English Language Teaching Faculty Members’ Knowledge and Awareness of Special Educational Needs at Universities in Japan: A Qualitative Study

Michael Ruddick, Simon Pryor*
Common Literacy Centre, Niigata University, Niigata, Japan

Matthew Diaz
Niigata Seishin Girls’ Middle and High School, Niigata, Japan

Author Bios:

Michael Ruddick is an Associate Professor in the Common Literacy Centre at Niigata University. He has taught English in Japan for almost 20 years. His areas of interest are Special Educational Needs in higher education, materials development and classroom research. He may be contacted at mruddick@ge.niigata-u.ac.jp.

Simon Pryor is an Associate Professor in the Common Literacy Centre at Niigata University. He has been teaching English as a second language at the University since 2009. His research interests include materials development, the psychology of language learning, reading in a second language, and issues connected to intercultural communication. He may be contacted at spryor@ge.niigata-u.ac.jp.

Matthew Diaz is an instructor at Niigata Seishin Girls’ Middle and High School in Niigata, Japan. He was formerly the ESL chairman at the International Studies Learning Centre in South Gate, California, for the Los Angeles Unified School District. His research focuses on Special Education Needs students, education, and outreach. He may be contacted at teachingmatthew@gmail.com.

Abstract

In this study, the researchers propose that the ratification of The Act for Eliminating Discrimination against People with Disabilities in Japan in 2016, may precipitate a rise in the number of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) entering universities. As English language learning is compulsory at most universities in Japan (Poole, 2005), the researchers also propose that English language teaching faculty are likely to regularly encounter SEN students if this rise occurs. Past research (Wilson, Getzel, & Brown, 2000) has shown that SEN students view university faculty members as being integral to their academic success. Given this, this qualitative research project focuses on the levels of knowledge and awareness of SEN held
by 15 English language teaching faculty at nine universities in Japan. Interviews were undertaken with the participants in which teacher perceptions, experiences and knowledge of SEN were investigated. The interviews also focused on knowledge of SEN policy and implementation and teacher training. The findings showed that all participants had experience teaching SEN students, that knowledge of SEN students and SEN policy lacked in most cases, and that most interviewees had not received any specific SEN training. Ideas for improvement included more information sharing between administrators and teachers, informing teachers of the kinds of SEN students had before classes begin, raising awareness of SEN amongst the student body at universities, and improved SEN-specific pedagogical training. Finally, we offer some implications for practice and future research.

Key Words: Special educational needs, English language teachers, higher education in Japan

Background
In the past thirty years, a global movement toward inclusion in education for disabled people has caused a significant number of countries to enact new laws and policies with the aim of creating equal opportunities for all citizens. Documents, such as UNESCO's Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations, 2006), have highlighted the need for the inclusion of disabled people in education and influenced lawmakers internationally. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (National Centre for Learning Disabilities, 2004) in the USA, The Special Educational Needs Disability Act (GOV.UK, 2001) in the UK, and The National Disability Strategy (NSW Health, 2010) in Australia are but a few examples of laws and policies influenced by this global movement and enacted to ensure that disabled people in each of these countries have the right to take part in an inclusive education system.

Like many of the countries working towards inclusion in education, Japan has also recognized the need for disabled people and those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) to be mainstreamed within the Japanese compulsory education system. In 2007, Japan signed the UNCRPD, which was finally ratified as law in 2014. Relating to education, article 24 of the UNCRPD states that signatories shall ensure that:

Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning... (p. 16)

And

That persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability (p. 17).
Similarly, in tertiary education, universities in Japan have been affected by this national movement toward inclusion. In April 2016 The Act for Eliminating Discrimination against People with Disabilities (Japanese Law Translation, 2013) took effect. The law is an attempt to create:

...the realization of a society of coexistence with mutual respect for one another's personality and individuality by providing the basic matters relating to the elimination of discrimination on the basis of disability and for measures for the elimination of discrimination on the basis of disability by administrative organs, etc. and companies. (Article 1).

The law mandates that municipal governments and private sector entities ban unjust discrimination against disabled people and take reasonable accommodation to remove social barriers for those with disabilities (Otake, 2016). This has led both private and public universities in Japan to produce their own policies - as individual private and public entities – regarding the new law.

Globally, an increase of students with SEN entering tertiary education has been well documented. From Australia (Zimitat, 2003), Russia (Volosnikova & Efimova, 2016) and the United Kingdom (Barnes, 2007), to The United States of America (Quick, Lehmann, & Deniston, 2011), Portugal (Martins, Borges, & Goncalves, 2018), and Spain (Moriña, 2017), this trend has been analogous with countries ratifying laws born of the UNCRDP. It has been reported that in the USA approximately 11% of post-secondary students were disabled (National Centre for Educational Statistics, 2012), in Ireland, disabled students represent 6.4% of the student population (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability, 2018), and in the United Kingdom, 13% of new entrants into universities in England in 2019, were disabled (GOV.UK, 2019). In Japan, a similar rise in SEN student numbers has also occurred. However, this rise is small in comparison to those countries mentioned above. According to the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO) (2020), the number of officially registered disabled students studying at universities in Japan rose from 0.44% in 2014 to 1.7% in 2019. While this increase may not seem significant, it should be pointed out that this rise is an increase of almost 286.4% in disabled student numbers over five years, and that Japan is only just embarking on its journey of inclusion in higher education.

**Motivation for this Study**

As SEN students enter higher education at a greater rate, it falls to university administrators and teaching faculty to ensure that social barriers are removed for disabled students. Given the reported experiences of SEN students in tertiary education, this is especially the case with instructional faculty. Wilson, Getzel and Brown's (2000) survey of SEN students at a university in the USA revealed that, more than any other campus entity, students believed that the instructional faculty could impact their academic success. SEN student interviews by Farone, Hall and Costello (1998) revealed that students believed faculty showed an absence of knowledge regarding information about SEN students and were not sympathetic to accommodation requests. SEN students indicated that the issues they have to deal with at the university level are not well understood by faculty (Cook, Gerber, & Murphy, 2000). Also,
negative attitudes from faculty members concerning SEN have been shown to prevent students from disclosing disabilities and asking for accommodations they are legally entitled to (Jung, 2000).

As Poole (2005) mentions, at most Japanese universities, students will at some point be required to attend an English language course. At many universities, English is a compulsory subject for first-year students, and students may continue to take elective courses in English throughout their four years of study. As well as this, academic departments may run English courses specific to their own faculties, for example, medical and engineering departments. Given the high volume of English courses at universities in Japan, and given that in many institutions English is a compulsory subject, it is not unreasonable to believe that English teaching faculty will regularly come into contact with SEN students. If, as past studies have shown, the impact of faculty members on SEN students has potentially negative consequences, then it is imperative that English-teaching faculty are aware of the recent changes to university policy regarding SEN students.

One approach to revealing the effects of the recent changes in Japanese universities is to ascertain the experiences and perceptions of faculty members concerning SEN students and university implementation of SEN policy and accommodations. Many studies have followed this approach (Brockelman, Chadsey, & Loeb, 2006; Love et al., 2015) and in doing so have revealed institutional policy at work and the attitudes of faculty toward SEN students. In this paper the researchers follow a similar focus to that of Love et al. (2015), in which the perceptions of STEM faculty members regarding SEN students were investigated. However, in this study the emphasis is on the English teaching faculty. This paper is concerned with how SEN education relates to English language teachers at nine Japanese universities and focuses on the reported numbers of SEN students at these institutions, SEN training, teacher knowledge of and implementation of SEN policy, and overall awareness of issues related to SEN.

Knowledge of Policy and Accommodations

Past papers focusing on teacher perceptions of SEN in tertiary education have revealed various deficits in faculty knowledge regarding SEN students. Wilson, Getzel, and Brown (2000), found that both faculty and administrators reported having restricted knowledge of legislation issues related to disabled students and were generally unaware of the resources and accommodations. This theme also became apparent in Bagget’s (1994) study, which found that participants were "generally unfamiliar with disabilities, students with disabilities, university disability providers, and disability laws" (p. 12). Likewise, Sniatecki, Perry, and Snell (2015) reported that 123 faculty members at a liberal arts university demonstrated a lack of awareness of policies and procedures relevant for SEN students as well as on-campus support services available. Volosnikovaa and Efimovab (2016) found that at nine state universities in Russia, of 2,081 respondents to their survey about inclusive education, only 15% were aware of Russian legislation on the rights of SEN students, while 31% reported a complete lack of knowledge.
One area related to this theme is defining and understanding SEN and SEN students. Love et al. (2015) interviewed five university STEM teachers about their experiences with SEN students. Their investigation discovered that participants in the study had difficulty determining different kinds of non-physical disabilities. Teachers mentioned having experienced working with students who have ADHD, social disabilities, emotional disabilities and Asperger’s Syndrome. However, it was noted that faculty members had little understanding of these conditions. Aware of this deficit in their knowledge, and the problems it created regarding implementing reasonable accommodation, the interviewees recommended that the university, or the students themselves, notify the faculty members about their condition. This in itself was seen to be problematic because of legal concerns. Many countries, Japan included, have confidentiality laws that protect the rights of those students who choose not to disclose their condition. This was an obstacle that the interviewees faced when trying to provide accommodations. As Love et al. (2015) state, “The participants in this study made it clear that they could research disabilities and accommodations, but they needed to know what disability the student had” (p. 34).

A further theme that arises regarding teacher knowledge of SEN in past studies is the flow of information between the university faculty and the institution itself. As Murray, Wren, and Keys (2008, p. 110) state, “…it is important for university administrators, deans, and department chairs to be cognizant of the potentially detrimental effects of resource constraints on faculty support for students with” SEN. In their study of 192 faculty members at a large private university, Murray, Wren, and Keys’ (2008) correlational analysis showed that faculty members having more knowledge of SEN was positively correlated with SEN students self-reporting their conditions, and, consequently, faculty members providing accommodations. Martins, Borges, and Gonçalves (2018) point to a failure in the dissemination of information. They noted that at a Portuguese university, faculty members alluded to a lack of support services for SEN students, although a support office for SEN students had been established, together with a website providing information on the subject. In the above-mentioned study by Love et al. (2015) participants claimed that changes needed to be made in the process of faculty members being notified about SEN students and accommodations related to them.

**Training**

One obstacle to remedying the above-mentioned problems is training for faculty members. Love et al. (2015) concluded that, concerning teaching SEN students, more effective results will occur when faculty members receive training and resources to accommodate SEN students. Wilson, Getzel, and Brown (2000) suggest a comprehensive training program to provide all stakeholders with the basic information needed on how to deal with SEN students. They also recommend "faculty development programs, departmental in-service training, internet short-courses, and new faculty orientation” (p.49) as potential avenues of training. Other studies have shown that training about disability, accommodations, university policy, and law can improve faculty attitudes toward inclusive practices
and SEN students. Lombardi, Murray, & Gerdes, (2011) report that “disability-related training is a positive influence in promoting inclusive instruction among college faculty” (p. 260), and suggest that faculty members take part in workshops on select topics related to inclusion.

Faculty members have also been vocal about the need for training in inclusive education. Faculty participating in Sniatecki, Perry, and Snell's (2015) investigation conveyed an interest in professional development sessions, panel presentations, and workshops on best practices in working with SEN students. Brockelman, Chadsey, and Loeb (2006) claim that although faculty members in their study had little knowledge about students with psychiatric disabilities, “they were motivated to learn more about working with them” (p. 28). Also, another study found that faculty members had insufficient knowledge to make appropriate accommodations for SEN students, but believed that having more information would better equip them to do so (Murray, Wren, and Keys, 2008). It has also been shown that training related to SEN correlates strongly with willingness among faculty members to provide accommodations (Bigaj, Shaw, & McGuire, 1999; Volosnikovaa & Efimovab, 2016).

Whereas some universities have taken steps to provide training for faculty (Debram & Salzberg, 2005; Simpson, 2002), others are providing very little. According to Martins, Borges, and Goncalves, (2018) there was a lack of programs offering teacher development with regards to inclusive education at the participating university in their study. A similar conclusion was reached by Leyser et al. (2011) who found that, despite an increase in SEN students over a ten-year period, faculty members reported “limited training in the area of disabilities” (p. 172). Likewise, in the above-mentioned study by Volosnikovaa and Efimovab (2016), only 8% of respondents had received any SEN training. In Bazon et al. (2018), of 26 professors interviewed from two universities, only two had received any training to work with SEN students. This was also highlighted in Mag, Sinfield, and Burns (2017) who observed a lack of teacher training at a Romanian university.

Methodology

Procedure

The methodology used in this study followed a qualitative design similar to that used by Love et al. (2015) and Yphantides (2019), and employed semi-structured interviews (Arham & Akrab, 2018; Hasanah & Mufidatunnisia, 2019). Fifteen English language teachers were selected for this study, eight from public universities and seven from private universities. Interviews with individual participants were undertaken and recorded digitally by one member of the research team. It was explained to the participants that all data collected would be kept confidential and that, should they need to, the interviewees could retract their information from this study at any time. The interviews were then transcribed by three members of the research team separately. The data was then read and coded by theme and category by each member of the group, individually, to create triangulation.
Instrumentation

To collect relevant data, a list of interview questions was developed by the research team based on their own experiences and perceptions of teaching SEN students (see Appendix 1). The body of the questions covered the following categories: perceptions/experience/knowledge of SEN policy and implementation, experiences of inclusion with SEN students in school, and teacher training and knowledge of SEN. Five interviews were then undertaken as a trial to test the relevancy of the questions and the data collected. To focus the study on teacher perceptions, knowledge, and experience of SEN students, administrators and official SEN policy, questions relating to teacher background, qualifications and general teaching experience were removed. This updated questionnaire was used in interviews with the above-mentioned participants.

Participants

The researchers employed convenience sampling as a means for collecting data as used by Hunter-Johnson, Newton and Cambridge-Johnson (2014). To ensure the uniformity of the sample population the criteria for selection was based on the length of full-time work at the university level in Japan (5 years or more), and academic qualifications (MA or higher). The group of 15 teachers were given a preliminary questionnaire to elicit this information. All members’ replies were kept confidential. The division of male to female teachers was eight men and seven women interviewees. Following the convenience sampling data collection method, a large percentage of the interviewed instructors were based in Niigata prefecture. However, a regional research conference allowed for instructors based in the Tokyo area to be included in the research sample. The participants also made up a wide range of nationalities. The composition of the respondents was - one Australian, four British, four Canadian, one New Zealander, four Americans, and one native Japanese instructor.

Results

The following results draw on the interviewees’ responses to questions regarding their actual experience of SEN at Japanese universities, their knowledge of SEN policy, the implementation of SEN policy, suggestions for improvement in SEN education, and thoughts regarding SEN training.

Experience of Special Educational Needs

All of the participants reported that they had had experience with SEN students in their classrooms. Interviewees gave a wide variety of responses when asked about the kinds of disabilities they have experienced. However, it should be mentioned that the participants who took part in this study were not specialists in the field of SEN - a point that is expanded upon in the discussion section of this paper. Therefore, the following should be seen as a list of SENs perceived by non-specialists. Because of this there may be some debate as to whether the SENs listed below are actually SENs or not.
The accumulated list of SEN disabilities identified by the interviewees included autism (the most commonly cited issue), Asperger’s syndrome, social phobias, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), introversion, hearing difficulties, blindness, seizures, and cerebral palsy. The participants also used terms such as emotionally disturbed students, transgender students, students with physical disabilities (e.g. wheelchairs), LGBT students, students with emotional and cognitive disorders, and students lacking in social skills, to describe SEN students they had taught in the past, or were teaching presently. Ten of the teachers interviewed reported that they were given either no, or very little, information about SEN students in their classrooms from their university. The interviewees claimed, “I was told there was no information and to carry on as normal”, “I’ve never been informed”, and “They (the university) didn’t tell me or offer information”. Others reported that they would be given information about their SEN students if they approached administrators and asked, but otherwise they would hear nothing. One teacher related that he was never informed by his institution but had, in the past, relied on colleagues to inform him about his SEN students. A typical statement from these teachers is that they would find out about their SEN students during the process of teaching them, or “by osmosis” as one interviewee stated.

However, five of the teachers reported a much better flow of information between administrative staff and faculty. These participants reported receiving lists of students requesting accommodations containing information given from previous schools, parents and doctors, and that they were made aware of the various supervisors responsible for their SEN students. However, they made clear that this information was only related to those students who had officially registered as having an SEN. One of these teachers reported positive outcomes and a responsiveness on behalf of their institution noting that, “I’ve been involved in several cases of students that for one reason and another requested special help and got special help.” Other teachers reported a discussion about SEN students among staff and ongoing support for SEN students. They talked about sharing information and reporting on the progress of particular students and other issues in the classroom. Another positive comment related to the existence of counselling services at some institutions. One teacher said, “When we realize that a student needs special support, we send them to the counsellor. We have a school social worker.” Some interviewees reported the existence of informal support networks for SEN students and the use of student advisors to assist with actual or potential problems.

Whether SEN students were officially registered as such was unknown to many of the participants. As mentioned above, the majority of participants received little to no information about their SEN students, though they assumed that SEN students were taking part in their classes. A minority of interviewees that said they were aware of their officially registered SEN students, and placed their student numbers at between one and five.

However, official numbers aside, the interviewees reported anecdotally on students in their classes whom they thought had a special educational need. In some cases, the number of reported SEN students in the classroom increased. One teacher reported a total of at least 14, with four officially
registered. Another reported that in one class of 18, four were officially registered and that there were five more that she had identified as being SEN who were not registered as such. For most interviewees, anecdotally, the number of SEN students currently being taught was between zero to five. Many reported one or two over a semester, but the numbers were often vaguely attributed, one teacher for example stating: “Probably … I would think between 3 to 5 and maybe a few I am not aware of.”

When asked if they had noticed an overall rise in the number of SEN students in their classrooms, 10 of the respondents said that they had. One teacher answered affirmatively but noted there had not been a “dramatic rise”, a sentiment reflected in other teachers’ comments. Two teachers said they had noticed a larger increase in SEN student numbers, saying for example that ‘every year the numbers rise’. Three teachers said they had not noticed an increase at their current institution and one found it difficult to say one way or another.

One problem that occurred when quantifying the number of SEN students in classes was the difficulty in defining what SEN actually means. One interviewee responded:

[I]t’s a question of definition and how kind of we look at that continuum of special needs, and ....if I define it … saying somebody with special needs is somebody who is incapable of collaborating or incapable of following basic instructions, putting their homework in on time, … then I’d say there’s probably about 5 - 6 more in that class who are really struggling, but then it’s a kind of a fine line.

Another teacher said:

Again, it’s categorizing SEN students… In the classrooms … you would have someone who was obviously autistic, or someone who had maybe a mental illness... But also in those classrooms you would have like a group of really kind of introverted… kids who didn’t really seem to want to be… … they didn’t seem to want to deal with other people.

Knowledge of SEN Policy

The interviewees were asked about their knowledge of SEN policy at their university. Most of the interviewees reported that they had no knowledge or very little direct knowledge of their school’s written policy. Some were even unaware if such a policy existed. Only two of the interviewees knew of their institution’s policy directly and had attended meetings about SEN to make staff aware of changes and pertinent issues. One interviewee reported there had also been meetings about the upcoming changes when the government introduced the new nationwide initiative regarding the policy of inclusion at universities in Japan in 2016.

The lack of knowledge regarding official SEN policy may reflect the fact that policies in Japanese universities are likely to be written in Japanese. Several interviewees noted this difficulty. One interviewee stated that “the university’s policy … was not really presented to us… because usually most of the policies are written in Japanese”. Another teacher commented that they might miss information about SEN policy because it passed them by amongst “the sea of information we receive in Japanese”.

No interviewees reported seeing an SEN policy in English. The only interviewee who reported being well-acquainted with their school SEN policy was a Japanese teacher of English, and the relevant
document was in Japanese. Other interviewees knew of documents and policies existing but did not know the contents of these documents.

Although most interviewees did not know about the SEN policy at their institution, many teachers inferred the existence of an SEN policy through observations around the campus and in their classrooms. One teacher noted: “I have not got into asking if there is a policy. But because the school is open to accepting these kinds of students then I would assume that there is [a written policy].” Other, indirect or inferential knowledge of SEN policy, was connected to teachers’ observation of things such as wheelchair access and accommodations for SEN students in the classrooms. Two interviewees had the impression that the policy at their institutions was being created on a piecemeal basis and that there was poor communication between committees that were working on SEN-related policy and its implementation.

Another issue about the implementation of SEN-policy centred on the lack of information given to teachers. Many interviewees reported that they were simply told that a student with a disability was joining the class with no information or advice given regarding how to deal with those students. Often the administration’s approach seems to be that SEN students should be treated the same as regular students. One interviewee said:

… I think just from observation, if somebody’s a high functioning Asperger’s, then they’re just basically put in the class, and the teacher’s given a heads-up, but not necessarily given any idea of the best way of teaching or inclusion, but that student is included in the classes as a regular student.

Another respondent mentioned that if a student does not appear on any list as having an SEN issue, then the teachers will not hear anything about them even though they may require additional assistance. One interviewee noted that the onus of reporting SEN issues was on the students themselves, or their families. If they do not say anything then the university will not proactively support students who may require assistance. He noted:

[We] don’t have any kind of formal mechanism where I can identify a student and then the support system can kick in for that student. It all rests on either the student or the parent, on coming to us and saying we need help.

Some responses related to the lack of information sharing between teachers. One respondent mentioned that any information he was given was not to be shared with other teachers. Half of the replies referred to being unsure about how the SEN students were being serviced at their institution due to a lack of dialogue among fellow staff members.

Teacher Suggestions for Improvement of Implementation

There were many suggestions regarding what the administration or university should do to better serve the SEN student body and teachers. One recurring theme was improving the flow of information from the front office to the instructors in the classroom. One interviewee noted that many
teachers are unaware of what services are being offered to university-level SEN students. She noted that “a clear list” of what services were available would remove the need for teachers to be well-versed in SEN support measures. Two respondents posited that a lack of information could lead to a detrimental classroom situation for SEN students. If teachers were provided a list of SEN students that would be attending before the beginning of the semester, they would be better able to formulate scaffolding of lessons and solutions to potential problems. Another respondent mentioned that knowing the make-up of the incoming class with SEN students included would lead to “more planning on the teacher’s part” creating a more conducive learning environment for both SEN and non-SEN students. Relating to problems caused by a deficit of knowledge among non-SEN university students, a third of the interviewees expressed a desire to go directly to the student body and educate them on SEN concerns. One respondent felt that information about SEN students needed to begin from the first day at the university stating: “at the outset...maybe at the beginning of term; something to reduce the hurdle”. One respondent mentioned the need to “destigmatize” the present mind-set regarding special education and the students who require it. There was a general consensus among the interviewees that if the student body was more aware of SEN that classes would run more smoothly and benefit from an overall raised awareness.

**SEN training**

The majority of interviewees reported that they had received no training in SEN. Only one interviewee stated that they had had training specifically aimed at SEN in graduate school. Two teachers replied that they had learnt about SEN through life experience and / or reading on their own about the topic. One teacher reported that they had learnt about SEN by reading about children with special needs and by raising their own children who had SEN-related issues such as ADHD and learning disabilities. Another teacher said that his personal experience with a disabled friend in Canada gave him valuable insights into his psychology and of his desire for independence. This experience helped him understand some of the issues that SEN students deal with in their life at university.

With regards to in-house training for SEN, the majority of teachers responded that there had been no formal SEN training at their institutions. Two teachers responded that they had attended meetings or workshops that were connected to SEN. In both cases they reported that there was little valuable information given as regards to how to work with SEN students. They said the workshops mainly focused on raising awareness of the different issues that teachers might face, but with no practical advice on how to deal with such students. Other teachers mentioned workshops and faculty development meetings relating to SEN training, but noted that attendance was optional and that there appeared to have been no coordinated, coherent approach to SEN in these meetings. When asked if they thought that other teachers or staff at their institution had adequate SEN training most interviewees answered in the negative. However, some of the interviewees said they believed that Japanese teaching staff in other faculties had received some kind of training regarding SEN students.
SEN training was one of the key elements that many interviewees cited regarding their thoughts on how SEN pedagogy could be improved and how the policy of inclusion could be better implemented. Approximately one-third of the interviewees mentioned teacher training as a method to provide equitable access to SEN students and to further improve teacher pedagogical practice. Many respondents also referred to their own lack of training in SEN as a factor that negatively influenced the implementation of SEN policy. One teacher asked,

“Why am I being tasked with...you know...somebody who if I don’t cope with well because of my lack of specialism, I could cause damage.”

Another interviewee reported colleagues saying they didn’t want SEN students in their classes because of their lack of SEN-specific pedagogical training. Other teachers referred to the lack of SEN specialists at their institution as a problem.

**Discussion**

From the above data a picture emerges of the issues relating to SEN in the field of English language teaching in Japanese universities. The data correlates with past literature on the subject (Love et al., 2015; Martins, Borges, & Gonçalves, 2018). We see that the majority of teachers are uninformed by their institutions about the SEN students they teach. Many are uninformed about those students who are officially registered as SEN students and have to make decisions regarding specific students without preparation. Many of the participants are also aware of a higher amount of unofficial SEN students in their classrooms than officially registered SEN students. This point is also raised in a paper claiming that teachers in Japanese compulsory education observed the amount of SEN students in their classrooms to be double that of the official number (Isogai, 2017). As with the previously-mentioned paper by Isogai (2017), the participants in this study were not medical experts. Teachers have only their intuition and past experiences to rely on when gauging whether a student has an SEN, what kind of SEN the student has, and how to choose the correct accommodations for that student. It is highly probable that the cause of this problem - as mentioned by two interviewees - is that those students who may have an SEN have the right under the law, once they enter education, to disclose or not disclose their condition. Other possibilities may be that students have entered education unaware that they have an SEN, or that the teacher, through lack of knowledge, has misdiagnosed the student's condition. Overall, the participant’s awareness regarding the SEN students they are teaching seems vague and somewhat confused.

An immediate complication that the above information creates with regards to this study is that of accurate reporting of numbers of SEN students taught. Officially, the number of SEN students entering universities in Japan is on the rise (JASSO, 2020). In some regards this is also supported by the data in this study. However, as discussed above, lack of knowledge regarding the actual definition of SEN means that some interviewees may have been including non-SEN students in their SEN student
numbers. Interviewees often seemed to rely on their intuitions when talking about SEN students and this could affect the accuracy of their reports. Conversely, under-reporting of SEN student numbers could also occur for similar reasons. In addition, classes with large numbers which do not allow the teacher to have much one-on-one contact with students may also lead to under-reporting. Consequently, some caution is required regarding the numbers of SEN students reported in the interviews. Although the numbers reported by the interviewees are not conclusive, they provide tentative support that SEN student numbers are on the rise in Japanese universities.

**Impressions of SEN Policy and Implementation**

As with teacher's awareness of SEN students in their classes, interviewee's knowledge of SEN policy at their institutions was likewise vague. All but two of the participants had no official, direct knowledge of SEN policy at their university. Despite this, by observation and every day, general experience at their institutions, the participants were able to infer that some kind of policy existed and was being implemented. However, on the negative side, the interviewees saw that implementation was hampered by poor communication, a lack of information and/or advice and a lack of information sharing and discussion between administrative staff members, and teachers. The overall impression of the implementation of policy and accommodations according to the majority of participants of this study seems to be, to quote one participant, "piecemeal". On the positive side, a minority of teachers reported that their institution was more active in supporting SEN students. These teachers cited an emphasis on sharing information on SEN students and ongoing support, in-house counsellors, workshops and in-house training.

The above, then, is evidence that there are, indeed, policies of some kind being implemented, although at some universities more than others. Regarding the needs of SEN students this is a positive in and of itself. Nevertheless, it is clear that the evidence supplied by the majority of teachers in this study corresponds with past studies on the subject in that knowledge of policy and accommodations is restricted.

**Language Problems and Foreign Teacher Status**

One problem highlighted by this study may be specific to university language teachers working in foreign countries. As several of the interviewees claim, knowledge of SEN policy may have passed them by because of language differences. In this study, all but one of the participants were native English speakers with varying levels of Japanese language ability. As official policy may be the most important driver with regards to accommodating SEN students at universities, and if Japanese universities are serious about support for SEN students, it is important that any official information regarding SEN students reach all teachers regardless of language ability. With a push towards globalization and creating students able to participate on the international stage, it could be argued that at least English-language training and policies should be a requirement. If institutions expect their non-
native Japanese speakers to teach SEN students, then the university should provide these teachers with the appropriate training and information. Conversely, it should be pointed out that the responsibility here is not strictly with the institution alone. Teachers themselves are responsible for their students and their own interactions with the administration of their specific institutions. If, as with the participants of this study, faculty members are observing the implementation of SEN policy, and teaching official and non-official SEN students in their classrooms, then they also have a responsibility to seek out and understand the official institutional policy.

Many interviewees also reported that they were unaware or had very little knowledge of their institution’s SEN policy, and felt that training programs relating to SEN were not available for foreign staff at the tertiary level. One possible reason for this could relate to the status of foreign teachers at Japanese tertiary institutions. Several papers (Hashimoto, 2009; McVeigh, 2002; Whitsed & Volet, 2010; Whitsed & Wright, 2011) have argued that foreign teachers often feel marginalized at their place of work. In their paper, Whisted and Volet (2010) commented that, “the constrained professional situation of the large number of foreign teachers of English across the whole university system [in Japan] is noticeable and beyond dispute” (p. 155). They continue to report that there is a perception among foreign teachers in Japan that they are excluded from decision-making processes and have little chance of becoming fully integrated into the university system, despite official statements to the contrary. For the purposes of our study, this exclusive attitude could partly explain the interviewees’ lack of awareness of SEN-related training and policy. Perhaps the Japanese administrative staff does not consider foreign staff to be fully participating members of the institution and overlook their needs when providing information and training on SEN. It would necessarily require extra work to provide information and training in English, and the resources and skills for this may not yet be available, particularly at lower-tier institutions.

Training

The lack of specific and effective SEN training was universally identified as a problem for teachers. Most interviewees reported they had received no official SEN training while completing their ESL or other qualifications, and similarly most reported a lack of effective training at the institution they currently worked in. Where in-house training or workshops took place, the interviewees who took part found them to be uncoordinated and not of much use. As with defining or diagnosing SEN students, the interviewees relied more on their own past experiences and research than official institutional training. However, even if they were unsure as to the content, the participants were well aware of the need for training and saw it as essential to the implementation of inclusive educational policy.

Implications for Practice and Research

Following the work of Wilson, Getzel and Brown (2000), Lombardi, Murray and Gerdes, (2011) and Love et al. (2015), the main solution to the problems emphasized in this study is training in
For a policy of inclusion to be effective at a basic level, a coordinated approach to training is needed, which should include both teachers and administrators. Any training provided should also help teachers to better identify and understand SEN disabilities so that they can take appropriate steps in the classroom. It is also essential that in-house training, faculty development meetings or input sessions should, at minimum, provide information relating to SEN policy and institutional services for SEN students. Over the past three decades, considerable research regarding SEN training has been developed by various organizations and universities (Carballo, 2017; Debram & Salzberg, 2005; Moriña & Murray et al., 2010; Simpson, 2002). Taking the context of Japanese Higher Education into consideration, future research may well benefit from a review of any pertinent information these studies can provide.

Regarding the language problems highlighted in this research, as of writing, this particular aspect related to foreign faculty language difficulties, their relationship to university administration, and how this might affect accommodations for SEN students, has not been the focus of study. As has been highlighted by past research, university faculty are seen as integral to the well-being, self-efficacy and success of SEN students in higher education. The problems raised by these particular findings may present a barrier to important information for foreign faculty members and a further barrier to SEN student development in higher education. For these reasons the language difficulties experienced by foreign faculty members should be an aspect to consider in future research.

It is important to note that this study is focused on the field of second language education and, in particular has focused on how it is perceived through the eyes of teachers working in that field. As such, the report may not be representative of how SEN education is being implemented at a more general level in Japan. One idea for further study would be to understand how Japanese staff perceives the implementation of SEN policy and whether they have a better understanding of how to accommodate SEN students in classes other than language education. Key questions to answer would also involve the level of understanding of Japanese staff regarding SEN policy, their perceptions of the overall goal of inclusion, and techniques used to help SEN students participate in class. It would also be useful to widen the scope of our study among second language teachers to include a wider variety of institutions. This would provide a more representative view of SEN education for language teachers in Japan and would possibly alter our current understanding of the situation.

**Conclusion**

Fifteen English language teachers working at Japanese universities were interviewed for this project. The data show that issues related to SEN internationally in the past three decades are, similarly, occurring now in Japanese universities. The list of issues includes problems of identifying SEN students and their disabilities, a lack of effective training and experience in SEN, a lack of communication between institutional administrative staff and teachers, between teachers themselves, and a lack of knowledge regarding SEN policy and its implementation. The findings showed that, because of differing levels of Japanese language ability, many of the teachers might not understand or not receive...
information relating to SEN policy, which seems to lead to a further barrier to SEN students receiving the correct accommodations. The researchers suggest that training be undertaken to help teacher’s bridge the knowledge gap in SEN education. Further research is needed to find out more about specific types of training that would be most beneficial. The language problem that teachers experienced also needs to be further examined and researched.

This research presents an image of Japan at the beginning of its journey to inclusion for SEN students at the higher education level. If Japan follows global trends in this area, it is possible to envisage a point in time when Japanese universities will report SEN student participation at a rate of 10% or more of the student population, as has been reported in other countries. If this research shows, in microcosm, that which is occurring on a larger scale, then it is crucial to begin to fill the knowledge gap that has been shown to cause problems for both teachers and SEN students.

References


Isogai, K. (2017) Recent developments in Japan’s Special Needs Education: Promoting an Inclusive Education System. *NISE Bulletin, Vol 16*, 28-32. Accessed on 13/07/2020. https://jn01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fnc3_test.niseg.co.jp%2Freport_material%2Fresearch_results_publications%2Fbulletin%2Fnise_bulletin_Vol16&data=04%7C7C0%7Cadamson%40unii.ac.jp%7C7C51126fa350e84a8df8a408d9b2627158%7Ccc67dc56f60d4fc5b1e4b33ca7662d4%7C0%7C637736958280037996%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMjIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%3D%7C3000&sdata=DHton%2FCkbbAWC84TGKn0mt5qtaPNOqTVjOAZsVpUO4%3D&amp;reserved=0


Appendices

Appendix 1

Questions used in the interviews

Perceptions/Experience/Knowledge of SEN policy and implementation
1) What do you know about SEN/inclusion policy for school?
2) How did you learn about the policy?
3) Was the information you received in Japanese or English?
4) How has it been implemented at your school?
5) Do you agree or disagree with how it has been implemented? Do you feel positive or negative about how it has been implemented?

Experiences of Inclusion/SEN students in school
1) Have you had any experience teaching SEN students in the past?
2) How many SEN students are there in your school?
3) How are they integrated into the school?
4) Have you been well-informed about individual SEN students who you will teach? And are you well-informed about SEN students you are teaching now? And in the past, were you well-informed in the years before now of SEN students in your classroom?
5) How many SEN students do you teach? (both anecdotally and officially assessed)
6) Have you noticed a rise in the amount of SEN students in your classes now as compared to the past?
7) What kind of disabilities do the students you teach have? For example, do they have physical or mental disabilities? Can you give examples?

Teacher Training and Knowledge of SEN
1) Do you have any SEN training or qualifications? If so, what kind?
2) Do you think teachers, in general, have adequate training or knowledge with regard to SEN students?
3) Has there been any in-house training with regard to SEN students?
   Is there an SEN professional in your school? If so, are they strictly an SEN outreach officer?
   Moreover, are they employed full-time or part-time?