Supporting Emotional Development in Japanese English Classrooms with Microsoft Reflect

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Abstract

This study explores how technology can support emotional development in Japanese university English classrooms, utilizing Microsoft Reflect as a data-driven emotional check-in tool. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is an educational framework that helps students develop emotional awareness, self-management, interpersonal skills, and ethical decision-making. While widely applied in primary and secondary settings, SEL is underutilized in higher education and often lacks cultural adaptation in East Asian classrooms. This study investigates whether digital SEL tools can assist students in articulating emotional states and teachers in responding to classroom climates. Conducted across two private universities over a three-week period, the mixed-methods design included an emotional regulation questionnaire, Reflect-generated student data, and teacher reflection journals. Findings suggest that while Reflect promoted some gains in emotional vocabulary and helped initiate classroom dialogue, its impact was limited by cultural norms discouraging emotional discourse and by a lack of training in interpreting emotional data. Teachers highlighted the importance of human facilitation, contextual knowledge and relational engagement to make meaningful use of such tools. The study concludes that Microsoft Reflect has the potential to support emotional development when integrated into a culturally responsive and relational pedagogy. It also calls for professional development in SEL and critical reflection on the role of digital tools in emotional education. This research contributes to the growing conversations on how technology can be ethically and effectively integrated to support SEL in higher education.

Keywords: Social Emotional Learning, Educational Technology, Relational Pedagogy, Japan, Teacher Agency, Microsoft Reflect

1. Introduction: Background/ Objectives and Goals

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has gained prominence in educational research as a framework for developing emotional intelligence, self-regulation, and social awareness among students (Elmi, 2020). While SEL has been widely integrated into K-12 curricula, particularly in Western educational systems, its application in higher education (HE) remains limited and underexplored (Lin & Wang-Hiles, 2024). This implementation gap is particularly evident in Japanese university contexts, where instructors—especially part-time and non-Japanese faculty—often operate with minimal institutional support or guidance for emotional development integration (Gurney, 2023). The decentralized nature of higher education compounds these challenges. Unlike K-12 environments where structured and licensed SEL products can be implemented across entire schools under centralized administration, university instructors typically operate with greater autonomy but less coordinated support. This professional isolation contributes to fragmented SEL implementation despite growing evidence that emotions play a crucial role in shaping cognitive processes essential for second language acquisition, including perception, attention, memory, and long-term retention (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Muller & Pentón Herrera, 2023).

In Japan, EFL instruction remains largely exam-driven and teacher-centered, emphasizing grammatical accuracy over communicative competence (Mori, 2024). This rigid structure leaves little room for student-centered approaches that account for emotional and social factors in language learning (Wang et al., 2024). Given these insights, integrating SEL into university-level EFL classrooms could enhance student engagement, self-regulation, and motivation by treating emotions as assets rather than obstacles in learning.

Recent reviews emphasize that most digital SEL interventions have focused on school-aged children, often over-looking the nuances required for older learners in more autonomous settings (Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Elmi, 2020). This lack of digital and SEL-focused studies in HE suggests that university instructors often receive limited guidance on how to integrate emotional development into their pedagogical practices (Stillman et al., 2018), leading to inconsistent implementation across disciplines.

This study adopts Microsoft Reflect as a digital emotional check-in tool embedded within Microsoft Teams. Reflect enables students to self-report emotions via a visual interface, providing teachers with aggregate, anonymized data on classroom emotional climate. Unlike predictive AI tools that algorithmically analyze emotional states, Reflect preserves relational pedagogy by placing emotional interpretation in the hands of the teacher. It was selected for this study based on three primary criteria: ethical alignment with non-algorithmic approach that maintains human judgment in emotional assessment; institutional accessibility built into Microsoft 365 platforms already used within the university context; and integration ease with seamless incorporation into existing HE institutional systems.

Microsoft has increasingly recognized the value of emotional intelligence in leadership and education, setting it apart from other technology companies that often treat SEL as an external add-on rather than a core feature of learning design. However, as Keefer et al. (2018) note, digital SEL tools must be paired with relational scaffolding to avoid superficial engagement or performative emotional responses.

This study draws upon two main complementary frameworks to guide its inquiry: the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) model and the Six Seconds Emotional Intelligence model. CASEL delineates five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, widely used in institutional SEL design (CASEL, 2020). These competencies represent what Immordino-Yang et al. (2019) describe as the neural and psychological integration of emotion with cognition, essential for effective learning. While well-established, the CASEL model was primarily developed for younger students and formal school systems, often requiring adaptation for more autonomous, adult learners in more complex social situations in higher education (Dvořáková et al., 2017).

The Six Seconds model offers a more personally driven approach. Originally developed and widely applied in corporate, organizational, and leadership training contexts. Used by global organizations such as FedEx and the U.S. Navy and increasingly in HE institutions, it cultivates emotional literacy, enhance decision-making, and support team collaboration (Six Seconds, 2014; Six Seconds, 2011, Freedman & Jensen, 2017). Central to the Six Seconds model are three guiding pursuits: Know Yourself, Choose Yourself, and Give Yourself which integrate eight emotional intelligence competencies that support metacognitive awareness, pattern recognition, and purpose-driven action (Six Seconds, 2020). The model encourages learners and educators to frame emotions as strategic resources rather than obstacles, that can inform decision-making, deepen reflection, and promote ethical action, which are key components of developing a relational, emotionally intelligent society prepared for a collaborative future. Mayer & Salovey's (2016) longitudinal research reinforces this perspective, demonstrating that emotional intelligence competencies serve as reliable predictors of both academic achievement and psychological adjustment.

Research on integrating SEL into HE is expanding. Jennings and Greenberg (2020) demonstrate instructor emotional intelligence significantly mediates the effectiveness of SEL interventions, with technology potentially serving as a scaffolding mechanism for both students and faculty. D'Amico et al. (2018) emphasize that successful SEL integration requires coherence across micro (classroom), meso (program), and macro (institutional) levels, a complexity that digital platforms are uniquely positioned to address through integrated data systems. University transitions present emotional challenges (Conley et al., 2020), and technological interventions can provide continuous support, as demonstrated in Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia's (2021) work on emotion regulation technologies. Particularly relevant to this study's Japanese context, Torrente et al. (2019) highlight the importance of culturally responsive SEL implementation, with technology-mediated approaches offering customization possibilities that respect cultural variations in emotional expression and interpretation (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2019).

In Japan, the successful integration of SEL into HE is complicated by cultural norms surrounding emotion and authority. Japanese emotional culture is discussed as emotional interdependence by Kitayama and Markus (2017), suggesting emotions are deeply rooted in social relationships rather than being solely individual experiences. This perspective significantly influences how students engage with SEL activities, especially those involving emotional self-disclosure. Practices like 甘え *amae* (dependence) and 遠慮 *enryo* (restraint) can inhibit open expression, as students are socialized to prioritize group harmony over individual disclosure (Uchida & Kitayama, 2019; Yamasaki & Hasegawa, 2021). Interestingly, digital platforms may help bridge this gap. Studies show that Japanese students

are more comfortable sharing emotions through technology than in person (Kamibeppu & Sugiura, 2018; Moriya & Ueda, 2021). This suggests that tools like Microsoft Reflect may support SEL by aligning with students' communication preferences.

Western pedagogies increasingly coexist with traditional Japanese values which can further complicate tensions (Yonezawa et al., 2020). Developmentally, this life stage carries heightened vulnerability, especially in Japan, where social expectations and identity pressures are tightly linked. Conditions such as 引き籠り *hikikomori* (social withdrawal) reflect the emotional toll of navigating autonomy and belonging without adequate institutional or emotional scaffolding (Tajan, 2018; Elmi, 2020; Spooner-Johnston, 2020). Reflective practices aligned with Japanese cultural values offer a promising approach to support emotional growth while respecting collective norms (Ito et al., 2019).

The research questions:
1.   How do university EFL instructors in Japan perceive the role of Microsoft Reflect in supporting social-emotional learning?
2.   What emotional patterns emerge from students' use of Reflect, and how do these shape instructional choices?
3.   How does the integration of Reflect impact teacher awareness, relational pedagogy, and emotional climate in the classroom?

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on SEL in tertiary education by examining the affordances and limitations of digital tools within culturally specific, under-explored educational contexts.

2.   Methods

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2014) to explore the integration of SEL and educational technology within Japanese EFL classrooms. A mixed-methods approach enables a comprehensive analysis of both quantitative (survey data) and qualitative (teacher reflections and student responses) perspectives, allowing for triangulation to enhance validity and reliability (Clark & Creswell, 2007; Dawadi, Shrestha, & Giri, 2021).

The research was conducted by practicing educators with full teaching responsibilities across two private Japanese universities.

2.1 Participants
The study involved 181 first- and second-year undergraduate students enrolled in compulsory English language courses at two private universities in Japan. The sample size was determined primarily by practical consideration, specifically the availability of intact classes where the researchers had sufficient curricular flexibility to implement the intervention. Students exhibited English proficiency levels from TOEIC 350 to 700, aligning with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) A1 to B2 levels, typical for Japanese university streams. Participants were predominantly 18-20 years old Japanese nationals with diverse language learning motivations including business, international trade, studying abroad, and overseas relocation. Japanese EFL classrooms traditionally emphasize teacher-centered instruction and exam-driven curricula (Smith, 2025). Students in Japan's monocultural educational expectations may struggle with explicit emotional expression due

to sociocultural norms discouraging direct displays of emotion (Mori, 2022). These cultural factors significantly influenced both study design and data interpretation throughout the research.

2.2 Data Collection

To ensure a comprehensive analysis, the study utilized four primary data collection methods: (1) Microsoft Reflect emotional check-ins (quantitative self-reported emotional states), (2) Pre- and post-surveys using the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents (ERQ-CA), (3) Teacher observations and student reflections (qualitative insights into SEL engagement), and (4) Instructor self-reflection (assessing the influence of SEL tools on teachers' own emotional awareness and pedagogical adaptation). Each data source was strategically selected to balance quantitative precision with qualitative depth, allowing for triangulation and enhanced validity (Creswell, 2014; Clark & Creswell, 2007). To ensure the ethical handling of emotionally sensitive data, multiple protocols were established to safeguard participant confidentiality. All student responses were anonymized before analysis, and data obtained from the Microsoft Reflect platform were collected solely in aggregate form, without any identifiable personal information. Survey responses and reflective journal entries were securely stored on password-protected digital platforms, with access restricted exclusively to the research team. To mitigate potential response bias and promote honest participation, participants were explicitly informed—both in writing and verbally—that their emotional disclosures would remain confidential in the classroom. Furthermore, they were assured that their responses would not influence their academic evaluation or standing in the course.

Microsoft Reflect, integrated within Microsoft Teams, allowed students to select from over 50 predefined emotional states during each class. Emotional descriptors were visually represented through emojis and descriptive terms in both Japanese and English were displayed, ensuring accessibility even for lower-proficiency EFL learners. Students could switch language settings independently, though this was not enforced. The tool's character-based visual elements aligned with Japanese cultural preferences for yurakura mascot designs, potentially reducing participation barriers while raising questions about response authenticity.

Students completed a modified version of the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents (ERQ-CA) (Gullone & Taffe, 2012) at the beginning and end of the study. The ERQ-CA is a validated psychometric instrument designed to measure two primary emotional regulation strategies:

1.   Cognitive reappraisal – the ability to reinterpret emotions in a positive or neutral way.
2.   Expressive suppression – the tendency to inhibit outward emotional expression.

A 7-point Likert scale was used for all survey items, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. This format allowed for responses and quantitative comparison of pre- and post-study shifts in emotional regulation. The use of a pre-existing, well-established framework allowed for a degree of objectivity, balancing the otherwise subjective nature of emotional self-reporting.

Students provided voluntary written reflections on their Microsoft Reflect experiences, though self-selection bias may overrepresent highly engaged participants. This limitation is acknowledged in the interpretation of findings, consistent with Creswell's (2014) caution

regarding the influence of participant motivation on voluntary qualitative input. Instructors also documented observations through multiple methods including post-lesson digital journaling, voice to text recordings for immediate reactions, weekly collaborative discussions, and casual in-person check-ins. Shared reflection templates ensured consistency across observation, while teachers participated in the same Reflect check-ins as students, creating experiential foundations for interpreting emotional data

Descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests (assuming unequal variances) analyzed pre- and post- survey responses using Microsoft Excel. Microsoft Reflect frequency data were categorized to examine emotional reporting trends and cultural influences on self-expression (Thomson et al., 2021).

Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase methodology (familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, review, definition/naming, and reporting) was conducted on teacher reflections, classroom observations, and student open-ended responses. Qualitative data were imported into Microsoft Word and analyzed manually using color-coded schemes developed inductively. Researchers independently coded the data and refined themes through peer discussion to ensure inter-rater consistency.

Three primary themes emerged: (1) emotional ambivalence and surface participation, (2) cultural restraint in emotional disclosure, and (3) teacher emotional mirroring. To enhance credibility, data triangulation was applied across Reflect logs, teacher notes, and student surveys (Creswell, 2014).

Despite the potential benefits of Microsoft Reflect, several challenges emerged during implementation, particularly in student engagement, emotional authenticity, cultural influences, and teacher adaptation. These challenges demonstrate the complexities of integrating SEL tools within higher education contexts, particularly within culturally specific educational environments such as Japanese EFL classrooms.

One of the primary concerns was superficial engagement, as some students clicked through check-ins without meaningful reflection, treating Reflect as a procedural task rather than an opportunity for self-assessment. Teachers noted that students often selected the same emotion repeatedly, often choosing positive or neutral options regardless of the activity. To minimize this issue, instructors introduced vocabulary building activities to strengthen emotional granularity, explicitly modeled deeper reflection during their own check-ins, and made time for class discussions linking students' chosen emotions with classroom events. These adaptations aimed to reframe the check-in process as an intentional practice rather than a compliance task. This aligns with McKeown's (2024) finding that structured reflection alone does not necessarily equate to deep introspection, especially when students are not intrinsically motivated. Similarly, Tevdovska (2017) found that students in structured SEL settings often engage in procedural compliance rather than meaningful emotional processing, raising concerns regarding the efficiency of digital self-reporting tools in developing authentic emotional awareness. To address this, instructors integrated vocabulary practice, modeled their own reflections publicly, and created low-stakes opportunities for students to link emotions with classroom experiences. These actions helped reposition Reflect as a leaning tool rather than a compliance mechanism.

A second challenge involved discrepancies between self-reported emotions and observed behaviors. While students selected calm or neutral emotional states in Reflect, their in-class

demeanor often suggested higher anxiety or disengagement. Teachers observed moments where students marked themselves as "relaxed" despite appearing visibly tense before presentations. This raises methodological concerns regarding the reliability of self-reported emotional data, particularly within cultural contexts where emotional restraint is valued. These findings also corroborate prior research on social desirability bias in self-reporting emotional assessments, wherein students may select socially acceptable emotions rather than their true internal states (McKeown, 2024; Pérez-Fuentes et al., 2018). The gap between stated emotions and behavior was particularly noticeable in classes where students feared judgment from peers, reinforcing previous findings that SEL implementation in higher education requires culturally contextualized approaches (Thomson et al., 2021). To minimize misinterpretation, instructors used these discrepancies as discussion points during their weekly reflections and refined their teaching strategies by combining Reflect data with observational insights. This helped interpret emotional patterns more contextually and responsively. Though not eliminated, the collaborative review of incongruities across data sources enabled teachers to treat emotional check-ins as one layer of emotional insight rather than an absolute indicator.

Cultural norms significantly influence emotional disclosure in Japanese educational settings. Traditional practices often discourage open emotional expression, creating barriers in both digital and face-to-face interactions (Thomson et al., 2021). Teacher reflections revealed that students frequently defaulted to reporting neutral or positive emotions, avoiding words such as "stressed" or "overwhelmed". This tendency likely stems from multiple factors: concerns about appearing vulnerable, adherence to collectivist values that emphasize group harmony over individual expression (Hosokawa et al., 2024), and cultural preferences for indirect emotional communication, which may lead to understated reporting of negative emotional experiences in self-reporting assessments (Savina & Wan, 2017). These patterns reinforce the necessity of culturally responsive SEL frameworks, particularly in educational environments where emotional expressivity is constrained by social norms. Failure to account for such cultural norms constrains emotional expression. Without proper cultural adaptation, digital emotional tracking tools may yield unreliable results in cross-cultural educational contexts (Shen, 2016; Frei-Landau et al., 2024). The group dynamic further compounds these challenges, as students demonstrate an increased reluctance to share feelings such as anxiety, frustration, or sadness, potentially due to fears of peer judgment (Campo et al., 2018). In response, teachers emphasized the anonymity of the Reflect tool, reassured students that their responses would not affect grades, and used emoji-supported vocabulary scaffolds to lower the emotional entry barrier. Some students expressed those visual tools felt safer than verbal sharing.

The integration of Microsoft Reflect as a pedagogical tool also presented challenges for instructors, particularly in the interpretation and application of real-time emotional data. Many educators lack formal SEL training, making it challenging to translate aggregated emotional trends into actionable teaching strategies (Allbright et al., 2019). One teacher's reflection emphasized difficulty with unclear emotional trends, as students consistently marked themselves as "calm" or "focused" yet appeared disengaged during activities. This aligns with previous research indicating that without professional development in SEL integration, instructors may struggle to make meaningful pedagogical adjustments based on emotional data (Zins & Elias, 2007; Keefer, Parker, & Saklofske, 2018). Without training, these tools may go underutilized, diminishing their effectiveness in building emotionally responsive learning environments.

Interestingly, while Microsoft Reflect was not designed for teachers to track their own emotions, instructors noted that their own emotional states influenced classroom dynamics. Teachers journaled and checked in with one another to discuss their experiences, frustrations, and successes with SEL integration. This aligns with the With-ness Pedagogy (Mori, 2024), which emphasizes that teachers' emotional engagement is as critical as students' in harboring a relational learning environment. The findings suggest that future iterations of digital SEL tools could benefit from dual tracking systems, allowing both students and teachers to monitor their emotional regulation over time.

While Microsoft Reflect provided a structured and scalable approach to SEL implementation, these challenges highlight the complex interplay between digital SEL, cultural norms, and pedagogical adaptation. The study is a reminder of the need for culturally responsive SEL practices, professional development for educators, and further research into how students and teachers engage with digital emotional tracking in higher education.

3. Results

3.1 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of student open-ended reflections and teacher observations revealed three engagement patterns: emotional insight and vocabulary development, resistance or uncertainty toward emotional reflection, and affective neutrality or disengagement. Approximately 80.9% of students reported recognizing changes in their emotional awareness. Conversely, some students expressed skepticism about the relevance of SEL in academic English contexts; 25.2% were ambivalent about continuing Reflect, citing discomfort with personal reflection in class.

Teacher observations offered important context for interpreting student responses, particularly when discrepancies arose between self-reported emotions and observed behaviors. Instructors emphasized the need for contextualized interpretation, using Reflect data trends to adjust lesson pacing, group configurations, and classroom tone. Access to real-time emotional feedback also deepened teachers' own pedagogical and emotional awareness, promoting more intentional delivery and opening space for discussions on well-being.

To validate findings, researchers triangulated emergent themes with classroom observations and aggregated Reflect data. Notably, spikes in reported fatigue or anxiety aligned temporarily with midterm assessments or presentations, supporting the credibility of student self-reports.

These findings indicate that Microsoft Reflect was most effective when linked to tangible outcomes like vocabulary growth, but less persuasive for students who perceived emotional reflection as peripheral to language learning.

In summary, while Microsoft Reflect was positively received by many, engagement depended on classroom culture, student readiness, and teacher facilitation. Teacher reflection journals both validated student self-reports and informed adaptive pedagogy, demonstrating the need for relational and context-sensitive SEL integration in HE EFL.

3.2 Quantitative Findings

Quantitative analysis examined pre- and post-test scores on emotional regulation and classroom engagement using Microsoft Reflect and the modified ERQ-CA. Paired samples t-tests were conducted to compare student responses at three points across the study period. While repeated measures ANOVA would typically be suitable for studies with three or more time points, limitations in data completeness and missing values led the researchers to analyze change using paired comparisons between the first and final sessions. Statistical analyses were conducted using Microsoft Excel and SPSS version 28.

Results indicated statistically significant enhancement in stress coping strategies ($t(118) = 4.35, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.51$) and negative emotion regulation ($t(118) = 2.23, p = .028, d = 0.28$). These outcomes suggest that students became more effective at managing stress and regulating negative emotional responses during the intervention. However, no statistically significant changes were observed for positive emotion regulation ($t(118) = 0.55, p = .586$) or emotional awareness ($t(118) = 0.33, p = .746$). These null findings reflect cultural restraint in expressing positive affect or limitations in the students' ability to self-assess growth in these areas

4. Discussion

The implementation of Microsoft Reflect in Japanese EFL HE classrooms revealed complex dynamics at the intersection of technology, emotion, and culture. While initial student interest was sparked by the novelty of the tool, engagement remained surface-level for many. Teachers observed that students often completed check-ins quickly, with minimal reflection. These findings highlight the need to embed Microsoft Reflect within broader pedagogical frameworks rather than using it in isolation. Structured follow-up activities-such as body mapping, role play, or storytelling-proved effective for deepening emotional insight and grounding digital check-ins in relational interaction (Mori, 2024).

To enhance curricular integration, educators should adopt multimodal strategies that leverage Reflect data in project work, feedback cycles, and culturally relevant scenarios. Participatory design and co-creation of SEL activities with students, as recommended by Kohn et al. (2021), can increase ownership and engagement. Researchers agree with Simmons (2019) that emotional intelligence must be framed through culturally responsive lenses, particularly in collectivist contexts where individual disclosure may be limited.

4.1 Navigating Cultural Nuances through Adaptive SEL Design

Cultural norms significantly influenced the implementation of Reflect. Students frequently selected neutral emotions such as "calm" or "focused," even when visibly stressed, consistent with collectivist emotional norms (Savina & Wan, 2017). Teacher modelling of emotional vocabulary, using terms such as tense in context, was found to mitigate these patterns, gradually expanding students' expressiveness. To facilitate culturally relevant SEL, tools like Reflect should adapt emotional categories to include context-specific terms. Consulting local educators and students in co-developing culturally resonant vocabulary banks can bridge gaps between standardized tools and lived experience. SEL effectiveness increases when cultural assets are centered rather than marginalized.

4.2 Ethical Considerations in Emotional Data Use

Although Microsoft Reflect anonymizes responses, the normalization of emotion tracking raises ethical concerns. Teachers noted risks of institutional misuse, student discomfort, and the reduction of emotion to quantifiable data. Zuboff (2019) cautions against datafication that

prioritizes system compliance over individual empowerment, while Postman (1993) warns of technology's potential to disempower educators.

Ethical guidelines should include:
•   Transparent communication about data use;
•   Policies prohibiting SEL data in academic assessment;
•   Shared teacher-student discussions on emotional trends to empower rather than surveil.

Equity-oriented SEL must also address how data systems may reinforce bias or stigma, requiring teacher training in ethical data use and culturally aware interpretation.

4.3 Technology as a Catalyst, not a Substitute
The most meaningful SEL outcomes occurred in interpersonal moments enabled by Reflect, not within the tool itself. Teachers consistently reported that discussions, informal check-ins, and collaborative work provided deeper emotional insight than digital check-ins alone. This supports the With-ness Pedagogy framework (Mori, 2024), which prioritizes relational engagement. Reflect's value lies in prompting reflection and dialogue, not replacing them. Future SEL technologies should emphasize teacher adaptability, student co-authorship, and integration with non-digital practices. Novice educators, in particular, benefit when SEL tools are paired with human-centered coaching and peer learning communities.

4.4 Directions for Future Research and Pedagogical Innovation
Further research is needed to assess long-term impacts of Reflect, including longitudinal studies on emotional competency and comparative studies across cultural contexts (Shen, 2016). Participatory methodologies, where students co-interpret their data, can foster ownership and disrupt hierarchical learning models. Design-based research could iteratively refine SEL tools in partnership with users. Teacher professional development should focus on culturally responsive, trauma-informed strategies, moving beyond generic SEL frameworks. Johnson's (2021) Know, Choose, Give model exemplifies choice-driven, relational SEL practices.

4.5 Final Reflections: Toward Human-Centered Emotional Learning
The adoption of Microsoft Reflect in Japanese EFL classrooms revealed both potential and limitations. While students engaged with the tool, genuine emotional learning emerged through human interaction, reflective dialogue, and culturally sensitive guidance.

"We need to be careful that we're not just teaching students to 'log emotions' but to actually reflect on them." (Teacher 2 reflection, 2024)

In an era increasingly shaped by algorithms, SEL must remain a human-centered endeavor. It should cultivate emotional literacy, critical thinking, and collective well-being, using technology as a relational bridge rather than a replacement.

5. Conclusion and Future Research
This study examined the integration of Microsoft Reflect in Japanese EFL university classrooms to support SEL. While Reflect provided structured opportunities for emotional check-ins, the most meaningful growth occurred when digital prompts were embedded within relational pedagogical practices. This finding reinforces Keefer et al.'s (2018) argument for contextually grounded, educator-led SEL, and aligns with Mori's (2024) With-ness Pedagogy,

which emphasizes the relational dimension of emotional learning.

Educators should view SEL technology as a supplement-not a substitute-for human interaction. Effective implementation requires integrating emotional data into class discussions, providing reflective language support, and adapting strategies to learners' cultural and developmental contexts. Recommended strategies include:

- Pairing Reflect check-ins with guided reflection prompts
- Incorporating culturally relevant emotional vocabulary
- Allocating time for peer and teacher-student emotional dialogue
- Engaging in professional learning focused on trauma-informed and culturally responsive SEL

Teacher reflections highlighted challenges with surface-level engagement, echoing McKeown (2024) and Tevdovska (2017), who caution against equating procedural interaction with authentic emotional reflection. Tools perceived as performative can mask disengagement.

The study also raised structural and ethical considerations. Although Reflect anonymizes responses, concerns persist regarding data interpretation, emotional authenticity, and potential institutional misuse. Clear ethical guidelines, as outlined by El Mallah (2022), are needed to ensure responsible and equitable use of emotional data.

Future research should:

- Conduct longitudinal studies to assess sustained emotional growth
- Examine cross-cultural applications of digital SEL in collectivist versus individualist contexts (Shen, 2016)
- Investigate co-design of SEL tools with students and faculty (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020)
- Explore emotional labor and reciprocal SEL growth within relational pedagogy (Gkonou & Miller, 2023)

In sum, effective SEL in HE must transcend compliance-oriented checklists, becoming a collaborative, reflective, and culturally attuned process. The value of digital SEL tools like Reflect lies not in their algorithms, but in their integration into classroom relationships that prioritize human dignity, emotional honesty, and shared learning.

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