

Reasonable accommodations for a Japanese Deaf student: A case study of an English pronunciation class

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify strategies and methodologies of teaching English listening and pronunciation skills to Deaf and/or vocally impaired students, while concomitantly examining the question of what constitutes reasonable accommodation. This case study followed the experience of a Japanese Deaf and vocally impaired student and the teacher, who together navigate an (L2) English pronunciation course at a Japanese college.

Introduction

As students seek to become more connected with the global community, learning a foreign language is one necessary component to create cross-cultural and bilateral connections. Understanding the words, the grammar and syntax, and the expressive nature of languages can help to build bridges and relationships between individuals, communities, and cultures. While foreign languages have historically been available as both elective courses and requisites for graduation for mainstream students, it is often difficult for the Deaf learner to access such courses because of the complex layers of support that are necessary in order to create a successful learning environment (Domagała-Zyśk, 2017).

Students with hearing disabilities and/or vocal impairments are an emerging group of students who appreciate the benefits of foreign language learning. Yet enrollment in foreign languages by Deaf students continues to remain less common (Cawthorn and Chambers, 1993). This is partially due to a prevailing assumption that Deaf students are not able to demonstrate speaking or listening ability, and therefore are not encouraged to take foreign language (Domagała-Zyśk, 2017). In fact, for many Deaf students, foreign language requirements for graduation or admissions are simply waived (Domagała-Zyśk 2019).

An additional factor in the accessibility of foreign language education to Deaf students is faculty preparedness (Leons and Herbert, 2002). Mainstream teachers of foreign language are not equipped to deal with the extremely specialized needs and pedagogical techniques for teaching general speech or sound production. Addressing profound disabilities in the area of vocalization is often left to a speech pathologist.

A final possible reason for the lower frequency of foreign language learning among Deaf students is that it can be argued that a Deaf learner can consider their native language (L1) to be a signed language, and the spoken language of their school and community environment is L2, and a foreign language (such as English in a non-English speaking country) beyond that is L3+. For the purposes of clarity, in this paper, English will be considered L2 for this case study.

In 2014, in compliance with the United Nations Treaty Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations Treaty Collection, 2006) major revisions to anti-discrimination laws

were passed in Japan that created more specific laws for students to enter colleges despite their special needs, citing specifically that:

“The Government and the local governments shall take necessary measures to improve and enrich contents and method of education to enable persons with disabilities to receive adequate education in accordance with their age, capacity, and conditions of disability. (Japan Cabinet Office, 2019).”

As long as a Deaf student can demonstrate appropriate pre-requisite success through entrance examinations, interviews, and any other entrance formalities, reasonable accommodation must be made for Deaf students to enter a university program. The question of what constitutes “reasonable accommodation” is often at the heart of many discussions when considerations are being made for a student with special needs. As defined by the United States Department of Education,

“Reasonable accommodations are modifications or adjustments to the tasks, environment or to the way things are usually done that enable individuals with disabilities to have an equal opportunity to participate in an academic program or a job (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).”

Time, space, equipment, money, availability of specialized support personnel, training and equipping teachers, logistics when using part-time teaching faculty members, and even personal motivation can be impediments to a smooth experience for students, faculty, and institutional protocols (Bento, 1996). Reasonable accommodations can come to a halt if even one of these elements is unattainable. An additional consideration in providing reasonable accommodation is to decide whether a modification would fundamentally alter the program, or place undue burden on the resources of the institution (Lazda-Cazers & Thorson, 2008).

These were central questions in the case of a Japanese Deaf student who wished to pursue a teacher license to teach high school English. This case study aims to document the material, philosophical, and methodological problems that face mainstream teachers of foreign language in hopes of demonstrating how Deaf students can have access to the benefits of foreign language learning despite their disabilities. The methodology traces the assessment of needs, implementation of techniques, unanticipated challenges, and reflections on the teaching of English pronunciation to a Deaf student while considering the question of what constitutes reasonable accommodation.

Context of the study

In 2016, a small, liberal arts college in southwestern Japan admitted a Deaf student as an English teacher candidate. To protect this student’s privacy, in this paper, the student will be referred to as Kei, a non-gender-specific Japanese name. Kei’s primary mode of communication was Japanese Sign Language (JSL). As a high school student, Kei attended a School for Deaf and Hard of Hearing students. The native English speaking faculty members at the college were informed of Kei’s admission six weeks prior to the first day of classes, and were asked to provide feedback (via

email) about their concerns regarding what would constitute the reasonable teaching and accommodation of this student. Since Kei was entering the teacher licensing program to earn an endorsement to teach high school English, Kei's potential teachers were asked to voice their questions and concerns in an attempt to create an atmosphere of collaboration and determine an appropriate support network. English Pronunciation 1 and 2, Speech and Debate, and English communication, all of which are taught to sophomore and junior level students by native English teachers, were courses for which questions and concerns were noted in email and written exchanges, summarized, and edited for clarity as follows:

- What were the speech and hearing capabilities and other physical limitations of the student?
- How would the student communicate with hearing students and teachers?
- How much in-class time would be necessary in order to address specific special needs?
- Was there a reasonable amount of time for teachers to prepare to differentiate an entire course curriculum?
- What professional development opportunities would be available for teachers?
- Would there be an opportunity for the native teachers to meet the student and assess the capabilities and limitations prior to the start of classes?
- Would (or should) knowledge and/or fluency of American Sign Language (ASL), Signed English (SE), or Cued Speech (CS) be a necessary component to Kei's overall preparation for English teacher candidacy?
- What did Kei wish to do with the skills learned in a pronunciation class, beyond passing the course because it is required?

Underlying each of these questions and subsequent responses was the question of what is considered "reasonable accommodation?" Professional development, specialized equipment, or enlisting the services of support staff require the resources of time, money, and personnel, and those hence become major additional obligations and responsibilities of individual teachers or institutions. Moreover, at what point might the course contents become so modified that the outcomes no longer resembled the original intent?

Kei was profoundly deaf, and had minimal ability to vocalize or produce phonemes, especially sounds that required significant duration. Utterances of vowel sounds, each with duration of less than two seconds, combined occasionally with a loosely produced fricative consonant, were the limitations of vocal production. However, to offset these oral challenges, Kei was able to communicate exceptionally through written English, or with the help of an interpreter (JSL to Japanese). Kei was also able to lip-read in L1 (Japanese). Because Kei's goal was to become an English teacher at the secondary level for students who are (also) Deaf, Kei's future students would also have a variety of abilities and limitations in hearing and speaking. As a teacher, modeling L2 skills would be integral to the job description and a basic knowledge of the theory and skills related to English Pronunciation would, in fact, become important at some point for Kei.

Professional preparation

American Sign Language (ASL) or Cued Speech (CS)?

Before committing to a professional development course, it was important to explore and decide upon a general course of action to address the skills that are covered in Pronunciation 1. Kei's ultimate goals were 1) to communicate in English (personal goal) and 2) to develop a broad understanding of pronunciation skills and techniques that would be required of Kei as a teacher (professional goal). The eventual course of action the department would take took these two goals under consideration.

Considering these two broad goals, as a team, we briefly explored the possibility of offering American Sign Language (ASL) in lieu of the English pronunciation class. However, since ASL is an entirely different language separate from English with its own grammatical rules, it would neither serve a profound purpose in Kei's mastery of English nor prepare Kei for the classroom. Furthermore, while ASL would be useful in communicating in the United States, it would not be useful elsewhere, since each country has its own sign language system.

Cued Speech (CS) has also shown to be an effective tool for English communication, given the relationship of the phonetic interpretations in a gestured context and the systems of using International Phonetic Alphabet as a tool in the teaching of pronunciation (Podlowska, 2016). However, in addition to the lack of training opportunities, the time constraints and effectiveness of the cued speech format for Japanese teachers of English was simply not a reasonable option to consider for this situation.

Fortuitously, circumstances allowed me to take a two-term ASL course in the United States in the semester prior to teaching the incoming Deaf student, and I was able to learn several key ASL patterns and signs that helped to augment our communication experience. Furthermore and perhaps more importantly, the course content included foundational concepts critical to understanding Deaf culture, which were immediately applicable and easy to incorporate into the classroom structure.

For example, maintaining eye contact when teaching or having a conversation might be an obvious necessity, but I discovered in the class how often 'hearing people' look away as they are distracted by other audible cues, which prevents the Deaf student from being able to see a face clearly (Mole, McColl, & Vale, 2008). As a teacher I am used to moving about the classroom and monitoring work, but with Deaf learners, it is important to avoid unnecessary wandering around the classroom so that student can focus on the teacher's face. Assuming that Deaf people want to become hearing is another mistake that hearing people often make, as the Deaf community sees itself as its own culture. Therefore it is important that teachers model and nurture an environment of respect and dignity for Deaf culture as its own entity so that other students in the classroom are able to recognize the special talents and cultural contributions of Deaf individuals (Stewart et al, 2011). Since the pronunciation class was for students who are taking English as an L2, cultural awareness, fluidity, and competency are all part of the curricular outcomes, so Kei's participation in the class further helped mainstream students address those goals.

Tellier's (2008) research examined the use of gestures in the classroom and the results informed my decision to implement a limited (ASL) vocabulary as a part of the methodology of teaching pronunciation to the entire class, including hearing students. Thus, it was reasonable for me to learn specific ASL words/phrases that were 1) applicable in both the classroom and in individual

settings with Kei, 2) used frequently enough to warrant the time necessary to learn, and 3) created a visual element to communication that was advantageous to all students in the classroom, including hearing students. Kei learned the gestures quickly and we were able to use them in the classroom and in the individual settings. Hearing students learned to recognize the gestures with minimal instruction due to the frequency of use. While some enthusiastic students enjoyed trying to use the ASL periodically, no hearing students were ever required to perform or be assessed on their knowledge of the gestures.

The primary ASL gestures used in the class included:

1) greetings: hello, goodbye, thank you

2) numbers: 1 through 10

3) expressions of time: today, tomorrow, last week, next week

*These were especially pertinent to this case study because the class met once weekly, and the individual tutoring occurred the day after the class meeting

4) directives/imperatives: repeat, practice, please write

5) frequently used vocabulary: teeth, tongue, homework

6) The letters L, R, T, H, V, B

Several online resources, including websites and YouTube videos that offered instruction in ASL, were valuable to establish comfort and fluency both prior to and for the duration of the Pronunciation 1 course. Attempting to learn ASL to the point of fluency would not have been a reasonable expectation. However, strategizing exactly what to study prior to the beginning of the Pronunciation class based on previous experience and reflections was a manageable task.

To prepare for the possibility of having to use Cued Speech (CS), another signed system to symbolize phonemic production, I familiarized myself with the system of gestures. There were several instances where Kei used CS to convey understanding of certain phonemes and their connection to the International Phonetic Alphabet, as it was the only way to elucidate comprehension of minimal pair differentiation when the physical mechanism occurred almost exclusively inside the mouth.

Support and unanticipated issues

One of the main supports provided for Deaf students is the use of note-takers (Hamilton, 2008). This basic support network was already in place for Kei, whereby two student note-takers were assigned per course to type and hand-write all audible components of the class. However, until Kei's sophomore year, those student assistants had not had any experience in an English-only classroom environment and/or were not skilled in English, so a modified plan had to be developed.

One of the primary concerns with note takers was that because of the speed of the native pace of English speech and the "English only" policy of the native teachers, Japanese college students majoring in English would not only not be able to process enough of the English to transcribe with integrity, but also that their typing speed would not be adequate. It was suggested that to the extent possible, hire native or native-like L2 speakers from off campus to do the note-taking work. If such a person was not available, the very best English students needed be asked to fill this position. Reasonable accommodation required searching for qualified candidates and being able to compensate

those people for their time and skills.

Due to availability and the intensive nature of the English work, it was decided that one student and one off-campus native-like speaker would be employed for each class period of Pronunciation 1. Each used a computer to type audible components of the class period, including instructions, commentary, and student responses. The note-takers were paid a small stipend for the class period during which they worked. In accordance with administrative policy, the off-campus adults who were hired were also paid a transportation stipend.

One problem that was not anticipated by the note-takers was how to transcribe non-word sounds during demonstrations, whether they were demonstrations of phonics, or when creating comparisons for students to hear differences between American, Australian, and British accents. For example, to explain the rationale for not focusing a great deal of attention on vowel sounds, I demonstrated how differently the vowels are produced in the phrase “I’d like a cup of hot coffee,” using an American, British, and Australian accent pattern. There was no way for the note takers to transcribe these phonic differences into writing.

Also not anticipated was the extent to which Kei follows the lead of other students visually. While a semi-circle shape of the class is advised (Hamilton, 2008), a class arrangement such as this was not possible. The initial thought behind placing Kei at the front of the traditional class arrangement was to provide the maximum visual proximity to the teacher’s demonstrations of pronunciation as possible. However, many of the practice activities done in class required students to perform broad movements of the hands and arms, a technique called “Total Physical Response” (TPR). Because Kei could not see that the other students were imitating the teacher, Kei did not engage in the TPR activities. However, once Kei moved to the middle of the class where peripheral vision could serve as a cue for physical participation, participation closely matched that of Kei’s peers.

Kei was proficient in lip-reading Japanese, but not English, and certainly not while both languages are in use. As an English teacher in a classroom of Japanese speakers, it was occasionally necessary to use both languages to assure clarity of instruction. Around the third week of classes, we realized that this natural tendency to flow between English and Japanese as necessity requires was problematic for Kei because without sound, there was not a specific cue to know which language in which to “lip-read.” For example, the English word “desk” looks exactly like the Japanese word “です” (desu). This was the case in both the classroom setting and the individual consultation setting. Therefore to avoid confusion of which language in which to read lips, we decided to communicate exclusively in English during our individual consultations, both in spoken and written contexts. However, in the classroom, we would delegate the responsibility of taking notes in the appropriate language to the two note-takers.

Homework and assessments

More than the didactics, the major challenge of the teaching methodology was creating assignments and assessments that could reflect and authentically assess Kei’s mastery of the material and skills. With a limited amount of in-class time to work with all the students, it was critical to develop skill-building tasks that could be practiced during the class time without disproportionate individual instruction, or for which one of Kei’s note-takers could provide assistance. Furthermore, assessments had to include features that would not only measure the mastery of

knowledge, but also the skills of pronunciation and listening.

It was determined after the first class period that Kei would need to come to my office for individual consultations and for assessments. Since receiving individual help during my office hour was an option available for all students because I was a regular faculty member, it was considered part of my normal workload, and thus, extra funding was not deemed necessary. However, during the second semester of Pronunciation 2, the teacher was a part-time faculty member and did not have regular office hours to be available for individual student support. This was particularly difficult to schedule and created a need for additional financial support to remunerate the teacher.

During the individual consultation time, which was usually 30-60 minutes, I was able to address homework and/or practice tasks that needed to be re-taught or assessed. For example, if students were to practice and demonstrate proficiency of the voiced TH sound /ð/, they could do that with relative efficiency in class or in a recorded audio file to send to me. For Kei, however, while the shape of the consonant could be shown, whether or not it was voiced could not be demonstrated because of the physical limitations of Kei's voice. In that case, in order to hold Kei to the same standards as other students, Kei would somehow need to demonstrate comprehension that the voice would be included when producing the /ð/ sound. This process could potentially be time consuming, depending on the skill, so we used the individual consultation time to complete those assignments and assessments.

The homework or assessments would often require Kei to write out some responses to questions to check for understanding. In addition to demonstrating the physical shape and production of English sounds, Kei needed to be able to show an understanding of the difference between vowels as they are produced in words, which is almost impossible to see from the outside. In these cases, I asked Kei to use Cued Speech gestures. For example, to demonstrate the pronunciation of the words cat, cot, cut, coat and kit, the external mouth shape is nuanced. Kei could show me the mouth shape but I was not able to assess the shape of the tongue, which is largely responsible for vowel production. By augmenting the demonstration with CS, Kei could show me in a different modality that each word has a separate sound. I did not require Kei to memorize CS gestures, but as they were fairly straightforward and easy to use, they became a part of the toolbox for creating assessments.

Technology use was an important part of designing both pronunciation and listening assignments. Hearing students could access the audio content that was available online with their textbooks, but Kei's disability precluded participation in that activity. Since most listening assignments were differentiation of minimal pairs such as deciding whether the speaker was saying "right" or "light," I addressed the minimal pairs listening assignments with the use of video. By creating a video of the audio assignments, I could create an assignment with the same content, using ASL (greeting, page ###, problem number ##) and then saying the word pairs. As the phonemes are often visually discernable, these assignments were completed successfully as lip-reading assignments. The most difficult differentiations were with sounds that are largely created inside the mouth and have similar exterior shapes, such as /d/ and /l/. I attempted to use pairs that were manageable but challenging enough to match the perceived difficulty of what the hearing students were attempting to do. The use of free or inexpensive apps was an additional tool for helping Kei to identify the duration of sound as it was being pronounced.

As English pronunciation relies heavily on knowledge and skills of stress and intonation, both skills that Kei had limited capacity to demonstrate vocally, developing methods to assess comprehension of pitch and intonation was necessary. To show the flow of pitch intonation (high

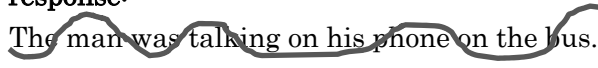
and low pitch), and instances of strength or duration in volume, I had Kei use a hand gesture to simulate the up and down direction of intonation. Another form of assessment was written, whereby I was also able to have Kei graph the intonation of a sentence to demonstrate comprehension and application of the knowledge of intonation patterns such as high pitch for content words such as nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, and low pitch for non-content words. Example:

Draw a line showing the intonation pattern of this sentence:

The man was talking on his phone on the bus.

Kei's response:

The man was talking on his phone on the bus.



Another way to visually depict sound and stress was the use of font styles in written instructional materials:

Con ent words should be **longer**, **LOUDER**, and higher in the voice.

Graphing and using font styles were helpful (and rather fun at times!) in assessing Kei and hearing students' comprehension of intonation, despite what their pronunciation sounded like when they were actually speaking. Because of the common disconnect between *comprehension* and *performance* for all L2 learners, these two methods were effective assessment tools for all students in the class.

Discussion and limitations of the case study

Kei was a student for 15 weeks, and we met individually outside of the regular classroom time on 11 separate occasions to work on course content. Meetings with Kei and Kei's advisor also occurred to continually monitor the progress of Kei's participation within the classroom and feasibility of continuing. Changes that needed to be made, possible modifications to curriculum, considered concomitantly with the requirements for teacher licensure were discussed. This fluid and open conversation created an environment that made conceiving the possibilities feasible and to whatever degree, successful. Kei's cooperation and willingness to try different methods of learning was critical to academic and performance success.

The methodologies employed during this course had several limitations. They were effective in assessing comprehension and mastery of pronunciation or listening *knowledge*, but they did not authentically assess Kei's mastery of pronunciation or listening *skills*. Given that Kei did not have the vocal strength or consistency to produce or demonstrate these vocal skills, it was decided that demonstrating mastery of the knowledge and theory would have to be sufficient within the context of Kei's education and teaching license preparation. This would need to be carefully considered when creating a course of action for any student with extensive or profound vocal and/or hearing disabilities in an educational setting, especially when a license or endorsement for teaching is being pursued.

As this case study illustrated the specific experience of one student, one teacher, and one class, the analysis of the findings may have limited broader application and would require further

experience and study to elucidate meaningful discovery. Since the application of pronunciation skills in a communication context is explored in the following semester of pronunciation, methods specific to this area of language learning were not addressed. An additional limitation was the ability to examine retention, which would have required longitudinal follow-up.

One area requiring further investigation is the question of applicability and rationale. The Japanese department of education requires teacher licensure candidates to take English pronunciation as a part of their teacher education program, but content and outcome requirements, as well as the rationale for requiring it of Special Education teachers who will teach in a school specifically for the Deaf and hearing-impaired remains weak, if it exists at all. An examination of the rationale and parameters for this course requirement would be appropriate as it would help inform teachers about the depth and breadth of the course contents.

In the class evaluation, Kei indicated an appreciation for the extra time spent on assignments, explanations, and assessments. Kei alluded to disappointment that doing partner activities was so limited because of the nature of the course content and Kei's limited ability to vocalize. Based on written feedback, Kei's experience in the pronunciation class overall was positive, and test scores revealed a significant improvement in the overall understanding of concepts and skills related to English Pronunciation.

ASL is something I continue to use in the pronunciation classroom, even if there are no Deaf or HH students. The physical gestures are helpful for all students in learning vocabulary and improving recall of L2, and connecting the ASL gesture to the vocabulary word provides a meaningful cultural allusion. I also continue to use lip-reading as a methodology in the classroom with hearing students, as implementing it proved to be an important step in encouraging students to maintain eye-contact and identify or recognize facial cues to help them listen with their eyes as well as their ears. Methods related to creating visual representations of intonation such as graphs and using fluid hand motions are tools that hearing students are able to use to help codify their understanding of the oral experience.

Conclusion

As foreign language learning continues to provide avenues and opportunities for developing cross-cultural interests, and as technology advances and improves, students with hearing disabilities are able to participate in such courses. However, the specific challenges of learning an L2 faced by Deaf students are less frequently and comprehensively documented. As documentation of these case studies increases, the ability to apply this collective knowledge of teachers could potentially help to serve the wider need of improving the foreign language learning experience of Deaf and vocally impaired students.

In this case, reasonable accommodations included the hiring of specialized note-takers, providing extra consultation and teaching time outside of the classroom, substantial modifications of the assignments for delivery and assessment, and occasionally utilizing specialized technologies or apps. Individually each of these accommodations was not an unreasonable responsibility for most teachers or departments to assume. However, collectively, they could become excessive if 1) the teacher is compensated in an hourly fashion for time on campus, preparation time, and for extra consultation because of the costs involved in remuneration, and/or 2) the teacher does not have

training or experience in developing individualized or modified education plans for special needs students, increasing the potential for ineffective instruction and lack of skill or comprehension mastery.

Further investigation and documentation of the methodology of teaching pronunciation and listening skills of L2 to Deaf and vocally impaired students is necessary. Considerations to individual and institutional circumstances should be documented. Sharing successful techniques as well as methods that were not successful has the potential to broaden the base of knowledge and methodology for all foreign language teachers. In addition to the benefits of having shared knowledge, the potential educational and social benefits for students are increased. As techniques and methods of communication aimed at addressing the non-hearing student are introduced in the classroom, hearing students have the opportunity to engage in their L2 through an unusual and perhaps illuminating lens. By incorporating the best practices and methodologies, teachers can feel assured that their students will develop proficiencies and competencies that lead to development and positive contributions within their future communities.

Recommended resources

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