An International Conference Organized by Four Asian Universities

-Practical English Discipline for Graduate Students –

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In these days, more and more engineers face an overseas business and they are required to have English communication and reporting skills as a professional. In order to motivate the students on the course to improve their English, many undergraduate / graduate courses in Japan have been designed the curriculum, such as English class in the course, oral presentation about the research outcome or short-stay at overseas university. On an educational purpose, department of civil engineering in Hiroshima University (HU) organizes a special conference with other three Asian universities of same department. This paper reports how we organized or managed the conference in the latest decade.

Keywords: Oral presentation, English writing, Communication skill

1. Introduction

In these days, more and more engineers face an overseas business and they are required to have English communication and reporting skills as a professional. In order to motivate the students on the course to improve their English, many undergraduate / graduate courses in Japan have been designed the curriculum, such as English class in the course, oral presentation about the research outcome or short-stay at overseas university. Except a short stay at the overseas university, however, such attempts in domestic environment are suffering from less necessity to write or to communicate in English with others.

On an educational purpose, department of civil engineering in Hiroshima University (HU) organizes a special conference with other three Asian universities for every year from 2009. In this conference, graduate students majoring civil and environmental engineering participate as paper presenters or panelists of a workshop chaired by a student group gathering its member from the four universities, which provides a practical opportunity to use the English paper writing and communication ability. This paper reports how we organized or managed the conference in the latest decade, and then summarizes the achievement with further issues.

2. History of ICCEE

In 2002, HU started the 1st international conference on civil and environmental engineering (ICCEE) as an inter-university exchange program with Thammasat University in Thai. The purpose of ICCEE in the early days was to provide an opportunity for young researchers and doctoral candidates to experience international conference, with exchanging the latest research topic for cooperation in academic research program. The conference was composed of oral sessions presented by young researchers, keynote lectures and a “student workshop” organized by graduate students with a panel discussion style. Up to 2007 in ICCEE, we exchanged several students with Thammasat, Ayowa, and Pukyon National Universities, respectively. Other outcome of ICCEE in those days was that some students among them enrolled in our graduate school for getting degrees, or that cooperated activities with the above universities was made in joint research program or special lecture by the invited lecturers from them.
Table 1. Summary of 10th to 13th ICCEE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year (#th)</th>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Papers</th>
<th>Keynotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011(10th)</td>
<td>Taipei</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012(11th)</td>
<td>Hiroshima</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013(12th)</td>
<td>Dalian</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014(13th)</td>
<td>Busan</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig.1. Opening session at 12th ICCEE in Dalian

An epoch making issue in ICCEE history occurred in 2008. Pukyon national university (PNU) participating ICCEE from 2006 became a core member and the steering committee agreed to hold the conference in 2009 at PNU in Busan. Unlikesome exchanges made up to 2008, the 8th ICCEE in PNU was the first conference that over 20 graduate students from Hiroshima University and PNU participated in ICCEE. In that year, Dalian University of Technology (DUT) joined and sent many oral presenters, and they became a core university to host the ICCEE in 2010. The 9th ICCEE was successfully organized at DUT, and then National Central University (Taiwan) became a new host of ICCEE in 2011. Table 1 shows the summary of ICCEE from 2011 to 2014.

By the increase of hosting university, the main target of ICCEE changed to expand mainly from young researchers to master students in order to enhance their integrated English ability in communication and technical writing as professional. In order to maximize the educational effect by the changes, more systematic support to the students submitting the paper was required. The details are shown in the next chapter. Moreover, financial support for the participants was also enhanced, and each of hosting university tried to get subsidies from alumni and other public foundations. In 2010 and 2011, for example, HU was supported from the short stay/short visit program in Japan Student Service Organization (JASSO) for ICCEE. With the other subsidies for student provided by alumni or incorporated foundations, the student participants from HU are financed covering registration, transportation and accommodation expenses.

3. Features in ICCEE

1) Oral presentation

In ICCEE, a student who submits a paper is well supported for its preparation as to maximize the educational effects. Most of students set a paper theme as their bachelor thesis, so that their supervisors help them about the paper writing. Table 2 shows a paper submission schedule in 2012. The student participants in HU are required to submit the draft version of an extended abstract and the full paper for English proofreading up to the beginning of May. The submitted draft papers are exchanged between a proofreader and the student author from one to three times in two months. During the proofreading, the students discuss with a supervisor for revising the paper in terms of technical writing in English, and of logical organization of the chapters. The proofed paper is submitted at the beginning of July. After the paper submission, the presenters prepare oral presentation with the material to present, supported by each supervisor and senior students of the laboratory. In HU, one credit of the course in graduate school is given for all the above preparation activities.

Among the student presenter, some of the excellent papers are awarded for its presentation and paper writing, which
Table 2. Paper preparation schedule in 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Call for paper</td>
<td>26th, February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft paper proof submission*</td>
<td>10th, May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full paper and abst. submission</td>
<td>10th, July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration</td>
<td>22th, July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference</td>
<td>17th to 19th, August</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Only for HU student

Fig.2. Student workshop panelists at 12th ICCEE

candidates are recommended from the steering committee member from each university. This award significantly motivates the students to improve the paper.

Since the updated ICCEE has been held only for these four years, an evaluation for such the educational system is not easy at present. One of effects brought by ICCEE in the current style is, perhaps this is worth noting, that the student motivation for English communication become higher, on average. The participants from our department got some shocks at oral presentation to see the difference in communication skill that some students from Korea or Taiwan makes fluent question and answers after their presentation. Another one is an increase of academic paper submissions by graduate students, since they can utilize the opportunity for practical training in English paper writing. Since there are no apparent evidence between these achievement and ICCEE presentation, further monitoring to measure the performance of our system is required.

2) Student workshop

Student workshop purposes to experience the students how they organize a discussion in English about the technical issues related to civil and environmental topic with other members from Asian universities. It is organized by the selected participants from each universities. They set the annual theme at the workshop firstly, and then allocate some sub-themes to present for each panelist. After exchanging the presentation contents for several rounds to revise, the agenda of student workshop will be fixed. Communication among the participants was made not only by mailing-list or virtual meeting system such as “Skype”, but by face to face meeting to visit the host university before the conference days. The final meeting is held at the night before the workshop during the conference days. In the conference, student workshop is not paralleled to the other sessions as same as keynote lectures because the steering committee agreed to think a great deal of it. The workshop is allocated for 90 to 120 minutes. A student chairperson from the host university facilitates the session as follows; presentations from each panelist, Q&A among the panelists, discussion with floor students and concluding remarks from the
chairperson. At the end, some comments are given from the lecturers of keynotes or the senior professors.

According to the follow-up hearing for the students participating Student Workshop, not only the difficulties in communicating with English but the possibilities for cooperating with Asian students were often pointed out. This is the precisely intended achievement of student workshop, while there are some difficulties due to organizing the workshop mainly by student as follows; an effective use in novel communication tool to compensate the limited opportunities for direct (face to face) interaction, an adequate setting of discussion agenda among the students with diversified background, and how or when an advisory faculties help the students avoiding over-intervention to their chairing.

4. Conclusions

In order to provide a practical and integrated opportunity for English communication to graduate students, our department has been held a special international conference cooperating with four Asian universities (ICCEE) since 2009. The conference has following two distinctive programs as oral presentation by students with academic paper and a workshop organized by student: student workshop. These programs surely contribute to motivate the student who participate in ICCEE into voluntary improvement in English communication skills and opening their mind for overseas issues. Based on the experience in the first round to host ICCEE among four universities, we will improve our organizing for ICCEE to become more effective.

Addition to ICCEE, HU started a novel scheme named Leaders Camp from 2011 at HU, which intensively discusses a broader theme by several small groups coming from the core universities. The remaining issues is how to link Student Workshop with Leaders Camp.

Biography
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