Program lets students polish English skills

By Laura Briggs
Lantern staff writer

The ability to tell a joke can be more important than making people laugh.
Denise Ng, foreign student advisor for the Office of International Students and Scholars, said students have mastered a language if they know how to tell a joke in it.

Since 1987, the English Conversation Program has given students an opportunity to practice their English in a less formal setting than in the classroom.

The classroom environment can often be intimidating to international students who are not used to speaking out in class or challenging the professor, Ng said.

This program differs from the American Language Program and the English as a Second Language Program because students are already proficient in English, they just need to get conversational practice, Ng said.

"Language is more than just words," she said.

Many students get confused because Americans often say something that they don't literally mean, Ng said.

Ng said there are 3,028 international students this quarter. Most students who use the program are graduate students from Taiwan, China, Korea, Japan and Southeast Asia, she said.

Every international student is approached before each quarter begins, Ng said. American students choose who their partners will be.

The program matches 100 students fall quarter and 30 students winter and spring quarters with English speaking students. The program doesn't take place during summer quarter.

Students are expected to meet once a week for an hour during the quarter, Ng said. Although there has been a good response by American students, the program is always short on volunteers, she said.

It is hard for international students when they come to this country because they have passed the English proficiency tests, but have a hard time understanding English when it is spoken faster than they are used to, Ng said.

Hasan Jap, a freshman from Indonesia, said he has been learning English for six years, but still wants to improve his speaking skills. Jap said writing is much easier than speaking because one can take as much time as necessary to get a written assignment perfect.

Some people are not sympathetic to international students because they have an accent. This can be very demoralizing to students, Ng said.

Jap said he once tried practicing English with one of his Indonesian friends, but both thought they sounded funny, so they began talking in Chinese.

Many of the English speaking volunteers are OSU staff members, but most are undergraduate students, Ng said.

Mark Haney, a Chinese and Economics major, said he has been volunteering with the program for two years and has had several conversation partners.

"One of my conversation partners wanted to know if I ate hamburgers every day, and was worried about my health," he said.

Ng said many students are lonely when they come to the United States because they no longer have a sense of belonging. He said they aren't familiar with street names or where to get their favorite food.

Over the years, the program has improved the quality of matches between students, and more follow-ups are done to make sure students are meeting with each other, Ng said.
Program aids language skills

By Hui-chung Shee
Lantern staff writer

Don't think you can't be part of the Office of International Education just because you're not an international student.

OIE's English Conversation Program can benefit both local and international students on campus, said Sherif Barsoum, an advisor in charge of ECP.

In the program, an American volunteer is matched with a foreign student who is learning to speak English, Barsoum said.

The partners meet each other regularly, doing things together like going to the zoo, going out for lunch or just chatting, he said.

This allows the foreign student to practice speaking English, and the American volunteer to gain knowledge about foreign culture and language, Barsoum said.

ECP is constantly in need of American volunteers, he said.

"We usually get 200 or 300 international students that want to have an conversation partner, but we can only place 100 or 150 of them," Barsoum said.

Anyone can be a volunteer partner, Barsoum said.

Last year ECP recruited over 100 American volunteers, he said. Some are students majoring in a foreign language, some have experience travelling abroad and want to know more about another culture, and some are retired people from outside Ohio State, Barsoum said.

Jonathan Roberts, an OSU student majoring in Chinese and Business Logistics, volunteered to be a conversation partner in order to practice Chinese with his Chinese partner.

Roberts said he found his conversation partner is making great improvements, and the program helps Roberts' Chinese language skills as well.

Roberts said he still keeps in touch with former partners and will continue to volunteer as a conversation partner.

Sue-Chih Liu, a graduate student from Taiwan, had an American conversation partner during her first year at Ohio State. Liu feels that by talking to an American friend, she has picked up English more easily.

"It's better that the one who helps you is your friend," Liu said.

"I can express myself without pressure."

OIE makes follow-up phone calls to get feedback from matched students.

Xiaqi Wu, former Peer Consultant at OIE, said most students are happy with the program and international students are grateful to their conversation partners.

Presently, only new international students can register for ECP because OIE doesn't have enough American volunteers for everybody, Barsoum said.

This fall, there will be about 750 incoming international students, he said. Barsoum hopes they can recruit 200 American volunteers in order to help the newcomers.