Hegelian ethics and dialectic method in English CLIL about the UN SDGs, empirical findings from the classroom (2022-2024)

国連 SDGs に関する英語 CLIL におけるヘーゲル倫理と弁証法的方法 ―教室実践に基づく実証的研究（2022–2024）

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要旨

ヘーゲルの弁証法は、対立する見解を調停し、対立を解決する手段として、さまざまな分野において応用されてきた。この弁証法的方法は、日常的な英語学習の実践にも活用することができる。国連の 17 の持続可能な開発目標 (SDGs) に象徴されるような複雑な世界において、学生は多様な視点を表現し、それぞれのトピックについて相互理解と合意の総合（ジンテーゼ）へと到達するよう促される。

さらに、「エウダイモニア (eudaimonia)」として定義される人間の善という究極目的を志向するヘーゲル倫理は、本実践において、人類の幸福と結び付けられている。この人類の幸福は、学生間で議論される SDGs の包括的概念の中に位置づけられている。

本研究論文は、建設的な倫理的対話の重要性を強調するとともに、英語力および SDGs に関する知識がともに中程度であった約 100 名の日本人大学 2 年生を対象に、4 学期間にわたる教室観察から得られた知見を要約するものである。

ABSTRACT

Hegel's dialectic has been applied across various fields as a means of mediating opposing views and resolving disputes. This dialectical method can also be utilised in everyday English learning practices. In a complex world, as represented by the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), students can express multiple perspectives and be encouraged to reach a synthesis of mutual understanding and agreement on each topic. Moreover, Hegel's ethics, which aims at the ultimate goal of the human good, defined as "eudaimonia," is linked in this exercise to the well-being of humanity, embedded in the holistic concept of the SDGs discussed among students. This research article highlights the importance of constructive ethical dialogue and summarises findings from four semesters of classroom observations involving approximately 100 second-year Japanese students who, at the outset, possessed moderate knowledge of both the English language and the UN SDGs.

Keywords: CLIL, Ethical dialogue, UN SDGs, Eudaimonia, Japan

Introduction.

This article highlights the methodological use of the 17 UN SDGs as a classroom interactive exercise to foster ethical education in the framework of global citizenship and English CLIL. From a methodological perspective, it was necessary in this regard to establish an empirical framework for such a topic and exercise.

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the philosophy of education developed by J.F. Hegel in the 19th century. Although much about his educational ideas can be inferred from the fact that the German philosopher never really produced a systematic theory on the subject, most of his thoughts on education are found in the "Philosophy of Right" and his personal correspondence with the Bavarian education official Niethammer. Additionally, his other works offer insights into educational topics.[1]

On the other hand, in addition to the theoretical framework mentioned above, we should consider the broader context of contemporary education, particularly highlighted by Spero's doctoral thesis in the historical moment of neoliberalism in Japan.[2] This context significantly impacts educational processes in specific settings, such as university institutions in Japan. This perspective relates to the concept of global citizenship and illustrates how Hegelian ethics, and the application of dialectics, can cultivate an alternative environment in the classroom. The results and considerations in the specific section of this article are a summary derived from a qualitative methodological analysis of student class exercises undertaken.

As part of the literature review for this exercise, an examination of research conducted in 2018 using a systematic approach reveals that nearly two-thirds of the studies involving global citizenship relied on students as the primary data source, and predominantly targeted undergraduates. However, none of these studies identified global citizenship education as their primary aim, as noted by Horey et al.[3]

In addition, Global citizenship within English-medium instruction programmes in Japan is significantly influenced by the perceptions of both faculty and students.[4] In fact, since the late 1990s, the concept of global citizenship has been a topic of discussion in academic circles concerning the internationalisation of higher education in Japan. Empirical studies have also investigated its impact, particularly in relation to study abroad programmes and the process of internationalisation at home.

Nakasato Lauren, a scholar at Tohoku University states that in 2010, the term *global jinzai* or global human resources, was introduced in Japanese internationalisation policy to define the ideal global graduate. This concept highlights the importance of foreign language acquisition, communication skills, leadership, initiative, and a strong sense of national identity, among other essential skills.[5]

However, also according to Nakasato's 2023 study on global citizenship in education in Japan, there is a lack of understanding regarding the role of global citizenship in the higher education policy landscape. This becomes

even more intriguing when we consider how the prevalence of neoliberal discourse and practices, alongside context-specific factors, significantly impacts the objectives, processes, and outcomes of internationalisation in higher education, ultimately affecting the classroom experience.

Overall, according to Horey et al.'s survey of 2018, the various purposes of global citizenship education, as I would add, can be confusing. Especially for academics who encounter this neoliberal framework not necessarily through their own research, but through university policies designed to implement broader strategic and pedagogical standards while also meeting marketing imperatives.[6] This confusion is happening because, as Spero has shown, this situation is applied in a context where neoliberal cultural forms persist in varying degrees, no matter how teachers interpret them.[7] What remains clear is that the concept of global citizenship should ideally not be solely intended as a tool for a selected branch of students to survive and compete in the global economy of corporate Japan.

The purpose of the article is also to shed light on such perplexity and explore the implications of ethical education in this context, as possibly away from a neoliberal framework and examine the opportunities that the UN SDGs can offer to enrich a humanistic vision rather than a utilitarian approach to global citizenship, and the Japanese concept of *global jinzai*. Educational systems, in fact, do not merely deliver content, but actively enable agency.

1. Hegelian Ethics and Its Relevance in Education in Japan

The significance of revisiting Hegel in the context of education in Japan is underscored by the influence of the Prussian education system, established by Wilhelm von Humboldt, which served as an early educational model in this country during the Meiji era.

According to Hegel, the ethical education of family members is limited for children to be considered capable of citizenship upon reaching maturity. To be capable of active citizenship, a person needs to be a member of a community. Such a community encompasses social institutions like the family, civil society, and the state. In Hegel, in fact, the individual is inserted into society, and such a vision is largely in contrast with a more Anglo-American vision of the liberal individualistic elements that enhance individual morality. That is quite important for the classroom if we consider in my view that CLIL is also language learning, and therefore inevitably related to Anglo-American culture and model of society. Spero in fact suggests that English-medium instruction and global citizenship education initiatives are not exceptions, as each is susceptible to re-articulation within neoliberal framings of the world.[8] This conflicting approach is however less predominant if we apply more the concept of English as a lingua franca in the classroom.

Hegel sees education as a process of formation in which individuals progress from a subjective state of nature to an objective state of social, moral, and cultural awareness. In this context, Knowles suggests in his studies of Hegel's philosophy that educational practices act as a means to deepen the understanding of the average citizen

within their society.[9]

Looking at the origins of Hegel's thought, he largely follows Aristotle's belief that the primary goal of education is to prepare individuals to be good citizens in a just society. Hegel in the early 19th century moves beyond the previous abstract idea of Kantian moral rules to focus on concrete, socially situated ethics. Morality is realised through participation in the institutions that structure human life.

In education, this is reflected in the formation / education of the individual (in German *Bildung*), a process that guides individuals from natural subjectivity to a conscious participation in community, culture, and objective knowledge. Moreover, Hegelian ethics emphasises that this type of education is implicit in the realisation of individual freedom.

The application of Hegelianism in the classroom of our case opposes merely technical or instrumental schooling, advocating instead for a "cultivation" of the soul that merges theoretical knowledge with practical ethical action. In summary, it seeks to develop a self-conscious individual capable of acting for the common good within a cohesive community. Hegel's ethics aim at the ultimate goal of the human good, the "eudaimonia," which is overall linked in this exercise to the objectives of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

2. Ethical Dialectical Dialogue as a Classroom Exercise.

Hegel's pedagogy suggests that education should not only convey knowledge but also train students to actively participate in and understand the cultural, social, and political "world." This can be achieved by communicative-interactive learning which is another aspect of Hegelian pedagogy. That is why Hegelian education moves beyond the passive consumption of information from teachers towards active, experience-driven learning (German *Erfahrung*), where students grapple with contradictions to gain knowledge.

In terms of pedagogy, the validity of Hegelian dialectics in the classroom is significant. This framework for enhancing communication among students allows a connection between dialectic and logical learning methods. Rosen for example describes the dialectic as a method, as "the method" of (logical) thinking. The scientific method that Hegel thematises and uses in the logic is therefore "dialectical."[10]

Such exercise could become particularly important at the university level to foster the individual between developing individual subjectivity and integrating it into the community, aiming for a balanced ethical individual.

This communication process among students like in the exercises carried out in my teaching practice, involves negating and discarding contradictory theses (thesis) on a subject, like on a particular SDG, and its antitheses (antithesis), while preserving their essential elements and "elevating" (German *Aufhebung*) them to a higher stage (synthesis). This is not merely annihilation of two diverging students' opinions; rather, it is a spiral

developmental movement that resolves and integrates contradictions, evolving them into new concepts that can be mutually agreed.

The critical question that could arise from this study is why communication exercises in English language for instance implying contradictions in discursive narratives and elevating them to synthesis is of particular relevance today? The reason in my view is that along the UN SDGs we have currently witnessing large paradigm shifts[11] in the world system as distinct, singular events in human history that abruptly redefine our current world.[12]

In this regard, for example the Rector of the United Nation University in Tokyo, Prof. Tshilidzi Marwala has recently defined that our current reality is characterised by constant, complex transitions driven by different layered forces such as technological disruption, environmental urgency, pervasive global inequality, and the fundamental reconfiguration of knowledge itself.[13]

The time in which we currently live has therefore a fundamental value in fostering a dialectic necessity for dialogue among individuals, as a logic of human reality. Like for Rosen, this has to be grasped and expressed from the viewpoint of the particular historical individual (the student in our case), in constant interaction with the cultural environment of his or her time.[14]

Such a human condition follows very much a contemporary figure of Hegel at the time. I am referring in particular here to Wolfgang Goethe's statement that *"A man sees in the world what he carries in his heart."* This basically means also that our perception and understanding of the world are heavily influenced by our inner state, beliefs, emotions, and values.

Goethe's metaphysics proposes that our internal disposition serves as a filter for interpreting external reality. When we cultivate for example love, optimism, and kindness within ourselves, we are more likely to notice these qualities in the world around us. Conversely, if we are filled with negativity, fear, or prejudice, we may view events and people through that distorted lens. In essence, our inner world significantly shapes our outer experiences. There is indeed a certain level of romanticism in these assumptions, but engaging in a dialectical method among individual students in our times is a valuable educational exercise.

3. UN SDGs as a Collaborative System for the Status of Eudaimonia.

As mentioned in the introduction, the Japanese business community has advocated for long time for internationalisation through the *global jinzai* concept, which continues to be the prevailing theme in various university curricula. Many contemporary human resource strategies can also be seen as stepping stones toward this objective.

According to Nakasato, however, some universities are starting to approach the relevance of internationalisation

from a humanistic perspective. They recognise the broader necessity for all students to be prepared to address and resolve the global challenges we face as humanity.[15]

However, in addition to this favourable shift, in terms of the east-west dichotomy, as mentioned earlier, Hegel's method referred to Aristotle's ideas and can therefore be viewed in Japan as another form of "westernisation," similar to that which occurred during the Meiji era. However, to express the concept in a more sustainable way, we should consider the broad spectrum of philosophy within which Japan is embedded. This concern aligns with the idea that humans are bundles of desires particularly regarded in Buddhism. In this context, I mean by that, that there exists a thesis connecting Aristotelian views with Buddhism: without desire in fact, there can be no virtue, and worldly desires can ultimately lead to enlightenment.

For example, the teaching that desires are a path to enlightenment is central to Mahayana Buddhism, as it suggests that it is precisely because we have desires that we strive to overcome them and improve ourselves. While desire can be a source of worldly passions, if harnessed wisely, it can also be a means to enlightenment. Thus, Buddhism can be seen as teaching us how to manage our desires. The ultimate goal of such a process should be people's well-being, as foreseen in Hegel's "Eudaimonia."[16] In the end, the cycle of enlightenment between Western philosophy and Eastern Asian philosophy coincides, making it feasible in Japan to teach under such methods not because it is "Western," as in the Meiji period, but because it is worldly.

Indeed, the term Eudaimonia used here is derived from the ancient Greek philosophy and it does not merely refer to temporary pleasure(hedonia)[17] but to "happiness obtained by living with meaning and realising one's potential." Eudaimonia, in fact, is not merely hedonia as pleasure; it represents "true happiness and purpose in life" achieved through self-actualisation, a sense of purpose, and social contribution.

Upon this conceptual framework, it should also be noted that since the late 1990s, the Japanese government has actively promoted Education for Sustainable Development(ESD), defined as "education that fosters the builders of a sustainable society."

In addition, the OECD, of which Japan has been a member since 1964, has emphasised life satisfaction and "Eudaimonia" too as indicators of subjective well-being. The 2013 OECD report particularly focused on this concept that encompasses "virtue" and "social mission." In this regard, the OECD's "Better Life Index" aims to define well-being by combining objective data with subjective opinions. In terms of indicators, the OECD explicitly states that "a better life" is determined subjectively by each individual, and the variables defining people's well-being vary depending on the prioritisation of eleven social aspects considered as indicators.[18]

Regarding the United Nations, there is a clear relationship between Eudaimonia and the UN SDGs. Eudaimonia and the SDGs are closely related when considering "true prosperity" and "sustainable well-being" in the

contemporary era.

Within this UN framework, the indicator of such well-being is particularly highlighted in the SDG Goal 3 (Health and Well-being) which aims to "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all." This goal emphasises not only physical health but also mental and social well-being. It is a core element of the human-centred sustainable well-being that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to achieve. Eudaimonia measures in this case a good mental state, positivity, freedom, and accomplishment, all of which contribute to both physical and mental health, as well as a happy life.

Overall, the 17 goals are more than just a framework for action; they serve as a moral compass, uniting governments, businesses, and civil society in the pursuit of a sustainable, equitable, and inclusive world. The SDGs can offer a practical framework for this essential alignment in education.

4. Class Exercise and Considerations

According to Nakasato's research, global citizenship has been a central topic of discussion in the academic literature on higher education internationalisation, but much of this discussion has focused on institutional-level efforts rather than national or institutional policies.[19] Even less of this, in my view, has ultimately been seen in the classroom, in particular with a bottom-up approach rather than an institutionalised one. Spero, however, argues that this complex cultural process of global citizenship involves "ideological influences" in any case. In this context, a top-down educational policy, on the other hand, is partially reproduced as it is mediated at multiple stages within a social environment already saturated with neoliberal logics, values, and practices.[20]

Nevertheless, under these circumstances, as reported in this article, I had the opportunity to implement Hegelian methodology regarding the SDGs an English CLIL / English as a lingua franca context for four semesters at a university in Tokyo. The exercise involved approximately 100 second-year students in total.

Similar to what Spero mentioned, the global citizenship policy, as a pedagogical form and ideological moment, is produced and subsequently influences actors at various levels within the educational process.[21] Teachers, in particular, play a significant role and are embedded in this process. In my view as a teacher as well, the outcome depends more on the course dynamics and settings established, as well as the ambivalence that an individual faculty member may feel about taking such individual responsibility for making a moral and political stand regarding this global citizenship. Indeed, this ambivalence can lead them to interpret the concept in more cosmopolitan or restrictive ways.

Personally, I enjoyed a large spectrum of autonomy in such interpretation and academic freedom in general at the university where this exercise took place and am grateful for such an opportunity. My personal outcome from this experience with the students using Hegelian dialectics is that teachers should have the freedom to adapt to

circumstances rather than establish cultural norms, particularly when the medium is a foreign language. Like Hegel taught in 1812 that "*Since every new concept in a systematic whole truly arises from what precedes it through dialectic, a teacher familiar with the nature of philosophising enjoys, whenever possible, the freedom to advance the inquiry through dialectic. Where dialectic finds no access, he is free to move on to the next concept without it.*"[22]

As for what concerns more importantly the students themselves, my impression was that the ability to express one's opinion brings a sense of fulfilment. Dialectic approaches between pairs of students, for example, have the advantage of avoiding the inherent authority of the teacher's view (a form of psychological safety). In Hegelian terms, the treatment and presentation (German *Behandlung* and *Darstellung*) foster collaborative peer learning events and the techniques used to facilitate such discussions. The key aspect of this exercise was its organisation, which aimed to facilitate learning from peers through sharing opinions and practical experiences across different countries.

Obviously, it was illogical to assume that all student participants carry the same weight and position in terms of expertise, power, access to information, and experience on the 17 SDGs. Partially, this has been circumvented by focusing on students' choices regarding interests in specific SDGs and also providing beforehand the necessary level of knowledge(content)/expertise for dynamic discussions.

The outcome of the exercise demonstrates that certain SDGs are more "digestible" in terms of conceptual "Eudaimonia" goals than others. Based on student choices, SDGs like 1, 4, 5, 9, 12, and 13 were the most approached in dialectical discussion by far. SDG "climate action," for example, was quite popular due to the current widespread narrative surrounding this goal and its coverage in Japanese society. Such situations demonstrate that the teacher must have the flexibility to consider and deal with the setting promoted by the particular environment in which a dialectical exercise is taking place.

Secondly, it is important to consider what the Japanese environment can favour, as visible in everyday life for the student to be able to handle the topic. If we take, for example, SDG "Life Below Water" in a country surrounded by oceans like Japan, the motivation of Japanese students to tackle such an issue was definitely more practicable and therefore "debatable" in their experience than a more abstract notion of SDG "Partnership for the Goals."

Moreover, a certain level of knowledge and critical thinking is necessary to be able to see two sides of the same topic in order to validate a thesis and its antithesis for a synthesis. This pushed the student to think outside conventional frameworks, and in my experience, this was the hardest part to achieve due to pre-existing settings in the form of rational thought by Japanese students. In addition to this, for several students, it was easier to take a stance on one thesis and an antithesis to the common narrative on another, rather than imagine the two sides (thesis and antithesis) on the same SDG. The reason why a matching exercise in the classroom was always necessary in order to genuinely put two students in debate: one arguing a thesis and the second student its

antithesis.

In terms of practice, it has been found that this exercise is more effective if organised in advance as a homework assignment and involves writing a script. However, it is necessary to adapt to debate dynamics and new questions arising during the exercise in the classroom.

In terms of assessing this pedagogical activity for a university, I think that a practice-based approach in the classroom helps identify "blind spots" in students' reflexivity, as well as deeply ingrained individual beliefs and institutional traditions. Such aspects, if not considered further, can hinder institutions from developing a genuinely reflexive approach to quality in education.[23] Too often, in fact, we are pushed as teachers to check in evaluations whether the student liked a course or not, without going beyond the face value of a statement and considering the inherent reasons for such a statement.

The data collected in this exercise on global citizenship linked to the SDGs can also be categorised into four main purposes: to describe practice, to examine students' perceptions, to develop theory, and to assess the impact of such an exercise by following Horey et al.'s approach.[24]

5. Conclusions

With this article, I have tried to illustrate how Hegelian education can be tasked with fostering ethical individuals through the transition from immediate and natural ethical substantiality to an ethical substance that encompasses subjectivity and the capacity for self-theorisation. This task or process can be achieved in this example through practical dialectical exercises that incorporate the UN SDGs in the classroom. Nevertheless, this largely depends on how the service model adopted by some Japanese universities would eclipse or not the ideal of a socially responsible institution by adopting a corporate framework instead. As demonstrated by Spero, such conditions inevitably lead to the reproduction of neoliberal cultural forms within the university curriculum.

This situation often equates inaccurately "service to industry" with "service to society" and "economic relevance" with "social relevance."[25] In this regard, business leaders are indeed eager to persuade governments and universities of the need to cultivate human resources graduates who are global citizens equipped with either corporate skills and/or social skills and capable of surviving and thriving in today's global market.[26] The challenge remains: how do we reconcile the enduring purpose of education to prepare individuals with contemporary realities while at the same time nurturing their ability to envision and create better futures for everyone? With this article, I aimed to demonstrate how these dual visions can be practised and harmonised within responsible institutions, promoting competitiveness alongside humanistic aims and a global vision for higher education.

This challenging task becomes even more complex when we consider the current "paradigm shift" in higher education, which is facing a crisis of purpose, relevance, and direction for the future. For universities to act as

catalysts for reflexivity, a careful balance must be maintained between institutional autonomy and responsibility. According to the rector of the United Nations University, universities face a twofold challenge: they must critically assess their role in shaping the future and re-imagine their responsibilities within a rapidly changing global context. As institutions of higher learning, universities hold significant privileges in generating knowledge, fostering innovation, and cultivating future leaders. However, he concludes that privilege without purpose can lead to perilous outcomes.[27]

Lastly, with regard to the UN SDGs, they will definitely continue to be a reference for further educational purpose and pedagogical reference beyond the 2030 programme deadline. In this regard, conversations are emerging in the UN regarding post-SDG goals. These discussions are focusing not only on economic indicators like the traditional GDP (Gross Domestic Product) but also on a transition towards a holistic system centred on "Human Flourishing" or, in definition, the concept of "Eudaimonia" highlighted in this article.

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Notes

[1] Notably in "The Subjective Spirit" and in details in the reports to Niethammer.

[2] Spero (2020).

[3] Horey, et al. (2018).

[4] Spero (2020).

[5] Nakasato (2023).

[6] Horey, et al. (2018).

[7] Spero (2020).

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Knowles (2002).

[10] Rosen (1992).

[11] A term coined by the philosopher Thomas Kuhn.

[12] In this sense, I think we can combine both the current wars in Ukraine and in the Middle East as critical events related to a paradigm shift in the world system.

[13] Marwala (2025).

[14] Rosen (1992).

[15] Nakasato (2023).

[16] Eudaimonia (a Good Soul) is, for example, achieving one's goals, helping others, pursuing meaning in life, and is related to internal/medium long-term perspectives.

[17] Hedonia (Hedonism) is, for example, eating delicious food, winning in competition, feeling cool, warm, and comfortable. It usually corresponds to external/short-term perspectives.

[18] The OECD dataset includes the following dimensions: Housing, Income, Employment, Community, Education, Environment, Civic Participation, Health, Life Satisfaction, Safety, and Work-Life Balance.

[19] Nakasato (2023).

[20] Spero (2020).

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] Hegel reported to Niethammer on 23 October 1812.

[23] These aspects were researched by Nyircsak(2025): when reflexive practice can easily become routine and absent-minded when performed repeatedly over time without yielding critical insights. In this regard, course evaluations, which, unless accompanied by a range of follow-up actions that lead to changes or improvements in educational quality based on the feedback received, may be seen as an administrative burden or even a constraint on academic freedom.

[24] Horey, et al.(2018).

[25] Spero(2020).

[26] Horey, et al.(2018); Nakasato(2023).

[27] Marwala(2025).