

Second Language Learning for Students with Special Needs: Perceptions of Japanese Secondary School Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents preliminary research into how Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) perceive their readiness in addressing the needs of students with learning disabilities, and what specific concerns they may have in ensuring a productive and healthy classroom learning environment for everyone. Using a qualitative, inductive research design, teacher perceptions were collected from open-ended questionnaires, which were then coded and analyzed. It was hoped that results could inform a needs analysis for teachers wishing to become more informed about learning disabilities and methods for best teaching these students.

INTRODUCTION

With the current emphasis on communicative language teaching (CLT) in second and foreign language teaching contexts, much of the discussion has been on curricular design and reform of traditional-learning delivery systems. This is particularly true in Japan, with the Ministry of Education, Sports and Technology (MEXT) placing heavy emphasis on students' communicative abilities over test-taking prowess. The rationale has been that communication should be the over-arching goal of English education. Overlooked in this environment of reform has been how students with special needs, such as those with learning disabilities like Dyslexia or ADHD, can be accommodated for within a system that emphasizes social interaction and willingness to communicate (WtC). It is still relatively uncommon to separate students with special needs from other students, meaning that they are left to cope with language (as well as other) learning which is delivered at a pace that is often beyond their cognitive capabilities to maintain. This paper presents preliminary research into how Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) perceive their readiness in addressing the needs of such students, and what specific concerns they may have in ensuring a productive and healthy classroom learning environment for everyone.

Special Needs Education and Second Language Learning

Learners with specific learning differences (SpLDs), such as ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia among others, exhibit difficulties in processing language. They might have a “reduced phoneme awareness and phonological short-term memory capacity” (Kormos & Smith, 2011, p. 73). A student with Dyslexia, for example, generally has reduced capacity to accurately discern phonemes as well as difficulty in automatizing learning—both critical skills in second language learning. As vocabulary acquisition is important in comprehending and using a second language (Wadden, Browne & Nation, 2018), a student who is not able to learn vocabulary and subsequently automatize its usage, would likely fall behind other students who are better able to cognitively cope with their learning (Anderson, 2000; DeKeyser,

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1996). Likewise, a student with ADHD may have difficulty focusing on the content of the lesson, and fall behind the other students who are naturally able to move at a faster pace. Additionally, this student may find it difficult to adhere to the pragmatically appropriate turn-taking system of the second language (Wong & Waring, 2010), rendering them at a disadvantage when communicative competence is the pedagogical focus as is the case in CLT methodologies.

Best serving students with SpLDs has long been a challenge, with many school systems having no clear support mechanism in place. In Japan, it is often preferable to keep all students of a grade (or class) together, rather than subject them to the social stigma of being seen as “other” in a culturally and socially homogeneous society (Kubota, 1999; Maruyama, 2007). Even for parents of children with special needs, there is a strong preference in not making them *appear* different by giving them special treatment (such as tutoring support or having them pulled out to attend alternative courses with content taught by specialists in their area of disability). While still rare overall, it is more common for schools to have accommodation mechanisms in place for students with physical disabilities (such as providing wheelchair access). In such an environment, it is not surprising that teachers feel unqualified and unprepared for dealing with students with special learning needs. On the one hand, they do not want to “slow down” the class for the other students, nor do they want to seem insensitive to the needs of the students struggling to keep up due to a learning disability. The questionnaire data presented below is the first time to our knowledge that English teachers have been asked specifically about their own perceptions of (and preparedness for) how to deal with SpLD students in their mainstream classes.

METHOD

In an effort to survey the perceptions of Japanese teachers of English about special needs education in their contexts, a questionnaire was given to junior and senior high school teachers attending a professional development workshop. The content of the workshop was structured around understanding the new MEXT guidelines as they relate to communicative language teaching (CLT), and pedagogical training in how to move from a traditional teaching environment (translation-based) to a communicative one (interaction-based). The content of the workshops did not deal with learning disabilities or differences. Following three, three-day workshops, which were sponsored by the US Department of State and the US Embassy in Tokyo, participant-teachers were asked to reflect on the content of the workshop (see Glasgow & Hale, 2018), as well as on how they perceive this new pedagogical approach in light of special needs education. The questionnaire was given to all participants, however not all participant-teachers opted to fill out the section on special needs. Of the 130 participants who completed the questionnaires, 49 (37.69%) answered *at least some* of the questions related specifically to special needs education.

The research design followed a narrative, inductive, qualitative framework (Creswell, 2009; Thomas, 2006). The open-ended responses of the questionnaire were transcribed and coded inductively (Saldaña, 2009) using the coding software HyperRESEARCH version 4.0, and themes were created from the resulting codes. Responses written in Japanese were translated into English for consistency prior to the coding process. It was hoped that responses to the questionnaire would add insights into how much Japanese teachers of English understood about students with special needs.

Questionnaire Items

The following items were presented on the questionnaire. Respondents could write as much or as little as they wanted about each of the topics. They were asked what they knew about:

1. 障害自体の概要/Information about (learning) disabilities
2. 各種障害と言語習得の関係/ Information about the relationship between disability and language acquisition
3. 障害に伴う学び方の違いと配慮の方法/Information about the specific language differences and reasonable accommodation that can be made in the classroom
4. 学校におけるアセスメント/Learning disability assessment by the school
5. 障害がある児童に対する 4 技能の指導法/How to teach English 4-skills to students with special needs

FINDINGS

Initial coding of the open-ended question responses related to special needs education produced 204 unique codes in the transcript data. These codes were concentrated into ten major code categories (see Table 1).

Code	Total	Bar Graph
Accommodation for LD	22	
Conflating language proficiency with LD	6	
Diagnosing students	26	
Difficulties teaching LD students	20	
Lack of training	25	
LD and Language Learning	21	
LD Terms	23	
Needing support	12	
Recommendations	16	
Uncertainty	33	

Table 1. Initial codes and total instances of each

Codes tended to cluster around problems dealing with students with SpLDs, as well as how teachers should accommodate these needs. Another major category of codes revealed that even when attempting to accommodate students with SpLDs, teachers generally lacked confidence in their approaches. Further coding passes of these responses resulted in consolidation of the ten codes into two over-arching themes:

1. Classroom Accommodation
2. Lacking Training

Classroom Accommodation

The most prevalent concepts present in the data reflected the difficulties teachers face in their attempts to accommodate students with special learning needs. A teacher's attempts to first diagnose specific needs often leads them to alter their instruction in ways they think would be helpful to the students. Terms such as "ADHD," "Dyslexia" and "LD" were often used by respondents in their descriptions of their students. This indicates that these teachers had at least some familiarity with SpLDs, though their attempts at accommodation often reflected a rudimentary understanding of the learning disability, as well as the limitations in addressing these needs. One respondent attempts to diagnose his or her student, and focus their language learning on areas that the student seems to enjoy: "Many of the LD and Dyslexia students

tend to have superior listening ability and can perform communication. They actually enjoy communicative activities that don't involve reading and writing.” Another teacher assumes to know something about SpLDs (perhaps Dyslexia) and how best to teach to someone with this learning disability, writing, “Since it is hard for students to learn things only by characters, I use colors and pictures.” Another indicated that he or she does “not give writing assignments [because] some can't remember English vocabulary.”

In addition to diagnosing students, and adjusting their teaching based on their own intuition about how best to address students with special needs, many respondents expressed frustration with having to do this at the same time as teaching other students in their classes. This comment is representative of this wider sentiment in the data, as it underscores misunderstandings about the prevalence of students with developmental disabilities (up to 20% of a single class), as well as how this effects their pedagogical choices such as when to utilize pair and group work:

Now the ratio of students who have developmental disability occupies 10 to 20 percent of one class. Teachers have to deal with not only slow learners, but such students who have [learning disabilities]. Especially, students who cannot recognize letters, which means cannot write, read, and remember words, and students who cannot concentrate on hearing others sometimes cannot be flexible. Therefore, one of the problems which I have to solve is to integrate such students into activities such as pair works and group works.

Lacking Training

The second theme contained codes related to concepts of uncertainty about what to do, as well as expressing the need for more training and support in terms of best serving students with SpLDs. Some teachers felt unqualified to diagnose students, although they may suspect a student has an SpLD. One respondent, for example, indicated that he or she “had never taught in special support education classes, [but felt] there may be some students [in his or her own classes] who cannot distinguish between ‘b’ and ‘d,’ and ‘q’ and ‘p’ in writing.” Teachers generally indicated this uncertainty, and wished for more training in how best to diagnose students in need, and also how best to teach to them. Some expressed frustration that they are essentially left to diagnose students on their own, and devise their own approaches to teaching. Comments like this one were common in the data: “Some students can't read and write English. Maybe they are Dyslexia. I want to know how to teach English in class.”

As is often the case when there is lack of understanding and training, some teachers made comments expressing stereotypes about students with SpLDs and how they assume they learn best. For example, one participant wrote, “Many of the LD and Dyslexia students tend to have superior listening ability and can perform communication. They actually enjoy communicative activities that don't involve reading and writing.” While another assumed that students with ADHD were particularly disadvantaged in the communicative English classroom: “Some say that it is good for them to [be in a] calm environment, but because of pair/group work, English classes tend to be noisy.”

Of all the initial codes, “Uncertainty” was the most common as teachers were unsure about not only the best practices in second language teaching for SpLD students, but also in how to properly identify these students in the first place. Teachers were particularly unsure (and uncomfortable) with issues related to assessment. Some teachers felt it might be unfair (even

unethical) to assess students with special needs in the same way that all students are assessed, particularly if they are not able to identify students with special needs. Teachers seemed perplexed by the notion of assessing students with Dyslexia, for example, on English writing ability.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This pilot study was intended to get a general sense of how much Japanese teachers of English in secondary schools understood about students with specific learning differences. It was not the intention to offer an intervention in any way, but rather to collect data that might inform further research in this area, and which could involve training and support for these teachers. What this data reveals is that there is no coherent understanding of learning disabilities in general among Japanese secondary school teachers, which therefore leads to spotty and unformed approaches in addressing the problem. This is not necessarily a failing by these teachers, as such training was not previously provided in typical teacher-training education programs. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has only recently required a single omnibus course in special needs added to the certification programs for secondary school teachers. Whether this would be adequate is not under discussion here, although it underscores the limited information available to teachers who are often tasked with both diagnosing SpLDs and devising their own approaches to accommodate for them.

While intentionally limited in scope, this study has limitations, primary of which is the small treatment size and response rate. However, the lower than optimal response rate (37.69%) could be interpreted as further indication that teachers do not possess much knowledge about special needs education in general, or at least not enough to comment about it in this format. In future treatments, a simple likert section could be added with items designed specifically to ask the question of whether they feel their knowledge is adequate, rather than asking them to elaborate on the concept. Naturally, this study lends itself to control and test-group research possibilities, in which one group receives instruction and support in diagnosing SpLDs as well as teaching methods specific to particular needs, and another does not (the latter of which, in effect, is the natural condition).

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