Postsecondary English Language Teachers' Concerns about Teaching Students with Disabilities

Davey Young
Sophia University

The implementation of inclusive education—education for all—is complicated in language learning contexts due to the unique barriers that students with disabilities (SWDs) can encounter when learning a foreign language. In addition, teachers' views on inclusive education are critical in ensuring its full and proper implementation. Therefore, there is a clear need to understand English language teachers' (ELTs') concerns about teaching such students. This study used the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) to interview 13 ELTs working at the postsecondary level in Japan about their concerns about teaching SWDs. Thematic analysis using the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) revealed 12 concerns, with the two most common being concern for issues related to diagnosis and/or disclosure and curricular constraints, both of which were frequently connected to concern for institutional barriers to inclusion. A discussion of local contextual factors and suggestions on how to reduce these concerns conclude the paper.

インクルーシブ教育（すべての人のための教育）の実施は、外国語を学習する際に障害を持つ学生（SWD）が遭遇する特殊な障壁のために、言語学習の文脈において　複雑である。さらに、インクルーシブ教育の完全かつ適切な実施を保障するためには、インクルーシブ教育に対する教師の見方が重要である。したがって、こうした　学生を教える際の英語教師（ELT）の懸念を理解する必要があるといえる。本研究では、クリティカル・インシデント技法（Flanagan,　1954）を用いて、日本の中等教育修了後のレベルで働く13人のELTに、SWDの指導に関する懸念についてインタビューを行った。継続的な比較法（Glaser,　1965）を用いた主題分析により、12の懸念事項が明らかになったが、その中で最も多かったのは、診断や情報開示に関する問題への懸念とカリキュラム上の制約の2つであり、この2つは、インクルージョンに対する制度的障壁への懸念と頻繁に関連していた。特定文脈の要因についての考察と、これらの懸念を軽減する方法についての提言を本稿の結びとする。

Inclusive education—education for all—is a human right, though several local factors such as insufficient understanding of the benefits of inclusive education and lack of relevant teacher training have stymied the protection of this right to varying degrees around the world (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016; Hunt, 2019). Inclusive educational provisions are further complicated by how specific impairments can obscure or obstruct learning, including in specific areas of study.

In English language education, significant gaps in both academic achievement and language acquisition have been observed between learners with specific learning difficulties (SLDs) and their peers without SLDs (Estrada, 2013; Haft et al., 2022; Kormos, 2017; Rhinehart et al., 2022). Compared to their peers without SLDs, "language learners with SLDs show significant differences in their working memory and phonological short-term memory capacity," both of which are "important predictors of success in language learning" (Kormos, 2017, p. 47). Depending on the exact nature of the SLD and other factors in the learner profile, students with SLDs may have difficulty processing input (written and/or spoken), automatizing lexical chunks, creating long-term memory, and producing output (Borodkin & Faust, 2014; Delaney, 2016; Kormos, 2017). For example, students with dyslexia may experience greater difficulty understanding and internalizing syntactic and phonological rules when learning a foreign language (Sparks et al., 1991). In some cases, students may encounter barriers related to an SLD in their L2, but not in their L1, and coping strategies cultivated in their L1 may not transfer to an L2 (Sparks & Ganschow, 1991). For instance, L1 Japanese students with dyslexia experience far fewer difficulties reading *hiragana*, *katakana*, or *kanji* compared to reading *romaji* or English owing to differences in the levels of transparency across these different orthographies (Todo & Young, 2024).

There is also ample evidence demonstrating that cognitive factors interact with affective factors in language learning for students with SLDs (Kormos, 2017; Liu & Huang, 2011; Sparks & Ganschow, 1991). Chen and Chang (2008), in a survey of 1,187 postsecondary EFL students in Taiwan, found that developmental learning difficulties were a major cause of foreign language anxiety. In a survey of 60 university students with SLDs and 144 without, Javorsky et al. (1992) found that the students with SLDs believed themselves to be less capable and have lower foreign language proficiency compared to their peers without SLDs. In that study, the respondents with SLDs reported greater anxiety associated with learning and using a foreign language. This gap can create a self-reinforcing spiral for students, negatively impacting language learning motivation, acquisition, and achievement (Kormos, 2017; Liu & Huang, 2011). All of which can be further exacerbated by stigmatization and stereotyping of English language learners with SLDs in academic settings (Haft et al., 2022).

Despite the growing understanding of how language learning can present barriers to students with disabilities (SWDs), many English language teachers (ELTs) in a variety of contexts have reported concerns about teaching such students, including lacking the necessary training, knowledge, and skills (Ali, 2018; Fernández-Portero, 2022; Hale & Ono, 2019; Lowe et al., 2021; Pokrivčáková, 2018; Razmjoo & Sabourianzadeh, 2018; Ruddick et al., 2021; Smith, 2006, 2008; Sowell & Sugisaki, 2020; Yphantides, 2022). Other common concerns about teaching SWDs reported by ELTs include low confidence and self-efficacy (Cimermanová, 2017; Hale & Ono, 2019; Iwata et al., 2015; Sowell & Sugisaki, 2020; Smith, 2006; Yphantides, 2022); increased workload (Ali, 2018; Cimermanová, 2017; Fernández-Portero, 2022; Fišer & Kałdonek-Crnjaković, 2022; Pokrivčáková, 2018); the (in)ability to give appropriate attention to all students in an inclusive classroom (Ali, 2018; Razmjoo & Sabourianzadeh, 2018; Smith, 2006); uncertainty about diagnosis or disclosure status (Ruddick et al., 2021; Sowell & Sugisaki, 2020; Yphantides, 2022); and distinguishing disability-related difficulties from general difficulty with language learning (Ali, 2018; Sowell & Sugisaki, 2020). Concerns for how well SWDs perform in class (Fernández-Portero, 2022), as well as whether SWDs will be accepted by their peers (Ali, 2018) have also been reported. A closer reading of these assorted studies also suggests that many ELTs' concerns about teaching SWDs are, at least to some extent, context-dependent while others may be more universal. In any case, alleviating concerns about teaching SWDs through proper pre- and in-service teacher training is a necessary undertaking for the broader field of English language teaching because teachers who have a more developed understanding of inclusive education perceive themselves as more prepared to implement inclusive practices, which can in turn have an impact on inclusion in actual practice (Dignath et al., 2022; Hunt, 2019; Ieridou, 2017; Krischler et al., 2019).

Case Context

The rights of SWDs in Japanese postsecondary education are protected by the Act for Eliminating Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (障害を理由とする差別の解消の推進に関する法律 [*Shōgai o riyū to suru sabetsu no kaishō no suishin ni kansuru hōritsu*], AEDPD), which took effect on April 1, 2016. The AEDPD primarily pertains to the business and government spheres, though there are some provisions covering higher education institutions (HEIs). However, the original wording of the AEDPD is rather insufficient in its guidance, stating only that SWDs be provided with "reasonable accommodations," a term borrowed from the UN's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities but not clearly defined or linked to that declaration (Boeltzig-Brown, 2017). A 2019 MEXT white paper has since provided an addendum to the AEDPD that uses the definition of reasonable accommodations from the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities General comment No. 6 and offers concrete guidelines for and examples of providing such support (MEXT, 2019). Until the AEDPD, HEIs in Japan had no legal obligation to provide education or support to SWDs in any way (Kondo et al., 2015). In other words, HEIs and their employees could legally exclude, segregate, or otherwise deny services to SWDs at their discretion. As such, the nature and degree of support for SWDs vary drastically from institution to institution (JASSO, 2023; Young, 2024).

Furthermore, HEIs in Japan have a policy of selective inclusion, meaning that SWDs must disclose their disability to their HEI to receive official accommodations (Young, 2024). ELTs working in Japanese HEIs may therefore have undisclosed SWDs enrolled in their classes, a concern that has been previously noted (Ruddick et al.; 2021; Young, 2021; Yphantides, 2022). The reported number of disclosed SWDs in Japanese HEIs in 2022 was 49,672, or 1.53% of all postsecondary students nationwide (JASSO, 2023). Considering the policy of selective inclusion and the possibility that some students may have undiagnosed SLDs, the actual number of SWDs in this context is undoubtedly higher (Young, 2024).

Methods

Purpose and Participants

The present research was undertaken to gain a better understanding of ELTs' concerns about teaching SWDs within Japanese HEIs with the hope that the findings could be

used to help determine context-specific training and support needs. Participants in the present study were 13 ELTs working in 11 different HEIs around Japan. Institutional approval and informed consent were acquired in all cases. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling and lettered A through M to preserve anonymity. There were ten foreign nationals and three Japanese participants. All held an MA in TESOL, Applied Linguistics, or Education. Five also held PhDs in the same fields in which they held an MA.

Data Collection and Treatment

Lesson observations and interviews in the form of post-observation conferences were conducted, a format designed to follow the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954). Each lesson was regarded as the *central activity* comprising various *critical incidents*. Participants were asked about specific critical incidents as well as about their concerns about teaching SWDs in general terms. In this way, concerns could be uncovered indirectly as participants responded to questions about critical incidents, as well as directly when participants were asked to enumerate and elaborate on their concerns.

Interview data was audio recorded for automatic transcription using Otter, and checked manually for content fidelity. Interview data was then thematically coded and analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) in the qualitative data analysis software Dedoose (https://www.dedoose.com/). The first cycle of coding used a combination of structural and provisional coding with a start list of anticipated codes generated through a review of relevant literature. In vivo coding was also used for emergent themes not included on the start list (Saldaña, 2021). Axial coding was employed for the second cycle of coding to facilitate relational analysis of the first cycle categories and subcategories, as well as their properties and contextual dimensions (Boeije, 2010; Saldaña, 2021).

Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed a total of 12 concerns about teaching SWDs. These 12 concerns and the number of times they were raised by each participant are sorted by total occurrences in Table 1.

Table 1.
Coded Occurrences for Concerns about Teaching SWDs by Participant (A-M)

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	Total
Diagnosis and/or disclosure issues	1			1	6	2	6	2	3	1	3		4	29
Curricular constraints		3		3	3	4	5	4	2			1	2	27
Japanese cultural interference					3	1	1	4	2	1		3	3	18
Student performance	1	1	2	2	1		1	4					3	15
Institutional barriers	3				1	2	3		1		1		3	14
Lacks knowledge and skills				1	2	1		2	2	3	2			13
Attention due to class size	4	1			5			2						12
Increased workload	1				1		1			2	2		1	8
Disab. or difficulty w/ lang. learning?	1			3				1	1				2	8
Japanese-English language gap			1			1			2	2			2	8
Acceptance by peers	2				3		2							7
Disrupts trad. practice												3		3

The total number of coded occurrences for each concern, along with the number of participants who raised each concern, indicates the general degree of how strongly the current pool of participants regards each concern. Viewed this way, in Table 1 it is possible to identify roughly three tiers. The first tier, and of highest concern, are issues related to diagnosis and/or disclosure of disabilities and curricular constraints. The next five concerns, beginning with Japanese cultural interference, constitute the middle tier. The final tier, which is of lowest concern, starts with increased workload. Second cycle coding and analysis, however, revealed a strong connection between the top two concerns and the concern for institutional barriers to accommodating SWDs. The remaining discussion will primarily focus on these three concerns, but there was other data summarized in Table 1 of a salient nature.

Seven participants expressed concern about lacking inclusive knowledge and skills a total of 15 times. This corroborates similar findings in postsecondary Japanese settings (Lowe et al., 2021; Ruddick et al., 2021; Yphantides, 2022); at the secondary level in Japan (Hale & Ono, 2019); and many other English language learning environments worldwide (Ali, 2018; Fernández-Portero, 2022; Pokrivčáková, 2018; Razmjoo & Sabourianzadeh, 2018; Smith, 2006, 2008; Sowell & Sugisaki, 2020). While this finding is not discussed in detail below, it should not be overlooked.

Issues Related to Diagnosis and/or Disclosure of Disabilities

Ten of the 13 participants, for a total of 29 times, expressed concern toward issues related to diagnosis and/or disclosure of disabilities. Both in terms of number of participants who raised the concern and total number of occurrences, this was the single greatest concern raised within the current data set. This concern has been previously noted by ELTs in other studies, including two conducted in the same case context (Ruddick et al., 2021; Sowell & Sugisaki, 2020; Yphantides, 2022). Five of the instances in which this concern was raised in the current data set were in direct response to questions about participants' general concerns about teaching inclusively. For instance, in response to the question, "For you, what problems or issues when teaching students with disabilities are the most significant?", Participant K said, "I think I'm most worried about mental issues and not being aware of them. Although, you know, sometimes you can't be aware of it."

Concern for diagnosis and/or disclosure of disabilities was most frequently raised when participants were asked whether they did anything in particular as a result of considering how SWDs' learning experience might differ from that of their peers.

This was typically asked as a follow-up to the question, "Do you actively consider the possibility that a student with disabilities may be present in your class?" Nine participants said yes, two said yes depending on the circumstances, and two said no. In all of these instances, participants expressed uncertainty about what specific accommodations they should have made when they suspected a student may have had an undiagnosed or undisclosed SLD in the past. Interestingly, however, these six participants also stated that they were still able to make some simple accommodations at such times.

Correspondingly, participants who expressed a concern about diagnosis and/or disclosure often grounded it positively in some prior or concurrent experience or knowledge about addressing this concern. One illustrative example was, when asked if he thinks about how SWDs' experience in the class compares to their peers without disabilities, Participant D responded with reference to a particular student:

> Just being aware that he does seem to have that slight discomfort in interaction with other people is something that I'll, you know, remember about him. And also, I think I need to pay more attention to him in terms of making sure that he's following what's going on. And so, whether or not he's a, you know, officially diagnosed as a special education student, it's almost irrelevant, noticing that about him.

Ruddick et al. (2021) similarly found that the 15 ELTs in their study, all working in Japanese HEIs, also relied on previous experience teaching SWDs to armchair diagnose potential SWDs that they later encountered. This led the researchers to wonder if any of them had ever misidentified a student as having a disability due to a lack of relevant training. The inclination, however, among these ELTs to identify students in this way likely stems from a combination of Japan's postsecondary policy of selective inclusion; a lack of clear institutional policy guidance and support on accommodating SWDs; and the similarity between the presentation of SLDs, language learning difficulty, and more general learner variables.

For the current study, Participants E and I wondered if some SWDs do not disclose to their institution because of the social stigma attached to disability; a concern that has been proposed previously in postsecondary contexts in Japan (Kondo et al., 2015; Young, 2021; Yphantides, 2022). The increasing percentage of self-reporting SWDs year-on-year as reported by the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO) indicates that this stigma may be slowly eroding. Kondo et al. (2015) first made this observation, but this may also play a part in some SWDs' decision not to disclose. At the very least, it is important to consider that many ELTs likely have this perception. Participant E, referring to undiagnosed students, stated:

Undocumented means that, you know, there's a good possibility that it exists in your classroom, and if there is some sort of behavior going on, it might be something more than just a bad behavior type of thing. And, I mean, I would like more support from the university, and more information, when there are things going on.

This comment from Participant E also demonstrates the frequent connection made between concern for issues related to diagnosis and/or disclosure and a lack of institutional support; a separate concern discussed in more detail below.

Curricular Constraints

Nine participants said that they had experienced or were currently experiencing curricular constraints or barriers to inclusion, for example being unable to adapt a textbook mandated by the curriculum. This is a concern other studies previously raised in connection to the adaptation of teaching materials for English language learners with dyslexia (Fišer & Kałdonek-Crnjaković, 2022) and visual impairments (Lintangsari & Emaliana, 2020). Additionally, one participant in Razmjoo and Sabourianzadeh's (2018) observations and interviews with four Iranian ELTs expressed difficulty including SWDs because of the school's mandated curriculum.

For the current study, there were a total of 27 separate instances of this concern being raised by these nine participants, making it the second most prevalent concern following issues related to diagnosis and/or disclosure. Two of these instances were raised directly in response to the question, "What problems or difficulties in teaching English to students with disabilities are the most significant?" Participant D's greatest concern was cases in which course aims, key tasks, and assessments presented barriers to certain students. An example of this was teaching and assessing speaking with students who have disabilities that impact their ability to speak freely with others.

When participants were asked about specific inclusive behaviors, concerns regarding curricular constraints or barriers to inclusion were also raised 20 times, but in an indirect fashion. This indicated that curricular constraints were perceived to be responsible for limiting those behaviors. Compared to other concerns raised by participants, at that time, concern for curricular barriers seemed to have the most direct and negative impact on inclusion in actual practice; at least as perceived by those participants. Affected behaviors were primarily related to differentiation, especially as pertained to resource and materials selection, and a lesser extent, assessment. A common feature of this concern was that participants felt that they lacked the freedom or authority to make changes to the curriculum set by their department, center, or program. Correspondingly,

those participants with a higher degree of control over their course content and curriculum expressed less concern. They reported a variety of mitigation strategies such as adapting prescribed textbooks to meet students' needs, engaging in reflective practice, and surveying students to determine their learning goals and topic interest.

Institutional Barriers to Inclusion

Concern for issues related to diagnosis and/or disclosure and curricular constraints were both frequently linked to a concern about institutional barriers to inclusion. This was mentioned a total of 14 times by seven participants, but often in an indirect fashion. Only one of the 14 total mentions was made directly in response to the question, "For you, what problems or difficulties in teaching English to students with disabilities are the most significant?" In this case, the participant's concern was closely tied to a concern for differentiating disability from a more general difficulty with language learning, as well as to a concern regarding student performance. The overwhelming majority of expressions of concern for institutional barriers to inclusion were in response to questions about institutional guidance on supporting SWDs; the extent to which participants followed such guidance; and the extent to which they felt supported by their institution when teaching SWDs. These responses paint a picture of shared dissatisfaction among the seven participants who voiced this concern.

Some common features of participants' concern about institutional barriers were a perceived lack of adequate communication with and support for teachers; a lack of meaningful accommodations for students; and a lack of adequate knowledge or expertise in supporting teachers or students. Asked about his institution's guidance on supporting SWDs Participant A responded:

It's basically nothing. It's basically, they send you that request, and then it's up to the teachers. Like, everything's up to the teacher's discretion. So, one of the frustrating things is if the student calls the office to ask for help, the office will say, 'Please contact the teacher because it's up to the teacher.'

In response to the same question, Participant K expressed similar frustration with the lack of communication and support from his university when an SWD is enrolled in one of his courses. Participant E replied, "Well, I'm sure it [formalized support for SWDs] exists, but it's not communicated to us," before relating an incident when he went to his institution's support office to ask about a particular student. In that incident, the support office was aware of the student because he had disclosed his disability and requested accommodations, but the office had never notified the teacher of his diagnosis or support needs.

When asked if she ever made assessment accommodations for SWDs, Participant G related a similar incident about encountering barriers to accommodating an autistic student. In this incident, Participant G offered to aid the student through the re-diagnosis and referral process after the student approached Participant G, but she was barred by her dean from providing this support. This anecdote also illustrates the role that university leadership can play in ensuring or denying students receive the accommodations they need, as well as how institutional barriers can be presented to both students and their teachers when they attempt to serve as advocates. Furthermore, the experiences of Participants E and G show how participants' concern about institutional barriers is often related to concerns surrounding diagnosis and/or disclosure. Such institutional barriers can be demotivating for ELTs and prevent them from providing accommodations, as was the case for some participants in the current study and was found to be the case in two similar studies (see Razmjoo & Sabourianzadeh, 2018; and Smith, 2006).

Other participants' expressions of concern about institutional barriers in the current research inquiry demonstrate that many Japanese HEIs do not provide ample support for SWDs, a fact that is plain to see in HEIs' annual self-reporting of support for SWDs to JASSO. In 2022, for instance, 36.5% of Japanese HEIs reported to JASSO that they offered training for teachers of SWDs; 29.3% reported having consultation services and social gatherings for SWDs and support staff; and 27.9% reported providing information about procedures for supporting SWDs to new students (JASSO, 2023). When such support is offered, it is likely to be only in Japanese, and this may present further barriers to non-Japanese teachers, or even prevent them from attempting to access available support (Creaser & Yukimaru, 2024; Ruddick et al., 2021; Young, 2019).

Regarding accommodating SWDs, there are also some existing reports of ELTs at Japanese HEIs experiencing different levels of support from their institution. Yphantides (2022) reported that eight postsecondary ELTs in Japan wanted more support from their institutions to properly accommodate SWDs enrolled in their courses. Kasparek and Turner (2020) noted the importance of a private Japanese university support office's involvement in their modification of an EFL course for a student with unspecified support needs. Moreover, concerns about institutional barriers at Japanese HEIs are not limited to ELTs. Dyliaeva et al. (2024) noted general discontent among nine teachers and four administrative faculty at a private Japanese university concerning the degree and nature of support mechanisms for SWDs.

In the current data set, Participant M was the most vocal in their concern about institutional barriers to inclusion. They identified a lack of transparency about university services and provisions and a top-down flow of information and decisions, as central features of these barriers. Participant M went on to say that they provide out-of-class support for struggling students in part to compensate for their institution's shortcomings. While some participants found strategies to address their institutions' lack of inclusive support, for example drawing on previous experience or providing out-of-class support, most of the participants who expressed this concern did not relate such workarounds.

Finally, it should be noted that concerns about institutional barriers were frequently connected to a concern for Japanese cultural interference. Many participants attributed their respective institutions' lack of adequate support to either cultural aspects of these institutions' organization and operation and/or a deficit view of disability they perceived to be more common in Japan than in other, especially Western, countries. Participants felt that a culture of exclusion either at their institution or in Japan more generally was to blame for insufficient support mechanisms for SWDs.

Conclusion

In the current study, participants' chief concerns about teaching SWDs appear to be largely context-dependent due to Japanese HEIs' frequently inadequate support for SWDs and their teachers, coupled with a policy of selective inclusion. The most prominently voiced concerns in this study's data set were related to diagnosis and/or disclosure of disability, curricular constraints, and institutional barriers to inclusion. The analyzed data set also suggests, as has been suggested before (see Ruddick et al., 2021; and Yphantides, 2022), that more inclusive institutional policy, better institutional support, and more targeted teacher training regarding diagnosis and identification of SWDs could help address concerns among ELTs. This presumes an assumed lack of disclosure in Japanese postsecondary education. Increasing such support would also help reduce the persistent social stigma surrounding disability and encourage more SWDs to disclose their disability and request accommodations. Additionally, English language programs that mandate curricula or teaching materials should also make an effort to design and/or choose more accessible options. The other option is to give teachers more freedom and flexibility to meet a variety of student needs. Finally, institutions should create more opportunities for pre- and in-service ELTs to receive training on teaching SWDs within the field. Training could be done in MA TESOL programs and through ongoing professional development. Such programs would help alleviate concerns about teaching such students while simultaneously expediting the paradigm shift towards greater inclusivity within the field of English language teaching.

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Bio Data:

Davey Young is a lecturer in the Department of English Studies at Sophia University. He holds an MA in TESOL and a Ph.D. in International Studies (Comparative Education). Davey is a co-editor of *Barrier-free Instruction in Japan: Recommendations for Teachers at all Levels of Schooling* from Candlin & Mynard. His research focuses on English language teacher preparedness to teach students with disabilities. <dyoung@sophia.ac.jp>

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