

What We Learned from Six Years of "Special English Lessons" at the University of Tokyo

Kumiko Morimura* and Jorg Entzinger*

**The University of Tokyo
morimura@t-adm.t.u-tokyo.ac.jp
j-entzinger@t-adm.t.u-tokyo.ac.jp*

Abstract

We started the "Special English Lessons" program (SEL) at the University of Tokyo (UT) in 2005 to help university students improve their English communication skills. The design and implementation of SEL were unique at the time, partly because of a vision with ambitious goals, and partly in order to cope with practical limitations. We invite (private) English schools to let their instructors teach students after-school and on-campus, while the students pay for the lessons. However, the university stays highly involved in the program, and decides what courses are given and controls the quality. Over the years, SEL has grown from a total of 150 engineering students in 13 classes in the first year, to over 700 students from all departments in 72 classes in 2010. Here we introduce our program and its development over the years, and highlight the key ideas and decisions that we believe determine its success.

I. Introduction

Globalization is an urgent issue for universities. Universities try to increase the number of lectures taught in English, the number of international students who come to Japan instead of going to US, and the number of students who can communicate with international students or who want to go abroad to study. When we started the Special English Lessons (SEL) program at the School of Engineering (SE) of the University of Tokyo (UT), the SE had only a small number of faculty working on English language education and there was no good curriculum for teaching practical English. Apart from these limitations, there were concerns within the SE that teaching English for course credits in the regular curriculum would compromise the engineering skills of SE undergraduates.

SEL was introduced under those challenging circumstances, but well received by the students, and it became a university wide program for teaching English over the past 6 years. In this paper, we will show the organization of SEL, its curricula, and its growth both in size and variety by looking at SEL's unique points and by sharing our philosophy and experiences.

II. Organization of SEL

A. How SEL started

At the school of Engineering, there are 2000 undergraduate students, 2000 master students, and 1000 doctor students. The number of faculty who can teach them English was only two in 2005 when the SEL program was planned. Thus, we, the "Global Ware Project" (GWP), had to think of a method to effectively teach 5000 students

English with only two teachers.

We came to the idea of inviting (private) English schools from outside the university to teach practical English skills at the university, with the GWP staff (i.e., the two UT teachers) taking care of PR, management, arranging on-campus classrooms, supervision, and quality control. The students do not get course credits, and they actually have to pay money to the English schools. However, since the GWP takes care of many issues, the English schools offer their courses against reduced prices and the students know they get value for their money. All participation is voluntary.

At first, two English schools were chosen to provide conversation classes in the summer semester of 2005. These classes were executed by the English schools and their instructors stood in front of the university classrooms. That was an epoch making phenomenon, and people within the university criticized the SEL program for outsourcing education. However, over the years, more and more people were convinced of SEL, since we as GWP staff are working closely together with the English schools to organize and evaluate SEL and to tune the curriculum, as will become clear from the remainder of this paper.

B. Flow of the SEL semester

SEL is organized every summer and winter semester. Additionally we organize a series of "Special Intensive Courses", with various daily half-day or full day classes in one week of the summer holiday. Here, we will focus on the regular SEL courses.

The typical flow of a SEL semester is depicted in Figure 1. It starts with the GWP deciding what types of courses we

would like to offer to the students. Typically we continue the successful courses of the previous semester, but sometimes we like to add a new course and/or English school to the program (see also subsection E “Quality Control”).

Subsequently, the English schools show what courses they can offer and prepare information pamphlets. We then take care of the PR through posters, our website, and spreading the pamphlets through various channels.

At the start of the academic semester, we organize a 2 or 3 orientation meetings for the students. Here we present the SEL program in general and the English schools demonstrate their teaching methods, curricula, and special features of their schools. Additionally we ask the English schools to provide a (free of charge) demo-lesson, so that the students can compare levels and schools before they make their decision.

After signing up for a class, students pay the tuition fee to the English school directly. Students for conversation classes take a level-check interview and will be placed in an appropriate class. We pushed the English schools to introduce this system after we found that a great disparity in students’ levels was the main reason for classes to be inefficient, low student ratings, and high drop-out rates. These level-check interviews are especially effective when many students sign up and several classes within one level can be made. It is also important to consider differences between students’ real and reported levels (the latter may be based on written test scores rather than conversation, or low self-confidence rather than actual capability).

Once the ten week session starts, the instructors from the English schools take the lead using their own school’s

curriculum, method, and materials. However, we keep it under our supervision through regular class visits and questionnaires (see also subsection D “Supervision of Classes”).

At the end of the 10 week lecture series, we have a “Final Presentation Night”, where each class gets an opportunity to show what they learned in front of an audience. Participation is voluntary. This event has many functions: it serves as a wrap-up opportunity for the classes, students get the experience of performing on stage in English, students can see what other classes did (and practice listening skills), and it is also a way for us to see the result of the classes and to show the success of SEL to others within and outside the UT.

Finally we discuss with the English schools about the results of the semester and provide feedback on each class (see also subsection E “Quality Control”).

C. Time Schedule of SEL

SEL has two sessions (summer and winter), each of which lasts 10 weeks. Summer sessions start from the second week of May and last until the end of July. Winter sessions begin from the end of October and last until the end of January. Since the summer semester starts in April and the winter semester early October, we have about one month to do PR among students, organize the orientations, demo-lessons, and level-check tests. In the other months (mainly February and August) we provide feedback to the English schools and plan with them for the new semester.

We had to place SEL classes after all the regular classes are over, because engineering students are busy with their specialties, and their schedules are filled with core subjects. Therefore, classes start from 6:30 pm and end around 7:50, 8:30, or 9:00 pm depending on the duration of the class. The program was called "After School English Course" as a nickname.

D. Supervision of Classes

Since we offer the SEL courses to the students as a university, we want to keep a strong grip on the program and assure value for our students. However, especially now the program has grown to as many as 13 simultaneous classes on some days, GWP faculty alone cannot cover all the classes. We therefore hire international students as teaching assistants (TAs), to help with the daily operation of the classes (such as bringing teaching materials, CD-players, etc. to the classrooms and cleaning up afterward) as well as to observe the classes and take notes about what is going on and how the teachers and students interact.

We decided on international students for several reasons. First of all they generally speak English well, so they can easily communicate with the teachers from the English schools if there are any problems or requests. Since they will also be able to understand the lecture and estimate the level of the participating students, their analysis of the class situation—and therefore their notes—will be more useful for the GWP staff to understand what is going on. Finally, there are not many opportunities for international students to

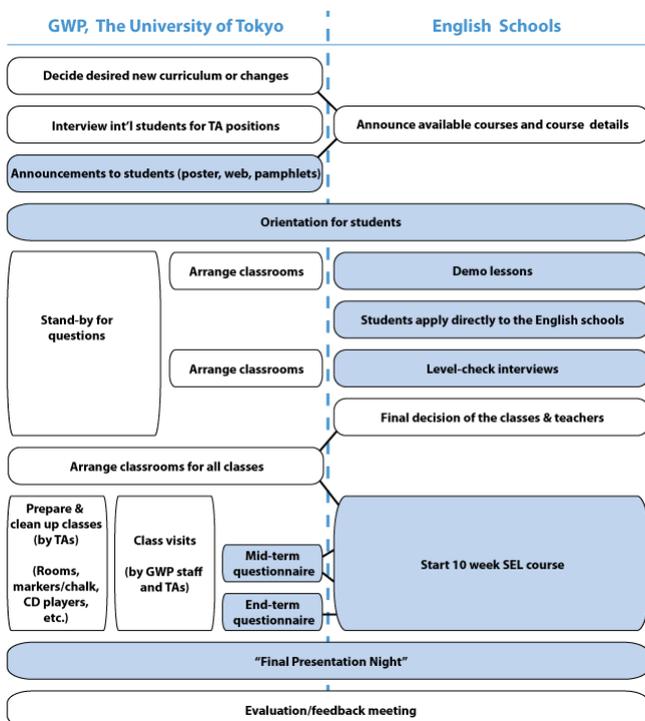


Figure 1. Flow of a SEL semester. The boxes with a blue background are the parts where the students are involved.

become a TA in the university or to get part-time jobs in Japan, and by offering them this opportunity we hope to help them in becoming a part of society here.

Like the GWP staff, the TAs also visit several classes on a day, and spend about 20-30 minutes per class. Generally they work once, sometimes twice a week. At the end of each day's classes we ask the TAs whether there was any specific issue, and read their notes. Twice per semester we organize a TA meeting to listen to the overall report of what TAs have noticed while watching the classes and discuss these issues or ideas for further improvement. We compare their comments with our own impressions and experiences from previous semesters, and provide this as feedback to the English schools, or in urgent cases to the teachers directly.

This way, the classes are executed by English schools, but they are still under our control.

E. Quality Control

In the previous subsection we already discussed how we supervise the classes during the semester. This is of course an important part of our quality control system, but not the only one. The choice of English schools and student satisfaction questionnaires also help us to guarantee a constantly improving quality.

The choice of which English schools to allow in the SEL program is another important factor determining the quality. The first two schools in the SEL program were a non-profit English school and a well known private school. The stability of the schools, the prospect that they could offer a constant quality, and their capability to supply for a growing demand in the future were key aspects when choosing these two schools. They were both asked to provide a demonstration lecture for the GWP staff before we decided to allow them to offer SEL courses to the UT students. For all the other schools who joined the program since then, the same rules have hold.

In some cases we used our "special intensive course" in the summer holidays to do a try-out of a new school that wanted to join the SEL program, or to try out new course ideas. This appeared to be a good opportunity to quickly evaluate the school's performance as well as the students' needs.

We take questionnaires twice during the sessions, one at mid-term and the other at the end of the term. We share the result of the questionnaires with the English schools so they can adjust the classes in a favorable way for students. At the time of the mid-term questionnaires, students may not be perfectly satisfied, but the instructors still have time to modify their classes and make them better. After the session is over, the GWP staff and each English school have an evaluation meeting. There we provide feedback from the questionnaires and class observations, and discuss how we can improve the classes in the next semester.

Additionally we have questionnaires after the orientation meetings, after the demo-lessons, and after the final presentation night. From these we try to gather more information on what the students actually want to learn, what their motivation is to take SEL, and how we can

improve these two events.

III. Growth in Size

We started SEL in 2005, when we had only six conversation classes and 64 students participated, 53 of which were engineering students. In the winter session of 2005, we added a TOEFL-test preparation course because the Graduate School of Engineering decided to adopt the TOEFL® test as part of its entrance examination. Eighty-eight students joined this TOEFL® course the first time. In 2006, we added two more English schools in the SEL program and the student enrollment for the summer became 164. This number doubled in 2007, and tripled in 2008. By then, we had 37 classes a year in total, including conversation and TOEFL® courses.

From 2010, the program was opened to students from all schools in the UT, by request of the Head Office of the University of Tokyo. A total of 700 students enrolled in the SEL program that year, and we had 50 lessons a week in summer and 37 in winter for 72 classes in total. Figure 2 shows the transition of the numbers of participants from 2005 to 2010.

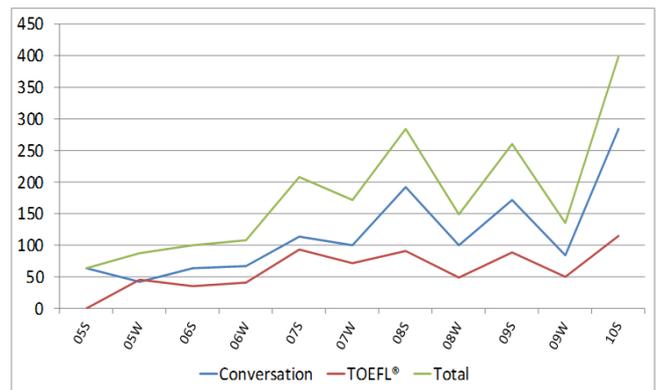


Figure 2. Number of students taking SEL each semester. The horizontal axis shows the year (05-10 for 2005 to 2010) and S for summer and W for winter semesters. The number of participants is generally lower in winter than in summer because many students are busy preparing for their thesis and final exam.

IV. Growth in Variety

A. Conversation Classes

For all conversation classes we set a maximum of 10 students per class. This is the result of a trade-off between the price students have to pay, and the attention a teacher can give to each student. Classes are generally cancelled if less than 6 people sign up, and 2 classes of the same course are started if more than 10 sign up, provided that the English school has the capability to do so. The intermediate level conversation classes focus more on daily (campus) life, while the more advanced classes pay more attention to academic issues, presentation, discussion, debate, etcetera.

When starting SEL, we had only 2 English schools offering conversation classes. One school provided courses with lessons once a week (10 lessons, 15 hours in total), the other twice weekly (20 lessons, 40 hours in total). Some of

the once a week courses were offered on multiple weekdays, to increase variety in the hope to better match students' schedules.

Although we started out with only intermediate and advanced conversation classes, the progress of the students' conversation ability lead us to gradually set upper-advanced and super-advanced classes as well. Actually, the score of conversation class students of one of the English schools increased from an average of 134.9 points at the level-check interviews in 2006 to 168.2 points in 2010 (significant at 5% level).

Since the SEL program started in the School of Engineering, there was a request to set an engineering oriented conversation class. In close collaboration with one of the English schools we opened one advanced level class for this purpose, where students could enjoy talking about engineering related topics such as "what is the most appropriate material for building a car", or "which shape is good for the bridges". The English school chose a teacher with a technical background to lead the course and developed some additional teaching materials for this purpose.

We also tuned several classes to meet specific targets of the students. From personal interaction and questionnaires we learned that especially the higher level students do not just want to learn daily conversation, but specifically want to work on their presentation, negotiation, or discussion skills. We therefore set several presentation classes where they learn how to make good presentations, as well as discussion classes where they learn how to improve their academic discussion skills.

Apart from these changes over the years, the number of students has grown (as discussed in the previous section). This offered the possibility to open more of the same courses on different weekdays, and to allow more English schools into the SEL program, each with their own distinct teaching philosophy.

B. TOEFL¹ Classes

In the winter session in 2005, we started a TOEFL preparation course. This course is mainly aimed at undergraduate students who want to improve their English skills before taking the TOEFL test which is part of the entrance examination for the Graduate School of Engineering. Apart from that, this course is also interesting for students who plan to study abroad, since many universities require a TOEFL score at application.

First, the course was focused on the PBT, and later it was modified to match the CBT, and then the iBT, according to the actual modifications of the TOEFL test. Now we have Reading, Listening, Writing, and Speaking courses, so that the students can take whichever class they want, depending on their schedules and needs.

The TOEFL preparation courses have more lecture type lessons, with parts taught in Japanese, and other more interactive parts by native speakers of English. For these lessons we allow more than 10 students per class, and the English schools set a maximum of 45 students per class. For the parts taught by the native speaker of English, they generally decide to split the class into smaller groups with several teachers and/or teaching assistants from the English school, to allow more individual care and feedback, especially for the speaking exercises. These smaller groups can consist of about 6-30 students, depending on the school and the total number of students.

Currently 2 different schools provide TOEFL preparation courses. There are no different levels for these courses. Variation exists in the teaching style of the school, days at which courses are offered, a focus on certain skills (Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening), and a specific PBT or iBT focus of some courses.

C. Other Variety

In the winter session of 2010, we added courses for staff, in order to prepare them for the internationalization of the university. As the number of international students and visiting professors increases, the UT staff have to be ready to supply for their needs and answer their inquiries. We set a conversation course and an email writing & telephoning course, which are currently only organized in the winter semesters.

When deciding on the classes for staff, several issues played a role. One was whether we should mix the staff with the students. For some courses we figured the objectives of staff and students would just be too different to serve both by the same class, so we opened the special email writing & telephoning course. Incidentally staff are interested in the TOEFL courses, where mixing in a few staff with the students is generally no problem due to the lecturing style of these courses. With the general conversation classes, however, it is not clear which solution is best. Although the experience and different views of staff may enrich conversations or discussions, their different interests, motivation, and possible dominance may affect the classroom atmosphere. We finally decided to have separate classes for staff, which we believe is the best solution for both, as long as there are sufficient applicants to guarantee small enough level differences in each class.

We added an "Academic writing class" in summer 2011. Especially Master and Doctor course students are eager to learn how to write good academic papers. Although we offer a (free and for-credit) regular course "English for Engineers and Scientists", this course can only touch on the basics and it is difficult to provide individual attention and extensive feedback to all of the 100-200 students who take this course each semester. Therefore, we started intermediate and advanced level academic writing courses in the SEL program. In the intermediate level course, they learn how to write different kinds of papers, such as emails, reports, essays, and so on. In the advanced level course, they learn how to write good academic papers, and attention is paid to

¹ TOEFL®: Test of English as a Foreign Language,
PBT: Paper-based Test,
CBT: Computer/Center-based Test,
iBT: Internet-based Test

structure, clarity, conciseness, etc. as well as to common mistakes Japanese people make in their written English. Even though this semester was the first trial, 20 students applied for these academic writing classes.

For the future we are thinking to add special pronunciation classes. Although several teachers pay attention to proper pronunciation, it is only a part of their lesson and feedback. Since Japanese students have some clearly identifiable difficulties with the pronunciation of certain sounds (such as r/l, b/v, th), a systematic approach to practicing these sounds could greatly help the students to improve their speaking. Since we also received several comments from students that they would especially like to improve their pronunciation, we organized a pronunciation class taught by a pronunciation expert as a “summer intensive course”, with great success and high evaluation by the students. Unfortunately we are currently unable to embed such a course in the regular SEL program.

With a total of 8 different English schools and several courses on various levels every day, there are over 20 unique courses to choose from every semester. This way students can select the course they really want from this wide range.

V. Student Evaluation of SEL

The students of SEL fill out a questionnaire about their classes twice, one at mid-term, and one at the end. Figure 3 shows some of the evaluation results from the classes in 2010. We generally look at these results, the drop-out rate, and the class atmosphere first. We use the answers to the other questions mainly to find out the reasons if anything is unusual. Other questions include for instance the clarity of the teaching materials, the price/value of the course and whether the duration and number of lessons were appropriate.

We find that the pace and level are related with each other. If the students think it's easy, they think the pace was slow, and vice versa. We prefer a good balance between “too easy” and “easy” on one side, and “too difficult” on the other. Generally, when students answer “difficult” they make comments like “difficult but a good challenge”, so we do not necessarily see the rating “difficult” as a bad sign, unless other signs also point in that direction.

The results for the TOEFL®-preparation classes are quite similar to the results of the conversation classes. However, the work load was much heavier for students in the TOEFL classes, but they are more likely to recommend the course to their friends.

Figure 4 shows students' self-evaluation of their levels before and after taking SEL. Here we also see little difference between the TOEFL and conversation classes.

Some typical comments the students wrote on their questionnaires:

- *It's good to have taken the course. Please notify the other departments.*
- *I would have taken this course every semester if I had known about it earlier.*
- *I would like to be able to handle English better after taking 4 hour class and immersed in English.*

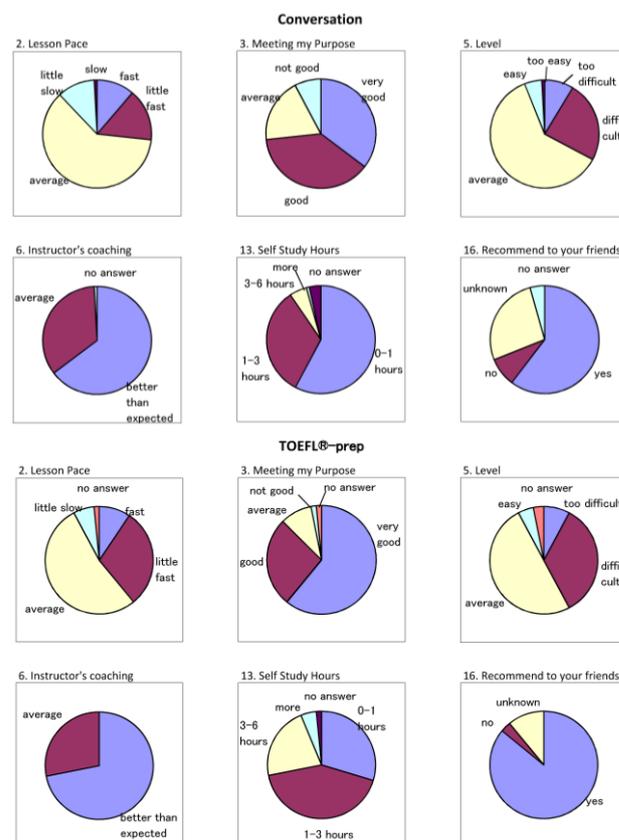


Figure 3. A few results from the end-term questionnaire of SEL winter 2010. Response for conversation classes 116/184 students, for the TOEFL®-prep classes 64/84 students.

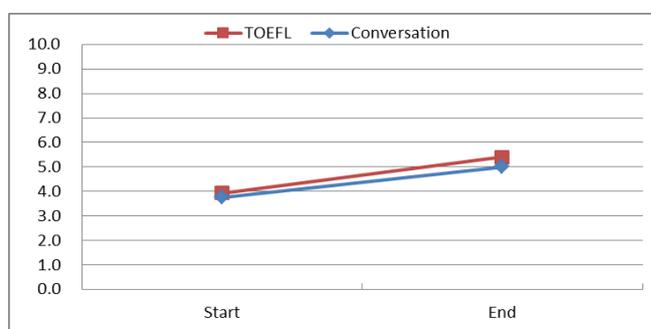


Figure 4. Self-evaluation of the students' levels in the conversation and TOEFL classes at the start and end of the 2010 winter course.

- *It was very useful because you taught me important information.*
- *I want to have some occasions to utilize what I have learned from the lessons.*
- *First, I was miserable because I was the only one who couldn't speak good English, but I realized that I can make as many mistakes as I want because I was at the bottom.*
- *Now, I can enjoy conversation because the teacher taught me enthusiastically.*
- *I would like to have more assignments.*
- *Please also organize courses at the Komaba campus. [SEL is currently taught only on our Hongo campus]*
- *Fewer people in a class, please.*
- *Lower price. Open new diverse courses.*

VI. Lessons Learned

- Level-check-interviews are very important to assure more or less equal student levels in each class. For conversation classes, interviews by native speakers of English are the only way to do this (scores of written tests are not meaningful). If levels within one class differ too much, some people get bored, others don't get what the teacher says, and in the end many will drop out or remain unsatisfied, resulting in bad reputation for the program.
- Offering quality classes after-school and on-campus makes learning English more accessible for students, and even if they have to pay a fee, many are willing to take the opportunity.
- Learning English should be fun, especially if you do it in your free time and pay for it. A good class atmosphere is therefore very important, and factors influencing this (teaching style, teacher, nr. of students per class, level differences, etc.) should be carefully monitored.
- For quality control, it is important to observe classes and to see the SEL courses in the wider context of the academic curriculum.
- It is important to communicate with both the instructors from the English schools and the students to match their expectations and results.
- As university staff, it is important to find out what the students need, and offering courses that meet that need. This includes the careful selection of English schools (and even specific teachers) that have a style that suits the university students.
- It is important to offer as much variety as possible in:
 - Levels
 - Schools (teaching styles)
 - Type (conversation/TOEFL/academic writing)
 - Days of the week one can take a certain class
 - Focus (presentation/engineers/pronunciation)
 - Special classes for staff
 - Etc.
- International students are effective as assistants for setting-up/cleaning-up classrooms and supervision of the classes. (However, staff should remain responsible, confirm TAs' findings, and care about the long term)
- Having a "Final Presentation Night" helps motivate students, gives them a unique experience and increased self-confidence, and facilitates internal communication of results.
- Separate classes for staff and students make everyone more comfortable and makes it easier to set goals.
- Students appreciate it if their teacher gives direct feedback on their mistakes (grammar/pronunciation), but one should be careful with lower-intermediate students, because generally they have to overcome their low self-confidence, before they are really open to critique.
- Students appreciate it if teacher gives a clear outline of each lecture on the board before starting (what topics are discussed, what kind of exercises are to be expected)
- Our philosophy is to put the students central and listen

carefully to their opinions and ideas. After all, we organize SEL for them.

VII. Summary and Conclusion

In the six years since the implementation, we have learned a lesson from the Special English Lessons. We realized enormous number of students at the University of Tokyo long for practical English lessons. People say students these days are not interested in the globalized world outside our country. However, we recognized the students are interested in improving their practical English skills, which means they want to use English in the real world not just in the classrooms.

Over the years our SEL program grew from a few classes for engineering students by 2 English schools, to a large variety of courses by many different schools open to all students of the University of Tokyo. To meet all the different needs students have, we adopt various types of courses including conversation, presentation, negotiation, debate, email writing, academic writing, TOEFL iBT, TOEFL PBT, telephoning, and so on.

In this paper we introduced our SEL program, how it grew over the years, which decisions we made and why. We also highlighted some of the core ideas of what we believe decides the success of a program such as SEL, and we hope that others find this useful when developing similar programs.

Acknowledgements

The SEL program is feasible only with cooperation of the English schools: AGOS Japan, Athénée Français, Berkley House, Berlitz Japan, Kurdyla & Associates, Nichibei Kaiwa Gakuin, Simul Academy, and ToFl Seminar. We appreciate their constant effort.

Bibliography

Morimura, K. & Ono, Y. A. (2007) Special English Lesson: Special Program to Enhance English Communication Skills for Engineering Undergraduate Students at the University of Tokyo, *IEEE IPCC (International Professional Communication Conference) 2007*, <http://ewh.ieee.org/soc/pcs/ipcc2007/index.htm>

Morimura, K. Ono, Y. A. Examining the Special English Lessons Class: An Extra Curricular Program to Enhance English Communication Skills for Undergraduate Engineering Students at the University of Tokyo, *IEEE IPCC2008*, <http://ewh.ieee.org/soc/pcs/?q=node/2>

Morimura, K. Ono, Y. A. Assessment of "Special English Lessons" for Engineering Students, *IEEE IPCC2009*, <http://ewh.ieee.org/soc/pcs/index.php?q=node/831>

Morimura, K. Active Utilization of International Students as a TA for Engineering English Education. 工学部英語教育における留学生 TA の活用、日本工学教育協会平成 21 年度工学・工業教育研究講演会講演論文集 pp162-163, 2009

Yoshida, M. Morimura, K. Promoting the Global Leader Education at the School of Engineering, UT, *JSEE Annual Conference, International Session, W-02*, 2010.08 to be appeared in Sendai