“Whose Rules?”

One activity, of which there are dozens of variations, is a very simplistic card game. This activity illustrates how we all play by rules, but when we enter into a new group, the rules may change completely!

1. Break your classroom into groups of 4–5 students. Give each group a deck of standard cards. Only give them the Ace–10 cards.
2. Distribute rules to each group. You can make your own rules up, or find a variety of rules online. Make sure you explain terms like “trump” to the players.

The rules could be something like the following:

a) Deal all cards to the players in the group. No one should look at their cards, but should stack them up in front of them face down.

b) In each round all players will play their top card. Whoever has the highest card wins that “trick.”

c) After seven rounds whoever has the most tricks wins. That person will move to the group on the right. The person that lost will rotate to the group on the left (assuming the groups are set up in a circle).

d) Now, here is the fun part. Before you distribute the rules, you need to modify them for each group. For example, for Group 1 you can say “Aces=1 point” but for Group 2 you can write “Aces=11 points.” You can also assign different suits for trump. Perhaps in Group 3 “Diamonds are trump cards.” Additionally, you should also explain how a tie (e.g. two people play the number 4) will be decided.

1. After the groups start playing, there should be no talking. The first round should go pretty smoothly because everyone knows the rules. However, after the first game the winner from Group 1 will go to Group 2 and the loser from Group 3 will go to Group 2. Now, when they play, they are assuming the rules are the same. However, when an Ace is played in Group 2, most of the group will think it is worth 11 points, but the new member from Group 1 will think it is worth 1 point. How will they deal with that discrepancy?

This activity illustrates that when you enter a new culture there are different rules you may be expected to abide by. What are some of the implicit rules ELLs may face in your classroom? How might they feel? Have you asked them?