

## Cultural Awareness in the ESL/EFL Classroom

As an ESL/EFL teacher, you should give some thought to cultural awareness to ensure that you are delivering language instruction without bias, discrimination or prejudice. Being culturally aware helps you to meet the needs of your students and create an environment in which students feel comfortable and ready to learn. So, how do you go about being culturally aware?

Cultural awareness begins with developing a sensitivity and understanding of your students' beliefs, attitudes, behaviours and values. Be proactive when it comes to learning about the different cultural backgrounds of your students. Read up on the cultural characteristics, history and customs of your students' native countries. Also, talk to your teaching colleagues as they can often have invaluable information that helps you to get a better understanding of common cultural issues that may arise in the classroom.

Find out what topics and actions are taboo. Each culture is different and there will be certain topics that are off limits, such as politics, religion, money, on-going conflicts, etc. Also, be aware of your own actions. Actions that may be acceptable in your culture might be taboo in another. You don't want to embarrass or upset students through ignorant actions, such as pointing, touching or holding eye contact. If you are teaching ESL in your home country, make your students aware of your own culture. You can share information about which topics and actions are appropriate and which are not. This will help your students immensely in their daily lives.

The diverse range of backgrounds and experiences ESL/EFL students bring to the classroom offer many rewards and challenges. In many countries, students are brought up to be more passive and reserved when interacting with adults. Non-English speaking students may often come across as less driven, intelligent or ambitious than their English speaking peers, but this is not the case. Take the time to get to know your students and their abilities and don't rely on your own cultural assumptions and ethnic stereotypes.

Developing cultural awareness is an ongoing process. It is important to remember that someone's cultural background often affects the way they interact in the classroom and how they learn English. Being sensitive to cultural ways of learning is a key step towards developing an understanding of your students' culture. Do research online to familiarize yourself with how your students' learn in their native country. Common learning tools that are used in classrooms across a lot of cultures are games, story-telling, puzzle-solving, repetition and visuals.

When teaching ESL or EFL, you need to understand that students engage more in learning when the language is presented within the context of the students' cultural frames of reference. If you continually reference a culture or nationality that is different from your students' in your material or teaching technique, your students may feel as though their cultural background is being sidelined and can consequently feel disengaged from learning. Therefore, it's important to adapt your teaching resources or techniques to suit your students. When possible, your lessons should incorporate multicultural content that reflects the different cultures of your students to help them learn more effectively and connect to the classroom environment.

With multicultural classes, you should also encourage cultural awareness by having the students explore and share one another's culture and heritage. This can be done in several ways. You can have the students give presentations on their native countries or include cultural celebrations in class throughout the year, e.g. Chinese New Year, Songkran, etc. Students can also share their culture by decorating the classroom with maps, flags, descriptions and pictures of traditional festivals, food, music or sports. Group activities also help to promote cultural awareness, such as discussions on current events, comparing and contrasting holidays in different countries, etc.