

Non-Native English Speaking (NNES) students at CUNY

An Introduction

Almost two out of five first-time freshmen at CUNY (38.2%) identify themselves as non-native speakers of English. These students have very diverse backgrounds, experiences, and needs, but they have all learned English as a second (or third or fourth) language.



THIS UNIT WILL...

- ◆ Help you understand the term “Non-Native English Speaking” (NNES) students
- ◆ Introduce you to NNES students at CUNY

Understanding the term “Non-Native English Speaking” (NNES) students

“Non-Native English Speaking” (NNES) students are students who learned another language before they learned English. They often speak their first language at home, while using English in school.

- NNES students are also referred to as “English as a Second Language” (ESL) students or “English Language Learners” (ELLs).
- They may need to develop skills in reading, writing, or understanding academic English.
- If they came to the United States recently, they may also need to learn more about American culture.

NNES students at CUNY

NNES students at CUNY differ in many ways.

These students could:

- Have grown up in **another country** **or** in the **United States**
- Know **all** about life in the United States, **or** **very little**
- Speak English like a **native speaker** **or** **have trouble** expressing themselves
- Have learned English mostly from **books** **or** from talking with their **peers**
- Have advanced **academic skills** **or** still need **help studying** for college

They might think of themselves as being:

- A **non-native** English speaker **or** a **native** speaker
- American, another nationality** (e.g., Chinese) **or** **both** (e.g., Chinese-American)



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Read about the following four NNEs students.

Think about students you have tutored and whether they share any similarities with these students.

ANNA

I don't even really know why my teacher said I need help with my English. I was only in ESL for a couple of years. I mean, I got all As and Bs in high school, and my teachers never marked my papers like they do now.

Anna came to the United States at about age 4 and attended NYC public schools. She is bilingual, sounds like a native English speaker, and knows all about life in NYC.

Because Anna is an ear learner (she learned English mainly through listening instead of reading), she writes like she speaks, so her writing is often too informal for academic papers. She needs help organizing and developing the ideas in her papers. She makes mistakes, such as leaving off *-ed* and *-s* endings, and misspells words that sound alike, such as *aloud* instead of *allowed*.

SAM

I'm doing OK in my classes and understand most of what my professors say, but I have trouble speaking up in class. When I do, people don't seem to understand me. Also, I'm really having trouble with my writing. I can't seem to write what I mean.

Sam came to the United States in the ninth grade and then started attending NYC public schools. In his native country he was a good student, wrote well in his first language and acquired good study skills.

Sam is a serious and motivated student; however, since he came to the United States, he has mostly interacted with people who speak his first language, so he is not as fluent as Anna and is sometimes a bit difficult to understand. He is not familiar with idiomatic expressions and lacks some background knowledge of American culture. Sam does well with grammar exercises, but his writing still contains grammar mistakes and awkward phrases. His papers are fairly well organized; however, he has trouble expressing his thoughts, opinions and complex ideas in writing.

ALEX

I can speak OK, but I can't write too well! I don't really know where to begin; all I know is I need a lot of help with my English.

When Alex came to the United States he was placed in the fifth grade in a NYC public school, even though he had only received a third-grade education in his native country. Also, because he left his country while still in elementary school, he did not gain a strong background in reading, writing or grammar in his first language. As a result, there are many gaps in his education. Alex only began learning English when he came to the United States. He can handle everyday conversations but has a lot of trouble discussing academic topics.

Alex is eager to do well at college. However, he feels overwhelmed at times, and his lack of academic skills prevents him from progressing as quickly as he would like to. He is not that familiar with some academic topics discussed in college and needs a lot of help with brainstorming and developing his ideas as well as with organization and study skills in general. Alex never studied grammar, so he has a hard time understanding grammar terms and concepts.

JEN

I just want you to fix my grammar. The content of my paper is good; it doesn't need any changes.

Jen, who recently arrived in the United States, received a very good education in her country. Even though she is a confident student, she is less comfortable speaking and has a stronger accent than other NNEs students.

Jen has only been here for a short time and therefore is not familiar with idiomatic expressions. However, she knows more about academic topics, world history and current events than other NNEs students. Jen learned English primarily through reading and writing, and though she still makes some grammar mistakes, she is very comfortable with grammar terms and concepts and prefers to focus on grammar mistakes rather than on writing issues. Her writing does contain complex and well-thought-out ideas. However, her papers can be hard to follow. This may be because she learned to write in her country in a style that differs from the American style.



UNIT 1 QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Can you describe how you have identified NNEs students in the past? After reading this unit, can you think of some new ways to identify NNEs students?
2. Can you recall some tutoring strategies you have used with NNEs students? Have you used different strategies for NNEs students with different backgrounds and needs?
3. An NNEs student comes to your tutoring center and says that she is not doing well in some of her classes. You are surprised because she speaks English fluently. What kinds of problems do you think she may be having with her class work? How can you help her?