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# Difference and Disability Matters

The Newsletter of the Supporting Students With Disabilities Interest Section

## VOICES FROM THE FIELD

### RESPECT FOR INDEPENDENCE AND VULNERABILITY: SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN JAPANESE UNIVERSITY CLASSROOMS

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#### Background

I have been teaching English at Japanese universities for over 15 years. In the past three years, I have had more students with disabilities in my classes than in previous years. This seems to coincide with a trend reported in the National Survey of Supports for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education Settings in Japan which indicated that the number of students enrolled in higher education had increased by nearly 88 percent since 2015 (JASSO, 2021). The primary thing that I learned from having students with disabilities in university language classrooms is the importance of reaching out and closely communicating with them to provide support that meets each student's needs and preferences. Japanese university students mostly range from 18 to 22 years of age, and they certainly wish to be treated as independent individuals. At the same time, though, they are still largely self-conscious about their appearances and behaviors. I learned that when it comes to providing support for students with disabilities, it is important for the instructor to respect their independence as well as their vulnerability and find the right balance, which varies greatly depending on the student and the learning format. In what follows, I share how I figured out some possible accommodations through close interactions with students with disabilities in hopes that they are helpful for fellow teachers.



#### A Student's Willingness to Share His Condition

Some students openly share their conditions with their peers in order to deepen their classmates' understanding of the characteristics of their disability. \*Koji, a student in my English Reading and Writing class, who has Asperger's syndrome, was this type of willingly open student. When working in pairs and groups, Koji often voluntarily explained that he had difficulty remembering his classmates' names and past events, which could possibly slow pair and group work and discussions. He also explained to me, while working on a book report, that as one of the common symptoms of Asperger's syndrome, it was difficult for him to imagine characters' feelings or understand implied messages in a book. His openness was helpful to me as I was able to remind him of his classmates' names and ask him extra questions during pair and group work to help him remember things. For his book report, Koji and I together thought of some alternative questions that he

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The *Difference and Disability Matters* Newsletter is calling for articles on supporting students with disabilities. For information on how you can contribute, refer to our [call for submissions](#). Please send articles and questions to [Difference and Disability Matters](#).

could comfortably answer, which helped him successfully complete this assignment.

### **Subtle Support for a Self-conscious Student**

On the other hand, there are also students who hide their disabilities from their peers. \*Eri, a student in my English Discussion class, had difficulty hearing with her left ear, but she strongly requested that I keep her condition a secret. She had a hearing aid, but she covered it with her hair. In the class, students were required to actively participate in group discussions, and, as a result, the classroom was often lively with students talking and laughing. In such an environment, Eri told me that it was difficult to hear her male classmates' low voices. As an additional hurdle, everyone was wearing masks because of the COVID pandemic, which made it impossible for her to read their lips. While it was challenging to support her without drawing others' attention, I did my best by having her seated near me and naturally (and slightly loudly) repeating what her discussion partners had said to ensure that she would understand the discussion. I also had her male classmates sit on her right so she could hear their voices well. Through many interactions (emails and private chats before and after each lesson), Eri and I figured out what worked best for her, and she passed the course as one of the best performing students.

### **A Challenge in Online Instruction**

While I have managed various situations in face-to-face lessons, I am still seeking ways to support students with disabilities in online lessons. I had one deaf student, Misako, in an online English class. Misako seemed independent and comfortable about explaining her condition to her classmates through Zoom chat. She also used a communication application that automatically transcribed what her classmates and I said. I had the impression that Misako wanted to manage the situation on her own without my assistance, and hence I respected her effort. What was challenging in her case was that I could not monitor or interact with her individually in the online space because I had 30 other students on my screen, and I could not see how much of my lecture and instructions she understood or how much support she was seeking from me. Monitoring and interacting became even more difficult when students worked in pairs and groups in breakout rooms. Because of the nature of an online lesson, I needed to enter Misako's breakout room to check in with her. I hesitated to do so too often, as I was afraid of appearing overprotective, and hence hurting Misako's pride. As general support, I spoke a little more slowly and clearly so that her communication application could transcribe my lecture and instructions precisely. I also used PowerPoint slides and written instructions as much as possible to provide visual support. While I received overall positive feedback about my support from Misako, my lack of close monitoring and direct interaction concerned me, and I was not sure whether I had supported Misako adequately in the online course. This made me realize the importance of close communication with students about their needs and preferred support.

### **My Effort for the Future**

Having students with disabilities in class is always a great learning opportunity for me. I learned that small actions, such as changing the seating arrangements, repeating students' names and what they say, providing a few alternative questions, and preparing extra slides can provide the necessary support students with disabilities need to comfortably participate in class. These small actions can support their independence in class without drawing others' attention, which university students are often conscious of. Now, I am making a list of possible accommodations to cater for various needs so that I can suggest my support ideas when a student reaches out to me. There are still challenges to tackle as I continue to learn more about the features of

various disabilities. Nonetheless, I will keep reaching out and closely communicating with students with disabilities to provide optimal support while respecting their independence and vulnerability.

\*Names have been changed for the protection of the students mentioned in this article.

### Reference

Japan Student Service Organization (JASSO) (2021). *National survey of supports for students with disabilities in higher education settings in Japan (Provisional Translation)*.

[https://www.jasso.go.jp/en/statistics/shougai\\_gakusei/\\_icsFiles/afiedfile/2022/07/15/fy2018\\_survey.pdf](https://www.jasso.go.jp/en/statistics/shougai_gakusei/_icsFiles/afiedfile/2022/07/15/fy2018_survey.pdf)

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