

Global Issues in Local Contexts: Japanese University EFL Learners' Reactions to the Development of Relevant and Engaging SDGS Materials

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Abstract

With the growing importance of the United Nations' SDGs, many EFL textbooks addressing the goals have been developed. However, these textbooks generally discuss the applicability of the SDGs in Global South countries, and for university students in Japan, this has resulted in “SDG burnout,” as they study the topic but often fail to find meaningful connections to the materials. This article builds on previous research into the efficacy of culturally familiar materials, and it takes SDG education in a new direction through the creation of materials in dialogue with social justice issues. Four lessons were created by the researchers, and as part of the post-reading assignment, learners had the autonomy to choose between culturally familiar or unfamiliar activities related to either the news or popular culture. A 6-point Likert scale was used to gauge student interest, which indicated that the inclusion of social justice issues may positively affect interest. A series of binomial tests revealed that learners preferred culturally familiar activities and activities related to the news. These findings provide important implications for teaching the SDGs as they suggest learners might be most receptive to culturally familiar materials that are based on the news and connected to issues of social justice.

Keywords: SDGs, culturally familiar materials, social justice issues, global education

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a hot topic in global education, from primary school classrooms to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university classes. Textbook publishers in Japan recently began creating SDG-focused materials targeting university students, including materials for content-language integrated learning (CLIL) as well as EFL learners. However, these textbooks generally discuss the applicability of the SDGs in foreign,

typically Global South, countries (Honma & Yamamoto, 2021; Nakatani, 2020; Sasajima et al., 2021, 2022; Yamamoto et al., 2022). This has resulted in a phenomenon so prevalent that the Japanese media has sometimes used the term “SDG burnout,” describing how SDGs are pervasive in Japanese media and schools, and students may have learned about the topic in several classes yet still fail to connect the material in meaningful ways (Kobayashi, 2023). Furthermore, while a small number of textbooks that teach the SDGs specifically use limited examples from Japan, such as black business practices or food waste, there is no sustained engagement with culturally familiar contexts (Nakatani, 2020; Oseki & McManus, 2021; Yoshihara et al., 2022). Based on these issues, this research project took SDG education in a new direction, through the creation of educational materials in dialogue with social justice issues both in Japan and overseas. The classes were structured to show how the SDGs addressed specific social justice issues relevant not only in Global South countries but also in the Global North, specifically in Japan.

Social justice education can be most broadly conceptualized as teaching students to recognize the social structures of hierarchies and inequalities around race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, and ability, among other traits (Boyd, 2017). In this paper, social justice issues refer to unequal treatment or access to opportunities caused by these hierarchies and the movements for greater equity, such as the Anti-Apartheid Movement, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, or #MeToo. For students, these issues can be broad, global social movements, but what they learn can also translate into small actions, such as respect and care for others in classroom contexts.

Attention to these issues is important because as Staley (2018) has argued, social justice in EFL education “increases students’ interest in real-world issues... helps them understand the authentic linguistic context,” as well as serves to “provide students with the tools to analyze power dynamics in the world and nourish within them the seeds of respect and advocacy” (para. 1). Furthermore, Brandon (2019) demonstrated that this can be significant because a focus on social justice restructures and reorients knowledge, which then reframes language teaching as a force for multiculturalism and equity. Thus, social justice education is not only a more meaningful way for students to connect to the SDGs, but through its multicultural dimensions, it also allows for both global and culturally familiar connections.

In order to shift the framework for the study of the SDGs in Japan, the present study had several objectives. First, after reviewing the current materials and identifying issues with how the SDGs are being approached in language education in Japan, we created original materials to better meet student needs and connect the SDGs to relevant issues in their lives. We investigated what context students would self-select for study, culturally familiar or culturally unfamiliar, and what source they preferred for their learning materials, news or popular culture. We sought to reaffirm our previous findings that when given the autonomy to choose, students will select culturally familiar related materials over culturally unfamiliar ones as well as lighter topics such as popular culture over heavier ones related to the news. To this end, the paper concludes with quantitative and qualitative analysis of student selections of activities, reactions to the units of study, and a discussion of the implications of the findings for educators and curriculum developers.

Literature Review

This project is centered around what are collectively referred to as the SDGs. Established by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals are a collection of 17 interlinked global goals designed to be a “blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all” (United Nations, 2023). They address inequality and social issues shared by every country in the world while highlighting some of the biggest crises facing the world today.

In Japan, lessons on the SDGs have become popular across all levels of education, from elementary school to university. There are even educational television programs, comedy collaborations, books, curricula, and informational advertisements dedicated to them. Such initiatives in education, advertising, and popular culture have raised the level of awareness of the SDGs and their purpose.

As early as 2019, Japan-based researchers were engaging with the SDGs and Education for Sustainable Development in Japanese education (Jodoin & Singer, 2019). Jodoin and Singer found that a more holistic framework was likely necessary to promote SDG competency in EFL classrooms, but such content can be a meaningful way to have students be better global citizens and language learners. This points to the larger issue that, even though some textbooks specifically teach the SDGs to EFL students in Japan, there are still problems with their approach, such as a perspective that focuses on the SDGs as Global South issues, repetition of content across different courses, and failing to connect the content meaningfully to social justice issues or problems in Japan. This bias is significant because the issues foregrounded by the SDGs and social justice movements are beyond the power of any single nation-state to effectively address (Fraser, 2008a), making these issues relevant for every nation, but the current materials effectively position the SDGs as problems for countries other than Japan.

Thus, the first problem with SDG education is that the perspective from which the goals are taught has been skewed. In Japan, the SDGs are frequently framed as problems in foreign countries, most often in the Global South. Japan is the fourth largest Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development donor and the largest donor country in Asia. For many Japanese students, the SDGs are often presented as a set of goals that Japan can help other countries achieve, rather than an opportunity for reflection on how the SDGs might be implemented in Japan, or how the issues in Japan and the world are interconnected. This indicates there is a clear bias in how the SDGs are taught. To give some examples, current Japanese global studies textbooks that are centered around the SDGs such as *Yasashi Eigo de SDGs!* (The SDGs in Easy English!, Honma & Yamamoto, 2021), or *CLIL SDGs* (Sasajima et al., 2021) tend to focus on the “global,” and significantly less attention is given to how Japan fits into this “global” society. The only texts to consistently address this gap are *Living as Global Citizens* (Oseki & McManus, 2021) and *SDGs x Discussion* (Yoshihara et al., 2022), both of which include examples from Japan.

For learners, neglecting to include local contexts in a global approach to education is not the most effective way to introduce language learners to the SDGs. Multiple studies have demonstrated that using culturally familiar texts and contexts improves student interest, material comprehension, and vocabulary recall. Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) initially demonstrated that incorporating a learner’s background knowledge assists in material comprehension, and further research has supported this (Anderson, 1994, 2004; Carrell, 1984;

Khataee, 2018; Y. Liu, 2015; Novita et al., 2023a). Further studies conducted in Middle East, ASEAN, and East Asian countries showed that nativizing the text by changing proper nouns to match learners' cultural contexts also increased comprehension (Alptekin, 2006; Erten & Razi, 2009; Jalilifar & Assi, 2008; Novita et al., 2023a, 2023b; Tavakoli et al., 2013; Wulandari et al., 2018) and vocabulary retention (Sasaki, 2000). Additional studies revealed that in contexts from Iran to Taiwan, EFL students believe that prior cultural knowledge of the materials is needed to be able to understand them (Bijani et al., 2022; Y. C. Liu, 2015) and the lack of any necessary sociocultural background knowledge or the presence of unfamiliar content hinders reading comprehension (Khataee, 2018).

In Japan, studies have also confirmed that culturally familiar materials resulted in greater vocabulary gains and comprehension (Sheridan, Tanaka, & Hogg, 2019; Sheridan, Tanaka, & Tang, 2019). These studies demonstrated that culturally familiar materials increased student interest. Additionally, Sheridan and Condon (2020) revealed that students would self-select culturally familiar material as reading assignments almost three-quarters of the time when given the autonomy to choose. This demonstrates that culturally familiar contexts lead to greater learning gains and student interest, and is relevant to the use of the SDGs in EFL classrooms because the SDGs are frequently taught as issues of other countries, and this may have the effect of alienating students from the material.

An additional problem in Japan specifically is students have often had classes on the SDGs and may be experiencing the aforementioned "SDGs Fatigue." The Japanese government has made SDG education part of its new curriculum (Okubo et al., 2021). This, coupled with the fact that for many students, the SDGs are taught in the context of Global South countries, can lead to boredom on the part of students as they may have learned about the topic in several classes but still fail to connect the material to their lives.

Furthermore, the current materials elide connections between the SDGs and social justice issues. However, the interest in the SDGs has occurred alongside an increasing awareness of social justice in education and an explosion of social justice issues featuring in news and popular culture. The interest in SDGs in education is occurring concomitantly with increased awareness of the importance of social justice education in our teaching practices (Boyd, 2017; Cates, 2016). The movement for social justice and the promotion of the SDGs are interconnected and approaching them in this way is a powerful educational tool. This approach also means the SDGs can be explored holistically, recognizing the issues as global problems that transcend and connect countries as Fraser (2008a, 2008b) has argued, rather than as a singular problem for specific countries. Recentering SDG and social justice education through this local and global lens has significant implications for educators around the world, regardless of national boundaries.

To demonstrate the efficacy of this holistic approach we investigate three points. First, we attempt to reframe SDG education to allow students to make more meaningful connections to the materials by incorporating issues of social justice with cultural familiarity that are relevant to their lives. Second, we look to find further support for our previous research that has shown that when given the autonomy to choose their own topics to research for homework, learners will select culturally familiar topics over culturally unfamiliar ones as well as, third, students will prefer to study items related to popular culture more frequently than topics related to the news.

Methodology

Participants

Seventy-eight lower-intermediate students at one private university (24 female, 19 male) and one national university (24 female, 10 male, 1 nonbinary) in western Japan consented to participate in this mixed-methods study. The participants belonged to four intact classes and ranged in age from 19 to 21. Two of the four classes consisted of students from the Faculty of Agriculture. The materials developed for this study were taught to these students as additional units of study within an EFL course with a set curriculum. Students from the other two classes belonged to the Faculty of Liberal Arts. They were taught the materials in a CLIL course designed around the SDGs and social justice issues. The four intact classes were taught by the two researchers of this study. Informed consent procedures were strictly followed, and students elected to participate based on this informed consent. Responses were accessible only to the researchers and data was anonymized to ensure student privacy and confidentiality standards.

Materials

The articles. The four articles used in this study were written by the two researchers. Each article was approximately 1500 words in length and covered issues of Food, Water, Plastic in the Ocean, and Labor. The researchers used the SDGs as a general framework to present these issues but simultaneously sought to highlight how the SDGs intersected with important social justice issues, for example, indigenous water rights, food access, or forced labor. Through attention to social justice issues, the courses also focused on how these problems were relevant globally and in Japan. Furthermore, the articles aimed to foreground the intersectionality of the SDGs.

Class assignment. As part of the two 15-week courses at each university, participants were required to read one article and complete a post-reading assignment each week for four weeks. The articles and post-reading activities were electronically assigned as homework. In the first part of the post-reading assignment, students identified unknown vocabulary and wrote a summary, discussion questions, and their opinion of the article. In the second part of the assignment, students were required to complete a research extension activity on the issue. As shown in the fifth activity of the Appendix, the students were given the autonomy to select from one of four research extension activities which were based on topics discussed in the reading. Hyperlinks were provided to the sources assigned. The four options students were given to choose from were:

- 1) read an article from a foreign news source,
- 2) review a foreign popular-culture media source, such as YouTube, music videos, or comic excerpts,
- 3) read an article from a Japanese news source, or
- 4) review a Japanese popular-culture media source, such as YouTube, music videos, or manga excerpts.

The options were all designed and selected to ensure each choice would take students approximately one hour outside of class to complete. The students summarized their research extension activity findings in one paragraph. Their selections in this part of the assignment were used to investigate the second and third research questions of whether the cultural

contexts of the activity and/or the type of activity, news, or popular culture, impact student selection of assignments. In class, the students read the articles in small groups and took turns presenting the first and second parts of their post-reading assignments.

Survey to gauge interest. On the first day of class, the study was explained to the students and informed consent procedures were followed. Students reaffirmed their participation on the last day of class. They understood they could withdraw their consent to participate at any time. After study and class discussion in each of the four class meetings, students completed a bilingual reflection survey which included a Likert-scale questionnaire regarding their interest in the unit of study. Participants were asked to indicate their reactions on a 6-point scale and further explain their answers in four or more complete sentences. The results from the questionnaire were used to help answer the first research question of whether incorporating issues of social justice with cultural familiarity that are relevant to students' lives would improve interest and allow students to make more meaningful connections to the materials. The article, post-reading assignment, and reflection survey for Plastic in the Ocean are shown in the Appendix as an example.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

Student interest in the materials. Self-reported interest scores on a Likert scale from 1 to 6 with increasing scores indicating greater interest were used to investigate the first research question of whether our newly-developed materials would be well-received by students.

Table 1. Interest survey scores

Unit of study	<i>n</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SEM</i>	<i>SD</i>
Food Issues	75	2	6	5.13	.08	.64
Water Issues	76	2	6	5.07	.08	.74
Plastic in Ocean	78	3	6	5.19	.09	.79
Labor Issues	69	3	6	5.03	.09	.71
Overall	298	2	6	5.10	.04	.74

As shown in Table 1, the four units of study received an overall interest score of 5.10 with the mean interest scores for all of the materials receiving scores of greater than 5 points out of 6. The most popular unit of study, Plastic in the Ocean, received a score of 5.19, followed by Food Issues, 5.13, Water Issues, 5.07, and the least popular unit, Labor Issues, received a score of 5.03. These results provided support for the authors' idea that students would show interest in materials relevant to their culture that are connected to issues of social justice within their own culture.

The cultural context of the activities selected. In order to answer the second research question of whether the cultural contexts of the activities impact student selection of assignments, we examined the frequencies and percentages of the contexts selected. We hypothesized that students would select activities related to the culturally familiar context of Japan over the culturally unfamiliar ones with a percentage higher than 50%.

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Table 2. Frequencies and percentages of the context selected

Unit of study	Frequency of Japanese context	Frequency of foreign context	Percentage of Japanese context	Percentage of foreign context
Food Issues	61	14	81.3*	18.7
Water Issues	34	39	46.6	53.4
Plastic in Ocean	49	26	65.3**	34.7
Labor Issues	45	26	63.4***	36.6
Total	189	105	64.3*	35.7

Note: Asterisks indicate a significant preference for Japanese context found with binomial tests. * $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .05$

As shown in Table 2, activities based in the culturally familiar context of Japan were selected 189 times overall, or 64.3% of the time. In contrast, activities based in the culturally unfamiliar context were chosen 105 times, or 35.7% of the time. A two-tailed, z approximation test was conducted to evaluate the differences among related proportions and frequencies. The proportion of .64 differed significantly from the hypothesized value of .50, two-tailed $p < .001$. A series of binomial tests evaluating the differences among related proportions and frequencies for each unit of study were also conducted. It was found that students preferred activities related to the culturally familiar context over the culturally unfamiliar one to a statistically significant degree for Food Issues (81.3% to 18.7%), two-tailed $p < .001$, Plastic in the Ocean (65.3% to 35.7%), two-tailed $p < .01$, and Labor Issues (45% to 26%), two-tailed $p = .032$. However, students slightly preferred activities related to the culturally unfamiliar context over the culturally familiar one for Water Issues (53.4% to 46.6%). However, the binomial test did not reveal a significant difference in preference, two-tailed $p = .640$.

The type of activities selected. Frequencies and percentages were also investigated to answer the third research question of whether the type of activity, news, or popular culture, affects student selection of assignments. We hypothesized that students would select the popular culture activities over the news activities with a higher percentage than 50%.

Table 3. Frequencies and percentages of the type of activity selected

Unit of study	Frequency of News	Frequency of Pop Culture	Percentage of News	Percentage of Pop Culture
Food Issues	54	21	72*	28
Water Issues	36	37	49.3	50.7
Plastic in Ocean	42	33	56	44
Labor Issues	57	14	80.3*	19.7
Total	189	105	64.3*	35.7

Note: Asterisks indicate a significant preference for the news activity found with binomial tests. * $p < .001$

As displayed in Table 3, activities based on the news were selected 189 times, or 64.3% of the time. However, activities based on popular culture were chosen just 105 times, or 35.7% of the time. A two-tailed, z approximation test was also conducted to evaluate the differences among related proportions and frequencies. The proportion of .64 differed significantly from the hypothesized value of .50, two-tailed $p < .001$. A series of binomial tests evaluating the

differences among related proportions and frequencies for each unit of study were also conducted. These tests revealed that students preferred activities related to the news over popular culture for Food Issues (72% to 28%) and Labor Issues (80.3% to 19.7%) to a significant degree, two-tailed $p < .001$. Students also preferred activities based on the news for Plastic in the Ocean (56% to 44%), however, this preference did not differ significantly from the hypothesized value of .50, two-tailed $p = 0.356$. Finally, it was discovered that students slightly preferred activities related to popular culture over the news for Water Issues (50.7% to 49.3%). However, the binomial test did not reveal a significant difference in preference (two-tailed $p = 1.000$).

Follow-up statistical analysis. Since the examination of the frequencies and percentages of context selected and the type of activity selected yielded the same overall results, further investigation was conducted. A chi-square test of independence was performed to evaluate the relationship between the context (culturally familiar vs culturally unfamiliar) and type (popular culture vs news) of the activity selected. However, the relationship between these two variables was not significant, $\chi^2 = (1, N = 294) = 2.73, p = .099$.

Discussion

Quantitative Results

The materials were in general well-received by the participants, and all units in this study were rated as interesting, receiving a mean interest score of greater than 5 points out of 6. This provides some support to the first hypothesis that incorporating issues of social justice with culturally familiar materials allows students to make more meaningful connections and serves to help increase interest.

When students were given the autonomy to select between culturally familiar and culturally unfamiliar activities, our results showed that students significantly preferred the culturally familiar context (64.3% to 35.7%), providing support for the second hypothesis and reinforcing the results of Sheridan and Condon (2020). This finding may be explained by previous studies that found learners' prior cultural knowledge of the content is necessary to make learning materials comprehensible, and lends credence to the idea that students more actively engage with culturally relevant materials (Anderson, 1994, 2004; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Carrell, 1984; Khataee, 2018; Y. Liu, 2015; Novita et al., 2023a). Finally, this result also speaks to the research that has demonstrated culturally familiar contexts increase student interest in the materials (Sheridan, Tanaka, & Hogg, 2019; Sheridan, Tanaka, & Tang, 2019).

The analysis also demonstrated that when students had the freedom to choose between activities based on the news or popular culture, students selected activities based on the news more frequently (64.3% to 35.7%) to a significant degree. This finding does not support the third research hypothesis nor the findings in Sheridan and Condon (2020) that showed learners would select easier activities such as ones related to popular culture over more difficult ones. However, there are several possible reasons why students may have preferred news to popular culture items. First, students likely found it easier to do activities that involved a single text rather than having to read threads about the topic on SNS or watch videos on YouTube. A second possible explanation is that students were able to use translation software on news stories, which is not possible with videos or social media. Finally, it is also likely that because the choices for popular culture texts were limited, they were not as interesting to students. An

avenue for further study would be to allow students to self-select their own popular culture materials and compare choice selections.

In addition, in the case of the water article, students preferred activities in culturally unfamiliar contexts and related to popular culture, contradicting the other results. There are two reasons why this may be the case. First, according to student feedback, the issues raised in the article about water were new to them and therefore had not been studied in any context. The novelty might be one reason why culturally unfamiliar contexts were popular. It might also be explained by the fact that the YouTube video that was offered in the foreign context contained Japanese subtitles, making it a more attractive option for students.

Qualitative Analysis

A qualitative analysis of student responses adds information to the quantitative results and also suggests important reasons why students responded the way they did. In this section, we analyze student feedback and highlight several recurring trends in student responses to clarify how students related the articles to their home country of Japan, to their daily lives, and their positive reactions to including social action and multiple perspectives in the lessons.

Relating the global to the local. Students in general responded very positively to articles that related to Japan and shared ways in which they could meaningfully connect classwork to Japan. This provided strong support for our statistical results and the first two hypotheses. A common remark on the student feedback forms was surprise, similar to what one student wrote when they said: "...I didn't know that Japan had the problem of poverty. I learned that there are children in Japan who suffer from hunger. I thought I should know the problem of the country where I live." A second student wrote, "...this article was full of surprises. I was especially surprised that there are people suffering from hunger in Japan. Furthermore, I was shocked that the percentage of people suffering from hunger is higher than I thought. ...people tend to overlook such people." Another remarked: "I used to think that food problems were only issues such as hunger in developing countries and food waste in Japan, so I learned that there are other problems... I realized that a problem in one area involves several issues and that it is important to think broadly." For students like this, examples from Japan helped them realize the issue was not just a problem in foreign countries, or the Global South, but in Japan as well. They also learned to think about the intersection of many SDG issues; as one student who connected hidden poverty to food issues in Japan wrote, "The most surprising point was the poverty rate in Japan... It was more than I thought. Honestly, I didn't know it and I felt embarrassed because I had not try to see such a fact behind Japan." By studying issues like food insecurity, scarcity, and sovereignty with examples from both Japan and abroad, students were able to see how in societies like Japan the issue still exists but might be less visible, and students can connect to the issues in the text in new ways. The majority of homework replies highlighted the fact that there were food issues in Japan that the students had not realized were a problem and they ranked the article highly because of that.

Relating to the students' lives. The connection of issues not just to Japan, but also to their own daily lives was something students highlighted in their feedback on all the articles, providing support to the authors' idea that personalization is a possible way to overcome SDG burnout. This personalization was reflected in responses as they wrote about how they saw social justice issues manifested in their lives. Students remarked they saw food waste around them every day: "I work in a supermarket. A lot of food is thrown away every day there..."

Being able to relate the article to their daily, lived experience was an important point for many students. This point was also illustrated in student responses to the article on labor; as one student wrote, “I have always been interested in labor issues because they are familiar to me... Frankly, I could be in that situation myself after I graduate from college. So I felt we had to think about how to deal with it now.” A second student remarked, “Because, labor issues aren’t someone else’s problem. I will become a member of society and work in the next few years.” Almost all students expressed some degree of interest in the article because it related to their lives and future, and they began thinking about potential social justice issues connected to labor issues in Japan. Furthermore, although the article did mention violations of the human rights of foreign workers in Japan, a large percentage of respondents focused only on issues of NEET and freeters instead. Their answers indicate this is an issue of relatability. The students that do mention foreign workers in Japan describe feelings, such as being again “shocked,” “surprised,” or “embarrassed” such a situation is occurring in Japan, rather than directly relating it to their lives. This use of adjective descriptors might indicate the greater effect that relating the articles to students’ lives produced.

Positive response to social actions. Another trend that was clear in the qualitative analysis was that many students cited examples of positive action given in the articles as one of the reasons why they were interested in them. Many social justice issues and SDG goals can seem daunting, but through its introduction of even small-scale solutions such as community fridges, cafeterias for children who do not have access to food or parental support all the time at home (*kodomo shokudo*), and food sovereignty, the food homework offered more potential solutions than did the other readings, such as the unit on labor or water. In the case of labor in particular, the lesson highlighted many labor issues without offering solutions, and this may be one reason for the bleak tone of many student responses.

The fact that students were inspired by concrete solutions in the article is also clear from their feedback. One student wrote, “I can’t take big actions that can dramatically change something, but I’m aware of the problem of food loss. So, I found it very interesting to know one of the practical means of community fridge projects by reading this article. There may be other initiatives in the world that are not yet known in Japan, so I would like to know about those...” A second student remarked, “It was good to know that many countries are working on this problem... After reading this article, I want to do what we can to deal with food problem.”

In contrast to this, the students expressed worry or displeasure in their responses to the labor article, perhaps because it did not show examples of activist work being undertaken for labor issues in Japan and had direct and immediate connections to their futures, reinforcing student concerns as they graduate post-COVID. Many students wrote things such as, “I worry about my future job,” or “I worry that I may be NEET and trouble people around me.” While the students’ age, as well as the fact that the lessons occurred during the disruption of employment and education caused by the pandemic, likely also influenced students to give voice to their anxiety, upon reflection it might have been useful to talk about groups or organizations working to address labor issues in Japan or overseas, as was the case in the food article. This may also account for the statistical anomaly in the water article, insofar as that particular piece introduced a broad range of issues but no steps toward action.

Appreciation of multiple perspectives. Finally, although students in general preferred news to popular culture sources as homework when music or popular culture materials were discussed in class, students indicated their appreciation of it in the course reflections. Many

students also specifically noted they appreciated the use of music in class as a popular culture source even if the song was not in English or Japanese. This was because it raised awareness about different perspectives and taught them things the readings could not. Specifically referring to the use of a song to promote awareness about food access (HarvestPlus's song by Rwandan artists, "Ibishyimbo"/ "Better Nutrition from High-Iron Beans," (2014)) one student wrote, "It is very useful to tell the thing by song that can't tell by words [sic]." Another wrote that they believed songs could also be potential solutions to problems that involved raising awareness, especially for people who might not have high education levels or access to printed material. Lessons centered around SDG issues, social justice, and music have been shown to be effective in other contexts and student responses to popular culture, when the students selected that option, were very positive (Yokota, 2022). Thus, using music as the only popular culture source might have yielded different results.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Research

This study found some support for the hypotheses. First, the study demonstrated that this new framework, approaching the SDGs through social justice and both global and local contexts, increased student interest and engagement. Importantly, this study further revealed that social justice approaches that take a holistic and culturally inclusive approach to the SDGs receive positive feedback with a high level of interest. Students uniformly rated the lessons highly and in informal discussions expressed their opinion that these were effective and interesting ways to learn about social justice issues relevant to the world, Japan, and the SDGs. In particular, learning about them through their connection to social justice and through their relevance to Japan was seen as a unique and positive way to study the SDGs. Common feedback included statements that indicated students had studied the SDGs before in other classes but had not thought about these specific issues before, or how they connect to Japan. They also appreciated the emphasis placed on how the SDGs intersected with each other in social justice issues, making the achievement of just one goal impossible. In addition, it reaffirms previous findings that students significantly prefer to study the culturally familiar context over the culturally unfamiliar one even in the case of global issues such as those that the SDGs address. However, this study disproved the hypothesis that students would prefer popular culture sources to news items, showing that in this instance, students preferred studying news to popular culture texts. At the same time, while students did prefer news to popular culture items, it is also important to note that some students appreciated the inclusion of popular culture as a new angle to think about materials that may have been taught before, indicating that further study in this area is necessary.

The present study had several significant limitations that should also be addressed in future research. First, the post-reading assignments were not always equivalent, as demonstrated by the fact that the labor article, unlike the others, included no possible solutions to social justice issues addressed, whereas the other articles did. In addition, in many cases, popular culture assignments were limited by what was available open-access and in English, as well as available at an appropriate level for the students enrolled in the class. Moreover, although the researchers selected news items the students could read, it was much easier for students to search for open-access, level-appropriate news they were interested in. This meant that many students chose news and searched for items that interested them, creating more options, which likely resulted in student bias toward the preference of news items. Furthermore, another limitation might be similarities or divergences between topics. Two of the units, Water and

Ocean Plastic, were closely related and were centered on environmental issues, whereas the other two units were topically different and more related to economic or cultural injustices (Food Issues and Labor Issues). Finally, the researchers did not directly compare the newly created materials, which include issues of social justice, to existing, SDGs-oriented materials.

A future study should address the aforementioned limitations, in particular, providing a greater selection of popular culture items that students could choose, or allowing students to engage with a popular-culture text of their choice. Another alternative would be to use uniform popular culture materials such as music videos. An additional study could also more systematically select SDG-related social justice issues, for example, two related to environmental issues (water and food, for example) and then two related to systemic or cultural problems (labor and gender, for example). Moreover, a comparison to statistically prove whether our new materials in fact increase student language gains and interest to a greater degree than the materials already on the market would be beneficial. Finally, a further avenue of study might also introduce a wide range of social justice issues and their connection with the SDGs to gauge student interest in each individual topic before running the present study again with the most popular items. While this analysis and research are ongoing, our results offer a preliminary suggestion that SDG education is relevant and important. Perhaps, we need to shift our focus or our framework to present information in new ways and with new emphases.

About the Authors

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Appendix. A Sample Article, Post-reading Assignment, and Reflection Survey for Plastic in the Ocean

Plastic in the ocean

Everywhere you look, you will see plastic. You can see it in your home, school, workplace, and even the ocean. Most people in the world have become dependent on it, with the United Nations (UN) estimating that worldwide we produce approximately 400 million tons of plastic waste annually, which includes using up to five trillion single-use plastic bags every year and one million single-use plastic bottles every minute.¹ But where does all of this plastic garbage go? Well, according to the UN, it is estimated that somewhere between 75 - 199 million tons of plastic waste are currently in our oceans², and by 2050, there will be so much of it that it will weigh more than all of the oceans' fish combined.³ It is evident that ocean plastic pollution has become a major issue. This article examines how plastic gets into the ocean, the severe problems it is causing, and finally some ways we might be able to solve this problem.

There are several different ways that plastic finds its way into our oceans, making the battle against plastic pollution difficult. Research has revealed that about 20 percent of the marine and coastal plastic pollution – such as fishing nets, lines, ropes, and vessels – is dumped directly into the ocean while the remaining 80 percent of it comes from land via rivers – including agricultural run-off, pesticides, plastic that people believe they recycled correctly, and untreated sewage⁴. It would appear that with greater efforts from fisherfolk to reduce their marine waste we could at least solve part of the issue; however, finding a resolution for the larger part of the equation might prove to be much more problematic.

As recent as 2018, it was thought that roughly 90 percent of the global riverine plastic waste (plastic waste from rivers) originated from just 10 rivers in Asia and Africa.⁵ This caused many to believe that by just targeting these problem areas, we would be able to make a big difference. However, a more recent study revealed that sadly this may not be the case. Meijer et al. (2021) found that it was in fact more than 1000 rivers that are accountable for nearly 80 percent of the global riverine plastic pollution into the ocean⁶. Since the number of contributing rivers is much greater than previously thought, a much more coordinated global effort to prevent, reduce, and collect plastic pollution is apparent.

¹ “Our Planet is Choking on Plastic,” *UN Environment Programme*. Available online: <https://www.unep.org/interactives/beat-plastic-pollution/>

² Ibid.

³ Fernanda Espinosa Garcés, Maria, “Op-Ed: We Must Save Our World From Drowning in Plastic.” *General Assembly of the United Nations*. 5 June, 2019. Available online: <https://www.un.org/pga/73/2019/06/05/op-ed-we-must-save-our-world-from-drowning-in-plastic/>

⁴ Ritchie, Hannah. “Where does the plastic in our oceans come from?” *Our World in Data*. 1 May 2021. Available online: <https://ourworldindata.org/ocean-plastics>

⁵ Hatta, Kosuke and Nishiwaki, Shinichi, “About 90% of marine plastic waste originates in 10 rivers in Asia, Africa: study,” *Mainichi Shimbun*, 17 September 2018. Available online: <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20180917/p2a/00m/0na/002000c>

⁶ Meijer, Lourens J. J. et al, “More than 1000 rivers account for 80% of global riverine plastic emissions into the ocean,” *Science Advances* 7 (18) 30 April 2021. Available online: <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.aaz5803>

Global plastic-waste management efforts are further complicated by two main factors. First, the majority of ocean garbage actually sinks to the bottom of the ocean. It is estimated that 70% of it sits on the ocean floor making it impossible to be ever recovered and removed from the ocean⁷. The portion of the plastic that does not sink is swept by the ocean current into gyres, which become garbage patches. There are now five garbage patches around the world, and the largest — the Great Pacific Garbage Patch — includes an estimated 1.8 trillion pieces of garbage and covers an area of about four times the size of Japan.⁸ There is also the issue of microplastics. Since plastic does not completely decompose, a lot of the ocean garbage that floats in the ocean ends up being broken down by sun exposure and wave action into tiny pieces called microplastics. Additionally, a small type of microplastic known as microfibers is also prevalent in our oceans and shorelines. It is estimated that more than 65% of our clothing is made up of microfibers and 700,000 of these microfibers are washed into waterways in just one load of laundry⁹ with microfibers accounting for 85% of shoreline pollution around the world¹⁰.

The Sustainable Development Goals Goal 14 is aimed at conserving and sustainably using the oceans, seas, and marine resources; however, despite the major crisis of plastic pollution in our oceans, only 14.1 of the SDGs directly addresses the issue. Moreover, as Walker (2021) points out, the issue of plastic pollution could hinder the achievement of as many as twelve of the SDGs¹¹. One such way is that plastic waste including microplastics could negatively affect SDG 2 of ending hunger, achieving food security, improving nutrition, and promoting sustainable agriculture. Food sustainability is dependent on agricultural soil and the ocean, however, microplastic contamination has been on the rise in both. Plastic debris is said to account for the deaths of more than a million seabirds and 100,000 marine mammals each year worldwide¹² and in a study conducted in the Northeast Atlantic Ocean, it was found that just under 50% of fish contain microplastics.¹³ Additional research has shown that humans consume up to five grams of plastic a week, which is about

⁷ Readfearn, Graham, “More than 14m tonnes of plastic believed to be at the bottom of the ocean .” *The Guardian*. 5 October 2020. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/oct/06/more-than-14m-tonnes-of-plastic-believed-to-be-at-the-bottom-of-the-ocean>

⁸ “Great Pacific Garbage Patch.” *National Geographic Resource Library*. Available online: <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/great-pacific-garbage-patch/#:~:text=The%20seafloor%20beneath%20the%20Great,the%20bottom%20of%20the%20ocean.>

⁹ “The World of Fast Fashion.” *Engaging Society*. 28 April 2022. Available online: <https://www.engagingsociety.org/trends/the-world-of-fast-fashion>

¹⁰ O’Connor, Mary Catherine, “Inside the lonely fight against the biggest environmental problem you’ve never heard of.” *The Guardian*. 27 October 2014. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2014/oct/27/toxic-plastic-synthetic-microscopic-oceans-microbeads-microfibers-food-chain>

¹¹ Walker, Tony R., “(Micro)plastics and the UN Sustainable Development Goals,” *Current Opinion in Green and Sustainable Chemistry* 30 (August 2021). Available online: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2452223621000535>

¹² “Pollution.” *The Green Institute*. Available online: 28 January 2020. <https://greeninstitute.ng/data/2020/1/28/pollution-statistics>

¹³ Barboza, Luís Gabriel A. et al. “Microplastics in wild fish from North East Atlantic Ocean and its potential for causing neurotoxic effects, lipid oxidative damage, and human health risks associated with ingestion exposure,” *Science of the Total Environment* 717 (15 May 2020). Available online: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969719346169>

the weight of a credit card.¹⁴ Thus, microplastics could adversely affect SDG 3 of good health and well-being as it has been shown that we ingest microplastics contained in seafood, salt, beer, fresh fruit and vegetables, drinking water, and even the air without knowing the long-term effects this may have¹⁵. Furthermore, microplastics are a real threat to SDG 6 of water and sanitation. According to a study conducted by Orb Media on plastics and tap water, 83% of the water samples from major cities around the world were contaminated with plastic fibers. To make matters worse, 93% of bottled water produced by 11 of the world's largest brands purchased from 19 locations in 9 countries also contained plastic fibers¹⁶.

Efforts are now being taken by countries, companies, and individuals to solve the issue of plastic pollution. Through an integrated waste and resource management strategy, seven of the EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland have been able to recover more than 80% of their used plastics¹⁷. The Ocean Cleanup¹⁸ is a non-profit organization that has been working on the development of new technologies that allow for the cleanup of ocean waste, with a goal of eliminating 90% of ocean plastic waste. Large companies such as Adidas, the Carlsberg Group, Dell, and Procter & Gamble also share a similar dedication to protecting and preserving our Earth's oceans. Adidas in collaboration with Parley is now using ocean plastic waste to make some of its shoes and clothing while Carlsberg has been eliminating 1,200 tons of plastic annually by replacing its plastic packaging with holders made from recyclable glue. There are also several ways that we, as individuals, can contribute, too. We can support environmentally friendly companies by buying their products, reducing our use of single-use plastic items, using products that are made from natural materials such as cotton, wool, or glass, and even volunteering to collect marine waste in your local community. It is time for everyone to play their part.

Name:

1. Write 5 difficult vocabulary words from the article and their Japanese meaning.
 - i.
 - ii.
 - iii.
 - iv.
 - v.

¹⁴ "Australians ingest a credit card's worth of plastic a week – so what's it doing to us?". The Guardian. 5 February 2022. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/feb/06/australians-ingest-a-credit-cards-worth-of-plastic-a-week-so-whats-it-doing-to-us#:~:text=On%20average%2C%20we%20ingest%20about,research%20scientist%20at%20the%20CSIRO>.

¹⁵ Parker, Laura. "Microplastics are in our bodies. How much do they harm us?" *National Geographic* 26 April 2022. Available online: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/microplastics-are-in-our-bodies-how-much-do-they-harm-us>

¹⁶ "Fact Sheet: Microplastics and Drinking Water." *Earth Day*. 6 March 2022. Available online: <https://www.earthday.org/fact-sheet-microplastics-and-drinking-water/>

¹⁷ "G20 Report on Actions against Marine Plastic Litter." Available online: <https://www.env.go.jp/press/files/jp/117136.pdf>

¹⁸ "The Largest Cleanup in History." *The Ocean Clean Up*. Available online: <https://theoceancleanup.com>

2. Summarizing and paraphrasing ideas from texts without plagiarizing them is an important academic skill. In one paragraph, summarize the main points of the reading given above (remember the importance of the thesis statement and topic sentences).

3. Think of two open-ended questions (questions that cannot be answered with a yes or no) about the reading. Write the questions (but not the answer) here.

- i)
- ii)
- iii)

4. Write your opinion! What do you think about this article? What do you agree with? What do you disagree with? Why? (Please write your opinion in 5 or more sentences.)

5. Do your own research! Pick ONE of the following options about topics covered in the reading and do further research on it. Summarize your findings **IN ONE PARAGRAPH**. Make sure to include a **CITATION** for the source you chose.

What key issues are highlighted? How are these issues presented? How does the representation of the issue influence the way you think about the issue or this reading? Was anything left out?

Option 1: Foreign news: Read an article from a foreign news source such as how to clean the plastic in the ocean.

Option 2: Foreign popular media: Watch a YouTube video to learn about how Adidas turns plastic bottles into shoes.

Option 3: Japanese news: Read an article from a Japanese news source such as Japan's plastic addiction is affecting oceans.

Option 4: Japanese popular media: Check SNS to learn about Ran Nomura's movement to achieve 'zero-waste' on Instagram.

Class Reflection 3 (Plastic in the Ocean)

Please write your name and student number: *

Your answer _____

How interesting did you find this article? (この記事にどれぐらい興味を持つよう *
になりましたか?)

1 2 3 4 5 6

Not interesting at all (全く興 Very interesting (とても興
味なかった) 味あった)

Why did you think so? Please explain your answer in four or more sentences. (そ *
してあなたはなぜそう思いますか? 4つ以上の文章で回答を説明してください。)

Your answer _____

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