

Teaching English to Students with Special Needs- A preliminary study

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This research aims to identify the issues and challenges of teaching English as Foreign Language to Japanese university students with specific special needs and seeks to investigate factors influencing academic performance of hearing impaired students in inclusive education, with specific focus on the English as a second language classroom.

Keywords: Hearing impairment; online teaching; teaching strategies.

Background

Okayama University of Science attracts students from a wide range of backgrounds, interests and abilities. In keeping with Japanese legislation, the university supports students with special needs of many kinds. Students are supported by a dedicated Communication Center which assists students and informs teachers of the nature of the disability. The center shares their recommended approaches and courses of action appropriate to each individual with respect to the nature of the special need. In practice, however, the advice received tends to be somewhat generic and not always of practical benefit to the instructor in a classroom setting, especially a foreign language classroom.

In the classroom each teacher must devise the optimum strategies to facilitate communication with the students and between the student and his/her classmates. The present author has been given responsibility for supporting students with hearing impairments but lacks any specialist training. This paper is intended as an introductory study of what may be effective approaches for teachers to take to provide the best possible learning experience for individuals facing this form of communication challenge.

There are various levels of hearing impairment:

Profound

Severe

Moderately severe

Moderate

Mild

Slight

In the education context, a hearing impaired student is described as one who is not able to use hearing to understand speech. Only a small number of students with this special need enters the university with the result that a corpus

of experience and advice does not exist, in particular for non-Japanese faculty members. This paper is intended solely as an exploratory document and further detailed research will be conducted into the needs of these young people in our care in the months and years to follow.

Education – primary and post-primary

In recent years, the right of children with special needs to be educated has been formally acknowledged by the Japanese government as an aspect of its support for human rights. The government seeks “normalization,” that is, integrated education, and the inclusion of people with special needs at all levels of education. In 1993, the government revised the 1970 Fundamental Law of People with Disabilities, and enacted the New Long-Term Program for Government Measures for Persons with Disabilities (1993-2002) as a result of a campaign by advocates for the disabled. The 1994 U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child and other domestic laws have now guaranteed the right of ‘all children without restriction to a free public education.’¹

In 1993, the Japanese government introduced a system of integrated education for children with mild disabilities. However, not all such children who seek integrated education have access to regular schools. Many mainstream schools lack adequate facilities and services for children with disabilities. For example, many school facilities are not barrier-free for children with wheelchairs or with other mobility issues. Although there is at present no requirement for every school to meet the needs of all children with disabilities, in order to decide which schools in their jurisdiction should make the renovations and accommodations for students with disabilities, each municipal board of education is now obliged to appoint a Committee of Advisors for the Schooling for Disabled Children. These committees typically consist of professionals such as teachers, doctors and psychologists².

A brief history of the education of young people with hearing disabilities in Japan begins with the first school for the deaf which was established in Kyoto in 1878. During the Meiji (1868-1912) and Taisho (1912 – 1926) eras, the number of schools continued to increase and by the Showa era (1926 – 1989) there were more than one hundred such institutions across the country. The alumni associations of these schools, alongside the Japanese Federation for the Deaf, laid the groundwork for the establishment of organizations for the hearing impaired. In time these organizations came to be a strong influence in bringing the issue of the recognition of the importance of sign language to the national government. The associations actively campaigned against the discrimination suffered by members of their community at a time when derogatory terms were in everyday usage. In the Taisho era a common misunderstanding existed in schools for the deaf that the use of sign language would act as an impediment to the acquisition of the Japanese language with the result that sign language was deliberately removed from the school curriculum. Despite this official neglect, sign language continued to be used and developed in a testament to the human drive for language acquisition. The sense of stigma once felt by those who availed of sign language took time to be eradicated however. The establishment of a law surrounding Japanese Sign Language (JSL or sometimes called 手話 or Nihon Shuwa) is at present being considered by the Japanese government which would have the desirable effect of bestowing official on of the language and eliminating any remaining stigmas.

¹ USJP.org: Japanese Education - Special Education

² *Ibid.*

Higher Education for students with special needs

In the year for which the latest figures are available, 2003, approximately half of all students with visual or hearing impairments entered two- or three-year vocational courses in special schools, colleges, or specialized training colleges. At the university where the present author is an instructor, a private college traditionally focused on science subjects, a number of students with moderate or mild hearing disabilities have successfully taken part in classes of English as a second language. Special equipment is provided in those classes and the teacher wears a Lavalier microphone (a small microphone that can either be wired or wireless varieties and be attached directly to clothing or around the neck) while the student uses a listening support device.

In these circumstances teachers may choose to implement much of the standard advice given to those in the non-language classroom, specifically to:

Pre-teach specific language and concepts required to ensure the student has the required prior knowledge for the activity.

Gain the student's attention before you give instructions.

Ensure that you are clearly visible to the student at all times.

Keep your hands and other objects away from your face while speaking.

Use normal clear speech. Do not exaggerate your speech.

Avoid speaking while facing the blackboard.

Avoid moving around the classroom while speaking.

Communicate clearly. Repeat and rephrase when necessary. Emphasize key words.

Use a focusing phrase e.g. "listen to this question".

Check for understanding by asking the student to tell you what they need to do or repeat what they heard.

Use "buddies" or classmates, to help relay and rephrase information.

Give students time to look at visual aids before talking to the aid so that the student with a hearing impairment has time to shift their attention from the visual to the auditory.

Use visual aids such as word webs and semantic maps and concrete examples to illustrate the links between information.³

At our university, a system exists whereby it is possible to utilize a network of student volunteers who attend the class with the hearing-impaired student as note takers. This system provides support and practical help and may have the further benefit of leading to companionship. This final approach is one that has been used with success at this university.

³ Reference: <https://www.brighthubeducation.com/special-ed-hearing-impairments/67528-tips-and-strategies-for-teaching-hearing-impaired-students/>

In 2020 due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, and with very little advance warning, all classes at this university transferred online. English language classes were chiefly taught using Zoom. The communication classes were taught online in their entirety online for this academic year with the concomitant disadvantages for the students' learning experience. In these challenging new conditions teachers were forced to learn many new pedagogical techniques. Equally, the freshmen were thrown into an unfamiliar world without the customary opportunities to get to know their classmates and teachers. Many were living away from their homes and families for the first time. Many of the lessons that had been learned by this author in the previous year were rendered irrelevant in the new situation experienced during the Covid restrictions.

As a positive, however, online teaching gave rise to some novel approaches that had not been available to English teachers previously. It was found that it is easy to share a great deal of visual material that was stimulating for all class members. Use of PowerPoint or Google Slides projected on a screen in the classroom will be a valuable approach in future classes with students with this special need.

The focus was on providing high quality visual materials and creating alternative opportunities for communication. The use of Padlet was one successful method that allowed all students to write their answers simultaneously on the online screen. The Chat function on Zoom was utilized to create an enjoyably competitive method to answer questions in writing. In this class also the use of English-language songs, usually a popular activity, was avoided. Instead, links were shared on the university's Learner Management System. Under this arrangement, students were free to listen for pleasure and to test their listening skills by filling in worksheets but there was no obligation to do so.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study population is obvious. English as a second language is required at this university only for freshmen. The number of students entering with severe hearing impairment will always be a small one. Rather than being a disadvantage, however, this allows the instructors a certain period of time in which to contemplate the most effective strategies to be put into effect in future years. The undertaking of further reading and research is the first imperative. In addition to an academic pursuit of experience the author has undertaken a course in basic JSL with a view to creating a positive and welcoming atmosphere for students entering the university. Compounding the challenges felt by every freshman many students are living away from home for the first time and may be experiencing a sense of isolation. It is the intention of this instructor to create classroom circumstances in which those with special needs will be able to feel part of a warm and secure learning space in which English will be learned and friendships developed.

It is the lack of sufficient experience in teaching special needs students in inclusive classrooms that creates challenges for busy teachers and can lead to a perception of personal incompetence and incapacity due to a lack of knowledge or the necessary specialist skills to create and use appropriate teaching materials.

A further hindrance to native speakers of English teaching in Japan is the lack of easy access to studies and Japanese reports relevant to our students. The number of those in the study group will always be small causing further difficulties in determining the type and level of support a student may require in the language classroom.

Conclusion

Howard Gardner has proposed an ‘individually education’, that is, one that takes the individual needs seriously and tailors the syllabus towards them. This study sought to determine effective instructional practices for hearing-impaired students in mainstream classes. It goes without saying that there is no single pedagogical approach that will suit each learner. In the case of students with special needs there is a further impetus to customize the content and the delivery of English language instruction in such a way as to suit each individual deaf learner’s own unique requirements. If the educational system is to succeed in mainstreaming the education of young people with special needs, there must first be an awareness by the instructor of the specific needs of each learner. This can be achieved at our university by intensive collaboration with the support staff at the communications center who are in a position to communicate with students in their own first language, Japanese, and then to inform the English native speaker teacher of the conditions that would be suit the learner. This process should ideally take place in the weeks before classes begin in the spring semester, allowing time to consider the adaptive strategies that will be required and the type and level of support the freshman student may require in the language classroom.

Accommodations and modifications may be required to both the course curriculum and the approach to the standard class. In addition, the consideration of specialized equipment which can allow students to participate as fully as possible. It may be that the most difficult hurdle is lack of time in a busy teacher’s schedule and this is where advance planning would be an ally of both student and teacher alike.

In 2019, this author felt that she was ill-equipped to teach in these novel circumstances and was trying to establish as time went along what was the best approach to supporting students with hearing difficulties. In 2020, a similar sense of confusion was experienced as all academic staff tried to adjust to the new world of online teaching. Both felt rather like emergency teaching situations. From now, this instructor would like to start to learn the techniques and strategies for teaching English to students who are not in a position to hear it.

In further research, the approach of differentiated learning will be considered in addition to computer-based language learning. The lessons learned through online classes will be developed and materials created that will contribute to a sense of a community of learning for all class members.

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