EDC and Disability: Reflections on Creating an Inclusive Classroom
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ABSTRACT
Based on notes taken from a teaching journal, this paper will examine my first experience teaching an English discussion class attended by a student identified with a learning disability. I will discuss how I adapted my teaching and materials to make the class more inclusive without any specialized knowledge of dyslexia. I will also discuss my observations of how the other students in the class responded to doing group work with the student identified with special needs. Finally, I will reflect on how this experience affected my own teaching beliefs and what I think is important to consider when assigned to teach a class with students with disabilities.

INTRODUCTION
The English Discussion Class (EDC) program at Rikkyo University is a compulsory, year-long, discussion based course for first year students taught over two semesters. Since the course is a foreign language requirement for all university students, it can be assumed that some EDC instructors will have classes with students with disabilities. In Spring 2016, I was assigned to teach a class attended by Keisuke[1], a student identified by the university as dyslexic. Since Keisuke's learning difficulty became known to the university's Students with Disabilities Support Office after he was already enrolled in the class, I was notified only a few days prior to the first class, providing little time for preparation.

Inclusion is an educational approach that aims to make it possible for people with disabilities to fully participate in general education (Reid, 2016). In order to make classes more inclusive, academic accommodations are often provided when students experience disability-related barriers to learning (Lazda-Cazers & Thorson, 2008). Applying the concept of academic accommodations in terms of teaching foreign languages, Lazda-Cazers and Thorson give some typical examples: changing the way the curriculum is presented, modifying the learning materials used, providing extra time on an exam, being tolerant towards poor pronunciation and/or spelling, and even waiving the requirements the foreign language course credit (Lazda-Cazers & Thorson, 2008). In the context of Rikkyo University and EDC, some academic accommodations are decided by the teacher in conjunction with the PMs or advised by the Students with Disabilities Support Office. For example, a student with a learning disability may be given access to an electronic dictionary in class.

I was given some information about his learning disability from the Students with Disabilities Support Office via the EDC Program Managers (PMs). For instance, that he was not able to read or speak English, and that his English comprehension was very low. In consultation with a PM, it was discussed that Keisuke may be better at listening than reading. While I did not have knowledge of his actual English proficiency level, and only a layman's understanding of dyslexia, I had to make some quick modifications to my lesson plan, such as giving all oral instructions, and reading out any written materials. I also decided to stay flexible, be observant, and check in with him during and after the class.

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[1] This name is a pseudonym.

My Initial Observations

Having been placed in a Level IV EDC class, Keisuke and his classmates had all scored below a 280 on the TOEIC test and were in the lowest of four levels. When Keisuke took his seat before the start of the first class, he told his new classmates in, Japanese, his L1 that he cannot speak English at all. My initial impression was that he didn't seem shy and communicated with others directly. At the beginning of the first class, I tried to make my spoken classroom English as accessible as possible by speaking slowly and repeating key words and instructions. I also used a lot of gestures and maintained eye contact with the students. While the other students seemed to mostly understand me, it seemed he was not able to understand what I was saying all of the time. However, he communicated this to me by either by saying "Sorry, No…", or he would feign understanding unconvincingly by saying "Oooookay!", while conveying that he did not understand through facial expression and body language. In this first class, we did some communicative activities to practice using phrases helpful for negotiating meaning in spoken communication, agreeing and disagreeing, and back channeling in English. During some of these activities I noticed that he was able to read the phrases and simple questions written on the blackboard. He also actively participated in the activities with his partners and while taking a relatively long time to do a picture description information gap activity with his partner, he was able to complete the actively and successfully communicate and comprehend the instructions of his partner. During this activity I observed that he would express whether he could or could not understand openly, reacted in English, and engaged actively in communicating in English. Despite his successful completion, the entire activity took a longer time than I had expected, so I ended up having to cut a planned follow-up activity. After class, I talked with him in Japanese and asked him how the class was. He told me that it was difficult for him because he cannot speak English, and the homework readings would be very difficult for him. He also mentioned that the homework reading would be very difficult for him because of his limited knowledge of English vocabulary.

Accommodating for Keisuke's Special Needs

One of EDC's main objectives is for students to be able to perform a variety of utterances that achieve a language function (Hurling, 2012). The EDC curriculum requires students to use target language, referred to as function phrases, which can perform a variety of communicative purposes within the context of an academic discussion, such as Giving Opinions (e.g. In my opinion…) or Asking for Reasons (e.g., Why do you think so?) (Hurling, 2012). Student assessment in EDC is partly based on the oral performance of functions within the context of class discussions and three discussion tests. Based on my observations of Keisuke's basic English ability, active participation in class, and strong interpersonal skills in the first class, it seemed that he would most likely be able to participate in the fluency, pair work, and discussion components of standard EDC lessons and that it would be advantageous to try and conduct class as usual while paying special attention to how he was learning target language. I thought that while he may not be able to participate at the same speed or level of complexity as the other students, he could still develop his English speaking abilities by participating.

In the first weeks of class, I introduced phrases which would help the students to negotiate meaning like, "I'm sorry, I do not understand", "Can you explain?" and "How do you say…", which I kept on the board and referred to throughout the class. Keisuke became familiar with these phrases quickly and would often glance at the board before using them to communicate with his classmates. I also paid special attention to review and orally drill any target language. Finally, I used model dialogues with fixed turns for the first lessons leading up to the first Discussion Test so the basic roles of speaker and listener within discussion were clearly

demonstrated. By around Week 4 of 14, Keisuke was good at understanding these roles and could ask for opinions and reasons, could express whether he understood, and would give appropriate reactions. His biggest challenge seemed to be articulating opinions and reasons. While he had made some progress in expressing his own opinions and reasons, these attempts were not always marked with appropriate function phrases like "I think…", or "It's because…". In the productive, original part of his utterance, he could not say simple grammatically correct sentences, and often his utterances would lack verbs and would be a composite of one to three English words. It was also apparent that he had very little knowledge of basic English vocabulary because he would use the phrase, "How do you say… in English?" frequently and for quite simple words like 'university student', or 'hobby', etc. That said, he was able to pick up some vocabulary words throughout the class by asking his classmates, which became a productive way for him to accrue essential vocabulary.

While the challenges he faced producing original utterances would not be easily remedied within the scope of the EDC course, it seemed his ability to participate in discussions could be facilitated through memorizing a narrower list of function phrases. After class on the fourth week – the lesson which precedes the first Discussion Test – I gave him some additional advice on how to prepare for the test by marking key function phrases in the back of his textbook with a pen. Rather than keeping the study strategy open-ended as to how to study the opinion and reason phrases, Narrowing the list of functions to a list of four and giving explicit instructions for Keisuke to memorize the phrases, seemed to be an effective strategy as he was able to use these function phrases in the test appropriately and he retained this ability in the lessons that followed. However, it should be mentioned that when he attempted to use these chunk function phrases, he was usually not able to produce the phrases in their entirety. For example, he would say, "My opinion…", instead of, "In my opinion…", or an upward inflected, "your opinion?" for "What's your opinion?". I disregarded this in his test and class evaluation and feedback since his classmates could understand him and he was performing the phrases in a pragmatically accurate way which demonstrated strategic competence.

DISCUSSION

Before I started journaling in Week 5, I had already been engaged in some form of reflective practice since doing so seemed like the best way for me to accommodate Keisuke's learning disability. While my reflective practice did not involve journaling, I would consult with the PMs, reflect on what was going on in the class, and then modify my teaching practices based on my observations and personal reflections. While it is true that all teaching contexts contain many unknown factors, which can be addressed through becoming aware of the particular students and class dynamics and adapting to the local context accordingly, it seemed to be essential in the case of this class. From the first class, it became clear that in order for me to adequately accommodate Keisuke's learning, I would need to be reflective and adaptive as I got more information and gained experience teaching him.

When I began to keep a teaching journal in Week 5, there were many things I was still trying to understand and so after every class I would write down observations and thoughts on that class. Looking back on my journal as a whole, it is clear to me that despite being four weeks into the course, I still had many uncertainties about how to approach teaching Keisuke, and I had some concerns about how he was feeling about the class, his own learning, and how he would progress as topics and functions became increasingly complex. My journals also documented some successful moments where Keisuke was making progress in his learning, and where the other students took initiative to communicate with him and make sure he could understand what they were discussing in English. Overall, the journaling process was a positive experience for me that

helped me to organize my thoughts and experiences about this class, and helped me to come in each week with a fresh perspective and open mind.

Keisuke's Motivation and Learning Development over the Course of the Semester
Looking back over the semester, it seemed that Keisuke's motivation was highest during the first third of the course, and of the three Discussion Tests, he seemed best prepared for the first. In my first journal entry in Week 5, I noted that when I entered the classroom ten minutes prior to the start of the lesson, he was writing down some ideas and looking up vocabulary with his electronic dictionary[2] in preparation for the Discussion Test. He was also well prepared for the quiz, scoring a nine out of ten, which was his highest performance for the semester.

Unfortunately, by Week 6 he seemed to be losing some confidence and motivation. At the end of the class, I spoke to him in Japanese and he said that he couldn't do a good job speaking in class because he didn't know enough vocabulary. It was interesting that he said that because during the class he seemed occupied with looking up words in his electronic dictionary. He even used it during the fluency - an activity predicated on the idea that students will speak continuously for a set amount of time over three intervals - which required him to pause what he was saying to look up a word. However, it seemed the topic was too complex for his vocabulary range; he lacked knowledge of abstract vocabulary such as 'government' or 'country' to discuss environmental issues. Since he seemed to have little confidence in his pronunciation, he would often also show the screen of the electronic dictionary to the other student after looking up a word. While I wasn't confident that using his electronic dictionary was always a good idea, because the university office permitted him to use it, I let him do so without advising him on best practices. Another thing I had noticed in this particular class was that in the second discussion, one student in Keisuke's group was particularly dominating during the discussion and was interrogating ideas of another student, at a level of English much higher than Keisuke could understand. I thought that this might have contributed to his low evaluation of himself after class. Since these two students were probably the two strongest speakers in the class, I decided not to put them in the same group as Keisuke in future classes to prevent this problem from recurring.

While Keisuke used his electronic dictionary in Weeks 6-8, he seemed to become less reliant on it, possibly because he realized it prevented him from listening to others in discussions and was time-consuming. By Weeks 6 and 7, I noticed Keisuke was struggling with the new and more complex function phrases. For example, in Week 6, he could easily say the function phrase "For example,…" but he could not supply an example and would usually say "Sorry" to his partner. Keisuke and his interlocutors would then generally abandon the idea and move on. Likewise, if someone asked him for an example, he would pause and then say "Sorry". When the function phrases for turn-taking (Joining a Discussion) were introduced in Week 7, he seemed to get tired quickly and lose motivation to use the new phrases, perhaps because they were syntactically more complex and numerous than the first three functions learnt. While in the end of the course he was able to use many of the Joining a Discussion phrases, he seemed to be overburdened, seemingly further hindering his motivation.

In Week 9, Keisuke seemed considerably less prepared for the second Discussion Test than he did for the first test. On the test itself, he only used Reason and Opinion function phrases and asked only one question. He spoke three times, gave some reactions to his interlocutors, and negotiated meaning a handful of times. His performance seemed to be partly the result of lower

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[2] It should be noted that at the beginning of this class, a staff member from the Students with Disabilities Support Office came to inform me that he was permitted to use an electronic dictionary in class.

motivation and a lack of preparation. Perhaps he was still unable to use the new functions of Examples and Joining a Discussion. After the second Discussion Test, I became worried about how to approach the upcoming lesson, which I anticipated would be even more difficult as the Connecting Ideas function can be more syntactically complex and nuanced. I decided to take a more direct support approach in Week 10, and I paired up with him for the Function practice activity, a highly controlled practice where the focus is developing competency at using the target language accurately. While he was struggling to use the function in the pair practice activity, he seemed to respond positively to working with me and he seemed to be more motivated. However, in the first group discussion I realized he still did not understand the meaning or purpose of the Connecting Ideas function as a speaker, so I intervened and I asked a stronger student to translate the meaning of "As you said…" into Japanese for Keisuke. The student translated the phrase appropriately for Keisuke and explained what it meant. While I am not sure how effective this was in helping him use the phrase, at least initially, it did seem to help him understand the meaning and why the other students were using it.

In Week 11, Keisuke seemed to become more confident in asserting his opinions to other students. It was the first time I had really seen him confident in his ideas, and while he had seemed motivated at the beginning of the course to participate in the class, he now seemed to be motivated to express his ideas to other students. It was an interesting turn in his performance and one that I could not have predicted. For example, in the second discussion in Week 11, in response to the question "Is technology good or bad?", contrary to the opinions of his peers, he argued that technology was neither good nor bad, but depended on whether the person who used it was good or bad. He gave an example that medical technology is created by good people while guns and weapons were created by bad people. After giving this opinion, he asked the others to comment on his idea. In doing so, he impressed on me that he wanted to see what others thought of his ideas. It seemed he had made a big step towards to taking ownership for his own learning.

Another interesting episode occurred in the fluency practice of Week 11. As the class was odd-numbered, I joined the fluency practice as a listener. When I was listening to Keisuke's ideas he said that he wanted to travel to the future so that he could bring back the technology that would help him be able to learn now. Keisuke's more confident attitude continued until the final Discussion Test in Week 13, where he insisted his opinions confidently. However, he was unable to use any of the newer functions, continuing to only use Opinions and Reasons. Upon reflection, I think he could successfully use three of the six function types over the semester, namely Opinions, Reasons, and Joining a Discussion, while he could only rarely use Examples, Connecting ideas, and Possibilities. I do not think that this is a failure on his part but rather that those functions were too difficult for him to use at the current stage of his English language development.

Group Work and Cooperation between Members of this Class
At the beginning of the semester, I was quite uneasy about how the other students would react to and cooperate with Keisuke during group discussion. By the end of the first semester, however, I was very impressed with how the students were effectively managing pair and group work with Keisuke. They seemed to be patient to make sure he could understand their ideas. They would often take time to explain vocabulary or the meaning of anything he did not understand. They rarely spoke in Japanese to him and showed respect for his English language learning experience. While it may have just been a stroke of luck that the students were mature and sensitive communicators, I also think that Keisuke's obvious struggle to communicate created an atmosphere where each of the students were considering each other as they discussed their ideas. Finally, my impressions are that the students were able to learn a lot more about communication skills through the experience of sharing a discussion with Keisuke, and the discussions were

enriching because of his presence.

Reflections on Ways for Teachers to Better Support Students with Special Needs
Over the semester I came to understand that while identifying students with disabilities is the first step in making a class more inclusive, the real challenge lies in understanding exactly what learning barriers they are faced with in order to know how best to accommodate them. As I described above, I approached modifying my classroom by observations and reflections, however, at the end of the course, I think the situation would have been improved if I had more specialized knowledge about dyslexia, Keisuke's particular experience of his learning disability. While there are some resources made available through the PMs and through Students with Disabilities Support Office, the PMs are not specially trained in disability education and EDC instructors have limited interface with the office because the staff members only speak in Japanese.

CONCLUSION
In this paper, I discussed my observations and reflections of how the learning and motivation of one student with a learning difficulty developed over a semester. There were times in this class where I was challenged in new ways, and there were some instances where I had to make decisions on the spot to accommodate Keisuke, which were counter to some of the policies of the unified curriculum. For example, I used some key Japanese translation and I modified how I graded his instances of function use. In conclusion, keeping a journal helped me to consolidate my own beliefs about the learning progress of the student and reflect on what the main challenges were for both him and myself. From this semester project, it is clear to me that reflective practice is a useful tool to assist in making appropriate accommodations for students with learning disabilities.

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