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## JALT2022 Plenary Speaker • Yilin Sun

### Culturally Responsive Teaching for Equity and Success in ELT

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We are living in unprecedented times, dealing with extreme social and racial inequity on top of the COVID pandemic. For English language education, it is fundamental that ELT educators integrate Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) mind-sets and strategies to achieve equity and success for all students during these challenging times. The author outlines seven key components of CRT, an asset-based, equity-focused pedagogy—not in any particular order—based on her learning from CRT scholars and educators (Gay, 2013; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Muñoz, 2020; Paris & Alim, 2017) and her extensive teaching experience with linguistically



and culturally diverse student populations. Suggested activities for each component are also included.

**W**e are living in unprecedented times, dealing with extreme social and racial inequity on top of the COVID pandemic. The challenges are even bigger for our students, especially for students from remote areas, from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and/or are members of racial or ethnic minorities and other less privileged groups. Far too many students from these historically under-served student populations have difficulty accessing educational resources, including technology and quality instruction. For English language education, it is fundamental that ELT educators integrate Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) mind-sets and strategies to achieve equity and success for all students during these challenging times.

CRT is an asset-based pedagogy that makes meaningful connections between what learners study in school and their cultures, languages, life experiences, and future careers (Gay, 2013; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017). These connections assist students in accessing the rigorous curricula, developing higher-level academic skills, and grasping the relevance of what they learn in class and on their own. CRT is not the same as multicultural education or social justice

education, though these are related. CRT is about building students' learning power and brain power by improving information processing skills and using culturally responsive learning tools. CRT is grounded in social and cognitive neuroscience.

In this short article, I will outline seven key components of CRT, not in any particular order, based on my learning from various CRT scholars and educators (Gay, 2013; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Muñiz, 2020; Paris & Alim, 2017) and my extensive teaching experience with linguistically and culturally diverse student populations. The seven components are: (1) Unpack personal implicit biases and reflect on personal cultural lens; (2) Have faith in the ability of all students to learn and succeed; (3) Respect and integrate students' cultures into curriculum and instruction; (4) Utilize transformative teaching and learning approaches; (5) Build learning communities with different stake holders; (6) Communicate in a culturally responsive manner; (7) Prepare students for constructive social changes with 21st century skills.

### **Unpack Personal Implicit Biases and Reflect on Personal Cultural Lens**

To become culturally responsive (CR) teachers, we need to unpack personal biases. Biases, whether implicit or explicit, exist in many forms and often derive from personal perspectives and views instilled from our life experiences since childhood. Our beliefs and biases are also shaped by our education, social interactions, and more. Culturally responsive teachers regularly reflect on their own life experiences and relationships in various groups (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation). We need to ask ourselves how these factors influence our beliefs and actions. Everyone can unintentionally internalize biases that end up shaping our teaching style and interactions with students, families, and colleagues. Also, we all may unknowingly use stereotypes and commit microaggressions (subtle comments or actions that are unintentionally discriminatory) if we are not mindful of how we think and act. As a result, our biases may influence pedagogical decisions, and we may also lower expectations based on a student's culture, social-economic status, and/or race. Being cognizant of the fact that we all have biases will not change them, but it may help us make more informed decisions and value differences from various perspectives so that we are not perpetuating inequality in education and the communities we live in. In addition, becoming self-aware can be uncomfortable, particularly for teachers who have never examined their identities. However, studies show

that actions such as forming a learning community to discuss and reflect on issues about implicit biases and microaggressions along with reflective journaling can help teachers overcome those feelings and fears. Educators working together in combatting personal biases and microaggressions is a critical step in addressing biases in our institutions and educational system.

### **Have Strong Faith in the Ability of All Students to Learn and Succeed**

CRT is an asset-based pedagogy which values the experiences and capabilities that every student brings to school. Educators need to believe that all students can learn and be successful. It is a matter for teachers to discover students' potential and strengths and then use culturally responsive teaching strategies to build students' confidence, cultivate their "ready for rigor and success" mind-set, and develop skills to undertake rigorous academic learning tasks. Teachers should have high expectations for every student, accompanied by a set of positive attitudes about them and a box of tools to support them. These include encouraging students to use their intellectual capacity, be persistent during their productive struggles in academic studies, and utilize their innate critical thinking skills and creativity in problem-solving. Those educators nurture students' academic, emotional, social, cultural, and physiological well-being.

### **Respect and Integrate Students' Cultures into Curriculum and Instruction**

Another important component of CRT is to integrate students' cultures and prior knowledge into curriculum and instruction to help bridge new learning. Cultural scaffolding, which is connecting new academic concepts and new learning with students' background knowledge from lived experiences, families, and communities, is an important strategy that culturally responsive educators use. Student input/feedback should be regularly collected to shape projects, assignments, and assessments. Teachers should also evaluate the school curriculum, instructional materials, and resources to make sure they do not perpetuate biases and stereotypes or exclude certain cultures or groups. Culturally responsive teachers provide "mirrors and windows" for all students. In other words, they integrate materials, examples, stories, games, and other resources that reflect experiences, characters, and settings that students can relate to in real life. They also provide "windows" to engage students in reading books or checking resources that help them learn

about others' worlds and address issues of inequity, environmental sustainability, and discrimination in the real world.

### Utilize Transformative Teaching and Learning Approaches

Unlike traditional teaching approaches that produce low student agency, CRT uses transformative teaching approaches that promote high student agency. Unlike traditional teaching, CR educators facilitate learning using student-centered strategies and activities. Learning is not confined within the class walls, as students are engaged in authentic project-based activities, which require them to ask critical questions, work with peers, and explore solutions from multiple sources to address problems that are not "Googleable" or solvable with a single answer. Students are encouraged to learn anytime and anywhere. CR educators use personalized differentiated instructions to help all students use their brain power to discover the best ways to connect new learning tasks with students' prior knowledge and interest. Students can identify learning outcomes, which not only helps them be successful in their current classes but be successful in their future studies and careers. At my own college, many faculty have been using TILT (Transparency in Teaching and Learning) as an equity tool to improve transparency in assignments, projects, and assessment to transform our instruction. We have seen significant retention and success among students, especially among first-year college students

from historically underrepresented backgrounds. Table 1 below summarizes the difference between transformative teaching approaches and traditional teaching approaches.

### Building Supportive Communities With Different Stake Holders

Culturally responsive educators understand the importance of building supportive communities with different stakeholders, including, but not limited to, learners, parents, policymakers, and the people in the communities they live in. They make a conscious effort to build trust and ensure that families of low-income and underrepresented students are involved at all levels of their children's education and that their input matters to the school curriculum and school policy. This is a change to the past practice that emphasizes mainly voices from middle/upper-class and white families. CR educators are also very open to learning about the local community and families' cultures, expectations, and values for education. They advocate for support and resources for equity, inclusion, and access to quality education for all students at local, state, and national levels.

### Communicating in a Culturally Responsive Manner

CR educators are effective communicators. They especially have a high awareness of the importance of communicating in culturally and linguistically

**Table 1**  
*Traditional vs. Transformative Approach*

Traditional Approach (Low Agency)	Transformative Approach (High Agency)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliver instruction</li> <li>• Teacher teaching centered</li> <li>• Classroom learning</li> <li>• Standard, one-size fits all</li> <li>• Learn to do</li> <li>• Content memorization focused</li> <li>• Looking for the right answer</li> <li>• Teaching segmented curriculum</li> <li>• Passive consumption</li> <li>• Technology as an add on</li> <li>• Assessment of learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate learning</li> <li>• Student leaning centered</li> <li>• Learning anytime, anywhere</li> <li>• Personalized, differentiated</li> <li>• Do to learn</li> <li>• Application focused</li> <li>• Cultivating critical thinking, problem solving</li> <li>• Integrating curriculum</li> <li>• Active learning opportunities</li> <li>• Integrated digital/technology literacy</li> <li>• Assessment as learning, for learning and innovation</li> </ul>

sensitive ways with students, families, and community members to make their classes and schools welcoming and inclusive. They advocate for translation services and resources in various languages for families to establish effective communication and support for student learning. Very often, due to different communication styles among different cultural groups, miscommunication can happen, which may result in over-disciplining students who are perceived to be vocal and defiant. Additionally, a student might be too quiet and passive and, as a result, be labeled as withdrawn and unmotivated. Culturally responsive educators continuously seek to understand how culture influences communication, both in verbal ways (e.g., the tone of voice, volume, and vocabulary used) and nonverbal ways (e.g., eye contact, gestures, distance between speakers, and body language). They make sure the class environment is safe and welcoming, and they encourage students to use their natural ways of speaking in the classroom. They act by example to honor and value students and families from multilingual, multicultural, and lower socioeconomic backgrounds by inviting them to share stories and perspectives as cultural ambassadors. They also include learning materials that represent the varied cultural backgrounds of students.

### Prepare Students for Constructive Social Changes With 21st Century Skills

Culturally responsive educators are committed to preparing students with 21st century skills so they can become constructive social change agents in society. Trilling and Fadel (2009) outlined the seven most important skills (the seven C's) that students need to be prepared as 21st century citizens, including (1) critical thinking and problem solving; (2) creativity and innovation; (3) collaboration, teamwork, and leadership; (4) cross-cultural understanding; (5) communication, information, and media literacy; (6) computing and ICT literacy; and (7) career and learning self-reliance. In recent years, especially with the global COVID pandemic and other challenges in society, many educators and researchers (Benard, 2000; Gerstein, 2013; Sun, 2021) have included three additional critical skills as part of the 21st century skills: resilience, agility, and adaptability. Resilience is the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties and hardship. According to the American Psychological Association, "resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands" (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.). Sun (2021,

adapted from Gerstein, 2013) categorized resilient people with nine traits: *awareness of strengths and assets, bouncing back* (strong adversity quotient (AQ), *courageous and calm, display passion-driven focus, emotion management, foster a sense of personal agency, good at critical thinking/problem-solving, help others/reach out to others, and insightful and resourceful*. Resilience is learnable and teachable, and as we learn, we increase our range of strategies and become more resilient. Agility is the ability and willingness to learn from experience, and then apply that learning in order to perform successfully under new situations (De Meuse, 2017). Adaptability is the ability to embrace change and be flexible.

Culturally responsive educators firmly believe that all students have resilience and can become agile and adaptable with the proper support and strategic practice. Students have the power to transform when facing challenges. They encourage students to utilize the nine resilience traits and use critical case studies and project-based learning activities where students have to be agile and adaptable in order to solve problems and come up with creative solutions.

### Final Words

In this article, I briefly discussed seven key components of culturally responsive teaching, an asset-based, equity-focused pedagogy. As we are dealing with extreme social and racial inequity, educational equity has become a top priority for schools and educators, and this is a time for them to engage in new ways of thinking, making a paradigm shift to equity and working with our students using asset-based CRT pedagogy. 21st century ELT education during these challenging times is about cultivating equity via committed, reflective, resilient, and innovative ELT educators and leaders. It is about building CRT guided academic rigor in order to close equity and achievement gaps, and it is about integrating 21st century skills and competencies to achieve success beyond the ELT classroom.

I sincerely hope this article has provided you with some food for thought, and I thank you for taking the time to read it.

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## JALT2022 Plenary Speaker • Ryoko Tsuneyoshi

### English and Intercultural Understanding in Japan: Elementary School English Reexamined

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With the recent reforms to the Course of Study in Japan, foreign language (English) was established as a subject in elementary school in the upper grades. In addition, Grades 3 and 4 are to practice what is called foreign language (English) activities. I point out that “foreign language” and “English” are used interchangeably in this process, illuminating the problematic assumptions that are being made. Such assumptions, it is argued, support a monocultural, monoethnic view of Japanese society, and thus present problems in trying to construct its multicultural vision. In particular, I argue that the framing of foreign language activities/foreign language as En-



glish disadvantages the major “foreigners” or ethnic minority groups in Japan (e.g., Koreans in Japan and Brazilians of Japanese descent), who are not associated with English-speaking countries. I argue that this and other related assumptions go against the goals of foreign language activities emphasizing international understanding and are detrimental to constructing Japanese society as multicultural, with people from various cultural backgrounds residing together in the community and society.

#### The Confusing State of Elementary School English Education

It is not difficult to notice that English has a special status among foreign languages in Japan (though the emphasis on English is not limited to Japan). The dominance of English is not surprising, given that English is often referred to as the language of the “international society,” and is a core component of entrance examinations at various levels. In a series of amendments to the Course of Study, the elementary school curriculum for 5th and 6th grades now includes English as a subject. Elementary school English is still in a transitional stage, and its shape changes with every revision to the Course of Study. Such changes illuminate assumptions that Japanese society has of “English,” some of which may be problematic.

First, in elementary school English, what is meant by “English” education is not altogether clear. To give an example, in the changes to the Course of