



## Back-to-School Icebreakers for Multilingual Elementary Students

This activity list was generated on Claude AI, using the following prompt:

*Please create a list of back-to-school icebreakers that could be used with a class of multilingual elementary students. These icebreakers can include artwork, visuals, gestures, and “get-to-know-you” activities.*

This prompt was written by Lydia Breiseth, Director of Colorín Colorado. Lydia shares her notes below and throughout the document.

### Notes from Lydia:

- AI-generated materials should always be reviewed. Think of them as a first draft!
- Educators would need to determine which of these ideas, if any, would be appropriate for their class. If the ideas weren't a good fit, the prompt could be tweaked or rewritten. It could also specify language proficiency levels.
- While these examples do a nice job of incorporating students' cultures and languages, some of the activities are heavy on language, would require students to know each other already, and might work better later in the year. I would have come up with different ideas on my own, but there are also some ideas here I wouldn't have thought of. And I added my own idea just for fun! It's marked with an asterisk.
- I've put some highlighted notes that show my initial responses to these ideas — you may feel differently! However, it's meant to encourage ELL educators to trust their own instinct when reviewing AI-generated materials. Think of it as an AI mentor text.
- Remember that most AI tools are not created with ELLs in mind. The expertise of ELL educators really matters when creating and reviewing AI materials for use in ELL instruction. You know your students best!
- In some AI tools, you can download materials that you create. In this case, I downloaded this document, lightly edited it, re-formatted it, and added notes.
- Learn more about using AI in [Supporting ELL Instruction with AI: Ideas for Educators](#).



## Visual & Artistic Activities

### 1. Self-Portrait Name Tags

Students draw themselves on large name tags and write their names in both English and their home language (if written differently). They can add symbols or drawings that represent their interests or culture.

**[Lydia says:** There are some ideas throughout this list that would be nice additions to our article on [learning students' names](#). This makes me think that rewriting the prompt to focus on name activities might be a better topic for the beginning of the year than icebreakers.]

### 2. Cultural Flag Creation

Each student creates a personal flag using colors, symbols, and patterns that represent their family, culture, or interests. No words needed — just visual storytelling.

**[Lydia says:** While it's true that students could do this activity without much writing or speaking, they do need *some* words because they need to understand how to do the activity! It might be helpful for them to see a model or simple instructions translated into their language. And if we want to include language development as part of the activity, a graphic organizer or sentence frame might be a good starting point.]

### 3. "All About Me" Poster Collage

Students create collages using magazines, drawings, and photos to show their favorites: foods, animals, activities, colors. This works across all language levels.

**[Lydia says:** This could also be a digital activity using slides or other online platforms, and it would be another great spot for graphic organizers and sentence frames.]

### 4. Handprint Welcome Tree

Create a classroom tree where each student adds a handprint as a leaf, writing their name inside. Students can share what their name means or who they're named after.

### 5. Photo Scavenger Hunt

Give students cameras (or use tablets) to take pictures of things around school that interest them. Invite students to explain their choices through pictures and gestures.

\*If you don't have cameras or devices available, you could also provide photos of objects they need to find in the classroom or school as a way to help them get to know their surroundings.



## Movement & Gesture Activities

### 6. Human Bingo with Actions

Instead of reading clues, students demonstrate actions (hop on one foot, wiggle fingers, touch their nose) to find classmates who can copy the movement.

**[Lydia says:** I don't get this one! Do you? Clarification needed! 😊 **]**

### 7. Silent Birthday Line-Up

Students must line up in birthday order without speaking — only using gestures and finger counting. Great for practicing numbers and non-verbal communication.

**[Lydia says:** This might get confusing if students come from countries where the date is written in the **day/month/year** format.**]**

### 8. Emotion Charades

Students act out different emotions while others guess. This builds emotional vocabulary and helps everyone learn feeling words in multiple languages.

**[Lydia says:** This might be better to try a little later in the year when students have learned some social and emotional vocabulary.**]**

### 9. Cultural Dance Share

Invite students to teach simple movements from dances they know. Everyone tries each dance together, celebrating different cultural expressions.

**[Lydia says:** This sounds fun, but some students may feel shy about dancing in front of peers in the beginning of the year. On the other hand, some students may love it!**]**

### 10. Gesture Name Game

Each student creates a simple gesture or movement to go with their name. The class practices everyone's name-gesture combination.

**[Lydia says:** I'm not sure about this one, especially since different gestures mean different things across cultures.**]**



## Interactive Get-to-Know-You Games

### 11. Two Truths and a Picture

Students draw three pictures about themselves — two true, one false. Classmates guess which is the false picture through discussion and questioning.

**[Lydia says:** This might be better a few weeks into the school year when students feel more comfortable interacting with each other.]

### 12. Find Your Match

Give students cards with pictures (animals, foods, activities). They must find others with the same picture and learn something new about each person in their group.

**[Lydia says:** This would need clear instructions. Maybe a guided prompt would be better than “learn something new.”]

### 13. Compliment Web

Sitting in a circle, students roll a ball of yarn to someone while sharing something positive they noticed about that person (can be demonstrated or drawn if language is limited).

**[Lydia says:** This could be fun once students get to know each other more, although maybe not as a back-to-school icebreaker. This would be a nice addition to our article on [gratitude activities](#).]

### 14. Would You Rather? with Pictures

Present visual “would you rather” choices (beach or mountains, cats or dogs). Have students move to different sides of the room and share why they chose their selection in small groups.

**[Lydia says:** Language scaffolds and sentence frames would help so that the purpose of the activity is clear. “I would rather visit...” Or “I would rather have a \_\_\_\_ as a pet.” It would also be important to explain the sequence of the events: Choose, move, explain. Are they explaining to the people who chose the same thing or to peers in a different small group?]

### 15. Family Recipe Share

Students bring in pictures of favorite family foods or draw them. They share (verbally or through pictures) what makes this food special to their family.



## Collaborative Building Activities

### 16. Classroom Quilt

Each student decorates a paper square representing themselves. Combine all squares into a classroom quilt that celebrates everyone's uniqueness.

### 17. Story Chain with Pictures

Start a story with a picture, then each student adds a drawing to continue the story. The final product is a visual narrative created by the whole class.

### 18. Hopes and Dreams Tree

Students write or draw their hopes for the school year on paper leaves (in any language) and add them to a classroom tree display.

### 19. Time Capsule Predictions

Students draw pictures of what they think they'll learn or how they'll change this year. Seal predictions to open at the end of the school year.

### 20. Class Constitution Creation

Work together to create visual classroom rules using pictures and symbols. Students can contribute ideas in any language, then work together to create picture representations.

**[Lydia says:** These are great ideas! They would all need to include clear explanations and examples so that students understand the purpose of the activity. For example, what kinds of things could a student include on the quilt square? And what kind of story is the class making in the story chain? Are they making it up or is it something true that happened?]

## Tips for Success

- **Provide multiple ways to participate:** speaking, drawing, moving, or gesturing
- **Pair students strategically:** mix language abilities and personalities
- **Use visual supports:** pictures, gestures, and demonstrations for all instructions
- **Celebrate all languages:** encourage students to share words from their home languages
- **Keep groups small:** 3-4 students max for better participation
- **Have materials ready:** art supplies, cameras, props for easy transitions



- **Model everything first:** demonstrate activities clearly before students begin
- **Allow processing time:** give students time to think and plan before sharing

[Lydia says: This is a nice list of basic tips for teaching ELLs.]

### **Note added by Claude AI:**

I've created a comprehensive list of 20 icebreakers specifically designed for multilingual elementary students. These activities emphasize visual communication, movement, and creative expression to ensure all students can participate regardless of their English proficiency level.

The activities are organized into four categories: visual/artistic activities that let students express themselves through drawing and creation; movement and gesture activities that use body language and physical interaction; interactive games that build connections through shared experiences; and collaborative projects that bring the whole class together.

Each activity is designed to be inclusive and accessible, allowing students to participate through multiple modalities — whether they're more comfortable drawing, moving, gesturing, or speaking.

The tips section provides practical guidance for implementing these activities successfully with multilingual learners. Would you like me to expand on any particular activities or add more details about how to adapt them for different grade levels within elementary school?

[Lydia says: This explanation can be useful in terms of understanding what was generated. The user could use this information to continue to refine the prompt and improve the responses.]