

# Roots and Connections: A Culturally Integrated Approach to EAL Instruction

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*This article describes a culturally integrated approach to teaching English as an Additional Language (EAL) through Roots and Connections: A Culturally Integrated ESL Curriculum for Community Orientation in Alberta. This was developed by the Centre for Intercultural Education to integrate intercultural sensitivity into English-language instruction. Based on a Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) approach to language development, it integrates supported community connections and cultural knowledge to provide effective early social integration supports through survival-level language development. This resource is a response to community needs determined through the Rural ESL Enhancement Project. Many rural communities in Alberta were struggling to support the needs of increasingly culturally diverse newcomers, including language programming, settlement services for newcomers, and intercultural sensitivity for community-service providers. This called for a culturally integrated resource in which the content, process, and instructor supports were intentionally designed to meet survival language needs and to develop intercultural sensitivity among all participants, in the service of broader community integration goals. This project demonstrates the enhanced effectiveness of EAL programming that explicitly engages the diversity of its learners using intercultural communication processes and supports the adoption of a culturally integrated approach to other kinds of part- and full-time EAL programming.*

*Cet article décrit une approche tenant compte de la culture pour l'enseignement de l'anglais en tant que langue supplémentaire par le biais du programme Roots and Connections: A Culturally Integrated ESL Curriculum for Community Orientation in Alberta. Ce programme a été développé par le centre pour l'éducation interculturelle de sorte à intégrer la sensibilité culturelle dans l'éducation de langue anglaise. Reposant sur l'approche au développement langagier des niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens, cette démarche intègre l'appui communautaire et les connaissances culturelles pour fournir un appui précoce en intégration sociale par le biais du développement langagier visant la survie. Cette ressource a été développée en réaction aux besoins communautaires tels que déterminés par un projet visant l'amélioration de l'ALS en milieux ruraux. Plusieurs communautés rurales en Alberta avaient du mal à répondre aux besoins des nouveaux arrivants d'origines culturelles de plus en plus diverses, y compris la programmation linguistique, les services d'établissement pour nouveaux venus et la sensibilité interculturelle pour les prestataires de services communautaires. Il fallait une ressource adaptée culturellement dont le contenu, le processus et les*

*appuis aux enseignants étaient expressément conçus pour répondre aux besoins linguistiques (de survie) et pour développer la sensibilité interculturelle chez tous les participants, au service des objectifs plus vastes d'intégration communautaire. Ce projet démontre l'efficacité accrue d'une programmation en anglais comme langue supplémentaire qui fait explicitement appel à la diversité des apprenants par le biais de processus de communication interculturelle et qui appuie l'adoption d'une approche tenant compte de la culture au sein de d'autres programmes à temps partiel ou à temps plein.*

In this article we describe a culturally integrated approach to teaching English as an additional language (EAL) expressed through the resource *Roots and Connections: A Culturally Integrated ESL Curriculum for Community Orientation in Alberta*. *Roots and Connections* includes an eight-unit curriculum, instructors' guide, planning guide, and toolkit. The project name refers to language training as *English as a second language* (see [http://www.norquest.ca/cfe/intercultural.proj\\_RESL2.asp](http://www.norquest.ca/cfe/intercultural.proj_RESL2.asp) for a free download). For the article, we use the term *English as an additional language* when not referring directly to the resource name. This resource is a response to community needs determined through a small-scale study conducted in four Alberta communities called the *Rural ESL Enhancement Project* and was funded by Alberta Employment and Immigration. We found that many rural communities were struggling to support the needs of increasingly culturally diverse newcomers. These included language programming, settlement services for newcomers, and EAL teaching, as well as intercultural sensitivity awareness for community service providers. This combination of needs called for a culturally integrated resource in which the content, process, and instructors' supports were intentionally designed to meet survival language needs and develop intercultural sensitivity among all participants in the serv-

Table 1  
Reported Registrants in Community Learning Organizations'  
EAL Programs and Services

<i>Year Reported</i>	<i>Learners Served with English Language Programs and Services</i>
2009	10,996
2008	8158
2007	6613
2006	5887

(Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2006-2009, *Community Adult Learning Program Reports*).

ice of broader community integration goals. We explain the context in which this project emerged and present a theoretical framework for a culturally integrated approach to teaching EAL. We also report findings from a pilot of the resource carried out in four Alberta communities.

## Background

In Alberta, immigrant settlement in rural communities and the demand for EAL programming outside urban centers has increased. As shown in Table 1, community learning organizations reported a twofold increase in the number of registrants seeking EAL programming and services between 2006 and 2009.

In many rural Alberta communities, access is limited to full- or part-time EAL programming, qualified EAL instructors, and Canadian Language Benchmark assessors; however, rural municipalities are developing their capacity to respond to the needs of newcomers in their communities. Various provincial initiatives, including *Welcoming Communities* ([wic.auma.ca/Alberta\\_Network\\_of\\_Welcoming\\_Communities](http://wic.auma.ca/Alberta_Network_of_Welcoming_Communities)) and *Rural Routes* ([www.norquest.ab.ca/pdf/Programs/esl\\_ruralroutes/RDPESL\\_newsletter\\_nov2010.pdf](http://www.norquest.ab.ca/pdf/Programs/esl_ruralroutes/RDPESL_newsletter_nov2010.pdf)) have been developed to support the capacity of rural communities to respond to newcomers. Through the *Rural ESL Enhancement Project*, the *Roots and Connections* resource was able to address three needs:

1. Provide a practical, easy-to-use resource to help orient newcomers to the community and reduce their isolation through English-language development.
2. Enhance the capacity of small community learning providers to offer culturally sensitive language programming and services.
3. Enhance the capacity of communities to welcome and include increasingly culturally diverse newcomers.

Language programs are a gateway to the social and economic integration of newcomers into Canadian communities. EAL instructors, especially in rural Alberta communities, play an important part in making this happen. The goal of integration is full participation in community life from economic, cultural, social, and political perspectives, and in Canada integration can be viewed as a two-way process of accommodation and adaptation between newcomers and Canadians (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2002). Immigration is an important part of rural development strategies used to bolster community economic development, address declining populations, revitalize and diversify rural communities, and attract higher-skilled workers (Gibson, Annis, & Berry, 2011). However, few resources are tailored to the needs of newcomers in rural communities, and this can result in isolation due to lack of social inclusion in the community. *Roots and Connections* is designed to support delivery of EAL programming in communities where LINC programming is not available and where the delivery of EAL programming is

offered by people without formal education in teaching EAL. For this audience, it is important to make explicit the intercultural sensitivity component of EAL instruction. Rural lifestyle and economic opportunities can be attractive to newcomers, but attraction, settlement, and retention efforts are required, and economic integration is not alone sufficient to ensure an inclusive integration experience.

## **A Culturally Integrated Approach to Teaching EAL: Conceptual Framework**

A culturally integrated approach was taken in the development of *Roots and Connections*, which is based on the concept of intercultural sensitivity development as defined by Bennett (1993). In this approach, the content, process, and instructor supports are intentionally designed not only to meet the survival language needs of newcomers at risk of isolation, but also to develop the intercultural sensitivity of all participants in the service of broader community integration goals. *Roots and Connections* applies a culturally integrated approach to support integration by reframing the EAL instructor's three distinct roles: EAL instructor, community connector, and cultural bridge. Each role is supported with a clear definition, carefully selected content, activities, design elements, and supplemental resources.

### *EAL Instructor*

The first role is that of the EAL instructor. *Roots and Connections* is first and foremost a language-teaching resource built on the principles and methodology reflected in the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB). This role is supported through use of a curriculum and teaching guide that align with the CLB framework (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2002). *Roots and Connections* includes an EAL curriculum targeted at CLB 1-3 and grounded in three core CLB principles: task-based teaching and learning, learner-centered study, and needs-based programming. The four skill areas—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—are addressed through routine tasks using illustrations, activities involving personal connections, survival English vocabulary and grammar, dialogues, numeracy, and community mapping. A learner-centered approach involves learners in the decision-making process of determining course content and tasks. Learners' full participation is encouraged by their prioritizing of units and by their involvement beyond the classroom in meaningful cultural encounters in the community. Because of the target student profile, it is critical that instruction be flexible and meet learners' immediate needs. The third principle, needs-based programming, relates directly to this. This resource includes a language assessment, a cultural needs assessment, and community knowledge and skill checklists to help instructors assess learners' needs and identify priorities. These tools take into account cultural distance and do not take a *commonsense perspective* of what

learners need, which can overlook differences in knowledge and skill that often affect social integration.

### *Community Connector*

The second role is that of the community connector. This role is based on three concepts: social inclusion, social capital, and identity. Social inclusion is

the capacity and willingness of our society to keep all groups within reach of what we expect as a society—the social commitment and investments necessary to ensure that all people are within reach of [close to] our common aspirations, common life and its common wealth. (Freiler, 2001, p. 2)

According to Putnam (2000), social capital is about connections or social networks among people and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. It is these networks of social relations that potentially provide needed support and resources for individuals and groups; they are necessary to support key transitions and promote community, which many newcomers lack, especially in small communities (Kunz, 2005).

In its design, *Roots and Connections* engages these concepts by encouraging established residents and newcomers together to develop confidence and increase awareness, knowledge, and trust as a means of building social capital and reducing isolation. Bringing people together through formal and informal networks enhances social capital and enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to one another, and to feel a greater sense of belonging. It is widely agreed that

learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities—it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person. To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the fact that learning involves the construction of identities. [Furthermore] learning is not merely a condition for membership, but is itself an evolving form of membership. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53)

*Identity wheel activities* provide a chance for learners to examine issues of identity and change, and community mapping activities enable them to establish a sense of place by locating themselves in their new community. Working with newcomers requires EAL instructors to be aware of identity as central to the experience of cultural transition. Instructors need to recognize the significant effort required by newcomers to renegotiate their identity in a new cultural context. Instructors can provide support by acknowledging and validating what newcomers contribute to the community while they are learning new rules and customs. EAL instructors act as

community connectors through *Roots and Connections* by facilitating the development of social networks, acknowledging identity, and promoting social inclusion in various ways:

1. Community connections (field trips to key resources facilitated by community facilitators, as well as coffee encounters);
2. Interaction with other community volunteers;
3. Personal connections (routine activity that enables connections through identification of important similarities and differences);
4. Identity wheel activities;
5. Community mapping (shows networks in a visual way).

### *Cultural Bridge*

The third role, key to a culturally integrated approach, is that of *cultural bridge*. The term cultural bridge emerges from the concept of cultural brokering, which has been defined as a health care intervention through which the professional increasingly uses cultural and health science knowledge and skills to negotiate with the client and the health care system for an effective, beneficial health care plan (Wenger, 1995). For our purposes, the cultural bridge role is defined as that of a person who mediates the cultural distance between learners and community members and uses bridging processes to facilitate a shift in perspective when exploring the cultural perspectives of these diverse groups. The cultural bridge role includes four components: a focus on anticipating and noticing cultural knowledge gaps; *asking questions* and gaining cultural knowledge; bridging or using cultural knowledge to help learners and community members make sense of why and how things are understood or done in Canada compared with other countries; and absorbing, or helping learners name and normalize their experiences, which can often be disruptive and challenging as they settle in their new country and community (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2011).

EAL instructors are in a natural position to serve as cultural bridges, and this role is enhanced with increased intercultural sensitivity. Intercultural sensitivity, which is developmental, is defined by the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS, Bennett, 1993) and is promoted through developmentally designed activities and delivery processes. The DMIS explains a series of patterned responses to cultural difference ranging from simple to complex. The first three, ethnocentric stages, are characterized by a perspective in which one's own culture is seen as central to reality and cultural difference is seen as irrelevant (denial), threatening (polarization), or minor and not threatening (minimization). The next two ethnorelative stages are those in which "one's own culture is seen in the context of other cultures," or in which "one's own culture is one among many viable constructions of reality" (Bennett, 2004, p. 62). Components of *Roots and Connections* that support intercultural sensitivity development have been designed to meet the

developmental requirements of the *polarization* and *minimization* stages of the DMIS, the stages most commonly documented in our work with EAL providers in rural Alberta communities.

*Roots and Connections* supports the development of intercultural sensitivity of learners, providers, and community members. Intercultural sensitivity is an essential component of the cultural bridge role for instructors. Strategies that support the development of intercultural sensitivity are integrated into the routine tasks and design of the curriculum (*cultural identity wheels*, and *personal connection activities*), the instructors' resources (culture bytes, intercultural resources, and background knowledge builders), the planning resources (registration, promotion, interviewing) and the community connection resources (community facilitator guide, coffee encounter guide, cultural knowledge resources, culture bytes to share with community facilitators). A cultural identity wheel identifies the components that comprise a person's identity. In this curriculum, the identity wheel is used to contrast components of identity (e.g., job, family, gender role, etc.) in their country of origin and in Canada as an intercultural process to explore transitional changes in components of identity. A personal connection activity uses a Venn diagram to explore the similarities and differences in a person's experience in his or her country of origin and the same experience in Canada (e.g., having a baby) as an intercultural process to explore the cultural perspectives of experience for self and others. Culture bytes are background information to highlight large cultural differences and are used by instructors to check their own cultural assumptions and to estimate the degree of cultural difference being bridged by participants.

To develop intercultural sensitivity, learners' activities must have a balance of challenge and support that aligns with their developmental stage. To meet the challenge of threat and the instinct to defend in polarization, developmental activities focus on nonthreatening shared experience, similarities, and commonalities. The balance then shifts to the introduction of important differences. Illustrations of this in the resources are the identity wheels (NorQuest College Centre for Intercultural Education, 2008a), personal connections activities, culture bytes (NorQuest College Centre for Intercultural Education, 2008b), and community knowledge and skill checklists (NorQuest College Centre for Intercultural Education). Identity wheels provide a way for learners and instructors to present their personal identity in more complex ways using shared similar categories such as family, favorite places, first country, new country, and so forth. Instructors first focus on what learners have in common and then look at differences. Personal connections activities use a Venn diagram to focus learners' attention on what is similar about their experiences regarding various topics and then on what is different. These activities give instructors an opportunity to see knowledge gaps as well as the types of adaptation challenges that learners

face. Culture bytes introduce background information about Canadian cultural norms related to unit topics such as education, finances, and health, beginning with concepts that are considered universal and moving to potential differences based on large cultural distance. The culture bytes also articulate norms that reflect patterns for Canadian mainstream culture to help instructors more accurately articulate broader Canadian norms beyond their personal experience. Being able to compare similarities and differences using a *my normal, your normal* frame is part of a foundational intercultural process of taking perspectives. The community knowledge and skills checklist includes a collection of competence statements gathered through discussions with immigrant service providers that include common gaps in knowledge and skills for newcomers to Canada (e.g., how to be safe at home in the winter, how and when to call 911). The integration of exploring cultural knowledge and intercultural processes allows permission to talk about learners' authentic settlement experiences and challenges in the English-language class. This intercultural space enables the identification of authentic language-learning needs and the building of relationships in the classroom, creating an enriched learning experience.

In a culturally integrated curriculum, learning experiences are designed to develop basic language and necessary knowledge, skills, and awareness for settlement, adaptation, and acculturation challenges couched in the context of social inclusion and multiculturalism. This encourages learners and instructors to see the interconnectedness and interrelationships of unit content language, cultural transition, community knowledge, and skill. The principles of intercultural sensitivity are integrated into the curriculum from both the perspective of the learner/participant and from that of the instructor/community. The process engaged in through *Roots and Connections* is meant to be a shared experience in which both community members and newcomers have an opportunity to establish a relationship and increase their understanding of each other. Cultural self-awareness and sensitivity to newcomers' cultures, experience, and cultural adjustment are infused throughout the entire curriculum and not presented as separate issues or marginal topics in the instructional process. Thus instructors and participants can develop a deeper understanding of the role of culture in building welcoming, inclusive, and culturally responsive communities.

## **The Roots and Connections Pilot Project**

*Roots and Connections* was developed as an applied research project and evaluated by means of a pilot project involving intended instructors' and learners' target audiences. An initial needs assessment examining isolation was completed through interviews and focus groups with rural program providers, learners, and employers. Results were used to design the *Roots and Connections* resource.



Table 2  
Part-Time Programming for the *Roots and Connections* Pilot

Community 1	45-hour program over 5 weeks with an instructor and a class assistant
Community 2	20 hours of tutoring over 5 weeks with 2 tutors
Community 3	27-hour program over 7 weeks with 1 instructor
Community 4	24-hour program over 6 weeks with 2 instructors and 1 tutor

The piloting of the *Roots and Connections* resource was conducted in four rural Alberta community learning organizations, which implemented it in their part-time EAL programming. The participating community learning organizations each had a mandate to provide lifelong adult learning opportunities with a focus on literacy and EAL programming, and tutorial services. The piloting included (a) pre-pilot interviews and focus groups with program providers; and (b) post-pilot interviews with program providers and learners. Participants included nine program staff, including coordinators, instructors, and volunteer tutors, all Canadian-born and of European ancestry; and 38 learners (28 women, 10 men). Ninety percent of learners had been in Canada for five or fewer years; 58% for three or fewer years. Learners represented 13 countries of origin in Asia, Europe, and Central/South America; the most frequently represented countries were the Philippines, Mexico, and Korea. As illustrated in Table 2, the communities offered part-time EAL programs of varying lengths based on *Roots and Connections* to meet the needs of their learners.

Evaluation of the pilot focused on the effectiveness of the resource flexibly to support language, cultural, and community knowledge, and to build the capacity of participants to offer a survival-level EAL program. Results were used to revise the final version of the resource.

### *Findings*

We found that instructors needed to develop capacity in their role as cultural bridge in order to facilitate the inclusion of intercultural and community connection events in their lesson-planning. Without the development of this role, we found that instructors and tutors were more likely to focus primarily on grammar and vocabulary activities in the classroom.

Using *Roots and Connections* raised the instructors' awareness of their cultural bridging role in teaching survival-level English and of the importance of this role in supporting the learners in their transitional experiences in a new country and community. In a pre-pilot assessment, one instructor commented that she initially felt the "Getting to Know You" section would be a bore to work through. However, once she had used it with her learners, she realized how important it was for them and how much they valued being

able to share who they were, where they came from, and to “talk about what they had left behind—their joys, their sorrows, things just came pouring out.” In post-pilot focus groups, instructors reported having been surprised by their learners’ information gaps such as where the hospital or clinic was located, how to dial 911, or how to call a taxi. Instructors who used the community knowledge and skills checklist included in the *Roots and Connections Toolkit* with their learners found that the checklists were useful to “explore contrasts and find knowledge and skill gaps for women. [The women’s] observations were of great interest to both the instructor and other classmates.”

The realizations reported by instructors and tutors can be characteristic of a minimization orientation as defined by the DMIS. Group profile results from the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI, <http://www.idiinventory.com/>) instruments administered to instructors and volunteers in the pilot indicated a Developmental Orientation score of 88.47, indicating an early minimization stage. Minimization is an orientation that highlights cultural commonalities and universal values and principles that may also mask deeper recognition and appreciation of cultural differences. The instructors in post-pilot focus groups demonstrated their growing awareness of meaningful differences in learners’ perspectives, seeing the intercultural activities as a “scaffold to notice things.” Instructors commented, “What I think is good and what others think is not always the same.” For instructors with a minimization stage perspective, the tendency to overemphasize commonality shifted to noticing differences identified by Bennett (1993, 2004) as the developmental movement toward the next stage, acceptance, in the DMIS.

We found that for some instructors, formalizing their cultural bridge role caused a shift in their informal role with learners. In communities where no formal settlement services were established, the EAL instructor had become the informal settlement support worker. Through focus group discussions, we found that *Roots and Connections* provided the means for instructors to bring their cultural bridge role into the classroom; through both intercultural activities and community connection activities they were able to build learners’ capacity to access community services such as applying for a bank card or going to a health clinic. One instructor commented, “It was huge for me, [it has] taken lots of stress and responsibility off of my shoulders ... I’ve given them the tools to do it for themselves.”

We also explored creating connections between learners and members of the community. This included community mapping of resources such as the post office and hospital and the use of community facilitator volunteers. In all pilot sites, the program coordinators had experience in organizing activities that connected learners with community members. *Roots and Connections* expanded their repertoire of means for enhancing engagement with community members. A community facilitator volunteer guide, part of the *Roots and Connections Toolkit*, provides volunteers with the background to

prepare for intercultural interactions with adult immigrant learners to reduce the likelihood of reinforcement of stereotypes. In the pilot, specific examples of intercultural interactions included class visits by peace officers and health unit nurses and class trips to the library, bank, and pharmacy. These activities provided opportunities for learners to ask questions of representatives of community services. Some learners followed up class activities with visits to community services on their own to apply for a library card or bank card, buy books from a used book store, or get a flu shot for their child, indicating that real linkages had been created. This demonstration by learners of independent activity beyond their classroom experience affirmed for instructors their learners' capabilities and the value of the community connections activities.

## Conclusion

A culturally integrated approach to English-language programming is an effective way to address the challenges of isolation and community integration in rural communities that may lack settlement and integration services, including full-time EAL programming. *Roots and Connections* is built on a CLB-guided approach and integrates community connections and cultural knowledge to provide early social integration supports effectively through survival-level language development. English-language proficiency is a key predictor of success in economic and social integration for immigrants in Canada (N. Alboim, personal communication, November 8, 2011). The strength and success of *Roots and Connections* is its focus on the mutual development of intercultural competence for learners and instructors through sharing both individual and community cultural knowledge using intercultural communication processes. This project demonstrates the enhanced effectiveness of EAL programming that explicitly engages the diversity of its learners using intercultural communication processes and supports the adoption of a culturally integrated approach to other kinds of part- and full-time EAL programming.

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