

Bridging Worlds: Cross-Cultural Communication & Academic Belonging in the Adult ESOL Classroom

Presented by Dr. Jennifer Lacroix ~ lacroixj471@gmail.com

The Dialogic Fishbowl: Setup Guide

Purpose: Give participants a concrete, replicable discussion tool.

What it is and why it works:

A dialogic fishbowl is a structured discussion where a small inner circle talks while the outer circle observes with a specific task. It's 'dialogic' because the goal is genuine exchange; building on ideas, not performing for the teacher.

For our students, it works because: it reduces whole-class speaking pressure; it gives quieter students, including many from high-context cultures, a bounded, structured entry point; it makes listening a visible, valued job; and it creates a natural container for cross-cultural exchange without anyone being put on the spot.

The setup in six steps:

1. **Choose a prompt** that has no right answer, connects to students' lives, and is low-stakes enough to enter. Example: *"What does it mean to be a good student where you come from and here?"*
2. **Select the inner circle (half of your total students)**; try to mix language backgrounds if possible; in your first fishbowl, seed with students who have some comfort speaking. The other half of your class sits outside the circle and each student sits directly behind one of their peers, but not facing them.
3. **Give the outer circle a specific written task**; without a task, observers disengage. Options: "Write one question you want to ask when the empty chair opens." / "Notice when someone builds on what another person said; mark that moment." / "Write one word that captures something you heard." The outer circle participants become the "language coaches" and offer constructive feedback at the end of each discussion cycle.
4. **Run the discussion (8–10 min)** do not interject. If silence falls, count to 8 before prompting. If a student shares something emotionally heavy, let it land. Do not

rush past it. The teacher needs to sit far outside the circle and say something like, “Just pretend I’m not here.”

5. **Trade roles:** After 8-10 minutes of discussion (or longer if needed), pause the discussion. As the students in the inner circle to turn around and receive feedback from their language coaches, students who were sitting behind them in the outer circle listening. Then, the students swap places; the inner circle becomes the outer circle and vice versa. Resume discussion for 8-10 minutes; encourage students to ‘piggy-back’ off something the first group had discussed and continue to make personal connections.
6. **Always debrief** (even for 3 minutes). Ask: "What did you notice? What question are you still sitting with?" The debrief is where learning consolidates and where you address any emotional moments from the discussion.

Pro Tip: Handling the silence after a personal disclosure (inside the debrief instructions):

If a student shares something real and heavy during a fishbowl and the room goes quiet, don't pivot. Say: *'What [Name] shared is real. I want to give it a moment.'* Then offer a written bridge: *'Take 90 seconds — write one word in response to what you heard, just for yourself.'* After class, follow up privately. What you don't do: move immediately to the next task. That silence says to the student: your experience is an interruption.

My Activity Design

1. **The academic norm or cultural communication pattern I'm addressing:** *(e.g., silence as respect vs. silence as confusion; self-advocacy; what participation means)*
2. **The form of cultural wealth I'm drawing on:** *(Which of Yosso's six capitals does this activity make visible or valued?)*
3. **The SEL connection:** *(How does this activity build belonging, reduce shame, or acknowledge students' whole lives?)*
4. **What students will actually do:** *(Be specific — what's the task, the structure, the timing?)*

5. **The cross-cultural communication move:** *(How does this activity help students — or you — interpret or respond to silence, tone, timing, or other culturally influenced signals?)*

6. **How I'll know it worked:**