Teaching Approaches and Motivational Strategies on Malaysian Tertiary Learners' Speaking Engagement

Radin Mardhiana binti Izaddin, Hanita Hanim Ismail

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Today, it still seems quite difficult for Malaysian tertiary learners to speak in English fluently. It has to do with language anxiety, limited exposure, and the fear of being judged. This study looks at teaching approaches and motivational strategies for effectively engaging learners in speaking. It seeks to adopt qualitative research with Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and blended learning to see how pedagogically targeted approaches and culturally sensitive practices could apply to problems related to attrition from participation. Semi-structured interviews, one with an experienced ESL teacher and the other with a learner in higher education, provide information on how integration of collaborative activities, gamified learning tools, and positive reinforcement can translate into fluency and lessen anxiety. Practical recommendations are made with respect to developing inclusive yet vibrant classrooms emphasizing cultural sensitivity and adaptation strategies in overcoming barricades to English speaking participation.

Keywords: approaches, motivations, strategies, speaking, engagement

INTRODUCTION

When people talk about proficiency in languages, skills become more than just skills; they also become the door to their global world. English is a language of communication and, above all, a language of education and business; as such, it is significant. The overwhelming dominance of English in academic terms is illustrated in that 17 of the top 20 universities in the world use English as the major medium of instruction as well as that of research (Crystal, 2020). What's more, it builds abilities in learners through which they can access lots of resources, make collaborative efforts internationally, and excel in a globalized social environment.

In Malaysia, English is considered as important as a second language and serves the purpose of a vehicle towards higher education. But the problem faced by most tertiary learners is that they cannot speak fluently in English. The highly dynamic multicultural environment, where regional languages and dialects are used dominantly around the learners in daily interaction, leads them to limited exposure to English. Because of this limited interaction, they end up having very low confidence and speaking anxiety. Making mistakes or being judged by peers intimidates most students and keeps them from involving themselves during class discussions and test speaking activities (Zainol et al., 2024). These are the concerns that call for the need for innovative approaches in teaching and motivating learners to work on building their confidence while addressing their fears regarding learning.

Motivational strategies using all kinds of these Dörnyei headings promise a lot against these issues. This creates an environment in which speaking English feels less threatening through the nurturance of curiosity and rewarding the effort (Dörnyei, 2001). Motivational strategies coupled with adaptive teaching realize a more empowered learner in surmounting these obstacles and gaining essential communications skills.

As applied in a culturally responsive pedagogy, it is relevant at a context like Malaysia being diverse context. Educators, by incorporating culturally-relevant sources and examples by the region, make lessons more relatable and inclusive for learners (SHS Web of Conferences, 2024). These approaches not only help in the reduction of anxiety due to the language, providing a sense of belonging, but they also promote the involvement of learners and confidence in expression.

This research would examine the interaction of teaching styles and motivational strategies to improve speaking involvement among university students in Malaysia. It identifies effective approaches to building student confidence and fluency as important elements of lifelong communicative competences and success in academic and professional settings. Even though only a single learner-teacher interaction has been studied, but the study is the most comprehensive with regards to very qualitative insights into the strategies and challenges of promoting English speaking engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Motivational Strategies

These motivational strategies engender confidence and commitment for ESL learners. Indeed, the gap between content in schools and intrinsic motivation of learners is narrowed by enjoyable activity blended with reality like grades and teacher recognition (Dörnyei, 2001). Such is illustrated by Susanti, Putra, and Aisyah (2022) when they described how YouTube videos changed role-play activities. Perhaps it improved the students speaking-skills and made them own their own learning because students started sourcing their own videos the third cycle into the program. This is quite a far cry from the usual motivational evolution, for this is what motivation produces when one encourages independent action in learning.

Astuti (2016) specifies that other activities such as games, songs, and role plays create an environment of engagement and interaction with learning. Activities such as the "cycle-stand" that combines physical movement with language practice keep students engaged and make learning dynamic and fun. The role of the teacher in this is crucial. By presenting lessons that are practically related and infusing humour, the teacher can create secure and freer spaces for students to experiment with the language. One student remarked: "The teacher makes easy-to-follow sentences which are closer to our worlds. She gives examples from real-life activity and gives us time to make our sentences" (Astuti, 2016). It is very much similar to Zainol et al. (2024), which highlights the importance of culturally relevant teaching in reducing anxiety and instilling confidence.

The harmony of intrinsic and extrinsic or external elements is the best motivator. Enjoyment to be intrinsic motivators, such as those that stem from task-based activities, is likely the most important. Ulla (2020) portrayed that speaking confidence has increased because of doing interactive tasks in classrooms in Thailand, despite problems with vocabulary and fluency. However, activities that involve culture, like storytelling, according to Agustina (2024), induce curiosity and provide deep connection with students in the study material. Digital tools such as language-learning apps increase intrinsic motivation by providing goal-driven and tailored experience (Lee, 2024).

Extrinsic motivation is also essential in very organized learning environments. Recognition, praise, and grading give a clear boundary for the success of students. In Malaysian classrooms, public recognition towards efforts inspires confidence and participation (Hasan, 2024). Likewise, Brewer and Burgess (2005) found the strong influence of teacher's positive attitudinal impact on students' performance. However, as explained by Namaziandost et al. (2019), old techniques, such as Grammar Translation Methods, tend to kill interest; on the contrary, cooperative learning creates a close-knit social environment and participates actively in a classroom.

It is important to find a balance between the internal and the external motivators in the long-term commitment of a student. From the principles laid down for motivation by Abdullah, Al Ghafri, and Al Yahyai (2019), a good mix would include group work, gaming, technological, and constructive feedback to keep it interacting into the lives of learners. This balance would not only reduce anxiety but also encourage resilience, which can be used by learners to overcome language barriers and help them maintain their upward direction (Yahya, 2024).

Teaching Approaches

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and blended learning are transformative teaching approaches to improve ESL learners' speaking proficiency. With real-world tasks, TBLT encourages all active involvement in and meaningful use of language. According to Ellis (2003), it

draws upon practical scenarios, as task-oriented activities bridge classroom lessons with real-life opportunities to benefit fluency and confidence. A collaborative task, as reported by a teacher in Agustina's (2024) study, can even help students stay motivated while developing their communication skills through dialogues. Yahya (2024) adds that task variation diminishes anxiety and increases participation, especially in mixed proficiency settings.

This is true for CLT, which speaks for spontaneity and fluency rather than grammatical accuracy. It finds instant application in Malaysian situations because storytelling and group discussions resonate more with students (Hasan, 2024). Furthermore, with authentic examples stemming from their culture, teachers can adopt this method. "Group discussions help me learn from my peers while improving my confidence," states a learner. That is exactly how collaborative efforts build both language and self-confidence. Rao (2019) agrees with this when he says that CLT prepares students to communicate in real life.

Blended learning uses conventional methods along with digital tools to offer flexibility and access to further resources. Applications like Duolingo boost self-paced practice, providing opportunities for difficult advancement without pressure. A learner said, "Apps like Duolingo help me practice at my own pace," supported by Lee (2024), who provided evidence showing how such gamified platforms hold onto engagement. Nevertheless, barriers such as inadequate access to technology and unequal levels of proficiency in digital literacy need to be tackled so as to reap similar benefits out of it (Abdullah et al., 2019; ShsConf, 2024).

Cultural and Contextual Relevance

Teaching methods to learners based on cultural or specific contexts lead to inclusion or engagement, especially with heterogeneous learners such as Malaysia. Culturally relevant materials lead the learners in relating to subject content, hence improving comprehension and motivation. Nonitah et al. (2024), for example, describe how Malaysian proverbs and festivals build bridges from academic concepts into daily living. On the other hand, Susanti et al. (2022) prove that embedding cultural contexts in role-playing activities could be effective tools to motivate learners to replicate real speech.

Cultural adaptation also plays a very major role in reducing anxiety. Yahya (2024) indicates that scaffolding and peer collaboration are such supportive environments where students would feel free to experiment with language. Ulla (2020) reported that students supported by their teachers and peers evidenced improvements in their speaking proficiency. However, culturally adaptive strategies often require resources and out-of-the-box thinking to be implemented. For example, Hasan (2024) proposes using open educational resources to integrate culture-relevant materials, while Naser (2024) stresses that collaborative methods would fully penetrate diverse learning needs. Unfortunately, there is no quick-fix solution for leveraging all these opportunities when it comes to creating inclusive, efficient, and effective language learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

It is quite necessary to understand the experience of the learner and the teacher with regard to the challenges and successes encountered in learning English. The present study uses qualitative approaches to seek further into those experiences that speak to teaching approaches, motivation strategies, and context within which an undergraduate learner in Malaysia is engaged with English speaking (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative approach is particularly suited to understanding the dynamics in the process of acquiring a second language, as it provides in-depth insights into the perspectives of the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Figure 1: Data Collection and Data Analysis

Participant and Sampling

The selected subject of purposive sampling for this research is one proficient ESL teacher with a teaching experience of five years and one tertiary student with an intermediate English proficiency proficiency (CEFR B1). This was because the student particularly agreed to share an affluent insight into her experiences about the confidence and engagement level in speaking tasks. The teacher who has been practical for years narrated very elaborate techniques of effective teaching, motivational strategies and hurdles faced while engaging speaking activities. While the learner had the most motivating account of his experience detailing how certain techniques impacted his confidence and fluency (Patton, 2015). Hence, this dual perspective added richness and authenticity to the study.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection where sets or themes of questions were drawn from previous literature review, offering flexibility while maintaining focus on the study's objectives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The teacher's interview explored motivational strategies, teaching approaches, and challenges faced during speaking activities, with a focus on effective practices. The learner's interview concentrated on her experiences with these methods, the impact on her confidence, and her suggestions for improvement. Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes and was conducted in a private, comfortable setting to encourage honest responses. Informed consent was obtained from both participants, and interviews were recorded for transcription and analysis (Bryman, 2016).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis used to identify recurrent patterns and themes represented, motivational strategies, teaching approaches, and challenges. The process entails familiarization with the data, coding of important concepts, and grouping of concepts into broader themes that align with the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Ethical considerations were the backbone of the study. The learner was informed of the study's aim, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any given moment. Informed consent was sought and all data were anonymized to protect the identity of the learner. Through this exercise of ethical adherence, the respect and value of the learner were maintained throughout the research process (Babbie, 2020).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Thus, the investigation reports on how certain targeted teaching methods and motivational or engagement activities influence a learner's participation in speaking assignments. Employing either Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) or Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) proved effective, whereas blended learning was quite an advantage because it allowed fluency through real-life applications and collaborative learning, despite some hiccups like accessibility to technologies. In TBLT, role-play and real-world activity participation rapidly enhanced the learner's sense of confidence and fluency as gamified tools such as Duolingo helped boost vocabulary and pronunciation. The teacher said that it reduced language anxiety over storytelling and group discussions putting an emphasis on fluency over grammatical accuracy and created an entire environment of support.

Motivational strategies incorporating fun tasks, extrinsic reinforcements, positive feedbacks, culturally-relevant material, can be used to enhance students' confidence and involvement while minimizing their anxiety and considering them from an inclusive perspective. Humor and peer support lessened language anxiety and created supportive dynamic learning lessons. The student noted that humor and relevant examples made the speaking task more fun and less frightening.

Mixed proficiency-student differentiated tasks encounter infrastructural barriers in realizing the full potential of blended learning. Therefore, these findings point to the need for integrating adaptive teaching strategies, peer support, humor, and cultural sensitivity into the pedagogy in order to build learners confidence, fluency, and participation; provision of practical pathways toward the overcoming of barriers in English-speaking engagements.
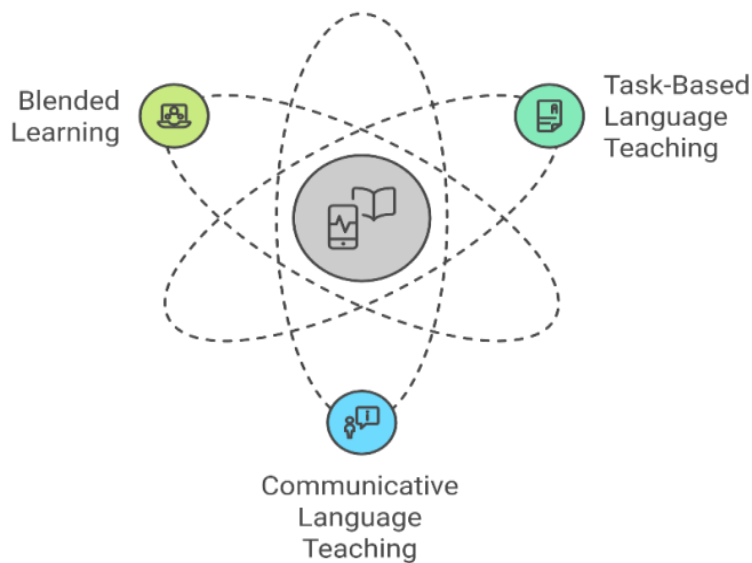
Teaching Approaches

Figure 2: Teaching Approaches

Task-Based Learning (TBLT)

Task-Based Learning (TBLT) emerged as a highly effective approach for enhancing speaking skills by immersing the learner in real-world applications. Role plays and conversational practices were highlighted for their practicality and engaging nature. As the teacher explained, *"We use role plays... it makes the students feel like they are in real-life situations."* This aligns with Ellis (2003), who emphasized that task-oriented activities improve fluency and help learners internalize language structures through meaningful use.

Collaborative tasks, such as dialogues, build confidence and create opportunities for authentic language practice (Agustina, 2024). Skehan (1998) underscores that TBLT's focus on collaborative learning encourages peer interaction, a critical factor in building both competence and confidence in speaking. These findings were corroborated during interviews, as the learner described feeling more at ease and engaged during task-based activities. These tasks, coupled with teacher guidance, act as scaffolds for incremental improvement in speaking proficiency.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

CLT's emphasis on fluency and interaction rather than grammatical accuracy was particularly effective in reducing anxiety and promoting the learner's confidence. Activities such as group discussions and storytelling emerged as popular under this approach. The learner noted, *"Talking to my classmates in English during group tasks builds my confidence."* This finding aligns with Rao (2019), who observed that CLT fosters fluency by encouraging learners to take risks in a supportive environment.

Naser (2024) further highlights that incorporating culturally relevant examples into CLT makes lessons relatable, enhancing engagement. Additionally, CLT's adaptability to different cultural and linguistic contexts makes it particularly suitable for multilingual settings like Malaysia. A teacher explained, *"Group work really helps in making students feel comfortable,"* a sentiment echoed by Namaziandost et al. (2019), who observed reduced anxiety and improved learner participation in similar contexts.

Blended Learning

Blended learning, integrating digital tools with traditional classroom methods, was praised for its flexibility and ability to cater to individual learner needs. Apps like Duolingo were frequently mentioned for improving pronunciation and vocabulary. The learner remarked, *"Using apps like Duolingo helps with pronunciation and learning at my own speed."* This reflects findings by Lee (2024), who noted that gamified platforms enhance

engagement by making practice accessible and enjoyable. However, challenges such as limited access to technology and varying levels of digital literacy were noted. Abdullah, Al Ghafri, and Al Yahyai (2019) emphasized the need for equitable access to technology, supported by Singh and Kaur (2017), who recommended providing adequate training in digital tools.
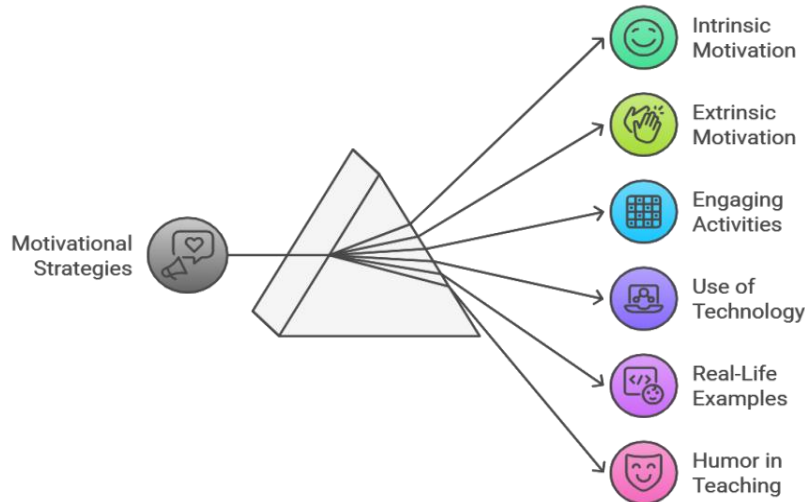
Motivational Strategies

Figure 3: Motivational Strategies

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Balancing intrinsic motivators, such as enjoyable tasks, with extrinsic rewards, like grades, was found crucial for sustaining engagement. Interactive activities, such as games, maintained learner interest. A teacher stated, *"Games like 'Mafia' make the lesson interactive while teaching essential vocabulary."* This finding supports Astuti (2016), who demonstrated that games and role-plays sustain motivation by combining fun with learning. Extrinsic motivators, including grades and teacher recognition, also proved impactful. The learner shared, *"Grades motivate me to participate because they reflect my efforts in class."* Hasan (2024) similarly noted that structured acknowledgment encourages active participation, particularly in formal educational settings.

Positive Reinforcement and Feedback

Constructive feedback was pivotal in reducing anxiety and encouraging learners to try again. The learner appreciated private feedback as a safe and supportive method, noting, *"The teacher gives feedback privately, which helps me try again."* Brewer and Burgess (2005) emphasized that personalized feedback fosters a sense of safety, making learners more willing to participate in speaking activities. Zainol et al. (2024) similarly highlighted the role of positive reinforcement in building confidence by acknowledging effort rather than focusing solely on accuracy.

Cultural Relevance

Incorporating culturally relevant materials emerged as a significant motivational strategy. The teacher explained, *"For a student from Sarawak, I try to relate words with their dialect."* This aligns with SHS Web of Conferences (2024), which found that learners engage more deeply with content that reflects their cultural and linguistic realities. Bridging the gap between academic content and everyday experiences fosters inclusivity, critical in diverse educational settings like Malaysia.

Engagement and Learner Confidence

Interactive Methods

Language anxiety, characterized by fear of judgment, was identified as a significant barrier to speaking

engagement. The learner remarked, *"I feel less anxious when the teacher uses funny examples."* This aligns with Horwitz et al. (1986), who found that language anxiety often inhibits participation. Teachers mitigated this by creating supportive environments and normalizing mistakes, consistent with Razawi and Mohamad (2024).

Mentor-Mentee Collaboration

Collaboration with peers emerged as a key strategy for fostering engagement and building confidence. Teachers reported using high-proficiency students to mentor their peers, creating a supportive environment. As the teacher noted, "*High-proficiency students guide others, creating a supportive environment*." Namaziandost et al. (2019) similarly found that peer collaboration fosters social cooperation, a critical factor in promoting speaking engagement.

Humor and Relatable Content

The use of humor and relatable examples was found to significantly reduce anxiety and foster a relaxed learning environment. The learner shared, "*I feel less anxious when the teacher uses funny examples.*" This supports Astuti (2016), who emphasized that humor not only makes lessons enjoyable but also reduces the perceived risk of making mistakes.

Challenges in Learning and Teaching Speaking Skills

Language Anxiety

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Mixed Proficiency Levels

Teaching learners with varying proficiency levels posed challenges to inclusivity. Teachers addressed this by designing differentiated tasks. One teacher shared, *"I plan activities at different levels so no one feels left out."* Namaziandost et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of tailoring instruction to ensure meaningful participation for all learners.

Impact of Motivational Strategies

Motivational strategies profoundly impacted the learner's confidence, fluency, and overall engagement. The provision of supportive feedback was found to be instrumental in overcoming the students' fears. "*By the end of the semester, even shy students manage to speak a few sentences*", the teacher said, underlining the importance of encouragement and persistence (Zainol et al., 2024). Well-designed interactive activities involving low pressure contributed to improving fluency. The learner described how group discussions and casual conversations made talking feel natural, a point resonating with Rao's (2019) findings on a need for creating real-time speaking opportunities. Motivational strategies tailored to the individual helped boost participation, with the learner saying, "*Using relatable presentations captivated my attention and helped with anxiety*". This would further emphasize the relevance of strategies that connect the experience of the learners themselves (Aubrey, King, and Almukhaild, 2020).

Recommendations for Improved Engagement

It is apparent from the findings that speaking engagement for learners can further be improved through an approach that is diverse and flexible. Teachers may then join the elements of TBLT with the principles of CLT together with integrating some culturally sensitive approaches in the development of an inclusive and engaging environment for learning. This combination, thus, could enable teachers to personalize what they undertake

with learners since it arouses interest in participation. "The motivational strategies can go no farther in influencing behavior over time unless they really change," claimed the learner. This highlights the need for innovative and dynamic teaching strategies to be introduced to keep the learners engaged. Positive reinforcement, humor, and collective activities reduce language anxiety and build learners' confidence (Ulla, 2020; Susanti, Putra, & Aisyah, 2022).

Technology is another component auxiliary to the classroom and provides avenues for learners to practice independently at their pace. Apps such as Duolingo gamify the experience of learning to make it less stressful while improving pronunciation and vocabulary. "Apps like Duolingo improve pronunciation and vocabulary," said one learner. This shows how we are integrating technology in learning a language. However, there is still a need to create an equal playing field in terms of digital access and training when learners face technological obstacles; particularly in less advantaged areas. Singh & Kaur, 2017; Abdullah, Al Ghafri & Al Yahyai, 2019.

A vital part of creating an inclusive learning environment is cultural sensitivity. When examples and content are culturally relevant, lessons become relatable to learners by teachers bringing real-life situations into the classroom. For example, content based on lessons that include local dialects or cultural practices renders teaching as inclusive and makes it possible for the learner to identify with the learning material. This approach closes the distance between the academic content and lived experiences of the learner at critical diverse educational contexts (Zainol et al., 2024; SHS Web of Conferences, 2024).

Last but not least, the fun, learning, and teamwork created can promote the kind of environment under which language anxiety can be reduced, e.g. language games and group work. Storytelling, role-play, and peer discussions, among others, have highlighted their effectiveness in increasing engagement and fluency. According to Aubrey, King, and Almukhaild (2020) interactive methods lessen cognitive load and entice learners to actively participate. In addition, constructive and private feedback individuals can develop student's confidence gradually learning good progress toward overcoming barriers and becoming successful English speakers. Together with increasing percentages of difficulty, these approaches really lay the groundwork for developing long-term learners in confidence and fluency. Last but not least, the fun, learning, and teamwork created can promote the kind of environment under which language anxiety can be reduced, e.g. language games and group work. Storytelling, role-play, and peer discussions, among others, have highlighted their effectiveness in increasing engagement and fluency. According to Aubrey, King, and Almukhaild (2020) interactive methods lessen cognitive load and entice learners to actively participate. In addition, constructive and private feedback individuals can develop student's confidence gradually learning good progress toward overcoming barriers and becoming successful English speakers. Together with increasing percentages of difficulty, these approaches really lay the groundwork for developing long-term learners in confidence and fluency.

CONCLUSION

It brings forward the transformational powers of motivational strategies and adaptive teaching approaches in improving English-speaking engagement among Malaysian tertiary learners. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and blended learning emerged as effective methods in improving fluency and confidence. These coupled with motivation such as humor, culturally relevant examples, and positive reinforcement were cited as strategies in alleviating language anxiety and building participation. Divided attention in terms of learner-specific needs within the context of level of proficiency and cultural gaps are part of the problem, and actually inclusive pedagogical approaches supported with continuous teachers' education may be. This study revolves around importance creating an enabling and environment that will be engaging and vibrant for learning wherein learners feel encouraged to experiment with language.

The research illustrates the effect of the motivational strategy and approved teaching method on the speaking participation of one individual student. Although the data of this study proves to be on a small scale, it still gives an insight into the direction of making theory into practice in terms of designing more effective, learner-centered and inclusive teaching. Future inquiries may follow up how long such effects last, or how they may be transferred or adapted to other multicultural contexts. Innovative and culture-driven strategies may equip teachers to inspire students to find means to breaking through language barriers, for better performance in

communication and stretching towards success in formal and informal worlds.

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