

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

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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 Social Emotional Learning (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."
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.