Tutoring Non-Native English Speakers (NNES)

Who is a NNES?
- A person who learned English as an additional language
- A person who often speaks their first language at home and uses English at school
- A person who may come from another country or a person who lives in the United States

In other words, Non-Native English Speaking students are those who have learned English as a second (third, fourth, etc.) language – regardless of country of origin.

Language, literacy, and culture influence our identity. Remember that the NNES tutee is a fellow college student who is here to learn. Take a holistic approach by showing interest and getting to know about this person when you start your sessions.

NNES may need:
- to develop skills in writing, reading, speaking, and/or listening
- to learn cultural references
- to develop better methods of note-taking for college level coursework
- to better understand academic language and expectations of style

General Tutoring Guidelines:

Work with the NNES tutee to determine how you will use your tutoring time. What are his/her needs from the tutoring session? Revisit your plan each time.

Don’t assume what this student wants to say; help them say what they want.

Create a safe environment in your sessions that will make your tutee comfortable enough to say, “I don’t know,” or “Can you help me with this?”

When it comes to cultural references, Americans make a lot of assumptions about what others know. When appropriate to the subject you are tutoring, ask questions of the NNES tutee that can help you check for cultural comprehension.

When it comes to written work, there is no reason why someone who has learned English needs to write – or sound – like a native speaker. Instead, focus on meaning by helping the student to create a clear message. Aim to suspend the influence of your voice and preferences in his/her work.

Whether written or spoken, you can point out repeated errors that may get in the way of meaning, but don’t point out every error; doing the latter can be discouraging. Wherever possible, focus on the learner’s strengths.
Course-specific Suggestions

One challenge for Chinese students – and one reason they request a tutor – is that they don’t always understand how to connect the content of science classes to their knowledge. In the Chinese education system, more emphasis is placed on question-solving abilities rather than real world application or real problems addressed in a lab setting. In these cases, patience is the key for a tutor. It takes time and practice for these students to apply theorems in a step-by-step method. It is worth the effort to point out the value of applying knowledge for other coursework as well.

Non-native English speaking students have a talent for language learning, so it’s not surprising that they often study yet another language while at the college. It can be a challenge to learn a third language with your second language (English). For these students, often skills of reading and writing are stronger than speaking and listening in this additional language of study. As a tutor, you will need to focus on helping the student to strengthen these oral/aural skills. Have fun with this and make the learning memorable. Incorporate interesting games and other interactive ways to motivate students to speak and to get them to feel less self-conscious about making mistakes.

Suggested Reading for Tutors:

- Understanding Global Cultures by Martin Gannon
- Keys to Teaching Grammar to English Language Learners by Keith Folse
- Teaching Pronunciation by Marianne Celce-Murcia
- The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring, 2nd Edition (Chapter 9) by Paula Gillespie

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