Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Projects in Japanese Higher Education: Creating Meaningful SDGs Materials for Self-Access Learning Centers

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Abstract

The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are being promoted actively in higher education around the world to bridge the gaps between university curricula and global issues like gender inequality and climate change. To promote the SDGs alongside English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at Konan University, the authors introduced an SDGs project that was used in the Self-Access Learning Centers (SALCs) on two campuses. The main goals of the project were to: (1) expose learners to the SDGs through their time in the SALCs, (2) increase language proficiency on SDGs-related topics, and (3) expand learner time in the SALCs. A 12-week program was drafted to align with existing offerings in these contexts. This paper will offer an overview of how the project was conceived with the self-access staff, academic staff, and support from university offices. Next, the implementation of the pilot and rollout stages will be discussed with an overview of the successes and challenges of implementing such a program over two campuses. Lastly, the challenges and future directions for the project will be outlined based on student and teacher feedback. Although the pilot project was largely a success, the hurdles of keeping the project going require additional buy-in, collaboration, and endorsement from the university at large.
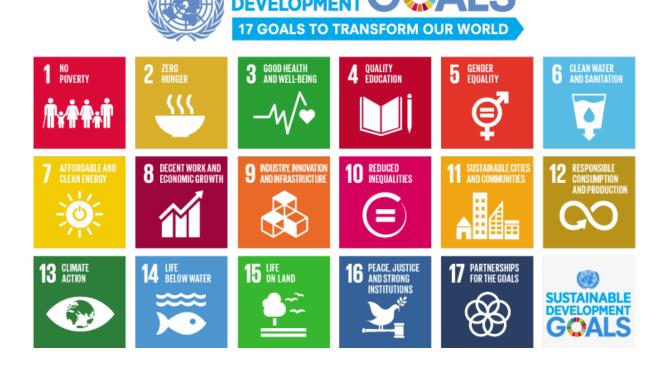
ジェンダー不平等や気候変動などの地球規模の問題と大学のカリキュラムとのギャップを埋めるために、国連が提唱する持続可能な開発目標（SDGs）が世界の高等教育で活発・推進されている。甲南大学では、外国語としての英語（EFL）と共にSDGsを推進するために、2つのキャンパスにあるセルフアクセス学習センター（SALC）で使用されたSDGsプロジェクトを紹介した。このプロジェクトの主な目的は以下の通りである。（1）SALCでの学習を通してSDGsに触れる。（2）SDGs関連のトピックに関する言語能力を高める。（3）学習者のSALCでの学習時間を拡大することである。12週間のプログラムは、これらのコンセプトで提供されている既存のプログラムと整合するように起草した。本稿では、セルフアクセススタッフ、アカデミックスタッフ、大学事務局の支援を受けて、どのようにプロジェクトが構想されたかを概観する。次に、トライアル版とロールアウト版の実施について、2つのキャンパスでこのようなプログラムを実施した際の成功と課題を概観する。最後に、学生や教師からのフィードバックに基づき、このプロジェクトの課題と今後の方向性について概説する。パイロットプロジェクトは概ね成功したが、プロジェクトを継続するためには、大学全体からさらなる賛同、協力、支持を得る必要がある。

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Higher Education (HE), Language Education for Sustainable Development (LESD), Self-Access Language Center (SALC), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

As the world struggles with emerging global challenges such as global warming and gender inequality, universities are continually faced with pressure to adapt curricula to meet students' future needs. As such, universities around the world have attempted to adopt, promote, and link the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into their university curricula, sustainability efforts, and research funding. The SDGs are an action plan that targets 17 of the most pressing challenges to humanity (United Nations, 2015) (Figure 1). Sustainable Development (SD), as defined by Brundtland (1987, p.41), is the "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." In addition, universities find themselves at another important inflection point in their adoption and promotion of the SD concepts. The SDGs act as a powerful blueprint for how to integrate SD into all aspects of our lives, and university education plays an essential role if these goals are to be accomplished by 2030. As such, many Japanese universities have begun the process of actively promoting the SDGs, which is essential for current students and future generations to understand, mitigate, and find solutions to these challenging global issues.

Figure 1

The Sustainable Development Goals (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2020, p. 4)

However, universities have been slow to integrate the SDGs into curricula due to several reasons including policy misalignments, challenges to grounding the SDGs contextually and meaningfully into curricula, proactive leadership, and unclear learning objectives, to name a few (Jodoin, 2023; Maley & Peachey, 2017; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017). Reassuringly, many language programs in Japanese higher education are looking at innovative ways to expand students' understandings of these dynamic, interconnected global challenges through best-practice Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (McKeown, 2002) or more recent frameworks developed through new fields of study such as, Language Education for Sustainable Development (LESD) (Jodoin & Bilici, 2022). One area that offers many opportunities to integrate Sustainable Development practices is Self-Access Language Learning (SALL) within Japanese higher education.

Context

Japan has been very active in the field of SALL in recent years (Mynard, 2019). SALL is usually supported by a Self-Access Learning Center (SALC), which should provide "an inclusive and autonomy-supportive space which contains services and facilities catering for diverse language learners" (Mynard, 2022, p. 6). Konan University has two SALCs. Both were designed under the notion of *on-campus study abroad* in that they can provide space for students to experience second language study outside the classroom and encourage learner autonomy by providing a range of student-selected activities. The Okamoto campus SALC is named *Konan Language LOFT* and includes several well-established self-access offerings such as self-access material, tasks, and interactive events (Yamamoto, 2017), which were even adapted to online formats during the Covid-19 pandemic (Yamamoto et al., 2021). The Nishinomiya campus SALC is named the *English O-Zone* and offers a combination of organized events, like the SDGs project, and self-access materials. Student assistants are an integral part of both SALCs as they work together alongside teachers to facilitate many activities.

SDGs Project Creation and Implementation

The SDGs project at Konan University was borne out of a gap identified in self-access offerings to students. Although there is currently considerable visibility of the SDGs in Japan, as well as substantial student interest in them, there were no English language SDGs-focused materials available in either of the Konan University SALCs. The authors identified that the

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creation of said materials could fill this gap by innovating on contemporary approaches. The project was viewed positively by the university faculty for three reasons: (a) the ability for students to attend sessions at either SALC based on their availability, (b) the possibility of attracting not only first- or second-year students from language courses, but also third- or fourth-year students from a wide range of faculties, and (c) the language and cognitive skills related to understanding and discussing the SDGs were seen as transferable skills to future employment. Furthermore, the project touched upon the concepts of language learning, learner autonomy, and learner motivation which are the core values of the SALCs on both campuses. Thus, for these reasons, this project was considered unique by university stakeholders.

  The project was pitched to the authors' managers and other staff connected to the SALCs. The stated goals of the project were to: (1) expose learners to the SDGs through their time in the SALCs, (2) increase language proficiency on SDGs-related topics, and (3) increase learner time in the SALCs. A 12-week program was drafted to align with existing SALC offerings. As it was logistically impossible to cover all 17 SDGs in any depth, a subset was created. Table 1 shows the six SDGs selected which the authors considered the most accessible and interesting for students. Two weeks were scheduled on each SDG with materials taking a reading or listening focus on alternative weeks to account for learner preferences, strengths, and weaknesses. Reading materials were short, graded texts adapted by the authors or visual texts such as infographics, graphs, and maps. Listening materials were designed from YouTube videos with closed captions in English available. The practicalities of each weekly session and the roles of the participants were pitched as follows. The weekly sessions were envisaged as content-based language workshops. Full time language teachers, who teach a range of language courses within the university and complete a range of duties in the SALCs, act as guides or leaders as they manage each session via the created materials and tasks. Student assistants provide further facilitation and support to small groups and individual students as required. The student assistants were advised that this should occur in a just-in-time learning approach by providing small chunks of information at the point of need, and that this could be done in L1 or L2, but L2 was preferred. Students are required to learn about a specific SDG via a series of collaborative tasks related to the reading- or listening-focused materials, and then discuss and share their ideas and opinions with other students. Moreover, this approach is reflected in the two phases of the sessions. In the first phase, students learn vocabulary connected to SDGs. Then, the students

view, read or listen to information about SDGs to gain a better understanding. Following that, they discuss and check understanding with other students, student assistants, and teachers. In the second phase, discussion questions prompt students to think about SDGs on global, regional, national, or local levels. Then, they share opinions on SDGs issues or listen to opinions of others. Lastly, they discuss possible solutions to SDGs issues.

Table 1

SDGs Included in the Program

SDG Number	Focus
SDG 2	Zero Hunger
SDG 6	Clean Water and Sanitation
SDG 7	Affordable and Clean Energy
SDG 10	Reduced Inequalities
SDG 14	Life Below Water
SDG 15	Life On Land

The project received approval for a four-week trial in the 2022 Spring semester with SDGs 2 and 6 selected for this stage of the project. Various faculty and administrative staff connected to the SALCs took responsibility for campus-wide advertising. The four-week trial was considered successful as most sessions had ample attendance and teacher observations noted materials were well received by the students. However, the teacher observations also highlighted the need for student assistant training, ensuring materials were available to them prior to each session, and providing briefings to the student assistants before each session. These adjustments would better ensure student assistants could help facilitate each session in an informed and prepared way. The project received approval to be rolled out in its 12-week format in the 2022 Fall semester. This was to be done in a *soft* manner meaning the project was not included in student course information and orientation materials but was advertised to students on campus and online. The schedule of the 12-week format can be seen in Appendix A.

Materials Development

Materials development under the specifications outlined above were balanced with best-practice ESD. This process was a challenge for the authors, who wanted to strike a balance between a suitable SALC activity and a meaningful SDGs content experience. As this was part of the SALCs, the activities were designed so that they were self-contained, easy to navigate for teachers and student assistants, and allowed for extensions outside of each session. In addition, best practice ESD involves offering students meaningful activities around the SDGs that not only raise interest and offer information around the SDGs, but also engage student values, beliefs, and norms (VBNs) (Bronfman, Cisternas, López-Vázquez, de la Maza, & Oyanedel, 2015). In other words, producing activities that offer opportunities for language learning as well as engaging students' ideas, values, and beliefs around major global challenges was important for this project's success (Jodoin & Bilici, 2022, p158-159). Generally, the materials were divided into listening and reading activities with a general flow as seen in Table 2, which also included various forms of additional support. An example of a 2-page reading material can be seen in Appendix B. Several design rules were agreed upon early in the materials development process to ensure consistency between materials developers, ease of use, and longevity of the SDGs project. The following general rules were considered for the materials development:

- Each material should be one page double-sided. This is so that the materials could be easily stored online, and used as a self-contained, minimal activity thus keeping any printing to a minimum.
- Materials should be created so that experienced teachers as well as the student assistants can easily use them. This was to ensure that the materials could have longer-term use within the program.
- Materials should have elements that challenge student VBNs and allow students to continue to study on their own after each session. This included discussion questions that attempted to focus more on what students believed or valued rather than typical language-focussed questions, which rely on finding information from a text or listening. Moreover, self-access follow-up activities were offered at the end of each activity sheet.
- Materials should be easily accessible and save resources. Padlet, a web application, was used to enable easily accessible materials, facilitate in-person sessions, and eliminate the need to print out worksheets, which is in line with the SDGs.

Table 2

Session Activities and Additional Support in the SDGs Project Materials

Session Activities	Additional Support
Reading/Listening 1 (Global level)	Language and content support notes
Reading/Listening 2 (Regional level)	L1 gloss for essential vocabulary
Discussion (Individual level)	Discussion aid
	Visuals for essential content
	Videos for additional content
	Self-access follow-up activities

Student Attendance and Feedback

Table 3 shows the number of attendees for both campuses at different stages of the project. The pilot stage was well attended but this did not translate to the 12-week program. In both project stages, the authors noted many attendees made informal comments during sessions about their high level of interest in SDGs. However, there were a similar number of comments that sessions were challenging. During the 12-week program, *Konan Language LOFT* attendees were asked when logging attendance via an online form, *Did this activity inspire you in a good way?* All responses (*n*=31) were positive with 28 attendees choosing *Strongly Agree* and 3 attendees choosing *Agree.*

Table 3

Total SDG Project Attendees

	Konan Language LOFT	English O-Zone
Pilot stage (4 weeks)	57	16[1]
Rollout stage (12 weeks)	31	29

[1]The trial at the English O-Zone ran for two weeks.

Table 4 shows additional comments from these attendees which mirrored the informal comments mentioned above. Overall, the SDGs project had positive student feedback from attendees.

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Table 4

Attendee Feedback Comments from the 12-week Program at Konan Language LOFT

Feedback comments
興味深いアクティビティをありがとうございました。`[Thank you for the interesting activity.]`
難しい内容だったけどなかなか勉強になった。`[The content was difficult, but I learned a lot.]`
とても楽しかったです。`[It was a lot of fun.]`

Discussion

  Via the combined analysis of teacher, student assistant, and SALC staff observations, as well as the various feedback sources outlined above, it was clear to the authors that several challenges had presented themselves throughout the project. Student perceptions of the SDGs were divergent, as they were simultaneously interested in them yet felt daunted by their inherent challenging and interdisciplinary nature. Assisting the students in finding the right balance between these perceptions during sessions was essential. Students were aware of the SDGs sessions thanks to campus advertising, but this did not result in well-attended sessions every time. Disseminating more information on the nature of the sessions during yearly student orientation and via other detailed promotional material should mitigate this problem. For students that did attend sessions, very few attended subsequent sessions thus hindering any chance of a community of practice (CoP) developing, in which learners with shared concerns or passions interact and learn collaboratively (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Finding ways to encourage regular or repeat attendance, such as increased campus advertising and stronger links with other academic classes, should develop a cohort of like-minded attendees.

  The future direction of the SDGs project is likely to be shaped by several enhancements. Next year it will be linked to pre-departure study abroad preparation and other globally focused university programs. These two factors are likely to increase attendance by motivated students. Additional teachers will also be participating in the program and developing materials in the next

academic year. This should allow the project to expand in terms of teacher and student assistant involvement, as well as the possibility of scheduling multiple sessions per week on each campus. Moreover, a more robust student feedback form will be considered that not only looks at the value of language learning in the SDGs sessions but also considers indicators of student VBNs around SDGs content.

In terms of challenging VBNs, the SDGs project encountered mixed results. One-off sessions with limited ongoing attendance are not ideal to have a lasting, meaningful experience with the content. The future enhancements to the SDGs project alongside a more robust way to measure student experience using a more detailed feedback form will improve the ESD element of the project.

Lastly, the authors feel that the main goals of the project were mostly successful with an eye to continue making future enhancements to the SDGs project overall. The first goal was to expose learners to the SDGs through a SALC experience. Although the idea of challenging VBNs was limited by the scope of the project, student exposure and interaction with SDG ideas was positively reviewed by students as seen from student feedback. The second goal was to improve language proficiency using SDG-related topics. Again, no conclusive measurements were taken, but we are confident that exposure to scaffolded language activities in SALC settings is beneficial to student language proficiency. The final goal was to expand learner time in the SALCs, which was largely a success, but can be improved further in future iterations of the project.

Conclusion

Although the SDGs project faced many hurdles such as initial buy-in and support from the university, materials development challenges from organizational constraints, and integration of meaningful SDG content through challenging VBNs, the project has found many successes. The fact that Konan University is now looking to support the SDGs project more deeply through university programs is a positive sign that the university understands the value of the project and the importance of having SALCs that encourage student autonomy and engaging content. More importantly, feedback on the project has been overwhelmingly positive from students, student assistants, and staff. Another notable success is that the faculty-initiated SDGs project is one of the first cross-campus collaborative efforts between the two SALCs, setting a precedent for

university-wide accessibility and inclusivity. The continued longevity of the SDGs project combined with the significance of SDGs-related content is secure in the short-term for the university SALCs. Ultimately, this will likely benefit our students' understandings and relationship with timely and essential global issues through their improved communicative competence and content knowledge.

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Appendix

Appendix A SDG Project Poster from Fall 2022

Appendix B Sample Reading Activity

Name:_____   Task **SDG2-1R**

Date:_____   Checked by:

1. **Scan the QR code and answer the questions below on SDG 2.**
    Source: https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/prevalence-of-undernourishment

    A. What does the infographic show? Circle your answer.

    | poor countries | undernourished countries | polluted countries |

    B. According to the infographic, what countries in East Africa and South East Asia are undernourished?

East Africa	South East Asia

    C. According to the infographic, what three countries could be places where the United Nations (i.e. the UN) should focus on **Zero Hunger (SDG 2)**?

    D. Looking at the countries above, what do you think are some possible causes of their hunger problems (**SDG 2)**?

2. **Scan the QR code and answer the questions below based on the information in the article:**

    A. SDG2 has four parts. What two parts are included in the story?

    | end hunger | achieve food security |
    | achieve improved nutrition | sustainable agriculture |

    Take notes on the questions below:

    B. According to the article, how many people in the world experience hunger?
    C. Where does Onigiri Action provide food? How much food has it provided?
    D. What is happening in each of the steps below?

3. Discussion Questions:
    A. **Explain what you think SDG 2 is in your own words.**
    B. **According to the article you read today, what do you think are some solutions to this problem?**
    C. **Is there anything that people in Kansai can do to solve this problem?**
    D. **Is there anything you can do to solve this problem?**

SDG Compass

English Word	Japanese Translation
undernourished	栄養不良の
hunger	飢え
not for profit organization (NPO)	エヌピーオー
ingredients	材料
social media	ソーシャルメディア (SNS)
donate	寄付
school meals	学校給食

Discussion Aid

- I think that…
- The solution to hunger is…
- I believe that **Kansai people / I** can solve this problem by…
- In my experience, I think that…
- For Example,… / For instance,…

Learn More about **SDG2:**

Learn More about **Onigiri Action:**

ZERO HUNGER

Click on the CC button for English Subtitles

Understand Goal 2: Zero Hunger (Secondary)

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