

The Effects Of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy On Enhancing The Academic  
Achievement Gap Of Adult English Language Learners.

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## Abstract

Education is not only an essential part of any person's life but also an integral one to the development of any country. The sad fact, however, is that many countries today are unable to provide quality education to their citizens. Through the findings of scholarly literature reviews, English Language Learners of this United States are in dire need of educational system that is conducive to cultural learning. I found disconnect between the pedagogical stance and or practices of teachers and the need of English Language Learners. The intent of this research project was to examine how culturally relevant pedagogy could be used to enhance the achievement gap of adult English Language Learners. The research took place in a college classroom and focused on four students for their active participation in the classroom activities. Through classroom observations, teacher and student interviews, I determined there existed no cultural relevant teaching for these adult English language learners.

*Keywords:* Culturally relevant pedagogy, adult ELLs

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### Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

#### **Rationale**

With the number of adult English Language Learners population increasing at a rate of 124% in the last decade (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005a), strategies to support their language acquisition and academic success must be a priority for educators. I can attest from my own past experiences as an English language learner, how connecting students' home culture to that of the curriculum improves the language comprehension, self-efficacy and the academic achievement of the learner. Therefore, in this action research project, I examined how teachers' use of culturally relevant pedagogy and the integration of students' funds of knowledge supports adult ELL's language development and academic achievement in the classroom. Researchers who study culturally relevant pedagogy put much of their efforts and focus on the K-12 population with little or no study of how this approach can increase the language acquisition and academic success of adult English Language Learners (ELLs). As a result, the intent of this action research project examines how culturally relevant pedagogy can also support the language acquisition process of adult ELLs.

Language learning is a long process that reflects ELLs' emotions and cultures. There is a relationship between language and culture: culture is expressly embedded in language (Fishman, 1996). We can say that culture actually represents the mind of the individual, the way he or she sees the world. Therefore,

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when teaching English Language Learners, it is important that we keep the individual's culture in mind and seek to understand that culture to better serve their needs.

Culturally responsive teaching is imperative, as widely agreed through the existing literature. All students come to school settings with pre-existing schemata (i.e. the prior knowledge) of their own that not only need to be validated but also promoted. As asserted by Lewthwaite and McMillan, "The underlying premise of culture-based education is that the educational experiences provided for children should reflect, validate, and promote their culture and language. These experiences should be reflected not only in the management and operation of schools but also in the curricula and programs implemented and pedagogies used" (2010, p.144).

Our nation's communities are increasingly diversified; this is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored. The number of English Language learners is on the rise and this growth is expected to continue in the next decades. In the year 2007-08, close to 4.7 million or 10% of K-12 students in the nation were of immigrant descent or were at least classified as English Language Learners (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

It is predicted that in the year 2050, the United States will be composed of 53% Whites, 25% Latino/as, 14% Blacks, 8% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian (D'angelo & Dixey, 2001). Given these statistics, it is important that the nation's school systems address the needs of ELLs. Currently, the academic achievement gap between English Language Learners and their native

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English speaking peers is widening. This gap and much of the lack of academic success among the ELL population emanates from cultural dissonance that exists between the school and students' native culture. Nykiel-Herbert argues that, "Ethnic minority students, and especially immigrant newcomers, who arrive at our schools virtually bursting with cultural diversity, are consistently at a higher risk of academic failure compared to "regular" American students" (2010).

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, "The Hispanic population has grown by nearly 60% since 1990 and that more than 80% of Hispanics reside in California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, Arizona, New Jersey, New Mexico, Colorado and Nevada. This demographic shift indicates that it should no longer be assumed that Hispanics will remain concentrated in a handful of geographic locations within the United States." Thus, English Language Learners demand the attention of our education system, a system that understands and attends to their needs using the best instructional strategies possible. One such approach is the use of culturally relevant pedagogy – which allows learning to be relevant and effective. Such an instructional approach and curriculum also uses frames of reference, background experience and students' cultural knowledge (Gay, 2000).

Instruction must not only be comprehensible but also relevant because students cannot learn what they cannot understand. If the culture and instructional strategies in the classroom align well with the home then we will have excellent performing students (Au, 1980). Therefore, culturally relevant teaching is a

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technique worth exploring and implementing to help close the existing achievement gap.

In order to close this gap, multicultural scholars such as Echevarria, Vogt & Short, (2008), and Ladson-Billings (1992), promote culturally relevant or responsive pedagogy as a way to solve our currently failing education system. Students' backgrounds and prior experiences, or their 'schemata' would need to be matched with the academic material for comprehensible input to take place. To further illustrate this cultural mismatch, Echevarria described a story that took place in middle school's self-contained special education class, the teacher was participating in a project using instructional conversations, an approach that explicitly links students' background to text (Echevarria, 2008). The teacher read a passage from a novel about a boy, Mike, who was reading his favorite magazine subscription while riding the bus. As he exits the bus, he forgot his magazine on his seat and spoke Russian to some passengers who were speaking Russian to each other. The teacher explained that Mike learned some phrases from his brother-in-law. Mike got off the bus and all of a sudden, some Russian men followed him off the bus and chased Mike, attempting to kill him. Mike was able to out run them and reached his apartment with a sigh of relief. A few minutes later, Mike looked out the window and saw the Russian men coming to his apartment building.

At this point, the teacher asked the students how the men could have possibly found Mike's apartment. The teacher expected that students would remember that Mike left his subscription magazine on the bus, which would have

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his address. One student answered and said that maybe they found Mike because they asked his brother-in-law. The teacher, then, asked the student to elaborate on his response. The student said that in their community (99% Latino with a small population of Samoans), if someone wanted to know where a certain Samoan person lived, he/she would simply ask someone from the Samoan neighborhood. The student's answer wasn't necessarily wrong; it just wasn't the answer that the teacher was looking for. The teacher nearly dismissed the student's perfect contribution (Echevarria, 2008).

It is therefore critical for teachers of culturally diverse students to engage with students using their prior experience \_and their funds of knowledge to make learning not only comprehensible, but also intriguing for both the students and their families. Delpit (1988) argues, "To deny students their own expert knowledge is to disempower them." As teachers of students of diverse background, we must cherish the wealth of knowledge and experiences that students come with. The more we know our students' cultures the easier it gets to create assignments that will help students to share their family and community experiences (Mays, 2008).

For those educators who want to understand their students introspectively, they should know that it is necessary to understand students' funds of knowledge: family background, experiences, etc. Having such a communication with students will secure a welcoming and learning environment. Berryman & Togo (2007) wrote that, "Where there is conflict between the culture of the child and the



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culture of the classroom, barriers to learning can be created, often unintentionally.”

The question remains, who are English Language Learners? They are sometimes referred to in the literature as limited English proficient or ESL learners or bilingual students. Regardless of the descriptors used by educators, all of these students face a huge challenge: the acquisition of a second language while learning academic skills simultaneously (Crawford & Krashen, 2007). Other challenges impact how the nation’s public schools meet the needs of ELLs today. According to Crawford and Krashen, the following are challenges that the increasing number of ELLs pose to public schools, “designing effective programs, mobilizing adequate resources, finding appropriate materials, and dealing with community concerns, among others. But unquestionably the biggest challenge for schools is to recruit and train sufficient numbers of qualified staff to serve ELLs’ needs. This is true whether programs are bilingual or all-English” (2007, p.13).

English Language Learners’ identity was better defined by Peregoy and Boyle (2001) as “Students who speak English as a non-native language [and] live in all areas of the United States. A large number are sons and daughters of immigrants who have left their home countries to seek a better life. Many recent immigrants have left countries brutally torn by war or political strife in regions such as Southeast Asia, Central America, and Eastern Europe; other have immigrated for economic reasons...Finally many English learners were born in the United States...”(2001, p.3). I personally relate to this fact because for one, I am an immigrant and the reasons I came here were many. I was escaping from a

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war torn country, so I was searching for better opportunities in life. I also had family members who were already living in the United States that I wanted to join.

Public schools make momentous mistakes in designing programs for ELL students. Crawford and Krashen argue that the concept of “sink or swim” is a failure and illegal under civil rights laws, yet schools continue to implement this method. With this program model, students receive the same set of instruction as native English speakers or English proficient students. Administrators at times refer ELL students to specialists without proper identification of the problems or needs of these students. Specialists cannot address all of the needs of ELL students in different school settings. ELLs are seen as having “language disabilities” rather than sustaining and recognizing the native language as a resource to support English acquisition (Crawford & Krashen, 2007, p 14).

Crawford and Krashen also argue that encouraging students to study academic subjects relevant to their native cultures and heritage language helps them to succeed and become proficient in both language and content area knowledge (2007). As an ELL student myself, I understand the importance of integrating the heritage language into the classroom material. At times, I find myself interpreting an English concept or passage into my first language in order to make the content more meaningful or comprehensible. In his comprehensible input hypothesis, Krashen (1982) argued that in order for language acquisition to occur, the learner(s) must receive comprehensible input in order to make meaning out of the content.

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Thus far, I have discussed the growth trends of the ELL population. I identified who they are, the challenges they face and the consequences of not attending to their needs. So how do teachers best \_ support language and content area understanding? One obvious answer is that students cannot understand what is foreign to them. Educators, then, would have to be appropriately well-equipped to teach ELLs as culturally responsive teachers. According to Taylor, “Culturally responsive teachers believe that culture deeply influences the way children learn and, when given the responsibility of teaching students from diverse backgrounds, their attitudes reflect an appreciation of the cultural, linguistic, and social characteristics of each of their students” (2010, p26).

According to Howard, “To become culturally relevant, teachers need to engage in honest, critical reflection that challenges them to see how their positionality influences their students in either positive or negative ways. Critical reflection should include an examination of how race, culture, and social class shape students’ thinking, learning, and various understandings of the world” (2003, p197). In a study by Crawford, et al. (2005), researchers examined the preparation of culturally relevant pre-service teachers. Their research described, 34 pre-service teachers who were enrolled at a large Midwestern university and had relocated 150 miles away from the university to a suburb of a large urban area for their senior year. Thirty six students were invited to participate in the study. Over the course of this seven month project, researchers used ethnographic approach to collect data. By using ethnographically informed methods to listen to the community at large, pre-service teachers began to interact with other

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perspectives different from their own. From this interaction they moved beyond awareness to effectively teach all students in their classrooms, especially those who have been overlooked because of their cultural heritage. Teachers did implement the valuable lessons they acquired from their ethnographic study into their respective classrooms.

I recall when my parents and my siblings migrated to this country; my parents were literate but couldn't speak English. So my sisters, 10 and 11 years of age at the time, were responsible for interpreting/translating for my parents. They would translate letters from immigration, the landlord, school and more to our parents. Therefore, building the literacy development for ELL students meant personal and social development as well (Hamayan, 1994, pp278-279).

### **Literature Review--What exactly is Culturally Relevant Pedagogy?**

Culture is dynamic and so are the interpretations of different societies around the world. However, I define culture as the shared values, customs and set of applicable rules for a particular group of people. People are proud of their cultures; in fact, it is a source of peace and cohesiveness in societies. Culture, is the element that helps with the how, when and what to do within a society. Culture consists of three main aspects, knowledge and belief, what people use and what they do (Peregoy & Boyle, 1993).

When reviewing the literature, I notice a commonality among the researchers' definitions of this philosophy and practice. Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is a holistic teaching approach for the individual and or a group. Ladson-Billings (1995) defines CRP as, "a pedagogy of opposition not unlike

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critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment. Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order.” (p. 160). We can therefore deduce that CRP serves as a liaison between home-culture and that of the school. According to Brown-Jeffy and Cooper, “Culturally relevant pedagogy is a way for schools to acknowledge the home-community culture of the students, and through sensitivity to cultural nuances that integrate these cultural experiences, values, and understandings into the teaching and learning environment” (2011, p.67).

Ladson-Billings (1994) argues that one of the foundations of culturally relevant teaching is an honest belief from educators that students from diverse backgrounds and low-income families are capable of being competent learners. In her book “The Dream Keepers” Ladson-Billing (1994) discusses the importance of “cultural relevance”, arguing that this type of teaching utilizes the culture of the students to rise above the negative effectives of dominant culture. That negative effect she is referring to is not seeing students’ culture and history represented in text books and in some cases not represented in a positive light.

Hyland (2009) argues that teacher education needs to be reconsidered; it needs to include extended experiences and great support for new teachers. This support should enable teachers to meaningfully develop community relationship through school based projects.

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This is why many research studies were dedicated to the promotion of culturally relevant pedagogy that enables teachers of English language learners to refrain from dismissing the contribution of any of the students. In this action research project, I will examine how culturally relevant teaching enhances the academic achievement gap of English Language Learners.

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### Chapter 2: Methods and Analysis

#### Setting

This research study, which explores in what ways can culturally relevant pedagogy, be used to enhance the academic achievement gap among adult ELLs, was conducted in October, 2011 at the South Cedar Community College campus (a pseudonym). This beautiful campus was located in the heart of Seattle, with easy access to freeways. According to the student handbook, on the North end of the campus was 10 acres of arboretum and a soon to be built authentic garden. Both of these gardens provided exceptional learning opportunities for SCCC students, as well as attracting a large number of residents and tourists to campus each year (SCCC Student Handbook, 2006-07, p. 4). The college offered two year Associate Degrees specific to the requirements of four year college transfer program. The school also offered Continuing Education/Lifelong Learning, non-degree vocational training programs, certificates, and a technical training certificate program. The college offerings were very convenient; they offered online learning and international learning opportunities for students. The school also partnered with local universities to offer bachelors level programs. Program offerings range from accounting and anatomy to computing software systems to English, mathematics, psychology and medicine. The school has two satellite locations.

According to the SCCC website, the student count for the year 2010 was approximately 7,000, of which more than 6000 were enrolled at the main campus. The student population was comprised of 19% African American, 23% Asian

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Pacific Islands, 44% Caucasian, 10% Hispanic, 2% Native Americans and 2% unknown. The website also provided student characteristics where students who are first generation college students accounted for 51%. In addition, the student body consisted of 10% single parents, 9% immigrants, 2% refugees, and 44% of students whose first language was other than English.

SCCC had an ESL department, where they divided ESL classes in literacy as beginning, intermediate and advanced levels. The ESL department categorized ESL students into six levels of literacy learning. These classes could be taken at any of the three campuses, two satellites and the main campus. ESL non-native speaking immigrant students could take an intensive or semi-intensive English as a Second Language classes in literacy beginning, intermediate and advanced levels. Non-immigrants were encouraged to take the Intensive English Program (IEP) courses available through the International Program. According to the program website, ESL students were taught conversation, pronunciation, reading, writing and grammar in skills core classes with special emphasis on the skills for survival English and employment-related English. Teachers helped students choose specific skills to supplement their core classes. Prior to enrolling in the program, students must take the English language placement test.

### **Participants**

Participants included an ESL classroom with a multicultural and multilingual population, which was comprised of speakers of Asian languages, Spanish speakers, Somali speakers, Ethiopian speakers and other languages. I



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counted 25 students in the class. Their ages ranged between 21 and 55 and over. I gathered data of students' country of origin and exposure to English, etc.

**Interview Participants.** I selected four students to interview. The students I selected were from four different parts of the world and thus spoke four different world languages: Spanish, Arabic/Farsi, Ethiopian and Cambodian. The participants were two females and two males. Their ages were 21 – 46 years old. I selected these interviewees on the basis of their class participation and ethnicity, and even though the gender ratio of the class was disproportionate, this particular selection of interviewees represented the cultural makeup of the class. My rationale for the selection was to find out their experiences, if any, of having culture as part of learning. I wanted how culturally relevant pedagogy influenced their second language acquisition.

### **Data Collection**

I used such qualitative methods for my research as observations, interviews with the instructor and case studies with ELL students. I conducted four case studies which yielded an profound understanding of students' backgrounds and their funds of knowledge. A case study is “an in-depth exploration of a single case, or example, of the phenomenon under study” (Mertens, 2010, p.233). The qualitative data I collected was represented in the fully developed description of the setting of the environment where the research was conducted, the teacher interview and the four case studies. These methods supported triangulation of data which “involves checking information that has

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been collected from different sources or methods for consistency of evidence across sources of data” (Mertens, 2010, p. 258).

**Observations.** Observations took place over a four week period for five sessions for a total of five hours and 40 minutes. My observations were during classroom instruction, before and after class. The class met Monday through Thursday from 8am to 11 am with a half an hour break from 9:15am until 9:40am. Four of my five sessions of observation were during the second half of the class and one was in the beginning half of the class. I made field notes during each observation day, while paying close attention to the setting, the overall layout and the classroom demographics, the textbook, and the pedagogical approach of the teacher.. I also observed the interactions between the teacher and students and student to student interaction.

**Teacher interview.** My second method of collecting data was an interview with the instructor. Prior to the interview I spoke with the teacher and shared with her the purpose of my research and how every piece in my research was confidential; she then agreed to be a participant in this study, (Mertens 2010). The interview took place after class at the instructor’s office at a time of convenience and suggested by the instructor. During the interview, I was looking for the instructor’s prior experience in working with ELL students and her view of culturally relevant teaching. A complete list of the interview questions is displayed in Appendix A.

**ELL interviews.** I interviewed four students and interviews ranged from 35 minutes to an hour. Interviews were conducted at school after class. I used an

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audio recorder and took notes at the same time in the event of a technology failure (Mertens, 2010). I prepared a set of questions to ask and to guide my interview. I asked open-ended questions which allowed participants to open up to me and express their concerns and or interests. Among others, I was focusing on knowing the interviewees' backgrounds, the familiarities of their cultures and perception of learning. A complete list of the interview questions is featured in Appendix...

### **Analysis**

Themes started to emerge through the observations and interviews. To analyze the emerged themes, I coded the phenomena as following:

- fossilization
- classroom practice
- teacher's style: traditional pedagogy
- Students' interest in culturally relevant pedagogy

**Grounded Theory.** Though my research question was my guide, I had no idea what specific elements I needed to observe as I walked into the ESL classroom. I first conducted both teacher and student interviews, and classroom observations. Then themes emerged, "out of the data themselves and not prior to data collection" (Mertens, p. 236). After thorough analysis of my data, I realized my data findings did not answer my research question; therefore, further study is needed.

### **Limitations**

As evidenced in my research, both the teacher and students felt positively toward culturally relevant pedagogy even though the teacher never engaged in

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culturally responsive teaching. More research is definitely required to find out ways that culturally relevant pedagogy can enhance the academic achievement gap of adult English Language Learners.

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### **Chapter 3: Research Findings**

#### **Research Site and Initial Classroom Observation**

The college where this action research project was conducted was located in an urban community with middle/lower income, small to medium sized, single-family homes and apartments. There were a number of small ethnic stores in the community. Industrial, shipping containers from the port of Seattle bound the hill-top campus. South Cedar Community College was a very active campus. The parking lots were full every day. The intercity routes wound through the campus. This college was by far one of the most culturally diverse schools in Western Washington with such ethnic groups attending classes as: East Africans, Asians, Latinos/as, middle Easterners and others. The school was truly the epitome of the community it was located in.

Before entering the ESL classroom, there was a small hallway room where there were a few lockers and some chairs, which resembled a waiting room. The classroom was well lit and included such technology as an overhead projector, television, document projector and a computer for the instructor. The classroom was set up in such a way that all students faced the teacher. There were two sections separated by a narrow pathway. There were three rows on the right section and four on the left. I counted 25 total students – 17 women and eight men: seven women and four men sat on the right side and ten women and four men on the other side of the room. There were 12 Asians: five men and seven women; three Latino/as – two women and one man; two Iranians – one man and one woman, and; eight Africans – four Ethiopian women, two Somali women,

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one male African and one female African which I am not sure of her country of origin.

I observed this classroom for a total of five visits ranging from 45 minutes to an hour each time for a total of five hours and 40 minutes. I also interviewed four English language learners, and an instructor.

### **Day One Observation**

I entered the class at a break. Students were in the class chatting, some of them were standing and some others were sitting, others were outside but just in front of the class in the waiting room. I sat on a chair that was on the side of the classroom while I waited for the instructor to enter. While waiting, during the break time, students were interacting and they were talking in mostly their languages but at times they would use English. The teacher, Kathleen Odom (pseudonym), walked in and I introduced myself. I then positioned myself at the back of the room where I would, at times, get up and walk in the back of the room to make sure I had observed everything that was happening.

Once the class resumed, students took their seats and Kathleen shared transparencies and pens with students, while she circulated the room. The lesson focused on vocabulary: "ambition" which she defined as wanting something very much. She posed questions to the class, and was very conversational in her communication style, and laughed easily. Students were encouraged to work in pairs and discuss what ambition meant to them. She also asked them to think of the word, ambition, in their own language, and to consider if it was negative or positive. She used total physical response to illustrate the positive and negative

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connotations of the word. One student, who was one of my research participants, Juan Gonzalez (pseudonym) answered the question and said that in his own language, the word ambition could be both negative and positive. The class discussed this lesson as they were asked to generate words that were synonyms. Kathleen wrote student responses on the board.

Kathleen used the overhead to present another lesson about career opportunities. Overhead transparencies displayed illustrations and visuals to provide vocabulary examples of culinary jobs. Students were asked to read aloud and the instructor helped with pronunciation. She posed questions to the class about the different roles of culinary workers and they discussed briefly.

The instructor, then, turned on the audio version of the lesson. Students listened and they answered some questions about the short lesson in writing individually rather than in groups. The lesson had a second part in which she asked them to write down their goals, both short and long term and how they planned to accomplish them. At the end of the class, the instructor wrote a homework assignment on the board and dismissed the students.

### **Day Two Observation**

I arrived for my next observation during the class break-time, the same time as my first visit. I noticed similar behavior and activities among the students. In the class, some were sitting, eating and drinking, some were standing, talking and walking around and some were in front of the class. Of the many different languages that students were uttering, English was the least spoken, while mostly native languages were being used. As usual, I positioned myself at

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the back of the class. One of the students, an older Asian woman greeted me with a big smile and waved at me while I waved back. The woman got up and came to me; she said they did not have books of their own because it was expensive to buy one. I asked if she was referring to the text book that they were using and she said, "Yes." She said the teacher passed out the text books to the class and collected them back at the end of the class. I was not sure why she shared this information with me, so I thought that she may have thought that I was an administrator from the school and she wanted me to address this concern. Therefore, I explained to her that I was not a student or a teacher from this school, but that I was from another college and was doing research. Though the teacher introduced me during my first day, perhaps not everyone understood my role.

During this observation, there were 10 students in the 1<sup>st</sup> row and 16 students in the 2<sup>nd</sup> row. There were two students missing, but there were two new female students in the class as well. The schedule was written on the board. The instructor, Kathleen, walked in and turned the overhead projector on. The lesson for the day was to complete sentences (six) with the correct future form. The following examples were four of the six sentences that students had to complete:

My sister (fill the blank) next week

Do you have any idea where you (fill in the blank) in twenty years?

My neighbors (fill in the blank) a party on Friday night.

We hope the party .....too loud

Kathleen demonstrated this activity by filling in the blank for the first, as a model. She then called on one student at a time and asked them to read the



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sentence aloud while filling in the blanks. Kathleen helped students with pronunciation as they read the sentences. After this lesson was finished, she put up another exercise. The instruction was similar to the last one – complete the sentences. These were common ESL vocabulary exercises, as known as cloze drills. Students were asked to use one of the verbs in the box with the correct future form. The box had these words: go, have and start. Here was the sentence:

I just saw Mike Cho in the street. Remember Mike?

He is doing well, but he's thinking about getting a better job. He <sup>is going to go</sup> back to school and he <sup>will start</sup> in September. Canyon College <sup>(present continuous)</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ an information session next week, and Mike <sup>(be going to)</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ to it. The college <sup>(will)</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ some counselors there to talk about the program – and Mike hopes they <sup>(will)</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ refreshments!

While students were working on these sentences, Kathleen passed out peer journals from one of the other ESL classes and instructed students not to open until they finished the sentences on the board. Kathleen sat with me at the back for a moment and explained to me the peer journal that she just handed out. Kathleen told me that she and another ESL teacher started the peer journal assignment a year ago. After use of these journals, they both noticed literacy and writing improvement among the students. The students used code names on their notebooks which the two teachers kept record of each student's corresponding real name. It was a free write as their peers read the journal and commented on it.

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According to Kathleen, this activity encouraged the student to read and write authentically.

When students finished work on the sentences, Kathleen asked if anyone had ever completed peer journaling and half of the class raised their hands in affirmation. Kathleen explained all about the peer journal. She told them that they could write about what they liked to do in their free time, their goals, and so on. She told them that the journals she distributed were written by students in another class, so she told them to look at the peer journals and comment on them now. There were 10 minutes left for the class and students were not expected to complete the task. When class time was over, she assigned it as homework. While students were commenting on the peer journals, Kathleen collected the text books and highlighters that she passed out earlier in the class. I noticed during the 10-minute peer journal writing, at least one of the students was using an electronic dictionary to support translation as he read the journal.

### **Day Three Observation**

I visited the class half an hour later than my usual 9:30 a.m. time. Kathleen was already lecturing about the term, “self-sufficient.” As usual, I sat in the back and did a head count of the students present. I counted 23 students. The following schedule was on one side of the board:

- No class on Wed. Oct. 19<sup>th</sup>
- Go over homework
- Future – speaking/listening
- Earthquake drill
- HW next sentences

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On the other side of the board was a lesson on a transparent paper. The lesson display was as follows:

## Lesson 7

## Listening and speaking

## Entrepreneurs.....

- have creative ideas
- are usually happy working for big companies.
- want to be self-sufficient or independent
- are not afraid to take financial risks
- are usually young

In this activity, students were asked to identify some qualities of entrepreneurs. Students raised their hands and read the correct sentence aloud. Once the activity was done, the instructor replaced the slide to another slide image that depicted a short story about a Russian entrepreneur with an audio narrated by a native (American) speaker. The slide also contained some questions about the short story. Once the story was finished, Kathleen modeled how to answer the first question out of nine. She then played back the audio and when it was finished, she asked if students felt comfortable answering the questions and all of them, unanimously, said “No!” So she identified the page where the story was located and asked them to follow as they listened, for the third time, to the native speaker narrate the story. After the short story was completed, a teacher-led discussion started and students were asked to answer questions on the board about the story of the Russian entrepreneur.

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Kathleen placed yet another slide on the overhead and informed the class that they would now work on pronunciation. The slide contained questions and students were encouraged to read out loud with American pronunciation. For example, she asked, “What did you do when you came here?” Kathleen said that the correct pronunciation should be “what ‘didya’ do when ya came here.” She added, “You pronounce it just like this.”

The teacher then turned on an audio of two native English speakers conversing and asked students to pick out ‘did and do’ accent. The audio stopped and teacher asked them if they heard the pronunciation of the “did and do” with a native accent but students were not too sure they heard. A moment later, it was time for earthquake drill and everyone had to get under their tables and class ended.

### **Day Four Observation**

During this observation, students were speaking to one another mainly in their languages. Instructor walked in and told the class that they must work on their assignment which she told them about before the break. The assignment was to write down five things that they felt when they arrived in the United States. Students were to work in pairs. I listened in on some group’s conversation and the following two questions were common among the groups I observed: When did they arrive in the United States?; How old were you when you arrived?

While students were working on this assignment, Kathleen wrote new instructions for the last activity of the day. She assigned numbers “1 and 2” to everyone in the class. The groups were split and assigned to different locations in

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the classrooms (north and south). She told them verbally that she would give them the vocabulary words and would have to place them under the correct part of speech and use them in a sentence. Kathleen also described the rules for this activity. She said that team members could not help each other. Everyone on each team would have their own individual turn. If they answered incorrectly, the question or word was awarded to the other team. The following instructions were also written on the board:

### Vocabulary

Use correctly in a sentence – 2 points

Tell the part of speech (Noun, Verb, Adjective, and Adverb)

### Irregular Verbs

Present Tense	Past Tense	Past Participle
---------------	------------	-----------------

E.g.: Go	went	gone
----------	------	------

Team South took the first word. Here are the words and how well students did:

Finances – this word took 4th student to tell its part of speech but still got the word use incorrectly. Instructor helped out.

Begin – no problem, the first student got it correctly.

Shake – same here no problem.

Identify – no problem.

Supervise – 2<sup>nd</sup> student got it right.

Throw - no problem

Spend – no problem

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Advise – no problem

Prepare – no problem

Supervision - 2<sup>nd</sup> student got it correct in its part of speech but couldn't use it correctly in a sentence, next team couldn't either so it came back to the original team but they also missed, the other team also missed so for the third time, the original team got it.

Ambition – no problem with part of speech but couldn't correctly use it in a sentence so the next team got it correctly.

Achievement – it took two students, one from each team to get the part of speech right.

Obstacle – no problem with use but it took 2<sup>nd</sup> student to get its part of speech.

Strategize – it took the second student from the other team to get it right.

Proof-read – the first student got the parts of speech right but wrote his sentence as: my friend proof-read my homework every day. Instructor deducted one point because he didn't write 'proof-reads'.

The students found this exercise engaging and the “south team” won. The class ended with this activity.

**Day Five observation:**

During this final observation, I arrived just a few minutes before the start of the class. There were some students who were interacting with each other in English. The white board was blank. Kathleen walked in and proceeded to write the following lesson plan for the day on the while board:

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- Sentences
- Go over irregular verbs test
- Handouts – homework
- Make sentences
- Dictation

Once Kathleen finished writing, she asked about their weekend and if they did anything for Halloween. One student said she took her 10 year old boy to a haunted house. Kathleen took this opportunity to teach the term ‘haunted house’. She explained it as a house with a ghost. Then Kathleen wrote the following parts of speech on the board: nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Kathleen then started pointing her index finger from one student of the class to the other, giving one word to each student. The students were asked to get up and write their perspective word on the board under the correct part of the speech and make a sentence using the word. The words given were: response, responsive, responsibly, responsibility, capable, capability. Not all students were present. As they arrived late to the class, Kathleen gave them one of the aforementioned words and they had to get up and write it under the correct part of speech and make a sentence of it. Finally, Kathleen led a discussion evaluating student work by going over and correcting their sentences. (Insert an Appendix B of student work of this activity).

Kathleen told the class that ‘Transition Day’ was on Wednesday November 2<sup>nd</sup> at 8:30 a.m. She further elaborated that this event was to be a workshop to help them plan for college. Then she handed out a piece of paper with information about this event so students were informed of it. I looked at the paper and it said the intended audience: ESL 4A/4B, 5A/5B, ABE, GED.

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Kathleen placed the Transition Day paper up on the overhead and she explained the workshops as following: Community College 101 – in this workshop student will learn about community college, degrees and certificates offered; Financial Aid 101 – this workshop will explore other sources of funding and who was eligible (Kathleen was the presenter of this workshop); Funding Your Education – this workshop would examine the variety of ways to fund education. Other topics included the Student-to-Student workshop which would focus on reasons students go to college and the Succeeding in Math workshop that would focus on learning math, strategies to succeed in math and overcoming math anxiety.

The class then was told to take out a piece of paper for dictation. Here were the vocabulary words:

- On transition day, I'll attend.... {They have to put down the name of the transition day name or workshop they want to attend}
- I have some questions about the workshop.
- I already know some things about it.

Kathleen asked students to take out their transition day paper that she gave them last week and asked how many workshops were there. They all replied “five workshops!” They were then told to pair up and discuss the content of the paper or which workshop they planned to attend. A few minutes later, Kathleen asked if they made a decision as to which workshop they would be attending. Some knew, but others had until the next day to decide. Homework was assigned and the class was dismissed. Collectively, these observations and thick, qualitative data represent the day-to-day practices of this adult ELL community class and the pedagogical approaches of the instructor. In the following section, my interview



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of Kathleen reveals her lived experiences that influenced those practices and drove her teaching philosophy.

### **Instructor Interview**

Kathleen Odom, the instructor of Basic and Transitional Studies, was Euro-American. She was an English native speaker in her early to mid-50s. She had a Master's Degree in what she said was, "Tri-focused: Linguistics, English and Education" from the University of Minnesota. She further continued her education into a Ph.D. in Educational Communications at the University of Washington but didn't complete it. She also received her undergraduate degree in Anthropology from Goddard University and had been teaching English to English Language Learners for over 40 years, 11 of which were overseas in places like Cypress, Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia. She had been teaching at this school for over 25 years now.

Kathleen speaks six languages: Arabic, Farsi, Spanish, French, Greek, and English. She can write them all except Arabic. She said Arabic is hard for her, but she felt that it has an "interesting alphabet." Kathleen also ran the intensive English language program for international students for this school. She taught at the university level in Iran and Egypt.

### **Teacher Philosophy**

Kathleen believed that in a teacher-centered environment, students do not learn much. They needed to be talking and generating comprehensible output. Thus, a student centered approach was preferable. She said the most important thing was to catch students where they are at and not teach above their level. She

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added, “Some of them need to go back and re-learn a lot of things.” It is worth to note that while this was Kathleen’s philosophy, the practicum opportunity for student centered was not present in her pedagogical style and approach.

Kathleen believed that the more literate the students are in their L1, the better they become in their L2. She explained:

They’re the ones that are fairly easy to teach, it is the others that are difficult to teach. Those are the people that may have good oral skills but have never become comfortable with English script and certainly have been comfortable with writing and for those students, I think they need to learn to write what they’re saying which is a very difficult thing to do, but it is a very important step. If they can write down what they’re saying and read it back to themselves it would be a very good way to learn to write.

(Personal communication, November, 2011)

According to Kathleen, most students need to store their learning in some sort of network. She feels that for those students who understand L1 grammar will have some familiarity with the target language grammar usually unless they learned it completely orally in a nonacademic setting. Kathleen explained:

I speak six languages, and I’m not good at any of these languages, so when I learn a new language I go at it with this idea of grammar so I think it is true with these students. Many of them have more than one language and the learning they have had, although not very many of them have prior learning, I’d say the

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majority of them want grammar but you can't just teach grammar, you have to go from their own writing because otherwise they can learn a rule but never apply it. I teach grammar explicitly but it is not the primary. (Personal communication, November, 2011)

I asked if the college assesses students' literacy levels. She explained that the state has a test called Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) that the school uses to assess reading and listening skills. Students take the CASAS test at the end of each quarter. However, the test scores don't determine their oral and writing skills. She went on to explain that the hardest thing for them is learning to write and for some of them the hardest thing is speaking. Kathleen said that East African students usually have no problems speaking but have difficulty in writing. In contrast, Asian students have problems speaking. So Kathleen assessed students in various ways. She added that the book she was currently using, *Future*, had a test at the end of each chapter, for writing, vocabulary and grammar. Kathleen explained that the decision of whether or not students can advance to the next level depends on if they can hand in all of their homework. She said the written work is hard for these students. She noted that Level 4 is the barrier level. After this level, she feels that most students are committed to going to college, so they really have to have the study skills necessary for that.

As for the essential goal for the class, she explained that it was for them to learn how to learn.. She believes that students only have so much time to be in class, but "they have English for the rest of their lives so they do need a fair

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amount of structure, grammar structure so that they can take on more and learn how to acquire vocabulary.” Kathleen shared that her students do have their own goals to go to college and advance in their endeavors. Therefore, her goal was to help them reach their goals and succeed in academic settings.

I shared with Kathleen that her class was very active, interactive and offered a vibrant learning community. Students talked and helped each other every day I was there. I asked how she promoted this learning community in the classroom. Her first words were, “That is one of the things I’m most proud of in my teaching career. If I was the teacher and they were the students in a top down approach – the community of learning wouldn’t have happened, the community wouldn’t have flourished.” She explained that the school had a Writing and Language lab (WAL) which was designed to be conducive, welcoming and fostering of community learning. She said students needed to take control of their own learning.

Kathleen also added that students must trust their instructors and trust each other to build a strong community. She said they had to know that the teacher is a learner as well that makes mistakes. She said one of the strategies she used in the past to build a community of learning was having them teach each other. When asked how she did that, she replied that there was a test about irregular verb forms that they took. When they didn’t do well, she re-taught the lesson and had them teach it to each other.

Regarding her philosophy of teaching, she said that one thing she’d like to be able to do, but can’t, was arrange the tables so they were facing each other and

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working in groups. She said she found out that if they didn't learn something she taught them before, she'd usually get them in groups and ask them to discuss, figure out and learn from each other. Kathleen said that her students are "adults and they need to be treated as adults." She also said that she had so much respect for them and their learning efforts and their cultures. She told me that none of the languages she learned is as good as her students' English.

### **Culture and Learning**

I asked Kathleen what culturally relevant pedagogy meant to her and she said that because it was a very diverse classroom, she could not make the pedagogy relate to one particular culture. However, she added that she had to be aware that not every student is of her culture so any references to anything that might be different from the American mainstream culture, such as holidays, may be important to discuss how it could relate to other cultures within the classroom.

We also discussed how she incorporated culture into her curriculum.

Kathleen replied, "We do talk about culture in the class. In the mornings they write sentences on the board and that helps them with not only the grammar but also what words mean culturally. I have not recently incorporated culture into the classroom instruction but I have had them give oral presentations about elements of their culture because they don't know about each other's culture and they certainly know a little about each other's religion." However, she said she plans to do more of this kind of activities in her class by incorporating cultural teaching into the classroom instruction.

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Kathleen felt that teaching proverbs are great tools integrating culture into the classroom instruction. She explained that because proverbs are such culturally rich nuances, she had students translate them into the target language and or L1 to L2 and L2 back to L1. As an ESL department, Kathleen said whenever there is an opportunity where culture comes up, “We like to take advantage of it. “ Kathleen holds the belief that culture enhances learning. She said,

You learn more about your culture because you have to explain it to others and others learn about your culture as well, similarities, and differences and so on. Students get an opportunity to talk to each other and ask questions about each other’s cultures. Students get along well. In my other class, we used to get into cultural learning activities way more than this class. In this class the focus is much more transition so I teach less of culture.

I asked what the term ‘transition’ means and she replied: “The upper level classes have a focus on transition into college because we want to make sure we support students in their pathway to get out of poverty. Research shows that having some college (one year) will help them get better paying jobs.”

She said that it is important for all ELL teachers to have cultural understanding. She also believes that most educators who are teaching adults do have that understanding but whether or not they integrate into their classroom instructions is another thing.

I asked Kathleen if she had any advice to a teacher of diverse students and her response was immediate, “enjoy your students, be flexible and teach to their

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level". She further explained herself by saying that the instructor must set up a learning environment where they can learn from each other, and be a facilitator and not a lecturer. In the next interview section, I will examine the perspectives of Kathleen's ELL students and explore their experiences while living in the United States and learning English in Washington state.

### **ELL Interviews**

I taped all of my four individual student interviews. I wanted to know if culturally relevant pedagogy was part of their curriculum. I wanted the participants to tell me if examining their own culture helped their learning better.

**James.** James was one of the first students I met with during my first visit to the class. He welcomed me and even asked me to sit next to him. James was a 46-yearsold Farsi from Iran. He migrated to this country just two years ago. James received a Bachelor's degree in Electrical Engineering. Even though James is a Persian from Iran, he spent the last 17 years prior to coming to the United States in Kuwait as an Electric Contractor Engineer, which was the highest position you can achieve in the industry. He worked his way up the ladder and finally assumed a managerial role.

While in Kuwait, James met his wife, Sandra, three years prior to this interview. She was an American. He moved here to be with her. They spoke English at home and his wife did not speak Farsi. James learned British English in Kuwait but he was not fluent. James spoke Arabic, Farsi and now English. James had been attending this college for the last 3 quarters, he started as a Level 3A, or

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a high beginning, student in ESL and he was at Level 4A, or the low intermediate level, at the time of this interview.

I asked James if they talked about culture in the classroom and he answered, “No.” He explained that culture is one of his favorite things to talk about, but it was not important to talk about culture in the classroom. He said that he wrote about his culture and history in an assignment for homework. He liked this homework assignment because it gave him the opportunity to present and inform others about his culture and history. He maintained, “Often times the teachers don’t have enough information to explain cultures and their intricacies.” He said his teacher from last quarter mentioned Persepolis in Iran, but she had no idea about this particular city. He said he helped the teacher better explain this historic city. James happened to be from that city and said that Persepolis is the City of Pars; this is where the Old Iranian Empire started 2500 years ago by Sirius.

James knows both his culture and language very well. He commented on the difference between Arabic and Farsi; he said that in his mother tongue of Farsi, there are 32 letters that is, 28 letters more than the Arabic alphabet. He said that having 32 letters in his language enabled him to pronounce certain English words with minimal difficulty.

James explained that because he learned British English in Iran, he faced some challenges learning American English and its pronunciation. For example, he said that he knew the word *metro* in British system, but in America it is called *subway*. Likewise, he knew *cell phone* as a *mobile phone*. Though not fluent in



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British English, he said it was easier to learn because his own native language of Farsi is comprised of British English with French pronunciation. For instance, the word, *national* is *nacional* in Farsi. One more problem in learning American English for James was silent letters. I asked specifically what words with silent letters he was having problems with and his reply was as follows: *lodging*, he said it was hard to get used to this. He also shared with me words such as *Geico* and *George*. In these instances, his concern was how you know when to pronounce the letter ‘G’ as ‘J’ as in *George* or ‘G’ for *Geico*. These are examples of error analysis – the systemic finding and investigation of the English Language learners’ produced errors (Myles & Mitchell, 2008).

I posed a question to James of how proficient he thinks he is in English. He explained to me that he understood and knows both his strengths and weaknesses. He said, first of all, slang confuses him. As for Standard English, he rated his listening skills, or how much he understands of what is being communicated to him, at more than 90%. On the other hand, according to James, his output was not as good as his understanding. He said that he could improve on grammar tenses when producing output in English conversation; he also added that he needed more vocabulary. I asked if he could elaborate on this point. He explained that for instance, he got confused as to which one is appropriate to use: ‘I’m talking to you or I talk to you’

I followed up with a question of how he measures and assesses his English learning. He said that he self-assesses by acquiring new vocabulary and using more correct tenses. He said that his wife told him that his English was better at

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the time of this interview than the last quarter. However, he told me that he struggled greatly in understanding the pronunciation of such words: “I’ll, you’ll or I’ve.”

After talking with James for over half an hour, I wondered if level 4A was right for him because he spoke and understood English very well. He said that he had to take a college placement test and was placed at level 3A when he first started at this college. The reason why he scored poorly was he had problem with listening, he couldn’t understand fast talking people. The college tested him twice in two subsequent weeks. The first test was comprised of 28 questions and he scored high, and on the second test he also did well. This test was for reading and listening. He said the listening part was hard because some of the listening activities you heard only once and very fast, while others you heard twice or more and that made it easier for him to comprehend.

James believed this notion of enculturation, where the native culture is primarily preferred but knowing, understanding and respecting other cultures is similarly important. For James, this was a different life, culture and community so his focus was to have a better life and contribute to the society by being a tax payer. He said that his challenge to getting a good job was not only his lack of fluency in English, but also his background expertise was not in use in this country. He said the electrical code was different from Europe and America so this created a big problem for him as he would need to be re-certified. Therefore, James was working on changing his career to a Real Estate Investor because he had an experience in selling.

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I asked if James had any advice for someone who was learning the language now and he explained that it was imperative for the individual to interact with other communities outside of his or her own. He said that he noticed certain ethnic groups stay within their group and therefore their English stayed fossilized without improvement, because they did not speak English with others, especially natives. He said that he mixed with others in the community and spoke English with them. For example, he visited American stores and he learned a lot by doing this. Before he started visiting American stores, he didn't know that a Sav-On, the name of a grocery store in his area, was short for *save on*. He said he also had no idea what organic food was or supplements.

As he interacted with the community around him he added a few vocabulary words to his already growing knowledge. He said that it was important to watch TV when learning English. He shared with me that he learned such words as *fog*, *foggy* and *cloudy* by watching TV. According to Suarez-Orozco's book Learning a New Land, "To learn a language well, one must have sustained interactions with education native speakers of English, as well as good language instruction."

**Jose.** Jose was a 33-year-old Latino. He was born and lived in the Oaxaca State, Mexico for the first 15 years of his life. Jose spoke and was literate in Mixteco, a native indigenous language and learned Spanish at the age of eight-years-old. At the time of this interview, he was learning English. Jose attended school in Wahaka State and said that learning Spanish was hard because it was not his mother tongue.

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Both of his parents spoke Mixteco, though he said his father barely understood Spanish. His mother had no formal schooling while his father's education reached up to 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Jose was married with one child. The primary language at home was Spanish.

Jose moved to Mexico City where he attended the National University of Mexico and achieved a Bachelorette degree in Economics. One year ago, he moved to United States for better opportunities and to enhance his English language ability. Jose visited his family that was living in New Jersey three times, but stayed a short time each time he went there. He started at South Cedar Community College the quarter before this interview was conducted, the summer quarter. He started as level 4A which he was still in at the time of this interview. When asked why he did not move up to level 4B he said, "Because Anthony who was my teacher he said that I do not use my grammar when I speak that is why." He also mentioned that ESL students at his community college stayed in one level for two quarters. He hoped to move up to the 4B the next quarter.

Jose explained that to speak excellent American English was a prerequisite to getting a good job in Mexico. Big companies in Mexico hired and gave priority to English speakers. He studied English for three years in Mexico, though his teachers were Mexicans and he said, "Both the pronunciation and the language were bit different than how people speak here in the States." If I were to rate Jose's English, I would say he was between a beginner and an intermediate English Language Learner. He had been learning English for four years and when I asked how proficient he was in English he replied, "When I'm in the U.S., I'm

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in between three and five on a scale of one to ten, but when I'm in Mexico, I feel like an eight." Myles and Mitchell (2008), as well as <http://www.moramodules.com> (November 28, 2011), address Jose's concern when they discuss language routes and the various levels of language proficiency.

I asked the following question, "Do you talk about your culture in your classroom?" He explained that they don't normally talk about culture, but their text book had a few lessons where the characters were Latinos/as. He said, "Mexicans in the book... that helped because we know how people feel when they coming here, you try to go up and learn English and or looking job or just try to get a better life for your family." He further illustrated this point by saying that if these people can make it, he can too. He stated that when he saw pictures of Mexicans in the book, he saw himself. He said that this pedagogy or strategy of integrating culture into the textbooks helped learning. Jose knew his culture very well; in fact, he took Anthropology classes in College in Mexico.

Jose knew his English was improving because he understood a great deal more of English than before. He said that I, as the interviewer, was talking too fast but he had no problem understanding what I was saying. He worked on refining his English language ability by watching Spanish speaking TV channel and translating some of the content into English or certain words into English. He used his English dictionary often when watching TV. However, he confessed that this strategy was not the most effective because sometimes he forgot what he learned from watching TV.

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Jose believed in the traditional and formal classroom instruction as a viable option in learning English proficiently. Therefore, he would advise others to attend school to learn English. He said he was not an enthusiast of Grammar, he preferred to come to class and read aloud so that the teacher could correct.

**Vicky.** Vicky was 31 years old, born in Ethiopia to Eritrean parents whose native and local dialect, Tigrinya is different than that of Ethiopia's Amharic language. Though both languages are Semitic in origin, they are completely two different languages. Geopolitically, Eritrea is an independent country on its own now; it borders Ethiopia to the North. In Ethiopia the national language with which all communicate is Amharic. Vicky's parents knew both the Amharic and Tigrinya dialects.

Ethiopian school system is similar to that of the United States. Vicky attended preparatory school or in America – head start, there she started the ABCs at the age of 3 years old. Her parents took her private all girl Catholic school which she hated with passion. At this stage, Vicky spoke more of Amharic and very little Tigrinya.

In the middle of second grade, she experienced medical problem with her nerve systems and she was taken out of school. Her mother had family back home in Eritrea who advised that there was a traditional medicine to heal Vicky's nerve problem. Vicky was taken to the neighboring county of Eritrea where she was received by her Aunt. There, she learned the local dialect – Tigrinya, most everyone spoke Tigrinya not Amharic, the language that Vicky knows. One of the things she remembered being in Eritrea was how she was not allowed to play

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outside as a little girl or play with boys. This created animosity between Vicky and her aunt because Vicky being young girl loved to go outside and play. She also remembered how she was told to clean around the house and that was something that was different than how things were in Ethiopia. Vicky stayed with her aunt for a year as she underwent treatment. She attended no school in this period. Upon her return to Ethiopia and to her former school, she was ridiculed by her classmates because she learned Tigrinya dialect and she mixed the two languages.

Vicky hated school because she said, “They [teachers] hit you so bad, spank you, they have big and thick rubber sticks, they tell you to lift up your clothes and they whip you mercilessly in front of the class so I did not like school.” She said her teachers were Indians and while they were not the ones involved directly in enforcing such an abuse, they had something to do with it; they would tell the Ethiopian teachers to carry on this abuse for them. She said this happened in every private school especially Catholic schools and added that public schools did not have that problem. She explained, “I never finished school; school was not for me.” Sometime later, Vicky left the country without completing her school and migrated to Egypt; she was there for nine months and worked as a babysitter but eventually returned to Ethiopia.

Vicky’s mother never worked, she was always a house wife but completed half way into her High school education. As for her father, she said he was educated but did not know about his education and how far he completed. She said he was a social worker. Her dad encouraged her often to finish school and if

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you do not, you will be stuck in one place in life and you will not get what you want in life.

Vicky won a visa lottery to come to the United States, she was 18 years old. When she arrived here, she enrolled herself into school but soon after learned that a war broke out in her home country. She said it was too much stress and had to drop school. She got two jobs to support her family back home; she said that she felt like she now had to take over responsibility from her parents. Her youngest brother, only five-years-old at the time was constantly in her mind, she was worried about him and his condition amidst the war.

She spoke English when she came to the United States some 13 years ago, she immediately found a job as a cashier and customer service at places like a 76 Gas Station and The Madison Hotel where she answered phones. She had no problem speaking English when she moved here. She started attending this college two quarters ago and as all new students do, she took a placement test that placed her at level 3B, she stated, “oral no problem but my writing is not good.”

I asked if they talk about culture in the classroom and she replied, “She [the instructor] told us to write stuff, about sentences of how we grew up and what our live was like.” She did explain that they never talk about their culture in the classroom; they just submit a written work to their instructor. I then asked her how well she understood her culture and she stated, “I think I know it good enough; I know basic things.” On a scale of one to ten, she rated herself seven.

I further probed if she thought knowing culture helped one learn better and her reply was, “Oh yeah! Because you compare your life style like your culture



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and you start to appreciate what you have or what you're having you learn, like let us say, my culture, as a little girl, you are not supposed to talk back to adults. I do not appreciate that one. But here, they [little girls] get listened, if something happens to the little girl and she have a right to get listened so I appreciate that one." She expanded on this point saying that she liked the idea of respecting elders, but in America "kids don't respect their elders as much as they should" and that bothered her. She clarified that her culture does not facilitate language learning as you are constantly reminded to be quiet. She said, "They [people of her culture] are always demanding you not to say things, not to do things, you are not suppose to talk loud, you are not supposed to talk to people about problems you have."

Vicky felt as though her English oral proficiency is "not bad." She thought that on a scale of one to ten, she was at 7 or 8. However, she said, "Not really good" when it comes to writing. She said she is constantly assessing her English learning by correcting errors.. She acknowledged that when she hears something she writes it backwards, she said, "I have that disability but I'm always learning."

I asked her if she had any advice for someone who was learning English language now and she explained, "Do not be shy, ask questions, do not keep it to yourself, do not act like you know it, you do not know just ask, ask in your own language, there are people around you, use dictionary." She then recalled how in her culture it is deemed wrongful to ask questions. She said what helped and worked for her was "watching TV and writing down excerpts from the TV or movies and looking them up in the dictionary."

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**Ann.** Ann was a married 21-year -old woman from Cambodia. She moved to this country just three years ago when she married her American born Cambodian husband. Ann had her aunt and uncle from her mom's side already living here in the United States but she left everyone else in her family back home. Her mom, grandma, her older brother and two younger sisters, her friends and childhood memories were left behind. Ann finished elementary and never attended high school because her family was poor and could not afford to pay for her high school education.

Ann started at South Cedar Community College two years ago at level 1; she was at level 4A at the time of this interview. I made mention of her going to the next level, level 4B but she said, "Oh now, I do not think so, vocabulary is so hard and my spelling is bad."

Her father had no formal education but he could read and write. His mother died at an early age and his father married another wife so he was taken to the temple where he was raised. When asked why he was taken there, she replied, "Because his father had another wife and they do not care about my father." Her mother, on the other hand, graduated from high school and worked as a tailor.

Ann spoke Cambodian most of the time at home. That was because her husband did not like her talking English to him. She said, "my husband tells me not speak to him in English because your English is so bad." She said whenever she tried to speak to her husband in English, she got stuck and she could not talk, but with other people she spoke without hesitation. At home, she said, they talked about their country, families back home, school and how to learn more English.

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Her husband finished high school but never attended college. She said he worked and was not at home most of the time.

Ann did not speak English in Cambodia; she started learning English when she came here in the last three years. I asked how proficient she thought she was in her target language and she stated, “I think so.” I then asked how she assessed her English learning and she enthusiastically replied, “because I always come to school every day I never quit school one days... Yes, and then I watch TV in cartoons in English then I practice follow them...and uh...when I have times I usually listening music in English and is sing follow them without...I don’t know.” I rephrased my question by asking how she knew if she was learning and she said, “I feeling like [I am] the same.” She did not know if she was improving or not but said that she could speak, though not well, and she could understand. She said her speaking ability was by far superior to her writing.

I asked if they ever talked about culture in the classroom and she said that they did not talk about culture in this course but some of her teachers from previous quarters did. I asked her to share with me her experience when her country or culture was mentioned in class. She explained, “I feel like I remember everything, and I felt like I miss my country.” I asked if that helped her learn better and she replied, “Yes, it makes it easier to learn; it is exciting.”

### **Data Analysis - Codes**

In the following section I am going to discuss the major codes and themes that I found in my data. Those codes include:

- fossilization

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- classroom practice
- teacher's style: traditional pedagogy
- Students' interest in culturally relevant pedagogy

**Fossilization.** James' utterance regarding the idea of fossilization with those English Language Learner groups who did not interact outside of their own communities aligns with the Mitchell and Myles (2008) research that learner's second language, at some point, reaches a point of freezing, or gets stuck and simply doesn't improve anymore. As an English language learner myself, I can confirm many such cases where those immigrants who do not allow themselves to interact with native speakers lack the proficiency and aptitude of their target language and never improve their level of English proficiency.

**Classroom practice.** My observation of this classroom helped me make the most of my introspective reflection regarding classroom practice. The classroom instruction was heavily focused on grammar but the students also practiced listening, vocabulary and pronunciation skills. Three of my four participants preferred to have grammar work, as they saw it was important to learning English.

**Teacher's style: traditional pedagogy.** Through the combination of my observational analysis and teacher interview of the data collected, I coded for the instructor's classroom practice, philosophy and beliefs. Kathleen was aware and made it clear to me of the significance of cultural teaching and student centered approach. Though she distanced herself from a teacher-centered practice during my one-on-one interview with her, her teaching style is one that doesn't provide

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room for student centeredness. In my sessions of observation of this class, I did not see any sheltered instruction or scaffolding strategies implemented.

**Students' interest in culturally relevant pedagogy.** James mentioned that discussing his background was important because it helped raise student awareness about culture, his people and history. Jose shared that even though the students did not talk about culture in the classroom, there were some lessons with Latinos/as characters and he was very excited. Ann also agreed that talking about culture helped learning, she said, "It is exciting." As evidenced in the English Language Learners interview section of this research, students crave culturally relevant pedagogy. However, the instruction did not offer or support critically/culturally relevant teaching. As described in my literature review, "Culturally responsive teachers believe that culture deeply influences the way children learn and, when given the responsibility of teaching students from diverse backgrounds, their attitudes reflect an appreciation of the cultural, linguistic, and social characteristics of each of their students" (Taylor, 2008 p. 26).

In the following chapter of this action research project, I discuss the implications and recommendations of the data collected. I will also explain how these findings can influence the design of teaching strategies and research for adult ELLs.

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**Chapter 4: Implications and Recommendations**

This action research project focused on whether or not culturally relevant teaching strategies were implemented in the adult ESL classroom and how such strategies impacted English Language Learners. The importance of integrating cultural teaching into the school curriculum serves as a means to cultivate learning and support the language proficiency of English Language Learners. In her book “The Dream Keepers,” Ladson-Billing (1994) argued that the “cultural relevance teaching” is so quintessential; it uses the culture of students to empower them and it encourages the positive and frequent representation of students’ culture and history in text books. Through the process of observations, interviews, audio transcription and analysis of collected data, my research findings yielded a null hypothesis. While students expressed preference for a cultural relevant teaching approach--and the instructor also agreed that the approach is positive--nowhere in the instructional design and implementation were there culturally relevant teaching practices in place.

As an English Language Learner myself and a community advocate, I have a vast opportunity to informally interact with immigrants. I understand the effective ways to support second language learning process through the lens of the learners. I came to learn that many youth in our community lack the necessary and basic academic English Language even though they may have lived here for many years from a very young age. One reason for this failure is the dismissal of the use of students’ native language to support second language learning (SLL). This is true, as evidenced by the scholarly literature; English Language Learners

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who receive their instruction in their native tongue have the propensity to achieve higher academic level of English than those in the immersed English programs (Crawford & Krashen, 2007). The needs for ELLs have been neglected and the result is catastrophic. According to Nykiel-Herbert, minority or immigrant students come with a rich cultural diversity and yet they are classified as academically high risk group compared to American peers (2010).

During the course of my classroom observations, it became apparent to me that students' needs were not being met. They, as proved by many research findings, benefit an environment that respects, encourages, promotes and is conducive to their native language and culture.

Through the theoretical lenses of Gay, Ladson-Billing, Au, Peregoy and Boyle's theoretical viewpoint, I examined how culturally relevant approach to teaching could improve the academic achievement gap of adult English Language Learners. During my interview with James, he shared that they do not talk about culture in class but he did an assignment about his culture and he liked doing it because he had to present his culture to the class. He said it was an opportunity to represent and tell his culture to the class right from the horse's mouth. He continued to explain that teachers do not have enough information to explore the intricacies of other cultures. To have teachers who are not culturally aware creates a disparity between the cultures of the home and that of the school. However, if the two cultures align, then we can look forward to excellent performing students (Au, 1980).

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While the concept of how to better understand and attend to the needs of ELLs has thus far been very intriguing subject, I am deeply mesmerized by the staggering statistics regarding the ELL population in the United States. The demographics, the increasing number of ELLs entering the American schools, their socio-cultural and socio-economics are all legitimate factors that impact students' success. The following statistics had my heart shaken. A recent report by Perie, et al. (as cited in Echevarria, J., Short, D., & Vogt, M.E., 2008) showed that 86 percent of both African American and Latino students in middle and high school read below grade level.

In his discussion of comprehensible input hypothesis, Krashen, (as cited by Mitchell, Rosamond, and Myles, Florence, 2004) argued that for second language learning to take place, the material presented must be understandable to the learner because comprehensible input will yield comprehensible output. We cannot learn that which we do not understand. As a result, it is detrimental to the development of our ELL students if we do not tap into their home cultures.

Rogoff (2003) maintained, "To understand human development, it is essential to understand the development of the cultural institutions and practices in which people participate" (pg. 327). As educators we must understand the culture of our students and the funds of knowledge of students' families.

Woodson offered an interesting story about culturally relevant teaching in the early 1900s whereby the U.S. government sent a delegate of elite educators to educate people of Philippines but the result was failure and the service of those educators was dismissed. In the meantime, an insurance man, who never taught at

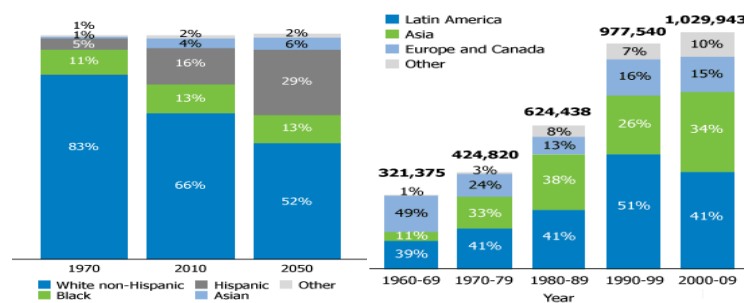


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all but with good people skills, travelled to the Philippines to engage in business but seeing that others failed, he went to work and yet the first thing he did was get to know the culture of the people. In his teaching approach, he crafted lesson plans about things which they were familiar with such as Lomboy tree in their environment and local heroes who fought for their country. He tapped into the funds of knowledge and provided instructional content based on familiar experiences and the result was a myriad of success (Woodson, as cited by Allen, 2007).

The English Language Learner population is expected to only increase year after year. The following graph represents U.S. Immigration growth broken into race and ethnic groups from 1970 – 2050 (<http://www.prb.org/Publications/PopulationBulletins/2010/immigrationupdate1.aspx>).

### U.S. Population by Race and Ethnic Group, 1970, 2010, 2050



Given this statistics, we must support a revolutionary change to bring about a culturally relevant curriculum as well as carefully trained teachers who understand the needs of ELL students.

### **Recommendations**

**Building on existing knowledge.** With the continuing increase of English Language Learners in the schools, we have no option but to teach ELL students as well as the educators themselves. The role of a teacher is to realize the “benefit from creating a classroom environment with the goal of expanding learning through building on the languages and cultures that children bring with them” (Mays, 2008). In Kathleen’s class, this strategy and goal of building on students’ language and culture was not present. Yet, Kathleen understands and is aware of the negative effects of not engaging in this type of practice. She acknowledged that the school wants to transition ELL students into college level English courses so the focus is to get them there. However, the only instructional approach I observed to help them reach that next level was to teach them grammar.

**Cultural Identity.** Kathleen explained in my interview with her that culture enhances teaching. In fact, she said, “You learn more about your culture and who you are by explaining your culture to others.” She is right, in order for educators to improve ELLs’ opportunities to acquire second language learning depends on their understanding of students’ cultural identities and their own cultural identity (Au, 1998). But her instructional approach was the opposite; there was no culturally relevant teaching and the college curriculum did not support it. There was no student involvement students in the construction of knowledge or the curriculum.

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**Teacher preparedness.** Teachers must be honest, caring and free of prejudice against those who do not look like them or share the same beliefs, culture or language. But teachers must also have the opportunity for self-reflection and multicultural training.

Over the years, I have had many opportunities to interact with communities of different cultures. I even taught in an after-school English and Math program hosted by the local community center as a volunteer ESL tutor. Students at this center were recent immigrants who were fully immersed in English-only speaking classes. Prior their arrival in the United States, some of them had never set a foot in school and struggles with their L1 literacy. I saw how frustrated they were by not getting culturally relevant material in class. Some of them described their school experiences to me, “we were like deaf and unimportant immigrants.” Others asked, “How are we supposed to learn if we can’t understand; we are scared.” This incident shows the importance of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy that prepares educators to be non-judgmental, welcoming of their students’ diverse cultural backgrounds and to be helpers of learning, (Brown-Jeffy, Cooper, & Jewell, 2011).

Some of those aforementioned students at the community center ended up dropping out of school because the school culture was simply too antagonistic regarding their home cultures. We must reconsider our education system at both the pre-service and veteran teacher levels so that the culture of the students are valued and integrated into school curriculum (Cochran-Smith, 1995)

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**Need for further investigation: the missing link.** The study of the effects of culturally relevant pedagogy on enhancing the academic achievement of adult English Language Learners calls for further research. A study with more participants across many different school settings is needed to examine the effects of culturally relevant learning. The literature review regarding the use of culturally relevant pedagogy discusses only K-12 learners. There is no research done on how this technique can be used for adult ELLs.

### **Conclusion**

In this action research project, I looked at ways in which culturally relevant pedagogy can be used to support the achievement of adult English Language Learners. Through the collection and analysis of qualitative data, it is apparent to me that teaching that is based on cultural relevancy uplifts both students and instructors alike. However, through my classroom observations, cultural relevant teaching was not practiced at all. With further teacher training, implementation and assessment, I am confident that different results will emerge. Based on my my action research findings, coupled with the scholarly literature, I agree that the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy can, in fact, support the academic achievement and language proficiency of adult ELLs.

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