The Cultural Responsiveness of the Communicative and Task-Based Instructional Approaches to African English Language Learners in A College ESL Classroom: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

In the United States school education system, there are students who are identified as English Language Learners (ELLs). ELLs are multilingual students who speak any other language apart from English at home. While majority of the ELLs are born in the United States, a few of them are immigrants from different parts of the world who later joined the US school system (Zong & Batalova, 2015) [18], and this study focuses on the latter student population at a college level. Various second language teaching approaches are often utilized by language teachers to make their classroom instructions effective. Lightbown & Spada (2013) [6] state communicative, task-based and content-based instructions, which appear to be commonly used when compared to the grammar translation and audiolingual approaches. The former instructions provide a ground for students to interact, converse, and communicate using the target language, and the students are expected to actively engage in the class discussions and interactions while the teacher facilitates them (Lightbown & Spada, 2013) [6]. However, little is known how culturally responsive the communicative and task-based instructions are to African ELLs in a college English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom in the Midwest. In order to address this gab, five African ELLs were selected based on convenience sampling and data were gathered through semi-structured interview and focus-group discussion. After analyzing the data through Miles & Huberman's (1994) [8] qualitative data analysis procedures, the following findings were reported. The cultural identity of the African ELLs did not seem to align with the principles of communicative and task-based instructional approaches, as the ELLs were raised to speak less but to listen more, avoid eye contact, and keep their head down when conversing as a sign of respect to the teachers. These elements of African cultural identity appeared to inhibit the ELLs from participating freely and actively in the English conversations, interactions, and group works in a college ESL classroom in the Midwest, United States. The study concludes that the communicative and task-based instructions should be culturally responsive to meet the unique needs of the African ELLs in a college ESL classroom.

Keywords: *English Language Learners, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Communicative and Task-based Instructions, English as a Second Language*

1.Introduction

In the United States public education system, learners who come from homes where English is a second language are identified as English Language Learners (ELLs). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023) [9], the number of ELLs has been growing from year to year; in fall 2010, there were about 4.5 million ELLs, but increased to 5 million by fall 2020. In a similar vein, a small number of ELLs are believed to attend the postsecondary institutions in the United States. The ELLs are often placed in English as a Second Language (ESL) class, before joining or while attending the mainstream class, to get language assistance so that they achieve English proficiency and meet the academic content and achievement standards. While majority of the ELLs are born in the United States, a few of them are immigrants from different parts of the world who later joined the US school system (Zong & Batalova, 2015) [18]. The study focuses on the latter student populations who are attending college education in the Midwest. In the ESL class, teachers often utilize various second language teaching approaches for quality classroom instructions and often use communicative, task-based, and content-based teaching approaches, as they provide a ground for students to interact and communicate using the target language and enable the students to actively engage in the class discussions while the teacher acts as a facilitator

(Lightbown & Spada, 2013) [6]. These teaching approaches don't align with Freire's (1993) [3] banking model, where teachers deposit information into the students instead of inviting them to participate in the knowledge construction system based on their cultural and linguistic knowledge. This may be the reason why communicative, task-based, and content-based teaching approaches are highly favored and suggested by second language acquisition experts. However, little is known how culturally responsive they are to African ELLs in college, and hence the study addresses this research question: How culturally responsive are the communicative and task-based instructions to African college ELLs in the Midwest? The qualitative study on which this paper is constructed is significant, as it can inform educators, policy makers, teachers and other education stakeholders about the cultural responsiveness of the communicative and task-based instructional approaches in a college ESL class in the Midwest.

2. Learning in the second language classroom

Learning in the second language classroom takes place in various settings and environments. Lightbown & Spada (2013) [6] explain that there is the "natural acquisition context" (p.123) in which the students learn the target language in a context where most of the other students are native speakers of the L2, and the instruction targets the native speakers of the target language rather than the language learners. In this kind of classroom, the language learners tend to learn more from their teachers' and peer's interactions. On the other hand, in the "structure-based instructional environments" (p.123), the authors argue that teachers teach the second or foreign language to language learners, where there is much emphasis on the language rather than the meaning carried by the language. In their instructions, the teachers focus more on teaching the grammatical rules and vocabulary of the L2. In such a context, the students often do not have ample opportunities to practice the second/foreign language and use it for communication purposes outside the classroom. Rather, passing the language assessment is their priority.

On the other hand, communicative, task-based, and content-based instructional approaches enable the second language learners to learn the target language in an authentic and communicative way. There is much interaction and conversation in the classroom, where the topic of the discussion aligns with the learners' interests. Thus, the main principles of communicative and task-based instructional approaches include effective communication, learner-centered work, and focus on meaning, whereas in the content-based instruction, subject matter such as history, anthropology, and geography are taught through the medium of the target language (Lightbown & Spada, 2013) [6]. This instructional approach focuses on the language and its use in different subject matter, where the grammatical accuracy is not the priority. Thus, there are different second language learning contexts and approaches where the emphasis of their language learning varies.

3. Literature on challenges facing English Language Learners (ELLs)

There are several challenges facing ELLs who migrated to the host country like the United States. Firstly, it may be difficult for them to get integrated into the dominant culture without losing a sense of their own cultural identity. There is an argument that some ESL classes have been used to assimilate ELLs to the dominant culture without leaving a room to practice their own culture and language as the minority groups (Oh, 2012) [10], and hence integrating the ELLs' cultural and linguistic experiences into the school curriculum was far from being achieved. This is not to say that the ESL teachers are not aware of the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy. Yoon (2023) [17] states that teacher trainees learn the significance of culturally responsive pedagogy in their classroom instructions, but don't implement it due to their belief that the ELLs should learn the formal English without switching to their home language, and writes, "pre-service teachers identified the importance of recognizing a student's home language as an asset, but they believed teaching standardized English was necessary" (p. 2). Culturally responsive pedagogy is an approach that considers the students' cultural and linguistic capital and provides a ground for teachers to include different kinds of differentiation and inclusive approaches in their instructions for their culturally diverse student populations (Ladson-Billings, 2009) [5].

The other challenge facing ELLs who migrated to the host country is that they come from a different education system. For example, Joyce et al. (2010) [4] in their study about university immigrant students in Australia found that the immigrant students were in greater tension and nervousness due to

the different education system from what they are used to, and hence the authors described the university as "culturally alienating place" (p. 169).

In addition, keeping ELLs in an ESL classroom for an extended time may be advantageous in terms of learning English as a second language, but they may feel a sense of exclusion socially and psychologically as they are not part of the mainstream class (Olsen,1997) [11]. For example, Davila (2012) [2] reported that high school Vietnamese refugee students, for being in an ESL class, missed the chance to engage with their peers, native English speakers. The latter would help them to improve their English skills and navigate finding scholarship and job opportunities after leaving high school. Due to lack of such interactions, the ELLs were compelled to withdraw psychologically, meaning they could not concentrate on their ESL lessons, and faced social isolation i.e., lack of engagement with the school community. Moreover, Orosco & O'Connor (2013) [12] reported that ELLs can benefit from culturally responsive instruction in an elementary classroom, as it gives them an opportunity to reflect on their cultural and linguistic experiences. In a similar vein, Williamson (2022) [15] reported the significance of integrating ELLs' cultural and linguistic practices into the preschool and early elementary classrooms for their academic success. However, little is known how culturally responsive the communicative and task-based instructional approaches are to African ELLs in a college ESL classroom.

4.Methodology

This study drew upon qualitative methods for data collection and analysis and employed a qualitative single case study methodology (Yin, 2014 [16]; Stake, 2005 [13]) bounded by time and place, as a way to understand the cultural responsiveness of the communicative and task-based instructional approaches to African college ELLs; this methodology was used because it helps to address the specific case which was bounded by the 2020-2021 academic year, by African ELLs participating in the college ESL classroom where communicative and task-based instructions were used. The study is set in the Midwest, United States, which was selected based on purposive sampling. The participants in the study are four African college English Language Learners who were selected on convenience sampling; they are from Eritrea and Democratic Republic of Congo. Their pseudonym names are Isaias, Hayelom, Peter and Solomon. While the first two participants are from Eritrea, the rest are from Democratic Republic of Congo.

Data were collected through semi-structured interview and focus-group discussion in March and May 2020. These methods enabled the participants to tell stories without being restricted to just responding to closed questions (Maxwell, 2013) [7]. All interactions were audio-recorded and transcribed, and the transcribed data were shared with the research participants (Creswell & Cresswell, 2018) [1]. Data were analyzed through Miles & Huberman's (1994) [8] qualitative data analysis procedures and interpreted through the social constructivist framework; this theory emphasizes on collaborative way of learning and knowledge construction based on people's interactions with each other's cultural and societal values (Vygotsky, 1978) [14]. It rejects one way of knowledge construction and cultural dominance.

5.Findings and Discussion

The participants felt that the English language teaching approaches being used in their ESL class were not culturally responsive. The task-based and communicative instructional approaches did not seem to give the English language learners comfort because culturally they were raised to be good listeners rather than good speakers. During a group work, the participants did not contribute much to the discussion due to their cultural values that emphasize on speaking less, keeping head down when conversing and avoiding eye contact. Also, their cultural values did not appear to prepare them to face criticism, which is often practiced during interactions, and hence makes them worry about what would happen in a communicative ESL class, and if the teacher would ask them to speak in class. They explained that they would do better if it was not a group work, one of the principles of communicative and task-based instructional approaches. Isais, one of the participants, states:

> ንኣብነት ናይ ጉጅለ ስራሕ ነይሩ፡ ማክ ኣበላት ጉጅለ ብግቡእ ዘይረዳዱእ ኮይኑ ስለ ዝተሰምዓኒ፡ ኣብ ዝኾነ ጉጅለ ተጸንበረ ነቲ ናይ ጉጅለ ስራሕ ከሰርሕ ኣይከኣልኩን። ስለዚ፡ በቃ በዕለይ ስረሐሉ። ካብ ካልኦ ባህሊ እየ ዝመጻእኩ። ከምኡ'ውን እቶም

ክልኦት ተማሮ ኣብ ቤት ትምህርቲ ንፉዕ ከምዘይኮንኩን እንግሊዝኛ ከዛረብ ከፍትን ከለኹ ለህጃ ከምዘለኒን ከይፈርዱኒ እፈርሕ። ኣሉታዊ ርእይቶታት ብዙሕ ኪጸውሮ ዘይክእል ብኸምዚ'የ ዓብየ፣ ንነብሰይ'ውን ኣብ ከምኡ ዓይነት ኩነታት ከእትዋ ኣይደልን። ስለዚ፡ እዚ ኣብ ቤት ትምህርቲ ናይ ብሓቂ ብዙሕ ጸቕጢ ይገብረለይ። ንቤት ትምህርቲ ክዳሎ ከለኹ ከይተረፈ ብዛዕባኡ እሓስብ። መምህር ኣብ ክፍሊ እንታይ ከዛረብ ይሓተኒ ይኸውን፡ እቶም ተማሮ ኣንታ ለህጃ ኣለካ፡ ብዙሕ ከምዘሸግረኒ ኣይፈልጥን'የ እንተበሉ'ኸ። ግን ማን ሓደ ተማራይ ጥራይ ከረዳዳእ ከለኹ ዝሓሸ ዝገብር ይመስለኒ፡ ቅድሚክፍሊ ግን ኣይኮነን።

[For example, there was a group work, and I couldn't join any group to do the group work because I felt like I would not communicate properly with the group members. So, I just worked on it on my own. I come from a different culture. Also, I fear that the other students may judge me that I am not good at school and that I have accent when I try to speak English. This is how I grew up that I cannot entertain negative comments much, and I don't want to put myself into that kind of situation. So, this puts really much pressure on me at school. I even think about it when I prepare myself for school. What if the teacher asks me to speak in class, what if the students say, oh you have an accent, I don't know it bothers me a lot. But I think I do better when I communicate only with one student, but not before the class].

The other theme that emerged was that the participants explained that if it is mandatory to participate in a group work in an ESL class, they would feel comfortable if the group members were immigrants from Asia and Mexico, not ELLs born in the United States. They justified their response by saying that Asian and Mexican immigrant ELLs shared their cultural values like speaking less, avoiding eye contact and communal work where they help each other in completing the task. Peter explains:

I usually prefer to do group work with Asians and Mexicans because they are very cooperative and understanding. I think we share some components of cultural values. They don't judge me but help me to do the work when I am unable to do so.

In conclusion, second language teaching approaches, such as communicative and task-based instructions aim at teaching second language in a communicative, interactive and authentic manner. This could be an effective way of delivering instructions in a college ESL class, as the second language learners get the opportunity to use and practice the target language. However, the findings show that the cultural identity of the African ELLs in this study did not seem to align with the principles of communicative and task-based instructional approaches, as the ELLs were raised to speak less but to listen more, avoid eye contact, and keep their head down when conversing as a sign of respect to the teachers. These elements of African cultural identity appeared to inhibit the ELLs from participating freely and actively in group works, presentations, and interactive activities in the college ESL classroom in the Midwest. The study suggests that the African ELLs' cultural and linguistic capital should be considered along implementing the communicative and task-based instructional approaches. The teachers may not know the African ELLs' cultural values but should make an effort to learn them and consider those values when using the communicative and task-based instructional approaches; as Vygotsky (1978) [14] argues, this gives the ELLs an opportunity to reflect on their own cultural and linguistic experiences and contribute to the knowledge construction in their ESL class.

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