

Tutoring Non-Native English Speaking (NNES) students in academic subjects

Lectures and readings in academic subjects often include background information about American culture, difficult vocabulary, and ways of organizing information that may be confusing for some NNES students. Providing these students with background knowledge, as well as strategies for building vocabulary, reading, and taking notes is important.



THIS UNIT WILL HELP YOU...

- ◆ Recognize and address gaps in NNES students' background knowledge
- ◆ Assist students with unfamiliar vocabulary
- ◆ Develop NNES students' note-taking skills
- ◆ Provide strategies for reading in college courses

Recognizing and addressing gaps in NNES students' background knowledge

If NNES students were raised and educated in their native country, they may be less familiar with aspects of American culture and topics studied in U.S. schools. Providing students with this background knowledge will help them better understand college material.

Become aware of how lacking background knowledge can affect NNES students:

Many lectures, books, and articles that NNES students need to understand refer to background knowledge they may not have.

Avoid assuming that students who grew up in another country will be as familiar with American history and culture as students who grew up in the United States.

Look and listen for references to American history and culture in books, articles, and lectures to become more aware of how common they are.

Ask students about difficulties they have understanding references to background knowledge so you can better appreciate the frustrations they have.

NNES STUDENTS EDUCATED IN OTHER COUNTRIES

May know less about:

- American history
- American culture

But may know more than other students about:

- Current events around the world
- The history and literature of their native country and other parts of the world

HOW MISSING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE CAN AFFECT NNES STUDENTS

Notice how many references to background knowledge about American culture are included in these two sentences from a newspaper article.

Social Conformity
Traditional Housewife
Suburban Family

When I entered college in **1969**, women were bursting out of **the 50s**, shedding **girdles, padded bras** and conventions. Women were once again imitating men and acting all independent: smoking, drinking, wanting to earn money and thinking they had the right to be sexual, this time protected by **the pill**.

Political Protests
Rights for Women & Minorities
Sexual Liberation

1950s
Restrictive Fashion
Social Restrictions for Women

Adapted from Maureen Dowd, "Are Men Necessary: When Sexes Collide," *NY Times*, October 30, 2005.

What would happen when an NNES student without background knowledge reads this passage?

The student **would probably not look up many words** (e.g., *padded bras*) because she **wouldn't realize that they referred to important background information**.

If she did **look up a word:**

- She might **not find it** in the dictionary (e.g., the 50s).
- She would **find the literal definition** (e.g., *a girdle is an elastic piece of underwear for women worn around the waist and bottom to shape the body*) **but not the cultural associations** (girdles are a symbol of how women had much less freedom in the 1950s).

Identify the specific background knowledge the student needs:

NNES students may not understand a reading because they don't have the background knowledge.

Have the student summarize the main points to see how much she has understood.

Ask her to underline the words, phrases and references she does not understand.

Make sure she understands other terms that refer to background knowledge.

Help the student get the background knowledge she needs:

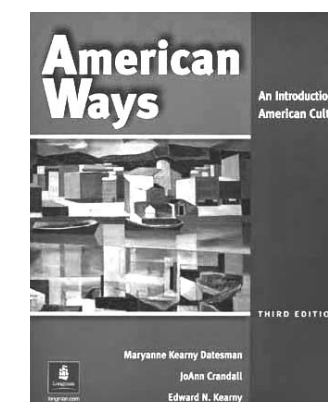
It's more effective to give students a broad understanding of the topic first, rather than focusing on every word the student doesn't know.

Explain the background behind groups of related words rather than defining each word (e.g., *the 50s* and *girdles* both refer to traditional roles for women).

Ask questions to check that the student understands the background information you explained.

Direct the student to reliable sources such as encyclopedias, ESL learner dictionaries, books about American culture (written in their native language or in English), as well as professors and knowledgeable peers.

See Section: *Resources for tutoring NNES students* (p. 38).
See Worksheets: *Building background knowledge*.



Assisting students with unfamiliar vocabulary

Both native and non-native English speaking students encounter new terminology and difficult academic language in their college readings. In addition to learning this new vocabulary, some NNES students also need to become familiar with everyday expressions, idioms, and metaphors that are second nature to native speakers.

Focus on the words that the student really needs to understand the reading:

NNES students can become overwhelmed by all the unfamiliar words and phrases they encounter in college texts. This prevents them from understanding the central idea of a passage.

Ask the student to explain the main points of the reading.

Have him underline any difficult words that are preventing him from explaining these points.

Identify other words causing him problems in summarizing the main points.

Explain how these words are used in the reading and check that he understands by having him use them in sentences related to the reading.

Move on to important details, explaining difficult words.

“ Reassure students that they don’t need to know every word in order to understand the main idea of a text. ”

Help the student discover the meaning of words on her own:

To develop students’ study skills and independence, show them that the text itself has clues that can help them figure out the meaning of a new word or phrase.

Teach the student how to use clues in the text such as definitions, examples, paraphrases, and contrasting words to guess the meaning of new words and expressions.

Direct her to look for signs of definitions, synonyms or paraphrases (e.g., dashes, parentheses, and commas, and words such as *is*, *means*, and *refers to*).

Have her break down a longer word into parts by underlining them (*un* *defeat* *able*), so she can more easily discover its meaning.

Show her how to use ESL learners’ dictionaries for clear concise definitions, and easy to understand examples.

See Section: Resources for tutoring NNES students (p. 38).
See Worksheet: Using a dictionary.

Explain the meaning of vocabulary that is difficult to guess or look up:

When words and expressions are difficult to guess or look up, it is appropriate to explain their meaning to the student.

Explain how the vocabulary item is used in the text in simple, clear language.

Give examples of how the word or phrase is used in different contexts as well, especially if the word is used in an unusual way in the text.

Use an ESL learner’s dictionary to help you find clear explanations and examples of words and idioms (common phrases).

Ask the student to rephrase the definition in her own words and use the word or phrase in an example.

See Section: Resources for tutoring NNES students (p. 38).

NOTICING EXPRESSIONS NNES STUDENTS MAY HAVE DIFFICULTY UNDERSTANDING

Notice the highlighted expressions in the academic excerpt below.

Think about how difficult it would be to understand these expressions by using a regular dictionary.

In general, research is a **sloppy** process. Researchers’ hunches or **gut-level intuitions** often **come into play**. Experimenters make **false starts** based on bad guesses. They often **wind up** doing experiments the right way for the wrong reasons **or vice versa**.

Adapted from David W. Martin, *Doing Psychology Experiments* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000), 109.

Familiarize students with vocabulary building strategies:

There are specific strategies that can help NNES students learn new vocabulary more efficiently and effectively.

Point out that they can acquire vocabulary quickly if they read about familiar subjects in articles and books that use advanced vocabulary.

Suggest vocabulary building books related to the subject they are studying (e.g., *Building a Medical Vocabulary*).

Encourage students to keep a record of this newly found vocabulary.

Advise students to review words in context, grouping related words and using them in sentences.

See Worksheets: Building vocabulary.



Developing NNES students' note-taking skills

In order to take good notes, a student must know how to record and categorize information quickly. Because some NNES students are still developing their English fluency, they might need more specific guidance for note taking than native speakers.

Give the student general tips for becoming a faster, more effective note taker:

When taking notes during lectures and while reading, NNES students sometimes use time inefficiently by writing out every word or miss key concepts by fixating on unfamiliar words.

Tell the student to focus on informational words such as nouns, verbs and adjectives, and avoid writing out full sentences for notes.

Practice paraphrasing with the student and explain how this will help him remember the material better.

Show the student how to use abbreviations and symbols to take notes more quickly.

Help the student develop ways of organizing and categorizing notes (e.g., by topic or author) so it will be easy to retrieve them.

See Section: *Providing strategies to NNES students for reading in college courses* (pp. 21-27).

See Online Exercises: *Learning how to take better notes* and *Practice note taking*.

SHOWING STUDENTS HOW TO USE ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS IN NOTES

Climate change will lead to increased economic destabilization in Third World countries.

Clim change → ↑ econ destabil 3rd Wld countries.

Familiarize the student with good note-taking strategies for lectures:

An NNES student may be overwhelmed by the amount of information presented in class and intimidated by new vocabulary. She might only write down what she understands.

Encourage the student to pay close attention to the beginning of the lecture. The professor will often give an outline for the lecture in the introduction.

Break down the note-taking process into steps to take before, during, and after class.

Tell the student to leave blanks in her notes for words and phrases she does not understand, and to fill these in later by asking fellow students.

See Worksheet: *Taking lecture notes*.

STRATEGIES TO GIVE NNES STUDENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL NOTE TAKING

BEFORE CLASS:	DURING CLASS	AFTER CLASS
Complete pre-class reading assignment. Pair up with a classmate as a study partner.	Note down key terms that the professor writes on the board. Ask questions in class for clarification. Listen for cues that signal important information.	Read through class notes and make necessary additions or changes. Compare notes with class study partner.

Providing strategies to NNES students for reading in college courses

Because readings used in college courses (such as textbooks, newspaper articles, and fiction) are all organized differently, NNES students who may not be familiar with these texts can benefit from strategies for reading and extracting information from them.

Strategies for reading newspaper and magazine articles

NNES students need to be aware of how newspaper and magazine articles organize information and use strategies to find and record that information efficiently.

Show the student ways to find the main idea if headlines are confusing:

Because headlines often use an abbreviated style, some NNES students may have difficulty understanding them.

Reassure the student that he can find the main idea even if the headline is confusing.

Direct him to the sentence under the headline (if there is one) to find the main idea. It is often more clearly stated than the headline.

Help him find the main points in the article if there is no sentence under the headline.

HELPING STUDENTS FIND THE MAIN IDEA IN NEWSPAPER AND MAGAZINE ARTICLES

IF THE STUDENT IS READING:	TELL HIM TO FIND THE MAIN POINTS:
A news article about a specific event (e.g., a law providing financial aid passed)	In the first or second paragraph
An article about a general subject (e.g., how students pay for their education)	After the example that often begins the article. Sometimes, names of groups like <i>students, parents,</i> and <i>schools</i> will help the student find the main idea.
An editorial or opinion article (e.g., an editorial supporting more spending on education)	Near the beginning or the end of the editorial. Supporting points can often be found after transition words like <i>first, in addition, and also</i> .

Show the student how to quickly find key details:

Key details can be harder to find in newspaper articles because they are not always highlighted as they are in textbooks. However, clues in the text can help students locate these details.

First have the student identify the main points so she can focus on looking for the details that support those points.

Show her how to use clues such as numbers, dates, and names of people and places to locate key details.

Explain how to use charts and graphs to find important facts and statistics.

See Section: *Strategies for reading and interpreting graphs* (p. 23).

Strategies for reading textbooks

To use textbooks effectively, NNES students need to know how they are organized and learn how to highlight text and take notes to retain key information.

Show the student how to use the organization and layout to identify important points:

Some NNES students have difficulty finding the main points in textbooks because they are not familiar with the way information is structured.

Demonstrate how the introductory text can help the student predict the content of the chapter.

Encourage the student to use the chapter summary as a guide to what is important.

Show him how the review questions can direct him to the important points of the chapter.

See Online Exercises: *Reading your textbook*.

Point out to the student how important information is typically presented in textbooks:

An NNES student may not always be aware of some of the language or formatting that is used to identify important information in a textbook.

Thus, analysts who support power-elite theory say that the United States is dominated by a **military-industrial complex**, the close association of the federal government, the military, and defense industries.

Adapted from John J. Macionis, *Sociology* (3rd ed.) (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), 453.

Make the student aware that bold and italics are used to emphasize important words and phrases.

Point out clues introducing definitions (e.g., a comma after a highlighted word) or listing examples (e.g., the words *for example* or *such as*).

Explain how charts and graphs provide useful visual illustration of key concepts.

Help the student develop techniques for emphasizing and noting important information:

Even when students initially understand the material, they may not be aware of techniques that can help them focus on what they need to recall.

Demonstrate how to highlight important points and sub-points using different color highlighters to indicate different categories of information.

Show the student how to create notes and outlines based on the highlighted text.



Provide the student with strategies for reviewing key information:

Since many words in textbooks may be new for NNES students, it is especially important for these students to review material effectively so they can recall it for tests and future classes.

Suggest that the student read aloud and repeat important terms and definitions; this method is especially helpful for ear-learners.

Tell him to use index cards to write down key terms, phrases or concepts so that he can review them easily and frequently.

Encourage him to come up with possible questions for a test and answer them. This will help him have a better grasp of the material.

Encourage him to join study groups and discuss the material.

See Online Exercises: *Reading your textbook*.

Strategies for reading and interpreting graphs and charts

It's helpful to introduce NNES students to terms used to discuss graphs and charts, as well as the skills needed to understand and interpret them.

Help the student understand the subject and purpose of the chart or graph:

NNES students may immediately focus on words they do not understand instead of first trying to understand what the graph is about.

Start with the title and ask the student to tell you what the chart is about. Explain it yourself if necessary.

Discuss the type of data being presented in the chart, using the legend.

Help the student identify the purpose of the chart (e.g., to compare two sets of data, to show change over time).

Have the student describe what the chart is illustrating.

Provide vocabulary for describing charts if necessary.

Help the student avoid making common mistakes while reading graphs:

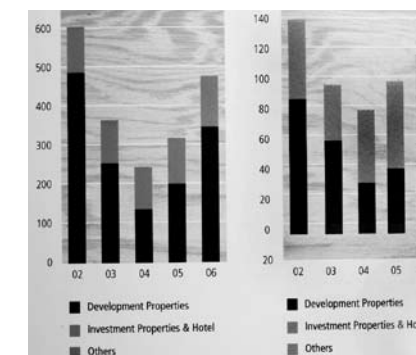
Because numbers in charts and graphs can refer to percentages, dates, etc., it is easy to make mistakes reading graphs, especially for NNES students who may not be familiar with the terms used.

Advise the student to study the graph carefully and to read all labels before she starts answering questions.

Make sure the student does not confuse numbers and percentages.

Tell her to focus on the actual units used, such as millions vs. billions.

See Worksheets: *Understanding and interpreting graphs*.



Strategies for understanding academic journals

Because academic journals are lengthy and written in complex language, it's helpful to provide NNES students with ways to effectively read and understand them.

Show the student where to find the information he needs:

Some NNES students become frustrated when reading journal articles because they may read them from the first to the last page instead of focusing on the sections that their assignment requires.

■ **Abstract** The Internet is a critically important research site for sociologists testing theories of technology diffusion and media effects, particularly because it is a medium uniquely capable of integrating modes of communication and forms of content. Current research tends to focus on the Internet's implications in five domains: 1) inequality (the "digital divide"); 2) community and social capital; 3) political participation; 4) organizations and other economic institutions; and 5) cultural participation and cultural diversity. A recurrent theme across domains is that the Internet tends to complement rather than displace existing media and patterns of behavior. Thus in each domain, utopian claims and dystopic warnings based on extrapolations from technical possibilities have given way to more nuanced and circumscribed understandings of how Internet use adapts to existing patterns, permits certain innovations, and reinforces particular kinds of change. Moreover, in each domain the ultimate social implications of this new technology depend on economic, legal, and policy decisions that are shaping the Internet as it becomes institutionalized. Sociologists need to study the Internet more actively and, particularly, to synthesize research findings on individual user behavior with macroscopic analyses of institutional and political-economic factors that constrain that behavior.

SHOW THE STUDENT HOW TO READ JOURNAL ARTICLES EFFICIENTLY

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>1 Have the student read the Abstract first to quickly find out what the article is about.</p> | <p>Help him find the key parts of the abstract (e.g., the objective, the results).</p> |
| <p>2 Have him read the Introduction next to understand the context of the study—what other studies have found, what information is still lacking, and what the study plans to discover.</p> | <p>Point out how the introduction is organized from general to specific:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Summary of previous research</i>
<i>What information is lacking</i>
<i>Purpose of study</i></p> |
| <p>3 Suggest he read the Discussion next to get a more detailed description and analysis of the results—the answer to the research question.</p> | <p>Show him how to locate the main findings by looking for words used in the abstract to describe the results.</p> |
| <p>4 Advise him to look at the Methods and Results last. Tell him to read this closely if the focus of the assignment is on how the study was conducted. Otherwise, let him know it is fine to skim this section.</p> | <p>Have him scan to find the Methods and Results sections. Sometimes there are separate headers for these sections.</p> |

Help the student summarize key information from the article in her own words:

The quantity and complexity of language in journal articles can make it difficult for NNES students to focus on the most important information. Summarizing the main ideas in more comprehensible language can help students efficiently retrieve what they need from these articles.

Help the student break down some of the complicated sentences into more manageable parts.

Rephrase long nouns (e.g., glass crack growth rates) using verbs to describe actions (e.g., how quickly cracks in glass grow).

Explain unfamiliar vocabulary using an Advanced Learner's ESL Dictionary (available at <http://dictionary.cambridge.org>).

Have the student take notes in a worksheet, summarizing the objective, results, and other important information.

See Worksheet: *Taking notes from a journal article.*

Strategies for understanding primary sources

Primary sources, such as speeches and original research, can be difficult for some NNES students to read because these sources often use complex language and refer to an unfamiliar social or historical situation.

Help the student focus on the key information:

Reading and understanding primary sources can also be challenging for NNES students because the information is often not organized as clearly as a textbook.

Discuss the background of the document with the student: the author, the purpose, the audience, and the social context.

Advise the student to read about the document in reference books (e.g., encyclopedias, reliable web sites, and history textbooks) before studying the primary source.

Provide him with a worksheet to take notes about the important information.

See Worksheet: *Taking notes from a primary source document.*

Help the student decipher language that she is unable to understand on her own:

Since primary sources are often written in a style from another time, they can be especially difficult for NNES students to comprehend.



Help the student break down complicated sentences into manageable portions, and then rephrase them.

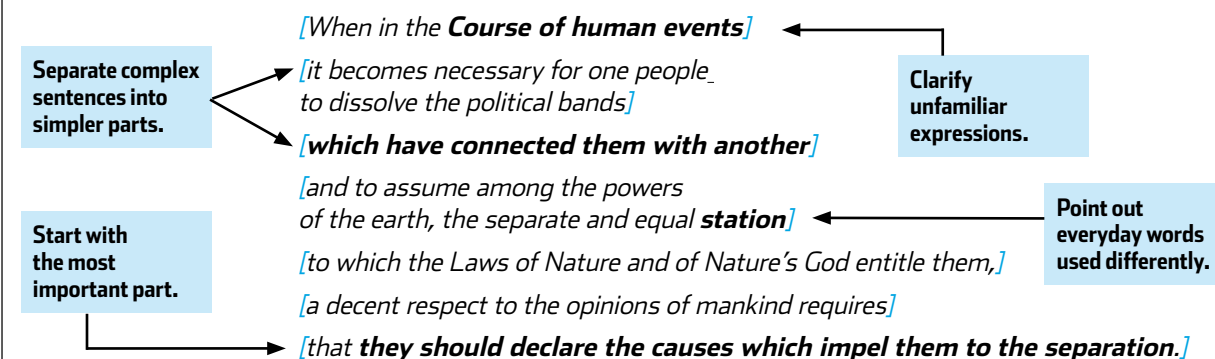
Provide her with the meanings of unfamiliar or obsolete words or expressions.

Point out different meanings of everyday words in older texts.

HELPING AN NNES STUDENT UNDERSTAND THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Explain the historical background first

- Written in **1776** when **people in America** were **ruled by the King of Great Britain**.
- Expressed the views of **Americans** who **wanted to form their own country**.



Strategies for reading fiction

NNES students may need help understanding the many cultural references, conversational idioms and sophisticated words often used by authors of fiction. Providing this help will enhance their understanding.

Help the student understand the social and cultural background of the work:

Background knowledge includes an awareness of any important events, people, or ideas that the author makes reference to.

Ask questions to find out what the student knows about the social and cultural setting of the work.

Explain the social and cultural references (e.g., important ideas, events, people, and places) that the student is not familiar with, and how they relate to the story.

Direct the student to sources (e.g., encyclopedias, history textbooks) where the student can learn more about social and cultural references in the work.

See Section: *Recognizing and addressing gaps in students' background knowledge* (pp. 16-17).

Provide the student with help and strategies for unfamiliar language:

Works of fiction use a wide range of vocabulary, from conversational expressions to very sophisticated words. NNES students need to learn a variety of strategies to understand the diverse vocabulary in fictional works.

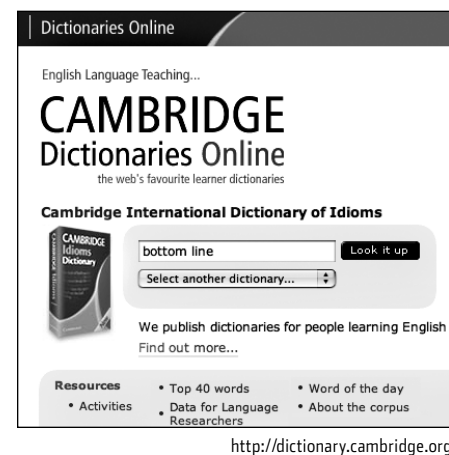
Suggest that the student only look up key words that are really necessary for understanding the work.

Explain how to guess the meaning of words from the context of the paragraph or from the parts of the word.

Introduce the student to different ESL dictionaries for idioms, phrasal verbs, and advanced vocabulary (available at <http://dictionary.cambridge.org>).

Explain the meanings of important idioms, slang, and figures of speech that the student is not familiar with (use an ESL dictionary if helpful).

See Section: *Assisting students with unfamiliar vocabulary* (pp. 18-19).



Give the student strategies for remembering the key information in the text:

Fictional works often have a great deal of information and language. Capturing key ideas in notes and diagrams can help NNES students focus on the most important information.

Suggest that the student read a summary of the story before reading the work so she can more easily follow the story and guess unfamiliar words better.

Show her how to create a plot outline or timeline, using key words to summarize the main events, including when and where they happened.

Have the student make a character list or diagram to better remember the main characters, their qualities, their role in the story, and how they change.

Help the student discover the theme:

NNES students educated in other countries may not have analyzed themes in the same way as students educated in U.S. high schools. For these students, it is useful to explain how to infer the theme of the story from the plot, setting, and characters.

Have the student first summarize the plot, the setting, and the key characters.

Explain and give examples of a theme or message of a story, and how it is different from the plot.

Point out how the theme of a story is influenced by the prevailing social and cultural issues, as well as the ideas of the time when it was written.

Ask guiding questions to help the student discover how the plot, setting, and characters communicate a larger idea or theme.

HELPING A STUDENT DISCOVER THE THEME

Read this dialogue to see how the tutor asks questions to help the student find the theme of a work of fiction.

Notice how the tutor leads the student from the specific plot to the more general theme.

- T:** What do you think is one of the important themes of Tolstoy's story, "The Death of Ivan Illich"?
- S:** I'm not sure. Is it that the main character realizes that in his life he only thought about himself.
- T:** Actually, that's more the plot – what specifically happens in the story—not the general idea or theme. What helped him to see his life more clearly? What finally opened his eyes?
- S:** Maybe he thought about his life during his illness. He thought about all the mistakes he made.
- T:** Right. A serious illness helped Ivan Illich see his life clearly. What does that say about life in general.
- S:** People's eyes are opened when they suffer. They understand things better.
- T:** Good. That's a very important theme of the story.



UNIT 3 QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. While tutoring NNES students, what problems have students had because they lacked some background knowledge? How could you help students with similar problems in the future?
2. Some NNES students are overwhelmed by all the vocabulary they do not understand. How could you help them focus on learning the most important words?
3. What techniques could you use to find out if an NNES student is using the most efficient strategies for reading a text? How would you encourage the student to try a new strategy if it were more effective?