Providing Reasonable Accommodations for EFL Students with Disabilities in Higher Education in Japan

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As more and more students with disabilities (SWDs) are identified in postsecondary education in Japan, there is an increasing need for English language teachers, program administrators, and curriculum designers to create inclusive learning environments that provide reasonable accommodations for such students. This paper outlines the current landscape for SWDs in institutes of higher education in Japan, reviews approaches to systematizing support for SWDs within language departments, and outlines the challenges tertiary EFL program administrators and teachers are likely to face in providing such support. The paper concludes with a call for language educators to actively destigmatize disabilities in the classroom, as well as to continue bridging the gap between language teaching and special education through research and resource sharing.

日本の中等教育後の教育において，障がいのある学生 (SWDs) が徐々に認められつつある中，英語教育者，プログラム管理者，カリキュラムデザイナーが，そのような学生に合理的な学びの場を提供することのできる包括的な学習環境をつくるニーズが高まっている。この論文は，日本の高等教育機関の現在のSWDsの状況の概要を述べた後，言語学部内でSWDs支援のシステム化を行うための様々なアプローチを提案し，また、そのような支援を提供する中で第三期のEFLプログラム管理者と教員が直面する可能性が高いと思われる課題をまとめている。この論文は、言語教育者が教室における障がいという汚名を積極的に返上することと，研究と情報共有を通して，言語教育と特別支援教育の間の橋渡しを続けるよう呼びかけ，締めくくりとする。

The number of students with disabilities (SWDs) enrolled in institutes of higher education (IHEs) in Japan has been rising every year; the figure more than doubled from 14,127 in 2014 (JASSO, 2015) to 31,204 just three years later (JASSO, 2018). As currently classified by the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO), these disabilities are categorized as health issues/poor health, physical disabilities, mental health disabilities, developmental disabilities, hearing and speech impairments, sight impairments, and other. One cause of the recent rapid increase in the number of SWDs enrolled in Japanese IHEs is the addition of developmental disabilities to JASSO's list of officially regarded SWDs in 2015, a designation which includes dyslexia, ADHD, and Autism Spectrum Disorder. Such disabilities might previously have been categorized as *other* or gone unidentified. As Kondo, Takahashi, and Shirasawa (2015) contend, numerous SWDs have likely long been present in postsecondary education across Japan, and the recent documented rise is perhaps simply reflective of a general increasing social awareness of disabilities. Regardless, as more and more known SWDs are identified, these students are likely to encounter barriers in many classrooms.

In June 2013, the Japanese Diet passed the Act on the Elimination of Disability Discrimination. In accordance with this Act, all IHEs in Japan were asked to provide reasonable accommodations for their SWDs beginning April 1, 2016. The term *reasonable accommodations* is broadly defined in the Act, although Boeltzig-Brown (2017) notes that policymakers are currently creating regulations to aid IHEs in developing accommodations for SWDs, as well as establishing appropriate procedures for ensuring the delivery of those accommodations. However, although national and public universities are required to provide such adjustments, private IHEs are only encouraged to. A comprehensive overview of support systems for SWDs across all Japanese IHEs in 2014 revealed that most were woefully underprepared to provide reasonable accommodations by the April 2016 deadline; only 60% of IHEs were providing support for SWDs in some way, 18% had created policies and procedures to guide such support, and 10% provided a dedicated disability services department or center (Boeltzig-Brown, 2017). Acknowledging that systemic change is slow to occur in the broader educational landscape in Japan, individual EFL programs would benefit from establishing specific support services and procedures in order to ensure the needs of all students are met.

Given the interactive nature of language classrooms, language teachers are likely to find themselves at the vanguard as more and more SWDs are identified in Japanese IHEs, especially where developmental disabilities are concerned. The general lack of special education (SPED) training among

language teachers presents challenges to providing reasonable accommodations in language classrooms and curricula. Although individual differences have been widely researched within the field of second language acquisition (SLA), very little inquiry considers disability as an individual learner variable (Kormos & Smith, 2012; Kormos, 2017a). Additionally, most of the available research on accommodating SWDs has been conducted in primary or secondary ESL contexts (Burr, Haas, & Ferriere, 2015; Ortiz & Artiles, 2010). Fortunately, many of the recommendations of the research reviewed here can be adapted to suit tertiary EFL settings.

Providing Reasonable Accommodations in EFL Programs

Extensive faculty training, when possible, on instructional adaptations for various disabilities is a straightforward and simple way to support SWDs. A project funded by the U.S. Department of Education (Scott & Edwards, 2012) found that a combination of intensive faculty training and ongoing collaboration between teachers and administrators in two postsecondary ESL contexts in California led to an increase in the average performance of students with disclosed disabilities in the project as well as a decrease in the number of SWDs withdrawing from their language courses before the conclusion of the semester.

Regarding the K-12 context in the United States, Hamayan, Marler, Sánchez-López, and Damico (2013) proposed that schools create ECOS (ensuring a continuum of services) teams of specialists spanning the SLA and SPED fields, noting that "[t]he more professionally and personally diverse the ECOS team, the more likely it is that the team will be able to generate a variety of interventions and creative solutions" (p. 22). Such an approach requires the availability of special education experts.

Young and Schaefer (2019) described a framework modified from Ortiz and Yates (2001) used in a large-scale EFL program at a private university in Japan. Under this framework, self-identified SWDs received extra support beginning with referral, assessment, and class placement. Next, multidisciplinary teams, which share some features of Hamayan, et al.'s (2013) ECOS teams in their composition monitored each SWD's progress and intervened as needed. Feedback from instructors suggested this framework had been successful in facilitating collaboration between stakeholders (Young & Schaefer, 2019). Grade and attendance analysis indicated that it is was a successful tool for ensuring that both individual student needs and course aims were simultaneously met (Young, Schaefer, & Lesley, in press).

In many Japanese IHEs, language teachers are left to make uninformed interventions without specialized support. In such contexts, Lowe (2016a, 2016b) proposed a continuing professional development framework that designates and trains English language teaching professionals to be equivalent to a special needs coordinator – a position ubiquitous in UK schools. Under this proposed framework, consultation with students precedes internal coaching and mentoring led by the special needs coordinator equivalent, opportunities for outside support and training, and a cascading system of training and knowledge transmission. Adopting such a practice in an EFL context can circumvent the need for separate SPED experts and afford individual departments a greater degree of agency in meeting individual student needs. Short of designating and training a special needs coordinator equivalent, thoughtful teacher collaboration through an iterative cycle of inquiry can be employed by language teachers untrained in special education (Turner, Kasparek, & McLaughlin, 2018).

A final approach to note here involves relying on other students under a peer tutor model to support SWDs. Boeltzig-Brown (2017) found that roughly 10% of Japanese IHEs implemented a peer tutor system in 2010, and about 90% of these included a training program for peer tutors. Boeltzig-Brown notes, "[p]eer tutors assist in many different ways: preparing teaching materials in alternative formats; providing reading and note-taking assistance, speech-to-text transcription, and sign language interpretation; and serving as walking guides" (p. 70). One well-known example is the University of Tsukuba, which employs a robust peer tutor system that includes extensive training as regular, credit-earning classes provided by the university's Office for Students with Disabilities (Boeltzig-Brown, 2017). With careful organization and oversight, such a system can be established and operated within individual language programs at other IHEs.

Additional Considerations

The methods provided above are by no means exhaustive, nor are they mutually exclusive. Practitioners in IHEs in Japan should adapt and create policies and procedures that best suit their own teaching context and student needs. Whatever model an IHE or department therein utilizes, the delivery of support should be systematized and subject to ongoing review. Each model or system for accommodation might work in its own context but should not be assumed effective in others.

Additionally, it is important for practitioners to educate themselves on the variety of SWDs they

might encounter in their educational setting. To this end, the World Health Organization offers a beginner's guide to its International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, which subdivides disabilities into six general categories: physical and mobility impairments, visual disability, hearing disability, cognitive and learning disabilities (including ADHD and Autism Spectrum Disorder), psychological (affective) disorders, and invisible disabilities (World Health Organization, 2002).

Depending on their specific roles and responsibilities, administrators in a postsecondary EFL context can borrow from Boscardin & Lashley's (2009) education administration leadership domains to help establish standards and ensure SWDs' needs are reasonably met. These domains describe sets of specific responsibilities with foci such as creating an effective learning environment, engaging in strategic planning, and ensuring professional values and ethics. Another set of standards by Boscardin (2009) may prove more useful for those administrators and teacher-leaders new to SPED, as each standard is sectioned into subsets of knowledge realms and discrete skills that read like a how-to guide for establishing, systematizing, and reviewing support systems for SWDs in a curriculum.

Good course design views disabilities in an *interactional* way that allows teachers to focus on how SWDs' learning and class participation might be hindered by environmental or context-dependent barriers; such a view is preferable to a *deficit model*, which views the disability itself as the barrier (Kormos, 2017b). Curriculum designers, program administrators, and classroom teachers can ask themselves how they can remove learning barriers for all students before asking how they can meet students' individual learning needs. Viewing curricula, lesson plans, and materials design in such a way is more preventative than corrective and reduces the need for *ad hoc* accommodations by providing more holistic, premeditated standards.

Persistent Challenges

Perhaps the biggest challenge regarding SWDs is identification and differentiation of invisible needs such as ADHD or dyslexia from more general language learning difficulties. Burr, et al. (2015) argued that the most effective policies and practices for identifying students with learning disabilities "should be comprehensive, systematic, and ongoing" (p. 16). However, a range of factors such as a lack of knowledge on the intersection of SLA and SPED, procedural uncertainties, and institutional inadequacies complicate the identification of SWDs in language classes (Hamayan, et al., 2013; Ortiz &

Artles, 2010). Unfortunately, there is little possibility of support for students with disabilities in IHEs in Japan unless they self-identify themselves as having a disability once enrolled, and the number of SWDs who do not self-identify remains unknown. Thus, there is significant need to have mechanisms in place to encourage self-identification and to accommodate SWDs as early as possible. Department heads should be proactive in contacting their university's support centers to ensure that they can receive adequate information regarding specific student needs to pass on to teachers. If not provided by a designated support office or center, individual departments and programs can still put systems of identification and accommodation in place.

In postsecondary EFL programs in Japan, the need to equip language teachers with basic SPED tools is complicated by contract limits, which are common at Japanese IHEs. These limits guarantee regular staff turnover, which encumbers the accumulation of expertise and may require continual familiarization and training. This challenge can be mitigated by a cascading model of teacher-training in which senior instructors with experience teaching SWDs pass knowledge to junior instructors teaching SWDs with similar needs in their own classes. In this way, expertise is handed down rather than concentrated among a smaller group of teachers who will inevitably leave the institution.

In international workplaces, communication across stakeholders can be further problematized by intercultural differences in communicating expectations and responsibilities. These problems can be minimized through a systematized standard operating procedure with clear roles and safeguards for when communication breaks down. A particularly frustrating challenge can be gatekeeping as a result of traditional university chains of command which slows the responsiveness of service providers. It is important to be both proactive and reactive when it comes to meeting student needs; therefore, stakeholders closest to the students must draw on all available resources and never stop advocating for SWDs.

Conclusion

Much work is needed to address the myriad of known and unknown challenges in providing reasonable accommodations for SWDs in English language classes across Japanese IHEs. All tertiary EFL teachers and administrators in Japan must work together to continue dispelling the stigma surrounding disabilities as well as conduct further research and share best practices to meet the wide variety of needs present in classrooms. Teachers can educate themselves and learn how to accommodate a variety

of classroom needs as well as anticipate the presence of hidden or invisible disabilities and plan lessons accordingly. It is a virtual guarantee that every EFL teacher in Japan will have at least one SWD in their classroom at one time or another, and each is just as deserving of the best possible instruction as the next.

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