



“I spoke English a lot in my US high school... why am I still struggling with language?”

If you are a nonnative English speaker who went to high school in North America, you may find yourself asking this question. In order to better understand the common language gaps faced by other Carnegie Mellon students like you, read this portrait of a student:

Eric was a Carnegie Mellon undergraduate who had spent many years living in the US. Although English was not his native language, he considered himself highly fluent and comfortable conversing in English. His years studying at a North American high school had benefited him in many ways: he developed a native-like accent, he used informal language (like slang) with ease, and his listening skills were strong. He also adopted the US-style of social interaction including body language and facial expressions. When he first arrived in the US, he worked on grammar and vocabulary in an English as a Second Language class, but soon after, he was admitted into mainstream classes. His native English speaking friends told him that he “didn’t seem like an international student” and they rarely pointed out errors in his speech (which made him think he didn’t make any errors). Eric felt fairly confident about his English until he started college. There the demands and expectations became much greater.

When Eric started taking rigorous Carnegie Mellon classes he began to see that the gaps in his English were impacting his performance, both in speaking and writing. For example, he was not able to deliver effective presentations in class because he was often overly informal and did not know how to sound professional. When he became nervous during presentations, he would often forget the words he wanted to use in English. Eric also struggled with writing assignments. He could not recognize problems with grammar and word choice, let alone find and correct his errors when proofreading. When he received comments from his professors regarding his writing and presentation skills, he often misunderstood the feedback because he lacked the language to discuss English grammar and communication style choices. His grades began to suffer. This surprised Eric as much as it did his professors who often thought, “He sounds so fluent when we chat outside of class, but the grammar in his writing is terrible.” It had been a long time since Eric studied the rules of English, and even then, instruction had been at a fairly basic level.

What Eric didn’t understand was that he needed to work on advanced academic fluency. He mistakenly thought he could just passively absorb the higher-level English that he hadn’t picked up in high school.

By his senior year, Eric had actually lost confidence in his English. He spent most of his time with friends who spoke his native language and much of his coursework was technical. He “got by” with conversational English and just didn’t take the time to work on the gaps in his formal, academic English. As graduation neared, he began interviewing for jobs with prestigious US companies. He would make it to the second or third round of interviews, but then his language deficiencies, especially grammar errors and informal speech habits, overshadowed his intelligence and experience.

He realized he needed help, but he didn't know where to find it.

Eric missed the opportunity to work on the gaps in his formal, academic English by not taking advantage of the free support that was available to him. Nonnative English speakers like Eric can get help at Carnegie Mellon's Intercultural Communication Center.

The Intercultural Communication Center offers support for nonnative English speakers at Carnegie Mellon. See our website for details, www.cmu.edu/icc.

In addition, many of the services at Academic Development, www.cmu.edu/academic-development, and the Career Center, www.studentaffairs.cmu.edu/career, while not directly aimed at nonnative English speakers, are extremely useful.