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## Tips for the Academic Teacher Working with Nonnative Speakers of English

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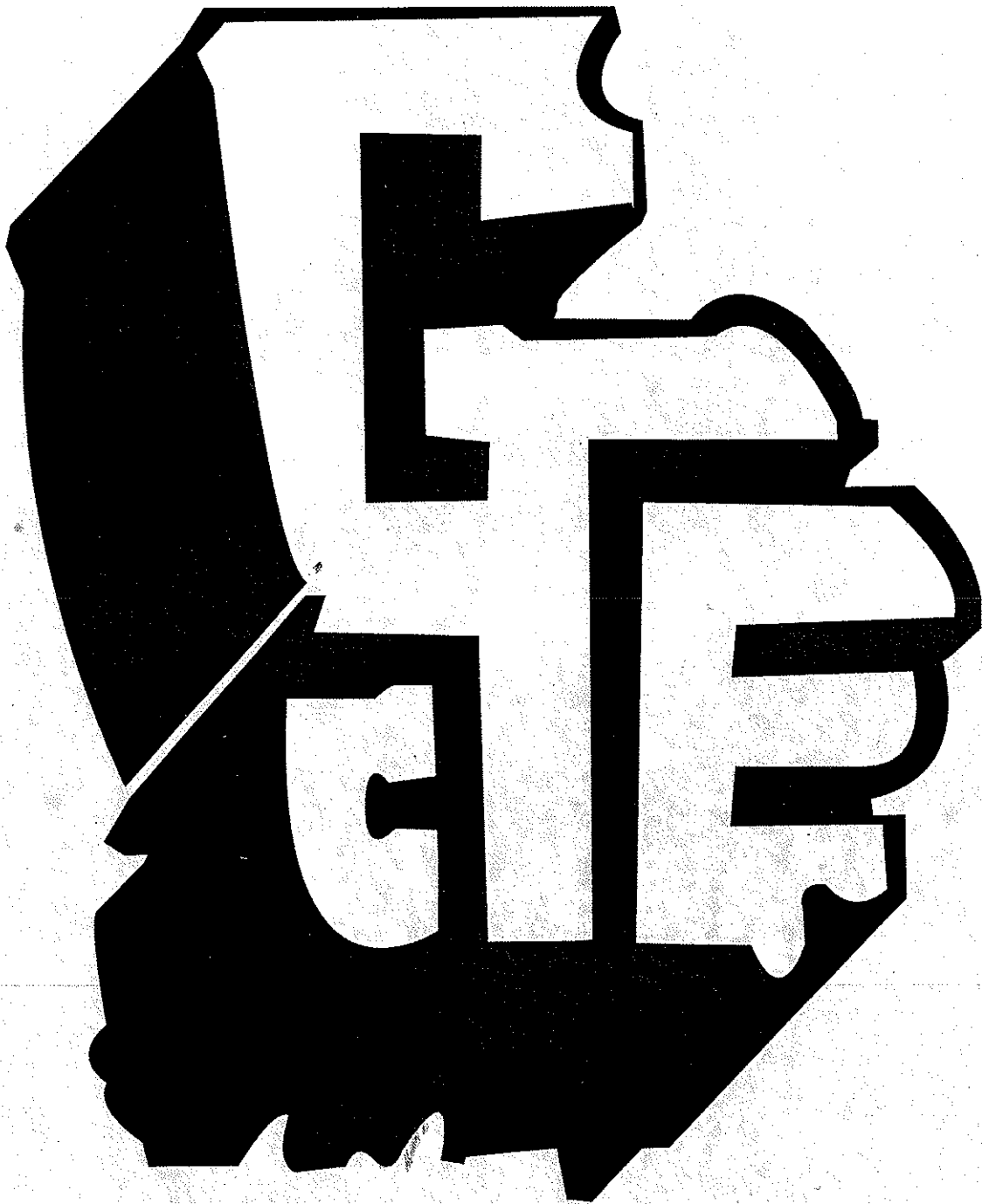
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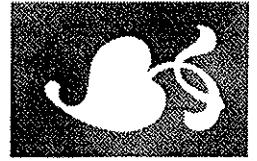
# Connections

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# Tips for the Academic Teacher Working with Nonnative Speakers of English

The international student population in the United States is growing by leaps and bounds; our need for teachers who specialize in English as a Second Language, therefore, also grows with each passing day. But everyone cannot be an ESL specialist, right? What we must also consider is the fact that many of our students who speak a language other than English as their native language are actually born here in the United States. Surprising? Not really when we consider that the demographic composition of major urban areas today consists significantly of families whose parents and grandparents come from different cultures and who still do not speak (or read or write) English in any way. As educators, we must prepare ourselves for the influx of nonnative speakers of English (NNS) who will come into our classroom and who expect and deserve the education that all people do. As difficult as this preparation may sound, there are some things that non-ESL specialists—academic teachers—can do to ready themselves for this change in classroom

environment. The following list is divided into three main categories: 1) helping the NNS adjust to the environment of the class and to classmates; 2) helping the NNS with the content or subject matter of the class; 3) using the community outside the classroom to facilitate learning for the NNS. These tips are by no means exhaustive, and content-teachers would be well-advised to ponder them and to expand and modify them when the need arises.

## Helping the NNS Adjust to the Environment of the Classroom

1. Welcome the student to the classroom. Since international students may not understand anything that you say, a positive attitude can go a long way; smiling reassures them that you are happy they are there. If the students do have some oral/aural English skills, then make an effort to talk to the students outside of class for reassurance. In addition to teacher/student relationships, involve the whole class by learning from the new students

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*As educators we must prepare ourselves for the influx of nonnative speakers of English (NNS) who will come into our classroom and who expect and deserve the education that all people do.*

*Nonnative speakers must participate in addition to watching.*

greetings, farewells, and other basic terminology in the students' native languages.

2. Learn to say the students' names. Be sure to learn these names and to pronounce them correctly; if the name is particularly hard to pronounce or remember, perhaps name tags for everyone will help. That way, the new students can learn the American names, and the American students can learn the NNSs' names. Small-group work can facilitate the learning of names throughout the class, and the students can get to know each other better this way.

3. Assign a peer tutor. This person can aid the teacher by acclimating the NNS to classroom routines and by giving help when assignments are made. The teacher could ask for volunteers to help tutor the new students and perhaps offer extra credit to those who are willing to take on the extra responsibility.

Depending on the age group of the students (i.e., teenagers), the teacher should consider the peer tutor carefully because if a native speaker is uncomfortable with helping the new kid, then the tutoring situation could adversely affect the nonnative speaker. If the students appear to get along together, perhaps the teacher could recommend an overnight stay or a weekend activity to encourage friendship between the NNS and the peer tutor as well as other classmates.

### **Helping the NNS with the Subject Matter of the Classroom**

4. Whenever possible, give the NNS a written copy of the information and directions being given in class. If there is not time for a written summary of the lecture, then perhaps an outline of the major points of the lecture is a good idea, leaving room between the major points for notes to be taken by the

students. If neither of these options is possible, give the student page numbers from the content textbook that will give information similar to the lecture.

Copying is good practice for LEP students (limited English proficiency). Please allow extra time. Remember, they are reading a new language.

5. Give the student and tutor a list of essential vocabulary. Determine which words are necessary for talking about the concept. For example, in an earth science class, the teacher should determine what terms the students should be familiar with in order to understand the concepts involved. Try not to assume any background knowledge on the part of the students; even though they may know in their native languages that the sun is composed of hydrogen and helium, they may not recognize this vocabulary as similar to their own and, therefore, may miss the essential concepts of the lecture. This word list could be given at the beginning of the unit for the student to look up and learn, or the list could be given on a daily basis as an aid in nightly homework assignments.

6. Use visuals whenever possible within a lesson. Pictures (with or without captions), role playing, and tape recordings are highly useful tools. Don't forget games; they are a productive, enjoyable means of learning English along with the subject matter of the classroom. Write down complex words and, especially, acronyms on the chalkboard: AIDS, NAACP, NASA, UN. Also, write down words that the NNS is mispronouncing or does not understand.

7. Use laboratory or 'hands-on' types of activities. Nonnative speakers must participate in addition to watching and listening. Manipulative materials in the students' hands are generally a good tactic. Use other resources in the classroom; involve the native speakers in the education of the international

students. Small-group work consisting of a task-oriented assignment produces genuine communication among students and helps the NNSs to improve their English. For example, if the class were studying *Romeo and Juliet*, then the class may be divided in order to create a comic book representing Shakespeare's play. If the NNS has good art skills, then perhaps she could be assigned to draw the pictures or design the layout of the comic book while the native speakers write the dialogue of the characters. Not only will this small-group assignment help the NNS to learn about the subject matter (the play), but it will also help the NNS to learn more English in the process.

8. Provide reading opportunities. Make individual assignments for the nonnative speakers to enhance their knowledge of the subject matter or even for them to pursue other avenues of knowledge, for reading is perhaps the most important academic skill for all students. A word of caution: avoid putting too many reading assignments on the students as to overwhelm them. Also be aware of the reading level of the students. Just because a student is assigned, for example, to the fifth grade does not necessarily mean that she is at a fifth-grade reading level.

9. Encourage gradual oral participation in class. Students are reluctant to speak aloud in class. This reluctance has at least three causes: the students' cultural backgrounds, their fear of being laughed at because of imperfect English, and their fear of divulging a lack of knowledge about the subject matter. One method of encouraging this gradual oral participation is to start the students in pair work, then to combine some of the pairs into larger groups, and finally to form a whole-class discussion in which the NNSs feel comfortable enough to add to the conversation. The pair work that can be used need not be 'academic' at first; it can include games

or 'get to know you' activities. Perhaps the NNSs can be encouraged to share information about themselves with their partners, then with their small groups, and then with the entire class after a certain period of time. It is critical here to be attentive to the students' needs because they may come from a culture that discourages class participation: get to know the students before making these kinds of demands.

10. Make some modification in testing situations when possible. Provide additional time, especially on essay questions. Have questions read aloud by the peer tutor. Permit oral rather than written responses on identification or short answer tests. Allow the students to use either a monolingual or a bilingual dictionary to ensure comprehension, or allow them to use both if they desire.

11. Consider the English proficiency level of the student in terms of evaluation. International students should be evaluated differently from the mainstream class. For example, the nonnative speakers who may make grammatical errors should not be penalized for these mistakes (as stringently as their NS counterparts) if their content meets the criteria of the test, but the errors should be corrected for their information and subsequent accuracy in using the language. The students' enthusiasm and effort should be judged in the evaluation process as well as their performance on the task.

### Using the Community Outside the Classroom

12. If an ESL specialist is available, inform her about the weekly objectives and vocabulary essential to the content course. The ESL specialist is an invaluable resource for the content teacher. Her pre-teaching will help facilitate the NNS's comprehension during the classroom presentation of the

*Encouraging a multicultural atmosphere will accomplish many things.*

lesson. Coordination between both teachers can produce immediate results.

13. Tap into the community for resources in educating the nonnative students. Use parents, government officials, and civic leaders for linguistic enhancement as well as cultural education. Invite the fire chief to class for a discussion of safety and prevention; invite the mayor or a council member to talk about the process of city government; invite parents to bring favorite foods or to help with special activities on days reserved for such occasions. Even the parents of the international students could be called on to talk about their own country or customs, provided their English proficiency does not inhibit comprehension by the native speakers.

### Conclusion

Probably the most important 'tip' that any teacher, academic or ESL, can know is to make the students feel welcome and that people do care about them. Encouraging a multi-cultural atmosphere in the classroom will accomplish many things. It will help the nonnative speakers feel less isolated than if they were thrown into the proverbial lion's den; it will help the native speakers to learn more about their new classmates; and it will help the teacher to integrate the new students into classroom activities in ways that are much more efficient and definitely more interesting and fun.

As for the academic teacher, please remember that establishing communication with the ESL teacher not only will provide ideas to use in the content classroom, but it will also ultimately benefit the students in numerous untold ways. Consider the

ESL teacher as an information source; he/she can help content teachers to acclimate themselves to dealing with the new students as well as help the new students to understand how the academic classroom operates.

### Authors' Notes

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2. The small-group assignment was suggested by Karen Burrell in an unpublished paper.

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