

Non-native English Speaker Focus Group Final Report

By Sean Riley

June, 2005

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On March 2, eight Evergreen students participated in the non-native English speaker focus group, a study designed to research the effectiveness of Evergreen's support of non-native English speakers. The students were asked about their learning experiences in writing, reading, speaking, and quantitative reasoning at Evergreen, as well as recommendations for ways to better accommodate their needs.

On a general level, participants found that KEY Services, Financial Aid, the LRC, First Peoples' Advising, faculty of color, faculty aware of students' linguistic backgrounds, and the campus environment were helpful to their learning. However, they also felt that lack of sensitivity in the classroom and being singled out were not helpful. **Concerning writing**, students found that the Writing Center and KEY Services were helpful resources. However, students also felt that the writing workload expected of them, combined with time constraints, often overwhelmed them. They also said that professors' feedback on their writing was often not specific enough to be useful. **Concerning reading**, students stated that strategies such as pairing "intellectual, philosophical" texts with other texts, one-on-one discussions with professors, and reading guides or study questions are helpful to their learning, when used. **Concerning speaking**, students expressed a sense of discomfort in participating in seminar. Students cited peers' listening skills, the pace of discussions, interruptions, competitiveness for originality, peers' receptiveness to different perspectives, and language issues as aspects that negatively affected their speaking experiences. **Concerning quantitative reasoning**, students found that the QR center was helpful. One student found that a foreign professor's use of specific terminology and everyday examples helped him learn.

The participants had several recommendations to improve accommodating the needs of non-native English speakers. The recommendations centered on support: support from professors and support from Evergreen services. Participants said that professors should be more familiar with students' linguistic backgrounds and sensitive to issues that may arise because of those backgrounds. They suggested that providing extra time, offering related texts in their first languages, having student-led seminars, and the involvement of professors and students with respective linguistic backgrounds would help. The students also stated that additional funding for services that support students of color, the integration of multicultural learning into the tutoring centers, having Evergreen paperwork available in other languages, and creating a center for international students and students who speak different languages to meet with other students and professors would be useful strategies in meeting the needs of non-native English speakers.

PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

On March 2, eight Evergreen students participated in the non-native English speaker focus group. The focus group was designed to research the effectiveness of Evergreen's support of non-native English speakers and areas of possible improvement.

The study was the joint effort of employees of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education and the Evergreen State College's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. Sean Riley, Emily Lardner, and Yul Gamboa collaboratively developed questions to be used in the focus group. Laura Coghlan and Jenni Minner provided suggestions and editing. Using their feedback, Riley, Lardner, and Gamboa modified the questions and ultimately used them in the focus group.

To participate in the focus group, students were to meet the following criteria: 1) English was not the participant's first language; 2) the participant felt more comfortable speaking in a language other than English; and 3) the participant was a currently enrolled Evergreen student. To recruit participants for the study, Riley and Lardner created an advertisement that was included in the February 24, 2005 edition of the campus paper, *The Cooper Point Journal*. Information on the advertisement was written in English, Spanish, and Japanese and informed the audience about the focus group, criteria for participation, compensation, and free food. Additionally, Riley spoke with employees in KEY Services, the Writing Center, and First Peoples' Advising to ask them to notify eligible students they knew about the focus group. Prior to the focus group, Riley and Lardner completed the Human Subject Review Application, answering six questions about their study and providing their informed consent agreement and focus group questions. The Human Subject Review Coordinator approved the application.

Students were paid \$25.00 for their participation. All participants signed an informed consent agreement and were assured of confidentiality. The focus group was tape recorded. Key statements were written on a flip chart. The focus group lasted about 1.5 hours.

PARTICIPANTS

Eight Evergreen students participated in the focus group. Spanish was the first language for four of the participants, Vietnamese the first language for two of the participants, Thai the first language for one participant; and Japanese the first language for one participant. Three participants were first-year students. Three were second-year students. One was a third-year student. Five participants were female; three were male.

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

This report is organized by the questions asked during the focus group. The focus group began with a general question regarding what had been helpful and not helpful to the students in their experiences at Evergreen. This was followed by asking what had been helpful and not helpful regarding 1) reading, 2) writing, 3) speaking, and 4) quantitative work. The focus group concluded with a question about what changes the participants

wanted to recommend to improve the experiences for non-native English speakers at Evergreen.

LEARNING AT EVERGREEN

“Given your linguistic background, what has been helpful for you in learning at Evergreen?”

The students found that on-campus services, faculty and seminar leaders, and the campus environment were helpful in their learning at Evergreen.

The participants cited several on-campus services as being helpful to their learning at Evergreen. Students cited KEY Services, Financial Aid, the LRC for quantitative issues, and First Peoples’ Advising as helpful services. One student said that First Peoples’ Advising is a helpful forum to express frustrations that arise in seminars.

A student also indicated that faculty of color and faculty who were aware that English was not her first language were helpful, particularly in supporting her writing development. Another student said that seminar leaders were helpful in supporting her as a student of color and “feeling that I have a right to be a presence at a higher institution for education.” Seminar leaders were also cited as focusing on writing skills and ways to improve them.

Regarding the campus environment, one participant said students are free to express themselves on many different levels at Evergreen. She said that seminars engender open conversations that are refreshing and vulnerable. Another student added that small classroom sizes have been helpful in learning at Evergreen. Lastly, one student said that it had been helpful having a circle of friends—often met through the EF program or meeting international students enrolled at Evergreen—who speak her own language.

“What has not been helpful for you in learning at Evergreen?”

Several of the participants cited a lack of sensitivity in the classroom as not being helpful to their learning at Evergreen. One student said that professors were not helpful if they did not know of or empathize with her language abilities and background. She said that one professor took two credits away from her because her written English grammar was not adequate although he understood what she was saying in her various papers. A second student added that language in the classroom is directed toward monolingual and/or monocultural students. He said the misuse of the terms “American” and “native speaker” were examples of this.

Students also discussed being singled out as someone “coming from a different country or may be open to thinking in a different language.” One student gave an example of being singled out as a “third world woman” because of being from a different country and thinking in a different language and then being criticized for using different rhetorical strategies. Adding to this, another student said that she had different thinking and writing patterns in terms of academic writing. She said, “It’s been frustrating to me that I have to change for the institution. The college isn’t going to change for me.”

WRITING AT EVERGREEN

“Any experiences that have been helpful in your development as writers, and what were those experiences?”

One student indicated that the Writing Center helped him develop his skills with tenses and self-identifying errors in his writing.

Another student indicated that KEY Services had provided him with a private tutor to help with his writing.

“Anything not helpful with writing?”

Students cited workload and time constraints and insufficient feedback on writing as unhelpful aspects of their writing experiences at Evergreen.

Regarding workload and time constraints, one participant stated that much writing for classes comes up at the end of the quarter. He felt that given his linguistic background and the timing, he had little time to write a paper and then no time to proof and rewrite his paper. “It’s almost as if it’s the end of the quarter, write the paper, then the end of the quarter’s over, and then I don’t get to rewrite my paper and learn more from it.” He also added that there were time constraints when it came to getting writing assistance. He stated that he was unable to get enough time for adequate writing help in the writing center and through KEY Services. “I need more time with help.”

A second student also commented on time issues, stating that it felt like there were five writing assignments due every week. She said that she could barely finish the weekly reading let alone the weekly writing. She felt that writing took her twice as long as native English speakers. She attributed part of this to academic writing papers. She said that academic writing papers were a new concept to her because that type of writing is not typical in her native country, Japan. She stated that in Japan students do “writings” for classes but that they are stylistically and structurally very different than academic writings here.

Regarding feedback, one student stated that feedback on writing often consisted of being told to rewrite something. She added that the writing expectations were not always clear and that restrictions—such as writing in a linear, non-personal style—made writing difficult. Another student said that she was told she has the analytical skills to write academic papers and that the professor understood her analysis, but it was an issue of getting the information out in a structured way. This issue seemed particularly difficult when writing integrative papers.

READING AT EVERGREEN

“In terms of reading, what have been your experiences?”

Several students said that professors have a distinct role in the quality of their reading experiences. One participant found it helpful for professors to pair “intellectual,

philosophical” books with texts such as autobiographies. “It’s always balance,” she said. A second participant followed this by saying that she found it really useful to discuss a text with a professor one-on-one.

Students also discussed the use of reading guides or study questions. One student said that in some of her classes, professors gave the class questions to read and answer in preparation for seminar. She found that faculty who did not give those guides “have been the ones who have had problems with my writing.” Another student followed saying that there were no reading guides in her program and that they “could help me focus and prepare me for what I am about to read, give some direction. Give me some subtext.”

One student said that the sheer amount of reading at Evergreen was a factor in improving his English-reading ability. He added that typically he hates reading, but in order to keep up with his programs, he has to read.

SPEAKING AT EVERGREEN

The participants’ comments on their experiences in speaking at Evergreen centered on difficulties in seminar. One student felt that he wasn’t given enough time to expound on his ideas in seminar. He felt that when he brought up an idea in seminar there was not enough time to develop it because other students then added to that idea. (One student described this as students going on tangents and “not really listening, but just really talking their own opinions.”) He felt that because of this there is a lack of “good synthesis or crystallization” in seminars and other classes. He added, too, that this makes him a poorer speaker because he does not develop his oratory skills. When measured against the amount of reading and writing he does for the class, he felt that he was not getting a reasonable amount of time to converse about the topic.

A second participant reiterated this point, stating that there is a sort of “rushness” in seminars, where “everyone wants to talk.” She felt that because of this feeling in the class, she didn’t have time to formulate and articulate her thoughts, particularly when she initiated a topic of conversation.

Several students said that they experienced a sense of discomfort when they did participate in seminar. One student felt that when she provided a perspective that differed from the “white” perspective, other students didn’t know how to respond. Another participant echoed this feeling, stating that in seminar, she tends to listen a lot to what people say, and that when she does speak, students don’t know how to respond. She felt this issue was compounded by a sense of competition in seminar, where students try to outdo one another with original ideas. Additionally, one participant felt that students often talk over or interrupt one another, things considered disrespectful in her culture. She said that this behavior has discouraged her to talk at times.

One student said that because of his discomfort at times with particular topics, he felt it should not be a requirement to participate in seminar.

Students brought up issues of language, as well. One student felt that in seminar she often developed ideas in her first language that could not be adequately translated into English, and she would lose her idea. Another student said that she mixes her languages and makes words up. Then, double-checking her vocabulary takes time and makes it further difficult to formulate and articulate her ideas.

One student found it helpful for one or two students to prepare for and facilitate a seminar. She felt that this helped navigate students and prepare them for the seminar, and that it worked best when every student, at some point, helped facilitate seminar.

QUANTITATIVE REASONING AT EVERGREEN

Two students identified helpful areas regarding quantitative reasoning at Evergreen. One student said that a private tutor, the QR Center, and one-on-one time with faculty were very helpful in his QR experiences. The second student said that one class, where students created a survey together, was particularly helpful in deepening his understanding of statistics. He also described a geometry class taught by a foreign professor. He found that the way the professor explained concepts, using specific terminology and everyday examples, was very helpful in his learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE AT EVERGREEN

The participants in the focus group had several recommendations for ways to better accommodate non-native English speakers at Evergreen. A major theme in their responses was increased support: increased support by professors and increased support by Evergreen services.

Regarding professors, one student suggested that professors take the time to get to know students better and find out what languages are spoken in the class. She also added that professors need to check their own assumptions about students. As another student said, "...faculty could get to know students more on a personal level because sometimes I get the idea that they think that just because you speak another language everyone that speaks that language is at the same level, and there's a huge variety." One student also suggested that professors be sensitive to the needs of non-native English speakers, and provide extra time for them for reading and writing. She also suggested that professors provide related texts in languages that students in the class speak, an idea extended by another participant who suggested that professors be flexible to students using texts in other languages in their classes and contracts. This student also felt that further classroom involvement of language teachers or students who speak common languages could be helpful for reading papers and giving feedback.

Some students brought up issues surrounding Evergreen support services. One student felt that programs that support students of color should receive more funding. She used First Peoples' Advising and the LRC as examples. She also felt that multicultural learning should be more integrated into the tutoring programs. A student also suggested that paperwork at Evergreen be written in languages other than English, as she had seen done at other colleges.

Another student argued that there needs to be more support for international students. She said that when she got here, she knew as much about Olympia as her advisor did. EF students are largely segregated from the rest of the Evergreen community, she said, and there are opportunities and desires for interaction. She felt that, as is, the way the EF program is set up, students are not getting a sense of what life is like in the United States.

She said, “I think international students need someone who has more experiences with the different communities and possibly the people who speaks like Japanese or Korean or Chinese or Spanish or any language that international students speak. I think having a space more or giving students more opportunities to be part of campus” is a good idea.

Such a space was further reiterated by another participant who said, “If I was the boss, I would open up a new department called Cultural Exchange.” The student imagined a forum where professors and students who speak other languages would have a dialogue about their own experiences and cultures. He felt that all professors at Evergreen would have to know another language and would be included in learning another language in the Cultural Exchange. “The cultural communication between the students and the professors would be a direct exchange. So, that would be a move for realization of a balance between students and professors.”

Lastly, one student argued that more students, particularly white students, need to attend the Days of Presence and Absence events. She suggested the events be mandatory or extended.