

## Review

# Research Synthesis on Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching for Multilingual Learners

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**Abstract:** Drawn from both existing research and the author's research experiences in middle schools in the United States, this research synthesis paper will highlight the key principles of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching (CLRT) for multilingual learners (MLLs) who are acquiring English as an additional language. Although CLRT is regarded as an important framework for middle grade MLLs' learning, there is a lack of resources that provide a comprehensive view of historically/theoretically ground and research-based approaches for middle grade educators to consider in the classroom. This paper attempts to address this need by discussing the historical orientation of CLRT and its five major principles commonly identified in relevant literature. These principles include: (1) building foundational knowledge of MLLs' home languages, (2) offering translanguaging space for MLLs' linguistic repertoire, (3) using multimodality for MLLs' engagement, (4) implementing integrated approaches for content and language, and (5) seeking collaboration for MLLs' diverse needs. These key elements of CLRT provide insight into how middle grade teachers can support equitable access to learning opportunities for MLLs.

**Keywords:** culturally and linguistically responsive teaching; multilingual learners; research-based approaches; middle grade educators



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## 1. Introduction

Cultural and linguistic diversity defines current U.S. classrooms. Multilingual learners (MLLs), defined as students who are in the process of acquiring English as a new, additional language, are one of the most increasing populations in U.S. public schools [1]. According to NCES [2], MLLs increased from 4.5 million students to 5.1 million students between 2010 and 2019; approximately 10% were sixth graders and 8% were eighth graders. Additionally, more than 400 different languages are spoken in U.S. public schools [3]. These data bring more attention to the need for culturally and linguistically responsive teaching for MLLs.

As affirmed by the Association of Middle Level Education's (AMLE) statements in *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* [4], middle grade education must be equitable, and MLLs deserve this opportunity. MLLs are heterogeneous groups who bring diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to the classroom, and it is the teachers' responsibility to address the cultural and linguistic needs of these students [5,6]. How teachers respond to the diverse backgrounds, needs, and identities of students affects learning success [7].

However, research shows that teachers are not prepared to teach this growing group of MLLs in the United States [8–13]. When teachers have MLLs in their classrooms who speak languages other than English, monolingual teachers are often at a loss for what to do because they do not have the knowledge and skills to teach this linguistically diverse group of students. Given that many MLLs receive instruction from general education teachers, the role of middle grade educators is crucial to support the equitable learning of young adolescent MLLs.

Additionally, even though there have been some changes in teacher education to include culturally and linguistically responsive teaching (CLRT) in its training of new teachers [14–17], there are some roadblocks that hinder teacher self-confidence when working

with MLLs. There can be deep-seated beliefs about language (i.e., placing “standardized English” above “non-standardized English”) that contradict learned interventions. For example, pre-service teachers identified the importance of recognizing a student’s home language as an asset, but they believed teaching standardized English was necessary [14]. Or in the case of Ramanayake and Williams [16], the pre-service teachers in the English program could not relate to or understand the significance of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching. As documented in these studies, we see that even though in recent years there has been some integration of CLRT in teacher education programs, there are still many teachers who are not prepared for MLLs in their classrooms.

Over the last few decades, culturally and linguistically responsive teaching has been the favored approach to support middle grade MLL learning. However, it is not clearly known how teachers define and understand CLRT and how they can implement it when working with young adolescent MLLs. This current article attempts to address these issues. It focuses on the historical orientation of CLRT and key elements that teachers can consider for successful language and literacy learning in MLLs. Although CLRT can be applicable to all grade level teachers, this article particularly aims to support middle grade educators with an overview. The empirical studies in middle school settings outlined in this paper will guide teachers to the resources available.

This synthesis of CLRT is drawn from extensive research and empirical studies on culturally and linguistically responsive approaches for MLLs. As a reminder, this paper is not considered as a systematic literature review, which requires specific criteria for the inclusion/exclusion of the relevant studies. It is situated within my extensive research experiences in U.S. middle school settings over the last two decades, as well as my positional identities as a veteran researcher and teacher–educator who has worked with pre-service and in-service teachers in teacher education programs. From my research and teaching experiences, I observed that teachers who are white and monolingual feel incompetent in working with culturally and linguistically diverse students due to lack of experience (see [18] for teacher narratives on their work with MLLs). I acknowledge that there might be important studies that I missed in the discussion. This paper is open for further systematic review to confirm, refine, and expand the findings that I highlighted here.

## 2. Historical Overview of Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching

Based on the different foci of teacher instructions, culturally and linguistically responsive teaching can be defined in various ways. Furthermore, even within the research community, there is no single shared definition of cultural responsiveness [19]. In this article, culturally and linguistically responsive teaching is defined as instructional approaches that promote multilingual learners’ language and literacy learning while maintaining their cultural and linguistic identities. This adopted term is drawn from the work of several scholars, as described below. In the beginning, the two terms “culturally” and “linguistically” were not used together. These two terms, culturally responsive teaching and linguistically responsive teaching, seemed to be used separately in the educational fields in the 1990s with slightly different orientations and foci. The historical perspectives presented below therefore present each concept separately, starting first with culturally responsive teaching followed by linguistically responsive teaching.

### 2.1. Culturally Responsive Teaching

The notion of culturally responsive teaching has a long history in the United States. It was developed to address the cultural mismatch between schools and students, which affected student learning. Initially, it started with the Kamehameha Early Childhood Program (KEEP), which was launched in a grade school (K-6) in Hawaii in the 1970s to resolve cultural mismatches between school curricula and student engagement in reading practices. The purpose of “KEEP was the development of a reading program that was effective and would be accommodated to the culture and language of the children”. In short, the program’s goal was to achieve “cultural compatibility” by producing “a school

program compatible with the culture of Hawaiian children in ways that will make the program educationally effective” [20] (p. 109).

In this program, which used “talk story and peer interactions” as main literacy activities aligned with Native Hawaiian culture, the students’ reading achievement increased significantly. Documentation of the start of culturally responsive teaching is sparse but it seems that the KEEP program might be the initial approach that provides research-based evidence of the impact of culturally responsive teaching on the academic success of students. The scholars who established its framework include Au and Jordan [21] and Tharp [22].

Although culturally responsive teaching dates back to the 1970s, it appears that this notion received much more attention in the educational field in the 1990s, as shown by how much work has been published in those eras [23–25]. Additionally, culturally responsive teaching has been known by several different terms over the history of the practice. Developing simultaneously is the term culturally relevant pedagogy [26]. The concepts of culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy are interchangeable. Ladson-Billings [24] defined culturally relevant pedagogy as a “pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically [by using] cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20). This culturally relevant pedagogy emphasizes the empowerment of students under teacher instruction.

This term of culturally relevant pedagogy is exemplified in the seminal work by Ladson-Billings [25], which discussed the practices of eight African American teachers who successfully worked with students of color. She emphasized that culturally relevant pedagogy aims to support students of color to be academically, culturally, socially, and politically competent. Ladson-Billings constructed culturally relevant pedagogy as a way to challenge other existing terms, such as “culturally congruent pedagogy”, because they might denote the assimilation of historically underrepresented students into mainstream culture rather than sustaining their cultural identities. Ladson-Billings continued to argue that culturally relevant pedagogy needs to be considered as a theoretical model:

A next step for positing effective pedagogical practice is a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate. I term this pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy. [25] (p. 469)

This notion implies that critical perspectives are one of the important components in culturally relevant pedagogy. Later, Gay [27] used the term culturally responsive teaching in discussing programs and strategies that accommodate students’ cultural experiences. Gay’s stance about culturally responsive teaching is similar to that of Ladson-Billings: leveraging the cultural identities of students for their academic success.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy [28,29] is the extended version of culturally relevant pedagogy [25] and culturally responsive teaching [27]. Paris [28] argued that there should be a change in terms of stance, terminology, and practice. He claimed that “relevant” and “responsive” approaches are not sufficient, and proposed a new and more inclusive pedagogy that focuses on sustaining student “languages and cultures” under teacher instruction. An intriguing point is that Paris [28] emphasized linguistic pluralism in his discussion but did not use the term linguistically sustaining pedagogy. Instead, he used culturally sustaining pedagogy. Compared to this pedagogy, the linguistically responsive teaching discussed below focuses on multilingual students.

## 2.2. Linguistically Responsive Teaching

Linguistically responsive teaching, instructional approaches that affirm the language differences of MLLs as assets, considers MLLs as their target students. Within this framework, the main principle is that teachers need to consider students’ linguistic diversity in their curriculum. The major principles of linguistically responsive teaching are similar to culturally responsive teaching. However, the target audience is different. Culturally responsive teaching was used as a statement to address the racial identities of students,

such as African American students, and race was the origin of this framework. Therefore, in the beginning, culturally responsive teaching did not specify multilingual learners even though Vavrus [30] defines culturally responsive teaching as a “response to traditional curricular and instructional methods that have often been ineffective for students of color, immigrant children, and students from lower socioeconomic families” (p. 49). Immigrant children do not necessarily include MLLs nor are all MLLs immigrants. Through the omission of linguistically diverse students within this framework, MLLs were often overlooked; their varied and diverse needs were obscured by culturally responsive teaching. In response, a new concept known as linguistically responsive teaching was created, a new term purposely addressing the linguistic needs of MLLs and not clumping them into the term “immigrant children.” This was developed in the early 2000s to recognize the linguistic identities of MLLs.

The term linguistically responsive teaching came out later than culturally responsive teaching in the field of education to bring awareness to the particular needs of immigrant students in the U.S. whose primary language was not English. Scholars (e.g., [31,32]) recognize that Lucas et al. [33] first used the term in their works to describe the role of teachers in meeting the diverse linguistic needs of MLLs.

The major reason that scholars intentionally use linguistically responsive teaching is to make a distinctive difference between students of color (e.g., racial identities) and multilingual learners (e.g., linguistic identities). Both terms connote historically underrepresented groups in the U.S.; however, lumping students of color and multilingual learners into one group is problematic since it obscures the different needs of these two groups. The term students of color (e.g., African Americans) does not mean that the students are multilingual learners who are in the process of acquiring a new language in English-dominant contexts. For instance, students of color can include African American students, but that does not necessarily include MLLs who learn English as their new language in U.S. contexts. Thus, the scholars in the field of second language and literacy education intentionally use the term linguistically diverse students to represent MLLs. An important aspect to remember is that linguistically responsive teaching includes the varied cultural and racial identities of students (e.g., Spanish bilingual students with Mexican cultural backgrounds). That is, linguistically responsive teaching does not exclude cultural aspects; it includes both cultural and linguistic elements in the framework.

The key tenet of linguistically responsive teaching is that teachers should view multilingual learners’ primary language as an asset. Given that the home language of a multilingual learner will play a role in acquiring English language and literacy, it should not be discouraged for the learner to use it in the classroom [28,34–36]. Linguistically responsive teaching posits that multilingual learners’ language and literacy knowledge, which is developed in their first language (e.g., Chinese), can transfer to their learning of English, a second language [13,31,33].

According to de Jong [37], teachers’ understanding of MLLs from multilingual and multicultural perspectives is crucial. This idea implies that linguistically responsive pedagogy is incomplete if it does not include both the primary languages and diverse cultures of MLLs in the instructional approaches of teachers. This framework implies that middle grade teachers should respond to the unique needs of MLLs by inviting students to use their home language knowledge as a way to utilize their “entire linguistic repertoire” [38] (p. 216) to develop English language and literacy learning.

Taken together, the combination of the tenets of culturally responsive teaching and linguistically responsive teaching is called culturally and linguistically responsive teaching (CLRT). The historical overview of CLRT is essential to understand how teachers can implement the ideas of CLRT.

### 3. Five Key Principles of Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching

Scholars in the field of language and literacy education have conducted studies on instructional approaches and strategies that aim to promote equitable learning in MLLs.

As noted earlier, some key principles are identified through extensive literature as well as my own observations in the classroom as a researcher and practicum supervisor for pre-service and in-service teachers. I remind the reader that these approaches and strategies are not exhaustive and linear. It is intended that the following sections provide a start to understanding the many and varied approaches that can be included in a middle grade general classroom. Ideally, MLLs will have access to a bilingual or ESL teacher, but even if that is not an option, the principles addressed can be the starting point for all content area teachers to include in daily instruction.

Additionally, the suggestions of these key principles are situated in the teacher preparation standards that are newly revised by AMLE [5]. The revised standards emphasize that middle grade teachers need to “understand and reflect on the major concepts, principles, theories, and research related to young adolescent development and use that knowledge in their practice” [5].

### *3.1. CLRT through Building Foundational Knowledge of MLLs’ Home Languages*

Research consistently suggests that a successful implementation of CLRT is based on the foundational knowledge a teacher has of MLLs’ home language [32,39,40]. Teacher knowledge about the major elements of a MLL’s first language and second language acquisition makes a difference to the student’s successful learning. Indeed, building the professional capital of teachers through theories of first and second language learning is fundamental to implementing CLRT successfully [31].

For clarity, this does not mean that teachers need to learn the languages of all their MLLs. Given that there are more than 400 different MLLs’ home languages in U.S. public schools, it is near impossible for teachers to learn all of their different languages.

However, researchers claim that it is essential for teachers to have a basic understanding of different languages to successfully support student language and literacy learning. For instance, the Arabic sentence structure is verb (V) + subject (S) + object (O), compared to SVO (e.g., I love you) in English. Teachers who have this foundational knowledge of the sentence structure might be in a better position to assist MLLs [41–43]. They can help MLLs to be aware of this difference between their home language and English in oral and written form for their successful “language transfer” [34].

Taking the time to understand the basics of some of the students’ home languages in the classroom can help teachers make connections and design instruction to better meet the needs of MLLs [13]. For instance, a study in a middle school [41] suggests that a general education teacher (e.g., white, monolingual) addressed MLLs’ needs by accommodating their home languages (e.g., Russian and Korean) and cultural references to support student learning. The students (e.g., Russian and Korean) who were rather quiet at the beginning of the semester actively interacted with their peers and participated in language and literacy activities toward the end of the semester. The teacher created an environment that is accommodating to the use of multiple languages. This study implies that teachers’ understanding of the cultural and linguistic needs of MLLs might contribute to student engagement in learning activities.

### *3.2. CLRT through Offering Translanguaging Space for the Linguistic Repertoire of MLLs*

Another key element of successful CLRT is to offer MLLs translanguaging space. Translanguaging is a way for MLLs to “draw on their full linguistic toolkits in order to process information, make meaning, and convey it to others” [44] (p. 386). According to García [45], it also means “the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential” (p. 140). In other words, translanguaging can be the process of using two languages (i.e., Spanish and English) to convey a thought or understanding of the material. As demonstrated in these concepts, translanguaging offers space for MLLs to engage in meaning making by using their diverse linguistic abilities,



including the use of their home language and cultural references. Indeed, translanguaging approaches are grounded in the framework of CLRT.

Numerous studies suggest that it is important for teachers to invite MLLs to engage in a linguistic repertoire through the offering of a translanguaging space (see [12,36,38,44,46,47]). MLLs should be invited to use their primary language as a leveraging tool to engage in learning activities. For instance, students from Bengali background might use the sentence structure of Subject (S), Object (O), and Verb (V). [48]. This SOV structure is different from the English structure (e.g., SVO). By inviting MLLs to compare and contrast the sentence structures between their first language (e.g., Bengali) and second language (e.g., English), teachers provide MLLs with opportunities to be aware of the different use of languages.

Translanguaging can be difficult for a monolingual teacher to implement in the classroom as it can rely upon the participants using two or multiple languages, but there can also be clever workarounds to provide a multi-language space. For example, Cummins [49] provided evidence on how a student actively used her home language, Urdu, in a grade seven social studies unit. He claimed that the student “contributed her ideas and experiences to the story, participated in discussions about how to translate vocabulary and expressions from Urdu to English and from English to Urdu” [49] (p. 9). This cross-linguistic example supports Cummins’s consistent stance on the importance of teaching for transfer across languages (see [46,50,51]). Additionally, in Martin-Beltrán et al.’s study [52], one intervention implemented in the classroom was the creation of bilingual (e.g., Spanish and English) groups which consisted of Spanish experts learning English and English experts learning Spanish in a secondary classroom. They observed that both students would use English and Spanish interchangeably as a way to develop their content knowledge.

### *3.3. CLRT through Implementing Integrated Approaches for Content and Language*

Another consistent theme among current studies on CLRT is that MLLs engage in learning more actively when integrated methods are used (see [53–55]). Scholars in the field of second language and literacy education claim that MLLs learn a new language while they learn content knowledge. This means that teachers need to make a close link between language objectives and content objectives, as shown in the sheltered instruction observation protocol (SIOP) model [55]. The purpose of the SIOP model is to promote the successful learning of MLLs through acquiring content knowledge (e.g., social studies) and language skills (e.g., reading) simultaneously.

For instance, a study by Delaney [54], which was conducted in a middle school setting, illustrates that a social studies teacher successfully helped MLLs through integrated methods between social studies content and language. In the context where content and language learning were not taught separately, MLLs were able to understand the important concepts of World War II through reading and writing activities about World War II. Another study by Curtin [53] also demonstrates the effectiveness of integrated methods to support the content and language learning of MLLs. In the study in a middle school setting where six Mexican MLLs participated, teachers in science classes utilized Spanish vocabulary to teach science lessons on weather and climate. In this context, the middle school MLLs were able to make a clear connection between science content (e.g., climate) and language (e.g., vocabulary) through integrated methods.

The SIOP model can be used in a broad manner by supporting the learning of MLLs through their family involvement. For example, He et al. [56] took the SIOP model one step further by also promoting community engagement. The teacher of this study was not only encouraged to design lessons using SIOP, but to also familiarize himself with the MLLs’ family and encourage “meaningful family involvement in the teaching and learning process” (p. 22). In this process, MLLs learned both content and language.

### *3.4. CLRT through Using Multimodality for MLLs’ Engagement*

Another main principle of CLRT is that MLLs learn successfully when the concept of multimodality is used in the classroom (see [57–60]). Multimodality is defined as the use of

multiple modes of communication, such as verbal, non-verbal, visual, and auditory, as a way of meaning making. It integrates more than one mode of learning, such as only relying upon the written form. Within this framework of multimodality, lessons are not limited to printed materials, such as textbooks, but also include other modes of communication such as video clips and cartoons. Many studies provide evidence that diversifying content delivery and student interaction, such as visual and auditory modes, are needed to improve MLLs' access to diverse modes of learning.

For instance, the study by Hughes and Morrison [57] in a sixth-grade classroom provides a positive example of MLLs' learning. The MLLs in the study were able to construct poems focusing on their language and literacy learning through multimedia tools. Specifically, the students "wrote an acrostic poem using their names and the online acrostic poetry tool on the [www.readwritethink.org](http://www.readwritethink.org) (accessed on 1 March 2022) website" [57] (p. 618). The poems were personal and included their lived experiences. The study implies that when multimodal texts are used in conjunction with the personal lives, realities, and experiences of MLLs, they engage in learning activities more readily (see [59,61,62]).

### 3.5. CLRT through Seeking Collaboration for the Diverse Needs of MLLs

Another researched key element that teachers need to consider when they implement CLRT approaches to meet the diverse needs of MLLs is teacher collaboration (see [39,63–66]). Teachers have professional capitals in their specialization. While content teachers are specialized in content, ESL or bilingual teachers are specialized in language. These two groups of teachers who have expertise in their areas should collaborate on effective strategies to meet the culturally, socially, and linguistically diverse needs of MLLs.

For instance, a study [39] in a fifth-grade classroom demonstrates an example of positive implementation of CLRT through teacher collaboration: a general education teacher effectively collaborated with an ESL teacher to support MLLs' learning by accommodating the students' linguistic identities. Another study [13] also provides a positive example of CLRT: a seventh grade English language arts teacher (ELA) who shared responsibility to work with MLLs with the ESL teacher effectively supported the ELA content and language learning of MLLs by positioning the students as cultural and linguistic assets. These two teachers made a conscious effort to find time and rely upon each other's expertise. Instead of seeing the classroom divided among MLLs and general education students, the two teachers holistically worked together. Teachers creating time and space to collaborate and to use and rely upon each other's professional capital can have a positive effect on MLLs' learning by allowing them to recognize both teachers as instrumental in their learning by not just relying upon one for content and one for ESL.

In sum, the historical orientation of CLRT, as well as its main principles, provide insight into how middle grade teachers can support the equitable access of MLLs to language and literacy learning opportunities. The AMLE standards [5] for middle grade teacher preparation are clear in that teachers need to be responsive to young adolescents' "individual experiences and identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, language/dialect, gender, culture, age, appearance, ability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, family composition)". It is the teacher's role to affirm the diversity of all adolescent MLLs. The suggested strategies and approaches, as well as historical perspectives of CLRT, offer middle grade educators a comprehensive knowledge of CLRT.

The five key elements of CLRT that I suggested above provide what it means to be responsive and how teachers can be responsive to culturally and linguistically diverse students. Understanding and incorporating these five principles can also support what Tigert et al. [67] refer to as "humanizing classroom management" (p. 1088). By supporting the cultural and linguistic identities of MLLs in the classroom, teachers are changing the classroom environment to be inclusive of "different languages, cultures, countries and schools, which can have both academic and social-emotional impacts" [67] (p. 1104).

#### 4. Suggestions for Future Research

Compared to other groups of students in the U.S. context, research specifically on middle grade MLLs is lacking. Although it is not clearly known what contributes to the lack of research in this area, reality suggests a need for future research and practice.

First, the principles of CLRT could be continuously examined, revised, refined, and expanded to move the field of middle grade education forward. Although I attempted to include as many studies as possible in this synthesis review paper, I found that empirical studies that show the dynamics of interaction between teachers and MLLs were rare. As noted earlier, this paper is not a systematic literature review. More studies guided by a systematic literature review design will be helpful to better understand the current status of research on CLRT for MLLs.

Furthermore, more research on young adolescent MLLs in school and beyond school contexts is necessary to provide nuanced approaches and practices of CLRT for the equitable learning opportunities, identities, and empowerment of MLLs. I hope this synopsis of literature on CLRT for MLLs serves as a steppingstone for further rigorous research and effective practice for culturally and linguistically responsive practices.

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