

# TIPS FOR TEACHING

## Non-Native English Speaking Students



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# TIPS FOR TEACHING NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKING STUDENTS

## INTRODUCTION

The following information is used with the permission of Margareta Larsson, Lecturer of Applied Linguistics and ESL at Georgia State University. Wilmington University appreciates her willingness to share her knowledge on teaching non-native English speaking students.

Today's university students come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and many are non-native English speakers (NNES). Teaching these students can present puzzling challenges. Some students, for example, do well on tests but rarely speak in class; when they do speak, they may be difficult to understand. Others may be vocal and sound native-like but struggle with academic reading and writing tasks.

NNES students tend to fall into two categories: (1) international students who completed their secondary education in another country and (2) residents who have U.S. high school degrees but who may speak a language other than English outside the classroom. International students are often more challenged by listening and speaking in English than by writing and reading. NNES residents are generally comfortable with conversational English but may be challenged by academic tasks. Mastering the language of academia requires time, especially for tasks performed in real-time, such as note-taking, in-class discussions, and writing against time limits. To help NNES students succeed, professors need not revamp their teaching style, but modifications can help.

The following suggestions are based on observations from teachers in Georgia State University's ESL Credit Program and the Intensive English Program; from surveys of NNES students at Georgia State University; and from advice compiled from teaching centers of other U.S. universities.

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## PARTICIPATING IN CLASS

The ideal American student is one who enthusiastically yet thoughtfully participates in class discussions and group work; is well prepared for classes and tests; writes clearly and succinctly following academic conventions; and is both friendly and respectful. Many students entering the university don't fit this ideal; however, NNES students may have particular trouble fitting in.



The typical “learner-centered” classroom, in which students are expected to be active participants in the learning process, might be very foreign to NNES students. This is especially true for those coming from more teacher-centered learning environments where asking questions or expressing opinions during class is not the norm. Also, formulating a question or expressing an opinion invariably takes longer in a second language.

Simply telling students that participation is important may not be enough to encourage it. It is therefore essential to be patient and accept that some students' means of participation is different and may take time to change.

*In-class strategies to increase NNES student participation:*

- Allow time for students to formulate a response. Wait a little longer (three to five seconds; this is hard, but try counting 1001, 1002, 1003...) after posing a question before calling on a student. Because other students in the class may be uncomfortable with the extended wait time (and will try to fill the silence with their own response), you may need to explain that you would like to allow a few seconds for all students to formulate their thoughts before responding.
- Avoid asking an NNES student whom you have difficulty understanding to repeat, as it might be just as difficult to understand the same words a second time. Ask them instead to restate their answers or write down the key words and have a classmate read it aloud, or ask another student to summarize or paraphrase what was said.
- Pause during the lecture and ask, “What questions do you have at this point?” Don't wait until the end of a lecture to ask. And don't forget to wait for the questions.
- Ask direct and specific questions, questions whose answers require the knowledge you want your students to have.



*Strategies to use before/after class:*

- Assign discussion questions as homework so students have time to prepare answers in writing. Directed readings and a list of key concepts related to the discussion can further help student participation.
- Assign quick writing assignments, such as a “minute-paper” at the end of class, asking students to list anything needing further clarification, or simply collect written questions about the lecture.
- Set up an online discussion board where students can pose questions.

*Strategies to use at the beginning of the semester to reinforce a participatory classroom culture:*

- Encourage students to ask questions since they might come from cultures where that is considered disrespectful.
- Explain that it is not only acceptable to ask a question, but that good students ask questions to show their engagement in the class.
- Continually encourage participation –not just on the first day.
- Start out by asking NNES students to talk about familiar topics, such as specific examples from their country of origin, as opposed to new concepts learned in class. Speaking on familiar topics can help students get accustomed to speaking class.
- Ask questions at first that require short answers.
- Ask leading questions to encourage students to elaborate on their ideas; NNES students may need help in formulating longer answers.
- Invite students to come to office hours –another American concept that might intimidate students from cultures where professors and students do not interact one-on-one. Office hours can be a good opportunity for you and the student to get used to each others’ accents, and the student might later feel more at ease speaking up in class.
- Refer a student to ESL tutoring if it is too difficult to understand his or her accent.





## COMMUNICATING APPROPRIATELY

The informal and open style of American communication may confuse international students. They may misinterpret American conventions and become excessively familiar – speaking too informally, raising inappropriate topics, or speaking too directly in class – and inadvertently come across as rude.

Students also might be unsure of how to address their instructors in person, whether to use, for example, “Professor,” “Doctor,” “Mrs.,” “Ms.,” or just the first name for a female professor. Their e-mail communication might also be extremely informal. (“Hi Prof, How R U?” “XOXO” followed by a nickname nowhere to be found on the official list of students.)

*To prevent or address inappropriate communication:*

- Tell students how you want them to address you both in person and in writing.
- Model acceptable ways of speaking in class by rewording a too informal comment into a more acceptable form.
- Offer guidelines on e-mail etiquette. For example, encourage students to use the university e-mail account, to state the subject in the subject line (instead of their first name or “hi”), to keep the greeting professional (“Professor”) and to end with a “Thank you,” or “Best regards,” followed by their full name as it appears on the roster.

## LISTENING TO LECTURES

Listening in class and taking lecture notes are also especially challenging for NNES students since one must process language very quickly to take notes. When speaking to a diverse group, be mindful of your delivery and encourage students to ask for clarification.

*To help NNES students follow lectures more easily:*

- Enunciate clearly, exaggerate intonation for important ideas, speak slightly slower and louder than usual, and pause after key words and important points to give students time to process ideas and take notes.



- Repeat important or complex ideas by paraphrasing. Avoid asking, “Do you understand?” Instead, repeat the same idea using different words, or ask a student to summarize or repeat what you said.
- Provide brief outlines (preferably a day in advance online) or write the lecture outline on the board, explicitly explaining the outline at the beginning of class, as in “Today we will cover the following topics....”
- State transitions during the lecture, e.g., “The third topic is....” Use vocabulary that indicates transitions (“in addition” or “in summary”) rather than “OK” at junctures in the lecture. Outlines and clear transitions help students take organized notes and make it easier for them to ask follow-up questions about specific points. A student can ask about “part three” only if they know they missed the third part of the lecture.
- Make connections to earlier material at the beginning of a new lecture and at the end, summarize ideas. Finally, preview what will be covered in the next class to help students prepare.
- Avoid lengthy digressions. As one international student at GSU put it, “My professor tells stories and makes us laugh all the time, but he never writes on the board and at the end of class, it’s hard to know what the main points were, and what to study.”

*Suggestions for addressing vocabulary and cultural-specific references:*

- Don’t avoid sophisticated or discipline-specific vocabulary, but do provide synonyms or explanations of unusual words – or ask a student to do so. Encourage students to ask about unfamiliar vocabulary.
- Write key terms and important names on the board during the lecture or provide a written list of such words. Be sure to give students time to note the key terms on PowerPoint slides or handouts. Many students need to see even familiar terms in writing since they might not recognize the pronunciation. Also, seeing words spelled out enables students to look them up in a dictionary. (Check carefully for errors since misspellings may utterly confuse NNES students.)
- Be aware that idioms and metaphors, such as sports metaphors (“throw a curve”), might be cryptic to people from other cultures. Avoid over-using metaphors and be prepared to explain their meanings when you do.
- Explain U.S. pop culture references, which can confuse NNES students. When possible, include references from different cultures.



- Use current pop culture references rather than alluding to events and trends that occurred 15 or 20 years ago since NNES students are more likely to “get” them.
- Avoid phrases like, “Because we all know the story of..., I won’t tell it here.” Those who didn’t grow up in this country may not know the story and may feel too embarrassed to ask about it.

## VOICE RECORDINGS

If you are comfortable with students recording your lectures, let them know that it is OK to do so. If not, tell them so early on. It is a good idea to let students know your policy since some students might not realize they need to ask permission.

## POWERPOINT

- Limit text on PowerPoint slides. Even native speakers find it difficult to listen to a lecture and simultaneously copy text from slides with different, albeit related, information. Including a few key words or phrases stating the main points on well-designed slides is preferable to slides dense with text.
- Be aware that a PowerPoint lecture is generally much faster and, therefore, more challenging for NNES students than traditional lectures during which the professor stops to write on the board.
- Use PowerPoint for main points and visuals (graphs, charts, illustrations) that help clarify the content and engage students.

## NOTE-TAKING FOR LECTURES AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

Sample lecture and reading notes can be enlightening to students who have yet to develop the study skills requisite for success at U.S. universities. Professors can help students develop those skills by demonstrating effective note-taking.



- Give directions for and show examples of good lecture and reading notes. Points out effective note-taking strategies in student samples, such as leaving white space and organizing notes based on outlines.
- Create a buddy system for lecture note-taking. For example, have NNES students pair up with native speakers who are good note-takers and are willing to share notes. Alternatively, assign some native speakers as note-takers for the class and scan and post their notes, at least at the beginning of the semester.
- Post brief lecture outlines online before the class that students can print out to use as note-taking guides.
- To encourage note-taking for both lectures and reading assignments, emphasize that there is information in the lecture that is not in the textbook, and vice versa.

*Suggestions for helping NNES students with reading assignments:*

- Take time to introduce the textbook and point out useful sections such as the glossary, index and review sections. Also, make a point of using the textbook in class; for example, for looking at graphs or specific sections of the reading.
- Give guidelines for individual reading assignments: give review questions and incomplete chapter outlines, or point out which sections students should focus on if the assignment is long
- Consider assigning more frequent, but shorter, reading assignments. Even a very good NNES student's vocabulary is much smaller than that of a native speaker. Consequently, readings invariably take longer in a second language.
- Explain your expectations for the readings, e.g. how much time to spend on a text, to read before or after the lecture, whether to skim or read thoroughly, and when to take separate reading notes.
- Give guidelines for how to mark up a textbook (e.g., underline, highlight, and take margin-notes).
- Review reading assignments using review questions, multiple-choice quizzes or a question-answer session at the beginning of class.



## WRITING

Expectations and conventions for writing assignments vary not just across disciplines, but also across cultures. Terms like “research paper” or “lab report” may be new to NNES students, and they will benefit from specific instructions illuminated by examples.

Although it might seem that NNES students need help mainly with grammar, most also need help with the early stages of the writing process: understanding the assignment, conducting research, and organizing and developing ideas. In a recent survey at GSU, students repeatedly asked for clearer directions for writing assignments – the more detailed the better.

*Suggestions for helping NNES students with writing assignments:*

- Give detailed directions for writing assignments that include everything from the format of the assignment to the type of analysis expected. Detailed written assignments can help tutors as well.
- Check for typos in written directions and avoid handwritten directions on the board; unclear or misspelled words can be confusing.
- Provide rubrics or checklists for grading that include required elements and specify how many points will be given for various parts of an assignment. Alternatively, have students generate a rubric based on what has been covered in the course.
- Provide effective and not-so-effective examples of papers and essay exams written by former students. Discuss or provide written explanations of what constitutes a well-done assignment.
- Use undergraduate student samples for undergraduate courses; for graduate students, published writing samples drawn from their discipline can serve as useful models.
- Require students to submit outlines and early drafts of their papers to make sure they understand the assignment. This helps students break the task into manageable parts and helps them resist the temptation to write a whole paper the night before it is due.
- Give feedback on outlines and drafts before the final drafts is due. If possible, meet with students individually to discuss revisions or encourage students to work with an ESL tutor.



- Try to ignore grammatical errors that do not obscure meaning. Underline the mistakes, but don't correct them. Try to focus on one or two types of errors that confuse meaning or are distracting or irritating (for example, verb form errors or punctuation). When grammar problems obscure meaning, ask students to clarify their ideas and rewrite the section.
- Encourage students to take responsibility for their own problems with grammar. Ask them to identify grammar areas that need improvement. Then encourage students to proofread for those by, for example, reading their papers aloud, or printing a draft with each sentence on a separate line.
- Give specific feedback and avoid global comments (such as "great!"). Instead try to give specific suggestions such as "add an example here to illustrate your explanation" or "your explanation fails to state the shortcomings of...." Most feedback will be more effective presented in person rather than on paper, especially in hard-to-read margin notes.
- Be aware that NNES students might not organize their work the same way a U.S.-born student would. U.S. students are accustomed to the linear, rhetorical convention of stating the main idea first and then supporting it. NNES writers might place the main point at the end of a paragraph or in the concluding paragraph of an essay.
- Give clear directions for rhetorical organization and provide examples from former students.
- Consider a class orientation at the library with a research librarian to provide instructions for the use of library resources.



## CITING SOURCES AND AVOIDING PLAGIARISM

Conventions vary across the globe for quoting, paraphrasing and citing sources. For students who come from cultures where it may be acceptable to copy text without citing sources or where paraphrasing can be considered disrespectful, U.S. conventions will seem odd.



Even after thorough explanations of U.S. practices, NNES students might be unable to comply. It's easy enough to grasp that it is unacceptable to copy and paste someone else's work without giving credit. However, to paraphrase competently on a new subject in a second language is very difficult. Academic conventions for citing sources are not as clear as we may like to think. It's therefore important to explain expected conventions and the consequences for violating the rules and, maybe more importantly, to help students with the language of their paraphrases.

*Strategies for helping NNES students avoid plagiarism:*

- Share examples of acceptable and unacceptable use of sources in student work. Post examples online or provide a do-and-don't handout.
- Walk students through the process of choosing and citing texts. Guide students in summarizing or paraphrasing passages.
- Provide samples (online or on library reserve) of student papers from previous semesters.
- Early on in the semester, collect a diagnostic in-class writing sample from each student. (The topic can be informal, such as "state reasons for your choice of major or career.") This exercise can identify students who need assistance with writing and grammar issues so they can be referred to tutoring right away. An in-class writing sample can also be used as a comparison with out-of-class papers if there is any question whether a student has completed his or her own work.

## PRESENTATIONS

Giving a presentation in a second language can be frightening. Students will benefit from rigorous preparation to keep anxiety levels down.

*Suggestions for helping NNES students with presentations:*

- Keep presentations short – generally no more than 10 minutes.
- Give step-by-step guidelines for how to prepare and encourage students to come during office hours to discuss their topics and plan for presentations to make sure they understand the directions.
- Require students to practice their delivery with a tutor or a classmate and by recording themselves.
- Emphasize the need for correct pronunciation of key words and of transitional words and phrases.



- Encourage the use of visuals, such as graphs and illustrations. Have students prepare handouts with outlines to help listeners follow their presentation.
- If a student pauses for a long time during the presentation, be prepared to ask a leading question or make a comment to help him or her return to the topic.

## PARTICIPATING IN GROUP WORK

NNES students who lack the language skills or experience to collaborate can be lost when assigned to do group work. They might also be confused over when they are required to collaborate and when such group efforts are not allowed. In some cultures, students might be accustomed to helping each other on assignments or tests, so it is important to state explicitly the expectations for collaborative work.

*Strategies to increase NNES student participation in group work:*

- For in-class assignments, encourage participation by monitoring groups and assign different roles for each member to promote equal participation. For example, have one student be in charge of monitoring turn-taking while others are in charge of different questions.
- For out-of-class assignments, strive to design group projects so each member has a different task and all are dependent on the others' work and cooperation. For example, assign different text for group members to summarize and then share; clarify that everyone in the group ultimately is responsible for all the content.

## TEST-TAKING AND GRADES

NNES students may find it more difficult than their U.S. counterparts to predict what will be on a test. They also may benefit from guidance on how to study for and even take a test. They also may benefit from guidance on how to study for and even take a test. Multiple-choice tests are especially challenging to them, since reading the possible answers requires high-level reading skills and test-taking strategies. The U.S. system of calculating grades might also be new. They may not, for example, realize the importance of participation, the relative weight of quizzes and test, or opportunities for extra credit. Many terms used in relation to course work and grading may also be new, such as "GPA," "pop quiz," "rough draft," and "add/drop." It might take time for students to understand how to navigate the system for themselves.

*Suggestions for helping NNES students with test-taking and understanding grades:*

- Provide focused study guides for tests.



- Provide sample of essay answers from previous semesters and checklists for what is required of an effective answer when appropriate.
- Practice multiple-choice items during review sessions and discuss multiple-choice test-taking strategies.
- Have students predict and formulate test questions and discuss what constitutes good exam questions. If possible, use student-generated questions for reviews and exams.
- Teach students your formula for calculating grades. Meet with students who are not doing well.
- If possible, allow extra time on in-class tests for NNES students.

## CONCLUSION

The challenges that some NNEs students face are vast, and professors can make an important difference. As one of our survey respondents put it: “Just the fact that [the professor] was aware and ready to help me in case I needed it, I think that was good enough.”



## REFERENCES

Smithee, M., Greenblatt, S., & Eland, A. (2004).  
U.S. Culture Series: U.S. Classroom Culture, NAFSA:  
Association of International Educators

Selected online resources:

City college of New York

<http://resources.jjay.cuny.edu/erc/faculty/understanding.php>

<http://resources.jjay.cuny.edu/erc/tutoring/pdfs/Unit.I.GB.pdf>

Marietta College (International Programs)

[http://faculty.marietta.edu/intladvisor/docs/teaching\\_tips.doc](http://faculty.marietta.edu/intladvisor/docs/teaching_tips.doc)

North Park in Chicago

[http://www.northpark.edu/Academics/English-as-a-Second  
Language/Resources/Faculty-Resources](http://www.northpark.edu/Academics/English-as-a-Second-Language/Resources/Faculty-Resources)

Purdue University

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resources/684/01/>

University of Denver

<http://ctl.du.edu/teaching-resources/working-with-students/handling-special-requests>

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

[http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcwev/esl/esl\\_student\\_tips.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcwev/esl/esl_student_tips.html)

<http://cfe.unc.edu/pdfs/TeachforInclusion.pdf>

## INFORMATION

### **International Student Contact**

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