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THE SIMPLE VIEW OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING AND HOW IT CAN BE APPLIED IN THE NIGERIAN CLASSROOM

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Abstract
Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is an approach that uses the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and frames of reference of ethnically diverse students as conduits for effective teaching and learning. This conceptual article presents a simple view of CRT, drawing on the foundational work of scholars such as Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson-Billings, and examines how the approach can be meaningfully applied in Nigerian classrooms. Nigeria's extraordinary ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity makes CRT particularly relevant. The article discusses the meaning and components of CRT, its documented benefits and challenges, and then focuses on practical strategies for Nigerian teachers working in multilingual and multicultural settings. Recommendations are offered for teachers, teacher educators, and policymakers. The central argument is that when teaching is deliberately connected to learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, engagement, comprehension, and academic achievement improve, while cultural identity is affirmed rather than eroded.

Keywords: *Culturally responsive teaching, cultural diversity, Nigerian classroom, mother tongue, inclusive pedagogy, multicultural education*

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Introduction

Classrooms in Nigeria, as in many other parts of the world, are composed of learners from diverse ethnic, linguistic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. Some learners come from rural communities, others from conflict-affected areas, and many belong to linguistic or ethnic minorities. This diversity is both a national strength and a pedagogical challenge. Teachers often face the difficulty of making curriculum content meaningful and accessible to students whose home cultures and languages differ markedly from the culture of the school and the medium of instruction (predominantly English).

Internationally, the recognition that culture plays a central role in learning has given rise to Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), also referred to as culturally relevant or culturally appropriate pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2002; Au & Jordan, 1981). CRT rests on the premise that academic knowledge and skills are more readily acquired when they are situated within the lived experiences and cultural frames of reference of students. In the United States, the approach has roots in the civil rights struggle for equitable education, including landmark cases such as Brown v. Board of Education (1954) and Lau v. Nichols (1974), which highlighted the need for schools to respond to the linguistic and cultural realities of diverse learners (Hallinan, 1998; Harmon, 2012; Bon, 2022).

In Nigeria, the relevance of CRT is heightened by the country's status as one of the most linguistically diverse nations in the world, with estimates of over 500 indigenous languages (Federal Republic of Nigeria, FRN, 2022). English functions as the official language and the dominant medium of instruction, while the National Policy on Education has, at various times, endorsed the use of the mother tongue or language of the immediate environment in the early years of primary education. Implementation has remained uneven, and many learners continue to experience a significant discontinuity between home and school cultures. This discontinuity can contribute to low engagement, limited comprehension, and underachievement.

The purpose of this article is to present a simple, accessible view of culturally responsive teaching and demonstrate how its principles can be applied in Nigerian classrooms. It is a conceptual article that synthesises key literature, clarifies core concepts, and translates them into practical classroom strategies suited to Nigerian realities. The specific objectives are: (1) to clarify the meaning, scope, and components of CRT; (2) to summarise its benefits and limitations; and (3) to propose concrete ways Nigerian teachers can apply CRT to improve learning outcomes while affirming students' cultural identities.

Meaning and Scope of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching is defined by Gay (2002) as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively." The underlying assumption is that when academic content is connected to students' lived experiences and cultural frames of reference, it becomes more personally meaningful, interesting, and easier to learn.

Ladson-Billings (1995) articulated three interrelated propositions that characterise culturally relevant pedagogy:

1. **Academic success:** Students must experience academic success. Teachers must hold high expectations and ensure that learners acquire essential literacy, numeracy, technological, social, and

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political skills.

2 **Cultural competence:** Instruction should help students maintain cultural integrity. What this means is that learners should not have to abandon their home cultures in order to succeed academically. Instead, elements of students' cultures are deliberately integrated into learning experiences.

3. **Critical consciousness:** Students should develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that enables them to critique the cultural norms, values, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities.

CRT therefore goes beyond simply celebrating cultural differences. It is a pedagogical stance that seeks to make teaching more effective by bridging the gap between home and school cultures, while also empowering learners to understand and challenge inequities.

Components of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Drawing primarily on Gay (2002), classroom instruction guided by CRT principles rests on the following five interconnected elements:

1. Developing a Cultural Diversity Knowledge Base
   Teachers need accurate knowledge about the cultural characteristics, contributions, communication styles, and learning preferences of the ethnic and linguistic groups represented in their classrooms. This knowledge base also includes awareness of the contributions of different groups to various disciplines so that curriculum content can be enriched.
2. Designing Culturally Relevant Curricula
   Gay (2002) distinguishes three kinds of curriculum: the formal curriculum (officially approved content), the symbolic curriculum (images, symbols, heroes, celebrations, and classroom displays), and the societal curriculum (messages about ethnic groups conveyed by mass media). Culturally responsive teachers critically examine all three and inject multicultural content where gaps or distortions exist.
3. Demonstrating Cultural Caring and Building a Learning Community
   CRT requires the creation of classroom climates in which ethnically diverse students feel cared for, respected, and capable of high achievement. Teachers draw on their own cultural experiences and those of their students to expand intellectual horizons and foster a sense of belonging.
4. Cross-Cultural Communication
   Culture shapes how people communicate—what is said, how it is said, the use of gestures, silence, eye contact, and patterns of turn-taking. Teachers need awareness of these cultural nuances so that they can interpret student behaviour accurately and communicate effectively across cultural differences.
5. Cultural Congruity in Classroom Instruction
   Instructional techniques should be matched, as far as possible, to the preferred learning styles and interaction patterns of diverse students and studies have shown that students may benefit most when their specific learning styles preferences are acknowledged in the learning process (Udu & Abughdyer, 2025). Teachers should deliberately connect new knowledge to students' prior knowledge and proceed from the known to the unknown.

Benefits of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Research and practitioner reports have

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identified several key benefits of CRT. In this article, six are presented.

1. It improves student engagement and builds positive classroom culture (Cuffee, 2020).
2. It helps address language barriers by valuing home languages and culturally familiar communication styles (Parlakian & Sanchez, 2006).
3. It supports academic achievement and can contribute to reducing achievement gaps (Byrd, 2016; Underwood, 2009).
4. It fosters cultural competence, cross-cultural understanding, and positive intergroup relations (Samuels, 2018; Byrd, 2016).
5. It encourages collaboration, social skills, and a sense of belonging among learners.
6. Drawing on students' cultural knowledge supports reading comprehension and mathematical thinking (Muniz, 2019).

A detailed explanation of each of these benefits is presented next.

1. **Improved student engagement and a positive classroom culture**

   Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) can improve students' engagement by connecting classroom learning to their cultural experiences, identities, interests, and everyday realities. When learners see their languages, traditions, histories, family experiences, and communities reflected positively in classroom activities and instructional materials, they are more likely to perceive learning as meaningful and relevant. This sense of relevance can encourage active participation, classroom interaction, motivation, and willingness to contribute ideas. Cuffee (2020) emphasizes that culturally responsive practices can contribute to stronger student engagement while also helping teachers create a classroom environment characterised by respect, inclusion, and mutual recognition. Consequently, CRT can foster a positive classroom culture in which learners feel valued and are more willing to participate in learning activities.

2. **Addressing language barriers through the valuing of home languages**

   CRT can also help reduce language-related barriers to learning by recognising students' home languages and culturally familiar ways of communicating as resources rather than obstacles. Learners who speak a language other than the dominant language of instruction may initially experience difficulties in expressing ideas, understanding classroom instructions, or interpreting unfamiliar concepts. When teachers acknowledge and appropriately incorporate students' home languages, experiences, and communication patterns into instruction, learners can establish connections between what they already know and new knowledge. Parlakian and Sanchez (2006) stress the importance of recognising children's home languages and cultural backgrounds in educational settings. Such recognition can strengthen learners' confidence, facilitate communication with teachers and peers, and provide a bridge towards greater proficiency in the language of instruction.

3. **Supporting academic achievement and reducing achievement gaps**

   Another important benefit of CRT is its potential contribution to students' academic achievement and to the reduction of disparities in educational outcomes. Culturally responsive teaching does not imply lowering academic expectations for learners from different cultural backgrounds; rather, it seeks to

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provide meaningful pathways through which all learners can access challenging academic content. Byrd (2016) and Underwood (2009) indicate that attention to students' cultural backgrounds can support academic outcomes by making instruction more relevant and accessible. When teachers connect new concepts to learners' prior knowledge and lived experiences, students may understand, retain, and apply knowledge more effectively. In this way, CRT can help address some of the cultural, linguistic, and instructional factors that may contribute to differences in academic performance among groups of learners.

4. **Fostering cultural competence and positive intergroup relations**
CRT contributes to the development of cultural competence by helping learners understand and appreciate cultures other than their own. In culturally diverse classrooms, students have opportunities to encounter different languages, traditions, beliefs, histories, values, and ways of interpreting the world. Teachers can use these differences as opportunities for learning rather than allowing them to become sources of misunderstanding or division. Samuels (2018) and Byrd (2016) highlight the importance of culturally responsive practices in promoting awareness of cultural diversity and improving interactions among learners. Through purposeful discussion, cooperative learning, culturally diverse texts, and exposure to multiple perspectives, students can develop respect for differences and learn to communicate constructively with people from different cultural backgrounds. CRT therefore contributes not only to academic development but also to social and intercultural learning.

5. **Encouraging collaboration, social skills, and a sense of belonging**
Culturally responsive classrooms can provide favourable conditions for collaboration and the development of students' social skills. When learners are encouraged to share their cultural experiences, perspectives, languages, stories, and forms of knowledge, classroom interaction becomes more inclusive and participatory. Cooperative activities that recognise different experiences can enable students to learn from one another while developing communication, listening, negotiation, empathy, and conflict-resolution skills. At the same time, the recognition of learners' identities can strengthen their sense of belonging. Students are more likely to participate confidently when they perceive that their backgrounds are respected and that they have a legitimate place within the classroom community. Thus, CRT can help create an environment in which diversity becomes a basis for collaboration and collective learning rather than a source of exclusion.

6. **Supporting reading comprehension and mathematical thinking through cultural knowledge**
CRT can also enhance learners' understanding of academic concepts by drawing on the cultural knowledge and experiences they already possess. Muniz (2019) notes that students' cultural knowledge can be used to support learning in areas such as reading comprehension and mathematics. In reading, for example, learners may comprehend texts more effectively when teachers activate relevant background knowledge and connect unfamiliar ideas to experiences that students understand. Similarly, in mathematics, teachers can

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relate abstract concepts and problem-solving tasks to familiar activities, occupations, practices, patterns, and situations within learners' communities. Such connections provide meaningful contexts for understanding academic concepts and can make abstract knowledge more accessible. The implication is that students do not enter the classroom without knowledge; rather, they bring valuable cultural and experiential resources that teachers can deliberately connect to formal academic learning

Challenges and Limitations of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Despite its potential to promote inclusive, meaningful, and effective learning, Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is not without challenges and limitations. The effectiveness of CRT depends largely on the availability of relevant evidence, teachers' cultural knowledge and pedagogical competence, students' participation in the process, and the material and institutional conditions in which teaching takes place. The following challenges are particularly important.

1. Relative paucity of rigorous empirical evidence

   One major challenge associated with CRT is the limited availability of rigorous empirical studies that can clearly establish its effects on specific educational outcomes. Although a growing body of literature reports positive associations between culturally responsive practices and outcomes such as engagement, achievement, motivation, and belonging, it can sometimes be difficult to determine whether these outcomes are directly attributable to CRT or to other factors operating simultaneously in the classroom. Byrd (2016), for example, points to the need for stronger empirical evidence concerning culturally responsive practices. This limitation is particularly significant in African educational contexts, where the cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and institutional conditions may differ considerably from those in which much of the existing CRT literature has been developed. Consequently, there is a need for more context-sensitive studies, particularly longitudinal, comparative, and mixed-methods research, to establish how CRT operates across different African educational settings, including Nigerian schools.

2. Insufficient attention to students' own voices

   A second limitation concerns the possibility that CRT may be designed and implemented primarily from the teacher's or researcher's understanding of students' cultures rather than from the students' own perspectives. Howard (2001) highlights the importance of teachers developing a deeper understanding of their students and their cultural experiences. A teacher may sincerely attempt to incorporate a particular cultural practice, story, language, tradition, or example into classroom instruction but may nevertheless misunderstand its significance to the learners concerned. When this happens, an approach intended to be culturally responsive may become stereotypical, superficial, or disconnected from students' actual experiences. Effective CRT therefore requires teachers to listen to learners, encourage them to describe and interpret their own cultural experiences, and avoid assuming that all members of a cultural group share identical beliefs, practices, or

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experiences. Student voice and participation should consequently form an important part of culturally responsive curriculum planning and classroom practice.

3. Teachers' limited cultural knowledge and difficulty handling sensitive issues

   Another challenge is that teachers may have limited knowledge of the cultures represented in their classrooms. In culturally and linguistically diverse settings, a teacher may be responsible for learners from several ethnic, religious, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Without adequate preparation, the teacher may find it difficult to select appropriate cultural materials, interpret culturally sensitive behaviour, or discuss controversial issues without unintentionally offending or marginalising particular groups. Samuels (2018) underscores the importance of teachers' cultural awareness and competence in the effective implementation of culturally responsive practices. Issues relating to religion, gender roles, ethnicity, family practices, historical conflicts, traditional beliefs, and social inequalities can be particularly sensitive. Teachers therefore require appropriate professional development that goes beyond acquiring factual knowledge about different cultures. They need skills in dialogue, reflection, perspective-taking, conflict management, and critical examination of their own assumptions and biases.

4. Time, resources, and large classroom sizes

   The practical conditions of many Nigerian schools constitute another significant challenge to the implementation of CRT. In large and under-resourced classrooms, teachers may have limited time to learn about individual students' cultural backgrounds, develop culturally relevant teaching materials, provide differentiated learning experiences, and facilitate meaningful discussions. Large class sizes can also make it difficult for teachers to give every learner an opportunity to share experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, culturally responsive instruction may require access to diverse books, locally relevant instructional materials, digital resources, community knowledge, and other teaching aids, which may not always be readily available. Teachers working under pressure to complete prescribed curricula may consequently find it difficult to devote sufficient time to culturally responsive activities. These institutional constraints suggest that successful implementation of CRT requires not only individual teacher commitment but also adequate school-level support, appropriate instructional resources, manageable class sizes, professional development, and sufficient instructional time.

Applying Culturally Responsive Teaching in the Nigerian Classroom

According to the Federal Government of Nigeria report (FGN 2022), five hundred and forty languages are spoken in Nigeria. This means Nigeria is home to hundreds of ethnic groups and languages. Classrooms in urban centres are often highly mixed, while many rural classrooms are more homogeneous yet still operate under an English-medium system that may feel distant from learners' everyday realities. The following subsections outline how CRT principles can be translated into Nigerian practice.

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Need to Understand the Nigerian Context

Key features of the Nigerian educational context that CRT must address include: linguistic diversity and the dominance of English as the language of instruction and examination; the presence of both majority and minority ethnic groups within the same classroom; religious diversity; urban–rural differences; and the influence of conflict and displacement in some regions. Teachers must also navigate national curriculum requirements and high-stakes examinations like the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSCE) conducted by both the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) and National Examinations Council (NECO) and the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) conducted by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) that prioritise English and a relatively standardised content.

Although policy on the use of mother tongue has shifted over time, and keeps shifting, the pedagogical insight remains constant: children learn best when new knowledge is connected to what they already know and when their cultural identities are treated as assets rather than deficits. CRT offers a practical way to honour this insight even when English remains the official medium of instruction.

Practical Classroom Strategies for Nigerian Teachers

Emphasis on 'Know your learners.' At the beginning of the term, teachers should endeavour to gather information (respectfully and sensitively) about students' home languages, ethnic backgrounds, and community experiences. Simple interest inventories, informal conversations, or short writing tasks can help them to achieve this goal.

Use of local examples and resources. When teaching concepts in science, mathematics, social studies, language or literature, teachers should draw illustrations from local environments, markets, farming practices, traditional crafts, festivals, proverbs, folktales, and historical figures familiar to the students. A mathematics lesson on measurement can use local market measures; a literature lesson can include or compare indigenous oral narratives with prescribed texts.

Value and strategic use of Learners' home languages. Even where English is the medium of instruction, teachers can allow brief clarifying discussions in the language of the immediate environment. Teachers can encourage students to take turns and explain concepts to peers in their home language, and treat bilingualism as an asset. Code-switching can be a bridge rather than a barrier when used purposefully.

Creating an inclusive symbolic environment. Classroom displays, charts, and reading corners can feature images, maps, and texts that reflect Nigeria's ethnic and cultural diversity. Celebrating International Mother Language Day (IMLD), cultural days or inviting community elders (where feasible) during activities like Children's Day, IMLD, etc. can reinforce belonging.

Designing cooperative and dialogic learning. Group work that mixes students from different backgrounds, structured discussion of cultural practices, and projects that require students to research and present aspects of their own or others' cultures promote both academic learning and intercultural understanding.

Maintaining high expectations while providing cultural scaffolding. CRT is not about lowering standards. It is about making high standards reachable by connecting content to students' existing knowledge and by providing the linguistic and cultural

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support needed for success.

Subject-Specific Illustrations

English Language and Literature: While teaching English language or literature or both, teachers can pair prescribed literary texts with local oral narratives, proverbs, or contemporary Nigerian writing. Similarly, they can encourage students to analyse themes of identity, conflict, and community through both global and local lenses.

Social Studies / Civic Education: Use local governance structures, traditional institutions, and community problem-solving practices as entry points for teaching citizenship, rights, and national unity.

Mathematics and Science: Connect abstract concepts to everyday practices—market arithmetic, indigenous measurement systems, local ecological knowledge, traditional building techniques, and indigenous agricultural methods.

Religious and Moral Education: Highlight shared ethical values across religious traditions while respecting differences, thereby modelling the critical consciousness and mutual respect that CRT seeks to develop.

Roles of Key Actors/Stakeholders

Key stakeholders are many, but a few have been selected and discussed here. These include, the classroom teacher, teacher educators, and students,

The Classroom Teacher

Teachers are the primary agents of CRT. They must continuously expand their cultural knowledge base, reflect on their own cultural assumptions, design inclusive lessons, and build caring classroom communities. Professional development and peer collaboration are essential supports.

Teacher Educators and Universities

Faculties and colleges of education should integrate CRT principles into pre-service and in-service programmes. Student teachers need opportunities to examine cultural diversity, practise designing culturally responsive lessons, and reflect on their emerging professional identities.

Students

Students are not passive recipients. In a culturally responsive classroom they are invited to share cultural knowledge, question assumptions, collaborate across differences, and take increasing responsibility for their own learning and for the learning community.

Practical Suggestions

The following practical suggestions could bring about an improvement in the practice of CRT in the Nigerian classroom.

1. Teacher education institutions like Colleges of Education, the National Teachers' Institute, Kaduna and Faculties of Education in Nigerian Universities should explicitly include modules on culturally responsive pedagogy and multilingual classroom strategies.
2. State and federal education authorities should support the development and distribution of supplementary teaching materials that reflect Nigeria's cultural and linguistic diversity.
3. School leaders should encourage and recognise teachers who experiment with inclusive, culturally grounded methods.
4. Researchers should conduct more context-specific studies on the effects of CRT practices in Nigerian primary, secondary, and tertiary classrooms.
5. Policymakers should ensure that language-of-instruction decisions are accompanied by adequate teacher preparation, materials, and support so

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that cultural and linguistic assets are leveraged rather than ignored.

Conclusion

Culturally Responsive Teaching offers a comprehensible and practical framework for addressing the realities of diversity in Nigerian classrooms. By recognising students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds as resources rather than obstacles, teachers can increase engagement, improve comprehension, support academic success, and affirm cultural identity. The approach does not seem to suggest that the national curriculum or the English language as used at the moment should be abandoned; rather, it calls for thoughtful adaptation of content, methods, and classroom climate so that learning becomes more meaningful and equitable. Implementing CRT at scale will require deliberate effort from teachers, teacher educators, school leaders, and policymakers. The reward is a generation of learners who succeed academically without having to leave their cultures at the school gate.

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