

Teacher Agency and the Enactment of Culturally Responsive Teaching within Prescribed ELA Curricula in the Arab Gulf Region

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Abstract

The increasing reliance on Western-oriented English Language Arts (ELA) curricula in bilingual and international schools across the Arab Gulf might pose challenges for teachers seeking to enact culturally responsive teaching (CRT) within prescribed curricular expectations. Although such curricula provide established content, materials, pacing, and assessment expectations, they may contain cultural perspectives and representations that do not fully reflect, or match students' local cultural experiences, identities, and values. This conceptual paper examines how teacher agency is central to the enactment of CRT within these contexts. Drawing on Gay's culturally responsive teaching framework, Sheets' Diversity Pedagogy Framework, and Priestley et al.'s ecological model of teacher agency, the paper conceptualizes culturally responsive curriculum adaptation as a process shaped by teachers' past experiences and knowledge, present contextual conditions, and future-oriented goals. The paper argues that teacher agency is central to how teachers interpret, evaluate, adapt, and supplement prescribed ELA materials in relation to students' cultural identities, while negotiating institutional and curricular expectations. Based on this synthesis, the paper proposes four interrelated propositions explaining how teachers' prior experiences, present contextual conditions, and future-oriented goals shape culturally responsive ELA curriculum adaptation. Culturally responsive curriculum adaptation is therefore conceptualized as emerging through the ecological achievement of teacher agency rather than as a practice occurring independently of contextual constraints.

keywords: Culturally Responsive Teaching, Teacher Agency, Prescribed Curriculum, English Language Arts, Arab Gulf

Introduction

English language teaching has become increasingly important in contemporary education, particularly as English functions as a major medium for advancement in science, global production, and creativity. This has contributed to English becoming the main language of instruction in many Arab universities (Mahmoud, 2015). Moreover, because English is widely viewed as a global language that expands opportunities for higher education, international travel, and employment, many parents in Arab Gulf contexts, such as Kuwait, prefer bilingual

(Arabic–English) or private English-medium schools over public schools to secure future prospects for their children (Alsafran et al., 2020). However, the global spread of English has been considered to be associated with the transmission of Western socio-cultural values and traditions (Diallo, 2012). Thus, these views raise questions about how English language education can respond to learners' cultural identities, experiences, and values.

These questions become particularly relevant in bilingual and international schools across the Middle East, where English language curricula and ELA textbooks may be adopted from American or British educational systems. Such imported materials may reflect the cultural perspectives, values, social practices, and representations of their contexts of origin, and may not always correspond closely to the cultural experiences of local learners. In Kuwait, for example, teachers working with US- and UK-based curriculum materials are expected to implement these curricula (as required by organizations such as the Council of International Schools (CIS) and the Council of British International Schools) while ensuring that their content fits within the context of an Arab and Islamic community (Sciarra, 2025). This creates a tension between prescribed curricular expectations and the cultural contexts in which those curricula are implemented, particularly when ELA textbooks provide limited representation of local cultural experiences.

Such tensions have raised concerns about cultural identity and the relationship between English language education and Western cultural perspectives. Mahmoud (2015), for example, highlights concerns regarding the preservation of cultural identity, while Almutairi and Al-Abdullah (2024) argue for approaches that decouple English language learning from Western cultural hegemony. The challenge, therefore, is not simply whether English should be taught, but how English language education can be implemented in ways that remain responsive to learners' cultural contexts.

Within this paper, a prescribed curriculum refers to curricular conditions characterized by mandatory core textbooks, standardized assessments, and established pacing requirements. The term Western-oriented curriculum refers to curricular materials and educational content developed primarily within US and UK educational contexts and subsequently adopted in non-Western settings. The term does not imply that such curricula are inherently inappropriate; rather, it draws attention to potential tensions that may arise when prescribed curricular materials do not fully correspond with the cultural contexts in which they are implemented. English Language Arts (ELA) is used as the primary curricular context in this paper, particularly in relation to literary texts, cultural representation, curriculum materials, and classroom practices. Relevant English language teaching (ELT), English as a Second Language (ESL), and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) research is also considered where it provides supporting evidence for culturally responsive teaching in English-language educational contexts.

This creates a pedagogical dilemma for teachers: how can they work within prescribed curricular requirements while simultaneously making instruction culturally relevant, engaging, and affirming for local learners? Culturally responsive teaching offers one approach to addressing this concern by connecting curriculum and instruction with students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and identities. However, its enactment becomes more complex when teachers work within curricular and institutional conditions that influence what can be taught, how it can be taught, and which resources can be used. Thus, the issue

extends beyond identifying what culturally responsive teaching involves to considering how teachers can enact such practices within the contexts in which they work.

To address this issue, this conceptual paper examines the role of teacher agency in the enactment of culturally responsive teaching within prescribed Western-oriented ELA curricula. The paper brings together three complementary perspectives: Geneva Gay's Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), Rosa Hernández Sheets' Diversity Pedagogy Framework (DPF), and Priestley et al.'s Ecological Model of Teacher Agency. Gay provides the pedagogical foundation for understanding culturally responsive teaching, while Sheets further specifies dimensions through which responsiveness to cultural diversity can be enacted in classroom practice. Priestley et al.'s ecological model, in turn, provides a framework for understanding how teachers' capacity to act is shaped by their prior experiences, present contextual conditions, and future aspirations. By bringing these perspectives together, the paper proposes that culturally responsive curriculum adaptation within prescribed settings can be understood as an ecological achievement of teacher agency. Teacher agency could be seen as central to the enactment of culturally responsive teaching within prescribed curricula because it shapes how teachers interpret, evaluate, and negotiate curricular conditions in relation to their students' cultural identities. The paper therefore asks: How does teacher agency shape the enactment of culturally responsive teaching within prescribed Western-oriented ELA curricula?

Culturally Responsive Teaching: Gay's Framework

Gay's Conceptualization of Culture

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), developed prominently through the foundational work of Geneva Gay, places students' cultural backgrounds within the process of learning. Gay (2010) explains that culture includes ethnic groups' "cultural values, traditions, communication, learning styles, contributions, and relational patterns" (p. 34). From this perspective, students' cultural identities and experiences are important contextual factors in teaching and learning. Gay therefore cautions against "decontextualizing" teaching and learning from students' ethnicities, cultures, and experiences, as doing so may limit opportunities for students to realize their full potential (p. 24).

Foundations of Culturally Responsive Teaching

As a culturally inclusive framework, CRT is centered on placing students' diverse ethnic and cultural identities at the heart of the educational process. Gay defines CRT as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (Gay, 2010, p. 31). Rather than viewing student diversity as an obstacle, CRT teaches to and through students' strengths, utilizing their individual characteristics and cultural backgrounds as fundamental tools for meaningful classroom instruction (Will & Najarro, 2022). Hence, CRT functions as a validating and affirming approach that bridges the gap between students' home environments and their school experiences.

Furthermore, CRT is anchored in four foundational pillars of practice:

1. Teacher attitudes and expectations
2. Cultural communication in the classroom
3. Culturally diverse content in the curriculum

4. Culturally congruent instructional strategies (Gay, 2010, p. 46).

Curriculum and Culturally Responsive Teaching

Curriculum content plays a central role in culturally responsive pedagogy. Gay emphasizes that textbooks remain the dominant tool of classroom instruction, drawing on research showing that textbooks form the basis of 70% to 95% of all classroom instruction (Apple, 1985, as cited in Gay, 2010, p. 129). Because commercial textbooks frequently reflect dominant cultural perspectives and present Eurocentric experiences as objective truth, they can create significant inaccuracies regarding non-dominant cultures (Gay, 2010, p. 129). To counteract these biases, CRT requires both teachers and students to critically examine curriculum content. When textbooks offer insufficient or inaccurate cultural representation, teachers must develop habits of supplementing or adapting instructional materials with wider-ranging, authentic cultural resources (Gay, 2010, p. 134).

The Teacher's Role in Enacting CRT

According to Gay (2010, p. 30), culturally inclusive content would not be sufficient unless supported by instructional strategies that promote inquiry, analysis, and other higher critical thinking skills. Hence, teachers need to link students' experiences at home with their experiences at school while learning how their cultural backgrounds and learning styles can serve as resources for instruction. Teachers also need to engage in self-reflection to assess the knowledge, experiences, values, and beliefs they hold in order to better prepare themselves to respond to ethnic and cultural diversity (p. 34).

Furthermore, Gay (2010, p. 46) specifies that culturally responsive teachers need to have the knowledge, courage, will, skills, and tenacity that would enable them to look beyond the failure of traditional teaching approaches towards more productive pedagogical practices.

CRT in English Language Teaching and Prescribed Curricula

Although this paper focuses primarily on ELA curriculum, research from ELT, ESL, and EFL contexts provides relevant evidence concerning the relationship between language education, cultural identity, curriculum materials, and culturally responsive teaching. This literature is therefore considered in relation to, rather than as a replacement for, the ELA context.

The implementation of culturally responsive teaching becomes particularly significant in English language teaching. For example, Mahmoud (2015), in a conceptual discussion of culture and English language teaching in the Arab world, argues that integrating students' local culture in English language teaching can reduce the possibility of "assimilation and alienation" when being exposed to cultures associated with the English language. To restore balance, scholars call for culturally grounded pedagogies that leverage students' local environments, values, and traditions during language encounters instead of assuming target-culture perspectives are universally applicable.

In this regard, research on English language teaching has increasingly examined how culturally responsive or culturally relevant approaches can be used to connect language learning with learners' cultural identities, experiences, and local contexts. For example, Malik and Imtiaz (2025), in a qualitative study of ESL teachers in Pakistan, found that teachers used strategies

such as multilingual storytelling, translanguaging, and culturally relevant materials to enact CRP (Culturally Responsive Pedagogy) within rigid curricula, though they identified standardized assessment requirements and limited specialized training as ongoing constraints.

As to the impact of integrating culturally responsive teaching strategies in English language teaching contexts, Chen and Yang (2017), in a single-subject study of three adult ESL learners from Asian countries, found that culturally responsive teaching strategies increased the frequency of students' classroom participation and communication involvement. Along with Chen and Yang's findings, Yuliantari and Huda (2023), in a qualitative study of one secondary school English classroom, reported that CRT integration in both classroom discussion and teaching materials in a secondary English classroom context resulted in creating a sense of belonging and a positive learning environment that prompted students' motivation and positive engagement.

However, implementing culturally responsive approaches is not necessarily straightforward. Gay (2010) acknowledges that achievement standards, standardized testing, and prescribed curricular resources can constrain culturally responsive teaching. Similarly, Young (2010), in a qualitative action research and case study involving six teachers, a principal, and a principal intern at one urban elementary school, found that teachers may recognize the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy while experiencing difficulty translating its principles into classroom practice when working within prescribed curricula, limited instructional time, and standardized expectations. Zorba (2020), in a mixed-methods study of 415 in-service English teachers (with follow-up interviews with 12), found that teachers' readiness to enact culturally responsive teaching varied by experience level and by whether their teacher education included culture-oriented coursework.

Diversity Pedagogy: Sheets' Framework

Conceptual Foundations and Diversity Ideology

Sheets' (2005) Diversity Pedagogy Framework (DPF) extends Gay's (2010) Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) by translating culturally responsive principles into identifiable teacher pedagogical behaviours and corresponding student cultural responses or displays. For Sheets, culture is what shapes individuals' habits of mind. Consequently, students who encounter unfamiliar cultural assumptions in school may be required to engage in ways of thinking and behaving that differ from their home and community experiences (Sheets, 2005). Therefore, culturally responsive teaching requires teachers to build what Sheets terms as a "diversity ideology" which directs teachers into critically examining whose values and perspectives are transmitted through standard educational practices. This is especially the case when schooling functions as a process of socialization and enculturation through which dominant cultural values and belief systems are reproduced (Pai & Adler, 2001, as cited in Sheets, 2005)

The Eight Dimensions of Diversity Pedagogy

Rosa Hernández Sheets' Diversity Pedagogy Framework (DPF) illustrates how culturally responsive teaching can be reflected in classroom practice through eight connected dimensions. Each dimension pairs a specific teacher behaviour with a corresponding student response. In short, when teachers create culturally supportive conditions, students are able

to express their cultural identity and learn more effectively. These eight dimensions are divided into two main groups: the first four focus on social and cultural development, while the remaining four focus on learning and academic growth (Sheets, 2005, pp. 15–16).

- **Social and Cultural Development:** Comprising dimensions such as diversity, identity, social interaction, and culturally safe classroom context. These dimensions focus on students' self-perception, sense of belonging, and social dynamics.
- **Cognitive and Academic Learning:** Comprising dimensions such as language, culturally inclusive content, instruction, and assessment. These dimensions address academic engagement, language acquisition, and knowledge construction.

The defining structural feature of the DPF is the explicit pairing of teacher pedagogical behaviours with student cultural displays across all eight dimensions (Sheets, 2005). Teacher pedagogical behaviours refer to the observable actions, attitudes, and instructional choices made in the classroom, including tone, resource adaptation, interpersonal interactions, and evaluation methods. Student cultural displays, on the other hand, refer to students' ability to express their cultural identities, communication styles, prior knowledge, and social interaction patterns in response to such behaviours.

In this framework, students' active cultural display is theorized to be an expected outcome that emerges in response to the classroom environment. When teachers implement culturally responsive pedagogical behaviours, they create safe spaces for students to exhibit their cultural strengths and competencies. Teachers can then utilize these cultural displays to bridge students' prior home knowledge with new academic learning, supporting both social-emotional development and academic achievement (Sheets, 2005).

Curriculum Materials and Cultural Representation

Similarly to Gay's views, Sheets (2005) emphasizes that textbooks play a dominant role in shaping daily classroom instruction. Within the Diversity Pedagogy Framework, addressing this heavy reliance requires teachers to demonstrate clear pedagogical behaviours through the intentional selection, evaluation, and adaptation of instructional materials (Sheets, 2005, p. 128). Because teachers choose the books, visual aids, and resources used in class, Sheets (2005) also argues that educators must go beyond quick reviews to critically analyse materials across three levels: availability, appropriateness, and ideological perspectives (p. 128).

This critical evaluation is especially important when working with prescribed Western-oriented curricula in Arab Gulf bilingual and international school contexts. Although modern textbooks may include images or brief mentions of diverse groups, Sheets (2005) cautions that this content is often superficial and remains framed by dominant Eurocentric perspectives (p. 129). This directly mirrors Gay's (2010) concern that commercial textbooks often present Eurocentric experiences as universal norms while leaving out local cultural realities. Because students usually view printed textbooks as completely factual and authoritative, teachers cannot simply deliver imported materials as they are. Instead, educators must exercise teacher agency to examine textbooks for cultural bias, adapt lessons to reflect local contexts, and teach students how to critically analyse textbook content for themselves (Gay, 2010; Sheets, 2005, p. 130).

Teacher Agency and the Enactment of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Both Gay (2010) and Sheets (2005) emphasize the important role teachers play in enacting culturally responsive teaching through their pedagogical decisions, knowledge, reflection, and adaptation of classroom practices. However, Priestley et al.'s (2012, 2015) ecological conception of teacher agency adds another dimension to this understanding by drawing attention to the interaction between teachers and the social and material conditions in which they work.

Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model builds on the temporal-relational conception of agency developed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). From this perspective, agency is not a fixed capacity possessed by individuals but is achieved through the dynamic interplay of past experiences, present circumstances, and future orientations. Emirbayer and Mische conceptualize these as iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions, respectively. Priestley et al. (2015) extend this temporal-relational understanding into the context of teaching by examining how teachers' personal and professional histories, contextual conditions, and future aspirations shape the achievement of agency in concrete educational settings. From this perspective, teachers' capacity to act is not considered independently of their contexts; rather, agency is achieved through how teachers respond to, negotiate, and, where possible, counter the constraints and possibilities presented by their environments.

This perspective is particularly relevant to teachers working with prescribed Western-oriented curricula. Although teachers may recognize the need to make curriculum content culturally relevant, their choices are shaped by factors such as prescribed textbooks, curriculum requirements, assessment expectations, institutional policies, and available resources. Teacher agency is therefore not simply about having the freedom to change a curriculum. It may be expressed through relatively small but purposeful actions, such as modifying names, examples, scenarios, or supplementary materials to make prescribed content more meaningful to students' cultural contexts. Teacher agency therefore provides a way of understanding how teachers may exercise professional judgment within these conditions to interpret, adapt, supplement, or otherwise negotiate prescribed curriculum materials in ways that support culturally responsive teaching.

Priestley et al. (2015) conceptualize this process through three interrelated dimensions of agency: the iterational dimension, which draws on teachers' past experiences and knowledge; the practical-evaluative dimension, which concerns their evaluation of present situations, constraints, and possibilities; and the projective dimension, which relates to their future aspirations and orientations. These dimensions provide the basis for examining how teachers' agency may contribute to the enactment of culturally responsive teaching within prescribed curricular contexts.

Recent empirical work has begun to apply Priestley et al.'s ecological model specifically to culturally responsive teaching. For example, Min and Nelson (2024) examined how US teachers' sense of purpose for culturally responsive teaching was shaped by their personal and moral identities, while Dao, Ngo, and Chi (2025) studied how English teachers in Vietnam exercised agency through acceptance, adaptation, or resistance when implementing a new government textbook policy. These studies demonstrate the value of an ecological approach

to culturally responsive teaching empirically, but each existing framework, taken individually, leaves a distinct gap unaddressed. Gay (2010) articulates what culturally responsive teaching requires of teachers, but does not theorize how teachers navigate prescribed, standardized curricular conditions to enact it. Sheets (2005) specifies how particular teacher behaviours correspond to observable student cultural displays, and attends closely to teachers' own reflective and ideological preparation. However, her framework does not fully elaborate on the contextual conditions surrounding the adaptation of prescribed curriculum materials from one cultural context to another. Priestley et al. (2015) theorize how teacher agency is achieved across time and through contextual conditions. However, their ecological model does not explicitly conceptualize students' participation in the achievement of teacher agency or the reciprocal relationship between students' responses and teachers' agentic practices. This paper contributes a conceptual synthesis that brings these complementary explanatory roles into relation with one another: Gay's framework supplies the pedagogical content of what culturally responsive teaching involves, Sheets' framework specifies the classroom-level behaviours and observable student responses through which that content becomes enacted, and Priestley et al.'s model explains the temporal and contextual conditions under which teachers achieve the capacity to enact it within prescribed, imported curricula. The synthesis, therefore, moves from what CRT requires, to what enacting it looks like in practice, to the conditions under which teachers are able to do so – though, as discussed in the Limitations section, it does not resolve the absence of the students as an active participant in the achievement of agency itself, an aspect not fully developed in the present conceptual synthesis and one that warrants further theoretical and empirical investigation.

Iterational Dimension: Teachers' Past Experiences, Knowledge, and Beliefs

The iterational dimension functions as the repertoire through which teachers interpret curriculum materials. Priestley et al. (2015) conceptualize this dimension in relation to teachers' past personal and professional experiences, which form the knowledge, beliefs, and habits they draw upon when responding to present situations. When teachers encounter a prescribed Western-oriented ELA textbook, they do not read it neutrally. They draw on their prior experiences, cultural knowledge, and professional beliefs to notice what is included, what is missing, and what may conflict with their students' local contexts.

This emphasis on prior experiences corresponds closely with Sheets' (2005) focus on teacher self-reflection. Sheets argues that culturally responsive teaching is a developmental process rather than a fixed capacity. This capacity develops over time through continuous self-reflection, cultural knowledge acquisition, and deliberate practice (Sheets & Fong, 2003). Becoming a culturally responsive educator requires acknowledging strengths and weaknesses in one's own pedagogical approaches while devising a "plan of action" to acquire cultural content knowledge that enables the development of better instructional resources and strategies (Sheets, 2005, p. 12).

A central element of this developmental process is the critical examination of teachers' internalized thinking habits. Sheets argues that teachers must examine their thinking patterns and recognize how personal schooling histories shape their beliefs about curriculum and practice. As Kennedy (1999, as cited in Sheets, 2005, p. 126) points out, past K–12 experiences often influence teachers more strongly than formal preparation programs, leading many to

simply teach as they were taught. Without deliberate reflection, educators risk reproducing familiar, dominant instructional models that they have previously absorbed. Culturally responsive teaching therefore requires teachers to evaluate how their classroom decisions are shaped by their personal schooling histories.

Priestley et al. (2015) similarly recognize teachers' personal schooling experiences as part of the iterational dimension, suggesting that such experiences may contribute either to the reproduction of established practices or to their critical reconsideration.

Gay (2010), on the other hand, highlights prior experiences and cultural backgrounds as critical ecological factors, arguing that culturally responsive practice requires teachers to critically examine the assumptions they bring to the classroom. These ideas represent the first CRT pillar proposed by Gay, which concerns teachers' own attitudes and expectations. For instance, in their qualitative study, Min and Nelson (2024) found that teachers' sense of purpose for culturally responsive teaching was rooted in their moral and personal identities, including religious faith and prior experiences with inequality. These findings suggest that the iterational repertoire is not only a source of habits and assumptions, but also a source of commitment that teachers can draw upon when navigating present constraints.

Within the proposed framework, this iterational repertoire is not fixed. Through critical self-reflection and the development of cultural and pedagogical knowledge, teachers can reconsider established assumptions, question dominant values in prescribed texts, and expand the range of practices they perceive as possible. The iterational dimension thus shapes how teachers interpret curriculum materials and identify possibilities for adaptation or supplementation.

Practical-Evaluative Dimension: Negotiating Material, Structural, and Cultural Conditions

The practical-evaluative dimension functions as the site where teachers evaluate and negotiate. Priestley et al. (2015) describe this dimension as the judgments and actions teachers initiate in response to immediate classroom dilemmas and contextual conditions. These judgements are both practical, in that they respond to the affordances and constraints of the situation, and evaluative, in that teachers consider which possible actions are educationally solid and consistent with their professional values.

Moreover, agency is seen to be achieved in concrete situations, constrained and supported by the cultural, structural, and material resources available. This dimension is particularly critical when enacting culturally responsive teaching within prescribed curricula, as teachers find themselves needing to make daily decisions under the pressure of institutional demands or "intrusion" into their work (Priestley et. al., 2015). As discussed in Section 2.5, prescribed curricula, standardized assessments, and pacing requirements can constrain culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010; Young, 2010). The contextual conditions under which agency is achieved can be understood across three aspects: material, structural, and cultural."

Material Conditions: Constraints and Affordances

Material conditions include the physical resources and curricular tools available to teachers. In bilingual and international schools in the Arab Gulf, ELA teachers work with prescribed textbooks imported from American or British educational systems, alongside pacing guides

and standardized assessments that leave limited room for localized cultural adaptation. When these materials provide limited or superficial representation of local cultural experiences, teachers face a material dilemma: they must either deliver content that may alienate their students or find ways to supplement and adapt materials without violating curricular requirements.

Structural Conditions: Constraints and Affordances

Structural conditions refer to the social structures, administrative expectations, and accountability mechanisms that shape what teachers can do. In bilingual and international school contexts in the Arab Gulf, administrative emphasis on adherence to pacing guides, standardized assessments, or textbook fidelity can limit teachers' practical-evaluative space for curricular adaptation. As Priestley et al. (2015) observe, policy requires that teachers exercise agency while simultaneously adding administrative constraints to this agency, resulting in "disabling" it.

However, Priestley et al. (2015) caution against treating prescription and agency as inherently incompatible. Structured curricular goals and processes may also provide teachers with resources for making professional decisions and adapting practice to local needs. The relevant issue is therefore not simply whether a curriculum is prescribed, but whether the conditions surrounding its prescription provide meaningful spaces and resources for teacher judgement. This is illustrated by Nguyen and Huynh (2023), who found that although teachers in Vietnam's Central Highlands lacked prior training for teaching ethnically diverse students, they developed culturally responsive practices through autonomous engagement with ethnic minority communities. Such engagements were informally encouraged, rather than restricted, by school leaders. Their findings suggest that structural conditions can become enabling, rather than disabling, when school leadership treats teacher-initiated adaptation as legitimate professional practice.

Structural constraints, then, are not fixed barriers, but conditions whose effect on teacher agency depends substantially on how school leadership interprets and responds to teachers' adaptive practices.

Cultural Conditions: Constraints and Affordances

Cultural conditions include the ideas, values, beliefs, and discourses that shape how English language teaching is understood and practiced. A prevailing belief in many Arab Gulf bilingual and international school contexts is that English should be taught through target-culture content (Diallo, 2012). As Al-Issa (2005) observes, prescribed national and imported curricula often transmit the interests, values, and beliefs of dominant cultural groups. Diallo (2012) further demonstrates that language pedagogy imported from Western settings frequently reflects liberal and secular epistemic traditions that can create tensions with the cultural and scholastic backgrounds of Muslim learners in the Arab Gulf. These cultural constraints shape not only what materials are used but also how teachers and students understand the purpose of English language learning itself.

Agentic Responses to Contextual Conditions

Exercising agency in these settings requires teachers to critically evaluate both their context and their instructional materials. Sheets' (2005) framework provides a key mechanism

through its emphasis on evaluating resources for availability, appropriateness, and ideological perspectives. When prescribed Western textbooks provide limited or superficial representation of local cultural experiences, teachers exercising agency move beyond passive delivery; they evaluate the appropriateness of curriculum content, draw on suitable supplementary resources, and adapt lessons to better reflect their students' local realities (Gay, 2010; Sheets, 2005).

In the context of language teaching, Sheets (2005) highlights language as one of the key dimensions of Diversity Pedagogy and as an important tool for preserving cultural identity. Hence, in ELA classes in Arab Gulf bilingual and international schools, teachers have a dual role in supporting students' academic and linguistic growth in English while sustaining their sense of pride and belonging to their own ethnic groups. For Sheets, bilingualism in English and a child's native language is a form of preserving children's identities within their family structure (p. 114).

It is also worth pointing out that in the context of English language teaching, Gay's other three pillars (cultural communication, diverse content, and congruent strategies) come into play when preserving students' identities within a linguistic context that does not match their own cultural experience. For instance, teachers exercising agency in the Arab Gulf region can draw on Arab or Islamic figures to mirror the characteristics of a protagonist in a required literary selection. In this respect, Sheets' (2005) dimension of "Culturally Inclusive Content" emerges as this teacher behaviour corresponds to students' cultural display when they link their prior experiences to the acquisition of new information. Additionally, encouraging students to investigate themes mirrored in their own cultural settings can motivate deeper engagement and understanding. For example, when exploring themes such as "family ties" or "traditional celebrations," teachers can prompt students to conduct research within their family circles to better understand how to represent themselves and their traditions while fulfilling academic ELA requirements. This practice falls under the "Instruction" dimension in Sheets' diversity pedagogy, which is theorized to result in students' display of their ability to apply their prior cultural knowledge and reasoning skills in their learning.

Furthermore, local cultural displays can be encouraged through events that allow students to showcase their culture and traditions through the English language. This practice reflects Sheets' (2005) dimension of Culturally Safe Classroom Context, in which students are encouraged to openly display their cultural identity within an affirming classroom environment while maintaining the ultimate goal of academic success.

These practices illustrate what Dao, Ngo, and Chi (2025) describe, in their study of English teachers navigating a new textbook policy in Vietnam, as adaptation- one of three modes of agency enactment alongside acceptance and resistance. Framed this way, the localization strategies discussed above represent a similarly adaptive, rather than oppositional or compliant, exercise of teacher agency within prescribed curricular conditions.

In this sense, it is not the absence of constraints that motivates the practice of culturally responsive teaching, but the exercise of professional judgment within those constraints. This distinction also separates teacher agency from curricular autonomy. Priestley et al. (2015) argue that the absence of regulation does not necessarily produce agency, since teachers may

continue to reproduce established practices or lack the cognitive and relational resources required for agentic action. Conversely, structured curricular conditions may support agency when they provide teachers with meaningful goals, processes, and resources for professional decision-making.

Projective Dimension: Future Aspirations for Culturally Responsive Learning

The projective dimension functions as the orientation that gives direction to teachers' evaluative and negotiating choices. Priestley et al. (2015) describe this dimension as teachers' short-term and long-term future-oriented aspirations, which are constructed through their core values and professional experiences. Agency, in this respect, involves not only navigating present realities, but also imagining and working toward specific educational outcomes. Thus, when teachers adapt a curriculum, they do not do it arbitrarily on the spot, but rather to achieve desirable aspirations such as: academic success for their students, establishing cultural affirmation, or creating a sense of belonging

This future orientation connects directly to the underlying purposes of both CRT and DPF. Gay (2010) emphasizes academic success as an essential goal of culturally responsive teaching, requiring educators to support subject matter mastery while remaining responsive to students' cultural backgrounds. Similarly, Sheets (2005) connects academic advancement with culturally responsive teaching through dimensions such as assessment and culturally safe classroom context.

For teachers working with prescribed curricula, these projective aspirations give direction to their daily choices. By establishing goals that combine academic standards with cultural relevance, teachers exercising agency draw on their values to design instructional plans and supplementary materials that connect students' identities to the required curriculum. Moreover, teachers may set professional aspirations for themselves that enable them to become more culturally aware and responsive to their students' needs through an ongoing process of learning and self-development. The projective dimension thus orients teachers' choices toward culturally responsive and academically meaningful outcomes, even when institutional constraints limit what can be changed in the short term.

Integrating the Three Dimensions

Analysed together, the three dimensions of teacher agency describe a process through which teachers interpret curriculum materials (iterational), evaluate and negotiate constraints and affordances (practical-evaluative), and orient their choices toward culturally responsive and academically meaningful outcomes (projective). This process is ecological because it emerges from the interaction between what teachers bring to the situation and what the situation affords or constrains. It is this process -not the individual teacher alone - that constitutes the achievement of agency for culturally responsive curriculum adaptation.

In this synthesized framework, each perspective fulfils a distinct, complementary role: Gay (2010) provides the pedagogical foundation, Sheets (2005) specifies the observable dimensions and practices of classroom enactment, and Priestley et al. (2015), building on the temporal-relational conception of agency developed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), provide the ecological lens for understanding how teachers may achieve the agency to negotiate prescribed curricula. Together, this integration explains how curriculum adaptation

within prescribed ELA contexts can be understood as an ecological achievement of teacher agency, a process through which teachers interpret materials, evaluate and negotiate constraints, and orient their choices toward culturally responsive and academically meaningful outcomes.

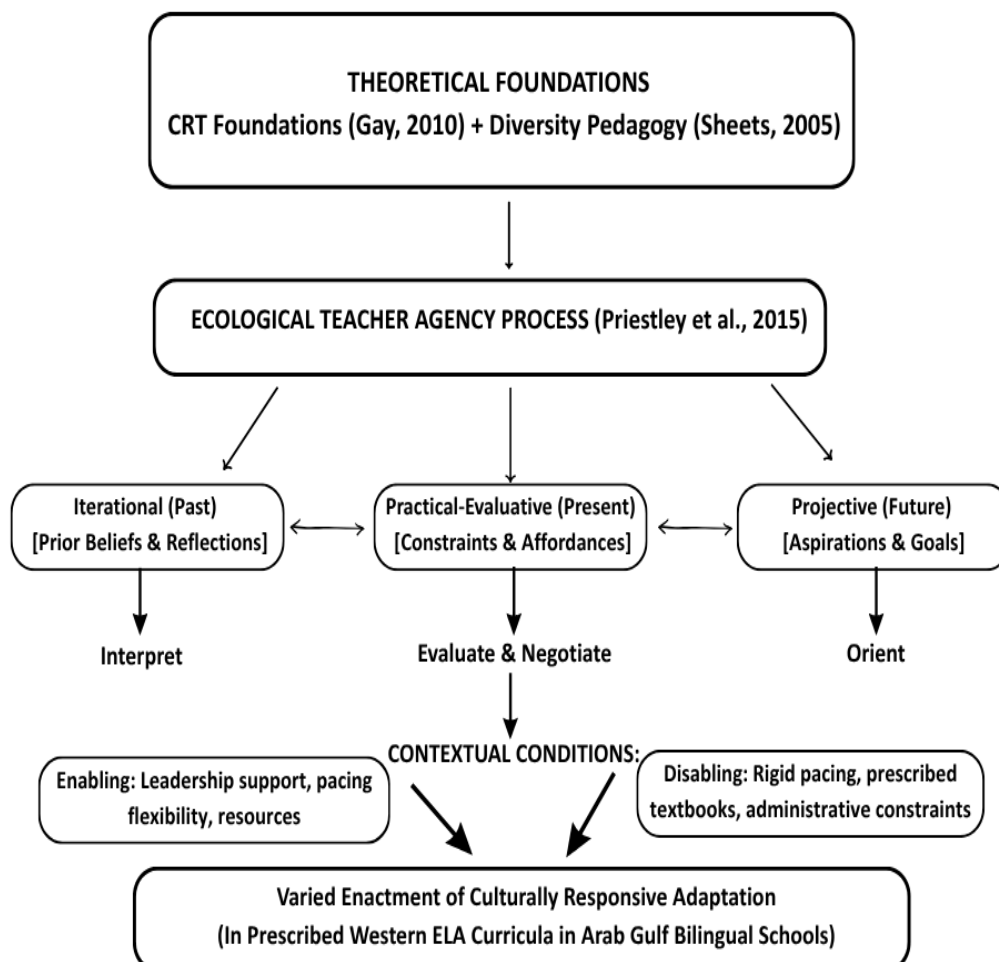


Figure 1: An Ecological Model of Teacher Agency for Culturally Responsive Curriculum Adaptation in Prescribed Western ELA Curricula

Figure 1 presents the ecological model of teacher agency for culturally responsive curriculum adaptation. The framework proposes four interrelated propositions that explain how teachers' experiences, institutional conditions, and future goals shape the adaptation of prescribed Western-oriented ELA curricula in Arab Gulf bilingual and international schools:

Proposition 1 (Iterational Influence on ELA Text Interpretation)

Teachers' prior personal, cultural, and professional histories shape how they critically read and interpret prescribed Western-oriented ELA materials, determining their capacity to identify cultural misalignments, Eurocentric representations, or textual gaps in relation to local Arab and Islamic student identities.

Proposition 2 (Practical-Evaluative Negotiation of ELA Constraints and Affordances):

The specific material, structural, and cultural conditions of Arab Gulf bilingual schools (e.g., CIS/COBIS pacing guides, textbook fidelity mandates, leadership support, and cultural norms) enable or constrain teachers' practical capacity to evaluate, modify, or supplement prescribed ELA tasks, texts, and language exercises.

Proposition 3 (Projective Orientation toward ELA Learning Outcomes)

Teachers' future-oriented aspirations for dual student success (achieving academic English literacy standards while maintaining cultural identity and affirmation) orient which specific ELA adaptations (e.g., localizing character names, contextualizing narrative themes, or integrating home-culture research) teachers prioritize and enact.

Proposition 4 (Ecological Achievement of Culturally Responsive ELA Adaptation)

In this paper, Culturally responsive ELA curriculum adaptation is argued to be achieved through the dynamic interaction of a teacher's iterational repertoire, practical-evaluative negotiations, and projective goals within enabling institutional conditions, rather than as an isolated outcome of individual teacher autonomy.

These propositions are not offered as empirical findings but as conceptually grounded claims that future research may investigate. They provide a framework for examining how teacher agency operates within prescribed curricular contexts and how contextual conditions shape the enactment of culturally responsive teaching.

Discussion: Synthesizing CRT, Diversity Pedagogy, and Teacher Agency

The synthesis developed in Section 4 has implications for teacher practice, professional development, school leadership, and educational policy.

Implications for Teacher Practice and Professional Development

An integral element of enacting CRT through teacher agency involves encouraging teachers to cultivate habits of self-reflection. Hence, teacher preparation programs and professional development (PD) workshops must move beyond standard instructional techniques and provide structured opportunities for teachers to examine their own cultural backgrounds, values, and biases. As Samuels (2018), drawing on focus-group data from in-service teachers in low-socioeconomic schools within a single urban school district, points out, teachers need such opportunities to understand how their own cultural backgrounds shape their culturally responsive teaching practice. This recommendation follows directly from the iterational dimension of agency: because teachers interpret curriculum materials through their prior experiences and beliefs, professional development must help them examine those experiences critically rather than reproduce them uncritically.

Furthermore, as agents of change, teachers must also be equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to investigate textbook content for underlying ideologies or biases that misalign with their students' local culture. Providing teachers with practical training to conduct critical textbook analysis while assuming an ideology of diversity would further empower educators in their professional roles.

Implications for School Leadership and Educational Policy

Because teacher agency is an ecological achievement rather than an isolated individual capacity, and because the practical-evaluative dimension shows that agency is enabled or constrained by material, structural, and cultural conditions, the enactment of culturally responsive teaching depends heavily on the conditions established by school leadership and educational policymakers (Priestley et al., 2015). School leaders therefore play a critical role in shaping whether teachers can negotiate culturally responsive adaptations.

To foster an environment where agency can emerge, school leaders and department heads need to create a safe and supportive environment where teacher agency is encouraged rather than conditioned. In this context, educational leadership and policy makers in bilingual and international schools in the Arab and Islamic region need to encourage teachers to adapt the imported curricula and further support teachers in creating localized supplementary materials that align better with their students' identities.

Additionally, school leaders can support teacher agency by building flexible timeframes into official pacing schedules, allowing teachers the structural room to integrate local Arab and Islamic cultural contexts, family heritage research, and supplementary resources. In doing so, they also sustain the projective dimension of agency by supporting teachers' long-term aspirations for culturally responsive learning.

Limitations and Future Research*Limitations*

While this paper provides a theoretical synthesis of Gay's (2010) Culturally Responsive Teaching, Sheets' (2005) Diversity Pedagogy Framework, and Priestley et al.'s (2015) Ecological Model of Teacher Agency, several conceptual and practical limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the proposed framework is propositional rather than empirically validated. It offers a conceptual explanation of how teacher agency may shape the enactment of CRT within prescribed Western-oriented curricula, but it has not yet been tested in specific classroom environments. Therefore, the relationships proposed within the framework require empirical investigation.

Second, the framework assumes a degree of teacher willingness and reflective capacity to examine and respond to cultural representations within prescribed curriculum materials. In practice, teachers' ability to exercise agency may be affected by practical and institutional conditions, including heavy workloads, limited professional development, and institutional pressure to meet standardized assessment requirements.

Third, although the proposed synthesis incorporates students' cultural displays through Sheets' framework, it does not fully theorize how students' responses and interactions with teachers may themselves contribute to the ecological achievement of teacher agency. This reciprocal relationship warrants further theoretical and empirical investigation.

Finally, the framework is developed primarily in relation to prescribed Western-oriented ELA curricula within bilingual and international schools in Arab Gulf contexts. Its applicability to other educational and cultural settings therefore requires further empirical investigation.

Future Research

These limitations highlight several avenues for future empirical research. First, qualitative narrative inquiry could explore the specific strategies teachers use to navigate practical-evaluative dilemmas and the institutional factors that facilitate or restrict their agency. Second, future research could examine student perspectives, particularly how localized curriculum adaptations relate to learners' cultural experiences, engagement, and academic learning in English Language Arts. Third, research examining the perspectives of school administrators and policymakers could provide further insight into how institutional leadership and curriculum policies influence the flexibility available to teachers when enacting culturally responsive teaching.

Conclusion

The enactment of Culturally Responsive Teaching within prescribed Western-oriented ELA curricula can be understood through the ecological process of teacher agency. This paper examined the role of teacher agency in the enactment of culturally responsive teaching within prescribed Western-oriented ELA curricula. By synthesizing Gay's (2010) pedagogical vision, Sheets' (2005) diversity dimensions, and Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model, the paper has proposed that culturally responsive curriculum adaptation can be understood as a process through which teachers interpret curriculum materials (iterational), evaluate and negotiate constraints and affordances (practical-evaluative), and orient their choices toward culturally responsive and academically meaningful outcomes (projective).

This synthesis clarifies what each framework alone does not fully capture. Gay and Sheets explain what culturally responsive practice involves and what it looks like in classroom enactment, while Priestley et al. explain the conditions under which teachers may achieve the agency to enact such practices within prescribed settings. Together, they offer a conceptual lens for understanding how teachers negotiate rigid structural constraints without either overstating their freedom or reducing them to passive implementers of imported curricula. Teacher agency, in this view, is not something teachers simply possess; it is something they may achieve through engagement with their specific contexts.

When teachers combine critical self-reflection, contextual textbook adaptation, and future-oriented goals for academic and cultural growth, they may transform imported Western-oriented curricula into culturally affirming learning opportunities. The framework developed here offers a conceptual foundation for further empirical research into the conditions under which such transformation becomes possible, and into the institutional, cultural, and material factors that either enable or constrain it.

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