

Teaching Through the CARE² Model: Exploring How an Instructional Design Framework Can Shape International Learners' Experiences

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences provided by 943 international business learners from Nepal, Bangladesh, and India enrolled in three courses at a private institution in Denmark, examining how instructional design influences engagement, learning, and meaning-making. Using a basic interpretive qualitative research design, data were collected through a qualitative survey with open-ended questions and systematic classroom observations, capturing learners' reflections and real-time behaviors. The researchers approached the data from an etic perspective, while striving to honor participants' voices, focusing on both successes and challenges in international learning experiences. Data analysis employed a deductive thematic approach, guided by the Fujii & Perez CARE² framework, which emphasizes Culture, Collaboration, Agency, Agility, Relevance, Repetition, Engagement, and Evaluation. Findings indicate that learners in the CARE²-informed intervention group experienced culturally supportive environments, meaningful collaboration, opportunities for agency, relevant and repeated content, and high engagement reinforced by ongoing evaluation. Deductive analysis revealed the elements most salient to learners, demonstrating the critical value of learner-centered, culturally responsive instructional design in diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: instructional design, culture, design and development model, multicultural learners, care2model

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Introduction

Instructional design is a subfield of education focused on creating systematic, research-informed learning experiences. Foundational models such as ADDIE, Dick and Carey, and Merrill's First Principles emphasize objective-driven instruction, structured sequencing, and assessment alignment to improve learning effectiveness (Branch & Varank, 2009; Dick et al., 2001; Merrill, 2007). However, these models were largely developed within Western educational contexts and often assume universal applicability, potentially overlooking the cultural dimensions that shape how international learners engage with instruction (Edmundson, 2007; Henderson, 2007). Cultural norms can influence communication, motivation, help-seeking, and academic performance, while international learners may also face challenges related to language, instructional expectations, and institutional power dynamics (Hofstede, 2021; Jones et al., 2020).

Scholars have increasingly emphasized culturally responsive pedagogy, including approaches that connect instruction to learners' cultural backgrounds and experiences (Howard, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Although frameworks such as Culturally Sustaining Instructional Design and WisCom incorporate cultural responsiveness into instructional design (Gunawardena et al., 2018; Smith & Staudt Willet, 2023), these models do not fully integrate relational, evaluative, co-creative, and adaptive dimensions across the design process. In response, the Fujii and Perez CARE² model proposes a more holistic framework centered on eight constructs: culture, collaboration, agency, agility, relevance, repetition, engagement, and evaluation (Fujii & Perez, 2025). By integrating cultural and pedagogical dimensions throughout the design process, CARE² aims to support more inclusive and contextually aligned learning experiences for international and culturally diverse learners.

Guided by the CARE² framework, this study examined how international learners experienced culturally responsive instructional design compared to more traditional instructional approaches. Using a basic interpretive qualitative design, the study focused on how learners described and interpreted their experiences across three courses (Merriam et al., 2025). By foregrounding learner narratives, the study explored whether CARE²-related constructs emerged naturally within student reflections and how culturally responsive strategies shaped engagement, motivation, and overall learning experiences. The study was guided by the following research question: In what ways do international students, without direct prompting, describe the influence of culturally responsive instructional strategies (CARE²) on their learning experiences compared to groups not using culturally responsive strategies?

Methodology

This study uses a basic interpretive qualitative research design, which seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences within specific contexts (Merriam et al., 2025). This approach is well-suited for examining international students' learning experiences, as it prioritizes understanding the meanings participants assign to instructional design practices and course interactions (Ary et al., 2018). Basic interpretive research operates under the assumption that multiple perspectives exist and that each participant's experience is shaped by their unique context, background, and interactions (Merriam et al., 2025).

Research Setting & Participants

This study examined three learning groups taught by different instructors using identical course content. One group implemented the CARE² model, while the other two followed traditional instructional design approaches. Focusing on learners' experiences, the study explored how instructional design and pedagogy shaped engagement, understanding, and meaning-making through a participant-centered, interpretive analysis. Participants included N = 943 international learners from Nepal, Bangladesh, and India enrolled at a private business college in Denmark, allowing the study to capture both shared and distinct instructional experiences across the three courses.

Learning Group Details

There were three instructors involved in this study, each bringing a distinct background and teaching style to their respective learning sessions, despite using identical curriculum content (refer to Table 1).

Table 1
Learning Group Details

Group	Classroom Pedagogy	Learning Tools
Learning Group 1	Constructivist	LMS, Kahoot
Learning Group 2	Instructivist	LMS, Kahoot
Learning Group 3	Instructivist	LMS

Instruments & Data Collection

This study developed two instruments to examine learners' perceptions and experiences: a qualitative survey and classroom observations. To capture international learners' experiences across the three courses, a qualitative survey with open-ended questions was designed specifically for this study to elicit learners' perceptions, reflections, and interpretations of their educational experiences (Braun et al., 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam et al., 2025). Survey questions were reviewed by instructional design experts and faculty to ensure alignment with the study objectives, strengthen content validity, reduce ambiguity, and minimize leading language (Guest et al., 2011; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). The final survey was administered near the end of the semester to allow learners to reflect on their overall experiences.

Although deductive qualitative studies often use direct prompting to elicit responses aligned with predefined constructs, this study intentionally combined a deductive analytical framework with indirect prompting during data collection (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Patton, 2015). Participants were not directly asked about CARE² constructs such as culture, collaboration, agency, agility, relevance, repetition, engagement, or evaluation. Instead, broad experiential questions invited learners to describe their experiences in their own terms, consistent with phenomenological and interpretative traditions that prioritize participant meaning-making (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Smith & Staudt Willet, 2023). This approach enabled the study to examine whether CARE²-related constructs emerged naturally in learner reflections, thereby

strengthening comparative interpretation and reducing construct-leading, response priming, and confirmatory bias during data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Patton, 2015).

Data Analysis Procedures & Rigor

The study employed a three-stage analytical process: machine learning–assisted preprocessing, human-led thematic analysis, and AI-supported validation. Preprocessing included text cleaning, normalization, tokenization, and automated dataset structuring. Following preprocessing, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework was used to examine the data across each CARE² dimension. AI-supported validation served as a secondary layer to refine the coding schema and improve internal consistency; however, all AI outputs were critically evaluated, and final interpretive decisions remained with the researchers to preserve contextual nuance and validity.

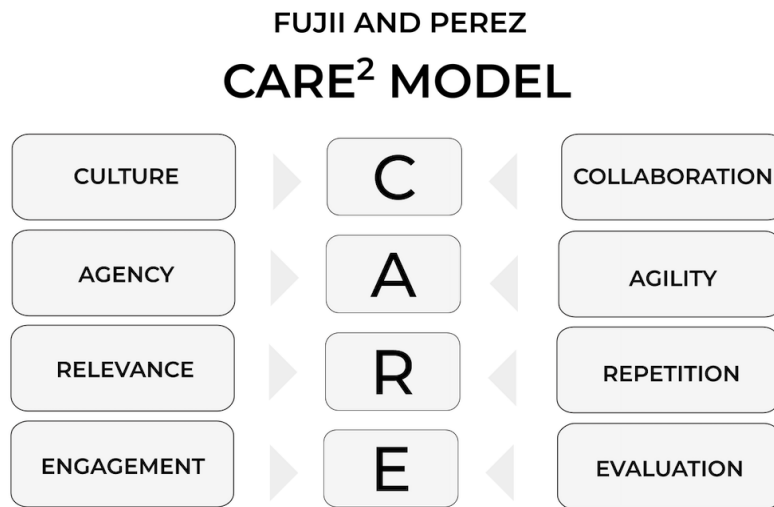
Conceptual Framework

The findings are presented narratively to highlight themes and sub-themes identified through the data analysis. Drawing on qualitative traditions that use metaphors to illuminate participant experiences (Perez, 2022; Smith et al., 2023), this study examined learners’ perceptions through the Fujii and Perez CARE² model: Culture, Collaboration, Agency, Agility, Relevance, Repetition, Engagement, and Evaluation. Grounded in learning and instructional design theory, CARE² served as a flexible framework for understanding how instructional design decisions shaped learners’ engagement, participation, and meaning-making across the three courses.

Table 2
CARE² Model Constructs

Construct	Details
Culture	This refers to the interconnections between home, host, and classroom environments that shape the classroom experience.
Collaboration	This refers to fostering learning through peer-to-peer teamwork and instructor support.
Agency	This refers to empowering learners to take ownership of their learning and actions.
Agility	This refers to the instructor’s ability to adapt plans, strategies, and content in response to learner needs.
Relevance	This refers to the use of contextualized, culturally-relevant content that connects course materials to learners' home cultures to support real-world application.
Repetition	This refers to the use of sequential or spaced review to revisit key concepts over time to support longer-term knowledge retention.
Engagement	This refers to the use of interactive activities, tasks, interaction, and elements of humor or excitement to maintain learners’ attention and promote active participation.
Evaluation	This refers to ongoing evaluation, feedback, and check-in to support and monitor learners' knowledge and needs, as well as formal, summative evaluation.

Figure 1
Fujii & Perez CARE² Model



Findings

The findings are sectioned by each of the CARE² Model constructs. Before presenting the findings by section, the following tables highlight the prevalence of comments for each group as well as the thematic interpretations by model dimension and learning group (refer to Table 3 and Table 4).

Table 3
CARE² Model Comment Mapping by Overall Prevalence and Learning Groups

Prevalence Rank	Model Dimensions	Total Comments	Total % Prevalence	LG1 Total Comments	LG2 Total Comments	LG3 Total Comments
1	Culture	295	48%	223	61	11
2	Evaluation	102	18%	82	0	20
3	Agility	66	8%	37	29	0
4	Engagement	59	6%	27	9	23
6	Collaboration	36	5%	18	9	9
5	Relevance	21	4%	21	0	0
7	Agency	12	3%	12	0	0
8	Repetition	7	1%	5	2	0

Table 4*CARE² Model Thematic Meaning Mapping by Learning Groups*

Model Dimension	Groups	Themes	Details	Representative Quotes
Culture	Learning Group 1	Similar to Home Culture Learning	Some learners positioned their prior educational experiences as a lens for interpreting teaching practices.	<i>"Instructor used the same style of teaching as in my home country."</i>
		Language Fluency	Some learners emphasized language proficiency as an important element of effective teaching.	<i>"[Instructor name] is one of the best English speakers in [institution name]."</i>
		Classroom Culture	Broader classroom culture emerged in the data as a meaningful theme focused on the instructor and sense of welcomeness.	<i>"Our instructor has a good teaching demeanor and is also friendly and welcoming."</i>
	Learning Group 2	Different from Home Culture Learning	Some learners positioned their prior educational experiences as a lens for interpreting teaching practices.	<i>"The course and teaching methods are different here, and we are not clear about what to do."</i>
		Classroom Culture Dynamics	Learning challenges reflected learners' perceptions of the classroom culture and instructor demeanor.	<i>"[instructor name] should be more friendly to improve the learning."</i>
	Learning Group 3	Classroom Culture Dynamics	Learning challenges reflected learners' perceptions of the classroom culture and instructor demeanor.	<i>"The instructors' attitude makes it difficult to learn from them."</i>
Collaboration	Learning Group 1	Instructor Approachability	Some learners viewed their instructor's approachability as salient to their learning experience	<i>"[tutor name] is approachable and knowledgeable, but also kind, helpful and patient."</i>
		Welcoming Peer Experiences	Having welcoming and supportive peers was meaningful for some learners	<i>"I always love the group work because my team helped me with problems."</i>
	Learning Group 2	Instructor Support	Some leaders repeatedly highlighted the role of their instructor in providing in-class support.	<i>"The instructor helped us to find more information."</i>

	Learning Group 3	Instructor Support	Some learners indicated that they valued interaction and support from their instructor.	<i>"We got assistance with the content in the class, which was good."</i>
Agency	Learning Group 1	Learning Autonomy	Learners highlight their ability to focus on studying or working on the tasks they felt would help them the most in preparing for their assessment.	<i>"I like that we were always given choices in how we wanted to study or what we wanted to focus on to prep for the test."</i>
		Supporting Technology in the Classroom	Learners valued having agency in choosing technological devices to support their learning.	<i>"The instructor gave us options to either focus on the course learning management system and assessments using our computers or phones."</i>
	Learning Group 2	No data	None	None
	Learning Group 3	No data	None	None
Agility	Learning Group 1	Timely and Adaptive Support	Some learners described the importance of receiving timely support to help with specific tasks.	<i>"I always got quick, clear answers, making it easier to understand."</i>
		Personalized Support	Some learners noted the personalized support the instructor provided, which they found meaningful.	<i>"I show my ongoing assessment to [instructor name] and they always helped me figure out the problems."</i>
	Learning Group 2	Timely Support	Some learners noted the instructor's timely and responsive support to address learners' immediate needs.	<i>"I got quick help and good suggestions for my situation."</i>
	Learning Group 3	No data	None	None
Relevance	Learning Group 1	Real-World Examples	Some learners felt the learning sessions helped offer real-world practice.	<i>"Clear explanations and practical examples that relate to real-world business scenarios."</i>
		Domain-Relevant Examples	Some learners felt the learning sessions connected theory to what goes on in their field.	<i>"Especially appreciated the real-world examples and how they tied theory to practice."</i>
		Fun Activities	Some learners mentioned how they liked the gamified activities.	<i>"Learning all with the fun games like Kahoot made my semester more amazing."</i>

	Learning Group 2	No data	None	None
	Learning Group 3	No data	None	None
Repetition	Learning Group 1	In-Class Review	Some learners highlighted the value they gained from revisiting key course concepts.	<i>"The class is a good way to recap the things we have learned."</i>
	Learning Group 2	Learning Reminders	Some learners valued reminders of what was learned previously.	<i>"Helped me to remind and revise me about what I learned."</i>
	Learning Group 3	No data	None	None
Engagement	Learning Group 1	Interesting Content	Some experiences were shaped by learner's interest in the content.	<i>"These sessions keep us interested and involved."</i>
		Interactive Classroom	Some learners highlighted how they valued classroom discussion.	<i>"Interactive discussions make the learning more engaging."</i>
		Safe-Space for Questions	A few learners described how the classroom was a safe space to engage and ask questions.	<i>"I feel comfortable asking questions in class."</i>
	Learning Group 2	Informative Content	Some learners described their experiences in response to the informative classroom content.	<i>"The content was taught in an interesting way."</i>
	Learning Group 3	Felt Heard	Some learners highlighted that they felt heard by their instructor.	<i>"I felt heard and supported."</i>
		Quantity of Learning	A few learners shared that they felt their learning experience was valuable because of the amount of learning.	<i>"I learned so many things."</i>
Evaluation	Learning Group 1	Helpful Instructor Feedback for Assessment	Some learners referenced the role of feedback in aiding their experiences.	<i>"Got assistance and feedback on the assessments."</i>
		Value Formative Assessment Technology	A few learners remarked on the technology used to support assessment prep.	<i>"I liked the Kahoot. It helped a lot for practicing."</i>
	Learning Group 2	No data	None	None

	Learning Group 3	Value Knowledge Gap Identification	A few learners highlighted that they felt the instructor helped them see where they were strong and weak in their knowledge.	<i>"I'm able to know about my weakness. It helps me to understand my assessment."</i>
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Discussion

This section highlights the results and their interpretation by dimension. The results, overall, by the highest recorded prevalence by a single learning group show that among the eight dimensions, Culture was described in most detail by learners overall, followed by evaluation, agility, engagement, relevance, collaboration, agency, and lastly, repetition (refer to Table 3).

Culture and Collaboration

Clear differences emerged across the three learning groups regarding culture and collaboration. Learning Group 1 demonstrated strong cultural reflections, with learners describing welcoming instructional environments, supportive communication, and meaningful peer-to-peer and learner-to-instructor collaboration. In contrast, Learning Group 2 contained limited cultural reflections and mixed perceptions of the classroom climate, including instructor strictness and reduced approachability, as well as restricted collaboration due to "no talking" expectations. Learning Group 3 included little direct reflection on culture, although observational data suggested an authoritarian, discipline-focused environment with limited peer interaction and primarily instructor-led support.

Overall, the findings suggest that classroom culture is closely associated with collaborative learning opportunities. Learning Group 1, the most culturally supportive environment, also demonstrated the strongest collaboration, reinforcing sociocultural perspectives emphasizing the role of social interaction in learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). Conversely, Learning Groups 2 and 3 illustrated how restrictive or authoritarian classroom climates can suppress collaboration and participation (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). These findings indicate collaboration is more likely to flourish in instructional environments characterized by openness, interaction, and social support.

Agency and Agility

Patterns across the data revealed notable differences in learner agency and instructor agility. Learning Group 1 demonstrated strong learner agency, with observations showing learners had autonomy in how they engaged with technology and learning activities. This was paired with high instructional agility, as the instructor provided timely, adaptive support throughout the learning process. In contrast, Learning Groups 2 and 3 showed limited evidence of learner agency, suggesting more constrained instructional environments where learners may not have perceived themselves as active decision-makers or co-creators. Similarly, Learning Group 2 reflected moderate instructional agility through clarification and task-focused guidance, while Learning Group 3 showed little evidence of instructional responsiveness. Overall, the findings suggest that learner agency and instructional agility contribute positively to the learning environment. Learning Group 1's combination of learner choice and responsive instruction aligns with constructivist perspectives emphasizing autonomy and support in learning (Reeve, 2012). Conversely, the limited evidence of agency and agility in Learning Groups 2 and 3 suggests more instructor-controlled environments, supporting research that highlights the

importance of flexibility and learner ownership in shaping engagement and participation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Relevance and Repetition

Findings revealed clear differences between the intervention and control groups regarding relevance and repetition. Learners in Learning Group 1 described instruction as meaningful and relevant, emphasizing real-world applications, gamified activities, and interactive learning experiences that connected theory to practice. These strategies were reinforced through structured repetition, which learners reported strengthened their understanding, addressed learning gaps, and increased confidence. In contrast, learners in Learning Groups 2 and 3 made little to no reference to relevance, and repetition was minimal or absent across both groups. In addition, these findings align with constructivist, cognitive, and motivational learning theories. Authentic and real-world instructional contexts appeared to support meaning-making and learner engagement (Laur, 2013), while structured repetition reinforced understanding and retention (Ausubel, 2012). Together, the results suggest that integrating relevance and repetition can support more meaningful and lasting learning experiences.

Engagement and Evaluation

Findings related to engagement and evaluation further highlighted differences across the learning groups. Learning Group 1 demonstrated the strongest multidimensional engagement through interactive activities, supportive relationships, and a welcoming classroom environment. Learners also reported frequent feedback, formative assessment, and instructor guidance that supported progress monitoring and learning. In contrast, Learning Group 2 showed limited and inconsistent engagement with no references to evaluation, while Learning Group 3 reflected moderate engagement primarily through instructor-led interaction and minimal evaluation-related experiences. Additionally, these findings align with constructivist, sociocultural, and formative assessment theories, which emphasize active participation, relational support, and ongoing feedback in the learning process (Bhattacharjee, 2015; Kulasegaram & Rangachari, 2018; Polly et al., 2017). Overall, the results suggest that environments combining interactive engagement with systematic feedback may support more meaningful learning experiences.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses on business students from Nepal, Bangladesh, and India at a single private college in Denmark; this limited scope hinders the generalizability of findings to other populations, disciplines, or institutional contexts. Second, the data in this study were relatively limited, as some learning groups had minimal or no reflections on key constructs, which constrained cross-group comparisons and the robustness of findings. Third, the reliance on self-reported survey data, with some classroom observations, may be influenced by social desirability or recall biases, and observations were sometimes sparse, reducing triangulation. Finally, data collection occurred at a single point near the end of the semester, providing only a snapshot of learner experiences and limiting understanding of how engagement, agency, or collaboration may have evolved over time. Collectively, these limitations highlight the need for caution in generalizing findings. It also highlights the need for future research to expand its scope, duration, and methodological triangulation.

Conclusion

This study highlights the value of using learner perspectives to examine learning experiences, particularly for international students navigating diverse instructional contexts. By combining rich qualitative data with a deductive analysis grounded in the CARE² model, the study highlighted which elements were most salient or top-of-mind for learners. This highlighted the importance of cultural responsiveness, collaboration, agency, relevance, repetition, engagement, and evaluation. Learners in the Learning Group 1 consistently reported meaningful engagement, authentic learning connections, and opportunities for autonomy that were largely absent in the control groups, demonstrating how thoughtfully designed instructional practices directly shape learner experiences. These findings emphasize that capturing learners' voices not only illuminates what matters most in the learning process but also provides actionable guidance for educators seeking to create inclusive, responsive, and meaningful learning environments. Ultimately, this research illustrates that leveraging learner perspectives through systematic, framework-informed analysis can reveal nuanced insights that drive pedagogical innovation and enhance educational outcomes for diverse student populations.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors declare that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used to proofread and refine the manuscript's language. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity.

The authors used OpenAI to simplify the initial research questions in the paper for the presentation, then used those same simplified questions back in the paper, so they were the same between the presentation and the paper.

Qualitative analyses were conducted through inter-coder review, with final themes generated based on coder agreement, and automated validation using OpenAI 5o to strengthen reliability. The quantitative data included two final assessments and post-unit surveys, capturing knowledge-based outcomes and learner perceptions.

The authors further declare that no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are original and derived from the appropriate and systematic conduct of the research.

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