

# Empowering Learners Towards Self-Sufficiency in an Inclusive Classroom Environment

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The number of students with disabilities, including Special Learning Differences (SpLD) and other developmental uniqueness, is increasing in Japan not only in grade schools but also in tertiary education (Center for Diversity Accessibility and Career Development, University of Tsukuba, 2017; Tsukuba Accessibility Department, 2017). This phenomenon is also prevalent at Keiwa College. This increase in the number of students with various learning differences emphasizes the need for inclusion, differentiated instruction, and accommodation, especially in classes where learners need to interact, collaborate and communicate with each other in a foreign language.

The theoretical background portion of the paper (section 1 to 3) is based on the earlier conference presentation and its' proceeding (Ooiwa, Yap, and Kaneko) in which authors point out the currently available support for both teachers and learners, and its insufficiency for those who show any differences/ difficulties with particular aspects of learning in tertiary level English as a foreign language (EFL) classes. The authors then, in the latter part of this paper explain their on-going action research to create an inclusive learning community where the learners are empowered to be self-sufficient and where shared accommodation takes place.

## 1. Background

In 1979, as the Japanese government made it mandatory to provide integrated education to children with special needs (Yamaguchi, 2005), integrated education emerged, and special needs classes were established within mainstream schools. In Takahashi's lecture (2017), he explained that the idea behind the development of such options came with the concept of "normalization" of people with handicaps, meaning that those with special needs have to be given opportunities to live in "normal living conditions".

The Ordinance for Enforcement of the School Education Act in 1993 stipulated the *tsuukyu* (to commute between two classes) scheme. This scheme allows children who need special attention to spend most of their time in regular classes but also have several hours of additional personal or small-group lessons a week to cater to their individual learning needs (Isogai, 2017). At this time of educational reform, the concept of normalization was skewed and executed as to make children with special educational needs to fit into the mainstream, and to be as "normal" as possible (Takahashi, 2017). Since the 2011 revisions to the Basic Act for Persons with Disabilities, the Japanese government has been enforcing equal educational opportunities, to ensure inclusive educational environment for all children (Matamura, 2013). This shift is crucial since the ideology of inclusive education does not dichotomize any individual into either a mainstream or a special education class. Instead, it looks at the learner's differences on a spectrum and recognizes that all children are unique and diverse — such is the nature of learners with Specific Learning Differences (SpLD).

There are many different types of SpLD. These include both learning disorders such as dyslexia, and developmental disorders such as attention deficit disorder (Lewisham Virtual School, 2019). All SpLD exist on a continuum from mild to moderate to severe. Common patterns of behavior and experience do exist, but there is a range of different effect patterns for each individual. SpLD are independent of intellectual ability, socio-economic or language background.

While diagnosed SpLD students are identifiable, there are many that fall into what is called "*gurei zo-n*", or hereafter referred to as "gray zone". The gray zone in Japanese as described by Himeno (2018) is a person who falls in between the black and white extremes of an ability spectrum and has some degree of learning difficulty. Those who belong to the gray zone may or may not be aware of their learning difficulties. Himeno also states the population of people in the gray zone is thought to be larger than the population of people with an official diagnosis.

## **2. From Policy to Practice: Gaps in Japanese Education**

The Ministry of Education and Sports, Science and Technology's (MEXT) ideology of ensuring inclusive education for all appears viable. The 2019 MEXT report states "According to Article 24 on the Convention on the Rights of Persons

with Disabilities, an inclusive education system does not exclude persons with disabilities from the general education system. ..." (Section 1.1, point 2). Furthermore, it explains the necessity of providing various types of schools and classes to accommodate students with different abilities as connecting "diverse environments of learning" . (Section 1.1 point 4). However, Mithout (2016) questions whether the creation of these new systems to cater to learner needs prompt institutions to radically transform towards the recognition of global diversity or is it merely words and no action. Takahashi (2017) also agrees with Mithout that while the inclusive education ideologies proposed by MEXT are sound on the surface, in reality, the institutions and their practices have not yet changed from the integrational educational practices.

MEXT reports (MEXT, 2016; Isogai, 2017) only focus on plans and efforts directed for learners in primary, middle and high schools, showing a lack of discussion or concern for learners with SpLD in tertiary education. For those students who want to pursue higher education, an earlier MEXT report on Higher Education (2012) provides ample guidelines and support systems on the tertiary entrance process, in accordance with constitutional rights that "shall be entitled to equal opportunities to receive education in accordance with concerned laws and according to his or her ability" (p. 2). Despite this, there is no discussion on considerations for students with SpLD once they have entered tertiary education, nor guidelines for institutions that receive these students. Perhaps there is an assumption that after completing their high school education, students with SpLD will get trained at vocational schools or start working immediately, rather than pursuing their studies in mainstream tertiary system. However, the percentage of Japanese high school students with diagnosed SpLD proceeding to higher education (81.5%) marked the highest in history in the year 2018 (MEXT, 2018). This increase of tertiary enrollees with SpLD corroborates the authors' personal observations working within the Japanese private tertiary system over the last five years. The Student Support Center at Keiwa College reports that in 2018, out of 633 registered students, sixty-eight are either officially diagnosed with a disability, undiagnosed but with SpLD with accommodation requests, or "gray zone" learners (Seino, I. personal communication, May 21, 2019).

This concurs with the JASSO 2018 report where the rapid increase of

student numbers with invisible disabilities, such as developmental disabilities, mental issues, and physical weakness and sickness is described. It states that 1.05% of students enrolled in Japanese tertiary education are classified as disabled students. Compared to a smaller difference of .26% over a seven-year period from 2006 (0.16%) to 2013 (0.42%), the following five years, 2013 to 2018, saw an increase of .63%. With the implementation of the Act for Eliminating Discrimination Against People with Disabilities, by law, all public schools have to provide "reasonable accommodation" if requested by students, and all private schools have to "try" to provide accommodations if requested by students (Japan Cabinet Office, 2016). Students with Learning Differences with or without an official diagnosis may request "reasonable accommodation" from the institution they are registered.

### **3. Prominent Issues Emerging in Language Classrooms and with Language Teachers**

As the number of students who require special support is increasing at the tertiary education level, the variety of student needs and accommodations being requested is also rising. Since first-year students are required to complete mandatory subjects, this surge is significantly felt in core curriculum English classes at Keiwa College.

The challenges experienced by the authors of this paper are not necessarily with how to provide individual accommodation requests, but the uncertainty of how to assist students who are in the gray zone. These students, seemingly coping, may have difficulties related to undiagnosed SpLD. As these students have not been diagnosed and given training to handle their specific needs, they often have difficulties in; managing time, following self-managed or collaborated classes, multi-tasking, asking for help or talking to people in general. Having been accustomed to fixed educational structures, procedures, and available support systems in middle and high school, the new status quo of tertiary education can be quite jarring for learners with SpLD. As such, these learners have no choice but to learn how to navigate and survive mainstream education, even if their learned skills are not sufficient in the new, less-sheltered university environment where independence and learner initiative are encouraged, if not expected.

Tertiary teachers are not only responsible for the content of their classes,

but also the learning environment, including providing accommodations to learners with SpLD. However, the lack of training to instruct and accommodate these types of learners makes the expectation less feasible. This is especially challenging in language classrooms where instructors may or may not have sufficient ability to comprehend or communicate in Japanese. Examples of instructor difficulties include some or all of the following: understanding institutional policies, the teacher's guidebook if available, or even specific accommodation requests sent directly to the individual teacher. An example of limited support provided to foreign language teachers, is the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO, 2019); while they provide extensive guidelines on supporting students with disabilities for faculty and staff, it is only available in Japanese. There are now books on the market for university students to self-support and self-understand their diverse abilities (e.g. Ishii, Ikeshima, & Takahashi, 2017; Takaishi and Iwata, 2012; Takahashi, 2012; Sasaki and Umenaga, 2010). Those books provide tips and advice for teachers, staff, and parents of the students with SpLD and those in the gray zone. Unfortunately, these again are only in Japanese. With limited Japanese language proficiency on the teacher's side, gathering information and communication with the students, their advisors, parents, and the counselors/school social workers may be difficult to manage.

Apart from these difficulties that foreign language teachers experience, language classes often require students to actively communicate with peers and with the teacher-in-charge. If students with SpLD lack experience in interacting with others, these classrooms can exacerbate presentation of SpLD. As these students are unable to remove themselves from various situations that trigger their stress points, they find it more challenging to manage their symptoms associated with their SpLD. In the same way, students without learning difficulties also require some support when they have classmates with SpLD. Without the proper guidance, learners with SpLD are often treated with indifference or, in most cases, simply ignored by their peers. This prompts a necessity to provide all parties ways to navigate this new environment.

For students with or without any type of learning difficulties to study in the same foreign language classroom, the first step of creating an inclusive learning environment is to ensure that social barriers are eliminated. Social barriers refer to

situations where learners with SpLD find difficult to navigate and interact in. The next step is to provide any reasonable accommodations requested by the students and to cater to students' individual needs and differences (Nagasawa, 2018).

This two-fold guideline provides ample foundation to an inclusive classroom, since theoretically, by providing both a barrier-free environment and accommodation requested, all students can learn equally. However, it is also important to note that the process cannot be successful unless the entire class is oriented towards working together despite individual differences and nuances. Learners should be provided with tools, guidelines and information that they can access in any event that they require assistance in working towards this goal. Concrete steps taken to achieve these possibilities is discussed in the following section.

#### **4. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Groundwork through Course Orientation**

Universal Design for Learning is a term coined by Rose and Meyer in the 1990s as an approach to curriculum that minimizes barriers and encourages maximum learning for all. Meyer, Rose and Gordon (2014) highlight the need for education to reshape the way teaching and learning take place. This educational innovation can occur by emphasizing flexibility and individuality. UDL's three principles and corresponding guidelines can help meet the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities inherent in students' variability, offering paths for those currently disenfranchised. UDL concept is based on developing learner's talents by providing equal learning opportunities through ongoing monitoring, feedback, and course corrections while maintaining class expectations and objectives. In the case of English classes, the course objectives would naturally include the acquisition of specific language skills set by each level.

From the authors' personal experiences of a typical college freshman class, it is expected that students come with all sorts of abilities, sensitivity, sense of maturity, sexualities, and language, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. However, with the reality in modern Japanese university contexts, this diversity now expands for learners with SpLD or ones in the gray zone. To provide a better educational set-up for learners of different learning abilities and difficulties, action

should be taken at the beginning of the school year - during class orientation. Instead of utilizing orientation as a typical “class-introduction-and-getting-to-know-each-other” day, this can be recalibrated into an opportunity for teachers to know students better and identify how to assist them throughout. A recalibrated orientation also helps learners become aware of differences in themselves and their classmates while learning how to seek for help.

At the beginning of the first semester of the academic year 2019, the authors conducted a study in six first year and two second year English oral communications classes. These classes consisted of a little over 150 students, to investigate the students’ learning styles and preferences in text size, fonts, and background colors through different activities. Part of this study was to help the instructors provide Universally Designed texts to best cater to the students’ needs. At the same time, the study was intended to help students realize their own learning styles and preferences, and also that everybody learns in different ways. The final portion of the study was a longitudinal action research, with the provision of recalibrated orientation at the beginning of April and observing the students throughout the academic year, focusing on students’ self-sufficiency and co-creation of an inclusive learning community. In the following sections, the process, content, and the purpose of the orientation are explained.

#### **4. 1 . Problem-Identification and “Asking for Help” Poster**

The first activity served as an ice-breaker, while the substantial purpose was to have students experience a situation where they need to identify a problem. Through communication and negotiation, students had to solve the problem within an assigned group.

Step	Activity	Purpose
1	Cube Puzzle Challenge	Students worked in groups of four. Each group was given a puzzle set. Pieces in this puzzle are cubes. Each group had to complete the puzzle by finding which side of the cube is required, and where the piece would fit. 9 pieces are required to complete the puzzle, but one of the pieces was intentionally removed. The objective was not to complete the puzzle, but rather to find a way to find the problem and the solution to the problem by communicating and negotiating.
2	Reflection	Students reviewed and identified what kind of challenges they have experienced during the activity. Then discussed how they managed to overcome the difficulties.
3	Explanation of the Poster	The instructors introduced the poster while reviewing the students process of solving the cube puzzle.

The poster (see Appendix A) presented is a flow chart, which is designed in a way a student can identify if she/ he: (a) has a problem, (b) knows a solution, (c) needs help, or (d) knows who can help.

The poster also includes a list of people or “back-up persons”, both on and off campus, in case a student does not know who to ask for help. These individuals would range from an advisor, a teacher, to the support center, office staff, classmates, friends and parents. The poster was displayed in the classroom throughout the semester. The poster contains QR codes that are linked to an extensive list of contact information (explained in section 4. 2) in both Japanese and English.

#### 4. 2 Contact list

The QR codes on the poster link to an extensive and detailed list of personnel and office sections on campus along with their locations, phone numbers and office hours. The list also included the names and phone numbers of hotlines within the area in the event when the student requires emotional management or reassurance.

### 4. 3 Phrases on Quizlet

After setting the classroom as an area where learners can freely ask for assistance when needed, it was logical to provide the learners with a set of phrases that they can use to seek help in pre-determined situations. The situations were decided based on the researchers' experience from previous classes, with learners who required accommodation and assistance. The selected scenarios were then populated with phrases, questions and statements, written in English and Japanese, that can be used within a given context. The lists were consequently migrated into Quizlet, a mobile and web-based application that allows learners to study information using various learning tools and games. Since the phrases are easily accessible through the application, students can either (a) use it as a quick reference tool, (b) use it for study and mastery, or (c) use it as a visual communication device when they are unable to verbalize what they need to express when stressed or anxious.

#### “Asking for Help” Phrases on Quizlet

Situations	Example of phrases listed
Asking for help to learn better	Could you please use white chalk? What page are we looking at?
When you forget something, were late or absent	I'm sorry I forgot my textbook. I'm sorry to be absent from our class last Monday. I did not feel well.
Speaking practice	Do you have a partner? Where do you want to sit?
Time out	May I walk around for a bit to think? May I step outside for a moment?
Teacher consultations	Excuse me, Mike sensei. Do you have time to talk? When is your office hour? There is something I want to discuss with you. Can I email you about it first?
Self-improvement	I would like to improve my listening skills. Could you check my writing before I submit? This assignment is very difficult for me. Can you give me some advice?
Office matters	I don't understand how to register. Can someone help me, please? I want to make an appointment with the school social worker. I have a question about this form. Is this the right place to ask for help?

By explaining the situations and phrases, instructors: 1) explicitly taught that these types of requests are reasonable and encouraged, 2) familiarized the students with the cultural norms and systems of the university, such as registration period, professors' office hours, and contacting the instructors and catching up by themselves when absent or late, and 3) made sure that students know how to request in an appropriate manner as accommodation is not made one way, or two ways (between the teacher and a student) but also among the students. If aimed to create an inclusive community of learning, accommodation is not delivered top-down but is made as a shared practice.

## 5. Observations

While formal data gathering and analysis is still warranted for this research, there is a wealth of anecdotal observations, student feedback and suggestions recorded in the authors' field notes. These notes are categorized in the discussion that follows.

### 5. 1 Requested Analog Reference Versions

*"Could you please print out the phrases with the contact information at the back?"*

- 1st Year Students, Oral Communications class

The selection and preference towards using Quizlet as a server for the "asking for help" phrases were based on mobile accessibility and multi-functionality. Unfortunately, even up to the end of the school year, some learners fall within the range of having limited access to a mobile phone to not owning one. This small but rather significant population of students have requested for a paper version of the phrases for their reference.

### 5. 2 Voicing Out Needs

*"Could you please make a new set of phrases that we can use for lecture classes?"*

- 1st Year Language Students

*"If I'm going to a funeral, what should I say to the office? Who should I talk to?"*

- 2nd Year student with ASD

Learners with SpLD have become more aware of the necessity to communicate their concerns instead of trying to hold in action triggered by stress points. Such awareness was very evident, especially to said learners in the second year. Typically, when these learners start to struggle with academics or class interactions, they would either exhibit their discomfort physically (suddenly standing, walking around the classroom, even leaving the classroom without notice, uncontrolled shaking, self-scratching or panic attacks), or they would shut down and withdraw into themselves. After becoming aware that help is available when they ask for it, the students gradually began using the phrases provided to communicate their needs, to participate in, and even initiate, classroom activities. Learners who were initially hesitant to use the phrases eventually followed the example led by the initiators after realizing the positive feedback and improved atmosphere of the class.

### **5. 3 Behavioral Changes**

*“So, it’s okay for some people to stand up and walk around in class if they need to?”*

- *2nd Year, English Major*

*“I would like to improve my English speaking skills but my group mates do not want to cooperate. What should I do?”*

- *2nd Year, English Major*

Positive changes in behavior were not only observed with learners exhibiting SpLD. It was also evident in the attitude of other learners. Prior to this exercise, non-SpLD learners would usually show reluctance or disdain when paired up to work with someone with a perceived learning difficulty. However, by revisiting the strategies and tools for seeking assistance presented during orientation, learners have transitioned into becoming more understanding and accepting of perceived differences. They assist learners with SpLD by giving them more time to process ideas, helping them create thematic categories, and guiding them in brainstorming sessions. In situations where learners with SpLD exhibit out-of-the-norm classroom behavior, their peers would then step in to remind them of what should be done.

## 6. Class Content Incorporation and Expansion

In some classes, instructors were able to plan supplemental activities based on the “Asking for Help” phrase list when the textbook themes matched. For instance, when a beginner level class (CEFR A0 Level) was on the unit on classroom items, the instructor created a worksheet to review who to ask for help when in a problematic situation, what to say (in Japanese), and the translation of the phrase with blanks for the target vocabulary.

### Unit 3 “Classroom” review

Problematic situation (originally written in Japanese)	Who do you ask for help?	What would you say in Japanese?	How do you say it in English?
You forgot your pen. You have nothing to write with.			“Can I borrow a ___ ___ ___?”
You asked your teacher how to spell a word, but you didn’t get it. If written on the board, you can understand better...			“Could you please write the word on the _____?”

About half of the mentioned class consists of students with diagnosed SpLD and many others in the gray zone, and is considered a remedial class. In the same class on the unit on health, the instructor printed out the “When you forgot something” phrase list and “Time out” phrase list, and had students brainstorm other situations where they have to talk about their health conditions. Extra phrases that students came up with, for example, were “May I go get some water to take a medication?” and “I am hypersensitive to smell. May I open the window because I feel sick?”. Through this activity, the instructor became aware of the students’ physical and mental health conditions and difficulties they often experience. One student asked how he can write his condition of missing a class on Friday morning because of “*futsukayoi*”. The vocabulary he was looking for was “hangover” but when he explained, it became evident that he is hangover on Friday because he often forgets which day of the week it is and starts drinking on Thursday. His peers found the reason behind his hangover serious and were able to provide advice to set a reminder so that he does not have to experience the health condition he mentioned.

## **7. Future Plans**

The positive reception, reaction and use of the tools provided during the recalibrated orientation have validated this endeavor. However, much work is still required to be completed to record, quantify and further develop the initial steps taken. The following tasks have been identified to improve or enhance the program.

- a. Conduct interviews with the students who finished one year of the course with our inclusive approach.
- b. Conduct a discourse analysis of field notes to determine the necessary changes in our orientation for 2020.
- c. Create a more concrete syllabus design to include the activities based on the “Asking for Help” phrases.
- d. Provide the translated “Keiwa College Guidelines for Responding to and Deterring Disability-Based Discrimination” to help full-time and part-time foreign language teachers understand the policy
- e. Share the contact list and give orientation to entire freshmen, not just the ones that take English class

## **8. Moving Forward**

Tertiary educators need to pay more attention to understanding and application of inclusive learning. In addition, the practices of UDL need to be reported more in the field of language education in higher education, especially in foreign language classes. Promoting students’ independence and self-support, while exploring possibilities of UDL in tertiary EFL classrooms are tall tasks to undertake. However, any practical tools to help remove barriers in classroom that prevent learning, facilitate towards a change of mindset, and assist students’ collaboration and cooperation, are urgently needed. Recalibrated orientation at the beginning of the school year is one way to cater those needs, and most importantly empower the freshmen university students towards self-sufficiency. In addition, when learners are equipped with awareness that their classroom is a community of learning and the diversity of the members are celebrated, provision of accommodation becomes a shared community of practice. With support achieved and experienced from multiple access points, learners are in a better position to focus on learning and meeting class expectations and objectives.

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In June 2019, Ayako Ooiwa, Mike Yap and Clare Kaneko presented a part of this longitudinal research project and earlier findings at a conference. As a conference proceeding, we have submitted the theoretical and background portion of our paper which is in progress for publication (Ooiwa, et al. 2020).

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## Appendix A

“Asking for Help” Poster

