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Architect helps other dyslexics succeed

Midori Matsuzawa / Daily Yomiuri Staff Writer

After graduating from middle school in 1999, Takanao Todo began studying in Britain. While he was in a preparatory program at a school on the outskirts of London, his teachers found that compared to his speaking skills, the boy showed far lower levels in reading and writing.

Then the young Todo was asked to take a test, though he didn't really understand what it was for. The results showed that he suffered from dyslexia, which affects the ability to learn to read and write despite otherwise normal intellectual development.

Dyslexia is less well known in Japan, a country that only last year officially introduced special-needs education for children with developmental disorders--such as learning disabilities and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

Todo's mother, Eiko, 55, traveled to Britain for a briefing on the finding. When Todo heard from his mother what he had been diagnosed with, "I was surprised, but much more than that, I was relieved," the now 25-year-old architect recalled during a recent interview with The Daily Yomiuri.

Since his primary school days, Todo had faced many language-related difficulties. He often felt that his efforts to write kanji were in vain, no matter how hard he tried.

"I felt as if I was in a fog or surrounded by a wall or something," he recalled. Discovering the reason for his problems helped the fog to clear, he said.

For Todo, kanji are images. When he was a primary school student, Eiko taught him how to pronounce and guess the meaning of kanji by breaking them into their elements, much in the way that foreign students study kanji. He still makes major mistakes when writing in kanji and often confuses certain hiragana characters, such as me and nu.

He describes reading as a sort of visual overload. "It's like all the textual information is coming

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out to me at once," he explained. "It's so tiring to find my place."

Nonetheless, Todo said it is "by far easier" for him to read and write in Japanese than in English, because dense-looking kanji can act as visual highlights amid lighter-looking kana, offering guideposts through a sentence. In contrast, he said, "All I can [stand to] read in English is about three pages."

Todo's memories of school life in Japan are bitter. His homeroom teachers during his last three years did not accept their students as they were, but instead insisted on forcing the "different" students to become "normal." Apparently, Todo was labeled as a difficult student, and was treated as such.

The boy often was misunderstood as merely having been lax in his penmanship practice. In arithmetic, he often calculated everything in his head, but his teachers would not accept his answers--despite their being correct--because he didn't show his work on paper.

However, Todo excelled when studying subjects he was interested in. Art always was his favorite subject, but he refused to finish his work whenever teachers added something of their own to it.

Todo spent his middle school days at a boarding school in Saitama Prefecture, where he "made efforts to be 'normal' and become more cooperative in my own way," he recalled. "But it was all in vain, and that only made me more frustrated."

Consequently, it became difficult for Todo to think of continuing his education in Japan. Instead, he sought hope in Britain, where his relatives had once worked or studied. The choice eventually turned out to be right.

After learning he was dyslexic, Todo received special tutoring to help him cope with the learning disability. The course, called "study skills," allowed the young man to experiment with a number of study methods. One method calls for a colored transparent plastic sheet to be placed over the page of a book, thereby making it easier to read. He also learned how to scan a book for the necessary information.

When taking tests, Todo was allowed to refer to dictionaries, and was given 25 percent more time than other students to complete his exams.

The test that showed Todo to be dyslexic also revealed his strengths, in particular excellent spatial perception. The boy studied 3-D modeling and graphic design when he took his A-levels at Cambridge. (A-levels are two-year courses taken by students in Britain, the results of which determine which university a student can enter.)

In 2002, he matriculated to London's Architectural Association School of Architecture, where he graduated this summer.

Todo said he appreciates that he has had people who trust him close by, including a supportive teacher at AA School.

His mother has been the principle figure for him.

"I'm really happy that my mother has always accepted me the way I am," he said, adding that she had been very flexible and accommodating.

"If you can realize, even just once, that somebody appreciates who you are," he said, "that kind of feeling can last long, give you hope and eventually the courage to go [and try something]."

After learning of her son's problem, his mother decided to take action here in Japan. Her research told her not only that dyslexia was little known in Japan, but also that she herself suffers from many of the same problems.

In 2001, two years after her son's diagnosis, she established a nonprofit organization called EDGE (Extraordinary Dyslexic Gifted Eclectic). "To help [those with dyslexia in Japan] improve their innate strengths further so they can live with self-confidence--that's our biggest goal," the founder said.

Todo has discussed his own experience at the organization's gatherings, which eventually led him to be featured in a recent NHK documentary. The up-and-coming architect is about to start his career in France next year, while continuing to help EDGE.

Todo admits that he had fortunate circumstances that enabled him to study in Britain and find a way to live on his own. "Had I attended high school and university in Japan, I'd have probably been left at a loss," he said. "My frustration [before going to Britain] could have turned into violence."

Therefore, he hopes that what he regards as good fortune "will become available as a matter of course in Japan."

"Hopefully, being dyslexic will be regarded as nothing out of the ordinary and just part of who a person is--just like blood types," he added.

Expert: 'Japan can catch up in dyslexia treatment'

Japan is nearly 10 years behind Britain in dealing with students with dyslexia, according to Madeleine Portwood, senior educational psychologist at the Durham County Council in England.

However, the expert also said she had seen a "tremendous willingness to learn" about the condition when she came to Japan last month to attend an event organized by the nonprofit organization EDGE. "I think in Japan, probably in two years' time, you'll be where the U.K. is now," she told The Daily Yomiuri.

To make it come true, "it's simply a question of raising awareness amongst teachers now in Japan," said the specialist in developmental disorders in children. "When they want to make a difference, then all of the strategies [we have found to be effective] are available."

In Britain, dyslexic students are aided by a number of tools and teaching approaches developed by teachers so that their difficulties with reading and writing do not disadvantage them.

Research has found that some dyslexics find it difficult to see black writing on a white background, Portwood said.

Yellow may work for some students, while pink or green may be helpful for others. After it can be found which colors would work best for these students, "the teacher will provide their work on the colored paper and also allow them to write on the colored paper," she said.

These students are also allowed to use colored filters when reading books. Some may wear tinted glasses instead, she added.

An approach called "multisensory teaching" is also effective for dyslexic students, the expert said, in which they touch letters with their eyes closed so that they can feel their shapes.

Teachers in Japan should look into the classroom and form their own ideas and try them out--just like their British counterparts have done so far, Portwood said.

"Because Japanese is a different language [from English]," she said, "we need the teachers in Japan to find strategies that work best [for Japanese students]."

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