



4 Activities to Incorporate Students' Culture in English Language Classrooms

by [Andrew J. Wykretowicz](#)

In this globalised world, our English as a second language (ESL) classrooms are more diverse than ever before. Our goal is to teach our multilingual language learners English, but we also have an opportunity to learn about our students and learn from them about their cultures. This approach can help eradicate stereotypes and misconceptions and create a student-centric environment. As a result, everyone feels welcomed and appreciated.

The following set of activities provides one way to teach English while incorporating various cultures. These activities allow students to share their heritage language and culture and at the same time improve their English. Each of the activities can be modified based on class size and English proficiency levels.

1. Loanwords

This is an easy early program exercise which demonstrates that students may already know some English words without realizing it. Most languages borrow words from other languages, and English is not an exception. These borrowed words are called *loanwords*.

For this activity, study the linguistic background of your students to find any loanwords from their home languages. Write these words on small cards and place them face up on a table, then ask the students to come over and pick the cards with words they know. After the students are finished, have them present the words, and you write them on the board. When all students have presented their words, share the original language of the words and explain that those words are also English words borrowed from other languages. Following is a sampling of words I have used with my students:

- lasagna, spaghetti, cappuccino, pizza (Italian)
- kielbasa, pierogi, kasha, babka, mazurka (Polish)
- kindergarten, brat, wurst, lager (German)
- salsa, taco, siesta, burrito, enchilada (Spanish)
- babushka, gulag, perestroika (Russian)
- baklava, kiosk, shish kebab (Turkish)
- chutney, guru, khaki, karma (Hindi/Urdu)

- dim sum, ketchup, monsoon (Chinese)
- sushi, sumo, bonsai, ikebana, anime (Japanese)

In this example, you could ask students if they notice any patterns or similarities in the words. (Many of these are words for food!) For more advanced classes, you can ask students to say the word aloud and write it on the board. This activity offers great encouragement for students to expand their English vocabulary while connecting to their own and their classmates' cultures.

2. Cultural “If...” Clauses

This exercise is for intermediate to advanced students. Students get a chance to practice *if...* clauses, share some features of their home countries or cities, and learn some cultural aspects of their classmates' as well.

Model for students by writing examples on the board using your own home city, and read aloud your model sentences.

Examples

- If you visit Chicago, you will see Willis (Sears) Tower.
- If you go to Chicago Millennium Park, you will see the Bean.

Next, distribute index cards and ask student to write sentences using the *if...* clause to describe something about their home town. When everyone is done, students share their work.

Examples

- If you visit Tokyo in spring, you will see cherry blossoms.
- If you go to London, you will see the Big Ben.

Examples are often quite interesting to students and prompt further questions, leading to lively discussion. Where possible, you should highlight conditional clauses during class discussion.

Optional Activity: Present the sentences with incorrect information and ask students to correct them.

Examples

- If you visit Berlin, you will see the Coliseum.
- You will see Taj Mahal, if you go to Bangkok.

Modification: For more practice, the activity can be repeated with the use of proverbs or quotes instead of places to visit.

Examples

- If you have a garden and a library, you'll have everything.
- If you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.

3. Finding Meaning in Proverbs

There are a number of proverbs which seem to be universal, and even if a specific well-known proverb is not known in a particular culture, there is often a proverb within that culture with a similar meaning.

For this activity, hand out a sheet containing explanations/meaning to well-known proverbs. Read one aloud or write it on the board, and ask your students to assign a correct meaning from their sheet.

Proverbs	Meanings (Out of Order)
Don't judge a book by its cover.	It is better to do something eventually than not do it at all.
Wise men speak because they have something to say; fools speak because they have to say something.	Don't form an opinion about someone or something based on their outward appearance.
Better late than never.	Talk when you have something important to say, and don't talk for the sake of talking.

Figure 1. Example proverbs and meanings.

After proverbs and meanings have been matched up, ask students if they're familiar with these proverbs in their home languages, or if there is something said that is similar. You can also ask them if there are any well-known proverbs from their home cultures that they'd like to share.

4. Outlining Family Structure

Another easy exercise that allows students to share their customs is outlining family structure. Various cultures have different definitions of what constitutes a family. The aim of this activity is to build vocabulary related to family. Start with the following chart and ask students to complete it to reflect their family structure:

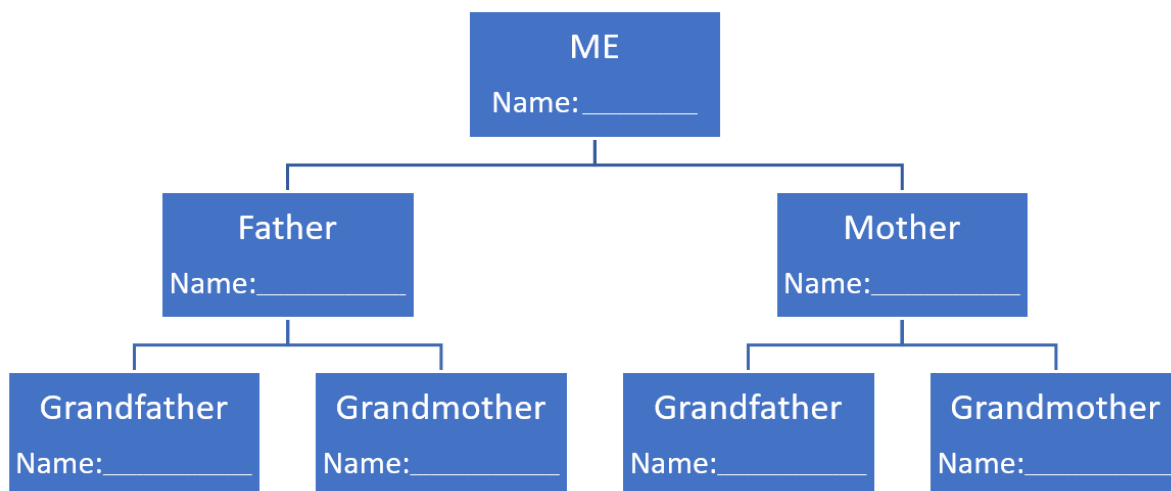


Figure 2. Family structure chart.

This activity is great for leading into a discussion about the meaning of the word *family* in different cultures, as well as other family-related traditions, like passing on names.

Conclusion

These are just a few activities to incorporate your students' cultures into your English language classrooms, for both their benefit and your own. With a little creativity, you can use these as a springboard for further cultural activities and rich classroom interaction and discussion.

Andrew J. Wykretowicz (MA TESOL) is an experienced EFL/ESL instructor. He is an adjunct in the College of DuPage ESL program and also teaches at nonprofit organizations in Chicago, Illinois, USA. He previously taught ESL at Oakton Community College in Skokie, Illinois; colleges in New York City; a private school in Connecticut; the Refugee Resettlement Office in Virginia; and at organizations in Canada and Poland. He is also an active member of [ITBE](#) and TESOL International Association.