

Lesson Objectives

Taking the individual experiences of adult learners into consideration can be critical to the development of instructional approaches that make the learning environment safer and learners more willing to take risks. In this lesson you will look at the meaning of culture and some key areas of cultural differences.



Variety in Learners

Regardless of country of birth, all learners have a variety of learning styles, levels of prior knowledge and expectations of the educational setting. Students come to school with various degrees of basic skills that support and advance school progress and life long learning. In addition to this, adults come to the learning environment at various educational levels, and with varying learning objectives. Adult learners born in other countries who are enrolled in literacy programs in the U.S. have additional strengths, needs and expectations.

The ESL classroom may have adult learners with a history of disruption, political trauma, and mental upheaval. English as a second language (ESL) teachers are often among the first people available to help refugees and other immigrants cope with a new cultural and linguistic environment. Although the identified role of the teacher (and volunteer) is to teach English language skills, the teacher's (volunteer's) role as a cultural broker is very important as well ([Adkins, 1999](#)).

English language learners come to the learning settings eager to share information about their cultures. Educators should design environments, curriculum and instructional strategies that include opportunities for exploring and learning about student's cultures.

What is culture?

"The simplest definition of culture includes those values, beliefs, and practices shared by a group of people. Social scientists and anthropologists vary on their definitions of what comprises a culture, subculture, or microculture, but for practical purposes, the notion of sharing a common worldview is often enough for individuals who find themselves moving between multiple cultures." ([Zieghan, 2001](#))

Key Areas of Cultural Differences

Culture and Family

In some cultures, family is the first priority. Children are celebrated and sheltered, the wife fulfills a domestic role and family mobility is limited. At the same time, teachers may have other students that come from cultures in which work is the priority, children are minimally parented and independent, and family mobility is quite common.



Culture and Education

Teachers/tutors may find that students come from countries in which the education culture is based on memorization with a lot of emphasis on theory with a rigid, teacher-centered, broad curriculum. These students may have a hard time with an analytical approach that emphasizes a practical, narrow and in-depth specialization.

Personal Sensitivity

Teachers/tutors may find that some students come from cultures in which there is a high sensitivity to differences of opinion. Students may fear embarrassment, especially publicly. They might shun confrontation and are often hurt by teasing. In the same classroom, other students may view sensitivity as a weakness and they may show difficulty understanding subtlety.

Control

Some students may come from a culture with a high sensitivity to being "checked on." They may be sensitive to giving and receiving critical feedback. On the other hand, there may be students from cultures in which critical feedback is universally accepted, practiced, expected and discussed.

Personal Appearance

Teachers/tutors may find that some students come from cultures in which dress and grooming are status symbols, while other students may believe that appearance is secondary to performance.



Work/Leisure

Some students may feel that they work to live and that leisure is considered essential for a full life. Money is for enjoying life. Other students may feel that they live to work and leisure is the reward for hard work. Money is often an end in itself.

Competition

Teachers/tutors may find students from a culture in which personal competition is avoided while others come from cultures where it is important to prove yourself in competitive situations.

Time

Some students may come from cultures in which time is a relative concept and deadlines are flexible. These students may believe that what is happening now is not more important than the future. Others may believe that deadlines and commitments are firm and that what is happening now is only important if it contributes towards the future.



Your Turn

Have you experienced another culture? How did it compare to your own? Take a minute to reflect on one of the eight key areas of cultural differences and how it relates to your own experience. Please write a brief written response.

This lesson is part of a full course entitled [Culture and English Language Learners](http://www.proliteracyednet.org/) offered by Proliteracy Education Network. To access this course go to the Proliteracy Education Network website <http://www.proliteracyednet.org/> and go to “*Instructors*” and “*Online Courses*” to enroll in the course.