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.

"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."


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 bra) because she wouldn’t realize that they referred to important background information.

What information would the student need to make sense of this sentence?

◆ Background knowledge about American culture
◆ Understanding of the 1960s
◆ Knowledge of social changes in the United States
◆ Familiarity with cultural references

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:

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.

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

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 (undefeat 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.

Help the student 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.

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.

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.

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:
- 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.

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.

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 take notes immediately, with the teacher or on the board, and to use key terms and important facts and statistics.
- Help the student understand that notes do not always highlight important points.

STRATEGIES TO GIVE NNES STUDENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL NOTE TAKING

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

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 destab 3rd Wld countries.

STRATEGIES TO GIVE NNES STUDENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL NOTE TAKING

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

Strategies for reading newspaper and magazine articles

- 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.

Helping Students Find the Main Idea in Newspaper and Magazine Articles

IF THE STUDENT IS READING:

A news article about a specific event (e.g., a law providing financial aid passed)

Tell him to find the main idea in the introduction.

An article about a general subject (e.g., how students pay for their education)

Tell the student to look for the example that often begins the article.

An editorial or opinion article (e.g., an editorial supporting more spending on education)

Tell the student to look for the purpose of the editorial and whether there is a specific point being made.

Telling him to find the main points:

In the first or second paragraph

After the example that often begins the article.

Near the beginning or the end of the editorial.

Supporting points can often be found after transition words like first, in addition, and also.

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.

Helping Students Find the Main Idea in Newspaper and Magazine Articles

- First have the student identify the main points so she can focus on looking for the details that support these 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 Sections: Strategies for reading and interpreting graphs (p. 23).
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.

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.

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.

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).

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

Strategies for reading textbooks

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

Help the student avoid making common mistakes while reading graphs:

Advice 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.

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.

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.
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.

SHOW THE STUDENT HOW TO READ JOURNAL ARTICLES EFFICIENTLY

1. Have the student read the Abstract first to quickly find out what the article is about.
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.
3. Suggest he read the Discussion next to get a more detailed description and analysis of the results—the answer to the research question.
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.

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

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).


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

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.

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

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:

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.

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.

Separate complex sentences into simpler parts.

[When in the Course of human events] (it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands) [which have connected them with another]

[start with the most important part]

[to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them] (a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires)

That they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

Clarity unfamiliar expressions.

Point out everyday words used differently.
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.

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

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).

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.

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.

Helping a Student Discover the Theme

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

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?
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?