E-Resource Center

FACULTY E-RESOURCES

Non-Native English Speaking Students (NNES) at CUNY

How do I know which of my students are non-native speakers of English?

A small percentage of NNES students at CUNY are flagged for placement in English as a Second Language (ESL) courses because the writing in their entrance exam indicated that they had a need for instruction from a professor with expertise in teaching English to non-native English speakers. In 2004, 10.8% of first-time CUNY freshmen in Associate's programs and 3.7% of freshmen in Baccalaureate programs were enrolled in ESL courses.* However, these numbers represent just a tiny fraction of the number of CUNY students who are non-native speakers of English. Some NNES students arrive at CUNY with language skills beyond the level of these classes (although still far from the academic English competency of the average native English-speaking college student); others come as graduate students or transfer students with enough credits to make them exempt from basic writing classes.

Non-native English speaking students at CUNY fall in three broad categories: foreign students, recent immigrants, and long-term U.S. resident English Language Learners. Some characteristics of these different types of NNES students are described below.

- **Foreign students**
  - received English language instruction and often attended college in their home countries;
  - are often less proficient in conversation than in writing;
  - come equipped with academic literacy skills but may not be familiar with the American academic conventions;

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- have a working knowledge of English syntax and grammar, as well as an understanding of how language works.

- **Recent immigrants**
  - arrived recently in this country and may not have received formal English training in their home countries;
  - have limited oral proficiency in English;
  - are not a homogeneous group; although they may begin their studies with the same low English proficiency, they differ greatly in their projected pace of academic English acquisition, depending on such socioeconomic factors as first language literacy and prior education.
- **Long-term U.S. resident English language learners (the Generation 1.5 students)**
  - have lived in the U.S. for 5-7 years or more and have spent years in mainstream classes in US schools;
  - may have even been born in this country but grew up speaking a language other than English with family and friends;
  - are orally proficient and often use varieties of English that are different from the English used in academic settings;
  - exhibit in their writing characteristics of both a first language other than English and varieties of English used outside of academic contexts.

It is important for CUNY professors and administrators to be particularly aware of the existence and the characteristics of these long-term resident students. In recent years, a higher percentage of Generation 1.5 NNES students have been matriculating at CUNY in relation to more traditional ESL students.*

Many NNES students at CUNY do not have a foreign transcript or the heavy accent typically associated with non-native English speakers. Their English language skills, however, may still be below the level of those necessary for

academic success. The process of learning English and developing academic literacy skills at the same time is complex and requires attention across the curriculum from faculty and support staff alike.

*(CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2004)

How has the population of NNES students at CUNY changed over time?

While the number of CUNY freshmen taking ESL courses has steadily declined over the past ten years, the incidence of NNES students has continued to remain high. In 1995, 18.4 percent of first-time CUNY freshmen in Baccalaureate programs and 19.6 percent of first-time freshmen in Associate programs were taking ESL classes; in 2004, the percentages had decreased to 3.7 percent for freshmen in Baccalaureate degree programs and to 10.8 percent for those in Associate degree programs.* Nevertheless, alternative NNES status indicators suggest that the number of NNES students entering CUNY has not, in fact, changed so significantly. Rather, it is the profile of NNES students at CUNY that has evolved over the past decade. In 2004, close to 60 percent of CUNY first-time freshmen reported that they spoke a language other than English at home. This percentage has remained relatively steady over the past ten years.*

The steady rate of students reporting speaking another language at home despite a decline in ESL enrollment signals that the NNES students who are currently entering CUNY belong to what is known as the 1.5 generation. They have lived here longer and have better fluency in spoken English. Yet many lack fully-developed English literacy. They may need extra language-related academic support in order to succeed in college but are overlooked for placement in ESL classes because of their oral English proficiency.

Certainly, not all Generation 1.5 CUNY students will require extra support for their English academic skills. The majority of students who grew up in bilingual households are "functional bilinguals;" they may need help with academic writing but not explicit ESL instruction. However, some are "incipient bilinguals," meaning they are in the process of acquiring English language skills, especially academic English, and will benefit from ESL support. In order to make sure that these students complete their coursework satisfactorily and graduate, administration and faculty alike need to be aware that many CUNY students are at different stages of developing their linguistic capabilities in English.

*(CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2004)

How long does it take to acquire academic English skills?

Acquiring academic English can take between 5 and 10 years, depending on the educational background of the student and his or her level of first language literacy. * Learners who arrive in the United States when they are younger than twelve years old, after receiving at least two to three years of schooling in their first language, generally reach the 50th percentile on reading and language arts tests after five to eight years. If learners arrive when they are older, as adolescents, they will most likely need seven to ten years to achieve equal levels of language proficiency with native-speaking peers. These are the students who are frequently identified as non-native speakers when they arrive at college and placed in ESL classes.

A student's understanding of language structures and level of reading ability in his or her first language are significant predictors of academic success in the student's second language. Therefore, students who arrive in this country when they are younger than six or seven years old are often the group of NNES students who are the least successful in achieving academic English proficiency. Students who came to the United States at a very young

age most likely were not formally educated in their first language and might have been moved out of ESL classes into mainstream public school classes before absorbing the background knowledge and attaining the level of language sophistication necessary to fully participate in these classes. As a result, many of these students permanently lag behind their native-speaker peers. This gap in achievement becomes most obvious in the upper grades or in college as the cognitive and academic demands of the curriculum increase.

*(Hartman, B. & Tarone, E. (1999). Preparation for College Writing: Teachers Talk About Writing Instruction for Southeast Asian American Students in Secondary School. In Harklau, L, Losey, K., and Siegal, M. (Eds.), *Generation 1.5 Meets College Composition* (99-118). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers)

What language-specific support do NNES students who have lived in the U.S. for many years and graduated from American high schools need in college?

Non-native English speaking students who have been educated in the US school system are sometimes referred to as **Generation 1.5 students,** a term that positions their linguistic and cultural identities on a continuum. These students often still need specialized language support during their time at college. They came to this country before receiving several years of formalized education in their first language, may have had interrupted schooling, and are often in the process of losing their first language while still acquiring their second. Their spoken English could be fluent, but their reading and writing skills may still need development due to a lack of academic instruction in their first language. Formal first language education and literacy play an important role in the academic success of NNES students because linguistic awareness, cognitive skills and conceptual knowledge - all

fundamental to academic language proficiency - can be transferred from a learner's first language to his or her second language.

Generation 1.5 students frequently arrive at college with academic and literacy skills well below the expectations of their professors. Although some of these students may consider English to be their dominant language, they most likely have not acquired the same extensive knowledge of the English language that a student who grew up in an English-speaking family would have. Moreover, because these students often have learned the language orally, they may leave out certain grammatical elements from their writing that are sometimes not stressed in spoken English. For example, they might drop final "–ed" or "–s" endings from words; they may use grammar that is particular to a dialect of English (e.g., "they was" instead of "they were.") The students' writing could also show signs of residual interference from a first language, such as the occasional missing "a," "an," or "the" in the writing of an Asian language speaker or an omitted subject from a Spanish speaker's sentence. Due to the influence of oral English in these students' language acquisition process, these students might write in a manner that is overly informal and conversational for many academic assignments.

In order to provide appropriate guidance to the substantial percentage of CUNY students who could be classified as Generation 1.5, professors must recognize that orally proficient NNES students are often learners of academic English. These students may lack the ability to discuss or respond to comments about their writing, and thus professors of mainstream courses must sometimes adjust their instructional language and teaching methods in order to help them learn. At the same time, these students might have no formal knowledge of grammar, so techniques and exercises often used in the ESL classroom must be modified as well.

There is no one mold that fits all NNES students. Some will flourish in the mainstream academic environment, while others will need such support from

their professors as clear, step-by-step instructions for assignments, study questions to accompany readings, and outlines of lectures. Some will need frequent visits to language-specific support services.

If I am not a language teacher, what can I do to help NNES students in my classes?

By taking time to read this site, you are taking a first step towards assisting your NNES students. Once you have identified the English language learners in your classes and maybe even determined where they are in the process of acquiring academic English, you might want to modify how you teach and interact with these students. For further information and advice on how to work effectively with NNES students, see Tips for Teaching NNES Students. Refer students who need extra academic support to the Student E-Resource Center website or to tutoring centers for English Language Learners at your college.