
Opinion and Perspective

Special Needs Training in ELT Programs as a Part of Continuing Professional Development

Robert J. Lowe

Tokyo Kasei University

In my final year as a teacher working on a large ELT program at a Japanese university in 2014, I was tasked with integrating a blind student into my class. This was a situation for which neither my practical nor my academic training had prepared me and was one that therefore presented something of a challenge. The specific ways in which I dealt with this situation are the subject of another article (Lowe, 2015), but being placed into this position made me aware of a wider issue within the tertiary-level ELT industry in Japan: the lack of teachers with special needs training in large English teaching programs at Japanese universities. This is an issue that is likely to become more pronounced with the increase of English programs that are mandatory for all undergraduate students, and so it is one, I believe, which merits our attention.

In this article I will first provide some background on the number of disabled students in Japanese higher education (particularly those with visual impairments, auditory impairments, and physical disabilities), and the kinds of support available to these students in universities. I will then discuss some of the specific difficulties that may be faced by students with disabilities in English classes, as well as the difficulties that these issues can present to teachers when planning and conducting lessons. Finally, I will attempt to make the argument that special needs training should be a part of the continuing professional development of teachers in large English programs in Japanese universities in order to provide a positive classroom experience both for learners and for teachers. I do not claim to

be an expert in special needs teaching myself, and in fact it is my lack of training in this area that has inspired my concern about the need for more specialized training for English language teachers.

Disabled students in Japanese higher education

In this section I will look at the number of Japanese university students who are registered as disabled, the laws that have been passed to help improve these students' educational experiences, and the steps that have been taken by universities to provide for the special needs of these students.

Number of students

As with many other countries, there are a significant number of students enrolled in Japanese universities who are classified as having disabilities. In 2014, the number of students with disabilities studying in Japanese universities was 13,449 out of a total of 3,213,518, or 0.42% of all students (Japan Student Services Organization, 2014). This may seem like a fairly insignificant number, but it is certainly large enough to be a concern for their educators. And for each student who may find themselves in a class with a teacher who has not had the opportunity to undergo appropriate training, it is clearly of significance.

Laws and provisions

There have been recent changes to the law in Japan aimed at increasing provisions for people with disabilities, including students. In 2013 the Japanese Act on the Elimination of Disability Discrimination was passed ("Dare mo okizari ni shinai" sekai ni, 2013), which requires public universities to provide support and accommodation for students with disabilities, as well as encouraging private universities to do the same. This law was introduced in 2013, and institutions were required to have fully complied with it by 2016. Despite this, it is possible that these measures may not have been fully enacted. However, this is not to say that disabled students do not have access to certain levels of support from their universities already. Universities often have a student support center, designed to care for the needs of all of their students, including those with disabilities. In addition, universities may be able to provide specific services to students who

have special needs. For example, disabled students may have access to student volunteers who can help guide them around the campus or to assistants who may help students in note taking during lectures.

These provisions are useful, and it is of course important that students have access to these kinds of resources. However, it is often not a requirement that teachers and lecturers have any specialist training in teaching students with disabilities. This is surprising, as this was one of the recommendations made in the Tokyo Foundation Policy Proposal on Higher Education for Individuals with Disabilities (Tokyo Foundation, 2013), which argued that “assistance for students with disabilities can be enhanced by nurturing faculty members with specialized knowledge and skills” (p.55). If this is accepted, then it is crucial for us to look at making improvements to the ongoing and professional development of practitioners. In the following section I will discuss some of the problems that may be faced by students with visual, auditory, and physical impairments in their English classes.

Potential difficulties for disabled students in English classes

There are a number of potential difficulties that may be faced by students with different kinds of disabilities in English lessons, some of which I will describe in this section. These difficulties are not necessarily specific to English study, but are certainly relevant to language teaching and are issues that have been written about in the professional literature surrounding disabled students in foreign language learning contexts.

Issues with mobility and classroom management

It is common for English classes to feature a lot of movement, as a teacher may wish to switch pairs, change group members during tasks, do activities involving movement around the classroom, ask students to come to the front of the class, and so on. These kinds of activities are likely to cause problems for students with physical disabilities for whom movement may be challenging and may also present difficulties for visually impaired students, who may require guidance

around the classroom.

In addition, instructions may need to be adapted in order to be comprehensible to all members of the class. Blind students, for example, may require more oral reinforcement of instructions through repetition, as they do not have the written material to guide them. They may also find it beneficial for the teacher to use the names of the other students in their instructions, especially when putting groups together, as they will otherwise be unaware of who is engaging in each activity (Lowe, 2015). Deaf students may also need special consideration in terms of instructions, as they will need to be positioned in a part of the classroom where they can see either the lips of the teacher or the instructions written on the board.

Issues with materials

For students with visual or auditory impairments, special considerations may have to be made with regard to materials in order for them to be accessible to all members of the class. Enjelvin (2009), in a case study of a blind undergraduate student studying French, found that through the use of a number of strategies it was possible to adapt materials in a way which made the content of the course accessible to the blind student as well as to his sighted classmates. These strategies included the use of Braille translations of materials, as well as the creative employment of learning technologies such as quiz programs and specialized Web sites. Similar techniques were utilized in a case study of an undergraduate student at Coventry University (Orsini-Jones, Courtney, & Dickinson, 2005), in which the instructors adapted materials to make them less text-heavy and otherwise more accessible to their non-sighted student.

Materials and course design may also pose a challenge to deaf learners enrolled in foreign language courses, as these students do not have access to the auditory support available to the other students. As Mayer (2009) notes, “the deaf ESL learner lacks access to a primary form of the L1” (p. 6) and therefore makes the case that “the design of typical ESL programs, with their initial emphasis on conversational English, is not appropriate” (p. 6). In addition, Mayer (2009) argues that “deaf students require programs which address the fact that they often lack basic aspects of English which other ESL students have ‘picked up’

via their ever-expanding knowledge of its spoken form" (p. 6), meaning that a more systematic approach needs to be taken in teaching these students, as they do not have a store of linguistic knowledge that they have absorbed from their surroundings. This gives some idea of the challenges facing ESL learners with auditory disabilities compared to their hearing classmates and also provides some insight into the amount of effort that is required on the part of teachers when integrating these students in their classes.

A further point is that students with learning disabilities such as dyslexia may need their materials to be written on different colored paper or on specially designed Web sites in order for them to make text easier to understand and recognize (Schneider & Crombie, 2003).

Issues of production

Students with disabilities may also have problems with producing aspects of their second language. Blind students may have issues producing written English, especially in terms of handwriting and may require more time than their classmates to produce written work. They may even need an assistant to whom they can dictate their work during lessons. Producing written work may also be an issue for students with physical disabilities, who may not have the dexterity to produce handwritten work during classes.

Problems of production may also be an issue among deaf students, particularly, as Swisher (1989) notes, in terms of pronunciation. Having not heard the language spoken and not being able to hear themselves speak, their production of English sounds may be inaccurate or unclear. Consequently, teachers may need to spend more time than usual on coaching deaf students in the mechanical aspects of their speech production.

This overview of some of the issues that may face disabled students in EFL classes is not intended to be exhaustive, and it is likely that other issues may also occur in the classroom. Nevertheless, it is clear even from this brief discussion that there are a number of potential issues that may emerge when attempting to integrate students with disabilities into English classes, and it is important for teachers to be aware of these potential issues in order for students to effectively

learn. This naturally raises the question of how this can be achieved, and it is this to which I shall turn in the following section.

Special needs training as a part of continuing professional development

In the case study at Coventry University referred to earlier (Orsini-Jones, Courtney, & Dickinson, 2005), the authors note that this was the first blind student who had entered the modern languages course, and that the staff members accordingly “were on a steep learning curve,” during which they found that “adjusting material was very time consuming” (p. 150). This brings us neatly to the central argument I am seeking to make in this article: that it would be beneficial both for students and teachers if the continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers were to focus, to some degree, on ways of teaching learners with disabilities.

CPD is an important part of the professional lives of teachers and is encouraged in many of the large EFL programs in Japanese universities. This professional development may take many different forms. In some cases, CPD may occur as a series of in-house faculty development training sessions, focusing on the development of the specific methodology used on the program. It may also involve the invitation of outside speakers to give talks or to present workshops focused on improving the teaching skills and knowledge of the faculty. CPD may additionally take the form of individual action research conducted by teachers on particular aspects of their own classroom teaching. Whatever form CPD takes, it is usually strongly encouraged by the management of these programs, as it is likely to lead to more skilled teachers, more effective methods of instruction, and consequently a better reputation for the faculty and potentially higher student numbers. I believe that, considering the number of students with disabilities currently studying in Japanese universities and the fact that laws recently passed will require reforms to the ways in which these students are treated, CPD in large EFL programs should feature a focus on teaching students with disabilities.

This CPD could take a number of different forms. As mentioned earlier, I was recently placed in the position of teaching a blind student without any formal training. As such, my professional development took the form of action research,

during which I experimented with different approaches to integrating the blind student into the class while maintaining the core learning aims and features of the course. I then relayed these experiences to other instructors in the department through informal discussions and internally distributed written documents.

While this was a suitable approach to take in this one exceptional case, it seems unlikely that such an approach to CPD would be able to achieve the wide coverage needed to bring all teachers up to an equal level of skill in teaching these students. In order to achieve this, other approaches to CPD are likely to be more effective. In particular, it may be useful to bring in outside experts who can run workshops on how to teach students with different kinds of disabilities. The benefits of these kinds of workshops are numerous; they can be presented by experts with specialized knowledge, can be conducted with large groups of instructors, and can achieve the kind of wide coverage that individual action research would be unable to attain.

While specialized workshops like this may be the ideal form for this kind of CPD to take, it may not be feasible for all courses to host workshops of this nature, due either to cost, scheduling, or other factors. In this case, it may be possible for program managers or instructors to research appropriate techniques on their own, and then present faculty development sessions on particular aspects of teaching practice or class management. These CPD sessions can take place on a number of different topics but may most fruitfully focus on some of the issues outlined above—those concerning classroom management, accessibility of materials, and issues of language production.

In whatever way these CPD sessions are conducted, I believe that this kind of training is important for teachers working on large ELT programs in Japanese universities to have an opportunity to develop their teaching skills to include the education of students with disabilities.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the teaching of students with disabilities should form a part of the continuing professional development of teachers on large ELT programs in Japanese universities. As more of these programs are created, and as

the law changes to enforce the equal treatment of disabled students in universities, it will be important for teachers and instructors to be versed in some of the ways in which disabled students can be effectively integrated into English classes. This, I feel, should be undertaken as part of the CPD of teachers and should be encouraged and facilitated by their faculties and departments. The addition of these features to CPD sessions would contribute positively to the ability of instructors to teach disabled students alongside their classmates and create a positive teaching and learning atmosphere for both instructors and students.

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Author Bio

Robert Lowe has been living and working in Japan since 2008 and is currently a lecturer at Tokyo Kasei University and a co-host of the TEFLology podcast. He holds a diploma in TESOL, an MA in Applied Linguistics, and is a PhD student in Applied Linguistics at Canterbury Christ Church University. robert-l@tokyo-kasei.ac.jp

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