



Minimizing Cultural Dissonance for SLIFE

by [*Helaine W. Marshall*](#)

Cultural dissonance is the feeling of alienation and not belonging that students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) experience when they come to our schools. This dissonance is a major factor that TESOL educators need to address in teaching SLIFE because being in school is itself a challenge for these students. We need to be aware of how the nature of formal education as we know it poses problems for SLIFE in addition to focusing on teaching English, literacy skills, and subject-area content.

Three Challenging Hallmarks of Education

In my recent work with DeCapua and Tang (DeCapua, Marshall, & Tang, 2020), we identified three major hallmarks of formal education that challenge SLIFE. These hallmarks are what I refer to as “deal breakers” because, when SLIFE face them, they find themselves stuck and unable to function as expected by their teachers and fellow students. However, teachers can address the cultural dissonance of a school with culturally responsive (Gay, 2018) and sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2017) classroom strategies.

These hallmarks are as follows:

1. The student believes in the promise of a future reward for education.
2. The student is motivated to participate and excel as an individual learner.
3. The student can take and pass various standardized assessments.
(DeCapua, Marshall, & Tang, 2020, p. 84).

Each of these hallmarks, or deal breakers, intensifies the cultural dissonance that SLIFE feel because their own ways of learning differ so much from learning in a formal classroom setting. We’ll take a look at each of them and consider how a culturally based framework can minimize these deal breakers by tackling them through a mutually adaptive pedagogy.

Deal Breaker #1: Believing in a Future Reward

SLIFE usually come from backgrounds where learning something new is immediately relevant to their lives. They are used to learning that benefits them in the short term and meets their immediate needs. Learning for these students consists primarily of practical knowledge and

pragmatic skills needed by families and their communities (Paradise & Rogoff, 2009; Rogoff, 2014). When teachers stress the benefit of education in the long term with a future-oriented mindset, SLIFE don't relate to these promised rewards. They find most of what they are asked to do during the school day irrelevant and less compelling than what they might be able to accomplish outside of school.

Deal Breaker #2: Becoming an Independent Learner

More than 70% of the world's cultures are collectivistic, placing a greater value on the group than on any one individual (Triandis, 1995). In collectivistic cultures, people see themselves as highly interconnected and interdependent. SLIFE, who generally come from countries identified by Triandis (1995) as collectivistic, find the opposite when they come to an individualistic culture like those in the United States, Canada, or Australia, which highly value individual and independent effort in school. SLIFE from collectivistic cultures tend not to be hand raisers and do not seek recognition, which makes them seem, from our perspective, less prepared or less motivated to participate. Teachers from individualistic cultures routinely expect students to demonstrate engagement and knowledge by raising their hands to respond, by keeping their eyes on their own work, and by seeking positive feedback for their personal efforts. SLIFE, in contrast, want to share responsibility with others; they try to maintain and form webs of relationships and not stand out (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013).

Deal Breaker #3: Mastering Standardized Testing

Today's school calendar is dominated by preparing for high-stakes, standardized assessments. A close look at what these tests require shows they demand three skills that are especially challenging for SLIFE. First, there is the just mentioned individual accountability. Next, there is the reliance on the written word, so difficult for SLIFE whose literacy skills are still developing and who communicate best orally. Last, there is the requirement to perform decontextualized tasks, such as answering multiple-choice, true/false, or matching questions, which do not imitate the real-world tasks SLIFE are used to doing. These school-based tasks confuse SLIFE because they see do not understand their purpose. In the real world, we wouldn't look at a tree and say to our children, "That is a tree, true or false?"

To compound the problem, these decontextualized test questions target types of explicit, academic thinking, such as comparison/contrast, cause and effect, classification, and so on, that are unfamiliar to such students. In their real-world learning experiences, the primary activity is to practice, not to analyze, or, when SLIFE do analyze, it is from a functional perspective rather than a school perspective. For example, imagine a test item showing four images (an axe, a hammer, a log, and a saw) with these questions: "What is the group? Which item does not belong in the group?" (Luria, 1976; see Figure 1) Participants' task is to decide what class three of the items belong to and then to select the one item that is not part of that class.



Figure 1. Sample test question. (Luria, 1976)

The class is “tools”; the item that doesn’t belong is a log because it is not a tool. For SLIFE, this type of classification based on abstract shared characteristics can be difficult because they tend to think functionally. They would likely never remove the log because then they could not use the tools for any purpose. While their thinking isn’t “wrong,” it is not the type of thinking—here, classification based on shared characteristics of what makes something a tool—expected on such assessments (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011; Luria, 1976).

The Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm®

With these three deal breakers, the cultural dissonance becomes overwhelming to SLIFE; however, the culturally responsive and sustaining [Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm®](#), or MALP® model (Marshall, 1998), lessens the effects of these deal breakers. MALP incorporates key priorities about learning held by SLIFE and places them into a framework that integrates key elements of formal education.

The basic premise underlying MALP is mutual adaptation, without which SLIFE encounter obstacles to their success in U.S. schools. MALP is *mutually adaptive* because it asks educators to adapt their pedagogy even as students are transitioning to Western-style formal education and new ways of learning and thinking. By including elements from the SLIFE learning paradigm, as well as elements from the U.S. formal educational learning paradigm, the priorities of both are honored and incorporated.

MALP Strategies

Here are the major MALP strategies that teachers of SLIFE can implement in their classrooms.

1. Create Relevance and Interconnectedness

Create two conditions for learning that help SLIFE feel comfortable in school: immediate relevance and interconnectedness. When SLIFE feel connected to each other and to their teacher in a personal way and when what they are learning incorporates at least some element that relates directly to their lives, they are more likely to engage and participate.

2. Combine Familiar and Unfamiliar Learning Processes

Combine oral and written work all through their instructional activities so that there is constant scaffolding for both low- and high-stakes activities. Alternate between shared responsibility and individual accountability so that SLIFE can master both.

3. Develop Academic Thinking and Provide Scaffolding

Design explicit lessons and projects to develop academic ways of thinking and familiarity with decontextualized, literacy-based school tasks. Encourage whole language repertoires, translanguaging, and English vocabulary that SLIFE have already learned, along with topics they already know something about, to provide scaffolding for them as they learn to master these new tasks and school-based ways of thinking.

Implementing MALP Strategies

The best way to implement these MALP strategies is to have students do projects. One MALP project that can be applied in any learning context is class surveys. For example, when one teacher, Ms. Arcadio, was teaching SLIFE about nutrition (DeCapua, Marshall, & Tang, 2020), she began with a class survey on eating habits and food preferences. Knowing that the academic ways of thinking underlying the concept of nutrition would be new to SLIFE, she built upon what was already familiar to them. Together, she and her class generated questions for the survey, collected data, and analyzed and reported the results.

Though it is not uncommon for teachers to query students about their eating habits, the difference here was the creation of a formal survey and the opportunities it afforded to incorporate MALP. Here is an analysis of her project through the lens of the MALP model.

- The questions dealt with the food in the cafeteria, at home, and in other venues. Rather than learning in the abstract about nutrition, they were relating it to their lives. Thus, Ms. Arcadio **implemented immediate relevance to students' lives**.
- The survey itself is by nature interpersonal and helps to establish and maintain relationships. As the students and Ms. Arcadio participated in the survey, they learned more about each other. This personalization of the topic of nutrition **built interconnectedness**.
- The students conducted the poll orally, noting down responses. Those SLIFE with low literacy **recorded answers orally** instead, using smartphones. Ms. Arcadio and the more proficient students transcribed responses, which formed the **basis for additional literacy skills development**. When they later analyzed the results, students formed discussion groups and **shared a written summary of their findings**. Thus, there were numerous opportunities to move from oral transmission to print.

- There was **continuous collaboration** among the students as they worked together to decide on questions and then as they reviewed and analyzed their results. However, Ms. Arcadio ensured that there were **individual tasks built into the project** as well. Each student contributed questions and polled on their own. Each wrote up their results and produced graphic representations of the data. During the analysis, Ms. Arcadio paired students to work together, combining their individual charts into a joint PowerPoint presentation. Through these tasks, the **transition from shared responsibility to individual accountability was gradual**.
- Once the data were collected, Ms. Arcadio designed **decontextualized tasks to develop academic ways of thinking**, but these were now accessible given the **familiar language and content of their own class survey**. Some examples were calculating the nutritional value of various diets, identifying patterns in the data, and presenting results in pie charts.

When teachers keep in mind the MALP strategies, they will find, as did Ms. Arcadio, that SLIFE can participate actively and make progress in school-based activities because the model creates a learning environment that acknowledges their background and needs. Because MALP takes elements of the school learning paradigm and elements of the SLIFE learning paradigm to create a new one, it is referred to as “mutually adaptive.” To learn more about MALP® and see how it is implemented, along with examples of projects for a variety of school settings, please see [“MALP Resources”](#) on the MALP Instructional Approach website.

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