A case study of inclusive class development based on UDL concept: Improving the 1st year seminar and mandatory language subjects at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University

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Summary of Research

  In recent years, the number of special needs students and the ratio of these students in Japanese universities have been increasing. Since the enactment of Developmental Disability Support Law (2005) and the reform of School Education Act (2013), educational institutions have been expected to provide a better environment and more efficient classes to meet the needs of a diverse range of students, including those with special needs. Universities in particular have been tasked with providing support for students with learning difficulties such as LD, ADHD, and ASD. Many universities in Japan are offering "reasonable accommodation" support to assure that human rights are met by offering academic advising, self-management, expert counseling, and providing case-by-case accommodation, however, the fact remains that such educational and instructional efforts have not been shared effectively among the faculty and staff. We will soon be expected to not only prepare better physical learning environments but also to improve or develop teaching contents to the point in which instructors understand the characteristics of learners and all the learners are able to learn from each other. We believe that through the promotion of such teaching methods, the development of teaching contents, and each teacher implementing such teaching methods, we will achieve inclusive education at the university level.

  In this study, we will investigate the way the universities can implement an inclusive educational system with a focus on learners with developmental disorders, while at the same time keeping in mind a variety of learners including those who are physically handicapped, have learning disabilities, and are sick or frail. We will also take into account learners who face difficulties which are not officially classed as disorders, foreign language speakers, different cultural backgrounds, and gender minorities. We could say that this is an attempt to expand the framework of inclusive ++educational research which has been aiming for educational systems where both challenged and regular students learn together. In considering the ways to reduce exclusionary practices in education, in a broad sense, we believe this is in line with the spirit of inclusive education. We will adopt the Universal Design framework (UDL) advocated by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) to improve lectures and conduct case studies with the aim of supporting various types of learner.

  UDL is a theory developed recently by neurocognitive science in order to consider what we learn

and the ways in which we learn. It is a framework that enables us to teach students from different language backgrounds, cultures and cognitive differences inclusively (Tracey E. Hall, Anne Meyer, David H. Rose, 2018). Since it allows us to take advantages of each learner's learning styles and strengths, teachers are able to expand the possibilities to design lessons that value learners' individual characters. Due to this, we can say that it offers the foundations for inclusive education practices that leave no learner behind. In addition, based on UDL principles, we teach in a flexible way, and the use of technologies is a core strategy, therefore, we can expect new possibilities toward UDL to emerge with regard to online teaching, which saw an increase due to the pandemic. UDL has already been adopted in primary and secondary educational institutions domestically and abroad. European and American universities have implemented it as a way to heighten the learning outcome regardless of disabilities which may impede learning, and many have observed positive learning outcomes (Burgstahler, 2013). In Japanese tertiary institutions, some universities such as Tsukuba University have started adopting UDL. It has been receiving attention as a lecture framework that does not require individual accommodations to be made for students with various needs, and also as a mission of a university which assures that students of various background will have equal learning opportunities (Burns-Kameyama, 2019). Based on these backgrounds, in this research project, we aim to improve our own lectures with UDL principles in mind.

　　We will start by investigating the trends, issues, and assessment efforts in inclusive educational systems in higher education both domestically and internationally to consider ways to improve our lectures at APU and design our learning assessments. Based on the insights gained through the literature review, we will design inclusive teaching methods for 1st year seminar and language subjects. As an outcome, we will implement revised lectures (either in-person or online) as case studies. After that, we will conduct qualitative and quantitative investigations with the enrolled students, examine the UDL theory, and propose a new lecture model. We believe that 1st year seminar and language subjects are important courses that impact the experience of group learning and university life. We aim to lighten the pressures faced by individual faculty members and ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn. It is our hope that this research project and the lecture implementation will move us forward in realizing inclusive education at APU, which encompasses diversity among students with or without disabilities, who are multilingual, multicultural, and gender diverse.

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