

【ショートレター】

Adapting a Program for the Advancement of English Studies and Globalization Skills in the Face of COVID-19†

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The Special English Program (SEP), offered by Mie University’s College of Liberal Arts and Sciences since 2015, provides first-year students who have scored 600 and above on TOEIC IP with opportunities to study in English-only environments. This is accomplished through a 14-month program in which students pursue intense study in Japan, followed by a three-week study abroad program in England. In the program’s sixth year, the COVID-19 global pandemic forced adjustments to the program. The present short letter reports the progress of the program, its adjustments, and future outlook in advancing students’ understanding of English and intercultural communication.

Keywords: English, globalization, study abroad program, active learning, COVID-19 pandemic

1. Introduction

The Special English Program (SEP) is a 14-month intensive curriculum at Mie University’s College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in which students develop practical English skills and intercultural understanding. SEP students first spend one academic year studying in Japan at Mie University. Toward the end of that year, they further develop those skills by studying abroad for three weeks in England at the University of Sheffield (see Table 1). SEP is open to first-year students who score 600 or above on the TOEIC IP test administered to all Mie University freshmen in April.

SEP requires students to take an active approach in their learning, both through its own courses and the study abroad program. Through the program, students become better equipped for communication and intercultural understanding in the global world of today.

Table 1: Timeline of the 14 months in SEP

April (1 st year)	TOEIC IP Test; Join SEP; Begin coursework at Mie University
August	Overnight workshop; intensive course
February-March	Three-week study abroad program at the University of Sheffield (England)
April (2 nd year)	TOEIC IP Test
May	Completion ceremony & presentation

This paper provides an overview of SEP, including its progress since its inception in 2015¹). In addition, it examines

the changes that became necessary in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Curriculum and Additional Offerings

There are two paths to completing SEP. Path (A), *SEP Completion*, includes 14 course credits, explained below, and participation in the three-week study abroad program explained in Section 3. Path (B), *SEP Credit Completion*, is awarded to students who complete the 14 credits without joining the study abroad program. The majority of students choose Path (A), and the total number of participants has increased since the program began in 2015 (see Table 2).

Table 2: Number of students completing SEP by year

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020 ²⁾
(A) Completion	51	56	55	71	72	0
(B) Credits only	11	25	24	26	20	84
Total	62	81	79	97	92	84

The 14 credits of SEP coursework include both required and elective courses. Short descriptions are provided below, with a summary in Table 3. The system is arranged such that students who complete SEP do not need to take additional courses compared with other Mie University students.

Active Learning courses emphasize taking control of one’s own learning. Start-up PBL Seminar (SUS) is a project-based course in which students build fundamental research and teamwork skills. In addition, students develop the *Four*

Abilities specified in Mie University's mission statement. In Liberal Arts Seminar (LAS), students working in groups select books from a recommended reading list. The emphasis is on interaction with the content through critical reading, after which students write a book review. SEP students choose to complete SUS, LAS, or both, conducted entirely in English.

Table 3: SEP Courses and Credit Requirements

Credits	Type	Example courses
2	Active Learning	Start-up PBL Seminar Liberal Arts Seminar
2	Comprehensive Education	Environmental Studies Work & Global Understanding
6	English I	Communication Academic Foundation TOEIC – satisfied by IP test score
4	English II Advanced	Presentation Reading Business English Writing

Comprehensive Education courses are content-focused courses. English serves as a tool for communication, not the main object of study. Students select from themes such as Environmental Studies and Work and Global Understanding.

English I courses develop core English skills. The Academic Foundation course develops vocabulary and grammar through reading, while the Communication course builds skills for direct interaction. SEP students are granted credit for the TOEIC course due to their TOEIC IP test score.

English II Advanced courses go beyond English I. There are four types of courses, each focused on a specific skill or language area: business English, presentation, reading and discussion, and writing. Students select at least four of these 1-credit courses. All are conducted completely in English.

Separate from the formal coursework, SEP offers an informal English Lounge. The Lounge is a place to use English in a relaxed environment. Held several times per

month, typically during the lunchtime break, English Lounge offers a wide range of activities such as discussions, quizzes, games, and presentation practice.

SEP, as a program, is evaluated by its students at the end of each academic year. The results are presented in Table 4.

3. Study Abroad in England: 2015-2019

One pillar of SEP is the three-week study abroad program in England at the University of Sheffield's English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC). Having already studied with purpose for 11 months at Mie University, students depart for England to further expand their English skills and gain first-hand experience in intercultural situations. The participants' evaluation of the program is reported in Table 5.

The academic program at ELTC includes several facets:

- Coursework: (a) Integrated Language Skills classes build speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. Students are assigned to classes based on a 100-minute placement test. (b) Options classes are electives in which students can focus on pronunciation, grammar, or discussion.
- Lecture: A weekly lecture is offered by professors from various departments. This allows participants to experience university-level course content presented in English. It is an opportunity to understand what is expected of native-level university students. Because program participants experience three lectures during their stay—one per week of the program—they can measure their own progress over time.
- Educational field trip: Students visit a location of cultural importance. Past trips have included Lincoln Cathedral, the Royal Armouries, and Warwick Castle, among others. Each trip includes its own educational materials.
- Tutorials: Each student has a weekly one-on-one meeting with a tutor to check their academic progress and their well-being during the adjustment to life in England.

Table 4: Special English Program – Survey Results (1: low ... 5: high)

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Overall satisfaction with SEP	4.4	4.5	4.3	4.3	4.2
Satisfaction with the English courses	4.4	4.2	3.9	4.1	4.1
Satisfaction with the Active Learning courses	4.1	3.9	3.7	3.9	3.8
Satisfaction with the Comprehensive courses	4.2	4.0	4.0	3.9	3.9
Improvement in English Abilities	4.3	4.4	4.1	4.4	4.2
Development of a global point of view	4.0	4.2	4.3	4.3	4.2

Table 5: Study Abroad Program – Survey Results (1: low ... 5: high)

Academic Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Overall satisfaction with the study abroad	4.5	4.6	4.4	4.4	4.3
Satisfaction with the orientations	3.6	3.9	4.0	3.7	4.1
Improvement in English listening	4.5	4.7	4.3	4.6	4.3
Improvement in English speaking	4.6	4.6	4.3	4.5	4.3
Improvement in English reading	3.6	3.7	3.5	3.6	3.7
Improvement in English writing	3.6	3.6	3.4	3.6	3.7
Satisfaction with extra-curricular activities	4.2	4.1	4.2	4.2	3.9
Satisfaction with the homestay experience	4.7	4.7	4.6	4.6	4.4

A key component of the study abroad is that each student lives in the home of a British host family. These daily interactions provide crucial experiences as students discover the nuances of communication and everyday life in England. The family provides breakfast, dinner, and daily care.

**Photo 1: SEP students in England****Photo 2: SEP students make a presentation in English about their study abroad experiences in England.**

All participants are considered regular students at the University of Sheffield for their entire stay. They have full access to the university library, sports and other facilities, as well as clubs and other organizations. In addition, the ELTC

hosts an optional activity after each day's classes, such as conversation club, hiking, and organized sport.

The number of participants in the study abroad component and in SEP itself have surpassed expectations (Boffemmyer, 2017). 51 participants joined the study abroad in 2015, exceeding the initial expectation that no more than 30 students would participate. Since then, the number of participants has twice exceeded 70, reaching a peak of 74.

In order to prepare students for the study abroad component, SEP holds five orientation sessions spaced throughout the academic year. In addition, the academic director of the ELTC has been invited to Mie University each summer since 2016 to run a four-day intensive English II Advanced course which includes immersion in an English-only environment from 8:50 AM to 4:10 PM. A two-day overnight workshop prepares students for life in England and study at the University of Sheffield.

4. COVID-19 and its effects on the 2020 Academic Year

4.1. Online Courses – Mie University

Courses at Mie University's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences shifted online for the 2020 academic year. This shift is discussed further in Section 5. Students' evaluation of SEP and its online courses is presented in Table 6.

Table 6: SEP Student Satisfaction 2020

A. Overall satisfaction with SEP	4.2
B. English II Advanced courses	4.5
C. Active Learning courses	4.0
D. Comprehensive Education courses	4.1
E. Improvement in English abilities	4.4
F. Development of a global viewpoint	4.2

4.2. Online Study Program – Sheffield University

With students unable to travel overseas, the decision was made to offer a five-day online study program in which students would join courses offered by the ELTC. Although it was not possible to offer the experience of studying abroad and living with a host family, the academic structure was closely based on what students would have experienced, had they been able to travel to England (described in Section 3). Lessons were shortened from 90 to 60 minutes to account for eye and mental fatigue due to the online nature. Program content ran from 6:00 PM to 10:00 PM Japan Standard Time (JST). 12 students joined the program. The results of the students' evaluation are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Online Study Program Satisfaction

A. Online course, overall	4.5
B. Integrated Language Skills classes	4.4
C. Option choice classes	4.6
D. Mid-week lecture	4.2
E. Meeting with tutor	4.2
F. Social activities	4.3
G. Class placement & difficulty level	4.2

4.3. Online Lecture Program – Sheffield University

A three-day lecture series followed the online course. Rather than a passive listening process, students were required to engage with the content through the combination of pre-lecture materials, the lecture itself, and a post-lecture discussion. Students were free to choose the number of lectures to attend. Nine 1st-year SEP students attended at least one lecture, with several of them attending multiple. The evaluation from the students is shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Online Lecture Program Satisfaction

A. Overall lecture program	3.89
B. Pre-lecture materials	4.43
C. Lecture	4.43
D. Post-lecture discussion	4.14

5. Challenges and Future Directions

As a program devoted to interactive lessons held in Japan and followed by an immersive study abroad experience in England, COVID-19 presents a significant obstacle for SEP. Courses in SEP typically involve pair- and group-work conducted completely in English. When these courses are

moved online, communication is affected in various ways. Non-verbal cues such as eye contact and body language may not be as readily available. Voice clarity is dependent on microphone and Internet connection quality. Courses such as the English II Advanced course on EFL presentation have required additional technological considerations (Sokolovsky, 2021). Further adjustments will be necessary as the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences has announced the adoption of a *hybrid* classroom in 2021, a system in which half of the students attend in the physical classroom, with the other half attending online simultaneously.

A positive interpretation is that online-offline mixed groups and long-distance communication through the Internet are likely to become increasingly common, especially for international teams. If so, gaining this experience through SEP classes may provide valuable training for these situations.

Regarding the study abroad program, although it was not possible to recreate the full intercultural experience, students indicated their satisfaction with the online study and lecture programs. Planned improvements include longer discussion times and an improved technical environment should the program remain online due to COVID-19.

Notes

- 1) Years in this paper refer to academic years which, for Mie University and much of Japan, run from April through March.
- 2) The study abroad program in the 2020 academic year was canceled due to concerns over COVID-19. Students were recognized for completing all SEP credits.

References

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† グローバル人材を育成する教養教育英語特別プログラムとコロナ禍への対応

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