

E-learning System on the Intranet and Other Measures to Help Students Improve Their English

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Abstract

According to the educational goal of Tokuyama College of Technology, our students are to be educated to be good communicators in English as well as competent engineers. This paper describes the measures we have taken so far to improve their English and also describes a newly adopted e-learning system. This system works on demand on the intranet and is available from the terminal PCs on campus. There seems to be a good prospect that it will help a lot of students to improve their English. What is important is how to promote the use of it in cooperation with the members concerned in other sections.

Key Words: educational goal, ALC Net Academy, e-learning, intranet, English

1. Introduction

The educational goal of Tokuyama College of Technology (henceforth TCT) is “to educate the students to be future engineers with a world-class competitive edge, practical skills, and competence in research and development.” In order to attain this goal, students are required to widen their technical and academic knowledge, acquire various skills and deepen their global understanding and improve their communicative ability. As for the last requirement, what it takes to be a successful engineer on a worldwide basis is to have a good command of English.

2. Various measures taken so far to improve English proficiency

To help students acquire a better command of English, the English Department staff has taken various measures. To begin with, successful applicants are invited to assemble two weeks before they are admitted to our college. They are advised as to how they should learn by themselves before entering the college and

prepare for Freshmen English Achievement Test. All the freshmen sit for it after they enter the college. Through the results of this Test, English teachers can roughly grasp the freshmen’s levels of English and can make use of these data for their later instruction.

To help students pass various levels of the Test of Practical English and of the Test of Technical English, the English Department staff has several extracurricular preparatory classes, offering them several materials as will be useful for them to pass. In addition, the staff prepares two achievement tests a year, one similar to the Pre-2nd level Test of Practical English and the other similar to the 3rd level Test of Technical English. These two practice achievement tests are compulsory to every student from the first-year students to the fifth-year students except for those who have successfully obtained these qualifications. As a result, more and more people are taking the actual tests.

The whole college has been eager to improve the students’ English. Last year a task force was set up to discuss how to improve the students’ English and submitted a report on the issue. A strict requirement has been established for every advanced course student with regard to the level of English. In order to complete the Advanced Course at TCT, every student is required

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to have scored 400 points or more out of 990 in the SP or IP Tests.

To develop students' listening and speaking abilities, the college started a program two years ago. During the summer vacation, the college encourages students to join the three-week English Training Seminar held at University of Technology, Sydney Insearch, paying each participant one hundred thousand yen as support for the expenses. More than ten students are selected to be sent to Sydney every summer.

All these measures seem to be promising and effective especially for those who already have the readiness to improve their English and also know how to do it. Not all the students are just like that, nor can afford to go to Sydney. Another effective measure was truly needed for the remaining students who had less positive attitudes toward learning English.

3. ALC Net Academy

3.1 Background and progress of installation

Japan Accreditation Board for Engineering Education (henceforth JABEE), which examines engineering education programs provided by Japanese institutions of higher education and gives accreditation if the programs successfully meet its criteria, has a criterion demanding the student support system:

4.3 Student Support System

Concerning the educational environment, the program must provide, display and implement a system that promotes students' enthusiasm to learn while attending to students' requests.

TCT applied for JABEE accreditation in the year 2003. Partly for the preparation for this and partly for the improvement of English proficiency of the whole college, we introduced an e-learning system called "ALC Net Academy" in 2002 with TOEIC Score Up Course.



Fig. 1 ALC Net Academy Log-in Screen

But since it was accessible from the terminal PCs in the teacher's offices, the number of registered users was no more than seventy-five. Most of the registered users were advanced course students and some were teachers. In May, 2003, six months prior to the examination for accreditation, Technical English <Fundamental> Course was added on to go into service. At the same time a hundred terminals of the two Information Processing Rooms were set up and made available for e-learning. This means that e-learning system is accessible to 719 users, including some six hundred and fifty undergraduate students. Thus two courses have been in use for all the students and registered teaching staff.

受講講座一覧

| コース名 | 選出 | 講座名 | 最終受講日 | 進捗率 | 受講開始 |
|------------|----|--------------------------|------------|-----|------------|
| 初級・中級コース | e | リスニング対策コース (初級・中級) | 2003/04/11 | 10% | 2007/04/22 |
| | e | リーディング対策コース (初級・中級) | 2003/05/07 | 15% | 2007/04/22 |
| | e | TOEIC®リスニング基礎コース (初級・中級) | 2003/05/07 | 20% | 2007/04/22 |
| | e | TOEIC®リスニングパート演習 (初級・中級) | 2003/05/07 | 14% | 2007/04/22 |
| | | 中間テスト/終了テスト (初級・中級) | | | |
| 技術英語・基礎コース | e | 技術英語 基礎コース | | 0% | 2011/04/10 |
| | * | 技術英語 読解力向上コース | 2003/06/02 | 1% | 2011/04/10 |
| | | 技術英語 中間テスト/終了テスト | | | |

Fig. 2 Choice of a program

ALC Net Academy (henceforth Net Academy) has two advantages suitable for use in our college. It is what is called an e-learning system with the use of the intranet. At TCT almost all teacher's offices, classrooms, lecture rooms, seminar rooms, laboratories, and other offices have been connected through the intranet with some servers in its center. Two years ago a new server was to be assigned to the General Education Division, and it had some capacity to spare. Considering the usages of the server, we came to a conclusion that an e-learning program for learning English should be set up in it.

As a result, each registered user can use Net Academy from any terminal on the intranet without setting up any program on their PCs. All they have to do is to switch on the terminal PC and log in Net Academy. They can start any time, and quit any time. They are free to use it as long as the terminal is available. The study records are automatically stored in the server. There is no need of going into trouble of maintenance on the part of users.

Another advantage of Net Academy is that it can handle multimedia data. The use of sounds and images, as well as texts makes learning more interesting and more amusing than usual text-based learning. And the use of sounds and images is wholly optional, so that the materials can be customized by learners themselves to suite their levels of English.

3.2 Two courses

Net Academy has various courses, among which we have only two. One is TOEIC Score Up Course and the other is Technical English <Fundamental> Course. The latter has been in use for more than one year, but has not been so widely used as we expected. This is probably because writing exercises take a lot of time, and there are only thirty or forty students in a year who are willing to take the English Technical Writing Test, the 3rd Grade or higher. Some teachers, however, seem to be eager to make progress in this course. They need to brush up their writing skills to write their paper in English.

By way of promotion, we set making 10% progresses in this Course as one of the requirements of the Technical English Writing (one of the compulsory subjects for the first-year advanced course students). We are in hopes that many of them will improve their reading and writing skills of technical English and will successfully pass the English Technical Writing Test, the 3rd Grade or higher.

TOEIC Score Up Course, on the other hand, has now been regarded as one of the usual ways of getting better marks by those who are going to take the TOEIC Test. In 2002 academic year there were twenty-four students in the second-year of the advanced course. Six students out of twenty-four had made more than 50% of progress in TOEIC Score Up Course and the rest less than 50%. The average score of the former was 453.3 in the IP Test held on September 4th, 2002, while the average score of the latter was 372.2. The difference between them was about 80 points.

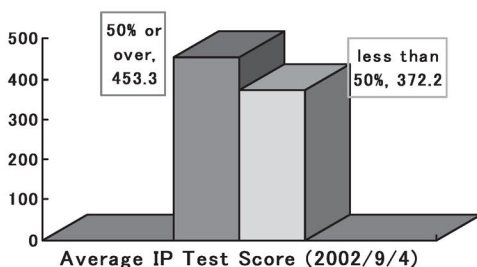


Fig. 3 Difference in the average IP Test scores

In 2003 academic year there were sixteen students in the second year of the advanced course. Their average score of the IP Test held on April 17th was 384, while their average score of the IP Test held on September 4th was 454. Actually, sixteen students took the IP Test in April, but in September five were excused because they had already scored over 400 points in April. The difference between the two average scores was about 70 points.

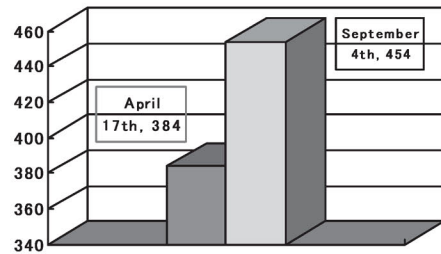


Fig. 4 Difference in the average scores of two IP Tests (April 17th and September 4th, 2003)

There may be some reasons for this, but it was certain that all the students had made more or less progress in TOEIC Score Up Course. This being the case, there is a possibility that TOEIC Score Up Course had raised their average test scores by as many as 70 points. There is another good ground for believing this true. In fact, three out of the eleven students who took the IP Test in September had made more than 50% of progress in TOEIC Score Up Course, and their average score was 430 points. The remaining eight students had made less than 50% of progress, and their average score was 370 points. There again existed a difference of scores, 60 points between the two.

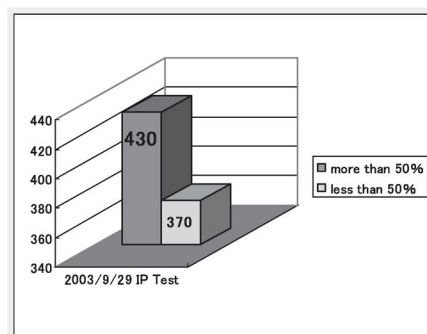


Fig. 5 Difference in the average IP Test scores (September 29th, 2003)

4. The issues to overcome and our new targets

There seems to be a gradual increase in the number of students who use the e-learning system. In order to increase the number of users, we have set making 10% progresses in Technical English <Fundamental> Course as one of the requirements of a credit for a subject. It may attract students' attention, and enhance a chance of winning users. During the second semester of this academic year, a subject adopting TOEIC Score Up Course as its main teaching material is to be offered for the fourth-year students. Similarly in some subjects, e-learning system is adopted as one of the options of homework for the summer.

In spite of all these efforts of ours, the pace of spread is rather slow to our disappointment. Preference may well be given to those who have gone far into the program. We are wondering if it is possible to give some advanced learners a credit or two of the extracurricular activities as an incentive. A drastic change may be needed to turn the tables.

There are several affairs to fulfill in order to keep the e-learning system at work. The student enrollment, the mechanical maintenance, the grasp of progresses of students and offering guidance or instructions to students are readily enumerated. Of course the English Department staff alone is not equal to all of these. It is, therefore, very important to obtain cooperation from the ones concerned. We are very happy to have cooperative and helpful staff at this college. We would like to help our college fulfill its educational goal by helping our students improve their communicative competence in English.

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(Received September 6, 2004)