

Specific Learning Difficulties

What they are, and what we can do

Jr Koch

Sapporo Gakuin University (Faculty of Humanities, English Department)

Hokkaido University (Graduate School of Education)

Summary

1. Introduction to SpLDs
2. Discourses on SpLDs
3. The situation in Japan and Japanese (higher) education
4. What do do (in general, and more specifically)
5. Final thoughts

Introduction

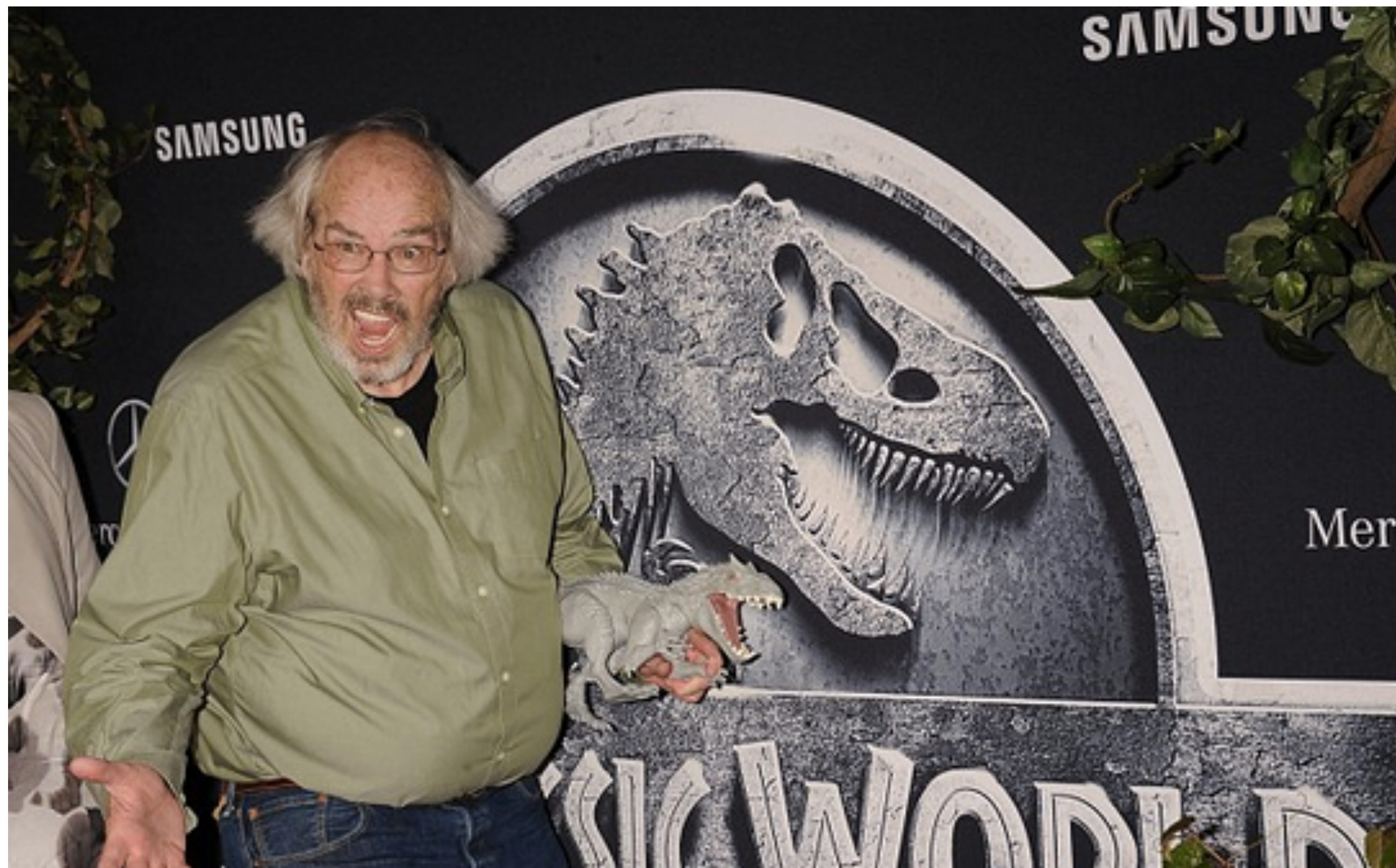
- English as a foreign language (EFL) is often a mandatory subject in higher education.
- Difficulties learning English can have a negative impact on students' success and university life.
- Some difficulties may be due to specific learning difficulties (SpLDs), of which the most common is dyslexia.
- Studies have shown that SpLDs affect between 2% and 15% of first-year university students.
- Although the concept of inclusion has gained strength in many countries, self-reporting of SpLDs is still low, support from schools is lacking, and educators' awareness is limited.

What are SpLDs?

- Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs; in Japan: 学習障害 (がくしゅうしょうがい) or LD) are difficulties comprehending or processing information.
- Also known as Specific Learning Disorders (DSM-5), Learning Disabilities (LDs), Learning Difficulties, Learning Differences.
- Some of the most common SpLDs are developmental dyslexia, ADD, and ADHD
- SpLDs are not caused by low IQ, nor are they correlated with low IQ
- Students with an SpLD can learn; even good students can have an SpLD
- An SpLD is NOT laziness, low aptitude, low motivation, but if not addressed, it can cause these and other affective problems

What are SpLDs?

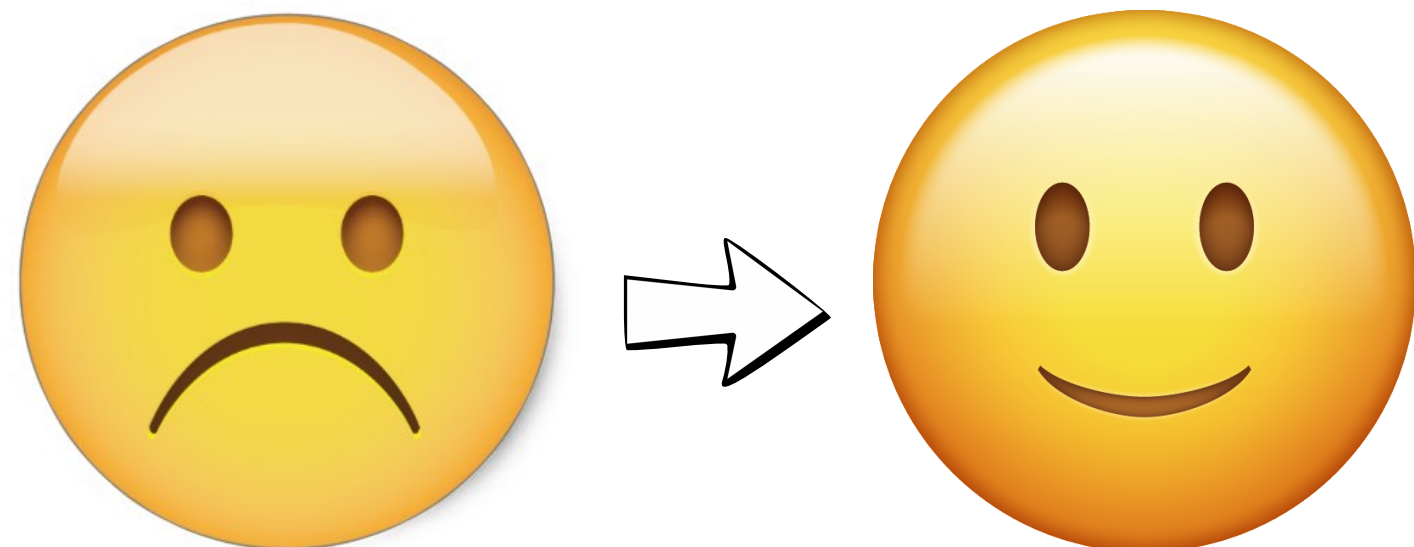
- Neurological, often run in families, they are often characterised by:
 - Memory difficulties.
 - Organisational difficulties.
 - Writing difficulties.
 - Visual processing difficulties.
 - Reading difficulties.
 - Auditory processing difficulties.
 - Time management difficulties.
 - Sensory distraction.
 - Sensory overload.



Discourses on SpLDs: euphemism treadmill

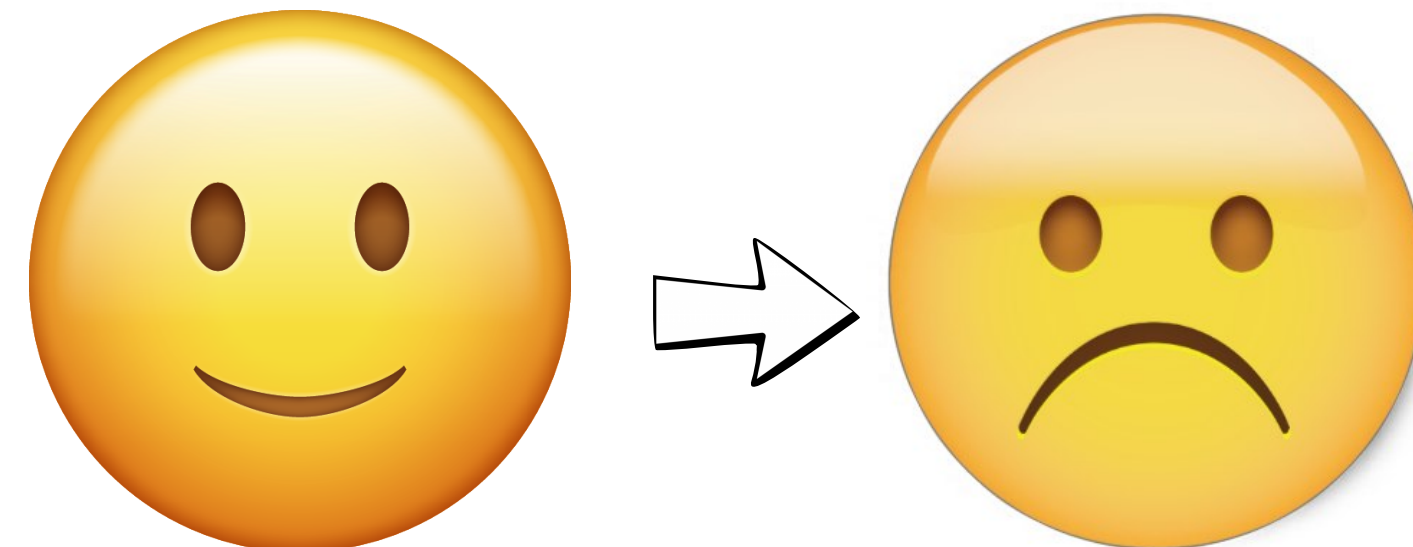
What once was not
OK is now OK:

- “queer”



What once was OK
is now not OK:

- “retarded”



The 5 Discourses on SpLDs

1. Medical
2. Legal
3. Social
4. Educational
5. Inclusive
6. Belonging

1. Medical discourse

- Late 1800s
- Focus on diagnosis, limitations, treatment
- Keywords: idiot, imbecile, dumb, handicapped, retarded



2. Legal discourse

- Late 1980s
- Focus on support, responsibilities, rights
- Keywords: exceptional, special

3. Social discourse

- Late 1990s
- Focus on disabling factors in society and the environment
- Keywords: specific learning difficulty, support, accessibility



4. Educational discourse

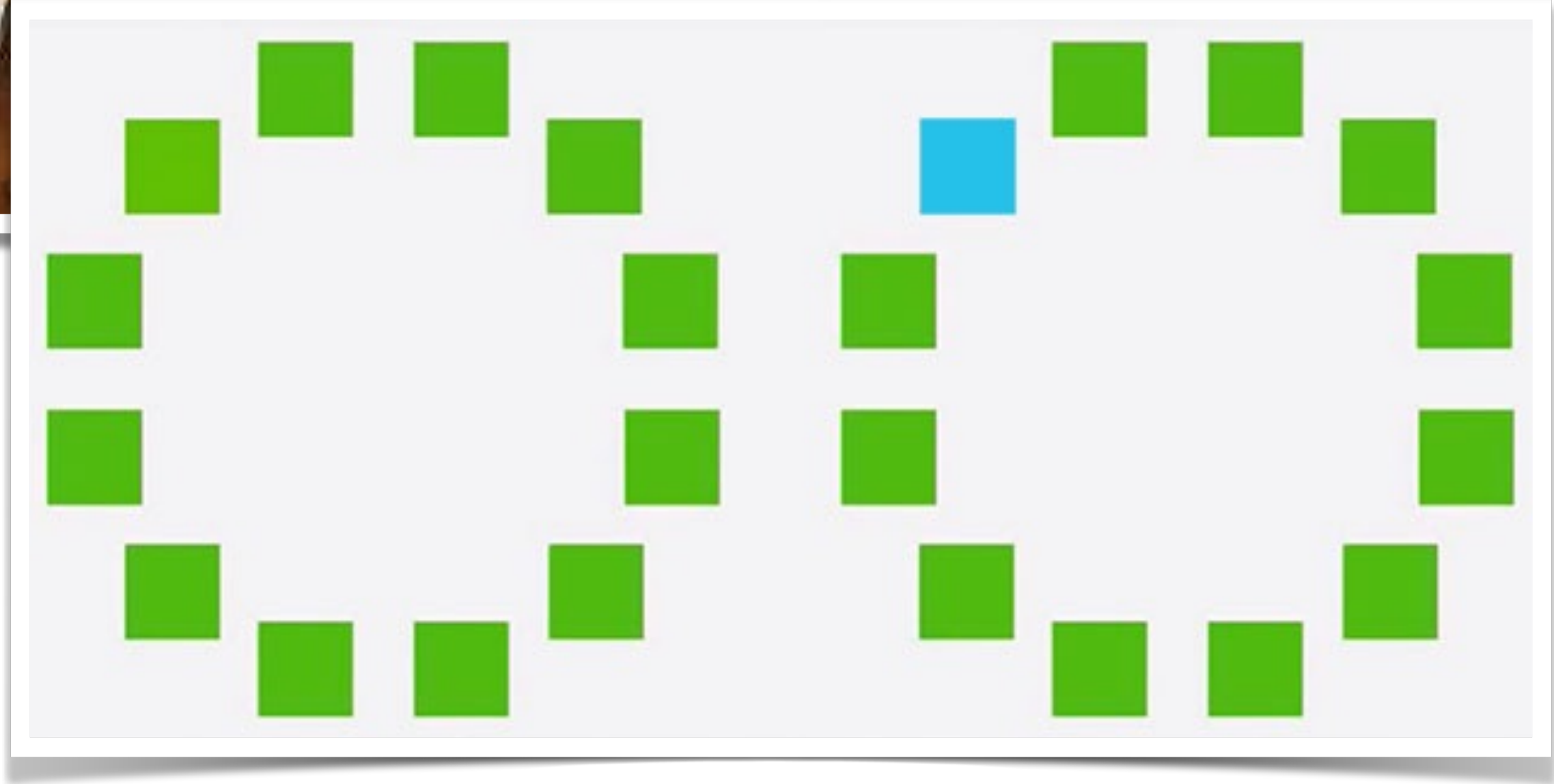
- Late 1990s
- A hybrid model based on previous and current discourses
- Keywords: diagnostic, mainstream and special education, specialist, support, accommodations.

5. Inclusive discourse

- Late 2000s
- Focus on true inclusion, on every member as an individual, inclusion instead of support (support is no longer needed)
- Keywords: inclusiveness, specific learning difference, individuality, diversity

6. Belonging discourse

- Late 2010s
- Focus on belonging, on every member as an individual who belongs in a social setting
- Keywords: belonging, mattering, feeling of belonging



障害を理由とする差別の解消の推進に関する法律

The Elimination of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities Act

Inclusive learning has become law in many countries, such as the UK, Germany and the USA.

In Japan, this Act came into effect in 2016, and it aims to advance the rights of people with disabilities

- By definition, this can be extended to include students with disabilities, including learning disabilities, also known as specific learning difficulties (SpLDs) or “invisible” disabilities.

The situation in higher education (1)

Although universities often offer provisions and support to their students' disabilities, this tends to be limited to “visible” disabilities.

Teachers are usually equipped to deal with general difficulties, and their ability to discriminate students with an SpLD from those with general difficulties, as well as identify and/or deal with students' EFL SpLDs, is limited.

Some universities recruit via non-conventional routes, and some teachers/institutions may put research before practice.

The situation in higher education (2)

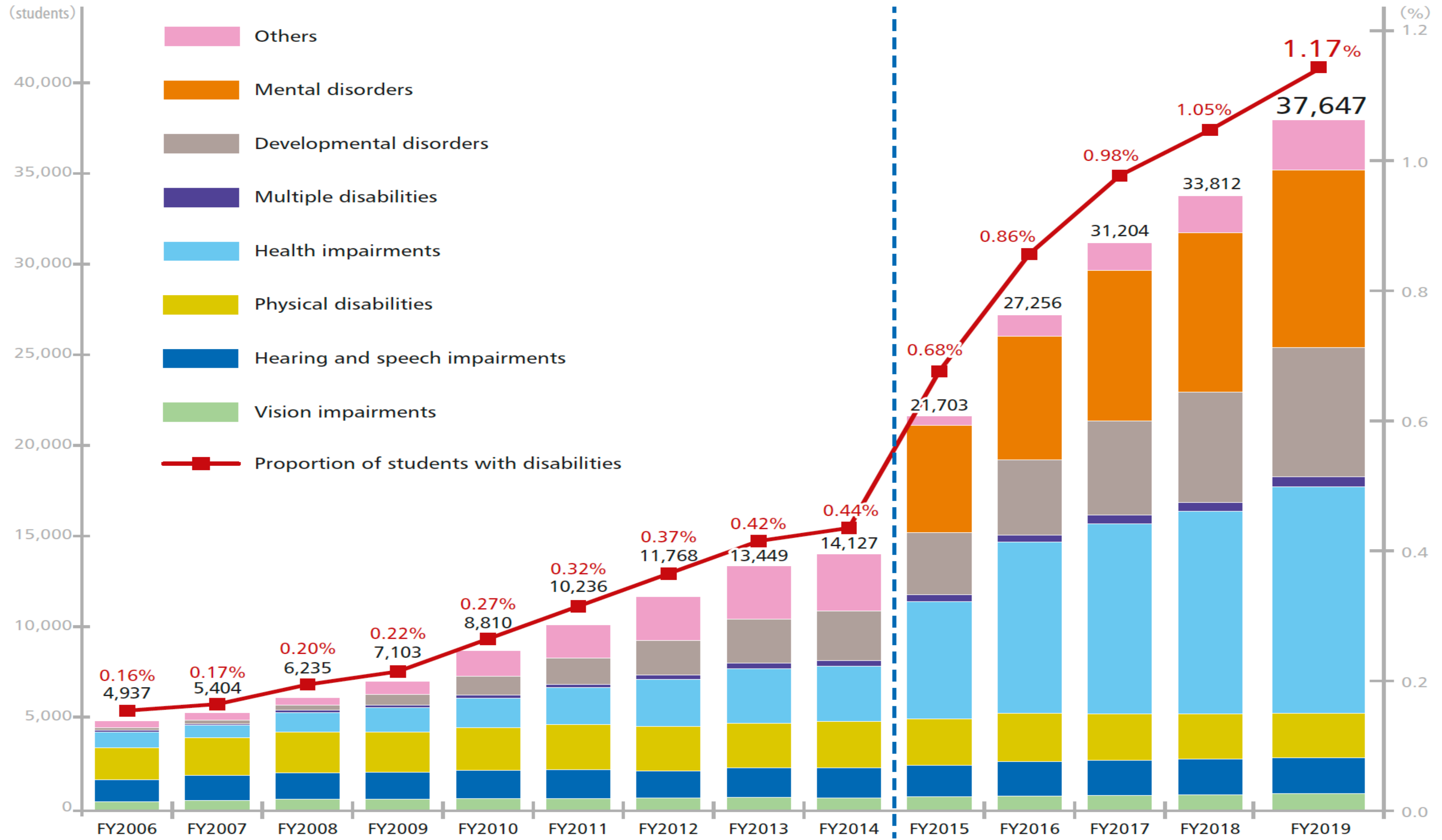
Although universities often offer provisions and support to their students' disabilities, this tends to be limited to “visible” disabilities.

Teachers are usually equipped to deal with general difficulties, and their ability to discriminate students with an SpLD from those with general difficulties, as well as identify and/or deal with students' EFL SpLDs, is limited.

Self-disclosed disabilities in higher education in Japan: 1.17% in 2019 (JASSO, 2020), compared with 10.8% in the US (US GAO, 2009) and 9.8% in the UK (HESA, 2014).

Guidelines for identifying an SpLD in FLL/SLL are not available.

The number of students with disabilities increases every year and accounted for 1.17% of all students in FY2019 (37,647 students).



General approaches
(what to do, in broad terms)

- peer or expert **consultation**
- teaching the **sound system** of the FL or SL
- teaching **cognitive** (e.g. reading aloud) and **metacognitive** (e.g. reflective summary) **strategies** to help students to read
- employ **multi-sensory techniques** - *hear it, see it, say it, write it, act it out* (British Dyslexia Association)
- testing **accommodations**, teacher **education** and readers/note takers are helpful, desired, essential

- develop a **positive relationship** between tutors/teachers, peers, and educational institutions
- **encourage** students to self-report and seek help through a positive school/class environment and teacher feedback
- use a multi-layered **support system** (including off-campus)
- training courses and teacher trainers should include **further training** about LD in general (and dyslexia in particular)

**In-class suggestions
(what to do, more specifically)**

- Speaking
 - Speak slowly, clearly, naturally
 - Be careful with idioms (they can be taken literally)
 - Emphasise words
- Body/face/voice
 - Face students (but be careful with excessive eye contact)
 - Be careful with your voice, face, gestures (some students have trouble processing these signals)

- Teaching
 - Use visual aids
 - Give them time to think
 - Train students to ask for help/repetition
 - Be explicit with important parts
 - Tap on students strengths
 - Break down instructions and concept check
 - Keep environment clear of distractions

- Teaching (cont.)
 - Use different test formats
 - Explicit explanations (obvious -> concrete -> abstract)
 - Don't move on without clear warning
 - Frequently check students' notebooks/textbooks
 - Use L1 when needed (instructions, clarification)
 - Review frequently

Final thoughts

- We should move on from one-size-fits-all approaches.
- Including students with specific difficulties add layers and perspectives and increase diversity.
- We should consider all learners' individualities and developmental differences.

References

- Asakura, M. (2016). Prohibition of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities in Employment. *Waseda Bulletin of Comparative Law*, 34.
- Brown, D. S. and Ford, K. (2007). Communication Strategies for All Classrooms: Focusing on English Language Learners and Students with Learning Disabilities. Retrieved from <<http://www.ldonline.org/article/19260/>>.
- Gajar, A. H. (1987). Foreign Language Learning Disabilities: The Identification of Predictive and Diagnostic Variables. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*. 20, 6, 327-330.
- Ganschow, L. and Sparks, J. J. (1991). Identifying Native Language Difficulties Among Foreign Language Learners in College: A "Foreign" Language Learning Disability? *Journal of Learning Disabilities*. 24, 530-541.
- Japan Student Services Organisation (JASSO) (2019). JASSO Outline 2019-2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.jasso.go.jp/en/about/organization/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2019/07/12/e2019_a4_0702s.pdf>.
- Kormos, J. and Smith, A. M. (2012). *Teaching Languages to Students with Specific Learning Differences*. Bristol, UK: MM Textbooks.
- Kormos, J. (2017). *The Second Language Learning Processes of Students with Specific Learning Difficulties*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lovett, M. W., De Palma, M., Frijters, J., Steinbach, K., Temple, M., Benson, N. and Lacerenza, L. (2008). Interventions for Reading Difficulties - A Comparison of Response to Intervention by ELL and EFL Struggling Learners. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*. 41, 4, 333-352.
- Macintyre, P. D. (1995). How Does Anxiety Affect Second Language Learning? A Reply to Sparks and Ganschow. *The Modern Language Journal*. 79, 1, 90-99.

- Ortiz, A. (2001). English Language Learners with Special Needs. Retrieved from <<http://www.ldonline.org/article/5622/>>.
- Ortiz, A. A. and Alfredo, J. A. (2002). *English Language Learners with Special Education Needs: Identification, Assessment, and Instruction*. McHenry, IL, USA. Center of Applied Linguistics; Delta Systems.
- Reid, G. (2016). *Dyslexia: a Practitioner's Handbook*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley.
- Root, C. (1994). A Guide to Learning Disabilities for the ESL Classroom Practitioner. *TESL Electronic Journal*. 1, 1. Retrieved from <<http://www.ldonline.org/article/8765/>>.
- Schiff, R. and Calif, S. (2004). An academic intervention program for EFL university students with reading disabilities. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*. 48, 2, 102-113.
- Schneider, E. and Crombie, M. (2003). *Dyslexia and Foreign Language Learning*. New York, NY: Favid Fulton Publishers.
- Schwarz, R. (1997). Learning Disabilities and Foreign Language Learning. Retrieved from <http://www.ldonline.org/article/Learning_Disabilities_and_Foreign_Language_Learning?theme=print>.
- Scott, S. and Manglitz, E. (n.d.). Foreign Language Learning and Learning Disabilities. Retrieved from: <<http://www.ldonline.org/article/6066>>.
- Sparks, R. (1991). Use of an Orton-Gillingham Approach to Teach a Foreign Language to Dyslexic/Learning-Disabled Students: Explicit Teaching of Phonology in a Second Language. *Annals of Dyslexia*, 41, 96-118.
- Sparks, R. and Ganschow, L. (1991). Foreign Language Learning Differences: Affective or Native Language Aptitude Differences? *The Modern Language Journal*. 75, 1, 3-16.
- Sparks, R. and Ganschow, L. (1993). Searching for the Cognitive Locus of Foreign Language Learning Difficulties: Linking First and Second Language Learning. *The Modern Language Journal*. 77, 3, 289-302.
- The Dyslexia Association. Specific Learning Difficulties. Retrieved from <<https://www.dyslexia.uk.net/specific-learning-difficulties/>>.
- Victori, M. and Lockhart, W. (1995). Enhancing Metacognition in Self-Directed Language Learning. *System*. 23, 2, 223-234.

Thank you!

- Questions? Requests?

Please contact me @
juniorkoch@gmail.com

This work is part of a research study supported by
JSPS Kakenhi Grant Number JP19K13297.