Reforming English Curriculum for Students With a Low Level of English Proficiency

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Abstract

In Japan, the government has emphasized the importance of English skills and of working on various improvement measures for the English curriculum. Even with such emphasis, Japanese proficiency scores are not showing the desired results. According to Education First (EF), the Swiss international education company, Japan's English proficiency Index ranking has been dropping since they started the survey in 2011 and the most recent results show that Japan ranks 78th among 112 non-English speaking countries. At the tertiary level, the decline in students' English proficiency, especially for universities with low academic standards, have been of great concern. As a result, some universities provide remedial education for under-prepared students. As one such university, the studied university has seen an increased number of students whose placement test marks low. To provide appropriate English instruction, a needs analysis of recent students is urgent. This study examines the results of the placement test, vocabulary size, final scores, the admission styles, and GPA of 61 first-year students. The analysis of this study involves numerical and correlation approaches. High correlations are found between two finals as well as between finals and GPA. Moreover, strong to moderate correlations are found among students' placement test scores, vocabulary sizes, final scores. At the same time, the study concerns students' low level of vocabulary size, which is compared to the standards found by previous studies. The results raise various challenges for adapting the situation, finding innovative instructions for students.

Keywords: English Proficiency, Remedial Education, Universities

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Introduction

According to the demographic data, Japan's 18-year-old population has been decreasing. After peaking at 2.05 million in 1992, the number of 18-year-olds has nearly halved and is predicted to be less than 1 million in 2031. This decrease negatively impacts universities, suffering from a shortage of applicants. It is reported that this is a severe condition that has hit universities hard, especially small and regional private ones; they find it challenging to attract students. As countermeasures, they must develop alternative admission routes to ensure their enrollment rate.

At the same time, the percentage of students proceeding to university has steadily increased. According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) the rate has reached its highest record in 2022 at 60.4%. With these situations overlapping, another serious issue facing universities is the academic decline of students, especially in the private sector. Many universities are now dealing with underprepared students. Universities must identify their problems and provide the necessary support through remedial education before they can continue their university education.

Literature review

The literature review covers the following topics:
- Definition of remedial education
- Types of remedial education
- Research on remedial education
  - English proficiency of university students
  - Approaches
  - Students' motivation and attitudes

Definition of remedial education

Remedial education, sometimes called developmental education, describes any program, course, or activity designed for students with basic deficiencies in skills necessary to start coursework at institutions. However, such definitions vary depending on institutions and contexts. The Japan Association of Developmental Education (JADE) defined and recognized remedial education at the plenary session in August 2019 as follows. 1. Remedial education means support for learning and acquiring skills and knowledge. 2. Individualized or coordinated support activities, including subjects, programs, and services in college work, which institutions offer as an essential basis for all students and prospective students at the tertiary level.

Types of remedial education at Japan universities

Since the definitions of remedial education vary, the remedial education programs vary at different institutions. Yamamoto argues there are four patterns of remedial education in Japan (2001). These are: 1) Additional courses provided by universities to review high school subjects targeting underprepared students; 2) Introductory courses aimed at freshmen which mainly prepare them for regular classes; 3) Preparatory courses to develop skills and knowledge for specialized or professional education; 4) Pre-admission education targeting prospective students, doing reports, or attending intensive programs. According to Hoyashita

et al. (2011), 70% universities offer the first type. These supplemental courses and variations are broadly divided into the following categories:

1) Intensive classes, implemented during breaks, or outside of regular classes.
2) Classes for underprepared students determined through proficiency level tests.
3) Classes for students who failed regular courses.
4) Formation of classes based on proficiency levels.

These classes vary in terms of required or non-required, credit or non-credit courses.

As can be seen, utilization of remedial education shows a large variety.

Research on remedial education

English proficiency and university students

It has been claimed that university students' English proficiency levels are declining. Nakajyo and Nishigaki (2007) measured students' English proficiency levels through the Eiken Foundation of Japan's tests. Among 50 participants, the results show that 8.7 % achieved high school graduation level, 47.8% achieved junior high school graduation level, and the rest performed below junior high school graduation level. According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) study in 2021, 46.1% of third-year seniors among 3306 high school senior students meet the government goal of possessing Grade Pre-2-level Eiken certification or above. Ishihara, K. et al. (2010) compared English abilities between the 1994 and 2008 cohorts, using C-tests and speed writing tests. The study reports noteworthy declines in students' English abilities.   When these students are classified into three groups, including lower, middle, and upper proficiency group, the difference between 1998 and 2008 become wider.   Nakajo, K et al. (2012) examined English proficiency level, targeting 161 university students. The study reports a serious deficit of grammatical proficiency among participants. Sakai et al. (2005) also reported the tendency of weak grammatical knowledge in remedial course students.

Approaches

Many universities have introduced remedial courses (Otani university, Nishio, 2016; Fukuoka University, Hayashi, and Ono, 2013). Approaches for each university vary.

The following two studies examined materials to determine their applicability in remedial education: Kuniyoshi et al. (2005) developed e-learning material for English remedial education, targeting freshmen with limited basic English skills. This program intends to help students develop their fundamental English language abilities to actively participate in and enjoy English courses. The program is also helpful for instructors who provide guidance and explain materials. Shigyo et al. (2019) focused on using digital materials for young children and examined the possibility of using them as remedial education materials targeting underprepared university students. The program used is the "Let's Go" books 4 to 6 by Oxford University Press. The study describes that the program teaches students a language by converting text to speech while covering basic English at junior high school level. Moreover, there is a wide variety of topics that pique students' interests. The study concludes that these digital materials are suitable for remedial education.

Other studies implement strategies and exam their effectiveness. Kominato (2021) utilizes "word order" in grammar teaching for students with low English proficiency. The study focuses on 43 students; 65% did not understand word order during their junior high and high

school years. She also utilizes e-learning for extracurricular activities. In this e-learning, instead of word order, a "connect two sentences" method is used. The survey result shows that the word-order method promotes their understanding, which is easier to understand than connecting sentences methods. In other study, Kominato (2016) examined the impact of homework assignments on self-regulated learning, which consists of effortful regulation, monitoring and planning strategies, and self-efficacy in education. The study, involving 33 first-year students in a remedial course, found that regular homework completion enhances self-regulation and self-efficacy.

Chujo and Nishigaki (2007) examine the effectiveness of a CALL program geared to EIKEN-type questions. The study involved 34 beginner-level freshmen who used CALL exercises and quizzes tailored to their proficiency level. Students participate in the program at their own pace with feedback from instructors. The study found an improvement in pre- and post-tests while the program was more favorably perceived by the more proficient participants in the group. Chujo et al. (2013) examined the application of the Data-Driven Learning approach, which uses authentic materials, promotes learner-centeredness through exploratory tasks, and use corpus tools such as concordances. Since this DDL approach have been used for intermediate or advanced level, the author modified materials using suitable level of corpora. Moreover, the complexity of the materials is modified to be more straightforward, easy, and intuitive. The study uses the AntPConc software and reports significant improvement in grammatical knowledge for beginner-level EFL university students. It is also reported students' positive perceptions of the material.

Regarding the contents of such courses, Makino and Hirano (2014) reported 40% of grammar instruction, followed by vocabulary instruction (28%) in their studies at 25 universities. The following studies implemented some strategies in their remedial courses and reported students' perceptions or attitudes.

Some other studies feature involvement of e-learning in the remedial education. Ono and Sakai (2005) examined the effectiveness of e-learning in remedial education, implemented at three universities. Significant improvement was observed when students' study hours and a supportive environment were secured. It suggests good monitoring systems enhance students' study habits. Hayashi and Ono (2013) report their study on their two-week remedial English intervention, which consists of one-week textbook learning and one-week e-learning. The improvement in pre-and post-diagnosis tests was observed in 10 participants, while the remaining two did not show improvement. The study suggests the importance of repeated practice, revision, and teacher support in sustainable and autonomous learning.

Students' motivation and attitudes
Gardner and Smythe (1975) argue that motivation is the major affective factor influencing L2 achievement. Dörnyei (2005) also claims that motivation is critical in second language acquisition; reporting high motivation may compensate for deficiencies in both one's language aptitudes and learning conditions.

Some studies focus on motivation among Japanese students. Ogane and Sakamoto (1997) performed a correlational study in which students' motivation and English proficiency were measured by the Certificate in English Language Teaching (CELT) test. The study found strong correlations between the two.

The subsequent studies focused on motivation among remedial students. Kiyota, Y.

(2009)focused on 200 freshmen at a remedial level and their cause. Their motivation is measured by a questionnaire developed by Hiromori (2005), and their English proficiency level is measured through the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP). The study classified students into three groups based on their attainment level and found that the lowest level group shows low motivation and serious difficulties in acquiring the necessary skills. Nakai (2008) examined learners' attitudes toward a remedial course through a survey containing 17 questionnaires administered to 99 freshmen. The study found students with a positive attitude toward learning specific elements tend to have an affirmative attitude toward other specific elements. In contrast, students with negative attitude toward learning specific elements tend to have negative attitudes toward other specific elements. The study investigates effective strategies which motivate students in remedial courses. These strategies include introducing listening and vocabulary learning, which will promote students' satisfaction with studying well. In turn, it improves their progress which may induce motivation. Moreover, a grammar review should be included when reading materials are introduced in class. Then students feel they can read and understand, which may enhance their interests. Makino (2017) studied 36 second-year students at the lowest level based on TOEIC scores. All of them were anxious and showed negative attitudes toward English. Makino planned and introduced several strategies based on the questionnaires administered in their first year to determine needs analysis. The survey was administered after the course and the students' self-efficacy and positive attitudes were significantly improved.

Harvard and Minami introduced their basic English course for students who scored the lowest in GTEC, namely 250th. The pre-and post-tests were administered, including 35 vocabulary, grammar, and reading multiple-type questions. The results showed that their grades improved significantly. Furthermore, according to questionnaires, most students felt that the class level was appropriate, as they were optimistic about reviewing basic grammar. Harvard and Minami suggest that their feeling of "I can do it" should be connected to their intrinsic motivation. Yamaoka (2014) used authentic materials, such as songs, movies, comics, and emails, as they all communicate content between actual senders and actual receivers. The study involved 83 medical students in remedial English classes and found that such authentic materials promote learners' autonomy and motivation. Yamamoto (2009) focuses on scaffolding activities for students in remedial English classes. Yamamoto argues the importance of creating a supportive environment where teachers recognize students' needs, facilitating appropriate scaffolding activities. The study found that students gradually acquire grammar and listening skills and make sentences. Students feel comfortable communicating in supportive environments. Yamamoto points out the critical role of the instructor in promoting students' intrinsic motivation.

Discussion (significance of the results of work)

MEXT has emphasized the importance of English education and has implemented major reforms in its guidelines for the last three decades to cultivate students' practical English skills. However, so far, such attempts have failed to achieve the goals set by MEXT. To make matters worse, some pointed out that measures for achieving such educational goals weakened students' knowledge of grammar, reading, and writing skills. As stated above, mainly due to a shortage of applicants, private universities continue accepting many underprepared students in English. In such a situation, a better understanding is necessary for underprepared students, including their proficiency levels, background, and difficulties.

The studied university has been using English placement tests since 2007 to identify students with low English proficiency and create special support classes for them. The year 2022 hit a record low on the average score in which an increased number of students with low English proficiency were observed. It is essential to continue needs analysis of the population's responses to identify problems and issues; design modified approaches to provide appropriate support, and identify early failures among the new cohort.

The study

Aims

This is a pilot study, performing need analysis on underprepared students. It aims to examine students' characteristics through various measurements.

Based on information obtained through this study, support needed for these students will be sought. This study aims to implement a well-planned support system for these underprepared students.

Methods

The following data collection and analysis methods are used to achieve the above purposes.

For data, the following tests are used.

Placement test scores: This is our original test. The test consists of 35 questions, including listening, word scrambles, grammar, and reading comprehension. This study uses records of the past 18 years of placement tests and the latest records involving the target populations' scores.

Vocabulary Size Test: Students' vocabulary size is measured by the Vocabulary Size Test for Japanese students developed by Hamada et al. (2021), administered at the beginning of the school year.

Final examination scores: There are spring and fall semesters' final examination scores.

Admission styles: Individual admission styles are found through students' records.

GPA: Students' GPA end-of-year scores are collected.

For the analysis, IBM's SPSS software is used for numerical and correlational analysis.

Participants

Participants are 61 first-year students, which include special class students. Their majors are physical therapy, occupational therapy, and human communications.

English instructions

English is a mandatory course for first- and second-year students. It uses the content-based ESP approach. Originally developed ESP textbooks targeting rehabilitation majors are used.

First-year students take the placement test, and those with the lowest scores will be assigned to the special class. The classes consist of mixed majors: physical therapy, occupational therapy, and human communications. In the second year, classes are divided into majors, and more major specific textbooks are used.

The textbook for first-year students has five units featured as self-introduction, introducing schools and majors, describing occupations, body, muscles, blood, health problems, and medical histories.

The following is a summary of the lesson format:
1. Study goals are stated at the beginning of each lesson to ensure students know the unit's goals.
2. Vocabulary: Vocabulary lists are presented as quizzes; students must match English and Japanese words. Students practice pronunciation.
3. Expressions in topic-related conversations are listed. Students practice these expressions orally.
4. Grammar rules: Grammar rules are explained using example sentences during reading.
5. Listening: Scripts, listening comprehension quizzes such as [true/false quizzes], and [open-ended answer] questions are prepared.
6. Other activities include labeling (in which students label welfare devices, muscles, and body parts), summarizing, fieldwork, such as research activities for muscles, blood cells, and their functions, role plays, and presentations.

Besides such activities, the following feature in the English instructions.

There are quizzes for each unit, five to seven quizzes per semester, and final examinations at the end of the semester. For these quizzes and final examinations, study guides are prepared. Make-up tests are also implemented for those failing final exams or missing quizzes.

In class, PowerPoint presentations are frequently used for visual support (written forms of language). Meanwhile, an originally developed online self-study site is prepared where students practice vocabulary exercises. Teachers can monitor students' website logs and their scores for quizzes.

Grading

For students' grading, all classes including the special class, use the same grading system and standards. Their grades consist of quiz results, presentation, and final examinations.

Support for special class students

Although the grading system and standards are similar for all students, there are extra support methods for the special class. Study guides are provided to all students, but extra time with step-by-step explanation is provided for the review, and all answers are provided before tests. Extra time is provided for the quiz period. L2 is more often used in the class. Moreover, grammar is explained slowly, simplifying and providing more example sentences and exercises. Another feature of this class is the extensive use of PowerPoint presentations. Since these students do poorly with listening or spelling, written forms of English are

necessary. In addition, student translations are provided for all reading material. Besides such instructions, students may have individual consulting or support upon request.

Findings

Admission style

There are various types of admission track in Japanese universities. The General Examination or National Common Examination measures students' academic performance through subject tests. In addition, there is the recommendation-based integrated selection system (formerly the AO) and the designated school system. The integrated selection system involves the process of self-recommendation wherein students present their motivations and strengths in their applications. The designated school system is based on the contractual agreement between high schools and universities to accept students without testing. The purpose of these admissions is to understand students' interests and unique abilities without them undergoing subject tests. Instead, interviews, presentations, group discussions, and written essays are assigned to students. It has been observed that the ratio for these types of admissions is transitioning.

The following two charts in Figure 1 indicate the ratio of students admitted through different admission styles in the years 2000 and 2021.

Figure 1: *Ratio of Admission styles in 2000 and 2021*
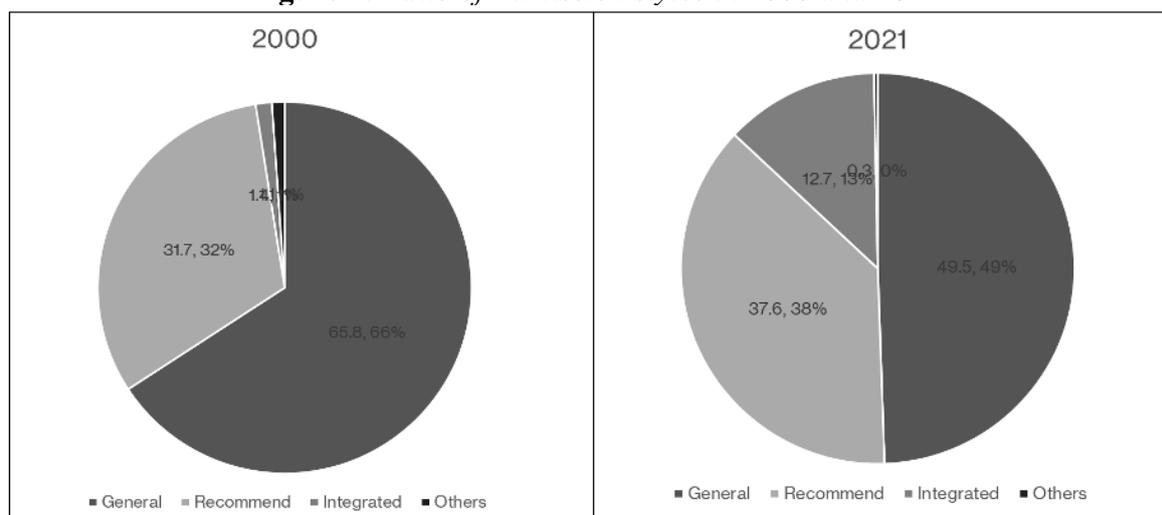
As shown in Figure 1, the ratio of students who entered universities through general admission in 2000 was 65.8%; subsequently, this ratio dropped to 49.5% in 2021. Presently, the number of students admitted via the integrated selection (recommendation) system is growing and now they total over 50%. As such, this means that new students with no experience of a written subject test have increased.

Figure 2 shows the types of admissions of all private universities in Japan as well as the situation of the studied university. The chart on the left, which indicates private universities in Japan, shows that about 44% of the students have entered their university through a general examination. By contrast, the ratio of students who have entered university through general admission at the studied university is only 19%. The remaining applicants have entered university through avenues which do not require subject tests.

Figure 2: *Ratio of admission styles of the studied university*
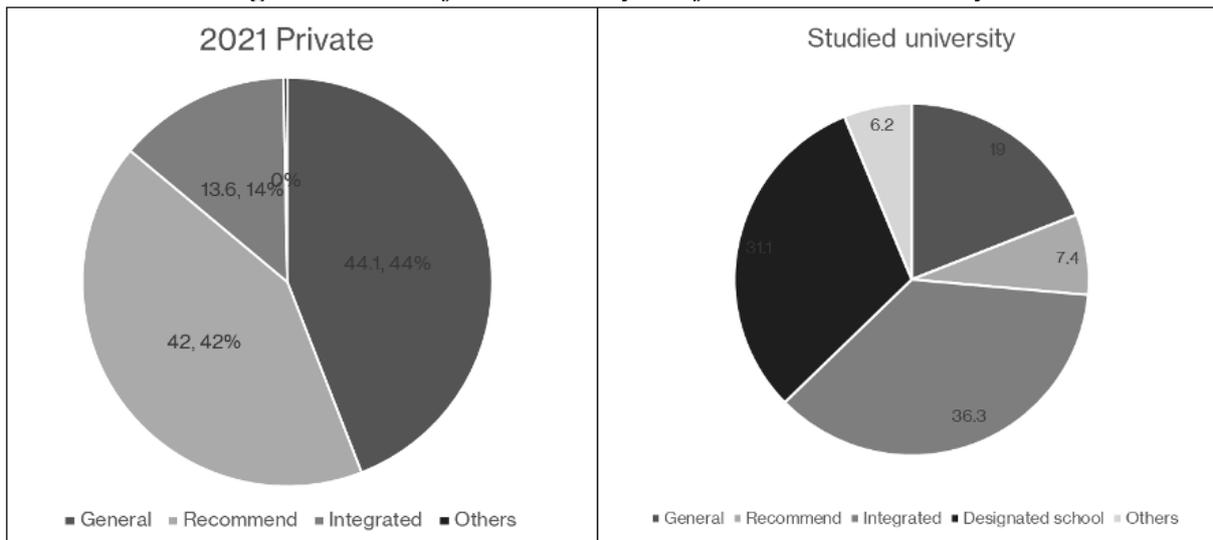
Next, Figure 3 shows the admission type of the special class.

**Figure 3:** *Ratio of admission styles of special class students*
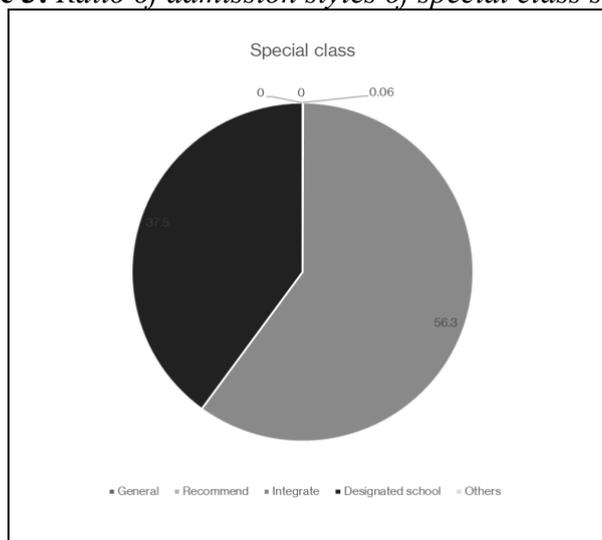
For this special class, there are no students who entered their university through general admissions. All of them have been admitted by either the integrated selection or the designated school system.

Placement scores

The university conducts an English placement test before classes start. The placement test is developed, implemented, and evaluated by the faculties responsible for English classes. Accordingly, based on the test scores, the English course coordinators decide the "cut-off line" to form a special class consisting of students with the lowest scores.

The following graph (Figure 4) shows the results of a placement test over a period of 15 years.

Figure 4: *Placement test scores*
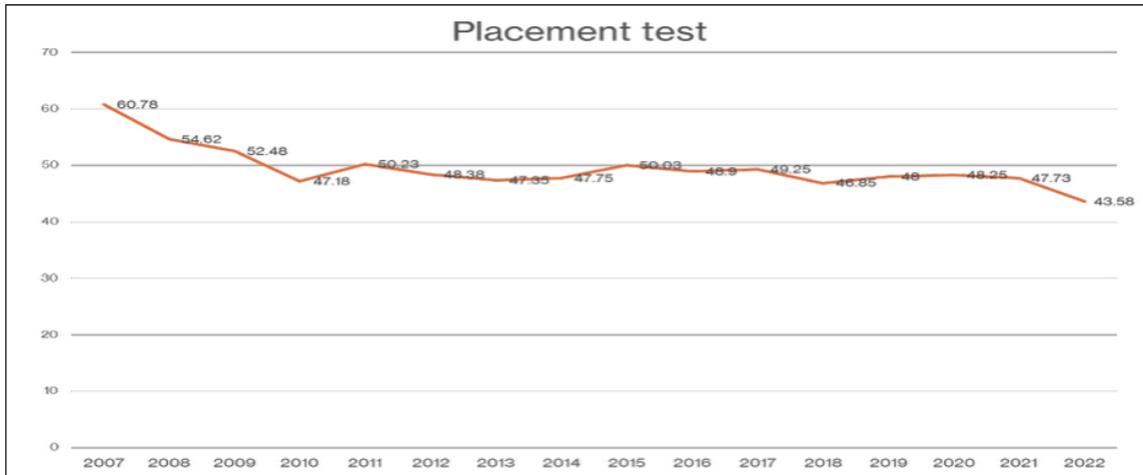
As shown, when the data was collected for the first time, the average was 60.78; then, it decreased and the record lowest score of 43.58 was established in 2022.

The next graph (Figure 5) shows the percentage of students whose scores were less than one-third of the total score as well as those which were less than half the total score.

Figure 5: *Placement test (lower level)*
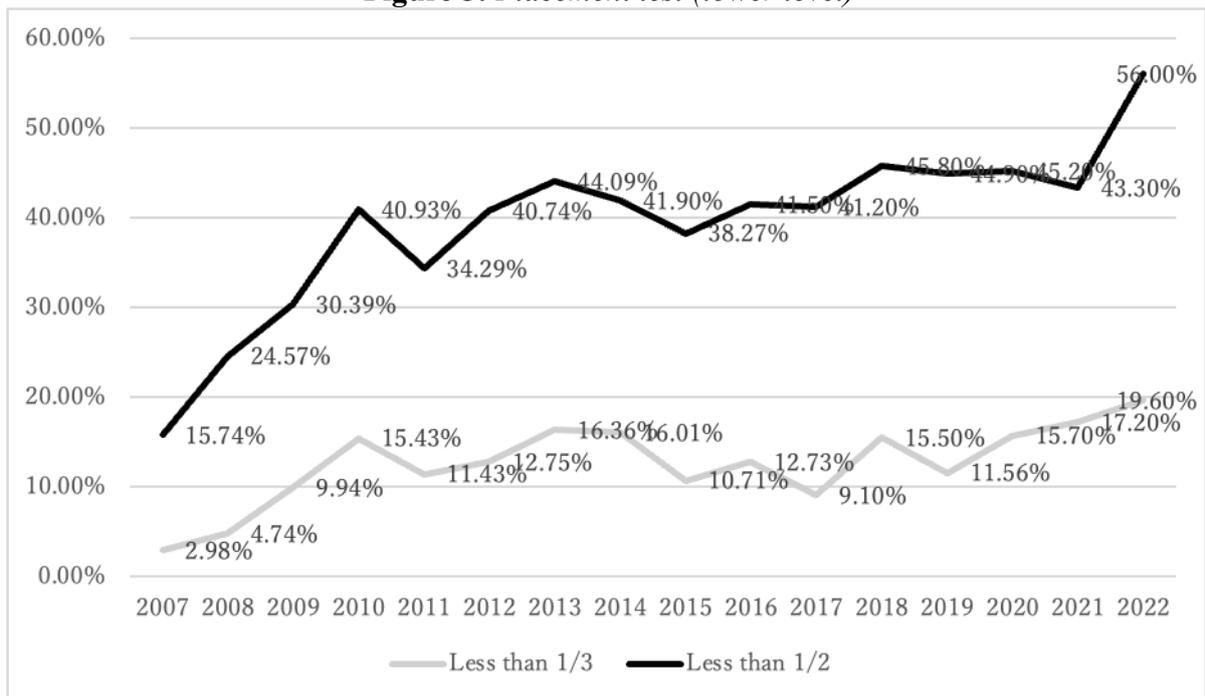
As indicated by figure 5, the percentage of students with lower scores has dramatically increased over the past 15 years. In 2007, the percentage of students who did not score 50% on the test was only 15.74%. Presently, 56% of them cannot obtain 50% and 19.6% cannot even score 33%.

The next box plot (Figure 6) presents the placement test scores for 2022.

Figure 6: *Placement test (2022 fiscal year)*
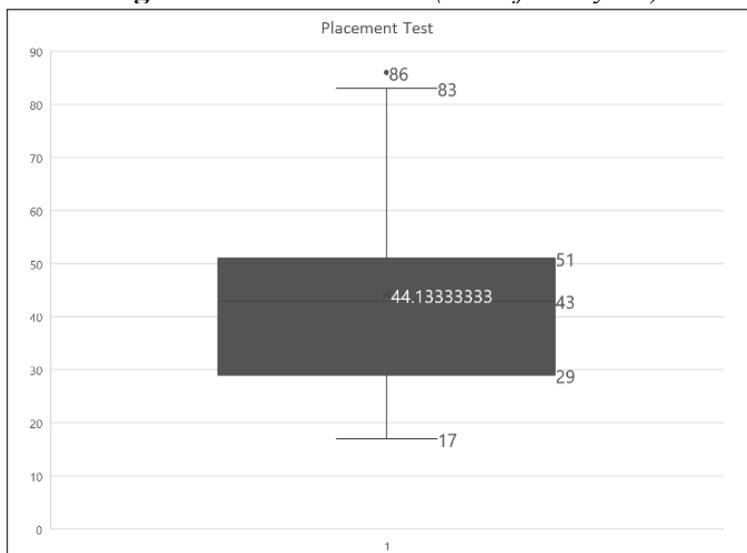
The average score is 44.13 with the highest being 86 and the lowest being 17. The interquartile range is between 29 and 51.

Figure 7 shows the comparison of the placement test score of the regular class and the special class.

**Figure 7:** *Placement test and cutline*
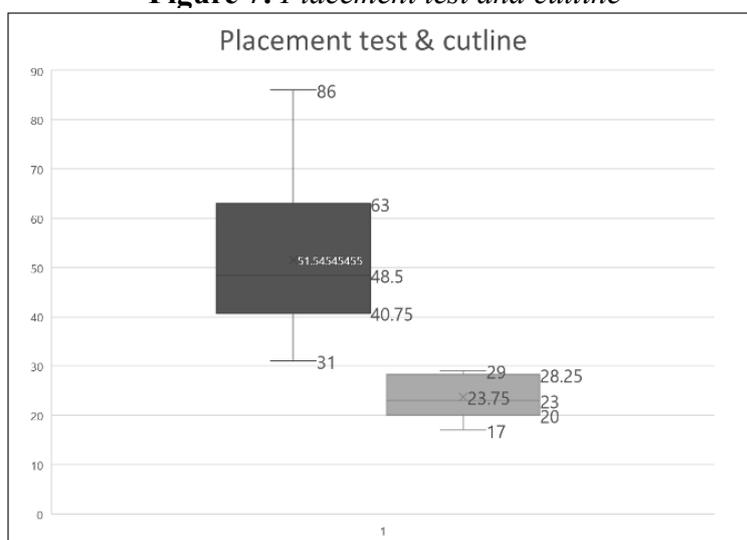
The cut-off line is at 30; notably, those whose scores were less than 30 are located in the special class. As shown, the regular class (right) had a wider range of scores compared to the special class.

Vocabulary size

Various studies have measured the vocabulary size of Japanese students. Although the target populations and measurement tools are varied, the average score of the VST for Japanese university students is between 2,370, which is the lowest, to 4,130, which is the highest.

The following box plot (Figure 8) shows the score of the first-year students in this study.
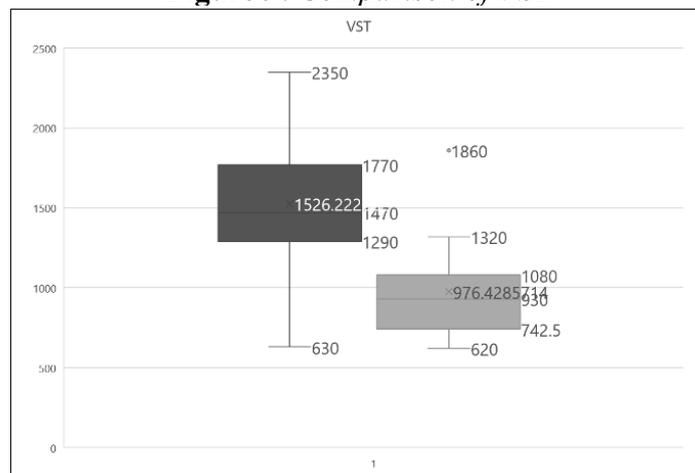
Figure 8: *Vocabulary Size*
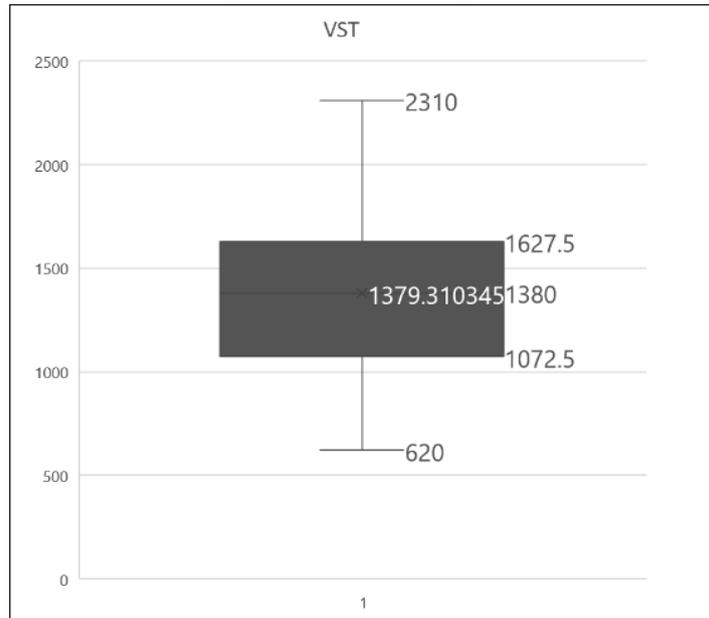
The interquartile range, which indicates the middle 50%, is from 1,072.5 to 1,627.5, thereby indicating an average score of 1,379. In general, it is clear they have lower scores than average.

Next, Figure 9 presents the comparison of vocabulary size between the regular class (left) and the special class (right).
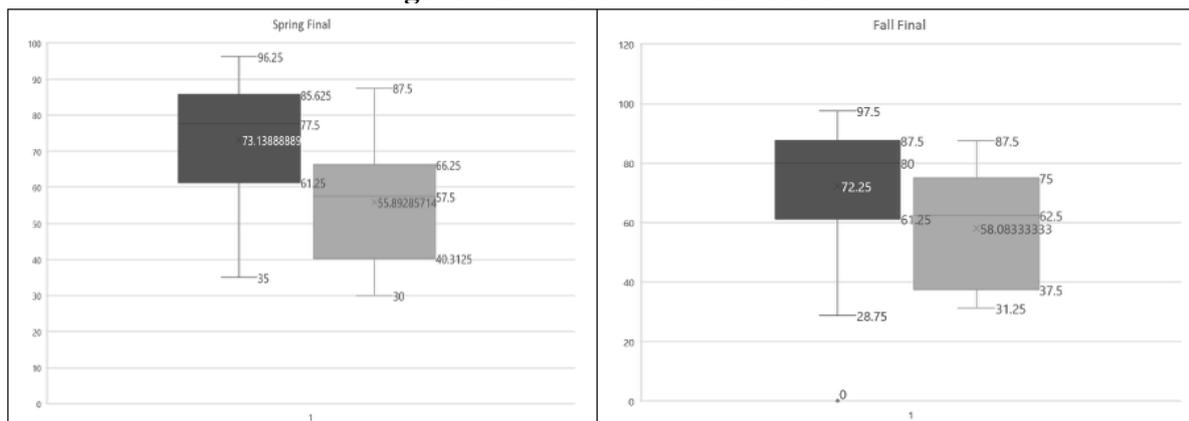
Figure 9: *Comparison of VST*

The average score of the regular class is 1,526 whereas that of the special class is 976.

Final test scores

The next two box plots (Figure 10) show the results of the two final tests which were conducted in the spring and fall.

Figure 10: *Final examination score*

For the spring finals, the average of the regular class (left) is 73, while it is 55 or 56 for the special class (right). For the fall finals, the average of the regular class is 72, while it is 58 for the special class. The interquartile range of the special class in fall finals is the widest. It should be noted that the passing grade is 60 and above. Therefore, the average of scores for the special class in both spring and fall are the below the passing score.

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Figure 11 shows the students' GPAs collected at the end of their first year.

Figure 11: *GPA*
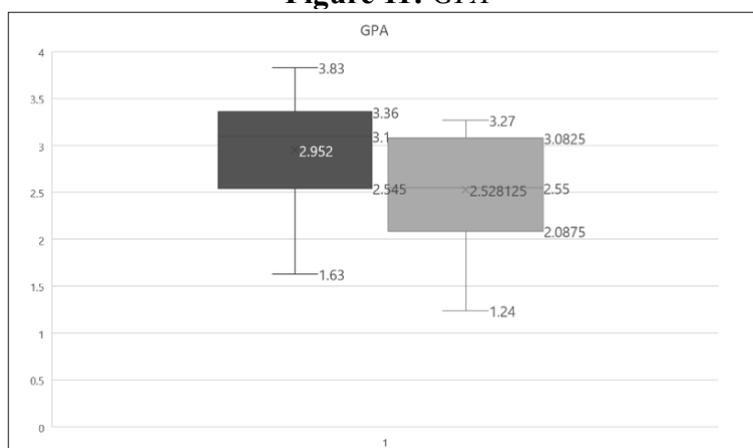
The average of the regular class is 2.95 whereas that of the special class is 2.53.

It should be noted that the described comparisons (Figure 7, 9, 10, and 11) were found to have significant differences via a t-test.

Correlational analysis

A correlational analysis among variables was performed and the results are shown below.

Table 1: *The results of correlational analysis*

		VST	Spring	Fall	PT	GPA
VST	Pearson's correlation	1	.477**	.367**	.531**	.457**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.004	.000	.000
	N	59	58	59	58	59
Spring	Pearson's correlation	.477**	1	.608**	.565**	.694**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	58	59	59	58	59
Fall	Pearson's correlation	.367**	.608**	1	.449**	.598**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.000		.000	.000
	N	59	59	61	60	61
PT	Pearson's correlation	.531**	.565**	.449**	1	.429**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.001
	N	58	58	60	60	60
GPA	Pearson's correlation	.457**	.694**	.598**	.429**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.001	
	N	59	59	61	60	61

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) 1% $P<.001$

As shown in Table 1, a moderate to strong correlation has been found among various measures. There is a strong correlation between the spring and fall finals, which is .608, as well as between each final and a GPA of .694 for spring and .598 in fall. Moderate correlations with a placement test were found in each final, VST, and GPA.

Summary of findings

The vocabulary size of the sample was found to be much lower than the national average.

Correlational analysis established moderate to strong correlation among the variables; strong correlations were evident between the spring and fall final scores. These final scores were also strongly correlated with students' GPAs. Placement test scores were also revealed to be correlated with vocabulary size, both finals, and GPA.

The special class consisted of students who entered the university only through integrated selection or designated school admission and none took subject tests for admissions.

Moreover, the averages of final tests are below 60, which is a "fail" grade. They also have extremely small vocabulary size (average 976) as well as lower GPA (average 2.53), significantly lower than those of regular classes. Results of GPA score suggest that the students in the special class have weaknesses not only in English but also other subject areas.

Conclusion, implications, and limitations of the study

It is clear that students in the special class need more support. Some possible strategies for providing necessary support are outlined below.

One is to enhance the pre-admission education. Students in the special class are admitted by integrated system or designated schools, and they gain admission by December. At this point, they are likely to stop studying whereas other high school students usually study until

February to March. Such condition may create disparity between the two groups in terms of academic performance as well as study habits. Pre-admission education, for example assigning workbooks or even tests, could help them to continue their studies.

Second, since these students' vocabulary size is extremely small, emphasis may be placed on vocabulary learning. Use of the online self-learning site should be considered. Currently participation on this site is voluntary, and only a limited number of students use it. Having students log in at least once a week may be helpful for improving their vocabulary size as well as nurturing good study habits. Additionally, introducing online sites for games, music, video sharing websites such as YouTube, or movies could help exposure to English materials and increase students' vocabulary size.

Third, the use of a study guide should be re-considered. Although study guides are designed to prepare for quizzes and finals, encouraging students to make good use of such guides is necessary. It is important students recognize the importance of review. For these students, opportunities for repetition, such as providing the same sheet twice, can be implemented.

Another possibility is related to students' autonomy, self-regulation, and sense of responsibility for their own learning. Creating a semester study log in which students set their goals, and record their learning or study hours outside the class may improve such aspects.

In addition to the above strategy, this study draws another implication. Moderate to strong correlations were determined among various measures. Therefore, focus on the placement test score could be considered. The placement test score can predict students' later academic performance or can identify at-risk students. Careful examination of the placement test scores and utilizing such information could be necessary.

This study has some limitations. First, the study involves a limited number of subjects (N=66). Therefore, the study may not be particularly generalizable. Another concern relates to the study method. The study only focuses on scores of various measurements. However, to achieve the triangulation of the study, students' perspectives should be included. Analysis of quiz or test results may also support the triangulation.

Since population or situations at the tertiary education level continue to change, on-going needs analysis with comprehensive approaches is necessary. There is an urgent need for well-planned curriculum with specific goals, plans, and activities and goals among stakeholders are necessary. The ultimate goal is to provide supportive learning environment in which students become active learners, being motivated and focused without anxiety.

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