Creating an Inclusive, Accessible, and Supportive Foreign Language Learning Environment for Students With Disabilities

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Abstract

Today, most higher education institutions have a support center for students with disabilities (SWDs), but for the most part, if a teacher is not directly contacted, these support centers remain largely unknown to language teachers. To help bridge the gap between the disabilities resource center and the foreign language classroom at the university in which this research took place, an open-ended survey was given to the staff and teachers. Qualitative surveys sought to identify procedural steps from student application for reasonable accommodation to the classroom and bring attention to the various types of disabilities teachers need to accommodate. In-depth interviews with two teachers describe how they adapted their teaching approach and learning materials to accommodate specific disabilities. A framework was first created showing the step-by-step procedure from application to the classroom to help teachers understand the services and support offered. Following this, the support center and teachers provided practical advice on classroom management for various disabilities. The researcher hopes that through this paper, teachers can gain a deeper understanding of the general procedure of applying for reasonable accommodation and consider how to more effectively accommodate students of varying abilities in the second language classroom.

Keywords: reasonable accommodation, teacher professional development, English as a foreign language (EFL)

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Introduction

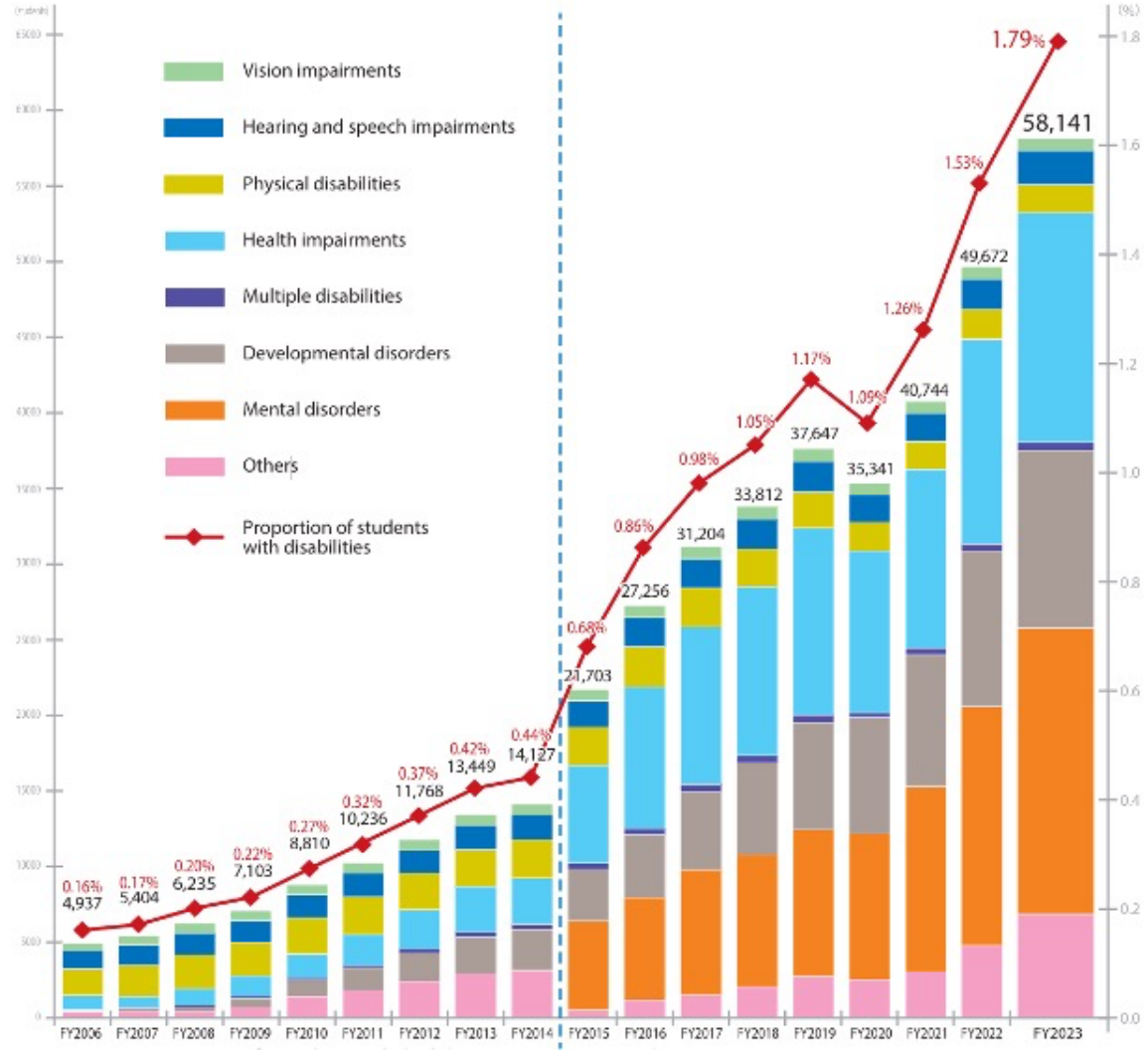
Based on the philosophy of the 2013 "Act for Eliminating Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities" (Japanese Law Translation, Act No. 65, 2013), Japanese universities are encouraged to provide "reasonable accommodation" (support) to students with special needs by eliminating barriers for all students to exercise the right to study and experience university life, ensuring an equal opportunity environment regardless of disabilities. Kyoto University's Disability Resource Centre (DRC) deems "disability" to be an "artifact of society or the environment (social barriers, etc.), rather than an aspect of the individual" (DRC, n. d.). In essence, students with disabilities (SWDs) have specific limitations in physical, sensory, cognitive, developmental, psychological, speech, or other disabilities accompanied by a physician's diagnosis. In order to participate effectively in regular classes, students must apply for reasonable accommodation after which teachers can make special provisions with teaching approaches, learning materials, and the physical classroom environment to accommodate their special needs. In 2021, the Act was amended to pertain specifically to public higher education institutions and in 2024 to private universities.

Since 2005, the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO) has provided support for Japanese higher education institutions in creating an inclusive and equitable educational environment. They have released several national reports related to the increasing number of SWDs in the past two decades. Between 2006 to 2025, JASSO has reported a significant increase in SWDs from 0.16% in 2006, 0.42% in 2013, 1.17% in 2019, 1.26% in 2021, and the current figure of 1.79% in 2023 (JASSO, 2022, 2025). The sharp incline on the chart (Figure 1) from 2015 was due to classification categories being increased and modified, as well as the opening of more support centers across Japan and overall improvements in coordination efforts in educational institutions.

Figure 1 shows the breakdown of various disabilities from JASSO's 2025–2026 report (JASSO, 2025).

Figure 1

Increase in Percentage of Students With Disabilities and Disability Type in Higher Education Institutions FY2006–2023 (n = 58,141)



At the university in which this research took place, the number of SWDs has seen a similar increase: from 43 students in 2017 to 300 in 2024. This has resulted in several language teachers having to accommodate one or two SWDs in their courses each year. For educators who have never taught a SWD or received specific training for special education students, this situation can cause feelings of anxiety or stress. Teacher affective issues (e.g., anxiety and well-being) related to teaching special needs students is an area of EFL that is somewhat under researched as the focus tends to be on how to effectively teach SWDs. A study by Alshahrani (2018) in Saudi Arabia reported a lack of specialist support and in-service training for teaching students with special needs leading to stress and anxiety. Challenges navigated by language teachers in Kahil and Pradia's (2023) research in the Philippines were limited teaching methods, a lack of resources for specific disabilities, communication difficulties, adapting to diverse disabilities, creating special assessment methods, and making individualized learning plans. In a systematic review, over ten years, Johnson and Erasmus (2024) found several persistent challenges educators face, mainly a lack of professional development and training programs, a weak institutional culture of collaboration and communication, and institutional barriers. In Japan specifically, Young (2024) surveyed 13 EFL teachers who reported five challenges of supporting SWDs: disclosure of disability, curricular constraints, barriers to inclusion within

the institution, lack of support from the university, and a need for more targeted teacher training. These studies all show that the challenges of teaching SWDs are worldwide and feelings of anxiety are natural. However, with some guidance and understanding of how to teach special needs students, teachers would be able to cope more effectively with reasonable accommodation requests.

The aims of this qualitative study are two-fold: (a) to improve teachers' understanding of the procedures related to requesting reasonable accommodation and (b) to bring attention to various types of disabilities and how language teachers can provide reasonable accommodation.

Method

This research used a qualitative approach to collect data from office staff and English language teachers. A bilingual open-ended survey was first given to the disabilities office at the university to understand the procedural flow from applying for reasonable accommodation to enrolment in courses as well as gain knowledge of the types of disabilities that teachers are expected to accommodate. The purpose was to help build a bridge between the disabilities center and the foreign language classroom. It also sought to identify specific services and support offered to help teachers understand where to go if they required assistance with the SWD. Key questions asked were:

1. What is the role of the staff in the disabilities resource center?
2. How is "reasonable accommodation" defined by the office?
3. How many SWDs are currently enrolled at the university? How much has this number increased, decreased or remained constant over the past decade?
4. What kinds of "disabilities" does the office support?
5. What is the procedure from application to course enrolment?
6. What kind of support and services are available to help teachers if they face challenges?

In-depth interviews with two teachers described their first-hand experiences of teaching SWDs, how they reduced feelings of anxiety when teaching special needs students as well as how they adapted their teaching approach and learning materials to accommodate specific disabilities. The following two questions guided the interview.

1. Could you describe your experiences with SWDs in the language classroom?
2. Based on your experiences, could you share any suggestions or advice that would help teachers to create a more inclusive classroom?

The researcher asked follow-up questions during the interview to delve deeper into the teachers' experiences.

Results and Discussion

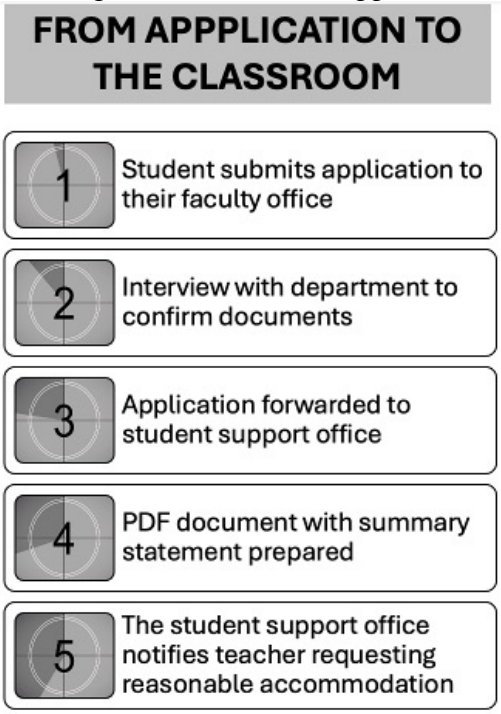
This section discusses data collected from the office staff and teachers. Practical information about procedures and types of disabilities are presented followed by first-hand accounts from teachers' interviews and suggestions about how to create an inclusive, accessible, and supportive learning space.

Data Collected From the Disabilities Office: Procedural Steps and Support

The process of applying for reasonable accommodation to enrolment in language courses is one of the areas that most teachers are unfamiliar with. Understanding the process for

disclosure can help to narrow the gap between the student disability support center and the language classroom as teachers become aware of various contact points to support their teaching and student learning. Survey data showed the procedure at the researcher's university (Figure 2):

Figure 2
Five-Step Procedure From Application to Course Enrolment



In step 1, the student applies for reasonable accommodation through the relevant office. An examination of reasonable accommodation is conducted by faculty to which the student is affiliated. Students are encouraged to apply as far in advance as possible as it becomes easier to meet any special need.

In step 2, the content of reasonable accommodation is determined through frequent communication with the student and confirmation of supporting documents (such as a disability certificate, doctor's note, or psychological findings).

In step 3, the student's faculty administrative office forwards the application to the DRC. The staff have a consultation as a team and with the student to identify how best the student can be accommodated.

In step 4, the DRC prepares a password-protected secure document explaining the type of disability and summarizing the needs of the student.

In step 5, the applying student will confirm the details and make a decision on whom to directly inform about their condition (faculty, teachers, other students, etc.). The disabilities center and faculty office will then send the document requesting reasonable accommodation to the classroom teacher.

In both teachers' experiences in this study, the students rarely contacted them directly. Instead, communication went mainly via the disabilities support office through emails, mostly for the

purpose of documentation, and if necessary, to report concerns or ask follow-up questions. It should be noted here as a possible sixth step, that if the condition or situation of disability changes, or the desired accommodation is not effective, the details are re-examined and further communication is required between the teacher and student.

Teachers are generally asked to consider four areas when accommodating students: the physical layout of the learning space, communication with the student before, during, and after lessons, use of assistive technologies, and flexibility with assessment procedures. One point that the researcher noted that was not mentioned in the documents provided by the faculty and disabilities office, is that reasonable accommodation is intended to provide *equal opportunities* and does not guarantee gaining the course credit. This is an essential piece of information that should be made clear to both teachers and students as early as possible to avoid any misunderstandings and unnecessary stress to both parties.

Disability Types

There are seven classified disabilities that language teachers were expected to accommodate at the university:

- Visual impairment (partial or full blindness)
- Hearing impairment (partial or full deafness)
- Physical disability (affecting movement or dexterity)
- Chronic illness / physical frailty (long-term illness that might not be visible)
- Developmental disability (usually mental development on a spectrum from childhood)
- Mental disorder (affecting emotions, thinking, and behavior)
- “Other” disabilities (impairments that do not fit into the above categories)

Of these disabilities, almost all students were categorized as having a developmental disability or mental disorder. The main reason for this is the modifications in the 2015 classification of disabilities (Figure 1) in which sub-categories were added to health impairment categories, mental illnesses were no longer classified as “other,” and more focus began to be placed on developmental rather than physical disorders.

Support for Students

Services and other support programs for students included individual consultation with trained staff, collaboration with libraries, assistive technology to help with specific learning needs, mediation between teacher and student, and proving a barrier-free access map to help students and teachers understand the best routes to various buildings. This information, provided on the office’s website for faculty and staff, is likely unknown to the teachers until they are asked to accommodate a SWD. For the researcher, the support and services offered to students and teachers was discovered only after beginning the study which is evidence of the wide gap that exists between the disabilities support center and teachers.

Data Collected From Teacher Interviews: Key Insights

Two teachers described their experiences teaching SWDs in the English language classroom. Interviews were recorded and key insights extracted from the qualitative data. Five themes emerged from interview transcripts:

1. Having to tailor instruction for each disability
2. Adapting learning materials for specific special needs

3. Being more flexible with assessment procedures
4. Understanding the importance of positive behavioral support
5. Experiencing feelings of anxiety as a result of the lack of special needs training and disconnect with the support office

The greatest challenge for both teachers was the time it took to adjust teaching methods for just one student. Having a SWD typically meant teaching a regular class and then spending extra time to make specific materials for the special needs student. This sometimes meant sending emails to the student in advance explaining what was going to happen in the next lesson and responding to questions if the student misunderstood the instructions or any part of the lesson. For teachers with large numbers of students in a class (over 30), having to spend additional time with only one student can easily lead to increased fatigue.

The second most challenging aspect of teaching SWDs was creating effective learning materials. Visually impaired students, for example, required special materials which needed to be made at least two weeks before the course began in order to be converted into braille text. If a student did not apply for reasonable accommodation before the start of the semester, it put pressure on the teacher to make special materials for the student each week. Teachers who make materials week-to-week would probably find it somewhat challenging to accommodate these students. In addition, courses with heavy visual content had to use appropriate language to describe each visual (e.g., charts, diagrams, maps, photos, power point slides, or scientific models). Explanations were written by the disabilities support office staff, but if the staff did not understand complex visuals or the course content, meetings had to be organized with the teacher in charge of the course. This led to extra time required for teaching the student. Thus, a recommendation from one of the teachers was to avoid using visuals unless absolutely necessary. A final point that teachers rarely think about when designing materials is the instruction used to explain a task. Special needs students sometimes need a learning activity to be broken down into basic steps with specific examples. Language needs to be simplified, strong models need to be included within task instruction, and clear goals need to be stated for every task, including how smaller tasks fit into the overall aim of the particular lesson. As mentioned before, this can be extremely time consuming and requires teachers to be very organized. Any changes to the learning materials during the semester must be communicated clearly.

One point that both teachers agreed on was maintaining positivity and being flexible with deadlines for assignments and exams. For teachers, it is crucial to help students build positive relationships with classmates without the stigma of being “special.” If SWDs feel that they are being treated differently, it could lead to a loss of motivation and feelings of unfairness from other students. Teachers thus need to keep an open a line of communication with all students equally to show that they are available for individual consultation if necessary. Understanding that the disabilities support center is available for possible mediation and suggestions for how to better accommodate students is crucial for both the learner and teacher. If the teacher does not speak the student’s L1, then they have to find creative ways to communicate. Due to the significant improvements in generative AI today, communication has become much easier.

Regarding feelings of anxiety, for one teacher there were times when they felt inadequate about how to accommodate the student due to lack of special training. However, the teacher felt that with the documentation provided by the university and early preparation, they could manage to adapt to the new situation without too much trouble. The other teacher had a background in special needs and found no difficulty in adjusting educational instruction and learning materials

to meet the needs of various disabilities. This shows that targeted training would be useful for all teachers, whether through an orientation video, forum, or reference guide. The researcher's plan in 2027 is to compile a list of teacher suggestions and teaching strategies when instructing SWDs into a central database for language teachers at the university. A few suggestions are presented below.

The Inclusive Classroom

One of the key suggestions from the teachers interviewed to create an inclusive classroom was adjusting teaching style to a universal method and designing learning materials to suit a wider variety of students. This means that rather than teaching for individuals with specific needs, teachers should instead design materials and approach teaching in a manner that suits all students in multiple formats (e.g., text, audio, video). Preparing materials far in advance, setting clear goals for the lesson as well as each smaller task, and including clear, simplified instructions in lesson plans and during teaching was most beneficial.

The Accessible Classroom

For both teachers, the accessible classroom was achieved both physically and in digital spheres. Ensuring that both the classroom and the teachers' office could be easily accessed, especially for visually and physically impaired students, was the most important consideration. Being aware of the classroom layout and instructing all students in the classroom to always be mindful not to create obstacles and providing special furniture where necessary contributed to creating an accessible classroom. Outside of the classroom, it is important for teachers to understand how to direct students clearly to the classroom or teacher's office (depending on the disability), as well as how to direct students to avoid various obstacles (e.g. garbage cans, or bicycles). Students with developmental challenges who struggled in face-to-face classes joined through Zoom and submitted assignments digitally. This required knowledge of various assistive technologies. The key point is to communicate with the student and office about how they can be *reasonably* accommodated and find the most convenient solution.

The Supportive Classroom

Finally, maintaining a positive attitude and keeping an open line of communication with students and the support office helps to foster trust and create a supportive atmosphere for all students. Providing clear structure but also being flexible with deadlines and/or assessments improved learning outcomes for learners who worked at a different pace. Both positivity and flexibility significantly reduced the pressure on the teacher to complete tasks in a certain time frame. A crucial point that one teacher mentioned was the possibility that inviting students to openly communicate with the teacher could lead to a significant increase in emails. With teachers already facing time constraints, having to respond to second language learners in the L2 in a comprehensible manner is challenging. Even with AI and translation tools, the teacher's communication style has to be simple but also clear so that the communication does not go back and forth several times. Constructing emails for second language learners that ensure full understanding can take a considerable amount of time. However, from the teacher's first-hand account, less than 10% of students, with or without disabilities, requested further assistance with assignments.

Conclusions

"Integration" and "inclusion" are two terms that are often confused or used interchangeably in the research literature, especially when it refers to SWDs. Whereas integration refers to being placed into an existing system and support provided accordingly, an inclusive classroom emphasizes that SWDs learn differently and should have the same access to educational resources and opportunities as other students. That is, rather than SWDs adjusting to a fixed educational structure, the educational structure is adjusted to accommodate several learning styles. As noted earlier, the DRC office at Kyoto University recognizes a "disability" as a product of the surrounding environment rather than a problem with the individual. Therefore, the intention of inclusive learning at the university is to remove barriers to allow all students in a class, with and without disabilities, to learn *equally*.

It is not possible for teachers to accommodate the diverse needs of every single student in a classroom given the time constraints, large class sizes, limited resources, lack of special training, poor IT skills, and/or fatigue. Thus, to create an inclusive, accessible, and supportive foreign language learning environment for students with disabilities, it is important to be aware of various factors, particularly how to improve learning materials, adapt teaching methods, arrange the physical layout of the classroom, and communicate openly with students and the disabilities support office.

Japan's journey toward inclusive education is ongoing and has been progressing steadily in areas such as universal design for learning (Berger, n. d.); inclusive practices in English language teaching (Young, 2024); and governmental policies and projects by Japan's Ministry of Education (MEXT, 2021) such as the "grand design for higher education toward 2040," and the "Reasonable accommodation practical case database" (NISE, 2026).

Creating an inclusive learning environment thus requires not only top-down reforms, but also teacher initiative, collaborative efforts with student disabilities centers, and most important, open communication with the SWDs themselves. For teachers, understanding various types of disabilities, being mindful about teaching practices, and helping to build a university culture where knowledge about teaching SWDs is shared could help to alleviate teacher burdens and improve educational outcomes for all students.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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