

Conditions of teacher training for elementary school teachers regarding inclusive education and English lessons in Japan with particular reference to support for pupils with dyslexia

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1 Introduction

Recently, the diversity of society is regarded as one of the important factors, and Japanese education has also tried to establish diversity in the classrooms. The concept of inclusive education was introduced into Japanese educational systems in 2007 to make classrooms diverse by including pupils with learning difficulties into mainstream classrooms. However, teachers do not have deep understandings towards inclusive education and have anxiety. Hiroswa et al. (2008) pointed out the negative attitudes of Japanese teachers towards the introduction of inclusive education and their workload. Teachers in Japanese elementary schools face tremendous anxiety, such as the level of English ability of teachers (Yoshida, 2017). It is difficult to establish an inclusive environment in the mainstream classrooms without positive attitudes and deep understandings towards its philosophy.

Under the trial for the inclusive education in Japan, there is another point to consider for classroom teachers in elementary school. English education was also adapted in elementary schools officially in 2011 in order to give students deep understandings towards multicultural society in today's world, and it has also been decided that after 2020, reading and writing English will be taught in 5th and 6th grades. For English lessons under the trial of inclusive education, teachers are demanded to give further support for pupils with particular difficulties. For example, dyslexia, which is one of the learning difficulties, is more likely to appear in reading or writing English than using Japanese. However, not so many teachers understand how to include pupils with dyslexia into mainstream classrooms, and they have anxiety about not only the introduction of those new things but also their workload which is produced by the support for each pupil. It is the time to review the condition of Japanese teachers and look for the support system for teachers from the angle of inclusive education and English lesson. Therefore, it seems that the decrease in that workload and anxiety of teachers can lead to the establishment of inclusive education, and teacher training can play a role to decrease their burden. This study explores the condition and the

problems of teacher training regarding inclusive education and English education, and finds the way to improve training systems, with the reference of the support for pupils with dyslexia.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Inclusive education

The concept of inclusive education was born in England in 1970s, and its government tried to include as many pupils as possible in the mainstream classrooms even if those pupils had learning difficulties. Since then, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and several countries have improved this concept differently. UNESCO defined inclusion as “a process that helps overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation and achievement of learners”. By referring to the term “equity”, it also explains that each learner is different individually, which is not the problem but the opportunity for democratizing and enriching learning (UNESCO 2017). Regardless of gender, race or other difficulties which prevent students from learning, UNESCO encourages every country to give learning opportunities to all learners.

In Japan, the concept of inclusive education was introduced as one of the systems which enable Japan to build cohesive society after Japan signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). By equipping the universal design and providing reasonable accommodation for pupils with special educational needs or difficulty (SEND), the government started to make an effort to include pupils with SEND into mainstream classrooms. In detail, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) set the “resource rooms” where pupils with SEND can get adequate support for their learning (MEXT 2012), and has promoted the collaboration work with specialists of each difficulty including school counsellors, social workers, and nurses outside schools (MEXT 2017). In order to include as many pupils as possible in the mainstream classrooms effectively and produce the environment which allows “diversity” in classrooms, teamwork with other specialists in each community is required.

2.2 Dyslexia

Dyslexia is one of the learning difficulties which need individual support for pupils to be included in mainstream classrooms. According to International Dyslexia Association (IDA), dyslexia is the learning disability which “is neurobiological in origin” and causes difficulties in the recognition of words, poor spellings and reading

comprehension though there is no absolute definition of this difficulty as the feature of dyslexia varies widely (IDA no date). Yet, most of them demand individualized teaching and support; for example, it is necessary to take more time to read texts fluently, memorize spellings and finish the examination. Dyslexic students may not need substantially different teaching approaches from other students, but each of them needs extra support (Bell and Mclean, 2016). To assist their learning, teaching phonics and introducing a multisensory approach are also effective from the early stage of their learning (Wolff and Kutscher, 2014). It is true that those approaches are undoubtedly useful for non-dyslexic students and can be one of the examples of “universal design”, but can be extra support and job for teachers.

2.3 English Education in Japanese elementary school

English education was officially introduced into Japanese elementary school in 2011 as the activity of foreign language”, and classroom teachers have made an effort to teach English to their young learners. From 2020, this “activity” will be changed into an official subject in 5th and 6th grades’ classes. The primary purpose of “the activity of foreign language” was to make pupils understand foreign cultures deeply through experiences and get the aptitude of communication in a foreign language. However, from 2020, communication through writing and reading will be added to the purpose of English education in elementary school, and teachers feel the lack of their English ability as problems (Yoshida 2017). They have anxiety about English lessons.

It is also true that the content of lessons and their quality are influenced hugely by teachers and the environment around schools. In the new curriculum from 2020, team teaching with both educators inside schools and specialists from their community around school can play a role to implement the English lessons, which will make it possible to draw pupil’s ability to the maximum. In the ideal lessons, classroom teachers make lesson plans and lead the class with other staff (Matsuka 2017). In fact, some teachers can involve people in their community such as specialists from nearby universities or foreign people as an assistant language teacher (ALT) whereas others try to manage the lessons without help despite their lack of English ability. On the other hand, Naoyama (2015) claims that there are not many schools which can get the support of the specialists of English education from nearby universities. For those schools, it is too challenging to teach the relationship between pronunciations and spellings in the classes, where only homeroom teacher carries the English class without help from ALT or specialist. These disparities among schools can cause a difference in lesson quality and anxiety levels of teachers.

When elementary school teachers need to teach how to write or read to pupils with dyslexia under the inclusive educational system, English lessons can be problematic. The English language is more likely to cause dyslexia than Japanese due to the difference of orthography (Doyle 2016). However, most English teachers in Japan do not have sufficient knowledge about dyslexia and may be confused between dyslexia and other learning difficulties such as ADHD or autism (Murakami 2007). It would be impossible to pick up the difficulties of pupils with dyslexia in English lessons without sufficient knowledge about dyslexia of teachers. In addition, support should be started at the early developmental stage to establish the basic reading and writing ability (Ishii 2004). Careful attention must be paid to identify what extra support should be offered, and teachers need to decide how to help pupils with dyslexia in mainstream classrooms.

3 Discussion

3.1 Working condition of elementary school teachers - Busyness and anxiety

Looking at the working situation of teachers in Japan, the most prominent feature is their busyness. Every time new things were introduced into the educational system, teachers are anxious whether those new tasks become the burden for teachers. Inclusive education is one example. Teachers in mainstream classrooms have negative attitudes towards this new concept, and anxious about their workload and stress and having the necessary knowledge and skills” (Forlin et al., 2015). In addition to the preparation for their teaching, school events, and other tasks, sometimes teachers do not have the time for teacher training. Although training courses can help them decrease their workload by providing knowledge or the opportunity to ask advice for other educators, their busyness deprives them of even its opportunity. As Forlin et al. (2015) claim, MEXT should create in-service training systems for teachers who try to implement the inclusive pedagogy so that they can surely attend the training. To get rid of teachers’ busyness and anxiety and to establish new philosophy in the educational system, the training system itself should be improved.

For English education in elementary schools, teachers’ anxiety is found, too. Due to the lack of specialized knowledge about English education for young learners, teachers tend to feel that teaching of English lessons is difficult. There are some kinds of anxieties, such as the one regarding their English ability and the lack of professional skills to teach (Yonezaki et al. 2016). It might be possible to improve their language ability through teacher training, but it is necessary to acquire specialized methods for young learners. Yonezaki et al. also explain that teachers feel the importance of

specialized educators outside schools. As the team teaching with other educators has been pointed out as one of the ideal methods to teach English at elementary school, international students or ALT in the community around their schools can be helpful for them. As Machida town created the curriculum with Tamagawa University (Sato 2017), classroom teachers should ask other people even outside the school for help. To get rid of their anxiety, communication and relationship between them should be improved. What is needed for English education in elementary school in Japan is to provide information about how to ask for help and support to remove the anxiety in training courses.

If a teacher has to include pupils with dyslexia into the mainstream classroom, the individual support for those pupils can be a burden for teachers. As it is better for pupils with dyslexia to take examinations in a quieter environment, and they need additional support such as the use of spellchecker, many teachers need to make as much effort as possible. To add to the anxious situation that teachers do not know where to consult for English lessons (Yonezaki et al., 2016), they cannot afford to give sufficient support for pupils with SEND in the English lessons. However, under their busyness, their too much effort can be the barrier to build the support system (Toyama et al. 2017). For inclusive education, the more enthusiastically teachers try to give support, the more complicated its establishment can be.

3.2 Insufficient training opportunity for teachers

To catch up with the new concept of education and curriculum and reflect the knowledge and skills in teaching, it is necessary to increase the opportunities for teacher training. However, in today's Japanese educational systems, the number of courses is limited, and teachers do not access to the adequate knowledge and skills when they demand it. Although initial 200-hour legal training is offered both inside and outside their schools during their first year, next legally mandatory training is offered as long as 5 years later (MEXT 2012). It seems that there are neither requirements for the number of hours nor the contents in this training for teachers with 5-years of experience. There is another type of training to renew the teaching certificate, but this happens only every 10 years. MEXT require them to take only 30-hour university courses during their regular holiday. Of course, there are non-mandatory training which is carried out by committees inside each school, boards of education, and government, but teachers often cannot attend these training courses due to their busy schedules. Under the insufficient opportunities for teacher training, it is doubtful that all teachers can catch up with frequently changing or newly introduced concept of education curriculums.

Focusing on the aspect of inclusive education, insufficient training prevents teachers from getting support for implementing inclusive pedagogy. The definition of inclusive education in Japan is ambiguous (Arimatsu 2013), and understandings of each teacher towards this concept vary among them. When pupils with SEND are in mainstream classes, teachers do not have official guidelines to follow in order to include them. Although MEXT encourages schools to establish “reasonable accommodation” for each pupil with SEND, it is not easy to provide a system which fits every difficulty of them. Therefore, teachers try to consider the support for each difficulty, and this situation needs more careful attention for each case. Without constant training, which gives support for teachers for all the cases, they are facing trouble to establish an inclusive environment in their classrooms.

Lack of opportunities for teacher training also confuses teachers who teach English to pupils, as the primary purpose of English education in elementary schools remains ambiguous. Although most schools teach English as a foreign language, its lessons aim to build the aptitude of communication and to understand the diversity of culture through foreign language (Sato 2017). As English lessons in elementary schools are relatively new, and another change of curriculum will happen in 2020, teachers are demanded to be more familiar with both the aim of English lessons and its pedagogy immediately. Without any instruction about how to teach English for “cultural understanding”, teachers can be confused.

Even though they cannot afford to catch up with inclusive philosophy and the pedagogy of English education, teachers surely have to include pupils with dyslexia into the English lessons in elementary schools and give sufficient support under the inclusive philosophy. Especially, dyslexic pupils can improve their reading and writing with sufficient support from the early stage of learning (Murakami 2012), whereas there is possibility that teachers are not equipped with the sufficient knowledge about dyslexia when they are needed, and fail to identify their difficulty and give adequate support for pupils. Lack of frequent opportunity to access the information about the difficulty and the pedagogy of English lessons for young learners can prevent pupils from learning effectively in mainstream classrooms and hinder the establishment of inclusive education.

3.3 Contents of teacher training

Both inclusive education and English lessons in elementary schools have been discussed. It is a chance for teachers to acquire specialized knowledge about those new matters. However, the amount is not sufficient. For example, teachers are not always

required to take the classes for inclusive education or English education in the training courses for the teacher certification renewal, which are offered by universities. Those courses are electives (MEXT, before 2009). It can be expected that many teachers do not go through the certificate renewal without getting knowledge or understandings about inclusive education or English lessons in elementary school. Of course, some universities and governmental institutions such as “National Institute for School teachers and Staff Development” (NITS) try to make teachers familiar with the specialised knowledge through training courses, and teachers can also apply for those courses individually. However, they do not have time for their training outside the schools, it is difficult for teachers to reach those courses without constraint in the busy life at schools.

On the other hand, in-school training is sometimes held with the style of workshops in order to solve each problem which teachers face in their daily teaching. This in-school training among fellow teachers can be useful to establish the support systems for both teachers and pupils. In fact, Sawada emphasizes the importance to share the information through training or workshops at school and collaborate with educational and medical specialists inside and outside the schools to establish the support system for pupils (Sawada 2014). For English lessons in elementary school, teachers also need training which can be accessed easily. As many teachers are anxious about the introduction of English lessons in elementary schools, the “network” should be built both within the school and in the community through in-school training where advice is available from specialists (Yonezaki et al. 2016). Compared to courses from universities or governmental institutions, in-school training and workshops are easily reached and beneficial to establish the network for asking for help from teachers.

From the aspect of inclusive education, it can be said that training courses for teachers should be the place to know where and for whom to ask for advice. Under the principle which MEXT shows for the implementation of inclusive practice, “reasonable accommodation” which is the support or extra help for each pupil with SEND by the entire school, must be prepared to include all pupils into a mainstream classroom. However, most teachers have few ideas about the support method or pedagogy to include pupil with SEND. As the importance of reasonable accommodation by the whole school is pointed out (Fujimoto 2014), each teacher should be ready to provide reasonable accommodation. Hence, all teachers have to establish the relationships with other educators and specialists within the school or community to ask for support, and in-school training or workshops with other educators can be useful to meet the demand of those teachers for the establishment of inclusive education.

At the same time, specialized knowledge, which is not available in in-school training, is sometimes needed such as the information about each learning difficulty. Specialized courses from universities or some agencies, such as “National Institute for School Teachers and Staff Development” (NITS), can help teachers acquire their knowledge. However, there is a limit as to how much information can be covered about the difficulties. Even with the same difficulty, the condition of pupils is different in each case. Some dyslexic students need longer exam time than other students. All of them require individual support, but there are gaps among not only individuals but also environmental conditions around them. As the ideal way or specific method of teaching can differ among pupils and schools, specialised training courses cannot provide teachers with all the knowledge which fits for all cases. Rather than being familiar with all the difficulties perfectly, knowing the place to go or people to ask for advice is more practical for teachers in mainstream classrooms in order to implement the inclusive practice. Teachers need to “learn to make referrals to other agencies” (Bell and McLean 2016).

For classroom teachers in elementary school, practical in-school training also should be the chance to build a relationship in the community. As English lessons were introduced in 2011 as “an activity of foreign language”, specific lesson plans have not been only developed since its introduction. The content of the official textbook is poor, and many teaching plans are published. It seems that they face the problem about what to do in the English lessons and which plan to choose. Of course, initial training or other courses which MEXT offers can be useful, but at the same time, it is also essential to adjust the lesson plans to each school by having training time with all the teachers and establish excellent communication with specialists from board of education or universities in their community (Azuma 2017). Especially, classroom teachers are expected to play roles as “commander” in each school and work with other educators in the community, such as ALT or international students living in the same community (Matsuka 2017). The classroom teacher may have to make lesson plans as a “commander”, but they do not always have to be familiar with specialized information about English education. Again, in-school training and workshops should be the opportunity to establish communication to ask for advice.

Of course, there is specialized knowledge or skills which can be taught in some training courses to include pupils with SEND into English lessons in the mainstream classrooms. Phonics can be useful, and the multisensory method for teaching English is effective, which make lessons more supportive not only for dyslexic pupils but also for other students. There may be difference of learning environment among schools,

but teachers can adopt such methods called “universal design for learning” by getting knowledge from training courses and should construct the system where they can ask for advice and support in the neighbourhood community in order not to hinder the implementation of inclusive education.

4 Conclusion

Teachers in Japanese elementary schools are generally busy. The introduction of new teaching methods or philosophy such as inclusive education and English lessons for young learners under this busyness produces anxiety and increases the burden for teachers, which can influence the learning of pupils. It is true that teacher training can be useful to get rid of their workload and anxiety. Some courses such as the ones from universities or governmental institution provide specific information, and others which focus on practical teaching methods or individual case of each teacher are held inside the schools. However, its system does not always function well now for teachers. Teachers’ busyness often prevents them from taking time for the training courses and they are insufficient. Therefore, in order that all teachers can attend them and catch up with the new information, in-service training courses should be adopted more frequently. It is time to reform the system and make it more effective for teachers.

The system of training also needs to be improved to offer the opportunity to ask for advice or support for specialists in their community. Being sufficiently ready to solve all the problems at school with the knowledge or skills from training courses is essential for teachers, but it is impossible to get all the knowledge or skills which teachers demand from the limited amount of training courses. Notably, under the inclusive education, teachers themselves are not needed to be specialists of each learning difficulty. They should be familiar with the opportunity to ask support from others to include pupils with difficulties in mainstream classrooms. For the English education at elementary school, also teachers should know how to manage the team teaching with other educators, such as ALT and specialists of language education, rather than knowing how to teach English by themselves. Information about where to go and whom to ask for support is more effective than possessing specialized knowledge. The teacher must be the professional of classroom management by using the support from other educators through training.

In this article, the necessity of improvement for the training systems regarding inclusive education is explained from the angle of English education in elementary schools and the support for pupils with dyslexia. However, little research can be seen

about the influence under the introduction of English education in Japanese elementary school in 2020, where reading and writing would be taught. In order that pupils with dyslexia can learn English effectively in mainstream classrooms, further research and development is necessary. At the same time, continuous improvement of training systems is required for other difficulties and other subjects in mainstream classrooms in order to get rid of the workload and anxiety of teachers and to establish inclusive classroom environment. Gradual improvement and continuous effort of teachers through training can be expected.

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