

Use of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Supporting International Students: A Canadian Experience with an Online Reading-Writing Program

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Abstract

International students with low Academic English proficiency face great academic challenges in remote learning. The Reading and Writing Excellence (RWE) program was delivered fully online during the pandemic to meet these students' unprecedented needs. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to investigate the effects of the Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. Nine groups were investigated in the winter cycle 2021 at the University of Toronto in Scarborough, Ontario, Canada. In the group, where Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) was implemented, low English proficiency students wrote 11,500 words each in journal entries, the highest volume of writing output and engagement metrics as compared with their peers in all other groups. The study shows the efficacy of the CRP for supporting international students with extremely low academic English proficiency in online teaching and learning.

Keywords: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, ELLs

Introduction

International students with limited -academic English proficiency face great challenges at English medium-sized Canadian universities. Besides language proficiency, different cultural orientations, arising from diverse educational training and structural barriers, due to racial, cultural or socio-economic status, further complicate the challenges that low English proficiency students face with their academic reading and university-level expectations on writing assignments, resulting in additional stress and anxiety (Andrade, 2006). Consequently, international students are over-represented in contract cheating cases (Bretag et al., 2019). The emergency remote learning, necessitated by the worldwide pandemic, has exacerbated the academic challenges faced by international students with limited English proficiency living in their home communities. Given the paucity of research on English language learners (ELLs) supported by Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), this paper aims to investigate the impact of using Culturally Responsive Pedagogy to accentuate the existing personalized language support pedagogy for ELLs in remote teaching-learning, with the goal of gaining pedagogical insights to better support ELLs with extremely low English proficiency.

Literature Review

International Students

Students lacking academic English are “linguistically at risk” (Elder & von Randow, 2008, p. 176), resulting in higher rates of failure in the first year of university compared to their more competent peers (Fox, 2005; Roessingh & Douglas, 2012). ELLs from countries where English is not the dominant language are more disadvantaged due to the large gap between their estimated reading levels and first-year undergraduate course materials (Roessingh & Douglas, 2012). Furthermore, these students need to develop competence in academic writing where they are expected to write with agency, expressing their thoughts in accordance with western ways of knowledge construction (Abasi & Graves, 2008; Tang, 2012). Given that international students are more likely to be reported for plagiarism (Beasley, 2016), a culturally responsive pedagogy in supporting ELLs “cultivate their awareness, knowledge and skills so that they can actively make choices to avoid plagiarism” (Eaton & Burns, 2018, p. 353) is important.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive teaching “is defined as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (Gay, 2002, p. 106). It is “inclusive, empowering, transformative, emancipatory, and humanistic” (Gay, 2018, p. 38-44). There are five key strategies closely related to the culturally responsive pedagogy: cultural bridging, personalized feedback, learner autonomy and empowerment, teachers as collaborators, and humanistic teaching.

Culturally responsive teachers “build bridges” between students’ existing knowledge and the new knowledge that they will acquire (Kilburn, Radu, & Henckell, 2019, p. 12; Krasnof, 2016). Culturally responsive teaching is “inclusive” (Gay, 2018, p. 38), as it takes students’ different backgrounds and needs into consideration by offering students customized feedback

and support. Culturally responsive teaching is “empowering, transformative, and liberating (Gay, 2018, p. 40-42). Learner autonomy and empowerment enhance student confidence and transform learning. In addition, when teachers regard themselves as co-educators and co-learners, the learning becomes reciprocal since students are treated as power-sharing partners. Last, but not least, culturally responsive pedagogy is “humanistic” and ethical (Gay, 2018, p. 44-45). Care and compassion humanize learning. Culturally responsive teachers respect students’ differences, treat students as “people first and foremost” (Glina), and treat their languages and cultures as resources instead of deficits (Huo, 2020).

Methodology

Research Questions

1. What is the efficacy of the culturally responsive pedagogy for supporting students with extremely low language academic English proficiency to develop their academic language skills?
2. What insights can be gained for supporting students with low academic English proficiency?

Research Site

The research site is the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Toronto (UofT) in Scarborough, Ontario, Canada. Toronto is one of the three campuses of the UofT.

Participants

Students were enrolled in the Reading and Writing Excellence (RWE) program, a long-running non-credit co-curricular program to develop their academic English reading, writing, and critical thinking, which was pivoted to a fully online, 1-month program with the special addition of an Academic Integrity module during the pandemic in 2020. Student participation in this program was voluntary. All students wishing to enrol in the RWE program needed to complete the Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA) Screening Test (Doe, 2014), and students who scored in Band 1 (the category with lowest score and thus, most at risk linguistically) are given priority to be in this program. As such, this program attracted a high number of Band 1 students (see Table 1). This study focuses on the Band 1 students in the winter 2021 cycle (i.e., the 2nd iteration) of the RWE program.

Table 1

Composition of Band 1 Students

	Winter 2021
Enrolment	226
Percentage of Band 1 students (i.e., those identified by DELNA screening to have extremely low levels of academic English)	46%
Percentage of students who self-identified as English-language learners	59%

International students	38%
Number of groups that the students were divided into, each with a different instructor	9

Data Collection

In the RWE program, students are encouraged to read their course materials for 40 minutes and write a journal entry for 20 minutes about their reading, daily, to their assigned writing instructor who provided asynchronous personalized feedback and guidance, according to the student’s individual learning needs, with a virtual 30-minute meeting biweekly. All 9 groups received the standard learner-driven, instructor-facilitated personalized support. In one intervention group, the instructor accentuated the standard pedagogy with the Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP).

Quantitative method. As the volume of students’ written output in 1-month cycle indicates written language practice, word count of daily journal entries was tallied.

Qualitative method. Anonymous surveys were conducted, and students’ end of program comments and reflections were also collected.

Data Analysis

As part of a larger investigation of this model for supporting ELLs (Research Ethics Board Protocol no. 40911), this study extracted Band 1 students from the Winter 2021 anonymized dataset for analysis of their journal entries during the one month of RWE. Since the purpose of this study is to understand what is possible when Band 1 students write almost every day, and in particular when their support is enhanced by CRP, only students who wrote 25 or more journal entries within the 4-week time frame were analysed.

Results

As Band 1 students are identified by DELNA screening to have a great need for support and development (Doe, 2014), it is necessary to help them gain academic language competence through a high volume of meaningful practice over time that directly supports them with their academic courses. Any amount of writing related to their courses is a step forward towards the level of academic writing skills that they need for success. Ideally, students would write a source-based journal entry for at least 25 days within the 4 weeks that they are in the program, thus amounting to the most daily practice. From Table 2, of the 104 Band 1 students in the cohort, 77 students (i.e., 74%) wrote at least 25 daily journal entries, while 11 students (i.e., 10%) wrote at least half the time i.e., 13-24 journal entries.

Table 2

Distribution of Band 1 Students in Winter 2021

	CRP group	8 Groups with standard RWE pedagogy
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Total number of Band 1 students (n=104)	24	80
Number of Band 1 students who wrote 25 days or more	11	66
Number of Band 1 students who wrote between 13-24 days	3	8

Assuming a student wrote 250 words per journal entry, in 25 journal entries the student would have written 6,250 words within the month, which can be considered a “milestone” for them. Table 3 shows that in all the groups, on average, each student had written in excess of 6,250 words—with students in the CRP group writing on average 11,562 words each, while students in the other groups wrote 10,442 words each. On average, a Band 1 student in the CRP group wrote 420 words per journal entry, while students in groups with the standard program pedagogy wrote 372 words per journal entry.

Table 3

Volume of Writing of Band 1 Students Who Wrote at least 25 Journal Entries

	CRP group	8 other groups with standard RWE pedagogy
Number of Band 1 students who wrote for at least 25 days in the one month of RWE	11	66
Average number of words written by each student in one month	11,562 words	10,442 words
Average number of words in each daily journal entry	420 words	372 words

Students’ end-of-program surveys and reflections indicate a greater comfort with academic reading and writing. For instance, here are excerpts of some reflections:

- *I have [a] sharper mindset about writing.*
- *After completing this program, I discovered that my critical thinking and vocabularies have been improved.*
- *I have built the [sic] confidence about writing and reading as well!*
- *I used to be a student who was very afraid of writing. After participating in this project, I became more confident...*
- *My critical thinking has been developed and [I] began to think in a deeper perspective.*
- *I have become quite efficient in giving a clear idea about what I am trying to explain in short words.*

Discussion and Conclusion

Summary of Findings

Students with extremely low academic English proficiency can write over 10,000 written words within a month when learning conditions are conducive to developing a positive mindset and confidence to bring their diverse lived experiences to their learning. Making the language practice a daily, manageable, and motivating activity that results in personalized support to improve their writing competence was found to engage ELLs during emergency remote learning. Seventy-four percent of Band 1 students across all groups managed to keep up with writing almost every day, especially in the CRP group. The factors that appear to have resonated with students are: (a) the no-risk, genuine, daily communication on course topics with personalized feedback specific to individual writing needs and challenges; (b) strong human connections through the CRP; and (c) a manageable daily reading-writing goal. Being non-graded, there was no incentive to plagiarize. Thus, Band 1 students acquired vocabulary, competence and confidence to write in their own words, making them more equipped to cope with upcoming assignments.

The use of culturally responsive pedagogy that accentuates the standard program pedagogy led to significantly higher output by low-proficiency students. These students also reported better understanding about academic integrity, which addressed the literature calling for better scaffolding for students to develop the necessarily language competence (Wette, 2010).

Although all groups had Band 1 students who wrote 25 or more journal entries, and the average number of words written by each student far exceeded the “milestone” of 6,250 words in one-month, both quantitative (e.g. students’ written output) and qualitative data (i.e. student reflections) indicate that it was worthwhile accentuating the standard program pedagogy with the culturally responsive pedagogy, as it motivated a larger proportion of students in the group to engage in (almost) daily practice, compared to other groups, as well as to write more per journal. This volume of practice is especially important for students living in communities where they do not get enough practice with English.

Implications

Personalized support is important for supporting students with extremely low academic English competence. Since the CRP group has been most productive compared to the others, the tenets of CRP could be used by other instructors, especially when supporting international students from distant cultures who are not too familiar with western reading/writing conventions and expectations of academic writing. These CRP principles could be applicable to many teaching contexts, such as transitional-year programs and first-year foundation courses.

Limitations

The sample size of the sub-group being studied is small, and there was no opportunity to interview students.

Recommendations

Future research could focus on a longitudinal study of Band 1 students who participate in a one-month intervention in their first semester, compared to other Band 1 students who did not. Interviews with those who have achieved the 10,000-word count should be conducted in order to discern what motivated them to go beyond the expected milestone of 6250 words.

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