



Implications and Strategies for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Practice in Collectivist Contexts

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Abstract

This paper aims to establish what teachers, leaders and researchers can actually do to make university foreign language teaching culturally responsive in collectivist settings more effectively. Systematic review following PRISMA 2020 was used. Every strategy was sorted by its source of evidence and rated for confidence. Six families of action emerged, covering classroom relationships, negotiated content, face-safe speaking tasks, group work, feedback and assessment, and teacher and institutional support. Scaffolded speaking, structured group work and inquiry-based teacher development were best supported; the rest rested largely on opinion, and controlled tests were scarce. The review proposes an integrative cycle of eliciting, scaffolding, structuring, aligning and reflecting as an analytic framework, not a validated model, and argues that strategies should be treated as hypotheses for action research and design-based testing, that scaffolds should be faded deliberately, that local content should be negotiated rather than assumed, and that teacher training should build inquiry skills rather than cultural profiles.

Original Research Article

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1. Introduction

1.1 From the case for responsiveness to the problem of strategy

The case for cultural responsiveness in tertiary FL education in collectivist contexts has been argued on four grounds: that learners judge teaching through the relationships it expresses (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998; Hamdan, 2014), that concern for face shapes participation (Tsui, 1996; Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998), that imported methods such as communicative language teaching and cooperative learning succeed or fail partly according to how well they fit local classrooms (Hu, 2002; Nguyen et al., 2006), and that content connected to learners' lives and professional futures supports engagement and identity (Norton, 2013; Al-khreshah et al., 2026). A companion review examines the strength of that case. Accepting it, however, does not tell a teacher what to do on Monday morning. The literature offers advice at very different grains, from macro-level calls for postmethod pedagogy in which teachers generate context-sensitive theory (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, 2003), appropriate methodology (Holliday, 1994) and a "context approach" to language teaching (Bax, 2003; Harmer, 2003), to task-level recommendations about group composition, rehearsal time and feedback (Rao, 2002; Littlewood, 2007; Nguyen et al.,

2006). These bodies of advice have rarely been brought together, graded for the quality of their evidence or examined for what they assume about learners.

The absence of such synthesis matters because prescriptions in this field carry characteristic risks. The first is essentialism: strategies derived from national-culture frameworks encourage teachers to explain student behaviour by nationality and so foreclose inquiry into individual histories (McSweeney, 2002; Baskerville, 2003; Holliday, 1999; Signorini et al., 2009; O'Dwyer, 2016). The second is the lowering of expectations, against which the founding literature on CRP warns repeatedly, insisting that responsiveness must coexist with academic rigour and high expectations (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2002, 2018; Sleeter, 2012). The third is the misattribution of institutional problems to culture, since examination washback, class size and prescribed syllabi shape what teachers can do irrespective of learners' values (Hu, 2005; Cheng, 2005; Shohamy, 2001). The fourth is the neglect of teacher agency: strategies handed down to teachers without attention to their beliefs, identities and working conditions are routinely reinterpreted, adapted or quietly ignored (Borg, 2003; Canh & Barnard, 2009; Phan, 2008; Priestley et al., 2015). Syntheses of culturally relevant

education in other settings add a further caution, namely that the practices attributed to CRP are frequently described in vague terms and tested in small studies (Morrison et al., 2008; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Aronson & Laughter, 2016), a limitation that is likely to be at least as true in tertiary FL research.

The tertiary level adds its own considerations. Learners are adults with professional aspirations, curricula often combine general language with disciplinary or academic purposes (Hyland, 2002; Basturkmen, 2010), assessment is frequently standardised and high-stakes, and teachers often have limited preparation in intercultural pedagogy (Borg, 2003; Nguyen & Ho, 2024). Strategies that work for secondary pupils, for example, may be inappropriate for adults who expect to be treated as emerging professionals, and strategies that depend on small classes or flexible syllabi may be unavailable in the large, tightly regulated programmes that characterise much tertiary FL education in the region (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016; Nunan, 2003). For these reasons the review examines strategies at three levels, the classroom, the teacher and the institution, and attends throughout to the warrant on which each strategy rests.

The review aimed to identify the strategies for culturally responsive tertiary FL teaching that have been reported, recommended or tested in collectivist contexts, to grade the evidence for each, and to state the conditions and safeguards under which they are likely to be useful. It addressed two questions:

1. What strategies for culturally responsive pedagogy in tertiary foreign language education in collectivist contexts have been reported, recommended or tested?
2. What teacher-development and institutional conditions are reported as enabling or constraining these strategies?

2. Method

2.1 Design and protocol

The review followed the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021; Moher et al., 2009) and guidance on systematic reviews in the social sciences (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006; Gough et al., 2017; Booth et al., 2016). A protocol specifying the questions, search strategy, eligibility criteria, appraisal and synthesis procedures was drafted before screening began, and a single search served this review and its companion on the importance of cultural responsiveness, with the analysis differing between the two. Because the primary studies ranged from classroom interventions and observational studies to surveys, interview studies and conceptual analyses, a convergent qualitative synthesis was adopted in which findings of different kinds were translated into themes, and reporting followed ENTREQ (Tong et al., 2012). The search strategy was built to retrieve the construct under the different names it goes by in the literature. Records were sought in

Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, ERIC, ProQuest Education, Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts, and Google Scholar. Regional indexes were added, and the reference lists and citing articles of key papers were also traced. The review covered publications from January 2000 to September 2026.

2.2 Extraction and synthesis

Each strategy, adaptation or enabling condition was extracted as a unit together with its context, the participants who proposed or experienced it, the rationale given and any reported outcome or difficulty. Thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) proceeded through line-by-line coding, development of descriptive themes into strategy families, and generation of analytic themes in response to the research questions, with coding informed by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and, where studies conflicted, by reciprocal and refutational translation in meta-ethnography (Noblit & Hare, 1988). To guard against the risks identified in the introduction, each strategy was checked against three questions: whether the cultural rationale offered was grounded in evidence about the learners concerned or assumed from a national profile; whether institutional explanations had been considered; and whether the strategy preserved academic challenge.

3. Findings

3.1 Classroom-level strategies

3.1.1 Relational strategies: making guidance, rationale and voice explicit

Evidence on what learners in collectivist settings read as care and competence suggests a family of relational strategies that precede and condition the others. Learners in several studies interpret clear explanation, preparation and visible effort by the teacher as signs of commitment, and expatriate and local teachers alike report that building relationships with students and linking lessons to their lives is central to making teaching effective (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998; Hamdan, 2014; Phan, 2004). The corresponding strategy is not to retreat to teacher-centred delivery, which would misread the evidence, but to combine structured guidance with explicit explanation of why interactive activities are used and what learners are expected to gain from them, since methods whose rationale is not visible can be read as the teacher abdicating responsibility. Related practices include brief consultation with learners at the start of a course about their expectations, regular and low-stakes channels through which learners can signal difficulty, and attention to humour and informality as relational resources, as in the Vietnamese classroom described by Sullivan (2000). General evidence that affective teacher-student relationships are associated with engagement and achievement (Roorda et al., 2011), and that such relationships remain under-researched in university settings (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014), lends plausibility to these strategies without establishing their effect in tertiary FL classrooms. Their warrant is therefore recommendation and observed practice,

and their principal risk is paternalism, in which care is expressed as protection from challenge, a risk that Ladson-Billings's (1995) insistence on high academic expectations is designed to prevent.

3.1.2 Contextualised and negotiated content and materials

Teachers in several settings call for materials that connect with learners' local, professional and disciplinary worlds, and the evidence of unmet need is strong: Saudi teachers identify the lack of culturally relevant materials as a constraint (Al-khresheh et al., 2026), and the practice of Vietnamese tertiary teachers of presenting culture as information about English-speaking countries indicates that existing materials and training do not support richer approaches (Nguyen & Ho, 2024; Dung, 2026). The strategic implication is not simply to add local content but to change the role culture plays in tasks. Moves that use learners' own contexts as the basis for engagement with other cultures, such as asking learners to describe, compare and explain local practices to interlocutors from elsewhere, are consistent with intercultural approaches that treat learners as mediators rather than recipients (Byram, 1997; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Baker, 2011), with materials-development principles that emphasise relevance and engagement (Tomlinson, 2011) and with the English-as-an-international-language argument that learners should be prepared to use the language with other multilingual speakers (McKay, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 2010). In programmes with disciplinary aims, English for Specific Purposes research suggests anchoring tasks in authentic disciplinary genres and scenarios (Hyland, 2002; Belcher, 2006; Basturkmen, 2010), and the use of learners' first language as a resource, supported by research on principled own-language use and translanguaging (Cook, 2001; Hall & Cook, 2012; García & Li, 2014), is a low-cost strategy that several studies report teachers already practising.

The decisive safeguard is negotiation. Local content selected by teachers risks reproducing the stereotypes that CRP seeks to avoid and cannot anticipate the variety of knowledge learners bring, so content should be elicited from learners through needs surveys, reflective journals or class discussion, treating their households, communities and professional aspirations as funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and their practices as repertoires and not as traits (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). Culturally sustaining critiques apply with particular force: substituting local examples for foreign ones without asking whose knowledge counts leaves the underlying hierarchy intact (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014; Sleeter, 2012). The warrant for contextualised content is largely recommendation, with teacher-reported benefits that have not been measured as outcomes, and confidence is accordingly low to moderate.

3.1.3 Scaffolded, face-sensitive participation

The face and participation literature converges on structural, not attitudinal, solutions. Recommended practices include rehearsal time before speaking, think-pair-share and small-

group discussion before whole-class reporting, written or anonymous contributions, predictable turn-taking and private or indirect correction, all of which reduce the exposure of error while increasing the quantity of speaking practice (Tsui, 1996; Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Jackson, 2002; Nguyen, 2025). The theoretical rationale is that willingness to communicate depends on situational confidence, which these structures raise (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Peng & Woodrow, 2010), and the ethical rationale is that psychological safety is a precondition for the risk-taking that language learning demands. Evidence that reticence is interactional and not cultural in any fixed sense (Cheng, 2000; Harumi, 2011; King, 2013; Zhou et al., 2005) strengthens the case for this family of strategies, because it implies that task design, group familiarity and the teacher's own conduct can change participation, whereas a trait account would predict that they cannot.

The more difficult question concerns trajectory. If low-risk formats become permanent, they may entrench the reticence they were meant to relieve and under-prepare learners for settings in which public performance is expected, and the evidence on long-term effects is thin. The defensible stance is developmental: scaffolds should be introduced with an explanation of their purpose, faded deliberately as confidence grows, and monitored through simple indicators such as the proportion of learners who speak voluntarily across a course. This is consistent with the principle, central to Ladson-Billings's (1995) argument and Sleeter's (2012) critique, that responsiveness should be accompanied by support to meet high expectations. Support for scaffolded participation is moderate, because several independent studies converge on the mechanism and on the strategies, although controlled tests of the strategies themselves are lacking.

3.1.4 Structured collaborative learning built on relational norms

The group-learning evidence supports adapting collaboration rather than abandoning it. Features associated with success include stable groups so that trust can develop, clear roles and shared goals, teacher mediation of conflict, and assessment that recognises both group and individual contribution (Nguyen et al., 2006; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Hall & Buzwell, 2013). Nguyen et al. (2005) argued that Western cooperative learning conflicts with in-group and out-group distinctions, face concerns and teacher authority in Confucian-heritage settings, while Nguyen et al. (2006) reported that an adaptation built on stable groups and the value of mutual help worked better, and Nguyen-Phuong-Mai et al. (2012) later argued that reform should build a hybrid of indigenous and imported forms because cooperative learning in some form already exists in Vietnamese education. Research on pair and group interaction in L2 classrooms shows that the pattern of interaction, and not mere grouping, determines learning opportunities (Storch, 2002; Watanabe & Swain, 2007; Philp et al., 2014), and peer feedback, which Chinese students have been reported to experience differently

depending on group climate and perceived peer expertise (Carson & Nelson, 1996, based on students in a North American context and so offered as indicative only), is likely to work best after trust has been established.

A critical reading adds that harmony is not an unalloyed good in groups. It can suppress disagreement, protect free-riders and make critique difficult, so teachers need to teach the interactional skills of disagreement and constructive criticism explicitly, in ways that respect face, and cannot assume that cultural affinity for collective work will produce effective collaborative learning (Storch, 2002; Philp et al., 2014). Confidence in the strategy family is moderate, resting on a tested adaptation, convergent evidence from the wider cooperative-learning literature and consistent practitioner reports.

3.1.5 Feedback and assessment

Feedback and assessment are the areas in which strategies can be drawn least securely from the corpus, although the conceptual and adjacent evidence is suggestive. General feedback research shows that the effect of feedback depends on how it is received, on whether it addresses the task, the process or the self, and on the learner's goals (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), and studies of written feedback show that teachers' mitigation strategies, including praise, hedging and suggestion, serve interpersonal as well as informational functions (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). For learners and teachers who attend to face, private, prepared feedback framed as improvement can be expected to be more usable than public correction, although this inference should be tested directly in tertiary FL classrooms. Assessment is a stronger constraint than any cultural preference, since examination washback shapes teacher and learner behaviour (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Cheng, 2005; Shohamy, 2001), and teachers in the corpus consistently report that adaptation is limited when syllabi and tests reward discrete knowledge. Culturally responsive teaching under such conditions requires alignment, in which communicative and intercultural goals are assessed in ways that learners and colleagues recognise as legitimate, for example through portfolios, oral assessments with rehearsal phases or group projects with individual accountability, and in which examination preparation is integrated with, and not opposed to, communicative practice. Confidence is low, because the warrant is almost entirely inference from adjacent evidence.

3.2 Teacher and institutional conditions

3.2.1 Teacher development and agency

Teachers across studies report limited preparation for adapting imported methods and for teaching culture beyond facts (Nguyen & Ho, 2024; Dung, 2026; Al-khresheh et al., 2026), and the broader literature on teacher cognition shows that beliefs, shaped by prior learning and context, mediate how teachers enact policy and training (Borg, 2003). Evidence on professional development suggests that effective programmes are sustained, content-focused, collaborative

and linked to classroom practice, not one-off workshops (Borko, 2004; Kennedy, 2016; Avalos, 2011), and in FL education action research, reflective practice and peer observation have been proposed as feasible forms (Richards & Farrell, 2005; Burns, 2010). Culturally responsive teacher education adds a distinctive requirement: teachers must examine their own cultural assumptions and those embedded in the methods they were trained to use (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 2001).

A critical caution applies to how this is done. Training that presents cultural profiles of learners, in the manner of Hofstede-derived checklists, can reinforce the essentialism that this review has identified as a major risk (Signorini et al., 2009; Holliday, 1999) and is arguably worse than no training. The more defensible approach is to equip teachers with methods of inquiry, such as short learner surveys, classroom observation and reflective journals, through which they discover how particular learners experience their teaching. Teacher agency is also central, since teachers adapt, resist or reinterpret policy in ways shaped by their professional identities and institutional environments (Phan, 2008; Priestley et al., 2015; Tao & Gao, 2017), and the evidence of behind-the-closed-doors adaptation shows that agency without support can leave good practice invisible and unshared (Canh & Barnard, 2009). Confidence in the value of sustained, inquiry-based development is moderate, because it rests on convergence between the teacher-education literature and consistent teacher reports in this field.

3.2.2 Institutional and policy conditions

Teachers' reports of constraint are consistent: curricula, class sizes, examinations and workload limit what classroom-level responsiveness can achieve (Nguyen & Ho, 2024; Al-khresheh et al., 2026; Istiadi & Yulianti, 2026). The implication is that culturally responsive practice is not only a matter of teacher skill but of institutional design. Conditions that follow from the evidence include flexibility in syllabus implementation so that teachers can negotiate content and pacing, alignment of assessment with communicative and intercultural goals, time and recognition for adaptation work and collaborative inquiry, and funding for the development of locally relevant materials. At policy level, the experience of national language-education reforms suggests that top-down adoption of imported methods without attention to local conditions yields partial and superficial implementation (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016; Carless, 2004; Government of Vietnam, 2008), which is consistent with the argument that educational transfer succeeds when it builds on local practice (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai et al., 2012). The institutional dimension is also a reminder that cultural responsiveness has a political dimension even where its original racial-justice framing is absent, since decisions about whose methods, texts and norms count are decisions about authority and legitimacy (Canagarajah, 1999; Holliday, 2006).

4. Conclusion

This systematic review synthesised evidence on strategies for culturally responsive pedagogy in tertiary FL education in collectivist contexts and graded the support for each. Six strategy families emerged: relational strategies that make guidance and rationale explicit, contextualised and negotiated content, scaffolded and face-sensitive participation, structured collaborative learning, feedback and assessment aligned with both culture and communicative goals, and sustained teacher development with supportive institutional conditions. Support is moderate for scaffolded participation, structured collaboration and inquiry-based teacher development, and low to moderate for the remaining families, because most strategies rest on recommendation and inference and very few have been tested against a comparison. The integrative cycle of eliciting, scaffolding, structuring, aligning and reflecting offers a way of sequencing strategies so that they address the risks of essentialism, tokenism and lowered expectations, although it remains an analytic construction that has not been tested.

For teachers, the immediate steps are to elicit learners' expectations before adapting, to make the rationale for interactive tasks visible, to introduce low-risk participation formats with a plan for fading them, to design group work with stable membership, roles and individual accountability, to negotiate local and professional content with learners, and to document what happens. For programme leaders and institutions, the priorities are sustained, inquiry-based professional development that avoids cultural profiling, flexibility in syllabus and assessment, and recognition of adaptation work as professional practice. For researchers, the priority is to move from recommendation to test, using intervention, observational and action-research designs across a wider range of settings. The limitations of the review itself should be acknowledged: it is restricted to published studies in languages the reviewers could read, the heterogeneity of constructs limits comparability, the dominance of perception data limits causal inference, and the concentration of studies in East and Southeast Asia limits generalisation. Within these limits, the review supports a culturally responsive, and not culturally deterministic, approach to strategy, in which each adaptation is a hypothesis about particular learners to be tested, shared and, where it has served its purpose, withdrawn.

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