

Preparing to work with Non-Native English Speaking (NNES) students

Tutoring NNES students is a great experience for a tutor. You learn how to interact with people from diverse cultural and language backgrounds, and develop skills that will be valuable for any career you choose.



THIS UNIT WILL HELP YOU...

- ◆ Identify and work with different kinds of NNES students
- ◆ Find solutions for typical tutoring situations
- ◆ Communicate with NNES students who have difficulty speaking or understanding English
- ◆ Use notes and diagrams to help students understand and remember

Identifying and working with different kinds of NNES students

Q How do I know who is an NNES student?

It's not always obvious if someone is an NNES student. Some may have grown up in the United States and speak English well, but still have problems with writing and grammar.

A To identify NNES students:

Ask students who seem to have difficulty understanding or speaking English if they speak another language.

Note if they are not familiar with common vocabulary.

Check their writing for typical NNES student errors.



Q I'm not sure why a student got offended when I called him an *ESL student*.

Many NNES students who already finished ESL classes in elementary or high school see themselves as native speakers.

If they've lived in America for some time, they may not think of themselves as immigrants or even know a lot about the country their parents came from.

A To avoid labeling NNES students, treat each student as an individual:

Ask specific questions to identify NNES students, such as: *Do you speak another language?*

Let the student describe himself rather than assuming something about his background.

Avoid using labels like *ESL, non-native speaker, immigrant, or your country* unless the student uses these words.

Learn students' names. Have the student say his name. Try to connect his name to something about him.



Q Why do my tutoring sessions go well with some NNES students but not with others?

NNES students can have very different needs. Some are recent immigrants who are still learning to understand and speak English. Others can speak English well but need help with English grammar and writing.

A To understand NNES students' needs:

Observe how comfortable the student is using English.

Ask questions like: *Where did you go to high school? Have you studied English with a grammar book?*

Adjust your tutoring style depending on how well the student understands English or grammar.

Share ideas and techniques with other tutors who work with NNES students.

Situations and solutions

Q Some NNES students will say: *My English is fine. I don't really need help with that.* How should I respond?

NNES students who speak English well may not understand how they still need to improve their skills in academic reading and writing, and English grammar.

A **To work with students who are reluctant to get tutoring:**

Explain that you are tutoring academic skills. Academic writing and reading skills are important to every student and needed in a variety of subjects, from sociology to chemistry.

Make the student aware of her specific problems with comprehension, writing, and grammar.

Show her how to solve problems on her own.

Motivate the student by letting her know how improving her writing and grammar will help her be successful at school and in her career.



Q Students sometimes expect to finish their assignment in the session, but it's not possible. What should I do?

NNES students may need help with understanding the assignment, organizing and developing content, and correcting grammar. There may not be time in one session to help the student with all these needs.

A **To manage student expectations:**

Review the assignment at the start of the session to see what the student needs to do.

Prioritize what needs to be done with the student.

Make a plan for the session and share it with him.

Review at the end of the session what you've done and what the student still needs to finish.

Q If an NNES student expects me to do all the talking, what should I do?

Some NNES students come from countries where students don't speak up in the classroom or work with student tutors. They may not understand how the role of the tutor is not to lecture like a professor.

A **To work with students who only want you to talk:**

Explain that you are there to:

- **Help** with the student's questions.
- **Ask questions** to make sure your explanations are clear.
- **Show the student** how to work on her own.

Q What should I say to an NNES student who uses learning strategies that don't seem to work well?

Some NNES students may have been taught strategies in other countries (e.g., memorizing long sections of text) that worked in schools in their native country, but are not effective in the United States.

A **To encourage the student to use more effective learning strategies:**

Show him other strategies for studying and learning (e.g., remembering the main idea and key details).

Explain how different learning strategies will help him save time and get better grades.



Situations and solutions

Q I felt like one of my NNES students was rude, telling me what to do. How should I respond?

Some NNES students may not be completely familiar with the specific words and intonation used to make polite requests in English.

A **To handle an NNES student who may seem rude:**

Avoid assuming right away that the student intended to be rude.

Respond with a question that models a polite request, such as: *Were you asking if I could ...?*

Consider making the student aware of more polite forms if she repeatedly uses impolite language.

Use phrases such as: *I know you don't mean to be impolite, but when you say ... it can sound rude. It might be better if you said ... instead.*



Q How should I respond to an NNES student who constantly apologizes for making mistakes?

Many NNES may have done well in high school and are used to being seen as "good students." Now, they may feel like "bad students" because they need help with writing and with understanding academic reading material.

A **To help build students' self-esteem:**

Treat the student like a good student. Assume he can and wants to learn.

Start with positive feedback about specific ideas, paragraphs and sentences.

Treat mistakes as opportunities for learning.



Q How can I make sure NNES students get help in group tutoring?

Tutoring groups can include non-native students from different language backgrounds, as well as native students. Each student can have different needs.

A **To address the needs of each student in a group:**

Establish a respectful environment where students are not judged for the way they speak.

Speak so everyone can understand. Talk slowly and clearly, and avoid idioms or slang.

Choose a common area to work on, such as a textbook chapter or paragraph development.

Make sure you call on NNES students so native speakers don't dominate.

Take turns working on different students' questions or work.

Communicating with NNES students who have difficulty speaking or understanding English

Q How should I communicate with NNES students who don't seem to understand me or have difficulty speaking English?

Some NNES students may have difficulty understanding tutors who speak quickly or use idioms or slang. Others may still be acquiring fluency in English.

A Help the student express herself and be understood:

Make small talk with the student the first time you meet so you can become familiar with the way she speaks.

Ask the student to explain if you don't understand what she says.

- **Avoid asking:** *Can you repeat that?* (She will just repeat what you didn't understand.)
- **Instead, say:** *I didn't quite understand that. Could you explain that in another way?*



Speak to the student so she can understand you:

Look at the student while you are speaking.

Focus on key points. Avoid talking for too long or using too many words.

Speak slower and more clearly. Emphasize key words by pausing or stressing the words.

Avoid using idioms or slang with students new to the United States. For example, instead of saying *go over* the paper, say *review* the paper.

Check to make sure the student understands you:

Tell the student to ask you to stop if anything is unclear.

Give the student time to summarize what you have said instead of just asking, *Did you understand that?* (The student may say *yes* even if she does not understand.)

Explain in a new way if the student has not understood you. Avoid just repeating what you said.

Create notes so the student can more easily understand and remember your explanations.

Using notes and diagrams to help students understand and remember

Q Some NNES students seem to get lost or forget what we went over. How can I help them remember key points?

All students, but especially NNES students with some difficulty understanding English, may have trouble remembering your explanation without written notes.

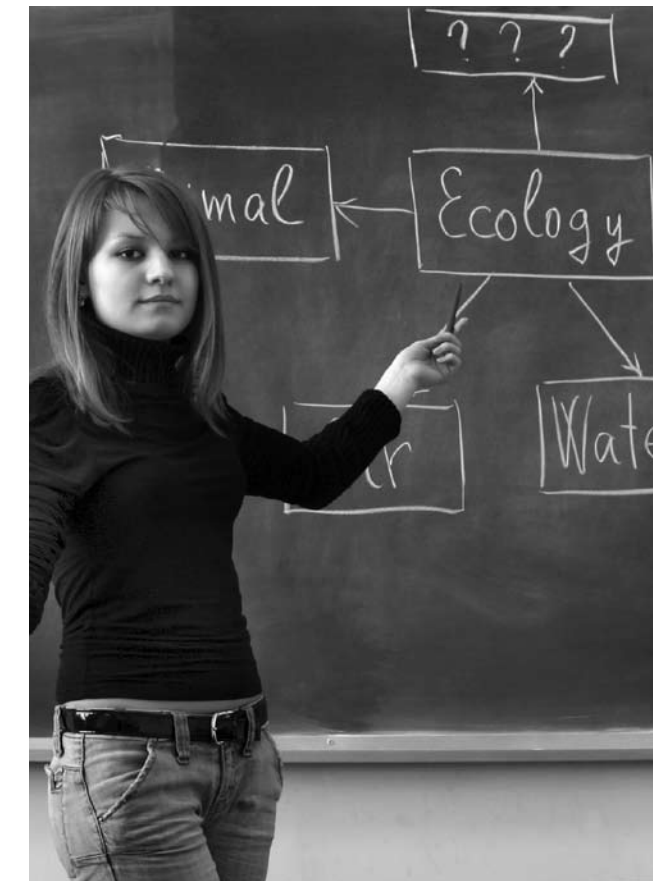
A Create notes that the student can take with him:

Write down important words, definitions, explanations, and instructions.

Use diagrams and charts to help explain a process or a set of related ideas.

Underline and make notes in textbook sections that relate to your explanation.

Encourage and give the student time to take notes on his own once you've shown him how.



? UNIT 2 QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Think about ways you've used to identify NNES students when tutoring. Then, list some new techniques you've learned to recognize NNES students.
2. List some situations in the past where you had some problems working with an NNES student. What was the problem? What did you do? How did the student respond? Then, consider how you might avoid these difficulties in the future.
3. What are some techniques of adjusting your speech so NNES students can understand you better?