

e-Lectures:

Differences in Assistive Technology and Access between Japan and The U.S.A.

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I will present the Differences of Law, Evaluating, Funding and Needs of assistive technology between Japan and the United States. There are many, many differences of assistive technology between these countries. In this time, I will introduce basic differences of assistive technology.

I will focus two main points.

The first point is the differences of Law, Evaluating, and Funding. When students with disabilities need an assistive technology at school in Japan, how do they get it? Where do they get funding? How about at Office and at Home? I will talk to you such basic information about this.

Second point is the differences of Needs for assistive technology. Japanese Culture, Japanese Custom, Japanese feeling and characteristics and so on are different from those in the United States. These differences sometimes cause the different needs of assistive technology. I will show you a couple of examples about this.

The biggest difference at school in Japan is how to evaluate assistive technology. When students with disabilities need assistive technology at school, in the United States, they can receive appropriate assistive technology because of the law, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA. Teachers, family members, professionals and the student himself organize IEP team or Individualized Education Program team. They discuss and decide what is the best technology for the student. But on the other hand, in Japan, every student also has a right to benefit from education under law, but the law says nothing about assistive technology. When deciding which technology to get for a student, the teacher in charge of the student, the principal and the other staff working at the school discuss and determine it without the student and his or her family present. They may ask the student which technology he wants before the meeting, and they try to consider his needs at their meeting. But they will make a decision without him and his family.

About Funding at school in Japan, they can request funding for assistive technology from the government. It means that they can use the government funds for equipment or teaching materials in the school.

After graduating from school, most people will want to work.

While in the United States, employers must give equal opportunities to people with disabilities at work, in Japan, it is not an equal opportunity, but a mandated minimum percentage of employees with disabilities. This is the biggest difference. The mandated percentage is only around 2.0%. I think it should be increased. In addition, employers must follow the rule, but actually, about half of the companies don't follow the rule. Why don't they follow the rule? Why do they choose to pay for penalty, instead of hiring people with disabilities? I guess there are two reasons. One reason is the lack of company's effort. Another reason is the difficulty of accessibility in Japan from home to a building of the company for people with physical disabilities.

When people with disabilities personally need an assistive technology, they can request funding from the government. How much subsidy they can get depends on their income. The income includes not only the person with disability, but also income of his families living with him. But they cannot get funding for all types of assistive technology. It has a limit for the kind of assistive technology. You must get some funding for assistive technology on only a fixed list of items.

For example, I have another electronic wheelchair. It is lighter and smaller than this wheelchair. I like it, but it made my clothes dirty, because my arm touched its tire. Then I needed something to keep my arm from hitting the tire. But I had to tell the government that I wanted an extra armrest. If I say "I want something to protect myself from the dirty tire", then they, maybe, will say "the item is not on the list. Please pay by yourself." This sounds strange!

The hardest work for people with disabilities living in Japan to get assistive technology is gathering information. In Japan, there are very few organizations, groups and companies that help the person to decide which technology is the best for him or her. I hope there will be more information provider or consultant about assistive technology in the near future of Japan.

These systems that I have already introduced are rules that the Japanese government made and they can change it. But the Japanese cannot change their culture and language. And, it causes different needs of assistive technology. I will show you a couple of examples about this.

Example 1. This picture is an inner front entrance that is lower than the rest of the house. Most Japanese take off their shoes here before entering the house. Therefore, there is a step from this area to the rest of the house. Most Japanese houses have such a step in their house. So people with disabilities need a ramp or lift to go into their house. The assistive technology required must be reasonably priced, nice looking and compact. Because most Japanese houses have a step, if it is reasonably priced, more houses may get the assistive technology. And an entrance of house is important place for most Japanese. Everybody go through the entrance to go into the house. Therefore most Japanese want to keep nice looking of the entrance.

Example 2. Most buses in Japan have no lift and some steps, but even if a bus has a lift for the physically disabled, it is still hard for them to get on the bus, because the buses are required to come to the bus stops on time. Therefore, drivers of Japanese buses are sensitive about the time. Therefore, some Japanese with disabilities insist that bus companies should change all bases into non-step buses. It would make it easier for not only people with disabilities, but also elderly, children and everyone to get on the bus.

Example 3. Japanese is difficult language to deal with by computer. Japanese has three types of characters: Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji. Hiragana and Katakana have 48 characters. And Kanji has more than three thousand characters. This causes confusion for people with visual disabilities who have never seen it before. And it is hard to make a communication device for developers of software or hardware.

I would like to talk to you about a couple of examples of my solution in my house.

As you know, most Japanese houses have a step at an entrance of the house. My house also has a step. Therefore, my father made a special ramp at the other entrance of my house for me. Good point is that we put a small board on the window sash, which makes it easier for me to go into the house with the wheelchair. But I still need help to do something when I enter the house.

It is to clean tire of my wheelchair with a wet towel because I don't take off my shoes.

My father also made small tables in the bathroom. I use these tables and to lie down on to take off and on my pants. These tables are useful for someone to help me to go to bathroom by his or herself. I don't care if I would lie down on the floor, because the floor of Japanese house is clean enough to lie down. But to lift me up from the floor will make his or her back hurt.

Before I came here to New York, I stayed at a kind of a senior care center near Washington D.C. for five months. My room was cute and has a personal bathroom and sink. But the lever on the sink was little bit far for me. Then, one of my friends who assist me to stay in the United States for the first month made a ring to pull the lever...from a coffee stir. I just hook my finger on the ring and pull the lever. When I turned off the water, I just push the lever.

I am going to talk about solution to open and close a door. I can push a door by my wheelchair, but it is hard to pull the door because I cannot reach a knob on the door. Therefore, I hook a string on the knob to pull the door. When I went to George Mason University in Fairfax in Virginia, I always brought the string to open or close the door. Then I could pull the door with the string by myself and I didn't need to ask anyone to open the door. These are very low-tech solutions.

In my house in Japan, I don't need to pull the door because all the first floor doors except the entrance are sliding doors. Besides, it is wider than a regular door. This is one of the solutions to open and close a door.

Finally, in order to get assistive technology easily in Japan, I think there are three points. The first point is to realize how independent assistive technology makes us. We sometimes don't need a big assistive technology, but a little bit changes may be enough to do by ourselves. Second point is to make it easier to get assistive technology. We have to get many procedures to get the technology. It make harder to get it. Therefore, final point is to make more organizations that help the person to decide which technology is the best. It is important to know which technology is the best for the person with disabilities in Japan.

Thank you for listening my speech. I appreciate it.