A Case Study of a Deaf Learner in an English Communication Class

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英語コミュニケーションクラスにおける一ろう学生のケーススタディ

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Summary

The purpose of this case study was to document the experiences of a deaf learner, while she was studying in an English communication course at a Japanese university. The subject was asked to keep a journal of her reflections about the unique challenges that she encountered over the course of one semester. During the class she participated in all class activities along with her hearing classmates, including communicative conversation and discussion tasks, while utilizing the help of volunteer note-takers and various other support strategies. In her journal, she writes about her experiences, shares the anxiety she felt, as well as offers suggestions for improving communication with her teacher and classmates. Her reflections are discussed along with observations and comments from her teacher and note-taker with hopes of providing insight into better ways to support students with special needs in a language classroom.

Keywords: language education, special education, deaf education, educational inclusion

要　　旨

　本ケーススタディの目的は、日本の大学で英語コミュニケーションを履修した一ろう学生の体験を記録することである。対象者には、一学期間の授業中に直面した、ろう者ならではの問題について、感じたことを日記に書き留めてもらった。対象者は、履修期間中、ボランティアのノートテイカーなど様々なサポート制度の支援を受けながら、聴者に交じって会話やディスカッションを伴う作業も含めすべての活動に参加した。日記には、授業中の体験や不安に思ったことに加え、教員やクラスメートとコミュニケーションを取るための改善策が記されている。本稿では、教員およびノートテイカーの感想や意見も踏まえながら対象者の感じたことを検討し、語学の授業において、特別なニーズを持つ学生をよりよくサポートするための方策を追究してゆきたい。

キーワード：語学教育、特別教育、ろう者教育、包括教育

Introduction

The feelings of anxiety associated with foreign language study are often discussed among language educators and have been well documented in the language learning literature (Brown, 1994; Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989; Young, 1991). Young (1991) elaborates on six causes of anxiety that may occur in a language learning environment, including personal and interpersonal anxiety, learner beliefs about language learning, teacher beliefs about language teaching, interactions between teachers and learners, classroom procedures, and language assessment. It has been pointed out that oral communication activities and assessments in particular may cause extreme anxiety among foreign language learners, due to a variety of factors (Phillips, 1992). One could imagine that this anxiety would be greatly compounded if a student were unable to hear the words spoken by her teacher or classmates. This study looks at such a case by reporting on the journal reflections of a deaf learner in an English communication class.

The number of students with disabilities entering mainstream programs at Japanese universities has been steadily increasing in recent years, as attitudes toward disability and acceptance of inclusive education improve (Otake and Nakayama, 2011). Japan's ratification of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2014 and establishment of the Japanese Anti-Discrimination Law, which came into effect in April 2016, ensure that this trend will continue (Kondo, 2015). Both of these agreements state as a goal, an "inclusive educational system," meaning that whenever possible, students with disabilities should have the opportunity to study together with other students. Japanese educational institutions are now under a legal obligation to offer any "reasonable accommodation" to students with disabilities. Commonly provided support for deaf students at Japanese universities includes note-takers, who write down words spoken during lectures, sign language interpreters, text-to-speech software, speech recognition/voice input software, and alternative oral instruction printed or in a digital document (Kondo, 2015).

Foster, Long and Snell (1999) provide an overview of some of the challenges faced by deaf students. Deaf students who are relying on an interpreter suffer "lag time" between when the teacher speaks and utterance and when it is understood by the student. This can negatively impact the deaf student's ability to follow a lecture or participate in class discussions. Students who are able to lip-read may miss key words or ideas as instructors continue to speak while turning to write on the blackboard or otherwise blocking the view of their face. Furthermore, deaf students are often left out of casual comments between teachers and other students about class expectations or clarification of assignments or course content.

Bills, Ferrari, Foster, Long, and Snell (1998) offer recommendations for educational

institutions that are trying to create a more inclusive educational environment for deaf students. Perhaps their most interesting suggestion is to "emphasize the similarities between deaf and hearing learners." They explain that the reason for this is that many changes to instructional materials and procedures meant to help deaf students in fact benefit all students. When trying to improve an institution's ability to support special needs students, they recommend beginning with teachers who are already willing to adapt their teaching to provide more inclusion. These teachers can then act as models for others. A third suggestion is to involve deaf students in the process. They understand their own needs best and can provide useful feedback. Another recommendation is to focus on strategies that are "practical and reasonably easy to implement," instead of wasting time with overly broad or vague ideas. Recognizing that teachers are busy and may not go far to seek out assistance, institutions should provide support for teachers in the most accessible ways. Their final suggestions should go without saying: "Recognize and reward excellence in teaching."

Deaf learners can and do learn foreign languages along with their hearing peers, but many universities exempt them from the listening skills portions of classes or aural assessments. Conversation or oral communication classes, which make use of both listening and speaking skills are a grey area in which institutions may be unsure as to whether to include deaf students. As a result, there has been little research in this unique area. Fukuda (2009) relays one teacher's recommendations for teaching a deaf learner in a conversation class, based on experiences teaching a deaf student in his class. Some of the more practical tips include:

- Utilizing visual aids, such as flashcards, whenever possible
- Avoiding talking when writing or pacing the room
- Providing a course outline before the first day of class
- Providing written plans for each class and instructions for each activity
- Always keeping a pen and paper ready for written conversations
- Being sure to include the deaf student when making jokes, digressions, skits, role-play, etc.
- Getting feedback after every lesson
- Being aware of the pace of the lesson to avoid rushing

These institutional recommendations and classroom suggestions may be helpful for educators seeking to improve the learning experience for deaf learners in their language program. However, if university language instructors are to provide the best environment and the most effective lessons for deaf learners to join their language classroom, clearly more research is needed.

Background

This study looks at the experiences of a deaf learner taking an English communication class at a small women's university in Japan. The student was a first-year, non-English major. Because of

her hearing loss she was placed in the lowest-level section of the course by the administration in hopes that it would be easier for her to keep up with her hearing classmates in a less-demanding class. The course was a two-semester English communication class that met once a week for 90 minutes. The goals of the course as stated in the syllabus were to help students (1) "better recognize and understand basic conversation and discussion skills," (2) "deepen [their] knowledge of the English used in communicative situations," and (3) "improve [their] fluency in using the conversation and discussion skills introduced" (McDonald, 2015). The approach used to achieve these goals was to improve students' communicative competence through weekly speaking tasks of gradually increasing difficulty, moving from simple greetings and introductions to conversations on daily topics, and finally culminating in discussions in which the students would discuss opinions with a small group of three to four students. Target language was typically introduced through model dialogues and then practiced in pair and group work, moving from more to less structured tasks. The lessons were conducted in English only, however, students were given a syllabus and a handout with common classroom phrases, both of which were translated into Japanese.

The subject of the study was an 18-year-old Japanese woman with severe hearing loss. She described her ability to understand speech as relying almost entirely on lip-reading, which she could do quite proficiently when her interlocutor was speaking in Japanese. She said that if an announcement came over the public address system, she was aware of the sound but was unable to distinguish the meaning at all. She had never learned sign language, and used lip-reading, written communication, and common gestures exclusively in order to communicate with others.

The university assigned two student note-takers during each class to help her understand lectures and other oral communication from teachers and classmates. The researcher approached her at the beginning of the course and asked if she would be willing to keep a weekly journal during the course in order to communicate any difficulties she was having and as a record of her unique educational experiences studying in an oral communication class. She was asked if her journal entries and the teacher's observations could be used for research in order to help others in similar situations, and she agreed. For the purpose of anonymity, she will be referred to in this paper as "Karen."

Research Questions

1) What challenges does a deaf learner experience while studying in an English communication class?
2) What support can a teacher or administration provide to help a deaf learner succeed in an English communication class?

Methods

This qualitative study made use of written entries from a participant journal, written

reflections from a note-taker, and teacher-researcher observations. The data collection methods covered one semester, a period of approximately 15 weeks. The researcher was also the instructor for the course.

Karen was asked to keep a weekly journal of her experiences during the first semester of the course. The researcher gave her guidelines for her journal entries that included writing for five to ten minutes each week about her thoughts and opinions related to studying in that English communication course. She was to start with a description of her educational background, as well as an explanation of the kind of special support she received in her high school English class. For her weekly entries, she was told to think about what was difficult for her in class, and what the teacher and note-takers did that made her studying easier. In addition, she was asked for any recommendations for teachers who teach deaf students or for deaf students who would like to study English.

During the semester, Karen wrote nine entries in Japanese, which were later translated into English. After reviewing her journal entries, the researcher asked her to answer several follow up questions, which she did at the beginning of the second semester. These answers were also translated into English. In total, the length of her responses came to 479 words, or an average of approximately 48 words per entry.

In addition to the journal kept by Karen, one of her note-takers, who was present for the majority of the classes, was asked to write down her reflections about her experience supporting Karen during the first semester. Finally, the researcher, who was also the course instructor, has included his own observations and reflections.

Results

In Karen's first journal entry, she described her experiences studying in her high school English class. She was assigned a note-taker, who sat next to her and wrote down what the teacher said. She was also given handouts and a textbook that explained the lesson contents in both English and Japanese. She then described her high school English communication class, which was taught by a foreign instructor. During conversation lessons, she used a handout that contained the questions her partner was going to ask. Instead of the usual conversation exam given orally, she received it as a written test.

Her next entry included reflections on her university English communication course, in which she described her frustration communicating with her classmates: "I can't understand conversation in English at all. I even can't read lips so it's so hard for me." Her teacher noted that when he spoke to her one-on-one before or after class, she could only understand even the simplest communication with the help of a note-taker. However, if he switched to Japanese, Karen was able to read his lips without difficulty.

Later on she described further anxiety that she felt after a graded conversation task. For this

task students worked with a partner to create a short dialogue on an everyday topic of their choice. The pair memorized the dialogue and practiced it together. Finally, they performed the dialogue in front of the class, while the teacher graded them on five areas: content, clarity, fluency, eye contact, and body language and gestures. Content included how well the students used the target language in their conversation. Clarity was judged on whether the student spoke loudly enough and with good pronunciation. Fluency referred to how smoothly and naturally the student spoke. For the eye contact score, students were expected to maintain warm, friendly eye contact with their partners. And finally, students were told to use confident body language and attempt to make at least five appropriate gestures.

In particular, it seems that Karen's anxiety centered around her ability to be understood: "I was very worried because I had a conversation exam for the first time. My pronunciation is bad so I'm worried if my partner was able to understand me." In fact, the researcher noted that it was difficult to decide a fair score for the clarity category. He mentioned that although her speech was difficult to understand at times, it appeared that this was an issue related to her disability, not a lack of language proficiency. The teacher decided to base her grade on the other categories, which were not directly affected by her disability. In those categories, Karen scored higher than the class average.

After the first graded conversation task, the course moved on to slightly less structured discussions. In these discussions, students would prepare a short anecdote about one of their personal experiences, as well as possible follow up questions for their group members. During the discussions, the students would begin by greeting each other and then take turns telling their individual stories. When a student had finished her story, her partners would ask her follow up questions. The discussion would end with students using a closer, such as "it was nice talking with you." Unlike the graded conversation tasks, these discussions were not entirely scripted, but rather made use of target phrases and a prepared script for just the anecdote.

In her next entry, Karen described her efforts to deal with the upcoming discussion: "I didn't have any problem in the class today. But I'm worried about next class because we will have more discussion. I can't read my partner's lips so if I could see a handout I would be able to follow the discussion. I always get nervous in the communication class but I want to do my best." Unfortunately, with a less structured speaking task like a discussion, there is no "handout" to follow. She described her frustrations with this in her next entry: "I couldn't read my partner's lips at all. When I saw my textbook I was able to follow the lesson, [but during discussion] I have no idea what I was asked so if they write it down or use a gesture I can understand a little better."

It is important to note that here she mentions her own ideas for coping strategies, namely having her partners write down what they want to say or use more gestures. Her ideas were independent of the note-takers, instead focusing on improving communication directly with her conversation partner. The teacher also began to question the role of the note-takers in

communication tasks. He noted that in a real world context, there would be no note-taker. He posited that it might be better to have Karen learn to use written communication in conjunction with oral communication, as this would be a more useful strategy outside the classroom.

Towards the end of the semester, there were two more graded communication tasks: another partner conversation, which was scripted, and an unscripted discussion test. After the conversation, Karen reflected on her experience and reiterated her hope of being able to read along as a substitute for listening: "The conversation exam didn't go well. We couldn't continue the conversation smoothly because I couldn't understand what my partner said. We will have a discussion in the next class. I can't read lips so I want to see the textbook while talking."

Based on Karen's suggestions, as well as his own ideas, the teacher decided to make some concessions to help her participate more equally in the discussion test. A note-taker would show Karen what each group member was saying as they spoke their anecdotes by pointing to a script. Also, the note-taker was asked to write down the questions that her group members asked her. Finally, the group was given extra time to allow for these additional measures.

Despite these changes, Karen did not seem satisfied with her performance during the discussion test: "Before the discussion test I was able to see the questions but I couldn't follow the discussion or react because I couldn't understand what we were talking about. I was able to ask questions somehow but it took a long time. The discussion test is harder than the graded conversations but I want to try harder."

Most students in this course consider the discussion test, which is longer and less predictable, to be more difficult than the graded conversations. One can imagine that this difficulty is compounded for a student who cannot hear what her group members are saying directly and has not yet learned to read lips in the target language. In fact, Powell, Hyde and Punch (2014) found that deaf students had similar difficulties even when having a group discussion in their native language. Despite Karen's frustration, it was encouraging to see that instead of giving up, she wanted to "try harder."

Each week, two note-takers helped provide support for Karen by writing down what her teacher and classmates said to her. Although several different students acted as note-takers over the semester, one note-taker in particular was present for the majority of the classes, and therefore was asked to provide written reflection on her experiences as a note-taker for Karen. Her comments provided insight into two areas in particular: the note-taker's relationship with Karen and the way other students interacted with her. The following excerpt highlights the difficulties she had in developing a closer relationship or in clarifying her role: "Looking back at last semester, I didn't communicate with [Karen] enough to understand her. I really wanted to know who she is exactly. Although we talked quite often in class and sometimes at other times, I wasn't able to ask what she wants me or other note-takers to do."

Although it is unclear why the note-taker did not communicate with Karen as much as she

thought she should, or ask her to clarify what she and the other note-takers should do, it is possible to speculate. The note-takers were all student assistants, who had little training either in transcription or in providing support for someone with a disability. In fact, the teacher had to instruct them to only write down what he was saying in English and to not translate to Japanese. When asked why they were initially taking notes in Japanese, they responded that it was faster and easier. Apparently, the value of using English as the language of instruction in an English communication class had not been explained to them previously. As peers and as non-professionals, the note-takers may have felt uncomfortable in taking an assertive role or asking for clarification of their role from a fellow student. Furthermore, cultural dynamics may have prevented the note-takers from asking more personal questions or asking their junior student for advice on how to perform their job.

In another comment, the note-taker described how the rest of the class interacted with Karen: "The environment was a bit of a problem. Some of the classmates tried not to communicate with her. I'm not complaining, but I think it hurt her, especially when she had to make a conversation partner. Sometimes I really disliked the atmosphere, that lack of [compassion], and kindness." It appears that in addition to overcoming aural challenges, Karen was faced with some degree of social isolation.

In the second semester, the teacher made additional efforts to support Karen's learning based on her journal reflections. Specifically, he made sure she was aware of the lesson plan and asked the note-takers to show her where conversation partners were on a script when they were performing dialogues, even when Karen was not a participant in the dialogue, for example when performing model dialogues or speaking assessments. Finally, he offered to work one-on-one with Karen to help her improve her lip-reading ability in English. To deal with the issues of social isolation, he approached several of the more mature or outgoing students in the class privately and asked them to make an effort to partner with Karen during class activities and conversation tasks.

Responding to follow up questions about her journal entries and the beginning of the semester of class, Karen wrote: "I'm okay with how this class is now. I have the syllabus, so I understand what we are going to do."

She still expressed anxiety about communicative assessments, but seemed satisfied with the current approach: "I was really nervous when I had a discussion or conversation test, but I tried really hard to participate in the class. I don't have any recommendations to improve it." Although her perseverance is admirable, it is the job of educators to find the best way to include students who want to study in their programs, without their various abilities or disabilities acting as educational impediments or social barriers. Future research should look at better ways to serve students with special needs.

Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, there are several suggestions that administrators, course coordinators, and teachers can implement to make their language courses more inclusive for deaf learners. The first step is to make sure that there is ample written support explaining classroom procedures and plans, which can come in the form of a detailed syllabus and daily lesson plan. The student should be provided with clear instructions for all classroom tasks and assessments, ideally in the previous class.

A second recommendation is to look at the role of note-takers. Note-takers should be paid for their time and trained in the task they are asked to do. Too often, universities rely on volunteers who may attend class sporadically or student helpers who may not have adequate training in the difficult task of not only quickly summarizing spoken language, but often doing so in their second language. In addition, in a conversation classroom, the note-taker needs to distinguish between speech that can be paraphrased, such as instructions, and speech that needs to be relayed verbatim because it is the target language of the lesson. Furthermore, administrators need to recognize that the complex interpersonal relationship between the note-taker and the deaf student, as well as the clarification of expectations, may require the scheduling of meetings between the note-taker and student before classes begin, with time for follow-up if needed.

Related to this point is the role of note-taking itself. As mentioned earlier, a deaf student will not likely have a note-taker with her when she has the opportunity to speak English in real world contexts. Should the program provide additional training in lip-reading in English? Alternatively, should the deaf student be encouraged to use a notepad to facilitate communication during communicative tasks instead of relying on a note-taker? Although such a strategy may be difficult at first, it is possible that it will better prepare her for authentic communication.

Future research in this area could explore the goals for a deaf learner in a foreign language classroom, and how they may differ from those of her hearing classmates. Deciding these goals may help educators find the balance between including deaf students fully in communicative activities, while also preparing them for future foreign language contexts. Although much of this study focused on traditional support methods, what other kinds of assistance might be useful for learners? Could a blended learning approach, such as using texting during a discussion, help deaf learners better join their hearing peers?

Conclusion

This study is merely a glimpse into the unique experiences of one deaf student trying her best to succeed in a foreign language class. However, with just this limited sampling of her thoughts and experiences, it is possible to imagine the challenges she faced and begin working on better ways of meeting the needs of students with a wide range of abilities. As our classrooms become

more inclusive, they become more diverse. And with increased diversity, the experiences of students and teachers alike become richer.

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