



## Culturally responsive teaching among pre-service CSL teachers: Perceptions, practices, and challenges

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### ABSTRACT

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The rise in China's influence worldwide and the upsurge in international students have increased the need for effective Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) teaching, enriching the atmosphere in Chinese classrooms. This study examines how future Chinese language teachers perceive and implement Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). Based on interviews with 20 postgraduate pre-service teachers at a leading Chinese university, most participants recognize the value of CRT; however, their understanding tends to be superficial and intuitive. The application of CRT is often inconsistent, as cultural aspects are frequently regarded as supplementary rather than integral to the learning process. Being international teachers and receiving guidance from mentors significantly supports the acquisition of relevant knowledge, yet learners face challenges such as low awareness of other cultures, insufficient training, limited resources, and institutional obstacles. Three thematic categories, beliefs and values, instructional practices, and contextual challenges, emerged from the analysis. The findings indicate a substantial gap between CRT theory and actual teaching practice, highlighting the need for increased efforts to incorporate CRT into teacher education curricula, develop specific frameworks tailored to different contexts, and implement supportive educational policies. This research offers original insights by (1) situating CSL teacher education within a non-Western context, (2) employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, and (3) providing recommendations for curriculum reform and professional development. Future research should consider longitudinal designs and multi-institutional comparisons.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature by situating Culturally Responsive Teaching within Chinese as a Second Language teacher education. It employs qualitative thematic analysis to explore pre-service teachers' perceptions, practices, and barriers. The primary contribution of the paper is documenting the gap between CRT theory and practice, providing context-specific recommendations.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The interconnectedness of the world's economy has had a considerable impact on the inclusion of cultural aspects in education systems. With the movement of economic globalization across the world, the idea of creating a community with a shared destiny for humanity has started to receive attention (Khan, Wang, & Ali, 2021). This vision, as described by President Xi Jinping in his important address at the United Nations General Assembly during the 70th session in September 2015, strongly emphasizes collective understanding and collaboration among

countries (China-Embassy, 2015; Liu, 2019). In the context of economic globalization, the mobility of international students has become not only a central factor in internationalization strategies in higher education but also an important vehicle for cross-cultural relations and global integration in education (Gay, 2009).

The global importance of the Chinese language has increased significantly due to the advancement of China's economy. Having recently surpassed the United States as the second-largest economy in the world, China's standing and global influence have improved significantly (Morrison, 2019). Because of China's accelerated economic development after the late 20th-century reforms and its increased global presence, the Chinese language has received more international attention (Gong, Gao, & Lyu, 2020). At the end of 2020, over 180 countries and territories had already included Chinese as a foreign language to be taught in their educational systems, of which more than 70 had officially adopted it in their schools (CGTN, 2020). This dispersion underscores the importance of culturally relevant teaching strategies, especially in China, where the teacher educates a culturally and linguistically diverse student population. As one of the six official languages of the United Nations, Chinese has also gained significant global standing, featuring a rich linguistic heritage spanning centuries. It was reported that the Chinese language was the third most spoken language in Canada by 2002, attributed to the increase in the Chinese population (Li, 2006). In the 2018 academic year, the UAE government added Chinese as a foreign language to be taught in 200 primary and secondary schools across the country (Global Times, 2021). In the US, Chinese is the third most dominant language after English and Spanish, while Russia has operationalized the teaching of Chinese in interstate examinations for universities (Kwan, Napoles, Chou, & Seligman, 2015). Additionally, by 2019, there were 535 institutes and 1,134 classrooms of the Confucius Institutes (China Daily, 2019), which were set up in 158 countries, demonstrating the increasing need for cross-border educational relations with China. Chinese as a foreign language is taught to non-Chinese foreigners through charitable Chinese-foreign cooperative institutes called the Confucius Institutes (Confucius Institute, 2020). They work towards promoting multiculturalism and global harmonization through educational and cultural exchange and collaboration with China. The role of these institutes has not only facilitated the rise in learning Chinese but has also brought fresh perspectives to the teaching of Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) through culture-based and interactive strategies.

There has been a global increase in learners of the Chinese language, which has boosted the demand for CSL teachers. To appropriately handle the enormous growth of overseas students coming to China, there is a necessity for educators proficient not only in the language but also in culturally responsive techniques. This aligns with the Chinese Education Reform Vision issued by the National Medium- and Long-Term Plan for Education 2010-2020, which notes that an inflow of overseas students correlates with the surging popularity of learning the Chinese language. This policy, together with the Study China Program run by the Chinese Ministry of Education, has propelled China to the third most sought-after country for studying overseas and has established its position as the premier educational hub in Asia (UNESCO, 2010).

Changes after 2013, with the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative, have had a notable impact on international student education in China (Li, Wang, & Zhao, 2023). The initiative has improved the standards and efficiency of education for foreign students, leading to a steady increase in international students, especially for postgraduate academic degrees. This rise in enrollment has prompted many universities to react by setting up new Chinese Culture or Schools of International Education, focusing on the development and enhancement of CSL teaching methods and dedicated teacher teams (Ting, Borah, Yun, & Liangze, 2021).

However, the rapid pace of globalization in education and increased cross-border student migratory movements affect the implementation of CSL instruction most profoundly. Addressing the cultural and linguistic diversity of classrooms is one highlighted concern due to the ability and need for more complex teaching methods (Bai, 2022). Along with these new developments in education, the policies in China's education system have changed as well, especially concerning Chinese as a Second Language (CSL). The first attempt to further develop this area of study was in 2007 with the Guiding Training Program for Master's Degree Students Teaching Chinese to Speakers of

Other Languages, which was designed to enhance reasoning and social interaction skills essential for engaging with the processes of Chinese language internationalization (Bai, 2022). In 2009, there was a major shift that included an internationalization focus in combination with cross-cultural communication skills for Master's full-time students (Li & Pitkänen, 2018). That shift demonstrates a greater understanding of the difficulties involved in teaching students from different cultural backgrounds. Another significant shift was in the 2012 modification by the Ministry of Education, sustaining the undergraduate degree titled Chinese Language to Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) within the discipline list of the department (O'Sullivan, 2020) evidencing the increasing worldwide interest in Chinese language teaching. The primary issue of this paper hinges on the intricate educational setting, which arises from a stark disparity in teaching and learning approaches, interchange styles, and cultural knowledge of the classroom with the native Chinese-speaking CSL instructors and their multicultural students (Zhang, 2001). The majority of students in CSL programs come from different countries and with varying cultures, which creates challenges stemming from differences in accent and tone as well as culturally defined viewpoints. In numerous instances, novice teachers lack the appropriate pre-service training addressing the cross-cultural complexities their foreign students bring to the classroom. Teaching requires intercultural understanding, and the absence of cultural competence is one of the most prominent barriers (Kruse, Rakha, & Calderone, 2018).

While Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) theories have been put forward in China, there is still a lack of research on the application of these principles by teachers in Chinese International Education (CIE). This gap could be due to the absence of a culturally relevant theoretical framework on CRT within China's culture and pedagogical context (Zhu, Peng, Hu, & Qiu, 2019). Although CRT has been broadly adopted to remedy issues of diversity and multiculturalism in the Western world, including the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, it is recognized as a guiding principle for bolstering Chinese international education (Hornbeck & Malin, 2023; Morrison, Rigney, Hattam, & Diplock, 2019; Swann, 2019) there is little literature on its adoption in CSL scenarios (Franco, Bottiani, & Bradshaw, 2023). This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating how pre-service teachers of Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) apply culturally responsive teaching methods. Through an examination of their experiences, perceptions, opportunities, and challenges, this study attempts to address the issue of developing effective pedagogical strategies for CSL education in the context of an evolving global society.

This manuscript offers a novel investigation of culturally responsive pedagogy in CSL teacher education within China. It integrates mixed methods to uncover both belief systems and classroom practices, filling a gap in non-Western contexts. It aims to provide a CSL-context-specific exploration of culturally responsive pedagogy. It begins with an introduction, followed by a literature review that examines CRT: its theories, cultural issues pertaining to CSL teaching, and current practices in cultivating cultural diversity among pre-service teachers. The methodology chapter describes the qualitative exploratory design of the study in detail, including the selection of participants, the collection of data through semi-structured interviews, and the analysis of data through thematic analysis. For the analysis, the findings focus on three areas: CRT teaching practices of pre-service CSL teachers, their perceptions toward CRT, and the enablers and constraints for implementing CRT in CSL. The discussion examines the findings in relation to other literature to understand the gap between theory and practice, advocating for a culturally responsive approach framework designed for CSL contexts. In the end, the paper argues for reforms in educational programs for teachers, policy, and practice, stating the study's limitations and recommending further research.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theoretical Foundations

#### 2.1.1. Creation and History of CRT

The emergence of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) was initially challenged as a novel approach to education that addressed the lack of cultural relevance in students' learning experiences covered by traditional

education. In her pioneering writing on culturally relevant pedagogy, Ladson-Billings (2001) and Ladson-Billings (2008) viewed education as a way of cultural validation, identity formation, and academic success, whereas the rigorously comprehensive method of Gay (2009) and Gay (2018) focused on daily personal integration of culture into any teaching process. Nonetheless, critics claim that these Western-developed frameworks cannot necessarily apply to non-Western settings without a radical adjustment.

CRT has found this development to depict persistent conflict between perfectionism and application. Although Howard (2021) and Rychly and Graves (2012) demonstrate that CRT has the potential to help bridge the gap in achievement, research has examined inconsistencies in its usage in educational settings. Recent studies indicate that a significant number of teachers adopt more superficial cultural changes rather than participatory pedagogic approaches (Harmon, 2012; Li, Mohamad Nasri, & Jamaludin, 2025). This discrepancy between theory and practice is especially acute in educational systems such as that in China, which is rapidly becoming global, with its traditional pedagogy clashing unwisely with the global needs of cultural responsiveness.

Modern research has developed a theoretical broadening of CRT in terms of cognitive and communicative aspects. The mechanism of cultural evolution described by Gabora and Saberi (2011) is the recursive memory and reviewed by Miton and DeDeo (2022), whereas the authors also analyzed how difficult tacit cultural knowledge is to transmit; such contributions in turn demand a look into these constituents of layers of complexity of communication that CRT has to operate within varied educational contexts.

Additional studies conducted in the past, uniquely focusing on the subject of CSL, show that there are considerable disparities between awareness and implementation. Adam-Comrie (2023) and Gong et al. (2022) argue that pre-service CSL teachers admit the value of CRT but have no confidence and preparation to use it in practice. As proved by Yao, Zhang, and Shen (2022) the number of research initiatives dedicated to foreigners studying the Chinese language in the world grows, but the system of its systematic education is at an early stage of development. This set of findings draws more attention to the fact that context-specific CRT implementations in the Chinese educational process are needed.

### ***2.1.2. The Fundamental Principles and Practices***

CRT has a number of principles that it uses in its application. According to Gay (2018) cultural identity affirmation, formulated by Gay as the core of CRT, entailed that a teacher should embrace the learners and their culture as assets of learning as opposed to barriers to learning.

The principle is also compatible with the strategy of contextualized learning (Ellerbrock, Cruz, Vásquez, & Howes, 2016), which places academic material in the cultural reference frames of students. Nonetheless, it can be applied differently depending on the context, whereby other teachers make it merely cultural festivals and not actual pedagogical change (Thomas & Berry III, 2019).

Recent CSL-specific studies indicate potential and shortcomings of CRT implementation. Gao (2021) reported effective implementation of cooperative learning instructions, cultural comparison lessons, and use of multimedia in Chinese language classrooms with higher student engagement using facts of cultural adaptation. Equally, intercultural communicative competence (NCSSFL-ACTFL, 2017) research confirms intercultural communicative competence as appropriate in meeting global objectives of international language teaching, which focuses on plurilingual and intercultural education as a fundamental aspect of the curriculum.

But there are still serious obstacles. The pre-service teachers have deficient access to reflection-in-action skills and adaptive planning, as these trainings are usually never completed, which leads to superficial cultural integration, in contrast to the transformative kind (Umutlu & Kim, 2020). According to recent research, institutional barriers, unmatched curricula, and insufficiency of resources still hinder the widespread application of CRT in CSL situations (Adam-Comrie, 2023).

## 2.2. Theoretical Frameworks

### 2.2.1. Social Constructivist Learning Theory

Critical theory of learning, social constructivist learning theory, is also a very important theory that offers critical theoretical reinforcement to CRT because of how learning is culturally mediated. Based on Vygotsky's model, the learning process is built in social interaction situations within the cultural contexts, which is in direct correspondence with the CRT-oriented idea. According to Norton and McKinney (2011), an effective acquisition of a second language should occur when certain learners are capable of positive cultural belonging at the same time they are also interacting with the target language communities, a view that adds credence to the additive rather than the subtractive approaches to bilingual education.

### 2.2.2. Combination with Second Language Acquisition

CRT intersecting the existing theories of SLA generates strong structures for CSL learning. The Social Identity Theory, a similar-focused learning concept, emphasizes the importance of cultural affiliations surrounding the success of acquisitions in learners. It describes the connection between cultural backgrounds and interference with learning instruments. Recent studies related to the CSL situation demonstrate that intercultural communicative competence develops more effectively when culturally responsive strategies are employed (Li, Chen, Ma, Zhang, & Huang, 2021).

## 2.3. Problems in CSL Teaching of Culture

### 2.3.1. Cultural Differences and Pedagogical Differences

There are special challenges in teaching Chinese as a Second Language due to a number of contradictions between the two cultures as well as synergies associated with the learning process. According to Deng and Wang (2022), the clashes between the Chinese tradition, which relies on memorization in instruction programs, and the Western creative-focused model result in student separation. These variations indicate greater polarities between collectivist and individualist schooling ideologies, and teachers need to find strategies to engage intricate cultural information flows in varied students.

The recent studies demonstrate that the problem of CSL contexts remains. Li, Yap, and Chew (2025) also discovered that enjoyment and desire to communicate between international CSL learners moderately depend on cultural background, which has implications related to pedagogical modification. According to their results, advanced knowledge of the impact of cultural factors on motivation and interest in learning a language is necessary for effective CSL teaching.

### 2.3.2. Disadvantages in Communication and Style of Learning

The lack of cross-cultural communication skills is not confined to the linguistic level but also includes the cultural interpretation of nonverbal communication and classroom interactions (Pavlovskaya, 2021). Recent investigations indicate that even seemingly less demanding activities, such as eye contact, have intricate cultural values, which require an educator to be more culturally sensitive. Clashed differences in the learning styles of individualists versus collectivists also do not contribute favorably to the instruction of CSL (Lew & Nelson, 2016) where the balance mode needs to be applied to support the varied needs of different learners.

## 2.4. Preparation of Pre-service Teachers to Cultural Diversity

The relationship between CRT and the Chinese teacher education programs is still in the rudimentary stages, yet there is a growing understanding of the value of its relationship. Taylor, Kumi-Yeboah, and Ringlaben (2016) and Qin and Villarreal (2018) reported the elements of multicultural education on a superficial level that do not offer effective diversity strategies. The newest studies verify these trends: a significant percentage of pre-service

teachers say that they are aware of the significance of cultural diversity, yet they would not mind acquiring tangible skills in responsive teaching methods (Singh & Akar, 2021).

Current research indicates that there is ongoing and partial development in the preparation of pre-service teachers. According to Zhao, Muhammad, Mustakim, Li, and Wu (2023), China was able to transition from a closed to an open system, shifting from skill-based to holistic teacher education models, supported by autonomous learning, an international perspective, and collaborative communication. Nevertheless, discrepancies still exist between idealistic policy goals and the actual state of policy implementation.

Evidence-based practices in the world entail efficient methods of designing culturally responsive language educators. The anti-racist syllabi introduced by Seo (2022) enhanced Korean pre-service English teachers' multicultural literacy, whereas an Indian study that was documented by Pokhrel (2022) resulted in positive fusion in the two-facet provisions in indigenous settings. These models prioritize culturally responsive teacher preparation in terms of mentorship, microteaching, service learning, and reflective practices as key attributes.

The European Center for Modern Languages' emphasis on plurilingual and intercultural education provides frameworks applicable to CSL contexts. Research demonstrates that active and diversified pedagogy, including cooperative learning strategies and cultural comparison projects, creates opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural engagement (Gao, 2021).

## ***2.5. Critical Synthesis and Research Gaps***

### ***2.5.1. Limited Applications in CSL Contexts***

Although there is a lot of literature concerning CRT, there is limited usage in CSL applications. The majority of the studies consider either English language teaching or general educational settings; few studies have been done on the adaptation of the principles of CRT according to Chinese linguistic and cultural factors. Considering the rapid growth of overseas pupils in Chinese institutions, this constitutes a major research gap, coupled with implications for excellence and equality in learning.

### ***2.5.2. Requirement of Frameworks that are Context-Specific***

The multicultural composition, comprised of 56 ethnic groups with varying language escapes, necessitates local CRT designs that do not rely on Western-derived designs. Gong et al. (2020) suggest culturally responsive pre-service teacher education, introducing the usage of relevant case studies, materials, and practices, which will allow them to establish actual and meaningful interactions with local cultural diversity and correspond to the national educational goals.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

### ***3.1. Research Design***

This research used a qualitative exploratory method to analyze pre-service Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) teachers' understanding and practice of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). The chosen methodology was qualitative because the phenomenon of cultural responsiveness is deep and multi-layered, requiring a rich interpretive narrative rather than quantitative analysis. The flexible nature of the research design enables the exploration of themes and patterns from participants' experiences and perspectives, which is particularly necessary given the sparse existing literature on CRT in CSL contexts (Franco et al., 2023).

With this framework, the study sought to capture the intricate details of pre-service CSL teachers' navigation and understanding of cultural pluralism in their teaching. A qualitative approach allowed the study to document students' interpretations and lived realities as they shaped professional identities in diverse educational settings. Moreover, this study design provided the opportunity to investigate the various aspects pertaining to the development of CRT competencies among pre-service teachers in Chinese contexts.

### *3.2. Participants and Sampling*

The sample comprised 20 pre-service CSL teachers pursuing a postgraduate program in Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL) at Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China, which is considered one of the top Chinese universities for preparing CSL teachers. The participants were recruited through a snowball sampling method, starting from identifying key informants in the TCSL program who subsequently passed along the names of other potential participants. This method worked particularly well for building rapport with participants and reaching people who had relevant experience from teaching in multicultural classrooms.

The sample population consisted of 15 females and 5 males, all pre-service teachers who were in the final year of the TCSL program and had at least one international teaching internship or practicum. Participants had a wide range of international exposure, with 12 of them having interned in East and Southeast Asian countries (mainly Thailand, Malaysia, and South Korea), 5 in some European countries (France, Germany, and Italy), and 3 in North American countries (the USA and Canada). The total duration of these international exposures ranged from 3 months to 1 year, enabling participants to experience different levels of multicultural educational settings.

The method of snowball sampling was especially appropriate for this study given the more advanced ethnographic focus as well as the attention that needed to be paid to relationship cultivation with participants regarding culture-sensitive dialogue pertaining to teaching frameworks. Furthermore, this method provided the needed access to participants who had varying experiences with international teaching, which further deepened the data from different cultural angles.

### *3.3. Data Collection*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted as the main method of data collection to balance focus and flexibility by exploring relevant issues that arose during the conversation. An interview protocol was created, guided by the research questions and prior research on CRT in the context of language teaching. The protocol had three main parts: (1) the participants' comprehension and definition of culturally responsive teaching, (2) their experiences of applying CRT frameworks during teaching practicums or internships, and (3) perceived enablers and constraints to the application of CRT principles in CSL teaching.

Every interview segment included open-ended questions aimed at capturing the nuanced insights of the participants. For instance, the questions in the first part included "Kindly explain what you mean by culturally responsive teaching" and "To what degree do you think a culturally informed approach is important in CSL teaching?" The second part contained questions such as "Share with me a particular lesson you taught where you attempted to use the culture of the students," and also "What difficulties did you experience with attempting to handle culture in your teaching?" The third part had questions such as, "What do you consider the most important factors for helping you acquire cultural responsiveness as a teacher?" and "What other aids or materials would make you more responsive to culture in your teaching?"

To enable their full expression and comfort, participants were interviewed in Mandarin Chinese. Key terms pertaining to CRT were defined in both Chinese and English to avert or mitigate conceptual misunderstanding. With the consent of the participants, all interviews were audio-recorded. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. For some participants who were on internship placements overseas, interviews were conducted in private meeting rooms at ABC University or using a secure video conferencing system.

### *3.4. Data Analysis*

The data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, allowing for the identification of patterns and themes across the dataset. The analysis process began with verbatim transcription of all interviews, followed by translation into English by the researcher, who is bilingual in Chinese and English. To ensure accuracy in translation, a second bilingual researcher reviewed a sample of the translations.

The coding process involved several stages: (1) familiarization with the data through multiple readings of transcripts, (2) generating initial codes using an open coding approach, (3) searching for themes by analyzing relationships between codes, (4) reviewing themes for internal coherence and distinctiveness, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final analysis with illustrative quotes. A basic qualitative data analysis software was used to facilitate the organization and analysis of the qualitative data.

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, several strategies were employed. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with five participants to verify that their perspectives were accurately represented. Peer debriefing with two colleagues familiar with CRT and CSL teaching helped to challenge assumptions and confirm the validity of the emerging themes. Additionally, an audit trail was maintained throughout the research process, documenting methodological decisions, analytical procedures, and reflective notes.

Figure 1 illustrates the research methodology adopted in the study.

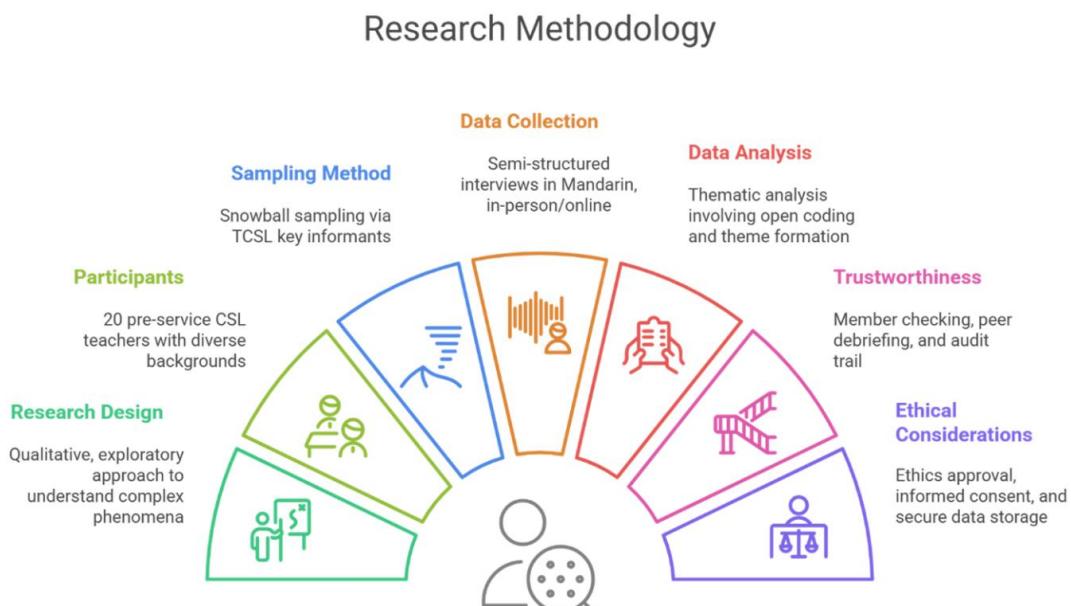


Figure 1. Research Methodology adopted in the study.

### 3.5. Ethical Considerations

Approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of ABC University prior to commencing the research study. Participants' consent was collected before data collection, with explanations provided regarding the study's aims, voluntary participation, confidentiality practices, and rights to withdraw at any time without repercussions. They were informed that their participation would not affect their academic credits or job prospects.

Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to ensure confidentiality, and identifying details were omitted from transcripts and research reports. Data were stored on password-encrypted devices, and only the research team had access to the raw data. Participants were allowed to read the transcripts of their interviews and had the option to modify parts of the text with which they did not agree.

To address researcher positionality, I used reflexive journaling throughout the entire research process. Having worked within both Chinese educational frameworks and international teaching contexts, I, as a researcher, considered the prevailing biases that could be linked to the contexts of data collection and interpretation. With the culturally defined biases I hold and the clear educational beliefs I possess, I endeavored to engage with the data in a manner that aligned with the biases associated with my participants rather than those that might distort the true meaning of the data. Regular discussions with research colleagues from other cultural and educational settings also aided the analysis process by bringing unexamined assumptions to light.

## 4. FINDINGS

This section details the data collected from the 20 pre-service Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) teachers' interview exercises concerning their understanding and practices of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). The findings are presented in three overarching themes: the contemporary practices of teaching CRT to pre-service CSL teachers, their attitudes towards CRT, and the enablers or barriers to its utilization in CSL classrooms.

### 4.1. Instructional Practices

The interviews uncovered disparities in the levels of CRT awareness and implementation among pre-service CSL teachers. The majority of the interviewees (16 out of 20) had some understanding of cultural responsiveness, even if it was superficial and not very well-informed. Only five participants provided descriptions of their teaching that contained some references to specific CRT concepts or frameworks.

Numerous participants seemed to take an intuitive approach in their attempts to be culturally responsive rather than a more methodical one. As one participant, Li Wei, explained:

I try to be sensitive to cultural differences in my classroom. However, I do not use a precise approach. I simply observe how my students respond, and when I see confusion or discomfort, I adjust my teaching accordingly.

Such sentiments were shared among other participants who considered their approach towards cultural responsiveness as "spontaneous," "natural," or "common sense," suggesting a lack of foundational pedagogical frameworks guiding their actions.

The findings suggest that participants who had completed longer international teaching internships (six months or more) appeared to have a more advanced critical awareness of CRT principles. These participants more frequently used phrases such as "cultural validation," "inclusive learning environments," or "culturally authentic materials" in relation to their instructional materials.

Even with differences in theoretical understanding, participants demonstrated a range of culturally responsive tactics that they applied in their CSL classrooms. All these strategies fit into four broad categories:

Comparative cultural analysis: 15 participants cited implementing direct comparison between Chinese culture and students' home cultures as a pedagogical strategy. This normally involved an analysis of cultural practices, values, and assumptions with regard to the use and comprehension of languages.

Scaffolded Communication: 12 participants spoke about the differences in their styles of communication with regard to culture and interaction patterns within the classroom. This involved giving students more cultural background to explain certain interactions, such as using direct questioning and providing feedback.

Culturally inclusive classroom management: 9 participants mentioned the use of classroom management techniques with regard to culture, such as how students are grouped, participation, and the perception of authority in the classroom.

Culturally contextualized language instruction: Only 7 participants indicated that they designed instruction by embedding language teaching and learning within culturally relevant contexts, facilitating students to use Chinese in situations that reflect their real-life experiences.

Wang Mei has shared an account of a year-long internship in Thailand, which provided a noteworthy account of contextualized language instruction within a culture:

While I was teaching food vocabulary to my Thai students, I didn't simply use Chinese examples like jiaozi and baozi. I developed teaching materials that had students compare Thai and Chinese cuisines, had students describe their favorite Thai dishes in Chinese, and set up a cultural exchange where students helped each other learn to cook simple dishes from both cultures in the target language.

Unfortunately, this type of cultural integration was the exception rather than the norm. Most respondents described a lighter touch approach using cultural facts or references to different cultures, but not fundamentally shifting their teaching style.

The integration of cultural components in language teaching differed significantly among participants. The most notable practices were:

**Cultural Anecdotes and Examples:** As reported by most participants, anecdotal accounts of culture were used in language teaching, at the very least, as illustrations. In practice, the vast majority of them (18 out of 20) reported using cultural anecdotes or examples in their lessons, but often these were included as afterthoughts and not as central elements of instruction.

**Culturally inclusive teaching materials:** 13 participants discussed employing teaching materials that contain cultural contexts or perspectives, although many admitted having difficulty locating such materials.

**Culture-based comparison exercises:** Eleven participants spoke about asking students to describe Chinese culture in comparison to their own cultures in the course of teaching the language.

**Culture-centered project work:** Only six participants indicated using sustained projects where students were encouraged to develop language skills through themed exploration of culture.

Here is an account from participant Zhang Lin regarding how she incorporated culture into a reading comprehension lesson.

While teaching a text on Chinese family relationships, I told my students to formulate their family trees and narrate them in Chinese. We compared how different cultures structure and refer to families before reading the text.

This approach enabled learners to associate newly introduced terminology with their personal lives and explain the important cultural aspects of the text.

All participants expressed some degree of interest in culture, although many reported using these approaches inconsistently or superficially. This point was highlighted by Liu Jian.

"I know I have to include more cultural content, but I tend to fixate on grammar and vocabulary too much. If cultural discussions happen, they happen at the end of the lesson, and more often than not, we run out of time, which is when I eliminate those first."

#### *4.2. Beliefs and Values*

The interviews uncovered significant differences in the understanding of pre-service CSL teachers' culturally responsive teaching. The answers provided by participants were generally grouped into three categories, as described below.

Nine respondents focused on elaborating ethnic and cultural differences or incorporating culture into the lessons. Most participant responses primarily emphasized cultural content rather than pedagogical actions. One participant noted, "CRT means teaching students about Chinese culture while respecting their own cultures."

Seven participants focused on relationships with people, defining CRT as forging good relationships with students from different backgrounds and creating a supportive class atmosphere. One participant mentioned, "It's about making students feel welcomed and understood regardless of where they come from."

Only four participants had more profound transformative notions of CRT, viewing it as an integrated approach in which all aspects of teaching, such as curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and classroom management, are systems with interaction and interdependence. Such participants referred to CRT as "a holistic teaching philosophy" or "a lens through which all teaching decisions should be filtered."

Remarkably, international exposure did appear to shape participants' understanding of CRT. Participants who had taught in more culturally peripheral locations relative to China tended to have more sophisticated definitions.

As an illustrative case, Chen Hui interned in Germany and provided the following feedback.

Culturally responsive teaching, as I understand it, goes beyond integrating culture into lessons. It is a holistic framework that analyzes culture's influence on every aspect, including curriculum development and evaluation. It entails understanding that teaching a language is always within its cultural framework and thus, instruction has to build on students' culture rather than erasing it. While all participants highlighted its significance to CSL teaching,

they had different takes on CRT. Nevertheless, the importance of CRT varied depending on the teaching context participants envisioned for their future professions. Teachers in culturally homogeneous countries (like China) tended to view CRT as important but not essential. As Sun Yi remarked.

"Cultural responsiveness is good to know about... I think language proficiency and engaging teaching methods might be more important in that situation."

On the other hand, participants who assumed teaching in more culturally homogenous settings paid greater attention to the need for cultural responsiveness. Zhao Wei, who had an internship at a multicultural school in Canada, remarked. After my internship experience, I realized that cultural responsiveness isn't optional—it's fundamental. Without it, you can't reach many of your students, regardless of how well you know their language or teaching practices. Most participants, 17 out of 20, expected that interest in Chinese taught as a second language would increase in the future due to rising global interest in learning Chinese around the world, along with the growing influence of China, and believed the importance of CRT in CSL teaching pedagogy would increase. These participants perceived cultural responsiveness concern as higher in regard to their professional development and future career prospects.

Overall, participants reported possessing a positive attitude towards cultural diversity. Nonetheless, the interviews captured different nuanced understandings regarding its impacts on teaching and learning. Three different perspectives emerged.

**Enrichment Perspective:** Cultural diversity was viewed as fundamentally enriching by eleven participants. For these participants, cultural diversity afforded opportunities for mutual learning, broadened horizons, and overall enrichment. These participants stressed the importance of multicultural classrooms for both the learners and the educators.

**Challenge Perspective:** Six participants focused on what they considered to be the myriad challenges that diversity posed to teachers, primarily obstacles related to communication, misunderstanding, and general classroom management.

**Integrated Perspective:** Three participants adopted a more moderate perspective while recognizing both the enriching elements and challenges accompanying cultural diversity. However, they emphasized the role of the teacher in managing the problem to ensure that the shortcomings do not outweigh the benefits.

Yang Min articulated the comments reflecting the enrichment perspective of "diversity as enrichment":

Having students from different backgrounds makes the classroom much more interesting and energetic. Everyone's perspective is different, which allows for purposeful interactions in Chinese. I have learned just as much from my students as they have from me.

In contrast, Huang Tao's comments represent the "diversity as challenge" perspective.

Differences in culture can create real issues in the classroom. Students of different backgrounds have different sets of assumptions and expectations about how to behave, learn, and interact with the teacher. Managing such differences consumes a lot of energy and often hinders the teaching pace.

In discussing their professional identity development, a majority of participants (16 out of 20) reported that experiencing cultural diversity positively impacted their growth as teachers by provoking self-reflection on their teaching practices and cultural biases. However, many remarked that managing cultural diversity was particularly challenging for new teachers with limited experience, which increased stress levels.

#### *4.3. Factors Promoting and Hindering CRT Implementation*

The participants who took part in the research indicated a number of factors that helped them to develop and implement culturally-responsive teaching practices.

**International teaching experiences:** Every participant who completed international teaching internships (20 out of 20) expressed the importance of these experiences in developing their cultural sensitivity and responsiveness.

The specific nature and cultural 'distance' of such experiences appeared to be particularly significant; those with longer internships in culturally distant areas seemed to learn the most.

**Mentor guidance:** Fourteen of the participants discussed having supportive mentors who are knowledgeable and practiced in cultural responsiveness, guiding them on how to work with culture. Effective mentorship involved active attention to the cultural dimensions of teaching, providing culturally relevant feedback on participants' practices, and prompting them to consider culture.

**Institutional support:** Eleven of the participants discussed the enabling institutional contexts that supported them in implementing CR as culture-responsive teaching. This included the administration's acceptance of the need for cultural responsiveness, the availability of appropriate materials, and the formation of professional development groups that addressed cultural aspects of teaching.

**Personal intercultural experiences:** Ten participants discussed personal encounters with diversity unrelated to teaching, such as friends from overseas, travel, or participation in exchange programs.

**Coursework on cultural diversity:** responses suggest that there are formal preparation gaps, as only Zhou Ling and seven others seemed to have integrated culturally responsive frameworks into their educator training coursework.

Zhou Ling spoke of how a number of things came together to aid her growth.

"The evolution of my understanding regarding cultural responsiveness was quite multifaceted. I began with my cross-cultural communication course, then deepened through my American roommate, and later, my teaching internship in South Korea truly brought it all into practice. It was very helpful to have a mentor who focused on culture; she guided me toward understanding my experiences and how to make them into something I could teach."

Participants also acknowledged a variety of barriers and problems when incorporating cultural aspects into teaching for community service learning (CSL).

**Lack of basic cultural knowledge:** Every individual (20) noted a gap in their understanding of students' cultures as an overwhelming barrier. Most participants highlighted the worry of being offensive or misinterpreting student behavior due to a lack of knowledge about the particular culture.

**Lack of sufficient training:** Eighteen participants cited a lack of adequate preparation in their teacher education courses. Many of them commented that it was mentioned but not elaborated on in the coursework, with no clear practical teaching applications.

**Time limitations:** Sixteen participants cited time-constraining factors as a primary impediment and noted that the cultural dimensions of learning required additional planning and, at times, teaching time.

**Lack of materials:** Fifteen of the participants cited the issue of searching for instructional resources that are multicultural or supportive of culturally responsive teaching as posing a challenge.

**Culturally responsive teaching and standardized assessments:** Twelve participants explained the struggle of balancing the use of culturally responsive teaching with preparing learners who are assessed using standardized tests that focus on language as content, void of contextual culture.

**Culturally responsive teaching vs. traditional Chinese pedagogy:** Ten participants remarked on the challenge of blending culturally responsive pedagogy with Chinese teaching methods that many learned through schooling, emphasizing the internalization of these methods.

Wu Chen spoke about this issue in detail.

There is sometimes a clash between what I know about responsive teaching and how I underwent training in Chinese. The traditional method emphasizes rote learning, the dominance of the instructor, and teaching the same material to all, which does not necessarily consider individual students' different cultural backgrounds. I seem to be stuck in the middle of these models of teaching.

The interviews uncover multiple contextual factors that guided respondents in the implementation of culturally relevant teaching methodologies.

Institutional priorities: Respondents' readiness to implement CRT was shaped by whether their institutions of teaching culture attended to cultural responsiveness or focused on scrambling benchmarks, assessments, and tests.

Student diversity levels: Respondents more frequently reported teaching with greater cultural responsiveness when working with more heterogeneous student populations, indicating that diversity perception impacts teaching.

Program structure: Respondents from more prescriptively taught programs with standardized curricular materials reported more limitations in the use of culturally responsive techniques than those with more freedom in their curricula.

Teaching environment: Participants' ability to deploy specific culturally responsive strategies was influenced by physical and temporal characteristics of the teaching environment, such as the layout of the room, class size, and class length.

Community context: Attitudes of the wider community towards culture, diversity, and international interaction shape respondents' comfort levels regarding the use of culturally responsive approaches.

Zhang Wei recalled how the setting of the institution influenced the teaching practices in his internship:

During the very first internship, the language center had quite a strong cultural exchange element. There was funding for cultural activities, flexible curriculum frameworks, and constant cross-cultural activities. I felt encouraged to devise lessons that were culturally responsive. In my second placement, everything centered around test prep. They squeezed in tons of grammar and vocabulary, and exploration was absent.

These results underscore the multifaceted relationship between personal, professional, and situational dynamics in the emerging teacher's model of culturally responsive teaching and practice as a pre-service CSL teacher. All participants appeared to understand the need for cultural responsiveness, but the integration of this awareness into teaching practice was hampered due to a multitude of factors, including, but not limited to, their understanding of the concepts, practical work, resources, and institutional confines. Table 1 presents the themes and sub-themes extracted from the study. Table 1 presents the themes and sub-themes extracted from the study.

**Table 1.** Themes and Sub-themes extracted from the interviews.

Theme	Subtheme or practice	No. of participants
Awareness & implementation	Basic awareness without theory	16
	Referenced CRT frameworks	5
	Spontaneous/Intuitive approaches	18
Classroom strategies	Comparative cultural analysis	15
	Scaffolded communication	12
	Inclusive classroom management	9
	Culturally contextualized instruction	7
Cultural integration	Anecdotes/Examples	18
	Diverse materials	13
	Cultural comparison tasks	11
	Project-based cultural learning	6

## 5. DISCUSSION

Our finding that although pre-service CSL teachers appreciate the importance of culturally relevant teaching, their comprehension seems to be more instinctive and shallower. This is consistent with prior studies suggesting that knowledge of CRT among pre-service teachers is often inadequate and unsystematic (Taylor et al., 2016; Umutlu & Kim, 2020). Many of the participants associated CRT with cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness, which is consistent with Gay's (2009) focus on cultural affirmation but fails to construct CRT as a framework for a guiding philosophy of teaching.

A few participants provided more advanced explanations of transformative conceptions of CRT aligned with Ladson-Billings (2001), defining the stance of culturally relevant pedagogy as a means for transforming the system. Such comprehensive understandings are mostly associated with having significant international teaching

experience, demonstrating the value of having experience in multiple contexts for the development of CRT understandings (Pokhrel, 2022; Seo, 2022).

The CSL teaching context presents specific difficulties that require pre-service teachers to perceive CRT in a particular way. Unlike English language contexts, CSL teaching is situated within a cultural and language framework that international learners may find more unfamiliar. Chinese teachers tend to be viewed as cultural gatekeepers, which, unfortunately, can lead to instructional approaches that are hierarchical or confined within traditional instructional paradigms (Lew & Nelson, 2016). Reference to culture by participants in the form of anecdotes or comparisons, while responsive, demonstrated attempts that were not deeply elaborate integration of cultural context into language teaching.

Also, as discussed by one of the participants, Wu Chen, institutional and sociocultural norms in China often focus on achieving uniform results rather than fostering culturally relatable pedagogy, creating conflict with the CRT principles. These contextual constraints highlight the need for CRT frameworks specifically designed to address CSL, instead of incorporating Western models in a simplistic manner.

The interviews indicate that experience with culture greatly impacts the development of teacher identity. Participants who interacted with students from different cultures or taught in multicultural contexts had greater awareness of their own cultural biases and teaching practices. This aligns with the CRT development in the literature, being closely interconnected with reflective practice and learning from experiences (Farinde-Wu, Glover, & Williams, 2017). Yet, in the absence of systematic training and organizational scaffolding, this identity evolution is erratic and opportunistic instead of being ingrained within a teacher education framework.

The disparity between CRT theory and practice was omnipresent. A few sophisticated participants appreciated the significance of cultural recognition as well as inclusion in classrooms, but few of them articulated such cultural appreciation in a planned teaching methodology. Most cultural approaches were merely addenda supplemental to the primary expression instruction and typically omitted during times of pressure. This supports (Rychly & Graves, 2012) claim that without integrating the application of CRT into daily teaching routines, there is a danger of the practice becoming tokenistic. Moreover, while some participants did have access to courses that focused on diversity, they were offered very basic content with little depth or practical application relevance, indicating a lack of coherence between teaching and the actual conditions in CSL classrooms (Singh & Akar, 2021).

Experiential learning emerged as a critical factor in participants' awareness of CRT. Those who had international teaching internships reported having a much deeper understanding of cultural responsiveness. These encounters enabled them to face classroom realities, implement different CRT approaches, and reflect-in-action. Such data affirm the importance of field-based experiences in teacher training, reinforcing what other scholars have reported that mentorship, cultural, and community engagement are essential in the development of CRT (Samuels, 2018; Seo, 2022). Such experiences were not consistently accessible, and their potential for change was further limited by a lack of follow-up support or structured reflection. Teacher education programs need to integrate authentic work experience opportunities into their curricula in order to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

As discussed earlier, there are various levels of CRT integration, and for CRT to be fully realized in CSL classrooms, it requires embedding it within the pedagogy instead of treating it as an ancillary tool. This includes infusing a cultural perspective into curricular frameworks, implementing language teaching that reflects the realities of students' lives, and accommodating socio-cultural hierarchies of engagement ascribed to power within the classroom (Gay, 2018; Lew & Nelson, 2016). Most participants, unfortunately, faced difficulties at this level of integration, grappling with processes of reconciling CRT and standard CSL approaches. This gap demonstrates the pedagogical models that are needed to show how cultural and linguistic instruction can be integrated meaningfully.

One of the most valuable insights of this study is that CRT frameworks need to be adjusted to fit the Chinese educational context. Even though the core tenets of CRT, including cultural validation, optimistic academic sufficiency, and open teaching, as well as community participation, still hold, their application is bound to be

contextual. The traditional Chinese approach to teaching is centered on hierarchical authority, rote memorization, and uniform results, which is at odds with the flexible, student-centered nature of CRT (Howard, 2021). Thus, the application of CRT in CSL teaching requires balancing these traditions with responsiveness and inclusivity. As Gong et al. (2020) stated, CRT's cultural site needs to demonstrate a balance between Chinese culture and the philosophy of education while still being receptive to pedagogical development from outside the region. They should also consider the cultural context of CSL teachers, who position themselves as both cultural representatives and language teachers.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS

### 6.1. For Teacher Education Programs

#### 6.1.1. Curriculum Recommendations

The results highlight the need for system-wide incorporation of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) approaches into the pedagogical theory classification system education programs in Chinese universities. The lectures are too broad in their scope and seldom link theories to real-life teaching practices. There is a need to include aspects like intercultural communication and cover inclusivity in curriculum design and construction as well as self-referential CSL case studies. CRT should not be taught in standalone lectures. Instead, it should be integrated into language instruction, classroom management, and other pedagogical courses.

#### 6.1.2. Pedagogical Approaches for CRT Training

Educational preparation programs need to integrate multisensory, contemplative, and collaborative instructional frameworks for the development of critical reflection thinking (CRT). Methods like microteaching and simulating multicultural peer dialogues, along with structured critical self-reflection, stimulate deeper meaning. CRT training should include supervised teaching practicums in diverse local and international cultures. Likewise, many participants articulated the value of guided mentorship during internships, stressing the need for pre-service teachers to navigate the theories within CRT for practice through dedicated mentorship from seasoned CRT practitioners.

#### 6.1.3. Assessment of Cultural Competence

Evaluation of pre-service educators' cultural competence levels should include more than just recalling facts. It should also focus on critical thinking, practical application, and development over time. Such tools include portfolio assessment, reflective journals, planning lessons from cultural perspectives, and implementing performance evaluations in real and diverse settings. These assessments should be developmental and not summative because they aim to support responsiveness rather than hinder understanding and growth at later stages.

### 6.2. For Educational Policy

#### 6.2.1. National Standards for CSL Teacher Preparation

For CRT principles to be effectively integrated within CSL teacher education, as a matter of priority, policies at the national level must require the incorporation of cultural competence within teacher preparation licensure and accreditation frameworks. These policies should include CRT, considering the international makeup of CSL students. These policies would enable CSL teacher education to embrace international standards of multicultural education and address institutional policy coherence.

#### 6.2.2. Support Systems for Pre-Service Teachers

Policymaking in this context should aim at the development of comprehensive support frameworks for educators in training as they engage with diverse classrooms. These may include systematic mentorships,

sociocultural exchange programs, scholarships for volunteer teaching placements abroad, and membership in professional development communities. Without such support, the construction of deep CRT capacity is likely to be ill-conceived, especially given prevailing routines related to standardized testing and rigid instructional practices.

### ***6.2.3. Professional Development Initiatives***

Such initiatives should be designed to deepen CRT at the international, national, and regional levels. These activities should be sponsored by the governmental bodies responsible for education in partnership with the relevant stakeholders in terms of workshops, certification, and collaborative CRT research projects in CSL. Additionally, programs should be intended for lecturers new to CSL teaching and irrespective of the levels of their teaching engagements, whether from or in-country or abroad.

## ***6.3. For CSL Classroom Practice***

### ***6.3.1. Practical Strategies for Implementing CRT***

CSL instructors should start with planning and scheduling lessons that incorporate cultural elements. Descriptive projects, narrative and culturally centered storytelling, and cooperative learning enable the personalization of language acquisition. Moreover, instructors should learn how to modify their communication and interaction styles to align with the cultural norms of their students, including those related to turn-taking, feedback, body language, and other non-verbal behaviors.

### ***6.3.2. Resources and Materials Development***

The availability of materials that foster multiculturalism and inclusivity still poses a major challenge. Schools and educators should collaboratively design databases of cultural texts, videos, and CSL teaching units that cater to the diversity of learners. Such materials need to move beyond cultural “snapshots” to genuinely grapple with the multifaceted issues of self-identity, empathy, and intercultural analysis. The inclusion of content created by the students and tasks involving the sharing of culture can further enhance inclusivity and ownership of the learning process.

### ***6.3.3. Creating Inclusive Learning Environments***

To support inclusive classrooms, educators need to create environments that appreciate all students' identities. This involves bringing students' cultures into classroom conversations, honoring different ways of knowing, and demonstrating appreciation for cultural diversity. Inclusive approaches to classroom management, such as varied and equitable participation frameworks, student choice in assignments, and flexible grouping, all serve to mitigate power differentials and encourage participation from all learners.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

The research article reviewed the perceptions and practices of second language Chinese teachers, who were pre-service teachers, of culturally responsive teaching (CRT). Although the participants accepted the relevance of CRT, the majority of them had minimal knowledge of the concept. The strategies for implementation differed, with the more proactive being those who had international exposure or served as mentors. Problems such as poor training, institutional constraints, and the absence of resources remain to hinder the all-encompassing integration of CRT in classrooms that use CSL. The scholar adds to the developing literature on the use of CRT in non-Western language instruction, reporting on pre-service teacher conceptions of and implementation of CRT, as well as structural, pedagogical, and contextual conditions affecting results. It presents an integration model that is culturally relevant to the changing educational environment in China.

There are various limitations that impact generalizability. The sample of only twenty participants is constraining/statistically powerless and less representative. The unitary design does not allow transferability to a different institutional environment. Self-reported data can give rise to biases in response, and a cross-sectional design does not allow investigation of changes in CRT implementation over time. Among the reported and actual practices, some gaps are not covered due to the lack of classroom observations.

Future research projects using longitudinal designs following teachers after education until professional practice should be utilized. Multisite designs employing observations and surveys across various universities and regions are recommended. Future research involving intervention studies that evaluate specific CRT training programs and studies focused on student opinions would contribute to a better understanding of effective implementation strategies.

The CSL educators are increasingly acting as intercultural brokers with the emerging influence that the Chinese are exerting on the world. Culturally responsive teaching is the ethical choice that will help every student receive empowering and relevant educational opportunities. Truly implementing CRT in CSL involves strategic teacher education, an explicit policy framework, and the involvement of inclusive classroom design.

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