Bridging Worlds: Cross-Cultural Communication & Academic Belonging in the Adult ESOL Classroom - Part 1

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Warm up: Turn-and-Talk

Chat waterfall

Think about a moment when a student did something in your class that confused you, frustrated you, or just felt off and you couldn't quite put your finger on why.

Directions: Chat waterfall: Type into Zoom chat: *In one sentence: describe a moment like that. Don't hit enter yet — everyone type, then we'll all send at once.*

Overview: Teaching the Invisible ~ Academic Culture for Adult ESOL Learners

- This workshop helps ESOL educators see what their students are navigating beneath the surface — not just grammar and vocabulary, but the unwritten rules of academic culture that nobody teaches and everybody assumes.
- We'll look honestly at how students from a wide range of countries and cultural backgrounds experience those invisible expectations, and we'll build real tools to address them — including how to handle the charged, tender moments when a student shares something deeply personal and the room goes quiet.
- Concrete tools: Lesson Plans and Curriculum Ideas for **New** and Experienced Instructors
- Audience: ESL at local libraries, community-based ESOL, DESI, and ?

Learning Objectives

By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:

1. **Design and implement** at least one classroom activity that integrates social-emotional learning (SEL) and supports cross-cultural communication for adult ESOL learners.
2. **Identify and explain two strategies** for teaching academic culture to students with survival needs, including how to interpret and respond to culturally influenced communication signals (e.g., silence, tone, timing).

What Is Cross-Cultural Communication?

What Cross-Cultural Communication Is Not…

What Cross-Cultural Communication Is …

The Iceberg: What Academic Culture Actually Is

Above the waterline (what we teach explicitly):

- Academic vocabulary
- Essay structure
- Grammar rules
- Citation formats

Below the waterline (what we assume everyone already knows):

- How to disagree with a teacher (or that you *can*)
- When silence means "I don't know" vs. "I'm thinking" vs. "I disagree and won't say so"
- Eye contact norms in authority relationships
- What "participation" means and why it's graded
- The expectation that you advocate for yourself
- The idea that asking questions signals intelligence, not ignorance
- That deadlines are firm, not relational

Some generalizations based on regions

Venezuela, Colombia, Argentina, Mexico, Nicaragua: Strong relational orientation toward teachers; warmth and personal connection often come before academic engagement; formality and informality operate differently by country and generation; silence can signal deep respect — or fear of being wrong publicly; some students may have experienced authoritarian schooling where questioning teachers was not safe.

China, Korea, Taiwan: High-context communication; strong face-saving norms; indirect disagreement; group harmony over individual voice; "yes" can mean "I hear you," not "I understand"; asking for help can feel like exposing inadequacy.

Russia: More direct communication style than many instructors expect from ESL students; may question authority intellectually but be unaccustomed to collaborative or discussion-based learning; written culture is very strong.

Turkey: Hierarchical respect for teachers; strong oral tradition; relationship-building before task-engagement is important; formality varies significantly between urban/rural backgrounds.

The Iceberg: What Academic Culture Actually Is

Padlet Activity

Padlet activity

Directions: Go to the Padlet now (link in the chat). Please add sticky notes to two zones:

- *Yellow:* "An academic norm I have explicitly taught"
- *Pink:* "An academic norm I have assumed — and never taught"

Culture Bumps: Storytelling & Framework

The **Culture Bump Approach** (Carol Archer) asks us to:

1. Identify the specific moment when something felt "off"
2. Describe the behavior — not the interpretation
3. Ask: *What did I expect instead?*
4. Explore: *What might this behavior mean in the student's cultural context?*
5. Find the shared human value underneath (e.g., both behaviors might reflect "respect" — just expressed differently)

Culture Bump Scenario Cards

Breakout Rooms:
15 minutes

- We have pre-assigned three breakout rooms.
- We will paste different scenario cards into the chat or share in a Google Doc.
- Each group gets 2 scenarios.
- In your teams, work through the 5 steps and identify the bump.

Let’s Debrief

Card 1: The Silence After Sharing

Valentina, from Venezuela, shares in a class discussion that she left her family behind to come to the U.S. and that she cries every night. The class goes completely silent. A student from China looks down. A student from Russia looks uncomfortable and changes the subject. Valentina looks mortified. *What's the bump? What's happening for each person in the room? What does the instructor do next?*

Card 1: The Silence After Sharing

The first one comes up in real classrooms all the time, and it's worth spending time on because the silence after a student shares something deeply personal is one of the most complex moments in cross-cultural teaching.

Here's what might actually be happening in that silence:

1. For students from high-context cultures (many East Asian backgrounds), silence is *respectful* — it means 'what you shared is too important to rush past.' Jumping in with words can feel dismissive.
2. For some students, the disclosure triggers their *own* unprocessed emotions — and they go quiet because they don't have the language or the safety to name that.
3. For some students, public emotional disclosure is simply not a norm in their culture. They're not being cold — they're genuinely unsure what the expected response is, and they're afraid of saying the wrong thing.
4. And sometimes, silence is grief. Solidarity. The highest form of 'I hear you.'"

What can the instructor do?

1. **Name it. Literally. Out loud. In the moment.**

   You can say: 'What Valentina just shared is real and it's heavy, and I notice we've all gotten quiet. I think that quiet is actually respect. It means what she said landed. I want to give it a moment before we move on.'"

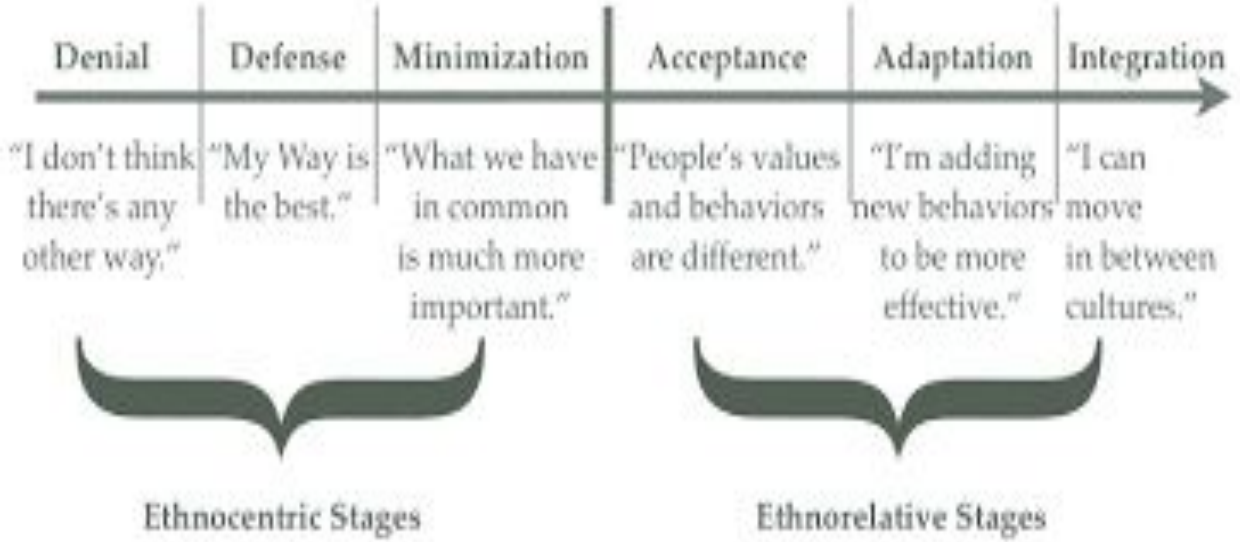
2. **Then offer a structured bridge — not a forced discussion, but an invitation:**

   You might offer a written reflection: 'Take 2 minutes and write a response to what Valentina shared — not for me, just for yourself. If you want, share one word that came up for you.' This gives quieter students a path in that doesn't require speaking."

Other bridging moves

1. **The universal human value reframe:** "Valentina, what you're describing — loving people far away — is something many people in this room know. You're not alone in that."
2. **The norming statement:** "In this class, when someone shares something hard, we don't have to fix it. We just have to be present. That's enough."
3. **The private check-in:** After class, send a quick message to the student who shared: "Thank you for trusting this class today. How are you?"

Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) by Bennett



Strategies in Action: Answering Your Real Questions

Best Practice 1: Make the Invisible Visible

Explicitly teaching the norms your course assumes is the single highest-leverage move you can make.

Concrete moves:

- **First-week norm mapping:** Give students a list of academic behaviors common in U.S. classrooms (e.g., "Students ask questions during class," "Students disagree with the teacher respectfully"). Ask: "Which of these are the same in your home country? Which are different?" This makes the iceberg visible *together*.
- **"In this class" statements:** Post and say explicitly: "In this class, asking for help is a sign of strength. Silence doesn't mean you understand — it means I'll check in with you. You can disagree with me. I will not be offended."
- **Teach the *why* behind the norm,** not just the rule. Don't just say "don't plagiarize." Explain the Western academic value of individual intellectual ownership — and name that this is a *cultural* value, not a universal truth. Your students from collective learning traditions aren't being dishonest. They're applying a different framework.

Best Practice 2: The SEL Bridge

Connect academic tasks to students' real lives and emotional experience in ways that build belonging and reduce shame.

Key moves:

- **Acknowledgment first:** Name the difficulty before asking for the work. "I know many of you are managing things outside this class that most people can't see. That matters. This assignment is asking you to..."
- **Community cultural wealth:** Explicitly value what students bring — languages, survival skills, navigation of systems — as intellectual resources. "You speak two languages. That is a cognitive and cultural skill. We're going to use it."

Best Practice 2: The SEL Bridge

Low-stakes narrative as scaffolding: Start with personal story before moving to academic argument. Students write about their *own* experience first, then bridge to academic analysis. This is especially effective across the Latin American and East Asian cultures in this group — storytelling is valued; abstract argument is learned.

Differentiated entry points: For a student from Korea and a student from Venezuela, the same academic task may carry completely different affective weight. Offering choices — "you can write this as a narrative, a list, or a letter" — isn't lowering the bar. It's widening the door.

Best Practice 3: Storytelling Tools for Cross-Cultural Discussion

These tools create structure for sharing that doesn't put any one student on the spot:

- **Photovoice:** Students bring or find an image that represents something about their culture, their experience, or their relationship to education. They share it with a brief explanation. Visual entry points reduce language anxiety and create genuine curiosity.
- **The "Two Truths About Where I'm From"** protocol: Each student shares two true things about their home country or culture — one that surprises people, one that feels important. Builds knowledge *across* the group, not just between student and teacher.

Best Practice 3: Storytelling Tools for Cross-Cultural Discussion

Fishbowl Discussion: 3–4 students discuss a prompt in the "inner circle" while others observe. Reduces the pressure of whole-class speaking. Rotate who's in the fishbowl. Works well in Zoom with breakout rooms used as the "inner circle" while others watch a shared screen.

Best Practice 3: Storytelling Tools for Cross-Cultural Discussion

Structured Written Response before Speaking: Before any verbal sharing, give 2–3 minutes of writing time. This levels the playing field for students who need processing time (common in high-context cultures) and gives quieter students something to anchor their voice.

"Build on" norms: Teach students to say "I want to add to what ___ said..." This creates explicit linguistic scaffolding for connection and tells students: *your job is to listen to each other, not just to me.*

The Commonality Bridge: After a student shares something personal, the instructor's job is not to respond with empathy alone — it's to find the thread that connects to others. "Valentina talked about leaving family behind. I'm curious — has anyone else had an experience of leaving something important behind to be here?" This doesn't force disclosure. It opens a door.

Photo by Jeffrey Hamilton on Unsplash

Pair breakout (5 min): Each pair picks ONE tool from the list and answers: "How would you adapt this for your specific classroom context?" Share back briefly.

Design It: Your Classroom Activity

Individual work on Padlet (5-10 min):

Each participant fills out their own section of the Padlet with this frame:

My Activity Design

- The academic culture norm I'm addressing:
- The student population/context I'm designing for:
- The SEL connection:
- What students will do:
- How I'll know it worked:

Partner feedback

Breakout Rooms:
5 minutes

Directions: Partners share their designs and give one piece of feedback using this stem:

"I notice you're teaching [X]. One thing I'm wondering is..."

Wrap-Up, Commitments & Take-Home Assignment

Wrap-Up: Whip-Round

Directions: Each person completes one of these sentences out loud:

- "One thing I'm taking back to my classroom is..."
- "One thing I'm still sitting with is..."

Take-Home Assignment (Between Sessions)

The Culture Bump Journal

Before the virtual Part 2 session:

1. **Notice one culture bump** in your classroom or in an interaction with a student. Write a paragraph: What happened? What did you expect? What might the student have been expressing?
2. **Try one thing** from today — either "Make It Visible," an SEL Bridge move, or one of the storytelling tools. Write 3–5 sentences: What did you try? What did you notice?
3. **Bring one question** to Part 2 — something you're genuinely uncertain about or want to dig into further.

There's no right answer here. The point is to pay attention differently.

Closing

Acknowledgment First is rooted in the simple neuroscience of learning: people can't access higher-order thinking (analysis, argument, synthesis) when they're in survival mode. If a student is worried about whether their landlord is going to call ICE, or whether they'll be able to pay for childcare this week, asking them to write a thesis statement is asking their brain to do two things at once — and the survival need wins every time.

Community Cultural Wealth comes from a framework by scholar Tara Yosso, and it's a direct pushback against a deficit model of education — the idea that students from marginalized communities are basically empty vessels who need to be filled with the "right" knowledge and skills.

Yosso argued that students bring *six forms of capital* to the classroom that traditional academics tend to ignore or actively devalue:

- **Linguistic capital** — navigating multiple languages and registers
- **Familial capital** — deep knowledge of community, kinship, and collective care
- **Social capital** — networks and relationships that help people navigate systems
- **Navigational capital** — the ability to move through institutions that weren't built for you
- **Resistant capital** — the knowledge and skills built through challenging inequality
- **Aspirational capital** — the ability to maintain hope and dreams despite real barriers

Thank you!

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