Teachers' Expectations and Challenges in Using Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) Strategies in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract—This study explores two ESL teachers' experiences in accommodating culturally diverse learners in a classroom. A case study is adopted to obtain an in-depth understanding and detailed information about the teachers' expertise in accommodating students with different cultures, ethnic, and genders in the classroom settings. The data is collected through semi-structured interviews with four English teachers teaching culturally diverse students in standard classroom settings from secondary schools. Descriptive and qualitative content analyses were conducted to analyze the data. The findings revealed that the ESL teachers possessed the adaptation to the circumstances with their expectations in teaching multicultural diversity learners. The participants also showed that ESL teachers faced challenges in teaching English to culturally diverse students in secondary school settings in terms of language barriers, syllabus, and socioeconomic background. The findings from the interview sessions showed the implementation of CRT strategies to facilitate more meaningful participation in the classroom by CRT approach, positive reinforcement, syllabus adjustment, and peer tutoring/group projects.

Index Terms—English as Second Language (ESL), Culturally diverse learners, Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)

I. INTRODUCTION

The lifestyle patterns of different groups are directly related to differences in their values and expectations (Hanel et al., 2018). Akifyeva and Alieva (2018) found that differences between ethnicities and expectations suggest the emergence of stereotypes. Stereotypes can be defined as a person's expectations, thoughts, and beliefs about certain characteristics toward all members of a group (Fiske, 2015). Alter et al. (2010) further state that stereotypes act like mental projection images when we assume a person belongs to a certain group, and they act as a kind of 'shortcut" when thinking about people who belong to a certain group. This study was inspired by the current trend of globalisation, that is, the interaction of people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Our personal and professional lives are increasingly populated by people from all walks of life, bringing us into contact with a variety of cultures. Consequently, according to Wilson (2003), the importance of cultural understanding and respect for cultural differences is becoming increasingly apparent.

The local education system is working to reduce the differences in economic and population distribution, as well as cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions among the numerous ethnic groups in Malaysia (Rakami et al., 2019; Idrus, 2014). However, the divergence of belief systems more often led to polarisation. Racial polarisation is a stereotype that persists in school buildings. Cultural diversity in a classroom leads to these common problems and inadequacies in the teaching and learning process. It is a fact that before Malaysia's independence, cultural and economic colonisation resulted in people growing up with cultural references and interests. For example, instead of engaging in heated debates with people of other nationalities, students prefer to meet friends from their ethnic group. It is well known that a lack of openness leads to strong prejudice and ethnocentrism. Moreover, such cultural preferences can lead to students being classified according to their ethnicity rather than their individual abilities. For example, there is a common perception that Indian students are fluent in English, while Chinese students are experts in mathematics and Malays cannot speak English, even though they are taught by the same teacher. The teaching profession focuses on the transmission of knowledge and the teacher's communication with learners. These cultural idiosyncrasies in the teaching and learning process can affect learners' performance, which later leads to stereotyping of teachers.

However, this is one dimension of multiculturalism that includes another angle that can be considered. The teacher can be the medium to bring learners to another platform of social diversity through Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). According to Gay (2013), CRT engages students by connecting cultural backgrounds to classroom activities,

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making them relevant to their multicultural references. This paradigm is closely related to Malaysian learners who represent major and minor races and are largely dispersed into smaller ethnic communities. In addition, learners viewed early education from home as their cultural knowledge bases and their alma mater, which would be the second phase of knowledge, thus the early classroom experiences are different for each individual. This is in line with Idrus' (2014) view that the process of teaching and learning does not only take place in the classroom or school, but also in other social contexts. In this current context, with the multicultural diversity between both parties, teachers, and students, this study aims to explore the expectations, challenges, and teaching strategies of four ESL teachers in dealing with CRT in the classroom.

The main objectives of this study are to investigate teachers' perceptions and expectations when teaching English to culturally diverse students in secondary schools. Perceptions are defined as what teachers believe and feel about the presence of cultural diversity in their classrooms. In this study, the students are Malays, Chinese, Indians, and other ethnicities in Malaysia. On the other hand, perceptions are based on a person's experiences, morals, and influences. This study also attempts to explore the main obstacles they face in implementing CRT in secondary school. In addition, the study aims to discover teachers' strategies to accommodate all students in the classroom regardless of their cultural differences.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Thanks to the internalisation and globalisation that the globe has experienced, a multicultural classroom is no longer a strange phenomenon. Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), according to Gay (2002), is the incorporation of cultural backgrounds, experiences, and ethnic perspectives into a teaching method. In the teaching and learning process, previous academic knowledge and skills based on the students' frame of reference are thus linked. Teachers and students in a culturally diverse community each have a unique cultural perspective on the world. The cultural lens, as defined by Ladson-Billings (1995), is the way a person sees and understands the different cultures in society. The inequalities in the classroom need to be acknowledged and respected by both teachers and students. As a result, teachers can teach their students to respect other cultures and to become familiar with the many assumptions, beliefs, and opinions that other students have in the classroom.

CRT is based on the foundations of differentiated instruction that connects information to both students' ancestral and current cultures (Santamaria, 2009). In this way, all students can be the source of knowledge in the classroom. Students have the opportunity to learn from each other based on their background knowledge, experiences, and skills they possess related to their culture. According to Gay (2002), this includes the development of a culturally relevant curriculum and culturally responsive teaching to make learning more meaningful and effective. Teachers who use culturally sensitive practices in their classrooms see culture as a strength that can be used to promote academic and social achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2010).

Furthermore, with CRT considerations, teachers have the opportunity to delve deeper into their understanding and discover the cultures that influence students' lives. Banks et al. (2001) argue that CRT must be used to bridge the gap between students' diverse experiences and the curriculum. Teachers can build a positive classroom culture and create relevant learning opportunities if they seek to understand their students' identities and cultures. Many teachers are inadequately prepared to teach culturally diverse students (Gay, 2002). Teachers are inadequately prepared to teach if they do not have sufficient knowledge of the subject matter and the students' cultures.

Implementation of CRT pedagogy can face challenges due to teachers' inadequate understanding of students' racial and ethnic backgrounds. Maintaining an atmosphere of equality and respect within the classroom can be challenging.

To avoid detrimental influences on their student's learning experiences, teachers try to be culturally sensitive or avoid undue stress by challenging their deeply held pedagogical and cultural beliefs (Vaccarino, 2009). Culture and learner cognition are interconnected. Therefore, to prevent academic underachievement and promote educational equity, educators need to incorporate intercultural orientations into their teaching.

The intercultural orientation can be derived from the social constructivist paradigm on which sociocultural theories are based, which assumes that knowledge is created through interaction and shared by people. Sociocultural theories consider social interactions as a component of learning and development that take place when a learner interacts with other people, objects, and events in a cooperative environment (Vygotsky, 1978).

A. Teacher's Expectations and Beliefs.

The expectation of teachers can be defined as the assumptions and theories a teacher holds about their student's abilities, potential, and performance both in the long and short-term using a variety of sources, including the student's cognitive level, such as academic achievements and IQ level, non-cognitive characteristics, like behaviours and attitudes, their background attributes, which include their ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, etc. (Akifyeva & Alieva, 2018).

When teachers are given the responsibility of teaching students from different backgrounds, their attitudes must reflect an appreciation of the cultural, linguistic, and social characteristics of each of their students (Sparks, 1994). By that, the teacher can understand different perspectives and appreciate others and at the same time, it can also help teachers to reflect on their own identity as well as teaching practices. This is often very difficult, especially when

students exhibit cultural characteristics that are so different from the teacher's culture. Gay (2002) mentioned that culture includes many aspects, some of which are more important for teachers to know than others because they have direct consequences for successful teaching and learning.

One should refrain from making assumptions about their students as a teacher or educator, whether intentionally or unconsciously. Because making accurate assessments of students' performance is at the foundation of the teaching profession, a professional teacher must be able to make an effort to set clear and accurate expectations for the learners.

According to Rubie-Davies (2017), teacher expectations can manipulate teachers' instructional practices toward different categories of students. As a result, teachers' expectations can influence their students' learning experiences. For example, students with higher expectations might receive the opportunity and be administered more creative and critical tasks.

B. CRT Pedagogy

Teachers are the driving forces of CRT in schools and classrooms. Montgomery (2001) has established five guidelines that teachers should follow in preparing their culturally responsive classrooms. First, conduct a self-assessment to determine the knowledge base about one's own culture and that of others. Second: Use different culturally responsive methods and materials in the classroom. Third: Create an environment in the classroom that respects individuals and their culture. Fourth: Create an interactive learning environment in the classroom. Last but not least, conduct ongoing and culturally aware assessments.

There are several strategies for incorporating CRT into the classroom to foster relationships and cultural understanding. Gay (2002) pointed out that CRT includes several resources and teaching strategies that can be used in the classroom. Based on a direct study of culturally responsive classroom management, Brown (2007) noted the importance of teachers building respectful and caring relationships with students. In addition, teachers created a caring and supportive learning environment where interactions with and between students created a safe place to learn and an emotional environment where students could seize the opportunity to trust each other and their teacher. Theorists of multicultural education (Sleeter & Grant, 2011) identify a number of approaches to integrating diversity in the classroom. Some of these approaches promote respect and tolerance for all individuals and emphasise the message that all people are equal, without acknowledging current racism and discrimination. In general, teachers who are sensitive to cultural differences create a classroom that respects individual differences and helps students understand the culture of their friends. They promote racial pride and the need for equality when they inspire, motivate and instil values alongside knowledge in their students.

III. METHODS

The qualitative research method was used in this study because the researcher attempts to understand and interpret human and social behaviour as it is lived by participants in a specific context. Creswell (2003) defined qualitative research as an effective model that happens in a natural setting which enables the researcher to establish a level of information by being directly involved in the actual experiences. It is a holistic approach that involves discovery.

Purposive sampling was used. According to Patton (2015), purposeful sampling involves selecting information-rich cases.

A. Setting and Respondents

TABLE 1
RESPONDENTS' DETAILS

Teachers/Respondents	Schools	Gender	Teaching experience
Dayah	SMK A	Female	5 years
Miza	SMK A	Male	7 years
Anis	SMK B	Female	5 years
Dyha	SMK B	Female	6 years

Participants 1 and 2 are teachers from a sub-urban area in Selangor whereas participants 3 and 4 are teachers in Pahang. The teachers volunteered to be interviewed and also shared their lesson plans with the researchers. They have had more than five years of teaching experience in teaching students from various cultural backgrounds including indigenous students at the selected secondary schools.

B. In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews

Teachers' interviews were the primary source of information for this study and were conducted by using an interview protocol, addressing culturally responsive teaching and instructional practices. Creswell (2013) suggests the use of an interview protocol with questions and space for notes with a recording device when conducting the interviews. The interview was designed to identify their perceptions towards cultural diversity in school and the teaching strategies used by the teachers to promote unity in the classroom as well as the effectiveness of CRT in teaching. Each respondent was interviewed once the sessions for each respondent lasted for more than an hour. This was to enable the researchers to obtain rich data from them. The sessions were recorded with their consent.

Using literature on instructional practices, the questions were designed to examine individual teacher experiences, culturally responsive teaching, and practice in the classroom. These experiences included perspectives, values, and students' culture in the classroom. The aim of using a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions is to enable review and expansion of the response during interview sessions.

C. Lesson Plans

Teachers' lesson plans for two selected lessons were made available to the researchers. No observation was conducted. The lesson plans were documents prepared by the teachers prior to the lesson or teaching session to assist and guide the teacher during the lesson in carrying out the activities in the classroom. The aim of analysing the lesson plans was to identify the teachers' strategies for implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching in their classrooms.

D. Data Analysis

The data and information obtained from the interview were processed using thematic analysis. It is one of the best methods for identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting the themes found in the interview. It is also a useful method for exploring the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting commonalities and differences, and uncovering unexpected insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcription, coding process, and finally the themes are identified in response to the research questions (Creswell, 2007).

Document analysis enables researchers to obtain further information related to the study (Ary et al., 2010). According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is a systematic process of reviewing documents. These may be written texts such as books, archives, reports, novels, letters, journals, transcripts, or newspapers. It can also be in the form of non-written records such as photographs or computer images.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from respondents. Longhurst (2009) asserts that semi-structured interviews not only contain a series of important questions that help to outline the areas under investigation but also allow the interviewer or respondent to deviate in order to elaborate on an idea or answer. Meanwhile, Mackey and Gass (2015) found that researchers can use interviews to explore phenomena that are not as readily apparent, such as learners' self-reported perceptions and attitudes. In this study, respondents were asked to participate in a thirty-minute to one-hour interview and answer open-ended questions about their experiences with service learning.

A pilot study, also known as a feasibility study, is often conducted as a preliminary step to the main study. This is to ensure that the instrument to be used for the actual study is suitable and meets the objectives of the research. A pilot study can provide feedback on insufficient information and possible problems that might arise when conducting the actual study. In this way, the researcher can minimise possible inadequacies in the main study as much as possible.

Thus, the interview questions were tested with one participant to check the reliability of the questions asked. The recording was analysed to identify areas that might be redundant or misleading. The pilot project proved beneficial to the researchers as several interview questions had to be changed to get clearer answers from the participants.

IV. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The researcher adopted an inductive approach in coding and analysing the data. The interview data were transcribed and the data results were analysed using thematic analysis as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify teachers' perceptions, instructional strategies to promote unity in the classroom in the face of cultural diversity, and the impact of these strategies. The codes were used to identify themes that could provide a coherent summary of the data. In addition, lesson plans were analysed to support the interview data and to ensure the credibility of this study.

A. Teachers' Perceptions

During the interview, the interviewees expressed their awareness of the diversity of their students by mentioning and discussing some issues and concerns about differences between students. To ensure that the teaching and learning process is effective and successful, participants make an effort to learn about students' cultural interests and needs.

In order to create a positive learning atmosphere and give the students a sense of community, the teachers also make an effort to enter the students' circle. This is an expression of their good attitude towards the diversity of children in their class. Teachers' positive attitudes towards students from culturally diverse backgrounds promote integration in an environment, claim Kalyava et al. (2007) because positive attitudes are closely and favourably related to motivation to engage with and teach culturally diverse students. According to Spark (2004), teachers who are to teach students from diverse backgrounds must demonstrate in their attitudes an understanding of the cultural, linguistic, and social characteristics of each student.

Each participant is aware of their students' backgrounds and takes this into account when planning a lesson to allow all children to participate in activities and expose children to cultural diversity in the classroom while fostering a sense of belonging. During the interview, teachers talked about the difficulties they encounter when addressing students' needs and promoting student learning in the classroom.

All participants except Dyha mentioned that they felt disturbed by their students' personalities when dealing with multicultural students.

'In terms of their self-esteem and the way they bring themselves up, for example, when the teacher asks questions, the Indian student is the first to try, even though, as I mentioned earlier, he is a minority in the classroom ...' (Anis, 25).

Self-esteem is one of the barriers that prevent them from joining a culturally diverse classroom because they think that students from the other culture might be better than them. They think that students from certain cultures are better than them because they have a general idea of the culture.

'From what I see, the minority might feel a little bit inferior or feel that they are treated differently. For example, because they are a minority in the class, they feel inferior when it comes to participating in activities, expressing their opinions, and so on...' (Miza, 43).

McCrae (2001) suggests that culture can shape personality. The environment they are exposed to and the way they are brought up are among the factors that can shape their personality. Dayah's situation is different: 'For me, the biggest challenge is getting students to appreciate other people's culture. At first, they do not welcome the minority students in the class because they do not like them' (Dayah, 78).

B. Teachers' Expectations and Challenges

Culture encompasses more subtle behaviours related to social roles, behaviours, communication, and beliefs, in addition to obvious and material characteristics such as food or clothing. Because culture is multidimensional and dynamic, there are differences between people within cultural groupings. Culture is shared and learned in groups of people connected by a common history, place, language, religion, or socio-economic class. As for teachers' expectations of CRT use, they all have different opinions about their expectations. Dayah, who teaches in a suburban school, mentioned that 'although most students have been exposed to a variety of cultures, it is still a difficult task to get them to work together as a team. that is the most difficult task for me' (Dayah, 44).

With 7 years of teaching experience, Miza said that sometimes there were ugly arguments due to misunderstandings about cultures and festivals. He felt that it was the teacher's duty to clarify this, even if it was exhausting. He went on to say that unresolved cultural differences between students and teachers can lead to misinterpretation of students' behaviour or teachers' expectations on both sides.

C. Teaching Strategies to Promote Unity

The teachers mentioned that asserting power in the classroom is of utmost importance. The experienced teachers agreed on how they exercise their power while trying to maintain a mutually respectful relationship with the students. All participants stated that they always lead their students to unity in the classroom. 'I use my power as a teacher to match the way they fit into a group to the way I fit into the group. So, I mixed them in the group' (Anis, 102). Anis focused on using her power as a teacher in the classroom to ensure that students mingled without discrimination. Whenever students have to complete a group activity, she uses her power to ensure that every student in the classroom does not sit in a group that consists of only one culture. Students sit separately from their classmates who have the same cultural background so that they can learn from each other and share their culture with their group mates.

'I set the standards and expectations every year at the beginning of the class or lesson. I told them to respect everyone's opinions and ideas' (Dyha, 40). Dyha prefers to use her power to set the ground rules before she starts teaching, and this usually happens at the beginning of the lesson. She makes sure that the students know the rules that she has set specifically for the students in the class. For her, it is important that students in a culturally diverse classroom respect everyone's opinions and ideas, as they have different cultural backgrounds that bring them to different beliefs, which can lead to unity in the classroom.

D. Knowing Your Students

The participants make a clear statement about the importance of students knowing the cultures of their friends so that they are united in the class. They strongly believed that the values they taught the students and the way they went about teaching had a positive impact on the students. By knowing each other, they are able to avoid stereotypes and prejudices and this allows the students to cooperate and work as a unit in the class. She said, 'I honestly took special care of him because I know he is alone. He had no one with the same cultural background to talk to, whose shoulder he could lean on to talk about anything' (Anis, 70). Dyha, on the other hand, said that the relationship between the teacher and the students depends on the teacher. According to her, it is best if teachers have the opportunity and know the cultural background of their students on an individual level, as every relationship depends on the extent to which the teacher knows the culture of the students. She lamented, 'Everything starts with the teachers understanding the individual students. If the teacher knows the student's background, he or she can relate directly' (Dyha, 28).

Close communication enables students to build a good relationship with their teacher. Consequently, teachers have the opportunity to understand the cultural background of their students as well as the student's strengths, weaknesses, and interests, which enables them to guide them to success during the teaching and learning process. Gay (2002) added that culture is made up of a variety of factors, some of which are more important to teachers than others because they directly affect effective teaching and learning.

E. Social and Emotional Engagement

It was not surprising when all of the participants agreed that the subject matter for the class should be something relevant to the student's cultural background. It allows other students in the classroom the chance to learn about the distinctive aspects of their friends' cultures while also exposing them to and teaching them to value Malaysia's overall

cultural variety. Gay (2002) mentioned that culture includes many aspects, some of which are more important for teachers to know than others because they have direct consequences for successful teaching and learning. In addition to that, the participants can learn more about their students' culture. Miza agreed by saying 'I will always find culturally relevant resources... Making sure the materials used will enable students to contribute their own culture in the classroom' (Miza, 64). Additionally, Dayah suggested 'I will give examples based on their backgrounds or something they are familiar with' (Dayah, 75).

It can be said that education professionals frequently deal with resource constraints and challenging problems. If the school culture is based on cultural responsiveness and equity, students might also have a strong cultural foundation to draw from.

F. Promoting Collaboration and Providing Support

The results show that 'mix and match' is one of the best strategies mentioned by all participants. Initially, students prefer to sit in their comfort zone with students who have similar language and culture. However, all participants feel that this is not a good and healthy way for their students as it does not give students from other cultures the opportunity to share and explain their thoughts. Moreover, it is far from promoting unity in the classroom. According to Sahlberg (2010), intercultural knowledge and understanding of others cannot be taught explicitly, but only through constant social interaction in the classroom. The best way to promote cooperation and give children the opportunity to support each other so that they can complement each other is to put children from different cultural backgrounds together in a group. This gives them the opportunity to work together and encourages them to stick together when they need to support each other. Dyha shared her experience by saying: 'what I did was, I selected one student who was quite good in English to be my translator. So, the others didn't feel left behind because some of the students, might be shy to ask me questions, they can ask me questions through the appointed representative (Dyha, 43). This result is consistent with Wahab et al.'s (2018) theory that social conflicts frequently result from people's resistance to understanding and appreciating the diversity of their own cultures. Because they recognise and value the cultural diversity of their classmates, the kids in the class will be united and free from conflict.

V. CONCLUSION

One of the most important conclusions from this study is that both participants demonstrate awareness of the cultural variety in their classroom and have favourable attitudes regarding it. It is evident when they raise concerns and issues regarding the students in the classroom and take the initiative to read and research more about the cultural backgrounds of their students to avoid offending any of their students' feelings when they attempt to provide examples or explain anything related to the topic to foster a culture in the classroom. They also play a role in maintaining order in the classroom to ensure that all students respect one another and recognise the value of unity in the classroom.

Building positive relationships has positive effects on the students. The relationship between the teacher and the students is formed when the students feel comfortable speaking openly with them about their ideas and beliefs. The teacher will be able to establish a rapport with the students while also closing the communication gap. An indication of positive engagement is how enthusiastic teachers are about it when it involves them and their students. Improved intergroup communication conditions were associated with more accepting attitudes toward individuals from various origins and a tendency to join together.

Throughout their lessons, the teacher and students had been in constant communication. Respondents began to comprehend the needs of their students and create resources based on their culture. To grab the students' attention and got them involved in the class, they did not just concentrate on the textbook materials. They became aware of the uniqueness of others when their culture is discussed and they are introduced to various cultures. From there, the students discovered the value of unity and learn to respect one another. Apart from that, the teacher made use of the chance to leverage the background knowledge of the students' cultures as a source of information they were eager to contribute in class.

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