



DESIGNING CULTURALLY RELEVANT SPEAKING TOPICS TO FOSTER INTRINSIC MOTIVATION IN MULTICULTURAL EFL CLASSROOMS

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Article history:		Abstract:
Received:	28 th September 2025	This theory paper explores how culturally relevant speaking topics can enhance intrinsic motivation in multicultural university English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) classes. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), it argues that topic design is not a neutral choice but a powerful pedagogical lever that can support or thwart students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When speaking tasks are grounded in learners' cultural experiences and community concerns, they provide meaningful reasons to communicate, strengthen the sense of ownership over English, and create conditions for successful participation. The paper connects SDT with work on culturally responsive teaching, funds of knowledge, and pluricultural competence, and proposes an integrative model linking topic relevance, need satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, and readiness to speak. Concrete design principles are offered for CEFR B2–B2+ speaking activities such as mini-presentations, debates, and collaborative projects. While no empirical data are presented, the article formulates testable propositions for future research and offers a practical conceptual framework for teachers and program designers working in diverse EFL settings.
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In many university EFL classrooms, students sit quietly during speaking activities even when they have studied English for years. Teachers often attribute this silence to shyness or lack of confidence, but the source of the problem frequently lies in the design of the tasks themselves. Topics may be distant from learners' lives, framed around textbook characters or generic situations with little connection to students' identities, communities, or concerns. When learners do not see why a task matters, it is difficult for them to invest attention, emotion, and effort. From a motivational perspective, topic choice is therefore not a cosmetic detail but a central design decision.

This article examines culturally relevant speaking topics through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which explains why students engage more deeply when three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are satisfied (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). It focuses on multicultural university EFL settings where students bring diverse linguistic and cultural repertoires. The argument is that culturally responsive topic design can support all three needs, thereby fostering intrinsic motivation and willingness to speak. The paper is conceptual rather than empirical, but it aims to be concrete enough to guide classroom practice and future studies.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Self-Determination Theory and Intrinsic Motivation

SDT distinguishes between different qualities of motivation rather than simply 'more' or 'less' motivation. When students act out of fear of punishment or desire for external rewards, their motivation is controlled and fragile. When they act because they find the activity interesting or personally meaningful, their motivation is more self-determined and sustainable (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Three basic psychological needs support this kind of motivation: autonomy (experiencing a sense of choice and ownership), competence (feeling capable of meeting challenges), and relatedness (feeling cared for and connected to others). Environments that support these needs tend to foster intrinsic motivation; environments that frustrate them tend to undermine it.

In EFL speaking classes, need-supportive conditions might include meaningful choices in topics or roles (autonomy), clear success criteria and scaffolding (competence), and a respectful classroom climate where all voices are invited (relatedness). Topic design can either reinforce or weaken each of these conditions. A highly controlled topic that bears no relation to students' lives may feel imposed and irrelevant, whereas a culturally connected topic with structured choice can invite ownership and engagement.

Culturally Responsive Teaching and Funds of Knowledge

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) positions students' cultural experiences as resources for learning rather than obstacles to be overcome (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). It involves high academic expectations, caring relationships, and curricula that draw on students' 'funds of knowledge'—the skills, practices, and understandings developed in households and communities (Moll et al., 1992; González et al., 2005). In language education, CRT implies tasks that invite students to share local perspectives, tell their own stories, and address real issues in their social worlds.

When speaking topics reflect only distant cultures or standardized textbook situations, they implicitly communicate that students' own experiences are secondary or invisible. Culturally relevant topics reverse this pattern: they position learners as experts on aspects of their own lives, while still challenging them to use English in sophisticated ways. This shift can have important motivational effects, which SDT helps to articulate.

Pluricultural Competence and CEFR B2–B2+

The CEFR Companion Volume places growing emphasis on plurilingual and pluricultural competence, highlighting learners' ability to mediate between perspectives and navigate culturally diverse interactions (Council of Europe, 2020). At B2–B2+, learners are expected to sustain discussions, defend viewpoints, and explain cultural references that may be unfamiliar to interlocutors. Such descriptors align naturally with CRT: when topics are grounded in learners' cultural realities, they create authentic opportunities to practice these skills and make pluricultural competence visible in assessment.

HOW CULTURALLY RELEVANT TOPICS SUPPORT PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS

Autonomy: Meaningful Choice and Voice

Autonomy in SDT does not mean doing whatever one wishes; it means experiencing one's actions as self-endorsed and meaningful. Topic design can support autonomy when students are given structured options that connect with their interests and identities. For example, a speaking task might ask students to choose one local issue that matters to them—such as public transport, environmental concerns, or student employment—and prepare a short persuasive talk about it. Within a clear academic frame, students exercise real choice about what they speak about and how they position themselves. This is different from 'choose any topic' freedom, which can be overwhelming and unfocused.

Culturally relevant topics also give students a chance to bring their languages, traditions, and community knowledge into English. Being allowed to draw on these resources signals that their backgrounds are respected, which can make the task feel more authentic and less like an empty exercise. When learners feel that speaking tasks allow them to say something that matters, they are more likely to experience intrinsic interest and to invest effort even when the language demands are high.

Competence: Familiar Content, New Language

Competence involves feeling capable of meeting challenges with effort and support. In speaking tasks, two kinds of difficulty interact: generating ideas and formulating them in English. When topics are culturally distant or unfamiliar, learners must struggle on both fronts at once. Culturally relevant topics reduce the cognitive load of idea generation by starting from content that learners already know well. They still need to find appropriate English expressions, but they are not searching for both ideas and language at the same time.

This arrangement creates good conditions for scaffolding. Teachers can provide lexical and discourse support that builds on familiar ideas—for example, useful phrases for comparing traditions, describing local problems, or explaining a cultural practice. As learners experience small successes in expressing complex, personally meaningful content, their speaking self-efficacy can grow (Bandura, 1997). Clear 'can-do' statements and rubrics aligned with CEFR B2–B2+ descriptors make progress visible and further reinforce competence beliefs.

Relatedness: Shared Stories and Classroom Community

Relatedness refers to feeling connected to others and valued as a member of a group. Culturally relevant topics can strengthen relatedness by creating spaces for students to share stories, compare perspectives, and discover common concerns. When learners speak about their own communities and listen to peers doing the same, they often find unexpected overlap as well as respectful difference. Carefully facilitated discussion around these topics can build a classroom culture of curiosity and empathy rather than judgment.

Teacher discourse plays a crucial role here. Simple 'talk moves'—such as inviting quieter students, probing for elaboration, and connecting contributions—signal that every voice is worth hearing. When learners trust that their stories will be treated seriously and not mocked or trivialized, they are more willing to take the interpersonal risks involved in speaking a foreign language (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Reeve, 2012).

An Integrative SDT Model for Topic Design

Bringing these strands together, the proposed model suggests that culturally relevant speaking topics influence intrinsic motivation primarily by shaping need satisfaction. Topic design is treated as a set of choices about (a) whose knowledge and experiences are centered, (b) what kinds of choices students have, (c) how much scaffolding is provided, and (d) how classroom norms frame participation. When topics are aligned with students' cultural repertoires, coupled with meaningful choice and appropriate support, they can increase autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These need satisfactions, in turn, should be associated with higher intrinsic motivation and greater willingness to initiate and sustain speaking in English.

The model also predicts that topic relevance will interact with other design elements. For example, making topics culturally relevant without providing scaffolding may raise interest but also anxiety, while scaffolding around

culturally distant topics may still feel empty and controlling. The strongest effects on motivation are expected when relevance, scaffolding, and supportive climate are aligned.

Design Principles for CEFR B2–B2+ Speaking Tasks

On the basis of this model, several design principles can be proposed for speaking activities at the B2–B2+ level in multicultural EFL settings:

1. Start from students' worlds. Use short surveys or informal discussions to identify issues, practices, and events that students care about, then frame tasks that invite them to explore these in English.
2. Offer disciplined choice. Provide a limited number of focused topic options or roles so that students experience real autonomy without being overwhelmed.
3. Make success criteria transparent. Translate CEFR descriptors into learner-friendly 'can-do' statements and share them before tasks.
4. Plan scaffolding and fading. Begin with strong support—prompt banks, models, rehearsal time—and gradually remove these supports as confidence grows.
5. Teach interactional language. Provide formulaic expressions for inviting opinions, agreeing and disagreeing, asking for clarification, and building on others' ideas.
6. Attend to emotional safety. Establish norms for listening and disagreement; intervene quickly if disrespectful comments arise.

Propositions for Future Research

Although this paper is conceptual, it points to several testable propositions:

- P1. Classes that use culturally relevant topics with structured choice will report higher satisfaction of autonomy needs than classes with fixed, culturally distant topics.
- P2. Culturally relevant topics combined with explicit scaffolding of language will be associated with higher perceived speaking competence and self-efficacy.
- P3. Opportunities to share and compare personal and community stories will predict higher relatedness and willingness to communicate.
- P4. Autonomy, competence, and relatedness will each mediate the relationship between topic design and intrinsic motivation.
- P5. The combination of culturally relevant topics, scaffolding, and supportive climate will yield stronger gains in intrinsic motivation than any of these elements alone.

CONCLUSION

Topic design is often treated as a matter of taste or textbook convenience, but from an SDT perspective it is a central tool for shaping motivation. In multicultural university EFL settings, culturally relevant speaking topics offer a concrete way to support autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thereby fostering intrinsic motivation and willingness to speak. By aligning topic choices with students' lives and with CEFR B2–B2+ expectations, teachers and program designers can create learning environments that are both demanding and deeply engaging. Future empirical studies can build on the propositions outlined here to test and refine this conceptual model.

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