classrooms in which my ELL students were placed for the school year because I wanted to learn what they knew about my students and their performance in their classrooms. Their responses were that many were quiet and reserved while others showed disruptive behaviors, that they were all below grade level, and that they would benefit from vocabulary instruction and from the presence of more adults who spoke their native languages. These answers are typical of teachers who struggle to include ELL students in their lessons and who have learned to focus on the students' deficiencies rather than what they bring as assets and what fund of knowledge.

Throughout the six weeks during which I collected data, I observed my ELL students closely, learned more about them, and found topics that they were interested in. They were pulled out from their mainstream classrooms at the same time every day in keeping with the

school system's designation of the time for providing services to students requiring special education support or English language development. However, I considered my time as dedicated to helping students become knowledgeable about what they are doing in their classrooms, for which I created lessons to supplement what they were already doing in other classes but in an environment where they are not afraid to ask questions and to be themselves. It can be seen in my video observations that students were talking and collaborating most of the time in English and that their native language was used as a form of communication as needed. We had our ups and downs, but we worked together. They learned from me as I learned from them, and they learned from each other. I became a better teacher throughout those six weeks because I took time to learn about them and created lessons that they enjoyed. There were lessons that they did not like as much as others, but we worked through them when they understood why I picked certain topics. As the days went by, I added more culturally responsive lessons. At first, they did not understand that it was okay to share information about their cultures to the point that I wondered if they had canceled who they were to become someone they were not. Through the lessons, they became more open to sharing their experiences and themselves, and we all learned from each other. My classroom is not a traditional classroom where students are working quietly and minding their own business. My classroom is a collaborative learning environment where students interact and share information with each other, that is, a student-centered classroom where we are actively vocal in communicating with each other. One day my principal came to observe what we were doing, and afterwards, the principal called to convey his congratulations to my ELL students for what they knew and how proud he was of them, adding that he had never heard their voices when they were in their regular classrooms. Therefore, culturally responsive lessons that include students and give them

the opportunity to share their funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 2010) offer an effective way to help ELL students feel known in their classroom, promoting that sense of belonging we all need.

### **6.3 Social Emotional Learning and Culturally Responsive Teaching**

When I was conducting this research, I did not know much about social emotional learning (SEL). Gayl (2017) has defined SEL as

the process through which children and adults obtain and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set, and achieve positive goals, feel, and show empathy for others, establish, and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. (p.1).

In an educational context, it is a process for helping students become aware of their emotions and set positive goals for themselves. My research, which was about positive teacher-student relationships that develop from the connections teacher-students make during the school year, was related to SEL in that it addressed helping students feel they belong and can be successful. Nevertheless, I did have episodes in which students had issues that we strived to surmount but were beyond what I was able to provide, and we strived, and I think that with a little more knowledge regarding SEL I would have been able to help them direct those emotions in a positive way and create a plan for their future.

ELL students not only carry the load of learning a new language, but experience are other stressors that negatively affect their school lives. Niehaus and Adelson (2013) found that in addition to environmental stressors, ELL students with limited English proficiency tend to have lower interpersonal skills, higher internalization problems, and fewer adaptive skills than mainstream students. ELL students who internalize feelings like worry, loneliness, sadness, or

anxiety tend to show inattention, off-task behaviors, and difficulties with classmates. I have observed this in some of my ELL students. For example, Clara often expressed that she had problems with her mother, which I tried to comprehend and help her deal with to the best of my ability, but her issues still interfered with her learning process. I also found it difficult to help another ELL student, also a migrant, who acted out when it was time to move again to another place. For students having a tough time adapting or dealing with emotional issues in or outside of school, I would suggest the use of culturally responsive teaching together with SEL strategies. Cuocci & Arndt (2020) stated that ELL students come to our learning environment with different linguistic, socio-cultural, and emotional needs and that teachers should take these into consideration to close the gap between them and mainstream students. Cho et al., (2019) expressed a similar view and advocated that teachers take a culturally sensitive approach and provide personalized instruction, form positive relationships with ELL students, and create a caring classroom environment promoting collaboration and support. Therefore, I was not that far from providing what some of my more distressed ELL students needed, but I could go farther to design culturally sensitive lessons that might cover those difficult issues that may be affecting my students without my even knowing it.

Now that I have more knowledge about both SEL and CRT, I would like to implement even more Culturally Responsive lessons that not only increase the positive impact on ELL students when they feel included in the lessons but also show them how to apply what they have learned. I implemented different strategies that were effective for students' learning, and I gave students ample opportunities to collaborate and learn from each other, but I do not think that I gave them sufficient opportunities to reflect on what they have learned or the tools to apply their

knowledge beyond the classroom. I saw on several occasions how they used what they have learned, but there is room for improvement.

In future research, I would also like to measure the self-efficacy of students to find what motivates them to do better and what strategies they develop on their own to be able to become successful. It is beneficial to learn from ELL students themselves about what they do when they encounter a problem or something they have a hard time understanding while they are learning a language and how they use their self-efficacy to improve themselves. Pajares (2009) stated that self-efficacious students use more cognitive and metacognitive strategies and can persist in difficult situations compared to less efficacious counterparts. I hope to explore how cognitive and metacognitive strategies help ELL students develop self-efficacy, which helps them have the persistence and motivation to improve their language and academic abilities.

#### **6.4 Conclusion**

Overall, Culturally Responsive Teaching enables ELL students to feel that they are not alone and that what they bring to the classroom is important and respected. Culturally Responsive Teaching and positive student-teacher relationships help ELL students to learn a new language while sharing what they bring from their respective countries and give them opportunities to teach what they know. Abduralthim and Orosco (2020) stated that for culturally responsive teaching to be effective it is necessary to build strong relationships with and among students, leveraging their linguistic and cultural identities in order to make instruction meaningful and connected to home with school, to be responsive to issues that are important to students, and to prepare and empower them to critically analyze and respond to social issues. Throughout this research project, I have observed how ELL students felt when the lessons were



guided toward them and how, at the beginning, they struggled to conceive that they were part of the lessons, and they could share what they know in a safe environment. They had the opportunity to be themselves, to laugh and to share rather than sit quietly in a classroom trying to assimilate to a new culture that they knew little about. I learned to celebrate what they brought to the classroom and to use their funds of knowledge to help them feel included. As a result, their sense of belonging improved and their relationship with me deepened. I cannot wait to see how the project continues throughout the years and how ELL students flourish because they are gaining the independence to be who they are, to question, to speak about what they know, and to research to further their understanding. I just wish that this could happen in mainstream classrooms and that all teachers would take the opportunity to learn more about the world through their students. In conclusion, I call for all teachers to embrace the new cultures that students bring into their classrooms without leaving anyone abandoned. Let us accompany our students on their learning journeys, honor their experiences, and help them realize their identities as full human beings. There is still much work to be done, but opportunities to help ELL students succeed are endless.

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*August 2020 – May 2024* **INDIANA UNIVERSITY BLOOMINGTON**  
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*June 2009 – August 2011* **BALL STATE UNIVERSITY**  
*English as a New Language License*

*June 2006 – July 2009* **OAKLAND CITY UNIVERSITY**  
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*Major: Growth Performance and Carcass Evaluation in Grower-Finisher pigs. Dr. Carmen Santana, advisor*

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**UNIVERSITY OF PUERTO RICO**  
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**Industry, B.S.A.**

**LICENSURE:**

<i>Elementary/Intermediate Generalist</i>	<i>Elementary/Intermediate</i>	<i>Rules 2002</i>
<i>Elementary/Primary Generalist</i>	<i>Elementary/Primary</i>	<i>Rules 2002</i>
<i>English as a New Language</i>	<i>All Schools</i>	<i>Rules 2002</i>
<i>Reading License</i>	<i>P-12</i>	<i>REPA</i>

**WORK EXPERIENCE:**

**August 2007- present: Washington Primary Elementary & Washington Upper Elementary**  
**ELL Teacher.**

- *Coordinator of the ENL/ELL/ESL program for Washington Community School.*
- *Administration of WIDA language assessment and State mandated exam.*
- *English as a Second Language teacher for students through a pull out/push in program and co-teaching on a daily basis.*
- *Provide parental involvement meetings.*
- *Create professional development training for teachers and paraprofessionals.*
- *Liaison of the minority population in our community*
- *Guided Reading teacher*

***March 2006-November 2007: LATINO LEARNING CENTER Instructor – Purdue  
Cooperative Extension***

- *Facilitated online courses through The University of Monterrey, Mexico*

***Oct. 2002 –December 2007 DIVERSITY CENTER Manager***

***Mission: To help the non-native population to integrate and develop in Daviess County  
Community.***

- *Helped with Immigration paperwork*
- *Linked to community services*
- *Looked for interpreters to help in the community*
- *Promoted educational classes and training.*

***Sept. 2001 – May 2008 VINCENNES UNIVERSITY ESL INSTRUCTOR***

***Adult Basic Education Program ESL in Washington, IN***

- *Taught adults to speak English as a Second Language*
- *Administered CASA assessment*
- *Monitored student progress and achievement*

***January 2001-May 2001 WASHINGTON CATHOLIC SCHOOLS***

- *Spanish Teacher*
- *Taught Spanish I and II to High School students*



## ***TRAININGS and CERTIFICATIONS***

- ***Blended Learning***
- ***Google for Educators Level 1 certified***
- ***DIBELS***
- ***mClass***
- ***Differentiated Instruction Practices***
- ***Effective Vocabulary acquisition strategies***
- ***RTI (Response to Intervention) MTSS***
- ***Non Violent Crisis Prevention Intervention Techniques***
- ***Fountas and Pinnell Reading program***
- ***SIOP (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol)***
- ***Tucker Signing***
- ***Differentiated Instruction for ELL students***
- ***Touch Math***
- ***Orton-Gillingham training***
- ***Lifelong Readers training***

## ***SKILLS AND INTERESTS:***

- \* ***Bilingual - Spanish and English***
- \* ***Strong organizational skills***
- \* ***Knowledgeable on Microsoft Office and Google Chrome***
- \* ***Take Care of my children***