

## How Social-Emotional learning improves the Japanese English education system

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### Abstract

It must be accepted that there will never be a perfect universal educational curriculum and teachers can only strive for improvement. In the process of reforming education, it has become no longer possible to discuss pedagogy, academic achievement, or the culture and climate of schools without discussing social-emotional competencies under the framework of social and emotional learning (SEL). This pedagogical concept has been welcomed in Western countries such as the U.S. and the U.K., but will it find a place in the educational systems in the East in countries such as Japan, and in what capacity? This paper aims to analyze d SEL, and disclose some of the possible problems of initializing this reform; the current Japanese educational system-in particularly the lack of transition between K-12 and university, thinking style, cultural prejudice, and gender inequality. This study conducts a literature review on the topic and presents the findings in a discussion.

**Keywords:** Educational reform; Equity; Social Emotional Learning; Teaching English as a foreign language.

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## 1. Introduction

For society to progress post-COVID-19, a holistic approach to social-emotional learning (SEL) is required for a new age of equal footing to emerge with better social awareness, self-management, and empathy for others. As with most countries and cultures, Japan has its unique values and systems that need framing before this literature review can begin.

The approach used is embedded in an anthropological ethnographic study of living and working as a sociology in English and English language teacher in the Japanese education system since 2003. This reduces othering or stereotyping all Japanese into a monolithic entity. It should be remembered that education is not a science. There is not, nor will there ever be one perfect universal educational curriculum. Biesta, (2010) outlines the case that education is value-based and that expectations set by previous works should be challenged.

### 1.1. Purpose of Study

This paper will explore how SEL can be used in English language instruction while exposing some of the problems as witnessed from the perspective of a mid-forties white British-born woman striving for a leadership role in the field of higher education in Japan. Social Emotional Learning will be defined, and the competencies drawn upon to suggest possible solutions to some of the problems disclosed herein, before deliberating upon the practicalities of how to initialize such a huge educational and possibly cultural reform so that the general issue of worldwide improvements in education can be looked at and researched from a more potentially equal playing field.

## 2. Results

In the process of reforming education, it has become increasingly difficult to discuss pedagogy, curriculum, instruction, academic achievement, or the culture and climate of schools without discussing social-emotional competencies under the framework of social and emotional learning (SEL). Productive language learning must foster emotional and sociocultural competence and enhance the ability to express one's personality in the language (Leaver et al., 2005). Neuroscientists like Badre (2021) are working towards understanding cognitive control; the intentional selection of behavior and how we bridge the gap between knowledge and action. This science is very important to understand so that we can better comprehend the complexities that are involved in knowledge acquisition and how we function not only in our daily lives for survival, but also as living, breathing organisms in a classroom, a society, and an evolving world. According to the educational neuroscientist Sprenger (2020), people need to use Sprenger's acronym "*celebrate...social-emotional learning elicits brain responses appropriate to experience*" (p.6). This validates research and the use of social-emotional principles to further the science beyond our current understanding.

Learning social awareness can help one understand other perspectives, and to anticipate how one's arguments may be interpreted and received, by taking on the perspective of others. Nationality, culture, and personal identity can greatly influence core values. On a personal level, these are perhaps kindness, intelligence, intuition, and imagination. On a school level, these may touch upon the SEL competencies but possibly look more like respect, sportsmanship or humility, responsibility, and/or loyalty. Institutions should be expanding courses that are ontologically in balance with their core fundamental values. These can help promote teaching techniques that create, investigate, utilize, and promote specific assessments to develop not only students' lives but also encourage all institution members to become more progressive citizens of the world.

Social learning concerns the outer environment affecting the inner, emotional learning then, covers the feelings and thoughts from the inside out. The three main models of emotional intelligence (EQ) researched by Salovey (2011), Goleman (1995), and Petrides (2007) are the ability model, the mixed model, and the trait model. There is a mix of these works found in the frameworks adopted by

policymakers around the globe and taken on as national and humanistic values under the umbrella terms of SEL or Social Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) in the United Kingdom or Collaborative for Academic, Social, Emotional Learning (CASEL) in the United States. Teachers and coaches can take advantage of the epistemological perspective of SEL competencies to navigate the complexities of cutting-edge neuroscience but lest not forget, that teaching cannot solely be a research-based profession because individual classrooms are far too complex (Claxton, 2021; Wiliam, 2019).

### **2.1. Key Competencies**

Providing an environment that is both safe and empowering is one of the key SEL competencies found across multiple policies under the current SEL trend. These competencies can become frameworks of school core values. There are differing SEL competencies depending on which researcher or practitioner is followed. Quite often, government bodies outsource policy challenges to organizations, and corporations such as Six Seconds (Six seconds, n.d.) and Rand (Rand, n.d.). Six Seconds focuses on three important pursuits: know yourself, choose yourself, and give yourself. This emotional intelligence assessment begins like Salovey and Mayer's (1990) ability model and then develops in recognition of Goleman's (1995) theory of EQ into eight measurable skills: emotional literacy, recognizing behavioral patterns, applying consequential thinking, navigating emotions, engaging intrinsic motivation, exercising optimism, increasing empathy, and pursuing noble goals. The UK government subsidized SEAL following Goleman's (1995) model of emotional intelligence, which uses the domains of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills to guide their values (UK government, social mobility commission, 2011). It is assumed that all SEAL-approved schools have similar curriculums and teaching methods (Humphrey et al., 2010). In the US, CASEL also supports five interrelated areas of competence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. From these key principles, we can begin to anticipate what values at a school level might be.

### **2.2. Japanese Education**

The term Japanese education here includes the literature that concerns a wide range of facilities from national, prefectural, private, elite, technology, liberal arts, foreign studies, and women's educational institutional contexts. There is a multitude of establishments and multifarious situations within these boundaries that make it difficult to predict outcomes or reactions to any change (Bain, 1878; Claxton, 2021; Wiliam, 2019). Actions and values are often shaped by a cultural determinism of the type and structure of an institution (Kelly & Adachi in Wadden & Hale, 2019). The new handbook of teaching English at Japanese Universities holds a wealth of information on the bureaucratic structure of the Japanese university, reminding us that universities are generally made up of four groups; the students, the faculty, the staff, and the upper administration (Wadden & Hale, 2019). The major difference in Japan is the hierarchy of power being more like a pyramid with the top cut off; as power is not centralized, and the upper administration is usually also faculty members.

There are scores of books written about how Japanese society is collectivist and often decisions are made via consensus (Haskins et al., 2006; Wadden & Hale, 2019; Yamagishi, 2011; Yang & Khoo-Lattimore, 2018). Universities are generally run by committees and other administrative groups and therefore implementing change can be difficult. The decision-making process is burdened by the fact that proposals need to be completed in excruciating detail before being passed to another committee for approval. Rather than a decision being made, and then details figured out, the details must collaborate with the possibilities of opposition being organized and mitigated before proceeding to the next step. This time-consuming act is generally looked upon as being narrow-minded or having the unwillingness to act (Kelly & Adachi, 2019). It can however be also heavily influenced by the salient values within Japanese culture and trying to have a more realistic view of any proposal.

The Japanese education system may appear to an outsider to have reluctance to change.

*Monbukagakusho's* (Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, also known as MEXT) succinct objectives of moving into a diversified society and providing children with an "*Ikiru chikara*" or "zest for living" was first introduced back in 1996 (MEXT, n.d.). Since then, even though MEXT is attempting to encourage more independence among lifelong learners and envisions an integrated international society, there is still a lack of society-wide cooperation (MEXT, 2013). Pathways and linkages among the governing bodies, schools, and social lives are being worked out behind the scenes, and policymakers are slowly being drawn out of their comfort zones. However, SEL competencies can help us to get comfortable with the uncomfortable. Life is uncomfortable; there is truth in universal rejection and building relationships (Cohen, 2014). Patience and resilience can help us not only cope, but also to act within this transitional period.

### **2.3. Role of English teaching in Japanese Universities**

Knowledge of universities in Japan is mainly from a *bungakubu*, generally translated as a humanities stance. Occasionally teachers of English find positions in the social sciences, but this is not as common. English teachers in Japan are generally put into non-specialized general education positions. The landscape of teaching English in Japan has dramatically changed since the economic crash in 1991 and job security is still difficult. Graduates from universities often find themselves in irregular employment as regular full-time employment is protected by strong labor laws and increasing the payrolls with full-time employees is avoided by hiring contract workers to manage routine tasks (Lawson-Hall & Stewart in Wadden & Hale, 2019). This is mentioned here to provide an understanding of the competition and limited positions available to both Japanese and foreign workers directly within the university systems and to realize that there is a hidden stress in these modern times that does not only apply to Japan.

English classes became required in senior high schools in 1989 and junior high schools in 1999 and grades 5 and 6 in 2011. MEXT has recognized the rapidly globalized world and is attempting to not only raise the level of English competence but to also enable its people to compete globally on a business level. To do this, a balance between the fundamental differences embedded within an array of cultures of collectivism and individualism needs to be sought. SEL competencies can provide terminology and expressions for learners to have a mutual understanding. Many teachers of English in Japan feel a threat of what many call - the silence of the classroom (Wiltshier & Helgesen in Wadden & Hale, 2019) or the nail that sticks up should be hammered down (Anderson in Wadden & Hale, 2019). Sociolinguist Haru Yamada detailed the phenomenon of Americans and Japanese misunderstanding each other as "*shaberu amerikajin kiku nihonjin* or Speaking Americans, Listening Japanese" (1997 cited in Wadden & Hale, 2019 p. 130-131). Part of the role of English teaching then must be in the sharing of approaches in situations and current worldviews.

Alternative approaches to education have moved away from the behaviouristic theory of learning and have begun to branch into the goals of the information age, and are based on cognitive learning theory (Birenbaum & Dochy, 1996). "The message is that one can learn how to learn and that there is no one best way to teach all learners" (Birenbaum & Dochy, 1996 p. 6). If SEL competencies can take rise in Japan, then perhaps socialization and language behavior can alter existing patterns of classroom existence. Enabling education to take the progressive leap away from what is sometimes referred to as testing culture (Wolf, Bixby, Glenn & Gardner, 1991 as cited in Birenbaum & Dochy, 1996).

### **2.4. K-12 Connections**

There is no formal continuity between high school and university curricula and the challenges of the high-stakes nature of schooling are constantly witnessed in the lives of parents and children. Classroom implementation of the positive progressive communicative methods of teaching English is often shunned for the more traditional grammar-translation methods to enhance chances of passing

tests. Most students, from kindergarten and throughout their schooling years, are encouraged to attend *juku*, a form of after-school private tutoring often in cram schools. East Asian education is well-known for its rigorous traditionalist methods in education, producing high test performances in math, science, and reading .

Annual unified university entrance exams help decide admissions to the 864 national, public and private universities and junior colleges within Japan (The Japan Times, 2022). The culture that has grown around these tests and the adverse results of this style of education include social anxiety, higher suicide rates, less socioemotional competency, reduced talent diversity, and poor sociopsychological well-being (Zhao, 2014, 2018). Learners and parents, when questioned, often relate that they want to be more relaxed and feel equality with their teachers, enjoy their studies, and know how to act in free play without anxiety and pressure. However, schools continue to be academically isolating as the pressure to receive quantifiable results to gain entry to certain universities remain in place.

Recognition of what is valued is worthy of consideration as reforms are happening. Once SEL competencies are internalized, people can change the learning culture. Students can progress from being oppressed, passive, and powerless to becoming "...an active participant who shares responsibility in the process, practices self-evaluation, reflection and collaboration, and conducts a continuous dialogue with the teacher" (Birenbaum & Dochy, 1996 p. 7). This shift in assertiveness can not only change the dynamic within a classroom, but it can also help to bridge the gap from high school to university.

### **2.5. Reflective SEL Practice**

Challenging perspectives can dynamically engage critical thinking skills that manage the complex rhythms of diversity. There are not enough experts available to guide this process, so schools must invest in their staff to provide cohort-based, ongoing professional development experiences that will in turn provide continuous support. By sharing your own experience and opening your practice to your colleagues' perceptions, practicing critical reflection can aid in understanding and management of the dynamics within your classroom and institution. Individual commitment to a group effort can help an institution, a society, and a civilization, work (Lombardi as cited in Reale, 2017). The momentum afforded by courageously debating philosophies behind actions represents creativity at its finest. Reflection is the bridge between theory and practice and can pave the way for transformative learning (Mezirow as cited in Reale, 2017). As Cohen (2014) nicely puts it, we should get comfortable with the uncomfortable. This is the intentional critical reflection that can lead to the change we need.

To foster awareness, curiosity, and discoveries, SEL's critical reflective practice can prevent learning from ending too soon (Horton-Deutsch et al., 2017). Critical reflection is modeling responsible decision-making and being accountable for the values an institution is trying to establish. A holistic approach is therefore essential for this modeling to commence. Having a set practice to follow will guide staff and onlookers and enable accountability when required. Reflection provides time for careful consideration of the challenges faced, time to contemplate the causes, and to postulate the solutions (Reale, 2017). It is deliberate.

If the community of the institution can spend time on collaborative reflection, it can work towards building stronger relationships with peers. Voices of varied perspectives and experiences can be shared, and advice sought in a desire to succeed. It should be worth noting that mandatory collaboration can occasionally lead to unavoidable micro-political agendas. Dewey (1963, as cited in Bleazby, 2017) would agree that reflection is an important part of the learning process and with continued practice, these agendas could be addressed appropriately. Reflective thinking is multifaceted. Educators require the empowerment of practical tools to challenge one another's

assumptions to improve learning (Brookfield, 2017). With this courage and reflective practice, teachers and establishments are more equipped to reach their full potential.

## **2.6. Implications of SEL in Japan**

### *2.6.1. Thinking Style*

People in Japan do not have a daily requirement to code switch between languages like other countries such as India or Singapore, which had colonial administrations and continue to use English as an official language. Japan continues to see English as “a poorly understood but vaguely longed-after consumer good” (Abe, 2018). Until the multitude of skills and dispositions required to survive and thrive in this interconnected and interdependent world is recognized as life competencies and are not only required during English language classes, then progress may be halted even further. These competencies and attitudes include creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, digital literacy, productivity, decision-making, problem-solving, and a host of other capabilities, many of which educational institutions were never before responsible for imparting (Anderson, 2008; Dede, 2007, 2010; McWilliam & Haukka, 2008; Voogt et al., 2013).

Perhaps most vitally, schools today, both within and outside Japan, are called upon to instill powerful and enduring habits of living, such as flexibility, curiosity, and persistence which are aspects of what we call lifelong learning or learning how to learn (Costa & Kallick, 2015). Problems and perplexities of intercultural understanding will remain and integrating culture within foreign language curriculum is a necessary aspect of globalization. Continual research remains as to how far concepts of thinking styles are interactions between humans, regardless of language, require integration between cultures and curriculums.

### *2.6.2. Cultural Prejudice*

English-language classrooms can be used to insert an array of activities to cover a broad range of topics to raise awareness from gender issues to race, class, and sexual orientation amongst other current affairs. Othering can also happen to Japanese teachers of English. Quite often within the university system, a role they are expected to play is as intermediaries between the Japanese administrative staff and the foreign faculty. This undoubtedly saves the administration from having to hire personnel, however that extra burden of the obligation of policy interpretation must be noted as an extra strain and another example of how having a holistic approach can be beneficial for all involved. Having skills and knowledge of sensitivity to see and predict why students may also struggle in language learning processes. They are not seeing models of Japanese English teachers fully functioning in the world. Quite often we can see courses that instill a cultural-racial divide. Students and teachers alike need meaningful connections and courses are still quite often separated into speaking, presentation, and academic writing for non-Japanese teachers and grammar, reading, and test-taking skills given to Japanese teachers of English. This is certainly depriving us all of a chance to enrich ourselves.

The native speaker learner fallacy (Matikainen in Wadden & Hale, 2019) is still very prominent. The English language is constantly changing and adjusting to current trends. According to statistics out of the world's approximately 7.8 billion inhabitants, 1.35 billion speak English and there are far more non-native speakers than native speakers (Statsia, 2021). It is therefore a language that we should cherish, and its speakers are respected for admirable communication and functioning skills. The paradigmatic shift in thinking is necessary for students, and faculties, to overcome the deeply rooted belief that they need to speak like a native speaker to be considered a competent English user. Inadvertently and unconsciously reproducing cultural prejudice needs to be focused upon so vocabulary and skills can be learned to contribute to the well-being of all identities involved in interactions.

### 2.6.3. *The Female Factor*

In the Global Gender Gap report 2021, Japan ranked 120 out of 156 in political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2021). Feeling much the same way as many other females higher education teachers in Japan, that despite the country's modernization and adoption of certain liberal Western ideals, there is still a major social problem of Confucian ideals and androcentric principles that continue to shape patriarchal attitudes today (Universidad EAFIT & Fernanda Villa, 2019).

Identity and environment hold a huge influence over us and as Mynard references Mercer (2012, as cited in Nagamoto et al., 2020), that self-concept is a powerful contributor to how we think, feel, live and work within any given society. Armenta and Holliday (2015: 28) also argue about stereotypes, "we are [...] all implicated in clinging to stereotypes for a variety of complex reasons. Cultural stereotypes are deeply embedded in the narratives and ideologies which govern how we position ourselves globally and in the natural psychology of how we imagine Self and Other." This essentially means looking at how ideologies interact with other ontological entities in the social realm.

The aspect of gender deserves noting not only for framing the perspective of identity within this male-dominated profession within Japan but also to consider the perspective of the students coming into the English language arena. Women are still generally seen as the main family caretakers, so women's educational and career choices are often influenced by these deeply ingrained gender biases. Nagamoto (2020) refers to her research aimed at higher education, to be unable to ignore the gender-related issues that arose. Females have been directed toward English studies as opposed to mathematics and other subjects because parents could not envisage careers for their daughters other than perhaps becoming tutors (Nagamoto et al., 2020). Japanese men also felt that studying abroad was unavailable to them as they felt pressure to stay in Japan and gain full-term employment with a company they would stay with until they retire (Nagamoto et al., 2020).

Although gender equality in education in Japan appears to have been achieved, at least in securing equal access, there is a continued higher female concentration in certain faculties such as language, education, nursing, and domestic sciences (Saito, 2021). There is a higher number of females now entering the science and mathematics fields, but as reading and think about the future of the English language and education in Japan, there should be an expectation of a continuing rise of female representatives (Bouchard, 2017).

### 3. **Conclusion**

Critical scrutiny of globalization as both a concept and a real-world fact can reveal how promoting the idea that the economy—and by implication, the unequal distribution of power and resources—is the principal engine behind the emergence of needs, differences, and processes in the social realm. English language teaching in Japan has had an overemphasis on economic factors. Instead of encouraging students to learn English to accumulate greater forms of capital, incorporating a holistic approach to SEL competencies, can aid in the emergence of alternative worldviews, provide effective strategies for managing value judgment and engage in new ways of formulating identity.

SEL is a new wave of education and providing SEL opportunities to people in Japan will be beneficial on a multitude of levels. Positive community-building social-emotional experiences have the potential to impact higher education. Young people are systematically socialized for interaction in the wider society. Acquired language behavior filters between languages and can be heard and seen. Emotional intelligence has the potential to address classroom behavior and consider the cultural dynamics, prior knowledge, life experience, and learning environments of all involved. The different values of relationships and misunderstandings can be dealt with competently so that ignorance and avoidance do not prevail.

The classroom is often embedded with the wider society surrounding it. The time of Anglo-

American communication styles being the only ones acceptable in English language situations has passed. This investigation of introducing SEL competencies is a requirement of the time. English cannot be tied to any particular culture. The grammar-translation rote memory methods behind English language learning are no longer required. English language learning in Japan needs to start promoting more compassion for one another, leaders, and students. If we can bring in a more general understanding and tolerance of different personalities, academic needs, and desires as well as emotional understanding and empowerment, then we will be equipped with the tools to not only cope with persistent change but to also respond without bias, to negotiate appropriate implementations and to encourage connections for growth and meaningfulness.

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