

# Handout: Being an Effective Cultural Guide

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In the role of culture guide, you are helping students discover how American culture “works.” Together, you and your students will develop an awareness of each other’s cultures—both the similarities and the differences. Enjoy the process! The tips below may be useful as you think about culture and your role as tutor or teacher and guide.

## Tips on Being an Effective Culture Guide

### Recognize who you are as a culture guide (age, gender, life experience, personal likes and dislikes, etc.)

You may be an American, but you also are someone with your own individual cultural roles and experiences. Never pose as the only “real” American. Your own view may be going out of style. By the same token, students do not represent all people from their culture. Each person is unique. Avoid stereotyping.

### Learn as much about the student’s culture as you teach about your own.

This helps the student by reinforcing his or her own cultural identity as valid, and it helps you discover points of contrast. An easy way to learn about culture is to ask questions of each other and discuss the answers. “What is a friend in your country?” “What’s the best way to find a job in your country?” “What do you like about the United States? What don’t you like?” In this way, teacher and student function as mutual cultural guides/informants.

### Examine similarities as well as differences between the cultures.

Similarities bind us together. Differences help us see the many ways we solve universal problems. Both are important. Note the various things your cultures have in common, and explore (respectfully) the ways in which they differ.

### Explore cultural meanings found in words, phrases, and gestures.

For example, in the United States, there is a difference between referring to someone as “fat” or as “heavyset.” The side-to-side headshake is not a universal way to say “no,” nor does the “OK” sign with the thumb to forefinger have the same meaning in every culture. Colors, too, carry meanings that can vary across cultures. White is not always for the bride, and black is not always for mourning.

## **Encourage students to practice guessing what is or is not appropriate in the new culture.**

Examples: When are gifts expected? What is the right time to arrive for a party? How does one decline an invitation? What do Americans mean when they say, “See you later” or “How’s it going?”

## **Train yourself and the student to be prepared for expressions that are not meant to be taken literally or that have culture-specific meanings.**

For instance, the expression “Let’s get together sometime” does not necessarily mean that the speaker is inviting the listener to a specific engagement. Such invitations are sometimes mere expressions of politeness on a par with the standard “How are you?”

## **Take time to explore the student’s perceptions and conclusions by following up with an observation of your own or a question.**

When a student describes a situation he or she encounters, you could ask, “What does that mean to you?” or “What did you see going on?” Discussing an event with cultural overtones from the student’s life helps bring clarity about cultural issues. Sometimes, you may find students making generalizations about American culture (or other cultures that they encounter). Try to refute misinformation in a nonthreatening way. For example, ask, “Why do you think so?” and give the student a chance to explain what is meant. Try offering insights and information that might broaden the student’s perspective on the matter, and then tactfully move on to a new topic.

## **Avoid being judgmental toward yourself or the student.**

As you build mutual trust, you and the student will realize it’s OK to make mistakes in your interpretations of each other’s cultural behaviors.

## **Realize that forming a new identity in a new cultural setting is a matter of personal choice.**

You can set objectives for what you want to teach about culture. But students must be the ones to decide which parts of the new culture to adapt or adopt. One’s cultural identity is a personal work of art.

## **Be aware that students often experience major adjustment problems.**

Be supportive, but do not undertake major therapy. Your role is simply to facilitate cultural adjustment as best you can.

# Pre-Viewing Activity: Language Experience Approach (LEA)

Watch this 12 minute video: [The Language Experience Approach for ESL Reading: Part 1 \(Individual Learner\)](#)

What do you notice about the:

- tutor's body language?
- tutor's voice?
- story content?

