

Accommodating Students with Disabilities Studying English as a Foreign Language (Practice Brief)

Davey Young¹
Matthew Y. Schaefer¹
Jamie Lesley¹

Abstract

Students with disabilities (SWD) can encounter a number of challenges in foreign language education, a field in which practitioners are too often untrained in special education. Additionally, there are few resources available for postsecondary foreign language program administrators who wish to systematize support for SWD enrolled in their courses. This practice brief describes an eight-stage framework created to accommodate SWD enrolled in mandatory English as a foreign language course at a university in Japan. This framework includes initial referral and class placement, the creation of multidisciplinary teams, specific interventions, and review. Ongoing collaboration and teacher training supplement this framework and its implementation. Grade and attendance rate analysis pre- and post-implementation suggests that this framework helps ensure SWD in the present context can meet course objectives. Implications and portability of this framework are also discussed.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, higher education, inclusive instruction, reasonable accommodations, disability services

Accommodating learners with disabilities requires careful and principled support. As Hamayan, Marler, Sánchez-López, and Damico (2013) argued, such support should be both systematized and blended into the learning experience to help meet the needs of all learners. Unfortunately, traditional curriculum design in English as a foreign language context has typically overlooked students with disabilities (SWD), leaving gaps that must be bridged if all students are to receive equal educational opportunities. A number of concerns raised in the literature regard a perceived lack of pedagogical expertise and managerial guidance for teachers of SWD (Hamayan et al., 2013; Ortiz & Artiles, 2010). Thus, there are calls for increased teacher training and professional development opportunities to raise awareness, build confidence, and improve instructional approaches among language teachers (Lowe, 2016a, 2016b; Ortiz, 2002; Park & Thomas, 2012; Scott & Edwards, 2012).

To answer some of these calls, some have suggested strategic ways to more effectively scaffold classroom practice and promote more inclusive teach-

ing (Carr, 2012; Santamaria, Fletcher, & Bos, 2002), while others have written about interventions specific to certain disabilities (Hamayan et al., 2013.) Many advocate for the use of individual education plans (IEPs) to more appropriately accommodate individual learner's needs (Cloud, 2002; Ortiz & Artiles, 2010; Ortiz & Yates, 2001). At the program-wide level, the delivery of any and all accommodations should be held to the same standard and subject to regular evaluation and revision.

Problem

In Japan, the Act on the Elimination of Disability Discrimination was ratified in 2013, though its key terminology of "reasonable accommodation" of persons with disabilities has received criticism for being insufficient, vague, and deserving of greater public scrutiny (Hasegawa, 2015; Kondo, Takahashi, & Shirasawa, 2015; Otake, 2016; Shirasawa, 2014). As more and more students with disabilities enter postsecondary education every year in Japan, there

¹ Rikkyo University

is a growing and increasingly evident need for more specific and systematic accommodations for SWD across institutions sorely lacking proper procedure for identifying needs and providing reasonable accommodations (Boeltzig-Brown, 2017; Kondo, et al., 2015). In 2015, the year before the Act on Elimination of Disability Discrimination was set to take effect, only about 60% of institutes of higher education in Japan reported supporting students with disabilities in any way (Boeltzig-Brown, 2017). After reviewing the internal procedure for providing accommodations for students with disclosed disabilities enrolled in English Discussion Class at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, Japan at the end of the 2015 academic year, English Discussion Class Program Managers determined that this procedure was insufficient for providing such accommodations and meeting students' diverse needs. A new framework for accommodating SWD, outlined below, was developed, implemented, and assessed in the subsequent school year.

Teaching Context

English Discussion Class is a mandatory, discussion-based course for all first-year students enrolled at Rikkyo University. The English Discussion Class curriculum is strongly unified, in that all teachers use the same teaching methodology, assessment rubrics, and textbooks designed specifically for the course. Students are streamed into one of four proficiency levels based on scores on TOEIC tests taken at the beginning of the academic year. Nearly 4,700 students take the course each year, several of whom report having a disability to the university's Students with Disabilities Support Office (SDSO) upon admission to the university.

The SDSO uses the Japan Student Services Organization's (JASSO) classification of SWD, under which disabilities fall into six broad categories: health issues/poor health, physical disability, mental health disability, developmental disability, hearing and speech impairment, and visual impairment (JASSO, 2017). The latter five categories are further subdivided into discrete diagnoses, though some of these remain vague. For instance, according to JASSO, physical disabilities include upper limb restrictions and lower limb restrictions. Developmental disabilities include learning disabilities, ADHD, and high-functioning autism, among others.

Over the four-year period from 2015-2018, a variety of disabilities across all categories were represented in English Discussion Classes, many requiring specific accommodations and support.

Framework Creation and Implementation

As there is a paucity of resources in English for teachers and administrators to support SWD in tertiary English as a foreign language contexts, English Discussion Class Program Managers turned to more developed and accessible bodies of research for guidance. To better and more efficiently meet the diversity of needs represented by students enrolled in English Discussion Classes, Program Managers modified an 11-point framework for providing special education services for English language learners with disabilities created by Ortiz and Yates (2001) for use in primary and secondary teaching contexts in the United States. The original framework was chosen for its ability to capture and describe existing resources on campus, as well as for its emphasis on collaboration and review. By making use of existing resources, accommodations in the current context can be offered at no additional expense to the university, though service providers experience an increase in workload to varying degrees and on a case-by-case basis. The modified framework is outlined in Figure 1 below.

Stage 1: Identification. Students self-identify as having special needs to the SDSO upon admission to the university.

Stage 2: Referral and Assessment. Various stakeholders meet and interview each student to determine specific support needs. These stakeholders include advisors from the SDSO, the director of the university's English Language Program, a representative from the student's college, and members of the university's Academic Affairs office. In cases of developmental disability or mental disorders, only the SDSO coordinator meets and interviews each student in order to reduce anxiety for the student. Specific support needs are then determined at a follow-up meeting with the stakeholders described above and which the student does not attend.

Based on the interviews, the SDSO and Academic Affairs create written documents detailing the student's diagnosis and needs in both Japanese and English. The student and college concerned will check the documents as necessary. Academic Affairs then passes these documents onto the English Discussion Class Administrative staff, who inform Program Managers. These documents are viewed on a need-to-know basis, which in the present context broadly includes all parties mentioned heretofore, as well as the teacher assigned in Stage 3. However, student consent is fully respected, and as such the level of information or number of parties informed beyond the Stage 2 meeting may vary accordingly.

Stage 3: Placement. Academic Affairs holds a placement meeting to place students in English Discussion Classes. This meeting is organized by Academic Affairs, though includes at least one member of English Discussion Class' Administrative staff, one Program Manager, and English Discussion Class' Deputy Director. This meeting is typically held in the first week of each semester before classes begin. Students are automatically placed with a teacher based on TOEIC scores and the existing teaching schedule, but this student-teacher pairing can be modified in one of two ways: (1) the student may be swapped with another student from a class in the same TOEIC band, or (2) two instructors can swap entire class assignments.

Such changes aim to place students with a teacher well-suited to that student's particular needs, and are made based on Program Managers' knowledge of and familiarity with the teaching staff. Program Managers consider teachers' prior experience with SWD, Japanese proficiency, general demeanour, and other factors that may impact student learning and their achievement of course aims. For instance, some SWD in the past have reported having an easier time communicating about their needs to a teacher of the same gender. As a rule, students are placed with instructors who have completed at least one full year teaching on the course.

Students who late-identify are unable to receive special considerations for placement, as they will have been automatically placed in a class based on TOEIC scores and the teaching schedule. University policy unfortunately prevents reassigning a student or instructor once classes have commenced. Therefore Stage 3 is omitted in cases where students late-identify.

Stage 4: Creation of Multidisciplinary Teams. A Multidisciplinary Team of, at minimum, one Program Manager and the assigned instructor is created for each student. Additional members may include other Program Managers, other instructors, members of English Discussion Classes Administrative staff, and coordinators from the SDSO. Before classes commence each semester, Program Managers hold a meeting to share information with Multidisciplinary Teams about their respective students.

Stage 5: Creation of Individual Education Plans (IEPs). The Multidisciplinary Team creates an IEP, here defined loosely as any number of accommodations or specific interventions to help the student meet lesson and course aims. The IEP may be created as early as the first meeting of the Multidisciplinary Team, but often occurs after the first one or two lessons of the semester, once teachers have all had a chance to meet their students and further determine needs within the classroom. Examples of specific ac-

commodations made as a result of an IEP are detailed in Table 2.

Stage 6: Implementation of the IEPs. Multidisciplinary Teams implement their IEPs throughout the semester. Additional support can be provided to Multidisciplinary Teams and students by the SDSO as needed.

Stage 7: Ongoing Review. Multidisciplinary Teams (in part or in total) meet to evaluate student progress and the efficacy of the IEPs throughout the semester as needed. Program Managers liaise with assigned instructors a minimum of three times, after Lessons 1, 2, and 5, in a 14 week semester (classes occur once per week). If the instructor reports that the student is adequately meeting course aims and no further support is required after the first discussion test in Lesson 5, no further Program Manager-initiated dialogue is required. From this point forward, instructors approach Program Managers if they or their student require further support. Additionally, students may approach either their teacher or the SDSO if they require further support.

Cases in which the IEP is largely ineffective will necessarily merit more frequent Multidisciplinary Team meetings. Program Managers and the English Discussion Class Administrative staff keep detailed records of students' progress based on feedback from students, instructors, and the SDSO. This information is helpful when revising IEPs and assigning future instructors when new class lists are made between semesters.

Stage 8: Revision of the IEPs. The IEP is revised and re-implemented throughout the semester or academic year as necessary.

Ongoing Collaboration and Teacher Training

As many have noted, teachers and administrators alike must have some understanding of disability-related needs (Burr, Haas, & Ferriere, 2015; Hamayan et al., 2013; McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, Cutting, Leos, & D'Emilio, 2005; Ortiz & Artiles, 2010; Park & Thomas, 2012). To this end, Program Managers have invited specialists from other departments within the university to lead professional development sessions for English Discussion Class instructors. Additionally, Program Managers have made efforts to further their own knowledge of disability-related needs in the language learning classroom (e.g., through taking online workshops, attending conferences, and reading relevant research) and accumulated a number of learning resources for teachers to access as needed.

As English Discussion Classes' 42 full-time teachers are employed on a maximum five-year contract, it is essential that the experience garnered by

these instructors can be retained. With regard to Stage 3 (Placement) described above, Program Managers employ a cascade model (Lowe, 2016b) to ensure that knowledge regarding particular needs are passed from senior to junior instructors. For example, if an instructor in their fifth and final year has previously taught students with ASD when such a student enters the program, that student may be placed with this instructor in the first semester. However, in the second semester the student will be placed in a class with a second to fourth-year instructor, but the fifth-year instructor will remain on the Multidisciplinary Team to share expertise and assist the less experienced instructor. Such a system has the further benefit of equipping a wider body of teachers with the knowledge and ability to meet a variety of needs.

Observations and Outcomes

A grade and attendance rate analysis found that both metrics among SWD enrolled in the course have improved since the implementation of the framework. As Figures 2 and 3 show, the improvement in SWD' performance in the course with respect to grading and attendance not only improved after the implementation of the framework in the 2016 academic year, but that this improvement was closer to, and often surpassed, the total average performance of students enrolled in the course. This may be attributed to the close attention to student progress and scope for intervention afforded by the framework, learner variables unique to different groups of students, or a combination of both.

It should be noted that the academic year in Japan begins with the spring term, and that a curriculum revision implemented in the 2017 academic year reduced the average grade across the entire course. Furthermore, it is typical for grades to decrease and the percentage of classes missed to increase from the spring to fall semester across the course in a typical year, as is evident in Figures 2 and 3 respectively.

Regular grade and attendance analysis is one part of the regular review of the framework and its implementation. Additionally, Program Managers meet with English Discussion Class Administrative staff and the SDSO to review procedures for communication across stakeholders and interventions for individual students, as well as collect feedback from instructors via a Google Form survey. This feedback shows consistent satisfaction with the framework's implementation while helping identify specific concerns, such as the timing or type of support provided for specific SWD or their teachers. Based on such feedback, Program Managers are able to make revisions

to how individual stages of the framework are carried out to better meet student and program needs. The efficacy of these revisions is then subject to further review at the conclusion of subsequent semesters and academic years through the same review process.

Most significantly, feedback after AY2016 revealed that some teachers felt unsupported by Program Managers early in the semester. In response, Program Managers began more actively following up with teachers and offering support for Stage 5 through collaborative lesson planning as early as the week prior to the commencement of classes. Teachers reported feeling more supported in AY2017, and Program Managers have since striven to continue providing early and consistent support to instructors. Based on feedback from English Discussion Class Administrative staff, the record keeping procedure in Stage 7 was simplified for AY2018.

Implications and Portability

The framework created and implemented at Rikkyo University's Center for English Discussion Class appears to have improved the ability of SWD enrolled in the course to meet course aims, and as such is hopefully transferable to similar educational contexts, especially those with less proactive disability service providers on campus. As a result of significant differences in context, aspects of the original Ortiz and Yates (2001) model were necessarily removed or modified when creating the current framework, and any transference of the current framework to a new context would likely necessitate further adaptations. In any case, it is advisable to select and modify a framework only after creating a full inventory of available resources.

Feedback within English Discussion Class suggests that the current framework has provided a serviceable degree of training and preparation for teachers to provide reasonable accommodations to students, and has greatly improved communication across stakeholders. As English as a foreign language teachers are often underequipped to provide reasonable accommodations to SWD in their language classrooms, English Discussion Class Program Managers hope to continue collaborating with the SDSO and other departments within the university to provide relevant training to English Discussion Class' fulltime staff. Such collaboration should be possible at any institution with a disability support office or equivalent services. However, Rikkyo University is one of only 120 institutes of higher education in Japan, or about 10% of such institutions, that reported having an office or center dedicated to student disabili-

ity affairs in 2014 (Boeltzig-Brown, 2017). Language teachers and program administrators at the remaining 90% of colleges, universities, and vocational schools around the country will have a considerably harder time accommodating their SWD. Even when resources exist, measures must be put in place to ensure that such support can extend to the language learning classroom. Furthermore, language teachers and program administrators should be proactive in providing accommodations to SWD, as students do not always independently seek the support they need.

One major shortcoming of the framework described above is that it can only be applied to cases in which the student reported their needs to the university upon matriculation. SWD who do not report their needs go without specific interventions or accommodations of any kind. As identification of various needs improves across many higher education landscapes, so too will there be a growing urgency to properly support SWD in language learning contexts. Language program administrators and teachers alike would do well to increase their own awareness of various needs, create environments in which students feel comfortable stating their needs, identify available resources to support students' learning, and create standard operating procedures for effective delivery of an appropriate framework. Finally, further research into the implementation and efficacy of such a framework and its delivery would benefit most greatly from the voices of students themselves.

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tional Christian University's English for Liberal Arts Program. His research interests include English for Academic Purposes (EAP), language testing and assessment, intercultural communication, and professional development in language education. He can be reached by email at: jlesley@icu.ac.jp.

About the Authors

Davey Young received his B.A. degree in English from the University of Puget Sound and M.A. degree in TESOL from Seattle Pacific University. He has worked in a variety of ESL and EFL contexts as a teacher and administrator in the U.S., China, and Japan, and is currently a program manager at Rikkyo University's Center for English Discussion Class. His research interests include topic interest, materials development, and language learning for students with disabilities. He can be reached by email at dcyoung@rikkyo.ac.jp.

Matthew Y. Schaefer holds a Cambridge Delta (Diploma in TESOL) and received his M.A. degree in TESOL from Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. His experience includes teaching EFL in France, Italy, and Spain and working as a Director of Studies at a private language school in London, UK. He is currently a lecturer at Tokyo International University's Global Teaching Institute, and co-hosts the TEFLology Podcast. His research interests include program evaluation, teacher education, and speaking assessment methodology. He can be reached by email at: myschaefer1920@gmail.com.

Jamie Lesley received his B.A. degree in English Studies from Exeter University, UK and his M.A. degree in Applied Linguistics and TESOL from Leicester University, UK. He has worked in a range of second language teaching, training, examining, and management positions in the UK, America, and Japan. He is currently an instructor at Interna-

Table 1

Categorization of Disabilities Represented in English Discussion Classes by Year

	2015	2016	2017	2018
Health issues/poor health	0	0	1	1
Physical disability	2	3	1	1
Mental health disability	0	0	1	0
Developmental disability	3	5	2	5
Hearing and speech impairment	1	2	0	1
Visual impairment	1	0	1	2

Table 2

Examples of Specific Disabilities and Accommodations in English Discussion Classes

Disability	Accommodations
Physical disability (lower limb restriction)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Classroom layout was modified to allow easier wheelchair access. 2. Activity staging was modified to reduce the frequency of students changing seating location.
Hearing and speech impairment (deafness)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Two student volunteers proficient in Japanese sign language used a tablet to convert utterances from classmates into writing, as well as to read aloud what the student had written, when participating in discussion activities with other students. 2. The teacher provided print-outs of planned teacher-talk (e.g., instructions for each activity) labelled alphanumerically to the student at the start of each class. The teacher would write the letter of the corresponding teacher-talk on the board to signpost the lesson. 3. Additional time was provided during discussion tests, which were assessed with a revised rubric.
Developmental disability (dyslexia)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Homework readings were provided in a digital format for use with read-aloud software. 2. The teacher reduced the complexity of written board work and supplemented this with verbal instructions and confirmation checks.
Developmental disability (Autism Spectrum Disorder)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discussion prompts were modified to preclude abstract concepts that the student found difficult to understand. 2. The lesson plan and classroom activities were highly routinized, including color-coded board work and seating charts. 3. The student and teacher agreed on a signal that the student could send to the teacher in times of distress. The teacher would then ask the class if anyone needed a bathroom break and allow the student to step out of the room.

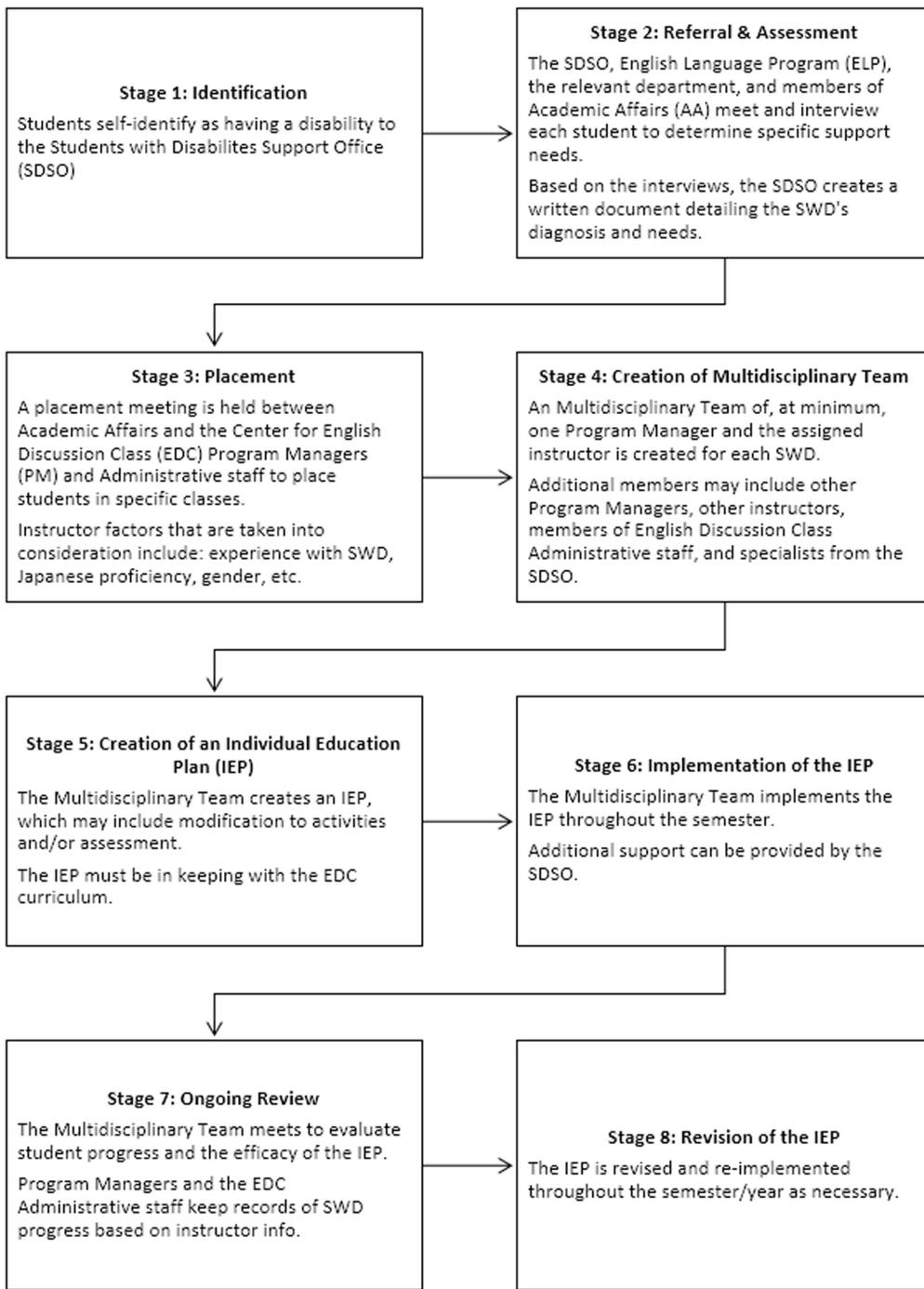


Figure 1. A framework for accommodating students with disabilities in English Discussion Classes.

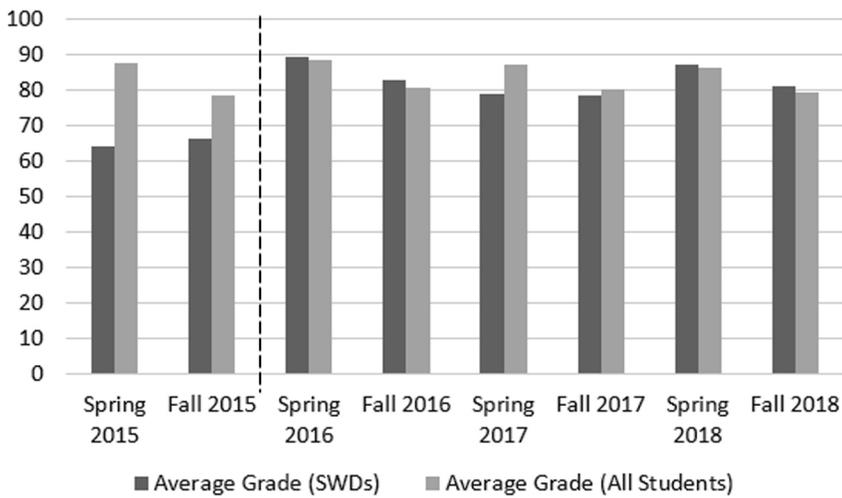


Figure 2. Comparison of average grades between students with disabilities and all students, AY2015-AY2018. (Dotted line represents the division between pre- and post-implementation of the framework).

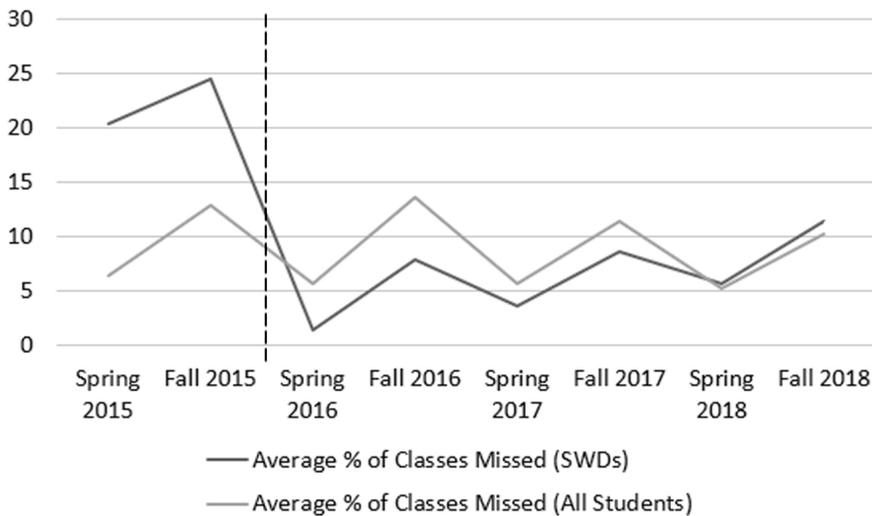


Figure 3. Comparison of attendance rates between students with disabilities and all students, AY2015-AY2018. (Dotted line represents the division between pre- and post-implementation of the framework).