Exploring Privilege in a Human Rights-Based EFL Course in Japan

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Understanding privilege is important for understanding social justice. In a 2019 required four-skills EFL course for second-year Japanese university students centered on studying human rights from a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach, students' presentations indicated superficial understanding about causes of human rights violations. To provide context, one lesson about privilege and the power held by privileged groups was added the following year. Several types of privilege were discussed. Analysis of end-of-course research papers indicated that students developed awareness of privilege and its contribution to human rights violations. After providing background to the original course, I explain how the topic of privilege was approached. Analysis of students' research papers is provided to demonstrate how adding one lesson about privilege appears to have led to a growth mindset enabling students to increase their understanding about causes of human rights violations.

特権を理解することは、社会正義を理解するために重要である。2019年に、日本の大学2年生を対象に、人権をテーマとしたCLIL(内容言語統合型学習)アプローチによる必修4技能EFL科目を実施したが、人権侵害の原因について表面的な理解しか見られないプレゼンテーションが目立った。そこで翌年、人権侵害のより深い文脈を提供するために、特権と特権を有するグループが行使する権力についての授業を一つ追加し、特権のさまざまな種類について議論した。コース終了時の研究レポートの分析から、学生が、特権に対する意識と、特権が関与する人権侵害への認識を育んだことが示された。本稿では、元のコースの背景を説明した後、特権というトピックにどのようにアプローチしたかを説明し、学生の研究レポートを分析することによって、特権についての授業を一つ加えることが人権侵害の原因についての学生の理解を深める成長的マインドセットに繋がったことを提示する。

Human rights education in Japan is a nascent concept that prioritizes teaching about harmonious relationships and societal obligations. Common topics include appreciation of individual differences, discrimination against minority groups in Japan (e.g., the Ainu), and large-scale disasters (e.g., genocide) occurring outside Japan (Nabeshima et al., 2000; Takeda, 2012). However, critics call for teaching specific knowledge about what human rights are (Takeda, 2012) because such knowledge correlates to the ability to recognize the universal and inviolable nature of human rights and increases the likelihood that one will take action to claim their own rights or protect those of others (Cohrs et al., 2007). It was through this lens that I designed a required four-skills EFL course centered around a study of human rights for second-year students at a public Japanese university in 2019 (Kambara, 2021).

At the beginning of the course, students demonstrated a vague understanding of human rights and narrow knowledge about the scope of human rights violations. Examples students gave about violations and where they occur were often rooted in stereotypes, and most focused on developing nations or authoritarian regimes (i.e., outside Japan). The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (United Nations, 1948) was studied as the foundational document for understanding human rights. To dispel stereotypes about where human rights violations occur (Cohrs et al., 2007) and to ensure learning activities were engaging and relevant (Peterson, 2009; Siegel, 2014), students read Japan-based news stories in small groups and discussed whether any human rights violations were indicated vis-à-vis the UDHR. Students later researched worldwide human rights violations and presented their findings in a poster-type presentation format. Presentations demonstrated that students gained a greater understanding about human rights. In post-presentation discussions, students indicated motivation to discover more about domestic and world issues and a desire to take action for change.

However, although students' presentations successfully identified what human rights violations are, they rarely indicated why violations occur beyond simplistic explanations

(e.g., female genital mutilation due to cultural beliefs). To provide context for deeper understanding, the following year (2020), I added one lesson defining privilege, outlining powers held by privileged groups, and illustrating how privilege leads to intentional and unintentional oppression.

Rationale for Introducing Privilege

Understanding privilege is essential to understanding social justice (Lechuga et al., 2009). Rawls's (1999) concept of social justice calls for all people to be treated fairly and to receive a just share of society's benefits. While there is debate about whether the meaning of fair and just should be based on equal distribution of benefits or individual needs (Lechuga et al., 2009), I approached social justice from a needs-based perspective. This stems from my prior experience teaching students with learning disabilities in which I was often challenged by other students' parents or teachers who believed that assisting those students provided them with unfair advantages. However, such assistance cannot be considered to be unfair because it facilitated access for all to the societal good of education (Rawls, 1999).

In her exploration of White privilege, Peggy McIntosh (1990) compared privilege to an "invisible knapsack" (p. 31) of advantages allowing Whites to navigate the world with relative ease. Privilege is extended to individuals (usually belonging to majority groups) who possess the characteristics and beliefs their societies consider the most important or acceptable (Lechuga et al., 2009). Members of privileged groups enjoy unearned advantages that grant disproportionate access to society's goods (Goodman, 2011). Additionally, power and legitimacy are extended to privileged groups giving them dominance over less privileged groups (McIntosh, 1990; Sidanius & Pratto, 2012).

Holding on to advantages, even unintentionally, leads to disadvantages for others (McIntosh, 1990, Johnson, (2017). Johnson (2017) notes, "Everything that's done to receive or maintain [privilege]—however passive and unconscious—results in suffering and deprivation for someone" (p.8). Because societal conditioning prevents groups from recognizing their privileged statuses (McIntosh, 1990), privilege often goes unexamined, and many who benefit from it struggle to grasp their privileged status (Bohmer & Briggs, 1991; Deguchi, 2017). As a result, those with privilege may neglect to consider perspectives and lived experiences of others, which can lead them to make decisions that result in intentional or unintentional oppression (McIntosh, 1990).

Indeed, I had never considered my own privilege until I moved to Japan. Aside from mild gender discrimination, my status as a White, middle-class, Protestant, heterosexual, cisgender, nondisabled, American woman had allowed me to move through life in my home country with relative ease. However, in Japan, I experienced being followed by store staff while shopping for the first time. When a realtor told my Japanese husband and I that they needed permission from the landlord of an apartment we had inquired about before renting to a foreigner, I reacted with a mixture of fear, shock, and indignance. However, the real estate agent's "assurances" that I need not worry because I was not of certain non-White or non-Japanese Asian ancestries, cast a spotlight on my privilege making it impossible to ignore. I realized that my Whiteness, my Americanness, and my marriage to a Japanese male academic would ultimately ensure I could live wherever I chose. Others do not have such certainty.

Japan remains a largely collectivist society in which adhering to group norms is rewarded and deviance admonished (Hendry, 2003; Sugimoto, 2010). Despite diversity across such areas as class, region, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, and religion, a genre of literature promoting a narrative of cultural homogeneity and societal equality in Japan remains influential (Befu, 2001; Sugimoto, 2010). Therefore, I wondered how much awareness my students would have about the existence of privilege in Japan or about their memberships in privileged or less privileged groups.

Several Japan-based teachers have used topics centered on White privilege or the Black Lives Matter movement when teaching about human rights (e.g., Deguchi 2017; Ellis, 2020; Head, 2022). Because I planned to teach only one lesson about privilege, however, I was concerned that focusing on those topics could reinforce stereotypes that privilege and human rights violations happen elsewhere and might prevent students from internalizing concepts of privilege, as Head (2022) observed in her Japanese students' encounters with texts about racism.

Deguchi (2017) asserts that Japanese students are capable of cultivating awareness about privileges they hold and uses White privilege as a starting point before transitioning into the potentially sensitive topic of Japanese privilege due to Japanese students' familiarity with White privilege. In the interest of finding common ground with my students, I began the lesson about privilege by sharing how my previously noted negative experiences in Japan enabled me to realize my privileged status.

The goal of teaching about privilege was to help students understand how privilege can lead to intentional and unintentional human rights violations when majority groups lack awareness of their privilege. Additionally, not being aware of one's privilege is itself a form of privilege because it gives one permission to be neutral or to escape accountability (Deguchi, 2017; McIntosh, 1990). Indeed, my experience with how inequitable treatment

feels and the simultaneous realization that I benefit from privilege as a White person in Japan stripped me of any neutrality or unaccountability.

Teaching about the damage unexamined privilege exacts was intended to help students cultivate a sustained sense of empathy necessary for social change (Goodman, 2000) and the realization that they can make choices that disrupt oppressive systems because those with privilege usually hold decision-making power in societies (Sidanius & Pratto, 2012). However, it was important to dispel any potential misunderstandings among students that the power to facilitate such change is limited to those in high-ranking positions. Indeed, many students will not hold such positions. Instead, they may find themselves as teachers accommodating students with special needs or as members of neighborhood associations making decisions affecting the needs of people with disabilities. For this reason, I advise studying a range of news articles dealing with issues at various societal levels. An example of an article with potential to facilitate discussions about which groups make decisions affecting others is one citing that over 80% of audible pedestrian crossing signals for the blind in Japan are switched off at night due to noise complaints from residents (Tasaki, 2020).

Research Questions

Drawing on Deguchi's (2017) research, I wondered whether and how an exploration of privilege would facilitate understanding about human rights. I was guided by three overarching questions:

RQ1. Would my students be able to understand privilege in Japan as Deguchi (2017) asserted that her students had?

RQ2. How would Japanese students receive the topic of privilege, especially as taught by a foreign teacher?

RQ3. Would students' presentations address privilege as a factor in human rights violations after one lesson about privilege?

Methods

Context and Participants

Participants were one class of 27 second-year Japanese undergraduate university students enrolled in a required four-skills English course in the 2020 spring term and had English proficiency in the CEFR B1 range (TOEIC 618-652). Per university guidelines, students were informed that findings from the course might be used for research and publication purposes and were given the opportunity to opt out without penalty. All students indicated their consent.

The 16-week course was conducted online asynchronously via Moodle due to COVID-19. Video lessons consisted of PowerPoint presentations, which I narrated via screencasting software and uploaded to the Moodle classroom. Each week, students responded to lessons and commented on each other's responses in Moodle discussion forums. Students made video presentations and wrote research papers about human rights violations chosen from a teacher-generated list (see Appendix).

Lesson Content

A CLIL approach was utilized to facilitate foreign language learning through study of meaningful content (Coyle et al., 2010) centered around the topic of human rights. Privilege was introduced in the third lesson of the course, just after studying the UDHR and prior to analyzing Japan-based news stories.

Social Justice

Rawls's (1999) concept of social justice, explaining fairness in terms of equity (i.e., benefits or treatment provided according to individual needs) rather than in terms of equality (i.e., the same benefits or treatment provided regardless of need), was introduced. Two illustrations were shown to demonstrate equality as a potentially unfair concept that rewards privilege.

The first illustration showed two views of three children of short, medium, and tall heights attempting to watch a baseball game from behind a wooden fence (Peace Corps, n.d.). In the first view, each child had received one box. However, the shortest child remained unable to see the game while the tallest child, who did not need a box to see over the fence, had received an unnecessary resource that could have helped the shortest child. In the second view, each child received what they needed (i.e., no box for the tall child, one box for the medium-height child, and two boxes for the shortest child), allowing everyone to see the game.

The second illustration depicted a teacher declaring that all students would receive the same exam in the interest of fairness (Cole, 2018). The students, several types of animals, were instructed to climb a tree. Two animals—a monkey and a crow—will be able to reach the top of the tree. However, the other animals—a penguin, an elephant, a fish, a seal, and a dog— cannot pass the test no matter how hard they study. A fair test would assess a task that all students are capable of accomplishing.

Unearned Advantages and Conferred Dominance

Privilege was also explained in the context of unearned advantages and conferred dominance (McIntosh, 1990). For example, dominance is conferred to White and light-skinned individuals, and well-dressed White men are often perceived as more trustworthy (Lechuga, 2009).

Students were shown photos of three men—a Black man with a raised fist wearing a baseball cap, a heavily tattooed White man, and a White man wearing a suit—and were asked who they perceived as trustworthy. After students' discussions, I revealed the Black man as Spike Lee, a respected American filmmaker whose movies prompt people to contemplate race and privilege. The heavily tattooed man was Jackson Galaxy, a cat behaviorist who hosts a television program which helps people become better cat owners. The well-dressed White man, however, was Ted Bundy, a 1970s American serial rapist and murderer whose charm and good looks allowed him access to his victims.

To illustrate privilege connected to having light skin, students were shown a set of photos of the same person with dark to light skin tones. I explained that light-skinned people are perceived as more attractive in many societies and often receive better treatment and access to services. Students were prompted to consider how skin-lightening products marketed in Japan perpetuate such biases.

Some privileged majority groups common to the US and Japan (e.g., sex or gender; sexual orientation or gender identity; physical or intellectual ability; religious beliefs; and race or ethnicity) were also discussed (Figure 1), and students were asked to consider questions about whether they might benefit from forms of privilege (Table 1). Students were instructed to think of the scenarios as happening in their own country (i.e., Japan) rather than when traveling abroad. Finally, they were told that if they never or hardly ever needed to think about these things, they might have privilege.

Figure 1

Privileged groups in Japan and the United States

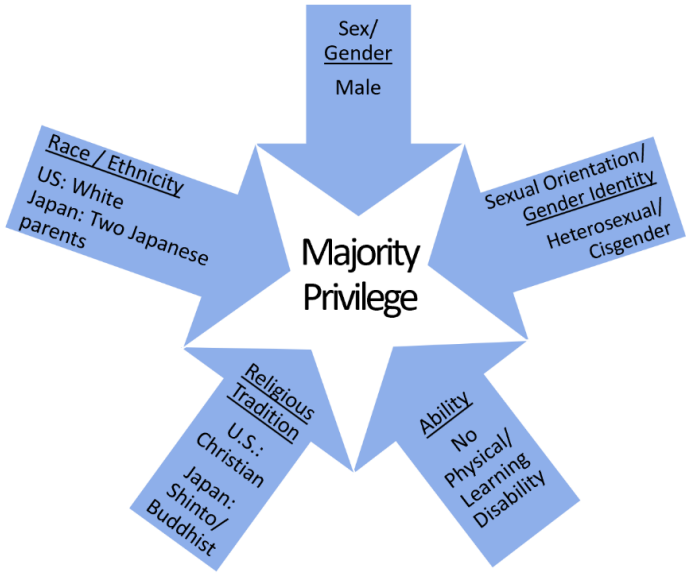

Table 1

Questions About Privilege

In your country…
1. Have you been told you cannot rent an apartment due to age, race, sexual orientation, religion, etc.?
2. Do people avoid sitting next to you on public transportation?
3. Has anyone called the police when you were walking through a neighborhood that was not yours?
4. Is it difficult to access some places because there is no way for you to enter (e.g., wheelchair ramp, or elevator)?
5. Have you been watched closely or followed by store staff while shopping?

Summing Up the Lesson

People often feel discomfort when confronted with their privileged status (Zarate & Mendoza, 2020). While I believe discomfort is a necessary stage of growth, I felt students should understand that they need not feel ashamed if they discovered they were privileged. I explained privilege as a function of societal structure and that it is often conferred upon those born into certain groups (McIntosh, 1990). I emphasized that the point of realizing one's privilege is fostering awareness so people can make decisions that are inclusive and protective of everyone's human rights.

To make inclusive and protective decisions, one must understand that people in privileged groups experience fewer hardships than people from less privileged groups and that people from less privileged groups often must work harder to enjoy the benefits of society that privileged groups take for granted (McIntosh, 1990). I emphasized that when people remain unaware of or refuse to acknowledge privilege, the system cannot be changed to ensure equity for all; people from less privileged groups will continue to be misunderstood or resented for feeling disenfranchised and calling for change; and uninformed decisions will be made that hurt others, either intentionally or unintentionally, and violate human rights (Goodman, 2011).

Human Rights Research Papers

The course culminated with presentations about a human rights issue and a human rights organization working for change. Students chose topics from a teacher-generated list (see Appendix) to ensure topic variety. Students recorded themselves presenting in PowerPoint via screencasting software and uploaded the videos to Moodle. A research paper was added to the presentation requirements in 2020 due to a university change in course requirements. I only examined the research papers for this study.

It is important to note that the research criteria were unchanged from 2019 to 2020. That is, despite having added a lesson about privilege, I gave students no instructions to address privilege in their research. The research criteria were as follows:

1. Establish background for the human rights violation (e.g., Which rights and whose rights are being violated? Where, why, and how long has this been happening?).
2. Assert why people should care about this issue (i.e., Which articles of the UDHR are being violated? What are the consequences if this problem continues?).
3. Introduce an organization working to resolve this issue. Inform people about how they can make a difference.

Assessing the Research Papers

Awareness of Privilege

I examined students' papers for indications of awareness of privilege as a factor in the human rights violations they researched. Twenty-one students indicated awareness of privilege while six students did not mention privilege in their papers (Table 2).

I began by looking for specific verbiage associated with privilege and later looked for usage of indirect verbiage. Examples of specific verbiage to describe privilege included the following: *privilege, advantages, disadvantages, disparity unequal, equity*. Several students did not use specific verbiage, yet they described instances of privilege. References included people living in poverty who must work harder to access basic needs (e.g., education, healthcare); Japanese laws recognizing heterosexual marriage but not same-sex marriage; and girls' and women's issues (e.g., access to education) in traditionally male-dominated societies.

Four major themes emerged about the nature of privileges contributing to or perpetuating human rights violations (Table 3). Inequitable laws and practices were most cited. This was followed by power disparity, with economic disparity cited most often followed by class and gender disparity. Practices or attributes perceived as contrary to societal norms (e.g., religion, sexual identity and orientation) and lack of awareness by more privileged groups or society about the hardships faced by less privileged groups were cited equally. Because many papers addressed multiple themes, the numbers in Table 3 total more than the 27 papers submitted.

Table 2

Types of Privilege Referenced in Papers

Types of Privilege Referenced	Papers (*n*=27)
Reference to Privilege (Connections to Japan)	13
Japan-Specific Paper Topics 9	
Paper Topics Not Japan-Specific 2	
Paper Topics Not Related to Japan 2	
Reference to Privilege (No Japan Connections)	8
No References to Privilege	6

Table 3

Themes About Privilege

Themes	# of Papers Referencing Themes
Inequitable Laws and Practices	15
Power Disparity (Economic, class, gender)	11
Practices Viewed as Contrary to Societal Norms	9
Lack of Awareness by Majority Groups or Society	9

Connections to Privilege in Japan

I also examined papers to determine whether students who discussed privilege connected their discussions to Japan (see Appendix). Of the 21 students who referenced privilege, 13 students referenced or drew connections to Japan, while eight students did not.

Referencing Japan when discussing privilege took two forms: 1) discussing instances of privilege in Japan, and 2) discussing Japanese understanding and attitudes about privilege. As not all the topics students chose dealt specifically with Japan-based issues, there was no expectation for all students to make connections to privilege in Japan. As shown in Table 2, 13 students made specific connections to Japan when referencing privilege even though not all 13 topics dealt with Japan-based issues.

Nine of the 13 papers referencing privilege in Japan dealt with Japan-specific issues (e.g., Human Trafficking in Japan, Unregistered Children in Japan, Homelessness in Japan). Two students referenced privilege in Japan when reporting on topics which could happen anywhere and were, therefore, not specific to Japan (i.e., Unequal Treatment of Minorities and Gender Identity/Same-Sex Discrimination). Two other students with topics unrelated to Japan (i.e., Child Slavery and Places Where Homosexual Acts Are Illegal or Punishable by Death) referenced Japanese privilege by citing ignorance of these issues in Japan or apathy expressed by some Japanese that such issues are unrelated to Japan (i.e., unawareness as a form of privilege).

Discussion

Awareness of Privilege in Japan

Regarding the first question, students demonstrated awareness of privilege in Japan. Indeed, several students spoke about privilege in Japan or from a Japanese perspective.

One unexpected result was that two students extended their learning by making connections to privilege in Japan when reporting on topics unrelated to Japan. Both students cited ignorance or apathy in Japan as problems. This indicates the need to emphasize these as forms of privilege in future courses.

Students' Reception of Privilege

Regarding the second research question, students' reception of the lesson about privilege was positive. I received no resistance during class or negative feedback via comments in the university's end-of-course questionnaire.

I approached teaching about privilege to Japanese students cautiously as I wished to avoid being perceived as a judgmental outsider criticizing Japan. To situate myself with my students, I explained that I consider Japan my home because I belong to a Japanese family and intend to spend my life here. I shared the belief that caring about one's country means looking critically at issues and working to resolve them.

Instructors who are interested in teaching potentially sensitive topics such as this should work to build trust with their students. Therefore, it is important to embark on a journey of co-discovery and to create safe spaces for students to challenge ideas and to explore and express what might be very new feelings and opinions (Freire, 2009; Peterson, 2009).

Effect on Research Papers

Regarding the third research question, the lesson seemed to influence students' reporting on human rights violations. Although there had been a requirement to explain reasons for human rights violations in the 2019 course, I found it did not ensure students would address privilege. Indeed, most causes students pointed out (e.g., child slavery due to poverty) did not indicate privilege. Of course, a possible reason for this is that we did not study privilege in 2019.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that learning about privilege made an impression on students and helped them make deeper connections to underlying causes of human rights violations. Students received the lesson well and were able to recognize the existence of privilege in Japanese society. Some were also able to extend their learning to connect privilege in non-Japanese contexts to Japan.

While results were encouraging, some limitations should be noted. The 2020 course was conducted asynchronously online whereas the 2019 course had been face-to-face; therefore, students were able to revisit videos of the lecture contents when composing their research papers in the 2020 course. While I view this ability as a strength, it might have allowed students to connect more deeply with the information about human rights in 2020 than students had in 2019, thereby influencing the results.

Instructors who wish to teach about privilege in face-to-face courses should keep the complex nature of the topic in mind and consider that students might not grasp as much as my students seemed to via the asynchronous online format. For this reason, instructors might want to devote more than one lesson to studying privilege if taught face-to-face.

Another limitation is that research papers were not required in the 2019 course. Instead, students presented in a poster presentation style setting. I did not film the 2019 presentations; therefore, my recollection of how and whether privilege was discussed is based on contemporaneous notes taken while observing presentations. Without presentation transcripts, it is difficult to ascertain whether my recollections are accurate. Therefore, differences between the 2019 and 2020 courses would be clearer if both courses had required research papers or if the 2019 presentations had been filmed. I would not, however, omit teaching privilege in a future course simply to establish a control group because the topic is important.

Teaching about privilege proved valuable for deepening students' understanding about human rights; however, the topic of privilege need not always be part of larger courses about major issues such as human rights. Privilege can be touched upon or woven into individual lessons about various topics, such as the environment, education, or healthcare. Simply asking students to consider who decides the rules or laws in various situations (e.g., near which neighborhood landfills are built) can expand students' learning and perspectives. Teaching about privilege, therefore, has important implications for empowering students and teachers to develop the growth mindset necessary to challenge the status quo and tackle social justice issues in a variety of areas.

Bio Data

Judith Kambara holds an MA in applied linguistics from the University of Massachusetts Boston and is a full-time language lecturer at Nagoya City University. She is also a US-licensed language arts and social studies teacher. Her teaching practice focuses on creating equitable and interactive learning environments. Her research interests include human rights and social justice education, intercultural communication, sociocultural linguistics, learner autonomy and self-efficacy, and critical pedagogy.

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Appendix

2020 Student Research Paper Topics and References to Privilege

References Made to Privilege in Japan
Within Japan-Specific Paper Topics
1. Unregistered Children in Japan
2. Human Trafficking in Japan
3. Homelessness in Japan
4. Ainu Issues
5. Forced Sterilization in Japan's Past Eugenics Policy
6. Child Abuse in Japan
7. Transgender Rights in Japan
8. Overwork in Japan
9. Japan's Hostage Justice System
Within Paper Topics Not Specific to Japan
1. Gender Identity Discrimination
2. Unequal Treatment of Minorities
Within Paper Topics Unrelated to Japan
1. Child Slavery
2. Places Where Homosexual Acts Are Illegal or Punishable by Death
References Made to Privilege in Relation to the Topic (i.e., not to Japan)
1. Unequally Funded Schools in the United States
2. Turkic Muslims (Uighurs) in China
3. The Rohingya in Myanmar
4. Police Brutality in the United States
5. Water Crisis in Flint, Michigan
6. Girls' Schooling
7. Honor Killing
8. Child Marriage

No References Made to Privilege
1. The Death Penalty
2. Japan's Low Acceptance of Refugees
3. Civilians in War Zones
4. Gender Discrimination
5. Female Genital Mutilation
6. Child Soldiers