Benefits of SEL in a Foreign Language and Exam Preparation Class

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This paper describes the classroom context and challenges that led me to include social-emotional learning (SEL) in my teaching in the English as a foreign language learning context in a Japanese university. I discuss specific strategies and activities I utilized in an online course with a group of English language majors and share some, largely positive, outcomes of the approach. The SEL practices are known to include strategies that allow learners to increase their social awareness and self-awareness, participate in responsible decision making, self-manage, and manage their relationships with others. However, unlike in typically implemented school-wide SEL curricula and programs (CASEL, n.d.; Elias et al., 1997), the approach I utilized meant introducing only a handful of activities and strategies in the classroom. Nevertheless, the findings show that most students found the strategies beneficial.

本稿は、私が日本の大学で英語を教える際に、社会性と情動の学習方法（SEL）を取り入れるに至った背景と課題について述べる。また、英語専攻の大学生を対象としたオンラインコースで私が活用した具体的な戦略とアクティビティについて述べ、そのアプローチによるいくつかの、主に肯定的な結果について共有する。SELの実践には、学習者が社会性や自己認識力を高め、責任ある意思決定に参加し、自己管理し、他者との関係を管理するための戦略が含まれている。基本的に、SELプログラムは全校規模で実施されるもの（CASEL, n.d.; Elias et al., 1997）であるが、今回はそのうち一部の活動や戦略のみを教室で導入した。それにもかかわらずほとんどの学生が当該ストラテジーを有益だと感じていることがわかった。

I first learned about social-emotional learning (SEL) when a student I taught several years ago decided to leave university. The student was in their first year and enrolled in one of my academic writing classes. They suddenly informed me that they were not coming to class again because they were dropping out of school. At first, I tried to respect their decision as the student announced they might try a different university and another major in the future, but I then ask the student to reconsider. After several email exchanges, the student finally reported being stressed out, feeling disliked by classmates, and unable to make friends, which led to their decision to forgo their studies at university. In addition, the student wrote that they found the level of English required too high and had difficulty learning the content of classes, which made them anxious. Furthermore, they did not seem to have all the necessary tools to manage time and regulate emotions. The student had been to a counselor on campus and mentioned their perceived inability to get along with classmates but was told only that their problem was a common one and that many students struggle at first and cannot successfully build relationships with their classmates in the beginning. The outcome was unfortunate. This student left the university soon after starting the fall semester. Although I was only one of this student's many teachers and was not their academic advisor, I was astonished that I did not notice the intensity of this student's struggle, even though I taught that class for the whole semester.

To try to prevent similar problems from occurring again, help students become more tolerant and supportive of one another, and improve their ways of handling emotional stress and managing their emotions, I thought I could introduce some kind of therapeutic intervention. A more specific goal was to increase students' compassion and mindfulness, plus provide emotional support to them. That is when, turning to the Internet and searching for helpful pedagogical literature, I found SEL methods on the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) website. Since then, I have used a variety of SEL concepts and techniques in many of my classes, ranging from first-year compulsory courses to fourth-year and elective courses. In this paper, however, the focus is on a first-year class. In the section below, I provide a brief overview of problems that university students tend to face and how SEL might help address these problems.

The Need for Social-Emotional Learning and Its Effectiveness

A number of university students drop out, and the reasons for leaving university vary. In recent years, COVID-19 has brought specific challenges, and economic reasons have been cited in particular as the cause of students leaving school in Japan (Kakuchi, 2021). It is also a fact that, even without the added burden of the pandemic, many students experience difficulty when first enrolling in university, indicating that entering university itself can be a significant stressor (Blimling, 2015). First-year university students might require extensive support to adapt to the college environment because they tend to face a plethora of problems during this transition process (Cole, 2017). To make matters worse, university students' needs for help from psychological and psychiatric services have been inadequately addressed (Balon et al., 2015). In addition, the number of reported cases of students with various learning and developmental disorders (Auerbach et al., 2018; JASSO, 2021; Teruya et al., 2019; Zablotsky et al., 2019) has been growing in the past years, and the SEL approach has been found to be beneficial in such situations (Elmi, 2020).

Without systematic community and university-wide support, individual teachers cannot do much regarding economic reasons for students leaving school. However, there are other reasons, such as lack of interest and decreased motivation in studies, and an inability to form friendly relationships with classmates (Hatano, 2013; NHK, 2021), where teachers might be able to intervene in their classes and help students on an individual basis. Strategies that are incorporated into the SEL approach might be helpful in such contexts, even though SEL is usually implemented in schools that collaborate "with parents and community members to provide educational support" (Elias et al, 1997, p. 3), and are not left up to individual teachers to include in their pedagogy.

Social-emotional learning, originally developed in the United States and used in classrooms where the majority of students used their dominant language and/or their L1, is a process by which students can, among other things, learn how to apply skills to manage emotions, set goals, show empathy for others, and build positive relationships (CASEL, n. d.; Elmi, 2020; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021; Reicher, 2010). Learning is inherently social and depends on social-emotional experience (Imordino-Yang, Darling-Hammond, & Krone, 2019). Hence, ensuring that learners have positive experiences in the classroom and form strong social bonds among themselves can enhance learning outcomes. Research shows that social-emotional learning (SEL) practices help create strong social bonds between students and improve academic performance (Durlak et al., 2015; Zins et al., 2007; Zins et al., 2004). More specifically, research has found that SEL leads to increased achievement scores, increased motivation to learn, increased time devoted to schoolwork, better classroom behavior, and fewer reports of student depression, anxiety, and stress (Durlak et al., 2015).

Social-emotional learning competency specifically means "the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one's life," which enables one to learn successfully, build relationships, and adapt (Elias et al., 1997). It encompasses self-regulation, self-monitoring, and social skills in the school setting (Norris, 2003). The five components or competencies of the SEL framework include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, n.d.).

Given the positive research findings on the efficacy of SEL, teaching SEL skills to university students would also reap multiple benefits. However, many universities in the United States have "not broadly or systematically implemented [SEL]" (Reinert, 2019), which has been criticized by Conley (2015) who has argued that university students, too, would benefit from social-emotional education. The situation seems to be similar in Japan, where most SEL materials and activities target children and junior high and high school students (e.g., Koizumi, 2016; SEL-8 Group).

There may be some validity in saying that SEL was not originally designed for use in the foreign language classroom, but the approach is adaptable for classrooms with ELLs and in world language classrooms (Move This World, 2019; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, n.d.). Although there is a lack of research on the effects of SEL approaches in foreign language classrooms, other studies, which did not focus on foreign language teaching, indicate that SEL strategies such as mindful breathing reduce students' test anxiety and improve their academic performance (Cho et al., 2016; McLeod & Boyes, 2021; Tasan et al., 2021).

In my classroom, I introduced a limited number of SEL activities because there was no SEL program implemented as a campus-wide approach at the time. I selected mainly activities that focused on two out of five elements of the SEL framework: self-awareness and self-management (see CASEL, n.d. for a comprehensive overview of the framework), which appeared the most appropriate for university students and seemed manageable by one teacher. Activities that focused on self-awareness included journaling, recognizing one's emotions, and positive self-talk. Self-management included goal setting and focusing on a growth mindset.

Context, Participants, and Method

The participants in the study were 22 first-year female students in the spring semester, and after an additional student joined the class, 23 students in the fall term. Several of the students were of mixed heritage with one Japanese parent, and the majority had both Japanese parents. The students were enrolled in a private university in Tokyo and majored in English. Their English level was estimated to be between B1 and B2 on the CEFR scale. The course I taught was held online and focused on preparing students to take a high-stakes English proficiency test. The students gave their informed consent for the data to be used in my research. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and would have no effect on their grades. The participants' names used in this paper are pseudonyms. The institutional requirements were adhered to.

Although most of the students appeared motivated (i.e., they did not miss classes, were not late, and they submitted assignments on time), the imminent exam seemed to cause students some anxiety. They expressed their worry in an initial study habits Google Forms survey my students take every year at the start of the spring term. A few students repeatedly voiced their concerns about their English proficiency and the exam throughout the course in class or in pair or individual conferences with me. Overall, the class was very active. In each class meeting, students asked questions, both in English and Japanese, in large part related to the exam, language learning in general, test-taking strategies, English vocabulary, and grammar. My role was to plan the students' learning, give instructions, teach test-taking strategies, assign work for them to do, and provide feedback. In addition, I created and administered quizzes. I also conducted mock exam interviews and gave feedback on students' speaking and weekly or bi-weekly written assignments.

The intervention consisted of introducing, demonstrating, and assigning SEL activities adapted from various sources (specific examples can be found below). The focus was on concepts and activities that had been found helpful in earlier studies (Conley, 2015) and what I thought as potentially valuable strategies for this particular group of learners. More specifically, the concept of a growth mindset, as opposed to a fixed mindset (described, for example, in Sprenger, 2020) was (re)introduced to students in April, during the first week of class. In addition, the previous year's students wrote messages at the end of the course, and these messages were shared with the current students as an example of how one's foreign language and study skills can improve over time. For instance, some past students reflected on how little they could write in English, but after taking the course from April until the exam in winter, they noted how their academic writing in English tremendously improved.

Students were encouraged to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses and plan how to improve their learning skills and prepare for the test at the beginning of the spring semester in April. In addition, they had opportunities to discuss their learning processes with their classmates in small groups throughout the academic year. This would allow them to notice how their skills improved and plan their own learning.

Some of the SEL activities introduced in class included mindful breathing (e.g., deep abdominal breathing, square or box breathing, and five-finger breathing), body scan (relaxing and gradually releasing tensions in various body parts), recognizing and acknowledging one's emotions, practicing positive self-talk, and gratitude journaling (Sprenger, 2020; Srinivasan, 2019; Tantillo Philibert, 2018). Students also engaged in other activities that were outside the scope of this paper. The students engaged in the aforementioned specific activities at the end of the spring and beginning of the fall term.

Data for the present study were collected through several methods. These included questionnaires administered through Google Forms, polls on Zoom during class sessions, written reflections on homework assignments and in-class tasks, semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom with two students, and class observations in breakout rooms and the main room on Zoom. Typically, all or most students took the questionnaires and answered Zoom polls. After a Zoom poll in which students reported how they experienced mindful breathing, body scan, and journaling, I asked students to email me if they were willing to talk to me, in English or Japanese, about their experience with the said activities, for the purposes of my research. Two students volunteered. I interviewed them to gather more detailed information about their feelings about the effectiveness of the activities they tried after I introduced them in class.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, I share what students reported about some of the SEL activities they engaged in as a small part of the course. The main focus of the course was on academic writing and preparing students for an English language proficiency exam that they had to take in the second semester. Due to space limitations, only several activities and students' reflections are discussed. The data discussed come from a Zoom poll, online questionnaires, and interviews with two students. The information shared here serves as an example, and it should be noted that similar, largely positive, reactions were found regarding the other activities as well. All activities were introduced in class and discussed both in English and Japanese. After I introduced each SEL activity, I answered students' questions about the SEL methods (i.e., how to engage in them and how they might help) mainly in Japanese.

Mindful Breathing and Body Scan

The first activity that the students learned about was mindful breathing, which students engaged in near the end of the spring term. First, I shared my personal experience with the technique and how it helped me calm myself in situations when I felt anxious. Students listened to my instructions and watched short videos, some accompanied by animation, about deep, slow abdominal breathing, square breathing (some varieties focus on 4 and others focus on 8 seconds for inhaling, pausing, exhaling, and pausing again before taking another breath), and five-finger breathing. I demonstrated square and five-finger breathing as I sometimes use these methods, and I explained that each person has different preferences. Students were invited to try these techniques and follow my example in class. I explained that the method might be used before taking or even during an exam and help them calm and focus. They were then encouraged to try out a few techniques after class. Finally, in the following class meeting they shared how they felt about these techniques in small groups and a Zoom poll.

In a poll after the students were exposed to breathing techniques for the first time, it became clear that although most students reported trying out the techniques outside of class, two students did not. In addition, one student said that she did not like any of the methods introduced. Another student wrote that she had tried mindful breathing in the past with some success. After the students had a chance to become more familiar with the breathing techniques through exposure to online sources in English and Japanese, and after having a chance to try the activities again, they discussed the activities in small groups. Following that, they took an anonymous questionnaire. Some students reported how different their experiences and preferences were compared to their classmates. Whereas some students enjoyed the square breathing method, others preferred the deep breathing. The results show that most of these students preferred square breathing. A majority said they liked it, five did not mind it, and one did not enjoy it.

Students' comments were mostly written in English, but some students used both English and Japanese in their written comments. I translated the parts written in Japanese into English. Students' comments about mindful breathing were mostly positive (common phrases are in italics):

> I was very tired from my online classes, and by doing this, my body *felt refreshed*. (Aoi)

> I could *relax* when I tried those breathing techniques. And it was easy to understand. It was different from my usual breathing, and I realized that this kind of breathing is also *important*. (Riko)

> I was able to *relax* and my partner also said that. I think that the heart rate will [decrease] when people breathe slowly. If we can lower our heart rate, we can *relax*. I was able to *relax* so much. I felt like my body was *floating in the air*. (Aya)

> When I tried the deep breathing in the video, I felt like my mind and body *calmed down*. The girl in my pair agreed with me. But the first animated video seemed strange to me. I thought I would *get sleepy* if I kept watching it. (Runa)

> I knew that relaxation was good for people, but I had never tried it before, so it was a *good experience* for me. This video made me feel relaxed and good, and also feel more sleepy than usual. The illustrations were cute and soothing. I was skeptical at first, but it really helped me relax. (Hana)

> [About the box breathing animation] I thought it was good to *enjoy* it visually as well. I thought it was good that it was visually *pleasing*, and since it was in simple English and a compact video, I *would like to continue* it regularly. (Maki)

In an interview, Yuki said that using the techniques introduced in class she "learned how to breathe properly, and when I practiced it, I felt *a little calmer*, which was *very good*. My partner said that it was good to know that breathing, which we usually do without being aware of it, can be an opportunity to *calm down and relax* our minds." Maki said she could "*breathe more quietly* with abdominal breathing than with chest breathing, so if I want to *calm down*, I should be aware of breathing with my abdomen."

The body scan was the second technique that students tried at the end of the spring term. I shared that although body scans were not suitable during an exam, the method could be beneficial, particularly when trying to calm down at home, relax, or fall asleep. Most students found the body scan effective as a calming relaxation exercise (the phrases that students commonly used are shown in italics below). However, two students did not enjoy it and decided not to continue practicing it. Two students reported that they did not dislike it, but also did not feel it was beneficial to them. In open-ended questions, one student wrote that she had "a very hard time sleeping and my sleep is shallow, but the day I tried this, *I was able to sleep well*. I was also able to wake up *refreshed* in the morning" (Chihiro). Another student wrote, "I felt *relaxed* and my body felt *very relaxed*. My pulse was *calmer* and my mind was *refreshed* [after doing the body scan]" (Yumi). Overall, the results indicate that even though not all students found the mindful breathing exercises and body scan beneficial, most seemed to truly appreciate them.

Journaling, Positive Self-Talk, and Other Activities

The third exercise, which students started doing at the start of the fall term, was gratitude journaling and short discussions based on prompts in English such as, "A strength I have and am grateful for," "A challenging experience I am grateful for," and "One thing that happened today and that I am grateful for is…." Students were encouraged to try gratitude journaling for a week and write in English or Japanese. They were interested in speaking about gratitude and found it helpful to use the prompts in English to converse in the language as speaking practice, too. For instance, one student commented that the prompts were "perfect for practicing speaking or communication in English, too."

However, overall the students were less enthusiastic about gratitude journaling than the breathing techniques and the body scan. Ten students responded that they enjoyed the activity, whereas the other ten did not think the exercise was useful but did not mind it. Three students reported that they did not try the activity. One student wrote that she had already known about gratitude journaling from before and practiced it sometimes as she found it helpful: "I was able to reconfirm that it was effective because it was something I used to do often."

Other positive comments on gratitude journaling and discussions include (common positive phrases are in italics):

> It was *good* because I was able to think about gratitude for things from various perspectives. In particular, when I hear the word "gratitude," I tend to think about people such as my parents and friends, but it was *interesting* to see that there were also different items to be grateful for, such as nature, change, and challenges. (Miho)

> I sometimes get sad because I find myself thinking about "nothing special in my life" even if I had some fun things, so I think it is *good* for me to write down and *remember* what happened. (Anna)

> I think this exercise is so *helpful* for me because I think I am a little negative. It gives me a chance to think about myself and good things in life. I had never thought about it before, so it was a *good* experience. (Aoi)

> I have a habit of looking for what I don't have rather than what I do have, but this was a *good* opportunity for me to analyze myself and my surroundings and be *grateful* for the *happiness* I have. (Hana)

> The examples of gratitude section made me realize that there are many things around me that *I should be grateful for*, even if they seem trivial. (Chihiro)

Positive self-talk statements were introduced next, in the same week as the journaling activity. Positive self-talk is one way to regulate one's emotions and thus manage stress. Examples of such statements included, "I have studied and prepared for the test and will do my best," and "I missed one question, but that is okay. I will focus on the next one." Occasionally, when students took a mock exam at home and before speaking mock exams with me, they were invited to recall this positive self-talk and try to engage in it. They did so with varying degrees of success.

One student mentioned how she practiced speaking for the speaking section of the exam on her own, which I advised the students to do and record themselves and then self-evaluate. This student used sample past exam questions found on the Internet and those provided by me in class. She reported, "Before the speaking part, I think back about the words which 'The test is important but not the most important thing in your life.' It made me feel relaxed." This was a phrase that I introduced in the class as a personal example not necessarily of positive self-talk, but still was a way to think positively and calm myself when I took tests in the past. No other students mentioned it in their written reflections in the questionnaire, but some might have thought in a similar way. Several students said they either completely forgot about positive self-talk or did not feel the need to use it when doing mock exams. One student responded that she found positive self-talk particularly helpful for the speaking exam practice, saying that "I told myself I should enjoy this as a nice opportunity. I pretend to have a conversation with a foreigner traveling overseas, so I tried to enjoy it and was glad that I could relax. Thinking positive!"

I interviewed two students who volunteered to be interviewed before they took the proficiency exam. Therefore, the focus was on their feelings about the techniques they practiced in class and at home but not the day before or during the exam. In addition to talking about specific SEL techniques such as journaling, the two students also shared their impressions about discussing time management and emotion regulation in small groups. Yuki said:

> There were times when I felt stuck because I was having difficulty with tasks, but I felt that I should try my best because everyone else was also trying their best. [...] It was good to learn about stress management [this includes positive self-talk], which I didn't know about before, and to talk with other students, which helped me feel less anxious about the class and the test.

The other student, Maki, also mentioned small group discussions and shared:

> There were people who had the same problem with writing, so I felt like I could share with them, and I should try my best to solve that problem, too. As for the stress management, I was able to learn new ways of coping when I was stuck in my studies by sharing with others. It is very important for me to listen to other students' opinions because it helps me to learn from them.

After the Exam and End-of-the-Course Reflection

After taking the exam, the students answered an online survey where they shared their thoughts and feelings about the exam and their experience with different strategies they used on the test. Twenty-two students answered the questionnaire two days after taking the test (one student did not take the exam). Three students reported that the breathing techniques were the most helpful SEL strategy they used during the test. Ten students overall said that breathing exercises were helpful during the exam. Out of 22, 17 students reported that breathing exercises and body scans helped them prepare for the exam and manage their stress during the preparation time. Six students said they used positive self-talk on the test and felt it was helpful. One student shared, "I took a deep breath every time because the test was long and it was easy to lose my mind." Unfortunately, one student wrote, "Being nervous, no idea to do any of those strategies."

Near the end of the course, in February, I invited students to share their course satisfaction, including activities done in the course, in an anonymous Google Forms questionnaire. Students could choose between values 1 (not satisfied at all/strongly disagree) to 6 (extremely satisfied/strongly agree). Their responses point to a good class atmosphere. Out of 20 students who participated in the survey, six rated their overall satisfaction with the course as 5, and the rest selected 6. One question asked students if they felt more comfortable speaking up and discussing with their classmates more than in similar English language courses, to which 13 students said they strongly agreed, five said they agreed, and two did not answer. When asked about what they liked most about the course and what they found helpful, most students wrote about ample opportunities to consult with and learn from their classmates. Many students also mentioned the novelty of SEL activities that gave a fresh dimension to the course and helped them deal with the stress of exam taking. The results indicate that the students perceived the SEL activities as a valuable and integral part of the course.

Finally, it should be noted that, like most small-scale studies, the present study has some limitations. First, the number of participants is very small and limited to young women only. Another limitation is that the students in this study were all English majors. Thus, it is possible that they were more motivated to try out the techniques that could benefit them when taking English proficiency exams. Nevertheless, the results show that SEL has promise and can be successfully implemented with English language learners in a university foreign language classroom. Wider and more diverse studies need to be done to provide significant and broad validation for SEL in this context.

Conclusion

This article has introduced several SEL techniques that can help university students deal with stress and anxiety related to the stress of foreign language learning and test-taking. Overall, the findings indicate that the selected SEL activities positively impacted the majority of students who practiced them. Students appeared enthusiastic about trying out a variety of SEL exercises and engaged in self-reflection upon doing the activities. Even though several students did not have positive experiences with the exercises introduced in the course, overall student feedback shows that mindful breathing, body scan, and gratitude journaling may benefit students willing to engage. An added bonus could be an improved classroom climate.

Reflecting on what the students did in this class in terms of SEL, I am rather satisfied with their engagement and the outcome. However, it might be more beneficial for the students to be introduced to SEL activities even earlier in the course. That way, students would have more time and opportunity to practice the techniques and perhaps try even more strategies that they find by themselves or the teachers introduce. On the other hand, the reality is that with the course focus on the exam and fundamentals of academic writing, not much time can be spent on SEL. Further studies could investigate how the activities from the current study, but also other SEL strategies might affect learning outcomes in a foreign language as there is a paucity of such research.

Bio Data

Natasha Hashimoto is an associate professor at Tokyo Woman's Christian University. Her doctoral degree is in education/applied linguistics, and her master's is in human rights. Her teaching and research interests include Bourdieusian theoretical framework, multilingualism, metacognitive strategies, social-emotional learning, and fairness in language testing. In 2020, she co-edited the volume *Teacher narratives from the Eikaiwa classroom: Moving beyond "McEnglish"* (with Daniel Hooper).

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