



## 3 Tips to Avoid Cultural Misunderstandings With Adult ELs

by [Diana Cooper](#)

English language learners and teachers come from a variety of cultural backgrounds. As teachers, we try to present topics in the classroom in ways that are understandable across cultures, but we may unintentionally convey our cultural assumptions in our words, gestures, and expectations. When this happens, our lessons may be misinterpreted by students who rely on the meaning of a gesture or abbreviation they learned in their home country. This article is written based on my experience teaching English in the United States as a North American and offers tips on how to reduce cultural miscommunication in the classroom. Let's consider some examples of three potential pitfalls in English language teaching and how to avoid them.

### 1. Nonverbal Communication

Have you ever used a peace sign with an Aussie or thumbs up sign with an Italian and received a mortified look in response? Although this experience may have left you perplexed, the explanation is in the different meaning of nonverbal hand signals across cultures. These innocent and positive hand symbols used in the United States may be associated with vulgar meanings for immigrant students.

We cannot learn the meaning of every gesture and action that is potentially offensive to our culturally diverse students, but we can start with an awareness of hand gestures, head movements, and expressions we use daily in the United States and understand that these may mean different things to different people. Also, observe the nonverbal communication used by your students. People who have just moved from India will tilt their head gently from side to side instead of nodding up and down as is done to express agreement in the United States. Students from Muslim regions may choose not to shake hands with people of the opposite sex, but some Islam students don't subscribe to this custom. Crossing your legs, especially when the sole of your shoe becomes visible to others, is disrespectful in many Asian countries. Eye contact is a sign of honesty in the United States but seen as disrespectful to those in authority by many students from China.

Being aware of the potential for miscommunication is the key to opening the conversation with students on this subject. I often learn from my students. If you know you are in the habit of using nonverbal cues while teaching, you may present your concerns in class. Ask them to tell you if you use signals or movements that carry meaning in another culture. Also, [\*Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: The Bestselling Guide to Doing Business in More Than 60 Countries\*](#), by Terri Morrison

and Wayne Conaway, presents many examples of the interpretation of a wide range of hand gestures and customs. This is a good reference to prepare teachers in ESOL classrooms for a wide range of nonverbal actions that may cause miscommunication and to open the discussion with students whose cultures are represented in the book.

## 2. Acronyms

Another way to confuse students is use of acronyms: abbreviations from the initial letters of other words, such as NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) and NBA (National Basketball Association).

In the United States, we use abbreviations daily—in the workplace and socially, in talking about sports, food, and a variety of subjects. One problem with acronyms for English learners is that the pronunciation of some letters sounds so similar to other English letters that the acronyms are misunderstood. The student hears “MBA” when someone says “NBA”; the meaning received is not “National Basketball Association” but “Master’s in business administration.” Additionally, meanings of acronyms could be different for students from various cultures. When North Americans hear the acronym “NASA,” we think of the U.S. space program. If you are from Central America or Mexico, you may confuse NASA with a familiar term, *masa*, a type of flour used in daily cooking in many Hispanic kitchens. Then, there are expressions that use the same acronym, such as “STD,” which have multiple meanings depending on context: “sexually transmitted disease” and, in another context, “save the date.”

It is helpful to present acronyms related to class topics and explain them to students—and reveal the potential double meanings. Also, ask students to bring examples of acronyms to class to share their confusion or discoveries.

## 3. Expectations

The third pitfall is in expecting students to know culturally acceptable behaviors in class. One role of English language instructors is to guide students in learning standard classroom practices. For example, in the United States, I encourage students to participate in class, make eye contact with me, and speak up with questions, as all of these behaviors are common practice in North America. However, these behaviors may make students uncomfortable and be considered disrespectful in the native cultures of many students learning English. There may be students, too, who seem quite forthright and even challenging in interactions with their teacher and other students. As instructors, we might take offense to these cultural differences. It is important for teachers to introduce students to common practices and guide students in learning class behaviors that may be new to them.

Here are a few ways to ensure everyone is aware of what cultural practices you would like to see in the classroom:

- Present and discuss guidelines of culturally acceptable classroom behavior, opening up a dialogue about behaviors in your classroom and in your students’ home cultures.
- List those behaviors in a visible place so students can refer to them when they need to.
- Use role-plays to demonstrate the behaviors.

Doing these things will lead to a productive and comfortable learning environment, adding to students' life skills in their new home.

Mindfulness of cultural differences and our students' perceptions will improve adult students' understanding of English and daily life experiences. Intercultural awareness opens the door for instructors and students to learn from each other and laugh over the meaning of actions and terms we, as teachers, may take for granted.

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