

# Developing a Program for the Advancement of English Studies and Globalization Skills†

Justin Boffemmyer\*

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Mie University\*

Japanese university students seldom have the opportunity to develop their English through active use. Additionally, most study abroad programs target upper-classmen who may be too focused on graduating and finding post-graduation employment to spend time abroad for English. Due to the difference between the Japanese academic calendar and those of the study abroad countries, Japanese students who wish to attend a study abroad typically have to take at least a semester off from their regular studies.

To better facilitate development of more active English, the Special English Program was initiated in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Mie University, and is limited to first-year students with a TOEIC IP score of 600 or higher. The program involves various courses in English during the first year, with a 3-week short-term study abroad during the spring vacation.

Keywords: English, globalization, study abroad program

## 1. Background

English as a foreign language is a required subject for all students in Japan, beginning in junior high school or in some cases even elementary school. It is also included as a required component of degree programs at the university level. However, despite this inclusion in core curriculums, students often lack the opportunity to engage with native speakers of English, and thus have difficulty developing confidence in actively using the language. There are various study abroad programs, but these tend to primarily target upper-classmen, such as third or fourth year students, who are often too preoccupied with preparing for graduation and job-hunting to study abroad. There is an additional difficulty in that the academic calendar of Japan does not coincide with those of the countries where English is spoken natively, and therefore the study abroad programs are usually during terms that overlap with Japanese semesters, preventing students from attending the programs without taking semesters off.

The Special English Program (SEP) was inaugurated in 2015 in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Mie University, to offer first-year

students the opportunity to not only receive instruction in native English, but to actively engage others using English, as well as to attend a 3-week short-term study abroad in the UK during the Japanese spring vacation. As first-year students take mostly general education courses, taking more specialization courses from their second year, they are not preoccupied with either research or job-hunting. Additionally, the spring vacation is the break between academic years, so there is the least pressure for inter-term studies or preparations. For the short-term study abroad program, we partnered with the English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC) of the University of Sheffield, England.

## 2. Curriculum

The SEP is limited to first-year students with a TOEIC IP score of 600 or higher only, and the curriculum consists of 12 credits that must be taken during the first year. The required credits are shown in Table 1. All credits concerned are required as part of the SEP but are otherwise elective courses, except for the English I courses. The Active Learning credits are mandatory and are usually completed in Japanese, but may be completed in English instead

if a student satisfies the TOEIC IP score requirement of 600 or higher. Although only one Active Learning course in English must be completed for the SEP, a student can elect to take both in English. All elective courses are taught by native speakers of English.

Table 1 SEP Courses

2 credits of Active Learning (in English):	either Start-up Seminar or Liberal Arts Seminar
4 credits of English II Advanced:	Presentation, Reading & Discussion, Writing, or Business English
2 credits of Comprehensive Education (in English):	Linguistics F, Lecture Course in International Understanding, or Environmental Studies A
6 credits of English I:	both Communication and University Basics, in both spring and fall terms

Start-up Seminar is a course implementing Project-Based Learning in which 1st-year students learn and develop the "4 skills" through working with others on a group project during the semester. Each group gives a presentation of both the problem and their proposed solution at the end of the semester. Liberal Arts Seminar is also group-oriented, where each group selects a reading, reads and discusses it as a group, and then each individual writes a book review of that reading.

Upon completion of the required credits in the first year, students can attend the short-term study abroad component of the SEP, discussed in detail in the following section. Students are also required to take the TOEIC test in the beginning of their second year, which we can use to assess improvements in English skills after completing the program.

### 3. Short-term Study Abroad

The short-term study abroad developed in partnership with the ELTC consists of 3 weeks of

classes at the ELTC. Accommodation for all students is provided by homestay families, ensuring that students not only have further opportunities to learn and practice English with native speakers, but also to learn first-hand the culture and daily life of England. The short-term study abroad class curriculum at the ELTC is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 SEP Short-term Study Abroad Courses

	Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.
M1	Eng. Skills	Eng. Skills	Eng. Skills	Eng. Skills	Eng. Skills
M2	Eng. Skills	Eng. Skills	Eng. Skills	Eng. Skills	Eng. Skills
A1	Social Eng.	Social Eng.	Open Lecture	Social Eng.	

M1 is the first morning session, which is from 9:00-10:30, and M2 is the second morning session from 11:30-13:00. A1 denotes the afternoon session, which is from 14:00-15:30. The open lecture on Wednesday afternoons differs in topic every week, given by a different professor from the University of Sheffield's regular departments, and is open to the entire university. In other words, it offers our students the chance to take a lecture course in English, together with regular University of Sheffield students. During the 3-week period there is also an educational field trip to a place of historic import, which was to Warwick Castle for the 2015 academic year short-term study abroad.

Our students are also treated as regular University of Sheffield students, so they have access to all the same facilities, as well as student clubs and organizations, as native University of Sheffield students. This provides them the opportunity to meet and mix with native UK students socially, which enables them to further learn English language and culture.

### 4. Activities conducted during academic year 2015

Initially, it was expected that perhaps as many as 30 students would join the program and attend the short-term study abroad. The response from the students, however, was overwhelming, with 51

students completing the program and attending the short-term study abroad, and 11 more completing the program courses only. As a result of the swell in applicants beyond expectations, the terms of the short-term study abroad were renegotiated with the participant university while the academic year was underway. We had initially applied for funding for fewer students from Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO), which turned out to be unsuccessful. Therefore, funding was sought from the Mie University President's Fund. The ELTC initially agreed to accept all of our students, but with the condition that 30 would be in their regular, mixed-nationality classes and the remaining 21 students would be in Mie University-only closed classes due to concerns about the resulting class sizes and proportions of nationalities. The cost for the students would be the same regardless of which classes they were to attend. We accordingly separated the short-term study abroad students into two groups based on a selection process, and as the funding was limited, it was decided to apportion more funding to those students selected for the mixed-nationality classes. Students selected for the mixed-nationality classes were apportioned 123,000 yen each, while the remaining 21 were apportioned 61,000 each. The selection process consisted of a written essay test in English as well as examination of the students' TOEIC scores and overall performance in the courses included in the SEP curriculum. The essay test asked students to explain, in detail, why they desired to attend the short-term study abroad program and what, if anything, they had done in preparation of achieving that goal. Due to changes in enrollment in the ELTC from other sources than Mie University, the ELTC was able to arrange for all of our attending students to be placed in mixed-nationality classes, though for some students this would only be some of their classes in a given day.

Throughout the year, we held orientations for the students for both course and credit guidance as well as preparation for the short-term study abroad. 3 faculty members joined the short-term study abroad as attending faculty. At the conclusion of the short-term study abroad, a survey was conducted

with the participating students concerning perceived improvements in abilities and their satisfaction, for both the short-term study abroad and the courses taught in Mie University. Overall, the responses were quite positive. The results from the survey are presented in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3 Short-term Study Abroad (1: low ... 5: high)

Overall satisfaction with the study abroad	4.5
Satisfaction with the orientations	3.7
Improvement in English reading	3.6
Improvement in English listening	4.6
Improvement in English writing	3.6
Improvement in English speaking	4.6
Satisfaction with extra-curricular activities	4.3
Satisfaction with the homestay experience	4.7

Table 4 SEP Courses (1: low ... 5: high)

Overall satisfaction with the SEP	4.4
Satisfaction with the courses	4.4
Satisfaction with the Active Learning courses	4.1
Satisfaction with the Comprehensive courses	4.2
Improvement in English abilities	4.3
Development of a global point of view	4.0

Extra-curricular activities in Table 3 refers to the myriad club and social activities that students could participate in at University of Sheffield together with regular University of Sheffield students, as well as the educational field trip.

We also held a closing ceremony on May 11 in academic year 2016 for the students who participated in the SEP during academic year 2015 that included presentations from all the students who attended the short-term study abroad.

## 5. New Developments in 2016

Having established our partnership with the ELTC, this year we knew ahead of time that they could accept all of our students, and as they know more in advance how many of our students to expect, they can prepare for having all of them in the regular, mixed-nationality classes. As a result, there is no need to separate our students into

different groups for the short-term study abroad. Thus, there is no need for a selection process and all students this year will receive equal shares of funding. Funding for this year is provided by JASSO and the Mie University President's Fund, at 90,000 yen per student.

In order to better prepare our students for the short-term study abroad, Helen Johnstone, the academic director of the ELTC, was invited to Mie to both lecture an intensive English II Advanced B course during the summer vacation as well as lead a workshop. The workshop included introductions to the University of Sheffield, the ELTC, and UK life and culture, a mock ELTC class, and discussion and advice for living in a homestay. Funding was provided by the International Relations Invited Researcher Fund and International Exchange Project Fund.

## 6. Challenges and Future Directions

According to the survey we conducted, students did not feel that they improved their writing or reading abilities so much during the short-term study abroad. Unfortunately, as the short-term study abroad is only 3 weeks long, it's difficult to really improve either of those, so this result is to be expected. Meanwhile, being immersed in an English-speaking environment, even for such a short time, strongly drives abilities in listening and speaking as these abilities become necessary for basic daily survival.

We learned that we can do better to prepare our students before the study abroad by improving the quality of our orientations. We have been striving to better focus the content of our orientations for the present academic year on the issues that students brought to our attention. This was also a factor in inviting Academic Director Helen Johnstone to lead the workshop, so that students could also have a chance to ask questions about both the ELTC and life in UK directly. We will conduct further surveys at the conclusion of this year's short-term study abroad to assess the changes and make further improvements.

The April 2016 TOEIC IP scores of the academic year 2015 SEP students showed a high degree of variance, with some students earning higher scores than their original TOEIC IP scores from April 2015, others staying about the same, while others still had lower scores. The variance can be attributed to multiple factors. The second TOEIC IP test was required only as part of the SEP, while the first is a Mie University entry requirement that is additionally used for class placement. Furthermore, although there is a score requirement of 600 or higher to enter the SEP from the first TOEIC IP test, there was no score requirement on the second TOEIC IP test. Therefore, students may have been less motivated to apply the same effort for the second test. Additionally, as the second TOEIC IP test was administered during the start of the spring semester of the students' second year, they may have been busier and more concentrated on their departmental studies, as their specialization courses begin from the second year. The TOEIC IP test also did not include speaking assessment, testing only listening and reading. As indicated by the survey we conducted, our students were more concentrated on developing speaking and listening during the short-term study abroad, meaning that half of the TOEIC IP assessed aspects that our students may have experienced disuse of, with only one third assessing an area they would have been stronger in.

An additional shortcoming is the number of English courses we can offer to the students, both in terms of both available subjects and time slots. At present, we lack sufficient faculty to support an increase in the classes offered, but we hope to increase our capacity in the future.

---

† Justin Boffemmyer\*: Developing a Program for the Advancement of English Studies and Globalization Skills

\* Faculty of the college of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Mie University 1577 Kurimamachiyachou Tsushi, Mie, 514-8507 Japan