For my mentoring project, I was an English tutor in the EELI Night Lab on campus. The EELI program is for internationals who need more training in English before they can become official EKU students. EELI stands for Eastern English Language Institute. I had volunteered as an English tutor in the EELI night lab before because it is a good opportunity to make friends with internationals. The night lab not only offers free tutoring and conversation practice in English, but also a chance for EELI students to make friends.

On my first night in the lab, an Asian student came to me with two movie reviews from the Internet and asked my help. This was not an assignment; he just wanted to read about the movies and to practice pronunciation in the process. He had highlighted the words he was most unsure of, and he asked me to work with him on those words first. He would pronounce each highlighted word, then I would either affirm his pronunciation, or point out the part of the word he missed and ask him to try an alternate pronunciation. Often, he would correct himself. Sometimes, though, even after I had repeated the word a number of times, he would not be able to mimic it. He especially had difficulty with the L and R sounds, because they are foreign to his language. I assured him that I had difficulty with those sounds myself as a child, even as a native English speaker.

I had the chance to work with a few students on essays. One rule in the night lab is that students must finish their writing assignments before asking for help. A Hispanic girl asked me to check her completed essay for mistakes so she could revise it. She would read each individual paragraph aloud first, then we would work on each paragraph sentence by sentence. Usually, as she was reading it aloud, she would notice some grammatical errors and fix them right away. Most of her problems were with articles, whether or not she should use a, an or the before a word. She also had some difficulty with verb tenses and superlatives. She had some awkward wording in her paper, as well. In
those cases, I would simply say, “What are you trying to say here?” She would plainly tell me, and I would say, “Write that down.” It was very rewarding to see her finished essay, after we had spent hours reviewing every sentence. Her voice was still very evident in the finished essay, but the grammar was much better and the ideas, clearer.

Some students required more help than others. Many nights, I would spend most of the time waiting for questions. A student from Taiwan once came into the lab and did his homework, never once asking for help, or even accepting it when it was offered. Apparently, he just came because he enjoyed the environment. One student from a South American nation would spend most of his time working quietly, occasionally pop his head up to ask a quick question, then go back to his work. His English was more advanced than many of the other students’, and while they used dictionaries to do their homework, he used the thesaurus. When tutors were stumped while working with students, they would ask the rest of the tutors for help. I did the same. Even that was valuable experience for me, because it is so important for teachers to use other educators as resources.

There were a few nights when no students would come for tutoring, and those nights proved to be educational, as well. Many of the hired tutors in the lab are international students themselves who are fluent in English. I listened to some very interesting conversations about cultures and beliefs across the world. For example, two European students once discussed how ridiculous it was that Americans were always smiling. Both of them said that in their countries, people only smiled when they were truly happy. One said that her speech teacher here at Eastern had once told her to smile while giving speeches, especially before she started. She said that, in her country, if someone did that, they would appear unprepared and stupid. That same student and one young man from a South American nation said that another strange practice that Americans had was speaking to strangers on the street, or on
The young man said that, in his country, if someone made and kept eye-contact with someone else and said, “What’s up?” that would start a fight. The young lady said that if she and her friends were sitting together, and some strangers approached them and said, “Hi,” she and her friends would be very suspicious and would think the visitors wanted trouble.

One of the highlights of this mentoring project was that I was invited to attend the luncheon held for EELI students, their tutors, their teachers, and the EELI staff. The luncheon was held at Western Sizzlin’, and it was free to everyone invited. After we enjoyed our meal, awards and special recognitions were given. The students and faculty also exchanged gifts in a fun and creative way. I enjoyed the luncheon very much, and was honored when the young man in charge of the night lab recognized me for volunteering in the night lab.

This project was not only enjoyable, but was also beneficial to me as a future educator, and as a student and friend. I saw how encouragement can be the best teacher, and that students, when given a chance, can usually correct their own mistakes (with a little prompting). I realized how little I really know about the English language, and I am inspired to study it further. Also, I realized how beneficial it is to read a paper aloud while writing it in order to detect mistakes more easily. I learned how to be sensitive to cultural differences, and to respect them. Hopefully, my involvement with the EELI lab and EELI students did not end with this project.