

## When We Started Using the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) as a Way to Teach English

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Sometimes overarching narratives can seem daunting and confusing. We may not understand *how* we are to make sense of and implement policies that seem too large or irrelevant to our classrooms. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) are such an overarching narrative, causing a shift in societies' operations. This paper reports on how three English language teachers were able to implement a new lesson curriculum using the UNSDGs as the primary content for instruction and make some significant changes to their classrooms. They also show how change within a formal operational structure being moved by external forces of globalization is possible. Finally, this report can be read as a guide for how to investigate and explore one's own educational context when there is a feeling that change might be necessary.

**Key Words** : UNSDGs, English, Curriculum Reform, Ideas-Based Instruction, Content-Based Instruction

### 1. Introduction

Sometimes overarching narratives can seem daunting and confusing. We may not understand *how* we are to make sense of and implement policies that seem too large or just plain irrelevant to our classrooms. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) are such an overarching narrative, causing a shift in societies' operations.

Japan and its 780-plus universities and colleges are not immune to the challenges identified by the United Nations and articulated in the seventeen goals. Ohmae (2005) and McKinsey and Company (2011) also document the challenges Japan has been facing and opportunities for a rebirth of sorts. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has created educational reforms and activities – Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) – that align and promulgate the UNSDGs (MEXT, n.d.). The case in this report has adopted the UNSDGs as part of its operational culture, strategic planning, and curriculum development. By accepting the spirit of MEXT's ideas toward fostering people who can design and build a sustainable society, this university illustrates how Japan's socio-political and -economic situation affects the classrooms of its teachers and the students' minds. The teachers have been encouraged to draft curricula that align with the goals, while not diminishing or diverting previously effective teaching practices.

The objective of the authors is to show a way forward for teachers when faced with the reality of policies that could impact their classrooms. When the choice to embrace changes is accepted, there is potential for new wells of teaching and learning to open-up and invigorate all who want to partake. The authors will describe how taking a content-based instructional (CBI) approach to their English language program allowed for this embrace of the UNSDGs and led to a rewarding experience for them as teachers, and hopefully their students. Furthermore, by taking this CBI approach there is possible future space for moving in the direction of a project-based learning (PBL) pedagogy throughout the English language curriculum.

While this university is not unique compared to the countless number of organizations implementing operational systems based around the UNSDGs, we feel it is important, if not vital, to highlight cases where the UNSDGs can be used as a catalyst

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for teaching, learning, and meaningful change. To illustrate the teachers' perspectives, reflective statements were written regarding how the course started and progressed. These statements are included in this report.

The following sections will review the pedagogical framework – content-based instruction – and its use in advancing language learning. We will report on the background of the university and its decision-making process that led to the incorporation of the UNSDGs as an operational framework for the university community. Reflections from the authors, who are also teachers at the university, will illuminate the challenges and successes of implementing such curricular changes. Finally, we discuss ways to adapt the English language curriculum to deal with future challenges posed by the aforementioned social changes.

## **2. Pedagogical Framework - Content-Based Instruction (CBI)**

One of the main inspirations for using the UNSDGs is the fact they are real-world ideas driving many of the policy developments taking place within national and municipal governments. It is the job of us as language teachers to use this rich environment to allow students a space for their language skills to grow and flourish while gaining an understanding of topics that will aid in their development as humans trying to better society. When real-world content drives innovation and change in the classroom, content-based instruction is the pedagogical approach being employed.

Brown and Bradford (2016) define content-based instruction as “an approach to language teaching in which content, texts, activities, and tasks draw from subject-matter topics are used to provide learners with authentic language input and engage learners in authentic language use” (p. 332). This definition aligns with the ideas-based approach that the teachers at the target university want to take with the English language curriculum. By using the various topics housed within the UNSDGs, teachers can generate countless micro-topics for the students to discuss. Teachers can also utilize myriad activities, tools, and techniques to reach the end goal of ideas production and comprehension.

## **3. The Case University**

The university in this report is designated a private university according to MEXT. It has a long history and was established in 1949 as a small electrical school just after the end of World War II. Currently, it has four separate schools on one campus in the center of a small rural city in Japan. On its main campus are a private high school, junior high school, and two-year nursing college.

Originally, its founding mission was heavily based on rebuilding efforts post World War II through practical science and engineering learning. This general operational and educational direction still applies today with undergraduate Faculties of Engineering, Environmental and Information Sciences, and Sports and Health Sciences, and graduate faculties of Applied Sciences and Engineering, and Social Systems Engineering.

In a sense, the hard sciences brand of the university was appropriate for the time the university was founded. As times have changed so too has the culture of the university. The core mission has basically remained the same that said the university is opened to including a more international student body and diversified faculty. From 2019 the university sought to rebrand itself a cutting-edge institution that remains proactive in its reforms. It is an institution that changes with the times to prepare the youth of Japan with the knowledge, skills, and capabilities to make sure Japan overcomes the challenges it faces. In this regard, the UNSDGs platform may have come at a perfect time because Japan is re-examining its approach to education and its path moving forward. The case of this university is ideal for uncovering and illuminating how the larger forces in society – political, economic, cultural, and globalization – affect what happens in the language classroom.

## **4. Participants**

Five people provided primary data for this report. Three were university classroom teachers of English (the three authors of this report). The other two participants were a committee leader responsible for implementing the university's UNSDGs

program (MT), and an administrator who works in the public relations department (KW). As all of us were employed at the case university, contact was quite easy to establish. Scheduling convenient times for interviews was not difficult.

## 5. Methodology

This study does not have a formal design underpinned by a deep theoretical framework. The authors recognized a deficiency within our English language learning curriculum and tried to address it. While reviewing our class curricula we noticed some larger forces that could and would affect what options we had with regards to any substantive changes. One of the authors was part of the university's UNSDGs committee responsible for finding ways to implement the goals throughout the university so that teachers would be encouraged to incorporate them into their classroom plans. The same teacher was also involved with translating various re-branding messages into English as part of efforts from university leadership to broaden the message of the university. This put him in contact with the public relations administrator.

All these activities and input from different people gave us pause and made us ask bigger picture questions about why we were doing what we were doing, and how would all this be implemented – what were our parts, as teachers, in various university initiatives? To this end, Stake (2006) and Yin (2009) support the use of a case study design in qualitative research when dealing with complex intersecting narratives that converge at a particular point. In order to gain a deeper understanding of university initiatives participants MT and KW were interviewed regarding their respective roles at the university as well as future initiatives that may incorporate the English language teachers. The interviews were done in Japanese, and English language transcripts were made after the interviews by one of the authors. There was no particular coding scheme implemented during the analysis phase of what we were doing. We were simply utilitarian in our approach; looking for information that could tell us about operational initiatives by the university and how these efforts may relate to our classroom situation. We were not engaged in a formal research inquiry so what emerged from our collected data was very organic. Again, we just wanted to fix what we thought was broken in our curriculum. Eventually, we chose to incorporate the UNSDGs into our curriculum, which was the culmination of some contentious meetings and the knowledge provided by MT and KW. To illustrate our (the author's) thought patterns each teacher provided a reflective statement organized around how the UNSDGs were brought into our classrooms. The hope is that the following reflections provide deeper insight and understanding into the reform effort. Following the reflective statements salient findings will be discussed that incorporate the interview data from MT and KW.

## 6. Teacher Reflections

### 6.1 SDGs as a Guide to English Curriculum by Edwin Hart

Before the beginning of the 2022 academic year, there had been some discussions amongst the foreign English teachers in changing the curriculum to more fully incorporate the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (hereafter referred to as "SDGs"), 17 goals proposed to help improve various aspects of the world's environmental and socioeconomic problems). Though themes and elements of SDGs (especially in regard to environmental issues) were previously incorporated into lessons in our freshman classes, some teachers proposed a more deliberate and dedicated approach to SDGs in the classroom material. The use of a textbook that not only discussed themes of SDGs but was entirely built around SDGs was suggested. The book was passed around for perusal by the staff, with varying degrees of enthusiasm. It was put forth that this could be the new textbook for freshmen students studying English.

This was a proposition to which I felt strongly against. Initially, I think some mistook my opposition as a form of discontentment or cynicism in regard to SDGs, but this was not the case. Simply, I felt the textbook was too difficult for freshmen learners of English to attempt. The book focused heavily on ideas and discussion with little (almost no) vocabulary learning and absolutely no grammar explanation or bilingual guides. In my mind, I felt like I was figuratively demanding someone to run like Usain Bolt before they could even walk. I also reflected back on my own memories coming in as a university freshman, and stepping into my Japanese 101 class for the first time knowing nothing, ready to learn. Even despite

being a very highly motivated student, I think that if I had been handed a textbook like the one my colleagues were proposing in my freshman year, I do not think I would have pursued my second language studies past the first semester.

With that in mind, I recommended that if we were to use the textbook, that we most certainly not use it for the freshmen classes, but for higher level grades who have at least had some time with our university's brand of English learning; to feel more comfortable in tackling the material with the English teachers.

I am happy that my opinion was considered and that the textbook was set to be used not for the freshmen, but for the sophomore classes of the higher scoring students in the Advanced Communications A level classes. When volunteers were asked to help spearhead this new experiment of ours, I happily raised my hand and joined the esteemed ranks of my fellow teachers, Malcolm and Kaminski. Both my senior in teaching experience, I looked forward to learning a lot from their experiences and differing teaching methodologies.

Each of us were assigned two classes of Advanced Communication A per semester. As the semesters went on, we shared our different ideas and methods as best as we could considering our conflicting and busy schedules. I found collaboration and discussion very valuable in considering my own methods in using the textbook and teaching the class.

While collaboration and discussion were important between us three instructors, our "experiment" was premised on the three of us attempting our own three unique styles in teaching the material and seeing how each fared. It was not a competition, but more of a test to see how well students responded to different methods of teaching the SDGs material.

For my own part, I struggled in the beginning to find my footing and find a good medium between what the students expected and were used to versus wanting to challenge them and push themselves further. Some students just wanted to come to the room, sit, listen, do some work in the book, and leave when the bell rang. Meanwhile, I could see other students, international as well as Japanese, whose eyes were bright and eager to try something new and not just take part in rote learning from a textbook. I made up my mind to cater to the latter type of student.

I decided my goal for the students was to simply have them articulate their opinion or thoughts on a matter in the simplest English possible. George Orwell's rules for writing quickly came to mind, which in their barest simplicity say to always use simpler language over overly verbose or difficult language if given the choice.

For assignments, I would propose a question on the chapter material (which was connected to an SDG), and give the students six days to write their answer (an opinion) via web-based submission (Manaba). I made it clear that I was not grading them explicitly on grammar and spelling, but on how well they could articulate their opinions. Could they clearly say what they thought? Could they give reasons and examples for what they thought?

I also made it clear that since it was their own opinion, there was no clear "right" or "wrong" answer and would not be graded as such. I think this was key in eliminating some of the initial fear from the students. In high-level classes, there is an innate assumption for a high level of perfection and execution. However, in my classes, I introduced a sort of mantra that I had heard: "Perfect is the enemy". Meaning, many students fear not being perfect in their execution to the point of giving up before they have even attempted anything. I stressed that conversation, English, Japanese, or otherwise, was not perfect, so not to be so worried. It was perfectly acceptable to be imperfect in our discussions. If anything, the classroom was the perfect place to be imperfect.

I found that this really helped the Japanese students, of whom I started to see more and more volunteer their ideas and discussions in class. I was especially happy when I started to see Japanese students start to talk and interact more with their classmates from different countries.

Lack of any paper test was also a new challenge for the students. Mid-term evaluations were done as one on one oral tests regarding the subjects (SDGs) we discussed in class. I gave the students a choice: they could choose what topic they wanted to discuss with me in the interview (giving them a chance to prepare in advance on the one specific topic), or let me randomly choose (which I did by writing some computer code in bash script which would randomly choose an appropriate chapter topic and accompanying questions). I found that giving students a choice in creating conditions for their tests and assignments helped to create a sense of learning autonomy and creativity which they may have lacked in their previous English classes.

The final tests were also something different - I asked the students to contact a company, either local or international, and ask about the company's SDG policies. While in the first semester I gave the students a choice between making a poster

presentation or a video presentation on their findings, the lackluster poster presentations made me decide to make the final presentation a video project in the second semester.

I was happy to see the students collaborate in their groups, especially when I saw international students and Japanese students work together well.

After one year of teaching the material of an SDGs textbook, I found that despite a rocky start, the students overall reacted positively to the new course methodology. There were, however, students who expressed their dislike of the textbook in the end-of-semester student class surveys, with several students saying they would prefer more practical everyday English to be taught. Despite these objections, I would argue that while the textbook material was focused on SDGs, the English skills I endeavored to have the students be comfortable with were English skills that could directly applied to be used in everyday situations. These skills are to be more confident and comfortable in attempting speaking in English, to not worry about absolute grammar perfection, to express what they think, to discuss and collaborate with others, and to hopefully enjoy the whole process.

## **6.2 The Introduction of UNSDGs to FUT English Program by Richard Kaminski**

When you spend so much time at a single institution or company a quiet voice appears in the depths of your psyche. One that says to leave your mark, in one way or another. The 20-plus years I spent working in Japan's secondary education system, first as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) to a Japanese Teacher of English (JTE) and then as an official homeroom teacher was an epic experience that will never be forgotten. It was also the major catalyst for wanting to do a language course based on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – 17 goals developed through interactions at the United Nations, which 144 nations have signed onto to promote as a common language for trying to address serious global challenges that stretch across national boundaries, class lines, and economic status.

After 20 years of teaching and dealing with all the problems and challenges of trying to teach English in a system that seemed to not produce actual English language speakers or communicators for that matter, I realized that the problems were so entrenched that I either leave or try to make a final push for real change. I had to stop and move away from the teach-to-the-test mentality, the rote learning, the overly-formulated grammar translations of strangely written texts, the mindless copying of vocabulary into notebooks knowing they will never be used or remembered, and the lack of proficiency of many of the JTEs with katakana pronunciation as well as classroom management faults. While students in my classes were having a good time because I really tried to create a fun atmosphere, the end result of their actual English language communication skills education was, to be blunt, pitiful.

At the end of these 20 years, I had concluded that high school English education in Japan had lost its way to such a degree and that practical useful natural language and communication skills were not a primary goal or priority. The process was a glorified but unfortunate IQ test. One that did nothing to really advance society with people who could actually think for themselves and communicate ideas using even basic English.

This background provides the context for my involvement in the SDGs course that is the main subject of this paper. Eventually, I had a restart of sorts at the university. Provided with an opportunity to teach university students with the hope of providing them with the education the high school system could not, I seized the opportunity to work with a group of professionals in providing the university students with a fresh restart at a critical period in their lives. A period that would see them get jobs and enter the real world. Hopefully, I could arm them with a positive English language learning experience, as well as a competent skill set they could use to engage the world.

### **6.2.1 Making Change in the Curriculum**

After moving over to the university full of zest and ideas for the new frontier, the pandemic hit a year into the job. My new colleagues and I had to rework our curriculum to an online format. Coming in as a senior lecturer I was responsible for the first-year listening course. I was also chosen to represent our department in a newly formed university committee focused on the SDGs and finding ways to implement them across the university community.

This was my first university committee assignment so I was keen to get something going and prove myself. I tried to get my colleagues to adopt the SDGs as part of their listening course project, something we have the students do as a final part of their coursework. To be honest, not everyone was supportive, but they were allowed to implement the SDGs into their specific class project

the way they wanted – teacher autonomy. The results were good, but I definitely wanted to take this SDGs initiative to a wider audience of students, but with pandemic teaching measures in place, we just kept doing what we were doing hoping for some return to normalcy whenever the pandemic abated.

Towards the end of 2021 we had a meeting amongst the English language teachers about trying to implement the SDGs into the wider curriculum. There were some disagreements during these discussions. Some teachers felt it was just too difficult for basic-level students – first-year students who did not really have the experience or proficiency to deal with such material. Some thought the primary textbook of choice was too difficult as it was all in English. Others were just against the idea of creating something that didn't really need to be created since the regular curriculum was proceeding just fine. After a pause in the talks, and some consultation with our lead teacher, it was decided to focus this SDGs for the classroom initiative on second-year students who would be placed in the highest-ability classes within each university major. This meant however that three teachers would be required to teach these second-year students who would be taking the Advanced Communication A course with the objective of implementing an ideas-based instruction approach. The students would be taught how to take difficult topics and break them down into simple ideas they could express using simple but effective English. To say the least, this would be a different type of course within the overall system. One which no teacher had taught before.

Not everyone was keen to accept the challenge of a radically new course, especially one based on the SDGs as its primary content. We would have to learn about a whole new subject matter ourselves which seemed off-putting to others. Thankfully, two other teachers accepted the challenge, both of them co-authors of this paper.

### **6.2.2 No More Bananas**

The previous Advanced Communication course used content that exposed the students to simple English conversation language like, “Do you like bananas?” We (the three teachers now tasked with teaching this new SDGs-based course) believed that everyday English conversation was not appropriate for a course labeled Advanced Communication. We entered the effort with a sort of mantra – No More Bananas. A signal that we were moving away from the old ways and forging a completely new path. One that would challenge the students and us to grapple with real-world issues and find ways to use English to express complex ideas simply and effectively.

We agreed on the basic skeletal format of the course. It was first decided that we would use the same textbook, so we could compare and contrast how we taught content, and how students received the content. We also decided there would be no paper tests. That felt good and right. I remember Wayne saying, “These kids have been doing tests all their life, and for what?” We all agreed and felt this was the right direction to move. Instead of traditional mid-term and final paper tests, we would do interviews for the midterm, and then some sort of PBL (project-based learning) presentation at the end of the semester. The rest of the course direction was up to each individual teacher.

As with all things, it would be hit-and-miss for the first year (April 2022 – January 2023). The benefits of using the SDGs platform were many and abundant. There were plenty of materials available online to let the students find things for themselves and instead of teaching the SDGs we would act as guides and facilitators to their active learning experience. The first year ran quite well. I had my students focus on two things for their weekly homework assignments. I would first get them to do some pre-reading from the textbook, with a few comprehension questions and then I would have them paraphrase what they had read. This was to become a core theme of my approach to the course.

### **6.2.3 Simple is Best**

For my personal teaching within this course, I have had a sort of guiding light in the form of a big photo of Albert Einstein that I have, which says, “*If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough.*” I wanted to teach the students this by teaching them how to paraphrase. I really believe getting people to explain things in their own words will dramatically change even the most routine real-life circumstances and their outcomes. In a language learning context, this often means using rather simplified sentence structures and vocabulary. Over the years, I have encountered many instances – from opening a bank account to buying a mobile phone – where simple easy to understand Japanese, on the part of the customer service professional, would have helped. While I can interact in many situations using Japanese, formal ones with lots of technical language give me problems. I always think to myself,

“Why can’t you use simple Japanese?” So, since this SDGs Advanced Communication A course started, I have been trying to get my students to put the basic concepts of the SDGs into their own words, using simple English they have learned over the course of their English language learning lives.

The first year of the course I struggled to get the students away from scripting everything. If the language were simple and easy to follow it would have been ok, but the language they would use, and try to rote learn and remember, in particular for the midterm interviews, was written English with overly technical terms and language that had no flow. It was as stiff and as painful as their body language. We got some good online video presentations from the students at the end of the term, who did some research and presented their ideas via homemade videos, but I couldn’t get the same output during the interviews. I couldn’t get the students away from remembering lines like robots and spitting them out to me. This has remained a challenge, but with the advent of ChatGPT, there is some light at the end of this proverbial tunnel.

#### **6.2.4 Owning Your Contents, Making Stories Yours**

With the world-changing release of OpenAI’s chatbot, ChatGPT, I was immediately hooked and already thinking about the possibilities. ChatGPT could actually rewrite complex materials for you and if you asked it nicely it would rewrite things in a way that a 10 to 12-year-old could understand! The core message remains, but the language becomes accessible to all, even our Japanese students. For the past six months I have had my students first read the passage from the textbook and do a bit of research about it. They then paraphrase what they have digested into their own words using any translating application they want. I told them this is a *WITH TECHNOLOGY* class and that they were free to use the tools at hand. The goal was to refine the message and make the contents their own, something that they themselves could fully understand as they said it. To me, this was what I have been trying to do my entire career; helping young language learners in Japan own their own content and tell stories that are worth listening to using English. First, they have to be able to understand and tell those stories in their own language, then they go through the process of owning and expressing them using English.

#### **6.2.5 Conclusion**

I think we have really started to crack it. I now get them to make ChatGPT produce bullet points for use in conversation. The students now understand the difference between written and spoken English and the good news is that the simpler the language, the easier it is to say and understand. They seem to really get it. There have been some magical moments where the students realize what a tool they now have at their disposal with AI, and how close the global language has become to them. Now all they need to do is find out what they want to say, what story they want to tell. Once they master that, they throw a joke in the mix, some well-timed body language, and they will become masters of communication. At least they will be on their way. No more eyes down listlessly reading. People simply won’t listen if there is no risk; that’s the magic of free talk. The SDGs were the perfect launchpad and the fact that young students all around the world are having the same conversations is also another motivating factor. The added realization that none of these global problems has a simple solution and that we as a human collective have to cooperate wholeheartedly, really seems to spark their imaginations. I have seen a sense of agency in the students emerge and look forward to seeing how far we can take this new technology and these 17 lofty goals to the minds of the generation that it will mean the most to. This truly makes me love what I do.

#### **6.3 Working Within the System to Change a System by Wayne Malcolm**

Sheer frustration coupled with a true desire for wanting more, or I should say wanting something more appropriate for the students I had been teaching is what drove me to the UNSDGs as content for an English class. I am not a proponent of surprise testing or assessing students on skills they never had the opportunity to study. I felt like we were doing that with our students. One year they are studying basic communication saying, “I like bananas. What foods do you like?” From there they go to *advanced* communication but are still saying “I like bananas. What foods do you like?” Nothing about Advanced Communication is advanced, just the name. After Advanced Communication students choose either Business Communication or Technical Communication. They are also taking a TOEIC test prep course. No where do we prepare them for these more

challenging courses. To me, this mismatch is a large waste of time for all participants involved – teachers, students, administrative staff, everyone!

The opportunity came where new textbooks needed to be chosen. I wanted a wholesale curriculum change, complete with new titles for the classes. Ideally, Basic Communication stays simple and introductory. In year two students take Intermediate English, which would be recycled from the Advanced Communication B course. The new advanced course would be a streamed course for high level students based on a content-based instruction model. There would be an Advanced B course that would be a continuation of the Intermediate course. Fourth year students would take Business Communication or Technical Communication, or choose from other teacher designed courses as electives. I had ideas for graduate classes as well, but those were delusions of grandeur really, especially when I was told my ideas for undergrad reform were not applicable. One major point of frustration for me has always been not being able to change the name of a course, but changing the book and contents is okay. I understand that schedules and programs would have to be rewritten and apparently approval gained from the ministry of education, but quite ridiculous that contents could be changed but not course name.

Anyway, change would come from within the system because after some time discussing a possible change to the course contents, predicated by deciding on new textbooks, a “new” course emerged from tense teacher exchanges. Sometimes division and confrontation are good because we see who wants to do what and can move forward without people pulling you backwards. Thankfully, the supervising teacher in the department was supportive of separating the second-year Advanced Communication class into an A and B section, with the A section being the UNSDGs curriculum, and the B section the regular English conversation course. The three authors of this paper volunteered to teach the new Advanced Communication A class.

The major challenge of this course was less about the content really and more about getting the teachers on the same page, in my opinion. Even though we were using the same book, and agreed on a basic structure, we had different ideas about how to teach the class. Ultimately, we decided to teach our own ways, but share what were doing so the others could incorporate all possible approaches to our classes. We formed a LINE group – *Advanced Experimental* – and shared materials, ideas, challenges, successes, etc. In the end, we all were incorporating pieces from the other’s classes. In a way we were collaborating without going through the obvious process of collaborating; a sort of meta-collaboration.

I never really saw teaching the material as all that challenging because I truly believe given proper teacher motivation and preparation, students can be taught anything. Maybe a bit more scaffolding needs to be used for lower-proficiency students, but given time and care, those students will perform. I had the students perform debates in my classes even though from one to the next the English proficiencies were different. Again, with some extra scaffolding and a slower pace, the lower proficiency students accomplished the same level of success with their debates. Actually, one student thought they performed better than the grade I gave indicated, so they challenged my grade. They gave sound reason from the challenge citing their debate performance, believing it was adequate for a higher recognition. I changed the grade to the one the student desired. I was proud that student challenged me.

There are a few takeaways I have from this experience, one being sometimes out of what may seem negative energy and defeat can come shining new opportunities. I was demotivated for a moment because of the internal system of curriculum change within my department and the university, but with patience and support from others, opportunities arise. Another takeaway is through honest and respectful collaboration, great things will happen. None of us forced our way on to the other, and in doing so never shut ourselves off from the other. We continue to share ideas, while teaching in our own unique ways. Finally, my belief in students continues to rise. Give them a nurturing environment and they will take on challenges set before them. It may be hard to grade or assessment, but a rule in all my classes is – give your best effort, and you will never come close to failing. No student who has given the work an honest try, has ever failed my class. I tell them that upfront. It is sort of a contract between us, and with themselves.

## 7. Salient Findings and Discussion

When approaching the salient findings from this inquiry, we focused on not only the reflection statements by the authors, but also data from the faculty member in charge of the university’s SDGs committee, MT, and the university public relations



administrator, KW. Their input revealed how the larger macro-context could affect what happens in the classroom, and what can be done by teachers to adapt their classroom teaching programs to incorporate external factors. Here we see a certain synergy between the teacher's reflections and the thoughts of the committee leader and university administrator. There is a clear understanding from both participants that universities must think broader and deeper about what happens within their classrooms because students must be ready to take on an ever more complex and hyperconnected world.

A salient point made by the participants that speaks to the macro-context influence on educational directions was recognizing the need for change during these challenging times for Japanese universities. The committee leader, MT, said that one reason she was chosen to lead the committee was the need to recognize diversity. However, her choice was not merely because she is a woman, but her qualifications as a veteran educator and researcher as well as an urban planner in the community put her at the forefront of dealing with issues such as an aging and shrinking population, youth flight from rural areas, etc. During our interview, she was able to articulate how the UNSDGs platform will become integral to the short, medium, and long-term futures of not just universities, but any entity whether it be educational, corporate, or governmental. She said, "There is no way we can't be involved." With those few words, there was a recognition that creating more diversity of thought and proactiveness toward solutions to pressing social issues needs to be the course of action, and the best place to do that is in university spaces where these issues and ideas can be studied, analyzed, debated, and understood. She was highly encouraged by the steps we as English language teachers were taking to introduce the UNSDGs to our students and assist them in understanding complex societal issues. This synergy between operational initiatives, committee involvement, and classroom teaching practice shows what can be possible when people recognize and support what each other does; we are not siloed into our departments. One may assert this is a core tenet behind why universities exist; to be a place of synergy and interdisciplinary fellowship for the betterment of society through the educating of young people. We must be involved!

Supporting that recognition of needing the university to be involved, the university public relations administrator, KW, spoke about a particular university directive that was taking place to address Japan's big societal issues. The university is apparently developing a Department of Information Technology and Data Science. He believes that big data analysis and understanding data science will be essential abilities soon. He said, "Everyone will have to be able to do it." Again, simple, but powerful words. Students will need to have those skills because the industries that shape society will demand them. Moreover, he recognizes the role of the English language classroom in the macro context. "We must produce high-quality engineers who can work in a global market." This is to say that students will need English because it is the global language of business, science, programming, health, etc. To this end, what we have started by incorporating the UNSDGs into our classes as core content is just that, a start. Based on what KW said, we need to expand, even revamp, our curriculum to motivate and activate students to do more using English. KW is supportive of any effort that aids in developing students' real work skills. There are some structural impediments to immediate reform as stated in the various reflection statements. That being the case, there is also great opportunity. The SDGs classes are a direct result of working within the system in order to reach a desired goal.

Another salient point that emerged from these interviews and reflections was using existing technological platforms for driving change. Both MT and KW spoke about using the university website as a place to showcase the work being done by faculty members who incorporate UNSDGs based research projects into their current research portfolios, as well as efforts by students. Committee leader, MT, said that the 17 goals and 169 targets of the UNSDGs offered teachers and students alike the opportunity to play to their own strengths by choosing an area to focus on that interests them. To do this, a diverse set of talents, personalities, and skills will be needed. Classrooms will need to be transformed into places of active learning where teachers encourage and provide opportunities for students to grapple with complex ideas. This is the driving vision of the content-based instructional approach introduced by the authors of this report. We wanted to shift away from a more grammar-based instructional style to a style where the students were engaging in the material, developing their own ideas, and finding ways of expressing those ideas. Furthermore, such discussion by key players in the faculty and administration aligns with principles of project-based learning – real-world challenges providing the context for driving questions produced by the student body with solutions expressed on a public platform so as to add to the public discourse (Buck Institute for Education, n.d.). All of these in-classroom approaches to deal with the macro-context would be brought to light by in-the-moment technological tools as

well. In his reflection, Kaminski highlights his active use of the AI Bot, Chat GPT, to help students develop and express their ideas in English. The cliché *carpe diem* (*seize the day*) is appropriate in this context.

The final salient finding reflects a certain amount of disconnect between, and resistance from, constituencies that have been hardened in what they do. Being the leader of a committee can be challenging at the best of times; when all members fully understand and support the goals and directives. In this case, that was not the situation. Investigating the situation at the case university revealed tensions across the university community. The university administrator expressed that the various sections of the university corporation used to have separate mission and vision statements that governed their operations. Bringing all these different interests under one operational masthead was challenging, but necessary. The dismantling of such silos is equally as difficult when it comes to university professors, who are very used to and protective of their autonomy as teachers and researchers. Regarding the English language teaching program at the case university, trying to reform and incorporate new ideas is also difficult because all too often the English language teachers are not fully informed about the direction of curriculum reform at the university. There is always talk about reforming the English language curriculum, but turbulence ensues when the discussion turns to the topic of *how*. What the committee leader and university administrator expressed was hope that the UNSDGs, as drivers for university-wide change, would provide a platform for English language education to play a more pivotal role in how the university evolves. The UNSDGs can seem quite daunting to the most knowledgeable of professionals in the fields of global urban, welfare, environmental, health, and education development. To professors, administrators, and students at a small university in a rural section of Japan, introducing such topics can be overwhelming. They can seem obtuse and irrelevant even though they focus on important issues. Getting all relevant stakeholders unified under one mission has proved challenging, and at best a continual work in progress.

When all is said and done, these three salient points link together. University leaders and educational professionals must recognize that the macro-context will indeed affect their community. In order to deal with the change, there have to be ways to drive the change the community wants to achieve. Technology is the tool that empowers the use of pedagogical principles premised on ideas activation and product presentation. Finally, recognizing that there is a disconnect in some respects does not have to hinder progress. Instead, the recognition shows the people involved where to focus resources and expertise.

## 8. Conclusion

This exploration and investigation was illuminating on many levels. What led to deeper inquiry started with a simple and routine review of our classes with the purpose of making the classes better. Through the reflection and reform process, we saw an opportunity to do more, but in order to do more we had to know more. Our classes were mostly following along a grammar-based plan, where students engage target language through everyday life themes – “How was your weekend,” “Describe your house,” “Talk about your future,” etc. Some teachers at this university wanted to make a change away from this grammar-based lesson structure to an ideas-based one grounded in content-based instruction. We wanted to get the students talking about larger issues; formulating their own opinions on topics we know they are going to have to deal with in the real world. A larger vision sees content-based instruction moving towards project-based learning instruction where students move from just expressing their opinions in a classroom to presenting a well-thought-out project for the surrounding community to embrace.

Japan faces many challenges, from a declining population, inconsistent economic outlook, hostility from other nations in the region, not to mention issues that touch every nation equally – climate change, pollution, etc. These are issues to be discussed in classrooms and the backdrop of the UNSDGs provides an opportunity for doing so. The direction this university is moving in is a start, but also a model for what other universities of its size and nature could also do. This case is not generalizable, and because this was a single case study, we did not investigate situations at other universities. A more robust case study across multiple institutions could have uncovered trends and characteristics that not only would have linked the universities but also provided a more vivid picture of how societal issues enter the classrooms. All that said, we do believe the illustrated case provides a blueprint of sorts for how teachers can research their own curricula and find ways to work with others united in finding and implementing good solutions.

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