Institutional Constraints and Agentive Stances of Adult ESL Instructors in Fostering Culturally Responsive Spaces in Their Language Classrooms[*]

Ograniczenia instytucjonalne i postawa sprawcza instruktorów języka angielskiego w tworzeniu kulturowo wrażliwych przestrzeni na zajęciach językowych dla dorosłych

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Abstract. Drawing on an ecological perspective of agency, this article provides insight into how two adult ESL instructors' experiences and relationships influenced their capacity to exercise agency in fostering culturally responsive spaces in their classrooms. The study shed light on the several challenges adult ESL instructors face in supporting ELs and their choices to serve their culturally and linguistically diverse students. This article introduces new considerations for scholarship on language teacher agency by focusing on how language teachers exercise agency when experiencing constraints in promoting culturally responsive spaces in the language classrooms.

Keywords: adult ESL, culturally and linguistically diverse students, culturally responsive spaces, institutional constraints, language teacher agency

Abstrakt. Opierając się na ekologicznej perspektywie sprawczości, artykuł ten opisuje, jak doświadczenia i relacje dwóch nauczycieli języka angielskiego wpłynęły na ich zdolność do tworzenia

wrażliwych kulturowo przestrzeni na zajęciach językowych. Badanie ukazało wiele wyzwań, przed którymi stają lektorzy, wspierając podopiecznych, oraz na wybory, jakich dokonują, aby efektywnie uczyć zróżnicowanych kulturowo i językowo studentów. W artykule przedstawiono rozważania na temat sprawczości nauczycieli angielskiego, koncentrując się na tym, w jaki sposób nauczyciele angielskiego doświadczają ograniczeń w tworzeniu kulturowo wrażliwych przestrzeni na zajęciach językowych dla dorosłych.

Słowa kluczowe: nauczanie dorosłych, studenci zróżnicowani kulturowo i językowo, sprawczość nauczyciela języka angielskiego, ograniczenia instytucjonalne, tworzenie wrażliwych kulturowo przestrzeni

1. INTRODUCTION

Adult ESL classrooms are diverse spaces as English Learners (ELs) differ in culture, ethnicity, language, and other aspects. As the United States becomes more diverse, adult ESL teachers, more than ever, must consider how they can address the needs of their culturally and linguistically diverse students. Jennifer Samson and Brian Collins (2012) highlight a few of the challenges that language teachers face in doing so; they include language teachers not being well prepared to educate a culturally and linguistically diverse population, schools facing constraints due to federal and state demands, and ESL programs receiving limited resources to assist ELs. These constrained school contexts and limited preparation in culturally responsive pedagogical knowledge, skills, and tools (Bickley et al., 2014; Brooks and Adams, 2015) create ensuing struggles for adult ESL teachers. In their attempts to create culturally responsive spaces, they often fall short of enacting culturally responsive teaching and frequently revert to teaching only language skills (Collins and Dytynyshyn, 2012; Dantas-Whitney and Waldschmidt, 2009). Given these confounding issues, language teachers may feel that they cannot exercise agency in moving toward a culturally responsive classroom environment and thus need support in reflecting on the importance and urgency of it. Culturally responsive spaces can be defined as classrooms in which "effective teaching and learning occur in a culturally supported, learner-centered context, whereby the strengths students bring to school are identified, nurtured, and utilized topromote student success" (Richards et al., 2007, p. 64). This study explores such complexities of agency work in examining an important pedagogical focus that has received little scholarly attention to date: adult ESL teachers facing institutional constraints and their agentive stances in creating culturally responsive spaces in their diverse classrooms.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The research on agency has centered both on the learner and the teacher. In this article, teacher agency is of a primary focus. Leo van Lier (2004) clarifies that the research on language learning from an ecological perspective originated in the 19th century, but more scholars have recently been interested in understanding the characteristics of the ecological approach in language learning and teaching. He reminds us that "a key characteristic of any ecological approach is its contextualized character" (p. 169), and there are "various levels of agency" (p. 110). Agency from an ecological perspective is being achieved in various settings and shaped by various experiences (Priestley et al., 2012); thus, it is said to be "exercised and enacted" (White, 2018, p. 200). Teacher agency, then, is "a capacity to act that is achieved within continually shifting contexts over time" (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 3). In this perspective, teachers are considered to be "reflexive and creative, act counter to societal constraints, and are both enabled and constrained by their social and material environments" (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 3).

The research studies that focus on language teacher agency point to a range of constraints that affect teachers' capacity to exercise agency. Nearly all of these studies demonstrate that even as language teachers exercise agency, they also face challenges while implementing pedagogical practices (Lopez, 2011), undertaking curriculum decision-making (Alford and Kettle, 2017; Leal and Crookes, 2018), adjusting to school accountability pressures (Buchanan, 2015), and engaging in professional learning (Brooks and Adams, 2015). These studies demonstrate that teacher agency can be exercised differently in various contexts and despite formidable constraints. Some teachers enact agency to challenge these constraints, while others deliberately choose to align with them. Language teacher agency is often limited when teachers feel constrained by school structures, practices, curriculum, or language policies, but their agency can be enhanced by language teachers' own past experiences, values, identities, and interactions with others (Buchanan, 2015; Ollerhead and Burns, 2016; Sanczyk-Cruz and Miller, 2022; Sanczyk-Cruz and Miller, 2024). Accordingly, this article focuses on how two adult ESL instructors' personal and professional experiences, as well as social and institutional situations, influence their capacity and willingness to exercise agency when creating culturally responsive spaces.

In addition to exploring language teacher agency more generally, this research study centers on how two language teachers exercise agency while creating culturally responsive spaces in adult education. Although some studies in the elementary to high school classroom settings have discussed language teacher agency in promoting culturally responsive pedagogy (Brooks and Adams, 2015; Lopez, 2011;

Parhar and Sensoy, 2011), there remains a lack of empirical research focusing on adult ESL instructors' agency when enacting culturally responsive pedagogy. Geneva Gay (2002) coined the term "culturally responsive pedagogy" and argued that "the academic achievement of ethnically diverse students will improve when taught through their own cultural and experiential filters" (p. 106). Gay (2002) highlights five crucial elements of culturally responsive pedagogy that include a) developing a cultural diversity knowledge base, b) designing culturally relevant curricula, c) demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community, d) fostering cross-cultural communications, and e) promoting cultural congruence in classroom instructions. There is a critical need for developing culturally responsive educators who can effectively address the needs of culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students, especially since some adult ESL instructors lack the skills, knowledge, time, and support to embrace these pedagogical concerns in their teaching practice (Collins and Dytynyshyn, 2012; Dantas-Whitney and Waldschmidt, 2009). Christine Sleeter (2012), for example, raised concerns about the current emphasis on standardizing curricula and discussed numerous other institutional pressures that contribute to the "marginalization" of culturally responsive pedagogy (p. 562).

Despite the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in creating a positive learning environment, some research studies have shown that language teachers face difficulties implementing it. For example, Nisha Parhar and Ozlem Sensoy (2011) report that some obstacles relate to structural or institutional constraints, such as limited school decision-making, little community-based involvement, lack of creativity and criticality in the classrooms due to imposed standardized testing, scarce resources to assist culturally diverse students and families, and lack of time for sustained opportunities for professional development. Maria Dantas-Whitney and Eileen Waldschmidt (2009) reveal that the ESOL teachers emphasize teaching language skills and avoid "examining larger social, political, cultural, economic factors that are behind ELs' responses to the classroom context" (p. 69). In addition, Evelyn Young (2010) concludes that language teachers are conflicted about integrating standardized curriculum, high-stakes testing, and culturally responsive practices. Lack of time for lesson planning and knowledge of the successful application of culturally responsive practices contribute to educators selecting a traditional curriculum over culturally responsive pedagogy. Given that, this research study fills the void in the literature and offers insights into constraints experienced by two adult ESL instructors in fostering culturally responsive spaces in their classrooms in the southeastern part of the United States.

3.METHODOLOGY

In the present study, a qualitative approach was used because it allowed exploring how individuals made sense of their agency through the accounts that they shared in interviews and by drawing on their reflections in journal entries along with researcher field notes that were created during classroom observations. The guiding research question for this study is as follows: How do adult ESL instructors create culturally responsive spaces in their language classrooms?

3.1. Participants

This research study took place at a community college in the southeastern part of the United States. Seven adult ESL instructors participated in a larger study. In the larger study, most of the participants shared effective promotion of culturally responsive pedagogy (Sanczyk, 2020); however, for this article, two participants were selected, one female and one male, because both of them shared similar challenges and agentive stances with regard to creating culturally responsive environments in their culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. It is paramount to shed light on these institutional constraints and their choices to understand how these two adult ESL instructors fostered culturally responsive spaces in their diverse classrooms. Table 1 shows their demographic information.

Table 1. Participants' demographic information

Pseudonym	Gender	Teaching experience	Context	Credentials
Cici	Female	15 years	Multi-level, on campus	Certification in TESOL
Sebastian	Male	25 years	Upper intermediate, on campus	Degree in TESOL

Source: Author's own study.

Cici is a teacher in her forties who has been teaching for over 15 years. She has always lived in her home state and identifies as Swiss German because her family migrated to the United States decades ago. Her mother's side is primarily German, while her father's side is Swiss German. Cici has had a passion for learning languages since she was a child and received her bachelor's degree in Teaching Foreign Languages with a minor in Spanish from a state university. She also received a certificate in TESOL.

Sebastian, in his fifties, is an American of European ancestry. He obtained a master's degree in TESOL and decided to focus on a career in academia. Sebastian taught English in various schools in Asia and the Middle East before returning to the United States. He has a 25-year teaching experience, and for over fifteen years,

he has been teaching adult ESL at a community college in the southeastern part of the United States.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The collection of data persisted for a period of five months in 2019, equivalent to one academic semester. Three data collection methods were incorporated into this study: face-to-face semi-structured interviews, journal entries, and classroom observations. Three individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant at the beginning, middle, and end of the research period. Each interview spanned one hour. The interviewees were presented with open-ended questions that encouraged them to recount their experiences, significant events, environments, and relationships. Furthermore, each participant was encouraged to engage in critical reflective journaling, with a prompt being given every two weeks throughout the five-month period. This resulted in ten journal entries per participant at the conclusion of the data collection process. Finally, the author of this article observed each participant's lesson twice for an entire class period to collect data about the teachers' pedagogical practices. The aim of the observation was to provide a description of the setting, the activities that took place within the said setting, and interactions between the instructor and students.

Drawing on John Creswell and Cheryl Poth's (2014) thematic analysis, first, three data sets were organized in separate folders according to the data source: interview transcripts, journal entries, and classroom observation field notes. Then, the salient words and phrases were highlighted in each data set, data sets were read multiple times, and the salient words and phrases from each data set were organized into a table. Then, similar salient words and phrases from each data set were grouped together and patterns and assigned codes were identified. After assigning codes, the author of the article looked at the patterns in the codes and developed categories. Then, she once again reread the data files and analyzed categories, and assigned themes. In sum, the interview transcripts, journal entries, and classroom observation field notes were analyzed separately before being analyzed comprehensively in an effort to identify common themes while keeping in mind the research question.

4. FINDINGS

The findings address the various contexts and experiences that have shaped adult ESL instructors' sense of their capacity to exercise agency in creating culturally responsive spaces in their language classrooms.

4.1. Institutional constraints interfere with culturally responsive practices

The first theme that was identified during data analysis pertains to language teachers' concerns about administrative tasks and the curriculum mandates that they were expected to comply with while teaching. In acknowledging these institutional pressures, the two focal teachers expressed frustration and discussed their efforts to balance their own desire to accommodate their students' diverse needs while still showing compliance with institutional expectations.

Formidable administrative tasks

Cici and Sebastian commented on their heavy administrative duties that include substantial record keeping and other paperwork as well as feeling a disconnect between the administration staff's objectives for their students versus their own desire to address students' real needs through their teaching practice. Classroom observations revealed that these teachers have little time for themselves even during their breaks. For example, as a full-time instructor, Sebastian's work schedule requires him to teach back-to-back classes and attend countless meetings in the afternoons, time which he wanted to use for lesson planning. Provision for such preparation time would also have allowed him to reflect more deeply on how to create culturally responsive spaces in his classes.

In addition, Cici and Sebastian raised concerns about administrative staff being unaware of students' real needs. They reported that the administration focuses on student data, such as attendance records but does not always know or seem to care about what is done in class, noting that administrative goals (focused on standardized testing results) and students' goals (focused on improving communication skills) were often vastly different. For example, Sebastian shared his concern that the administration "forgets it is about the students". He and Cici both noted that they sometimes feel discouraged about the conflicts they experience in trying to meet administrative requirements while also meeting their students' needs, which points to a constraint on their agency to teach culturally and linguistically diverse learners effectively. Cici and Sebastian also noted that while they had the freedom to choose what to teach, the administration rarely involved teachers in the decision-making about various aspects of teaching.

Despite voicing their concerns about the effects of administrative policies and expectations in the interviews and in their journal entries, Cici and Sebastian did not report on any actions that they had taken to make the administration aware of their concerns. It seems that they complied with institutional expectations even as they recognized that their administrative responsibilities often hindered their ability to address their students' needs fully.

Pernicious teaching demands

Furthermore, both participants expressed concerns regarding federal and state government interference in their teaching. One of the challenges they faced related to standardized testing pressures. For example, Cici commented that there was too much emphasis placed on testing and that she was often "stressed by the frequent changes in testing requirements". They also reported feeling anxious about students' level gains on the English proficiency tests because every teacher's performance is measured by the percentage of their students who reach a certain passing rate. While being nervous about constant testing and the need for student-level gains, the teachers explained how they dealt with that. They simply conform to the testing standards and guidelines by infusing test practice into their class lessons. Even so, they described how they worked to balance their test-oriented instruction by also providing culturally responsive spaces so that they could address students' personal goals as well as meet academic requirements, discussed further in the next section.

Another challenge both Cici and Sebastian experienced when promoting culturally responsive spaces pertains to the continuous dilemma between using the prescribed, mandated curriculum and their desire to address students' real needs by using alternative materials. Even though instructors must follow a prescribed curriculum, Cici and Sebastian commented that they worked hard to make sure that students' needs, backgrounds, and interests were still validated by supplementing and adding a variety of activities and resources into their lessons. For example, Sebastian explained that he combines using "the prescribed curriculum while also giving students a collective voice in choosing what to learn". In addition, Cici's lessons were student driven since she "prepared discussions, activities, and materials that best fit students' needs". Classroom observation field notes revealed that in every class Cici gave students a choice on what topic or language area they wanted to focus on and was flexible in changing her planned lesson if students' voiced concerns about certain skills they wanted to improve or matters they wanted to have explained.

4.2. Making intentional choices when creating culturally responsive spaces

Despite these pressures, Cici and Sebastian demonstrated a strong sense of agency in helping ELs have an enriching learning experience by providing additional resources and experiences in the classroom. Several intentional efforts to seek ways to create an engaging and culturally responsive classroom environment are going to be discussed below, such as reinventing scarce resources, diverse experiences impel empathy, and avoiding sensitive and politically driven content to create safe culturally response spaces in their diverse classrooms.

Reinventing scarce resources

Both participants reported that they have limited resources; for instance, they do not have enough funding for making photocopies of ancillary materials or any extra textbooks. However, they still developed culturally responsive materials (materials that validate students' cultural backgrounds and perspectives) by showing pictures and videos, providing additional worksheets, and creating PowerPoint presentations to enrich students' learning. For instance, Sebastian designed new materials for students, such as graphs, maps, and short reading clips that expanded their linguistic and cultural knowledge and encouraged them to exchange experiences. Cici and Sebastian also agreed that one textbook was inadequate for reaching all of their culturally and linguistically diverse students, and, thus, they supplemented it with materials that they believed were relevant to the needs of their students.

Another way to foster a culturally responsive space is to organize activities that allow all students to feel valued and validated and to feel like they are part of the community in the classroom so none of the students feels alone. For example, Cici formed circle time at the beginning of each lesson where students shared their personal stories, updates, and news. Students were encouraged to exchange information and felt part of the learning community. In addition, in order to enhance their learning experience, Cici brought additional resources such as websites, job application forms, or videos that helped students improve their communication skills and job-related vocabulary so they could feel confident and successful members of their new communities.

Diverse experiences impel empathy

Gathering diverse experiences throughout personal life influenced adult ESL instructors' work. Cici, for example, described her experience of having numerous international family members and friends and that helped her be more sensitive to students' needs. She mentioned during one of the interviews: "My cultural identity influences my work in that I know my roots were from another place also. I can see how both cultures play an important part in my life. I identify with a lot of ELs". She also learned Spanish as part of their undergraduate studies and was open about how she intentionally used Spanish when teaching to encourage a comfortable and welcoming learning environment. Cici shared that it was crucial to support students by sharing their experiences with each other. She did this by asking them questions to "find out their prior knowledge and experience to adjust [her] lesson's level. [She] related the lesson to their personal needs and experiences". She also highlighted that she was supportive and encouraging "to let them share about difficulties here in the U.S. and maybe how they are having a hard time adjusting or feel left out".

In addition, Sebastian shared that his earlier international travels and efforts to learn another language enabled him to understand ELs' unique needs and challenges.

He recognized that "the journeys ELs take were complex and intimidating". Such experiences prompted him to be more empathetic and understanding. He exhibited a strong sense of agency in learning about students' unique challenges, histories, needs, and goals.

Deliberate avoidance of sensitive and politically driven discussions

Even though both participants are intentional in creating culturally responsive spaces to support their ELs, they consciously shun certain topics. These decisions are made based on the belief that they want to ensure a positive classroom environment that promotes being comfortable, valued, and relaxed. For example, Sebastian and Cici purposefully stay away from sensitive topics, such as abortion, immigration status, or religion because they do not want students to feel uncomfortable. While they stay politically neutral when teaching, this is in contradiction to the assertion that English language teaching "is not a politically or morally neutral activity" (Richards, 2008, p. 173). Sebastian and Cici displayed a strong sense of agency in avoiding sensitive topics such as politics, religion, and immigration and explained that their actions stem from putting their students' feelings first. They do not want to cause embarrassment or conflicts among students. They are aware of the fact that some of the students are undocumented and recognize that this is a sensitive matter. That finding supports research by Arongna Borjigin (2017) and Michelle Johnson and Debbie Chang (2012), who found that adult ESL teachers avoid discussing certain topics in class because they want to avoid making students uncomfortable or igniting tensions among different students during discussions. Christine Sleeter (2001) and Dawn Williams and Venus Evans-Winter (2005) also found that teachers show resistance to fully engaging in culturally responsive teaching by avoiding difficult conversations.

5. DISCUSSION

This research study investigated various aspects that shaped language teacher agency in creating culturally responsive spaces. The thematic analysis reveals that these two participants often decided to conform to institutional pressures by complying with administrative requirements, testing standards, and the mandated curriculum in their classrooms. In other instances, they showed resourcefulness and perseverance in finding ways to develop additional, culturally responsive materials and to provide their students with new experiences despite contending with limited funding and insufficient supplies. In both situations, they made decisions on how to teach because of their desire to meet their culturally and linguistically diverse students' needs as

best they knew how, even if, at times, they preferred playing it safe by conforming to institutional pressures. They demonstrated how language teacher agency is "achieved within continually shifting contexts" (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 3).

Studies in adult ESL teaching have found that adult ESL teachers often do not have sufficient knowledge about their students, avoid incorporating cultural and political topics, rely only on surface-level cultural values, rarely supplement the curriculum, and do not regularly promote student autonomy (Borjigin, 2017; Johnson and Chang, 2012). The findings of this study add to this research by highlighting the intentional efforts of these two adult ESL instructors to create culturally responsive spaces. Their critical evaluation of their practices and relationships with students illuminated many intentional, culturally responsive strategies that they perform to address the needs of their diverse learners. Such strategies include taking action to provide a safe, inclusive, and enriching learning space where students' needs, goals, feelings, and interests are valued and supported. They also work to create classrooms as spaces for exchange of meanings and perspectives, intercultural appreciation, and genuine interactions. The participants in this study work hard to create a safe and comfortable learning environment where students' various cultural and linguistic backgrounds are validated and appreciated.

At the same time, these teachers exercise agency in avoiding certain aspects of culturally responsive pedagogy. While both teachers make sure their students feel comfortable and validated in their classroom, Cici and Sebastian shared their hesitations in fully engaging in culturally responsive pedagogy as they intentionally avoid discussing difficult topics that pertain to religion, immigration, or politics because they do not want students to feel uncomfortable. Thus, this study revealed that both participants do not view culturally responsive teaching as "a political endeavor" (Sleeter, 2012, p. 577). Instead, their students' comfort level, strong relationships, and language learning were prioritized. However, the proponents of culturally responses pedagogy agree that such teaching should involve intellectual, social, emotional, and political learning (Sleeter, 2012).

The findings of this study carry significant implications for adult ESL teachers and educators, highlighting the importance of continuous research on the subject of culturally responsive spaces in language education. Acquiring a comprehensive understanding of participants' unique teaching practices and challenges can inform effective language teaching methods. Consequently, this study accentuates the need for preparing pre-service language teachers and training in-service language teachers to actively promote welcoming, safe, and culturally responsive spaces. Furthermore, additional research is necessary to deepen knowledge regarding language instructors' experiences, practices, and challenges. The present research study also raises a few opportunities for future research. The most evident limitation is

the sample size. The limited number of participants in this research study (2) may present a limitation in terms of transferability. Given that the study was conducted over a single semester, it is also recommended to extend it to longitudinal research. Conducting a longitudinal study would be highly beneficial for gaining a deeper understanding of language teachers' activities that foster culturally responsive spaces.

6. CONCLUSION

Two adult ESL teachers recently shared their struggles and experiences in creating culturally responsive spaces in their diverse classrooms. Despite facing numerous challenges, such as administrative demands, constraining curriculum, and testing pressures, they chose to comply with the rules out of concern for their students' needs while also demonstrating a strong sense of agency in creating stronger culturally responsive learning environments despite limitations in funds and resources. They credited their personal and professional experiences, such as living in different countries and working with students from various backgrounds, for allowing them to empathize with their students' challenges and make changes to their instruction, curriculum, or classroom environments. Despite the pressures from their institution, these two teachers remained persistent in creating culturally responsive spaces in their diverse classrooms.

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