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Bridging Global Goals and Local Contexts: Advancing Equity and Human Rights in University Classrooms

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines ways to integrate social justice and human rights education into international university courses taught through English as a foreign language (EFL) and content and language integrated learning (CLIL) in Japanese universities. Grounded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this study connects these goals to human rights issues to create culturally relevant, student-centered lessons that develop intercultural and linguistic competence while raising awareness of diversity, equity, and social justice. Drawing on classroom observations, material trials, and surveys, this paper proposes a framework for designing curricula that link global social justice themes, such as gender equality and climate justice, with local contexts and student experiences. The findings highlight the importance of relatable content for sustaining engagement and fostering critical thinking, intercultural competence, and language skills. Overall, this study underscores the importance of international course design, which uses intercultural communication tools to deepen global understanding and improve learning outcomes.*

Keywords: culturally relevant materials, human rights and social justice issues, SDGs in EFL education, student-centered learning

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INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the Japanese government launched a "Top Global University Project," which aimed to internationalize Japanese universities through grants to institutions that prioritized global education and competitiveness by using English as a medium of instruction, recruiting more foreign faculty members, and enrolling greater numbers of international students (Rose & McKinley, 2018). The program ended in 2024, and while a comprehensive evaluation of its successes and failures in internationalization at Japanese universities is beyond the scope of this paper, the number of international students in Japan has increased over the past decade (Japan Student Services Organization, 2025). Within this broader push for the internationalization of university education, mixed domestic and international student EFL/CLIL classrooms in Japan have become important sites of international education.

Students in mixed classrooms must navigate linguistic diversity, different educational norms, and new cultural perspectives. Research has shown that international students in Japan often struggle with limited integration, hierarchical communication norms, and uneven opportunities for interaction with domestic peers (Hollenback, 2019a; Lee, 2017; Onishi, 2017). These challenges make the EFL/CLIL classroom a crucial setting for developing intercultural communication skills and shared understanding, which can contribute to the success of international students. Drawing on human rights education research, Paulo Freire's pedagogical theories, and social justice concepts, this paper examines how a flexible, student-centered approach to teaching human rights in EFL/CLIL classrooms can facilitate meaningful intercultural engagement. Furthermore, this model supports international student success by creating structured opportunities for intercultural dialog, reciprocal knowledge sharing, and collaborative meaning-making, all of which help reduce isolation and improve academic engagement.

This is significant because international collaboration is increasingly important, as the world faces a "triple planetary crisis" involving climate change, loss of nature and biodiversity, and pollution, whereas wars and armed conflicts continue to create humanitarian crises. Given these unprecedented challenges and the growing importance of the United Nations' SDGs, human rights issues are becoming increasingly important across all levels of education. An education that emphasizes critical thinking also encourages students to consider human rights

and their connections to privilege, oppression, and the power structures shaping society.

Theoretical Frameworks

Human Rights

Focusing on human rights in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) classrooms creates space to explore the dialectical relationship between culture and human rights issues. The course is informed by a dialectical understanding of human rights, following Jennings' (1996) argument that human rights should be understood paradoxically as both universal and culturally situated. While the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) presents human rights as universal and innate to all people, in practice, their interpretation and application are deeply embedded in specific cultural, social, and political contexts (Jennings, 1996). In practice, human rights are continually negotiated, contested, and redefined by the cultural and institutional contexts that shape their implementation.

Understanding how ideas of culture, identity, and human rights intertwine is essential for students to critically analyze how global discourses are negotiated within local cultures. This framework guided the course, as students were encouraged to choose topics for study that not only interested them but also allowed them to examine tensions between how human rights were understood or implemented in different cultural contexts.

Social Justice

The course design detailed in this paper also uses the concept of social justice as a framework for understanding how greater equity and fair access to rights can be achieved. Like human rights, the idea of social justice, here understood as equal opportunities and equitable access to social and economic benefits (United Nations, 2025), must be considered within the dialectical relationship between human rights, culture, and power. Its expressions vary depending on which groups are privileged or marginalized in specific societies. This approach encouraged students to examine the production and resolution of systemic inequality in different cultural settings.

Paulo Freire's Dialogic Pedagogy

Freire's (2017) dialogic pedagogy is an important tool for co-constructing knowledge, empowering students as producers rather than merely receivers. Our approach used Freire's ideas by centering on student-selected topics and peer teaching, which allowed for more reciprocal questions and discussions, as well as a flattening of the hierarchical dynamic in teacher-centered classrooms. Although Freire's ideas have limitations in EFL contexts because of uneven language proficiency and cultural norms around hierarchies and participation, this approach

contributes to the internationalization of the classroom by positioning students' backgrounds and cultural knowledge as course content, thereby enabling students from diverse backgrounds to learn collaboratively about global issues and human rights.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research at Japanese universities shows that human rights education and critical social issues can benefit both domestic and international EFL/CLIL learners. Teaching human rights issues not only improves students' language skills (Staley, 2018) but also provides students with opportunities to critically examine power dynamics in multicultural contexts (Senbayrak & Hart, 2024; Brandon, 2019). Cultural scaffolding has also been shown to improve students' language gains and interest in Japanese university settings (Sheridan et al., 2019a; 2019b). Furthermore, research in Korean contexts has demonstrated that, in addition to critical thinking, engagement with global issues also promotes empathy and ethical reasoning (Auh & Kim, 2024).

Furthermore, including examples of social justice movements and activist responses is important because previous research suggests that when addressing complex human rights issues, students engage more positively when they encounter concrete examples of people and organizations working toward solutions (Sheridan et al., 2019a; 2019b; Sheridan & Tanaka, 2024). This dialectical relationship between human rights, social justice, and culture contributes to efforts to internationalize curricula and develop students' intercultural communicative competence in ways that are locally meaningful while also flipping the classroom to create an education based on dialog (Freire, 2017).

This is significant because, in recent years, global citizenship education (GCE) has been gaining popularity (UNESCO, 2025; Al-husban & Al-Abri, 2024; Salem, 2021; Hollenback, 2019b). While the present study is inspired by GCE frameworks, it differs in that there is no explicit action component, and it utilizes a peer teaching methodology inspired by Freire. While social justice-focused pedagogical strategies have been documented as effective across EFL contexts globally (Chen, 2024), little attention has been given to how such approaches can be developed through student-selected topics and peer-led instruction to support intercultural communication in internationalized university settings.

In this sense, the present study fills an important gap in current research. To the best of the authors' knowledge, no studies have combined pillars of GCE, dialogical critical pedagogy, global issues, and human rights with student preferences when discussing these topics. Furthermore, although human rights and social justice in language teaching are a growing field of academic interest, there is limited empirical research demonstrating how these ideas can be practically implemented in Japanese university classrooms, especially while incorporating local cultural content and international communication.

Despite increasing attention to human rights and social justice in language teaching, research demonstrating how these ideas can be implemented in Japanese classrooms, especially with local cultural content and mixed international and domestic students, remains limited. In this paper, an international student is a university student enrolled in a Japanese university whose country of origin is not Japan. Approximately twenty different nationalities were represented across all the courses. There is also a great deal of research that focuses on the challenges faced by students studying in other countries and the ways in which global politics shape the study-abroad experience (Gultekin, 2025). This research has led to greater institutional attention to human rights issues, on the one hand (Takamatsu, 2023), but it has also resulted in reflection on the ways in which students themselves shape the experiences of their peers from other countries (Hastowohadi & Ma'rifatulloh, 2025). The flexibility of the course design gave students room to discuss their own cultures and global politics within the framework of culture and human rights and created a space where they could reflectively share personal stories and reflections on their own experiences, fostering both social and emotional transformative learning (Yeh et al., 2021). The peer teaching method facilitated trust between students and, in effect, created an in-class support system. This finding is incredibly important because recent studies have shown that social support from both peers and faculty has a positive effect on student success (Beri et al., 2025).

Purpose of the Present Study

This study investigated the interests and attitudes of university students toward the use of materials incorporating social justice topics in EFL and CLIL classrooms in Japan. It examines whether and how students' preferences in the topics may shift over the semester, what factors influence their engagement, and how they evaluate the course materials. Specifically, this study addressed the following research questions:

- RQ1: Which social justice issues are students most interested in studying, and does their interest in these topics change from the beginning to the end of the course?
- RQ2: Which topics did students find most and least interesting in the course, and what factors influenced their levels of interest?

METHOD

Research Design

Using a mixed-methods approach, this study investigated how students' interest in social justice topics may evolve from the beginning to the end of a CLIL course. The quantitative data were collected via pre- and poststudy Google Form questionnaires, which asked participants to rank a list of 20 social justice topics according to their preference for studying them, whereas the qualitative

data were gathered through a series of open-ended reflections on the poststudy survey to provide insights and help interpret the quantitative results. The research took place over a fourteen-week period in four intact classes, which were selected through convenience sampling, with the lessons and educational materials chosen on the basis of the students' ranked preferences in the topics. This design made it possible to examine both changes in topic interest and identify factors influencing student engagement. Teacher-prepared readings, student-led presentations and classroom discussions, and homework assignments served as the intervention, as these materials offered students culturally relevant, student-centered content that connected global and local perspectives on social justice and human rights. The flexible, student-centered approach used student-selected topics, open-ended materials, and peer-led activities as an effective course design to integrate human rights education into global education EFL/CLIL courses.

Participants

Forty-nine students (38 female and 11 male) at two public universities in western Japan participated in this study. The participants, aged 19--23, belonged to four intact intermediate-level EFL elective classes offered to first- through fourth-year students within departments focused on global studies. Thirty-three of the students were Japanese nationals, while the remaining 16 were international students (Nigeria, France, Algeria, Romania, Denmark, Norway, Germany, Indonesia, China, Taiwan, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Canada, Vietnam, Spain, Brazil, Thailand, Bangladesh, and Malaysia were among the countries represented). All of the students were in a global studies course, with sixteen having a specific global business focus. One of the authors instructed the students in the courses and collected the data over the course of one semester. Participation was voluntary, and all the data were kept anonymous and confidential. The purpose of the study was explained to the students at the beginning, and informed consent was obtained as part of the poststudy questionnaire.

Instruments for data collection

Upon obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board for this research project, participants were given a bilingual (English and Japanese) questionnaire via Google Forms at both the beginning and end of the study. The students took the survey on the first day of class, and if they were absent, they completed it during the second week. The survey was also posted in the LMS so that students could access it and complete it at home. By the end of the second week, the students had completed the survey, and on the basis of their selections, topics were set for the third week (see Appendix A for the course syllabus).

The questionnaires were designed to assess changes in students' interest in various social justice topics from pre- to poststudy, collect feedback on course content, and identify the factors influencing their engagement. The prestudy questionnaire asked the students to rank 20 social justice topics from 1 (most

interested) to 20 (least interested) on the basis of their interest in studying them. The students were informed that the topics to be covered in the course would be determined by the survey results, so they were encouraged to rank them carefully and thoughtfully. The poststudy questionnaire (Appendix B) also asked the students to rerank the original list of the 20 social justice topics on the basis of their current level of interest in them. Students were reminded that future course content might be influenced by their responses, so it remained important to rank the topics thoughtfully.

The postsurvey questionnaire included five additional questions. The students were asked to rank the social justice topics covered in the course from 1 (most interested) to 11 (least interested). They were then asked to indicate which factors (e.g., class activities, personal experiences, current issues, etc.) may have influenced their interest in the topics covered. The students provided brief written explanations for their rankings and factor selections, with an option to respond in either English or Japanese. From a list of 10 topics not covered during the course, students selected any that they wished had been included, instead of indicating "None" if they did not wish to make any changes. Students then identified which of the 11 covered topics, if any, they would be willing to eliminate them from the study of the topics selected in the previous question. The students were again asked to explain their choices with a follow-up open-response question. Finally, the students were invited to share any additional feedback or reflections on the course in an open-ended response section.

Articles and class assignments

The first two lessons were introductions to human rights and social justice to provide students with scaffolding for the remainder of the course, and the final week of the course was a class wrap-up session with no new content. Because Japanese universities operate on a 15-week semester system, 11 lessons were left to cover the topics students selected. On the basis of the students' responses to the initial topic-selection survey, the 11 most popular social justice topics were chosen, and original reading materials for these topics were prepared by the teacher. This ensured that the readings would align with students' interests and perceived relevance to their own lives. The teacher taught the first two weeks of lessons that served as a broad introduction to human rights, social justice, culture, identity, and the systems of power that shape these. In addition to providing the framework for the course, the initial weeks allowed the instructor to prepare readings for the students and assign students to pairs or groups of three. Each week, the students were given homework for the next lesson, so each group had a week to finish their lessons after receiving the reading.

In each case, the reading selection gave examples from diverse global contexts, exploring how the topic could take multiple forms. Moreover, each reading addressed how the human rights issue that was the topic of the class might also be an issue in Japan. For example, bodily autonomy was one of the core topics selected by students, and the instructor subsequently developed into a reading that explored how this human right connects to everyday life, culture, and social norms

in multiple countries, including Japan. The reading defined bodily autonomy broadly as each person's right to make choices about their own body, free from coercion or violence. This includes decisions about health, reproduction, clothing, body art, work, and personal boundaries in relationships.

To highlight the cultural and human rights tensions, diverse global examples, from extreme violations such as forced child marriage to culturally codified dress, such as mandatory or banned hijabs in different countries, are presented. These different contexts allow students to demonstrate how cultural norms can both restrict and protect bodily autonomy. The text also included an example relevant to Japan in that it took up the case of tattoos. It described how indigenous groups such as the Ainu and Uchinanchu view tattoos as important cultural practices but how social prejudice in Japan creates barriers to bodily expression and cultural identity.

Thus, each reading was designed to show how a single human rights issue can look very different depending on cultural and political contexts. Each reading attempted to show both extreme and everyday manifestations of the issue as connected to human rights. In this way, each reading emphasized the dialectical process between questions of identity, culture, and human rights. Instead of giving students a single answer or a black and white view of any specific issue, readings were open-ended, and homework was limited to opinion and reflection questions, allowing students to think critically about how the human right that was the topic of the assignment could be protected for everyone and how culture and human rights can be balanced in complex real-world situations. The homework was designed to be the basis for the discussion; the course was heavily discussion-based.

The materials were teacher-written to address a gap in commercially available EFL textbooks, which often present global issues without connecting them to local contexts. Thus, the materials were specifically written for the class not only to meet students' levels but also to include a Japan-specific example as cultural scaffolding. This approach also allowed for the inclusion of extreme examples but also more everyday or less extreme examples of how human rights might be compromised that would be more relatable to university students in Japan. Writing our own materials also allowed us to foreground the dialectics informing this project and provided flexibility to be responsive to student interests.

Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data

The quantitative data from the pre- and poststudy questionnaires were analyzed via SPSS Version 29.0.2.0 to examine potential shifts in students' interest in 20 social justice topics from the beginning to the end of the course. The dataset included students' responses from both pre- and poststudy surveys, where they ranked the topics and, in the poststudy survey, indicated the factors that influenced their interest. All the rankings and factors were coded numerically and organized by participant and survey phase (pre- and postintervention). Descriptive statistics were first used to compare the mean rankings of all 20

topics before and after the study, with lower scores indicating greater interest. Friedman tests were conducted on both the prestudy and poststudy datasets to evaluate differences in participant rankings. To determine whether these prepost changes for individual topics were significant, follow-up paired sample *t* tests were conducted for each topic, and effect sizes were calculated via Cohen's *d*. For the 11 topics included in the course, an additional Friedman test and follow-up pairwise comparisons were used to assess differences in preference. The frequencies of the factors selected in the poststudy survey were calculated with a Cochran test and McNemar's tests with Bonferroni adjustments to evaluate differences among the proportions of the factors selected. Finally, in addition to the quantitative analyses, the open-ended responses from the poststudy questionnaire were analyzed qualitatively. The responses were coded in Microsoft Excel to identify recurring patterns and common themes (e.g., collaborative/group work, peer teaching/enthusiasm of presenters, relevance and diversity of materials). The frequency of each theme was examined, and the most frequent themes were included in the final analysis.

RESULTS

Quantitative analysis

RQ 1: Which social justice issues are students most interested in studying, and does their interest in these topics change from the beginning to the end of the course?

To answer our first research question, we analyzed the participants' rankings of the 20 social justice topics collected at the beginning (prestudy) and end (poststudy) of the course. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for these rankings. As indicated by the prestudy mean scores (with rankings in parentheses), gender equality received the highest level of interest (M = 6.71), whereas indigenous issues received the lowest among the 20 topics (M = 11.10). Based on these prestudy rankings, the top 11 topics (Gender Inequality to Overconsumption) were selected and included in the course syllabus. A Friedman test was conducted to evaluate differences in participant rankings among the 20 social justice topics. This nonparametric test was used because the topic rankings were measured on an ordinal scale. Therefore, a repeated-measures *ANOVA* was not used, as it requires continuous, normally distributed data, which is not appropriate for ranked responses. The test was significant, $\chi 2$ (19, N = 42) = 38.55, p = .005, indicating that the topic rankings were not uniformly distributed. The Kendall coefficient of concordance of .048 indicated very low agreement among participants, suggesting a wide range of individual preferences.

Post-study rankings demonstrated a modest change in students' perceived interest in the topics. The poststudy mean scores show that Slavery/Human Trafficking (M = 11.27), Climate Change and Environmental Justice (M = 10.86),

and Overconsumption (M = 10.61) fell out of the top 11 topics, whereas Economic Inequality (M = 9.45), Access to Healthcare (M = 10.04), and Labor Issues (M = 10.04) moved into the top 11. A Friedman test was conducted to assess whether participants' rankings of the 20 social justice topics differed significantly across studies. The test was significant, $\chi 2$ (19, N = 49) = 95.94, $p < .001$. The Kendall coefficient of concordance of .103 suggested a slightly higher but still modest level of agreement among the participants poststudy.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Pre- and Poststudy Rankings of All Topics

Topic	Pre M (Rank)	Pre SD	Post M (Rank)	Post SD
Gender Inequality	6.71 (1)	5.39	7.76 (5)	6.10
Racism/Racial Injustice	7.29 (2)	5.41	9.27 (6)	5.84
Death Penalty	7.50 (3)	4.67	7.06 (1)	6.03
Bodily Autonomy	7.98 (4)	5.59	7.69 (3)	5.62
Education	7.98 (5)	5.83	7.69 (3)	5.69
Children's Rights	8.10 (6)	5.44	7.22 (2)	4.72
Food Insecurity/Hunger/Poverty	8.55 (7)	5.75	9.27 (6)	5.46
Slavery/Human Trafficking	8.76 (8)	6.5	11.27 (16)	5.94
Refugee Crisis	8.83 (9)	5.9	10.51 (11)	5.74
Climate Change/Env. Justice	9.07 (10)	5.98	10.86 (14)	6.91
Overconsumption	9.14 (11)	6.02	10.61 (13)	6.27
Labor Issues	9.29 (12)	5.79	10.04 (9)	5.50
LGBTQ+ Rights	9.62 (13)	6.42	10.57 (12)	6.19
Environmental Disasters	9.67 (14)	6.17	11.55 (17)	5.68
Disabilities	9.95 (15)	5.78	11.10 (15)	5.59
Economic Inequality	10.05 (16)	5.99	9.45 (8)	6.33
Water Pollution and Access	10.24 (17)	6.45	13.45 (20)	4.80
Biodiversity Loss/Speciesism	10.60 (18)	6.11	11.63 (18)	6.25
Access to Healthcare	10.71 (19)	5.37	10.04 (9)	4.95
Indigenous Issues	11.10 (20)	5.87	12.55 (19)	5.46

Note. Due to the 1–20 ranking system, a lower mean score indicates a greater preference. The sample sizes were N=42 for the pretest and N=49 for the posttest.

Follow-up paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted to determine whether students' interest in each topic changed from pre- to post-study. As shown in Table 2, most changes in student interest were small and not statistically

significant. Due to the 1–20 ranking system, a negative difference in the mean score indicates greater interest in the topic post-study. In contrast, a positive mean difference reflects less interest in the topic poststudy. Effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) ranged from negligible to moderate, with only a few topics showing meaningful shifts. Most notably, water pollution and access showed a statistically significant decrease in interest (mean Diff = 3.18, $d = 0.58$, $p < .001$), with a medium effect size, even though these topics were not covered in the course.

Table 2: Paired-sample Differences in Topic Rankings

Topic	Mean Diff (Post–Pre)	Cohen's *d*	*p*	95% CI (LL,UL)
Gender Inequality	0.15	0.02	.885	–0.29,0.33
Racism and Racial Injustice	1.73	0.29	.079	–0.03,0.60
Death Penalty	–0.90	–0.12	.442	–0.43,0.19
Bodily Autonomy	–0.90	–0.12	.886	–0.43,0.19
Education	0.18	0.03	.292	–0.28,0.34
Children's Rights	–1.27	–0.17	.292	–0.48,0.14
Food Insecurity/Hunger/Poverty	1.00	0.14	.368	–0.17,0.46
Slavery/Human Trafficking	2.55	0.35	.197	0.03,0.66
Refugee Crisis	1.52	0.21	.277	–0.11,0.52
Climate Change/Env.Justice	1.23	0.17	.159	–0.14,0.49
Overconsumption	1.58	0.23	.034	–0.09,0.54
Labor Issues	1.37	0.17	.274	–0.14,0.49
LGBTQ+ Rights	0.55	0.07	.644	–0.24,0.38
Environmental Disasters	1.55	0.29	.072	–0.03,0.61
Disabilities	0.63	0.09	.572	–0.22,0.40
Economic Inequality	–0.55	–0.08	.603	–0.39,0.23
Water Pollution and Access	3.18	0.58	<.001*	0.24,0.91
Biodiversity Loss/Speciesism	2.10	0.23	.152	–0.09,0.54
Access to Healthcare	–0.45	–0.08	.625	–0.38,0.23
Indigenous Issues	1.63	0.25	.123	–0.07,0.56

Note. Effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) are interpreted as follows: $d \geq 0.2$ = small effect, $d \geq 0.5$ = medium effect, $d \geq 0.8$ = large effect. An asterisk (*) indicates a significant result, $p <$ 0.5. The sample size was N=40, as not all participants completed both the pre- and poststudy questionnaires, accounting for the slight variations in mean scores.

Slavery/human trafficking also had a moderate effect size (d = 0.35), but the decrease in interest (Mean Diff = 2.55) was not statistically significant (p = .197). Similarly, Racism and Racial Injustice (Mean Diff = 1.73, d = 0.29, p = .079) and Environmental Disasters (Mean Diff = 1.55, d = 0.29, p = .072) showed moderate effect sizes, with mean score changes that approached significance, suggesting potential decreases in interest. In particular, since Racism and Racial Injustice and Slavery/Human Trafficking (Fragile States) were covered in the course, they warrant further exploration.

RQ 2: Which topics did students find most and least interesting in the course, and what factors influenced their levels of interest?

To answer the first part of our second research question, regarding which topics covered in the course did the students find most and least interesting, a Friedman test was conducted on the dataset displayed in Table 3 to evaluate differences in participant rankings across the 11 social justice topics. Follow-up pairwise comparisons were then performed to determine whether significant differences in interest in studying these topics existed.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Pre- and Poststudy Rankings of the 11 Topics Covered

Topic	M (Pre)	SD (Pre)	M (Post)	SD (Post)	Mean Diff (Post–Pre)
Death Penalty	7.5	4.67	7.06	6.03	-0.44
Children's Rights	8.1	5.44	7.22	4.72	-0.88
Bodily Autonomy	7.98	5.59	7.69	5.62	-0.29
Education	7.98	5.83	7.69	5.69	-0.29
Gender Inequality	6.71	5.39	7.76	6.1	1.05
Racism and Racial Injustice	7.29	5.41	9.27	5.84	1.98
Food Insecurity/Hunger/Poverty	8.55	5.75	9.27	5.46	0.72
Refugee Crisis	8.83	5.9	10.51	5.74	1.68
Overconsumption	9.14	6.02	10.61	6.27	1.47
Climate Change/Env. Justice	9.07	5.98	10.86	6.91	1.79
Fragile States (e.g., Slavery)	8.76	6.5	11.27	5.94	2.51

Note. Owing to the 1–20 ranking system, a lower mean score indicates a greater preference. The sample sizes were N=42 for the pretest and N=49 for the posttest.

The Friedman test was significant, $\chi 2$ (10, N = 49) = 56.65, p < .001, and the Kendall coefficient of concordance of .116 suggested a modest level of agreement among the participants poststudy. Follow-up pairwise comparisons were

conducted via Wilcoxon tests. To control for Type I errors across the 55 comparisons, a Bonferroni adjustment was applied to the critical *p* value (*p* value of .05/number of tests = .05/55 = .0009). Eight pairwise comparisons were statistically significant after the adjustment. Death penalty was rated significantly higher in interest than climate change and environmental justice ($Z = -3.33$, $p < .001$) and education ($Z = -3.44$, $p < .001$). Food insecurity, hunger and poverty were rated significantly lower in interest than death penalty ($Z = -3.69$, $p < .001$) and education ($Z = -3.57$, $p < .001$). Refugee crisis was rated significantly lower in interest than death penalty ($Z = -3.34$, $p < .001$), children's rights ($Z = -3.68$, $p < .001$), bodily autonomy ($Z = -3.76$, $p < .001$), and education ($Z = -3.48$, $p < .001$).

To answer the second part of our second research question, regarding what factors influenced students' levels of interest, a frequency analysis of the factors selected by participants on the poststudy survey, as displayed in Table 4, combined with a qualitative analysis of student responses to the open-ended question, was conducted.

Table 4: Frequencies of Factors that Influence Interest

Factor	Frequency	Percentage
Pair/group work and collaboration	34	69.4
Enthusiasm of the peer teachers	32	65.3
The opinions of the teacher	31	63.3
Diversity of topics in the article	30	61.2
Presentation skills of the peer teachers	29	59.2
The context of the article (Japanese, Global)	26	53.1
The opinions of the peer teachers	26	53.1
Difficulty of the article	23	46.9
Ability of the peer teachers to use PowerPoint	20	40.8
Relevance of the article	21	42.9
The questions related to article	14	28.6
Language ability of peer teachers	10	20.4
Other:		
Knowledge	1	2.0
My experience	1	2.0

Note. N = 49. Percentages were calculated by dividing the frequency of each response by 49 and multiplying by 100.

A Cochran test, which assesses differences among related proportions and frequencies, was significant: $\chi 2(1, N = 49) = 136.93$, $p < .001$. The Kendall coefficient of concordance was .22, indicating moderate agreement among the

factors. Follow-up pairwise comparisons were performed via McNemar's tests. To account for Type I errors across the 91 comparisons, a Bonferroni correction was applied to the critical p value (p value of .05/91 = .00055). Several comparisons remained statistically significant after this adjustment. Pair/group work and collaboration were chosen significantly more often than the context of the article, χ^2 (1, N = 49) = 12.89, $p < .001$; the opinions of peer teachers, χ^2 (1, N = 49) = 12.02, $p < .001$; the difficulty of the article, χ^2 (1, N = 49) = 31.03, $p < .001$; and the use of PowerPoint, χ^2 (1, N = 49) = 31.03, $p < .001$. The enthusiasm of the peer teachers was selected significantly more often than the difficulty of the article, χ^2(1, N = 49) = 31.03, $p < .001$, and the use of PowerPoint, χ^2(1, N = 49) = 31.03, $p < .001$. Teacher opinion was chosen significantly more frequently than difficulty of the article, χ^2 (1, N = 49) = 28.03, $p < .001$, and use of PowerPoint, χ^2 (1, N = 49) = 28.03, $p < .001$. The diversity of topics was selected significantly more often than the difficulty of the article, χ^2 (1, N = 49) = 25.29, $p < .001$, and the use of PowerPoint, χ^2 (1, N = 49) = 25.29, $p < .001$. Finally, presentation skills were chosen significantly more often than difficulty of the article, χ^2(1, N = 49) = 29.03, $p < .001$, and use of PowerPoint, χ^2(1, N = 49) = 21.33, $p < .001$. These findings suggest that participants place greater value on factors such as pair/group work and collaboration, the enthusiasm of peer teachers, the opinions of the teacher, the diversity of topics in the article, and the presentation skills of peer teachers. The absence of these factors may negatively influence their interest in the topic.

Qualitative Analysis

In addition to the quantitative analyses, the open-ended responses from the poststudy questionnaire were analyzed qualitatively, and the responses were coded to identify recurring patterns and common themes. Because this class relies heavily on student input, from topic selection to peer teaching, student responses are especially valuable for interpreting learning outcomes. Data were collected through an end-of-course survey that replicated the initial questionnaire and gauged whether and how student opinions changed over the semester. Through this thematic analysis, five factors emerged as central to shaping student engagement and interest: collaborative pair or group work, the enthusiasm and effectiveness of peer teachers, the teacher's role as a facilitator, the diversity and relevance of teaching materials, and the presenters' skills.

First, the students appreciated the setup that allowed for pair and group work, as well as a collaborative classroom environment. Many students reported that discussion and working together increased their interest in the topic by allowing them to engage with multiple perspectives. One student wrote, "Talking with classmates helped me understand and enjoy the topic more," and other students echoed this, with two more writings: "Group discussions were fun, especially when we worked toward solutions," and "I learned so much by listening to different opinions." From such responses, we can see that class discussion and peer collaboration were a large part of what made the class successful and kept students engaged.

Second, the peer teaching structure of the course was also positively received and kept students engaged with the material. For students, the reading provided background, but they looked forward to the class discussion, as one student stated: "The article provides me an initial overview… I especially liked when the peer teachers go out of their way to teach about new topics that are not discussed in the article." Similarly, another student wrote, "I think most of the topics that were covered in the class were very interesting. I think the structure of the course is what made it fun to learn about those topics," and another student elaborated, "These were topics that I hadn't been very interested in before, but I became interested in by gaining new knowledge through class." This was echoed by another, noting that peer engagement increased their desire to share: "The peer teachers have great presentation skills in English, and classmates (listeners) also have their own ideas and discuss actively. I was also passionated about telling them my thoughts."

Because peer teachers picked topics they were interested in, sometimes the class was quite personal in a way that students also appreciated. In response to the lesson on bodily autonomy taught by a student wearing a hijab, one classmate wrote that because the student was presenting on something personal and important to her, "For bodily autonomy, the presenter's (name removed) opinion for hijab made me feel interest in the topic." This kind of feedback indicates that the students were deeply involved in the dialogical thinking the course aimed to foster.

The skills of the peer teachers also made a difference. Students naturally had more positive responses from more skilled peer teachers. One student wrote, "I thoroughly enjoyed learning about bodily autonomy and the death penalty. The people who presented these topics were truly good at engaging with the class, and I felt like I learned a lot." Another concurred: "When the presenters were enthusiastic, I became more interested even if I wasn't before," as did yet another student, who wrote, "A passionate presentation made the class more exciting." According to such comments, enthusiastic peer teachers could effectively engage their peers. The downside of this was that less enthusiastic teachers could dampen the class; a student noted that "If peer teachers just read the PowerPoint or the text they prepared before, the class will become a little bit boring." That said, the course's structure, centered on discussion, did allow for engagement even when the peer teachers were less confident.

Students repeatedly highlighted the importance of group work and sharing different opinions in their learning. Students noted things such as "Throughout the group work, I learned a lot," and "The opinions or articles the presenters or group members shared were not the opinions I could have imagined." One student wrote that "There were many difficult topics, but with the breakdown from the teacher and peer teachers sharing their opinions, we were able to see a number of viewpoints." Indeed, peer teaching was sometimes so persuasive that students changed their ideas or became deeply interested in a topic that they were not interested in before, as we can see in the feedback of the student who wrote, "After peer teaching, I change my mind. Some topics are boring before they teach us

using their opinions. Additionally, professors give me other ideas and let me be more interested in this topic."

Importantly, despite the flipped classroom where the students led, many students continued to value the teacher's contributions. The teacher's role in this classroom was to simplify complex ideas and, in some cases, complicate or push back against students' ideas. In part because human rights issues are complicated and often fraught, at times, teacher intervention to clarify concepts or introduce other ideas is important. This was generally positively received, with students noting "Even hard texts became understandable when the teacher explained them" and "The teacher gave me new ideas and let me see the topic differently." Thus, rather than a leader, the teacher's role in this classroom was that of a facilitator, simplifying complex material and adding depth to the discussion when appropriate.

In general, students responded very positively to the diversity of topics introduced in each homework reading and the way connections were made between Japan and the rest of the world. One student wrote, "The article gave me a new perspective I didn't expect." Another student added, "I liked when the topic was not something I had heard about before." That said, the materials were also too general, or too broad, for some students, as one wrote, "I think it would be nice to learn about more specific issues."

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Our results indicate that the topics that students found most interesting at the beginning of the course were gender inequality, racism and facial injustice, and death penalty, whereas indigenous issues, water pollution, and biodiversity loss were the lowest. One likely reason for the low interest in climate change–related topics is that many students felt that they had already studied them extensively in high school and during compulsory education. As one student noted, "If I already knew well a topic, I would usually get more bored because I already know the topic (climate change, for example)." Another was more blunt: "Climate issues have been discussed repeatedly, so I do not feel the need to overemphasize the importance of climate change." Additionally, some students reported less interest in topics they felt were not directly connected to their daily lives. One student explained, "I choose some topics as 'not that interested' because these topics may not be closely related to my real life."

Shifts in Topic Interest Over the Semester

By the end of the course, the most popular topics had shifted slightly, with death penalty, children's rights, and bodily autonomy rated highest. Many students explained that they were drawn to topics that were new or unfamiliar, even more so after the course. For example, one student wrote that they chose these topics "since those three topics were unfamiliar to me and I had few chances to learn about them before." This suggests that opportunities for new learning are a factor in engagement, a finding that can inform topic selection for future classes.

The death penalty unit in particular proved to be especially engaging, and it was the most popular. Several factors may explain this: the lesson focused on a morally complex issue with clear opposing viewpoints, allowing for lively debate; it was also made more relevant by the high-profile news coverage of Hakamada Iwao's acquittal after 46 years of death, which highlighted the risks of wrongful convictions in Japan's justice system. For some students, the news story may have brought the death penalty into sharper focus. As one student reflected, "I think the most interesting part was learning about details I did not know anything about, which was especially the case with the death penalty."

Furthermore, the international makeup of the class added layers of perspective. Students come from countries where the death penalty is more common, such as Southeast Asia or other Asian countries, as well as from EU countries where the death penalty has been abolished. This diversity created strong, sometimes conflicting opinions, and the students were able to ask their classmates questions and engage in debate. The topic's emotional engagement, relevance, and moral complexity make it an especially important topic for the kind of dialogical, critical thinking the course aims to foster.

Impact of Peer Teaching

In addition to the topics themselves, student feedback repeatedly highlighted the importance of the peer teaching structure and discussion-based format. Many students noted that peer-led lessons and group discussions were important elements in keeping them interested and helping them engage with multiple perspectives. They appreciated the chance to learn from classmates, share ideas, and rethink their own views.

Taken together, our data show that combining open-ended, locally relevant topics with peer teaching and a discussion-centered classroom supported student engagement, critical thinking, and debate. Using student-selected topics in a student-centered, peer-teaching model allowed us to facilitate a dialogical environment in which students engaged with difficult and intertwined problems to coconstruct knowledge and develop critical awareness of complex social issues. For educators, these findings suggest that students may gravitate toward topics that are new to them, have some moral complexity, and are relevant to their real-world experience. They further demonstrated that peer teaching can be a powerful tool for motivation and fostering dialog.

CONCLUSION

This article presented a framework for a flexible, student-centered approach that can help educators effectively integrate human rights issues into their EFL or CLIL curricula. By surveying students' interest in topics and then structuring lessons around open-ended readings, peer teaching, and discussion, educators can create courses that connect global human rights themes to learners' own lives and interests. Our findings show that this approach increased student engagement and

fostered critical thinking, intercultural competence, and the ability to consider new perspectives, which aligns with the goals of the Sustainable Development Goals.

While the peer-led lesson structure sometimes depends on the enthusiasm and skill of individual students, the teacher's role as a facilitator helps maintain intellectual depth, and class discussions allow further engagement. Because the students came from diverse backgrounds, they presented contrasting perspectives on issues such as capital punishment, bodily autonomy, and children's rights. These differences created opportunities for intercultural exchange and dialogic learning. International students frequently contributed insights from their home countries, which helped all students understand how human rights were culturally mediated. For international students, peer teaching allowed them to create a collaborative space where differences were normalized and discussed and where multiple cultural viewpoints were foregrounded. It created an opportunity for integration and collaboration with Japanese students, as scholars such as Hollenback (2019a), Lee (2017), and Onishi (2017) reported difficulties for international students in Japanese universities.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that in EFL contexts, students can address complex, sensitive topics when materials are carefully scaffolded, and space is given for diverse perspectives. Future iterations could explore how to best support peer teachers in developing presentation skills or refining topic selection to offer students a greater balance between novelty and relevance. Ultimately, this model offers a student-centered, adaptable framework for integrating human rights education into university courses in ways that foster global-minded, critically engaged citizens.

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Appendix A: The course syllabus

Global Cultural Studies and Social Issues

Course Description
This course uses contemporary social issues in Japan and around the world as a lens for developing students' academic communication and critical analysis skills. Rather than treating culture simply as background knowledge, the class positions it as a central case study for understanding how local cultural practices shape, and are shaped by, global social and human rights concerns. Students examine the historical and social contexts behind current issues and consider their wider international implications. To support this work, the course draws on diverse media sources to analyze how social justice and human rights topics appear in everyday cultural forms.

Course aims:
This course is an overview of academic communication through a discussion of human rights and culture. Students will gain an understanding of how culture reflects and participates in social issues in Japanese society today and will be able to discuss those issues intelligently and confidently. Students will also learn to lead a discussion for one class and share their opinions.

Technical Requirements:
Bring your textbook and a Japanese-English dictionary to class. Your phone is fine.

Assignments:
Each week, we have assignments from the teacher. In addition, each week, a student or pair of students is responsible for leading the discussion on that week's homework assignment and expanding the material. All materials will be provided by the teacher.

Course Schedule

Week	Lesson	Homework	Class Leaders
1 Ice Breaker Activities Reading #1	Going over the syllabus Icebreaker Activities	Survey on topics for this class Online Survey	Teacher

		Homework reading and worksheet	
2 What is social justice in cultural studies and why does it matter?	Going over the reading Key concepts and vocabulary for the class	Homework reading and worksheet	Teacher
3 How does social justice relate to human rights?	Going over human rights and global social justice movements	Homework reading and worksheet	Teacher
4 Climate Change and Environmental Justice		Homework reading and worksheet	Student A, Student B
5 Overconsumption		Homework reading and worksheet	Student C, Student D
6 Racism and Racial Injustice		Homework reading and worksheet	Student E, Student F
7 Gender Inequality		Homework reading and worksheet	Student G, Student H
8 Bodily Autonomy		Homework reading and worksheet	Student I, Student J
9 Children's Rights		Homework reading and worksheet	Student K, Student L, Student M
10 Education		Homework reading and worksheet	Student N, Student O
11 Food insecurity, hunger, poverty		Homework reading and worksheet	Student P, Student Q
12 Refugee Crisis		Homework reading and worksheet	Student R, Student S
13 Human trafficking and slavery		Homework reading and worksheet	Student T, Student U, Student V
14 Death Penalty		Homework reading and worksheet	Student W, Student X
15	Final	Class wrap up and final project discussion	

Final Project
For the final exam, students must pick and complete an extension activity related to the topics covered, then present their work to the class. Details will be given in the second half of the semester.

Appendix B: The poststudy questionnaire

Social Justice and Academic English Class Topics社会正義とアカデミック英語の授業で取り上げるトピックについて

Opinion Survey 「意見調査」

1. Please rank the following social justice topics from 1 (most interested) to 20 (least interested) in studying. I will choose topics for future classes based on the results of this survey, so please rank them carefully and thoughtfully. / 以下に挙げた社会正義に関するトピックのなかで、１位（最も興味がある）から20位（最も興味がない）まで順位をつけてください。このアンケート結果に基づいて、今後の授業で扱う課題を決定しますので、よく考えたうえで順位をつけてください。

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Access to Healthcare/ 保険医療へのアクセス	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Biodiversity loss/speciesism/ 生物多様性の喪失／種差別	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Bodily autonomy / 身体の自己決定権	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Children's rights/ 子どもの権利	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Climate Change and Environmental Justice/ 気候変動	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

と環境正義								
Death Penalty/ 死刑	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Disabilities/ 障がい者	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Economic Inequality/ 経済的不平等	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Education/ 教育	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Environmental disasters/ 環境災害	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Food Insecurity, Hunger and Poverty/ 食糧不安、飢餓、貧困	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Gender Inequality/ ジェンダーの不平等	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Indigenous Issues/ 先住民族に関する問題	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Labor Issues/ 労働問題	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
LGBTQ+ Rights/ LGBTQ+の権利	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Overconsumption/ 過剰消費	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Racism and Racial Injustice/ 人種差別と人種的不正義	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Slavery/human trafficking/ 奴隷制度／人身売買	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Refugee Crisis/ 難民危機	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Water pollution and access/ 水質汚染と安全な飲料水へのアクセス	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

2. Please rank the following social justice topics we covered in the course from 1 (most interested) to 11 (least interested). この授業で扱った以下に社会正義に関するトピックのなかで、１位（最も興味がある）から11位（最も興味がない）まで順位をつけてください。 *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Bodily autonomy / 身体の自己決定権	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Children's rights/ 子どもの権利	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Climate Change and Environmental Justice/ 気候変動と環境正義	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Death Penalty/ 死刑	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Education/ 教育	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Food Insecurity, Hunger and Poverty/ 食糧不安、飢餓、貧困	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Gender Inequality/ ジェンダーの不平等	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Racism and Racial								

Injustice/ 人種差別と人種的不正義	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Fragile States/ 脆弱性を有する国々	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Refugee Crisis/ 難民危機	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Overconsumption/ 過剰消費	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

3. Which, if any, of the following factors may have influenced your interest in the 11 topics we covered in class? 以下の要因のうち、どれかが授業で取り上げた11のトピックに対するあなたの興味に影響を与えた可能性がありますか？ *

- [ ] Relevance of the article/本文の妥当性
- [ ] Difficulty of the article/ 本文の難しさ
- [ ] Diversity of topics presented in the article / 本文に提示されたトピックの多様性
- [ ] The context of the article (Japanese, Global, etc.) / 本文の背景（日本的、グローバルなど）
- [ ] Language ability of peer teachers / ピアーティーチャーの言語能力
- [ ] Enthusiasm of the peer teachers / ピアーティーチャーの熱心
- [ ] Presentation skills of the peer teachers /ピアーティーチャープレゼンテーションスキル
- [ ] Ability of the peer teachers to use PowerPoint/ ピアーティーチャーのPPTの使い方
- [ ] The opinions of the peer teachers/ ピアーティーチャーの意見
- [ ] The opinions of the teacher /教員の意見
- [ ] The questions related to the article / 本文に関する質問
- [ ] Pair/group work and collaboration/ ペア・グループ活動と協力
- [ ] None
- [ ] Other:

4. Please briefly explain your response to questions 2 and 3 and provide details whenever possible. 2番と３番の回答について、なぜそのように思うのか簡潔に説明し、可能な限り詳細を挙げてください。(日本語での回答も可。) *

Your answer

5. Out of the following 10 topics that we DID NOT study in this class, please select the ones you wish we had studied instead of the topics we covered. If you do not wish to make any changes, please select 'None.' この授業で取り上げなかった以下の10のトピックのうち、取り上げたトピックの代わりに学習していれば良かったと思うものを選んでください。変更を提案しない場合は、「None」を選択してください。 *

- [ ] Access to Healthcare/ 保険医療へのアクセス
- [ ] Biodiversity loss/speciesism/ 生物多様性の喪失／種差別
- [ ] Disabilities/ 障がい者
- [ ] Economic Inequality/ 経済的不平等
- [ ] Environmental disasters/ 環境災害
- [ ] Indigenous Issues/ 先住民族に関する問題
- [ ] Labor Issues/ 労働問題
- [ ] LGBTQ+ Rights/ LGBTQ+の権利
- [ ] Slavery/human trafficking/ 奴隷制度／人身売買
- [ ] Water pollution and access/ 水質汚染と安全な飲料水へのアクセス
- [ ] None
- [ ] Other:

6. In order to study the topics you chose in question 5, which of the following topics would you eliminate from the class? (If you did not select any topics in question 5, please select 'None'). 質問3で選んだトピックを学ぶために、次のトピックのうち、授業から除外するものはどれですか？(質問3でトピックを選ばなかった場合は、「None」を選択してください。) *

- [ ] Bodily autonomy / 身体の自己決定権
- [ ] Children's rights/ 子どもの権利
- [ ] Climate Change and Environmental Justice/ 気候変動と環境正義
- [ ] Death Penalty/ 死刑
- [ ] Education/ 教育
- [ ] Food Insecurity, Hunger and Poverty/ 食糧不安、飢餓、貧困
- [ ] Gender Inequality/ ジェンダーの不平等
- [ ] Racism and Racial Injustice/ 人種差別と人種的不正義
- [ ] Fragile States/ 脆弱性を有する国々
- [ ] Refugee Crisis/ 難民危機
- [ ] Overconsumption/ 過剰消費
- [ ] None
- [ ] Other:

6. Please briefly explain your responses to questions 4 - 5 and provide details and examples whenever possible. 4番t5番の回答について、なぜそのように思うのか簡潔に説明し、可能な限り詳細および例も挙げてください。(日本語での回答も可。) *

Your answer