



Raising Awareness of Mental Health Issues

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Introduction

Japan has the 4th highest suicide rate of all countries in the *Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD). According to the National Police Agency, 320 Japanese youth under age 18 died by suicide in the year 2016 (Lim, 2017). This suggests that mental health problems such as depression are influential in Japanese high school students' lives and points to a need for increased awareness of the issues.

This article briefly explains 1 unit (2 lessons) of an *Advanced English Discussion* course for final-year students at a 5-year technical college which was designed to raise students' awareness of mental health problems and present methods for dealing with these. The lessons are based around authentic materials. The first lesson uses the experiences of a professional rugby league player who suffered from depression (Ward, 2016), while the second focuses on a *World Health Organization* (WHO) video (2012) with advice from mental health experts on how to reduce stress and combat depression (State of Mind, 2015).

Lesson stages

1. Introductory video and discussion

Students begin by watching a short video of an exciting event in recent rugby league history (Super League TV, 2015). They then share their immediate reactions and impressions of the players with their classmates. Students generally use words and expressions with positive connotations such as "cool," "strong," and "powerful." Using a sport that students are unfamiliar with means that their reactions will not be conditioned or clouded by prior knowledge of the sport. The teacher tells the students that, although rugby league players are indeed strong, they can suffer from mental health issues, just like anyone. This segues into a brainstorming activity, as students work together in groups to think of mental health problems and their effects.

2. Article summary

This stage requires students to work in groups to read, understand and summarise a section of an article by a professional rugby league player about his battle with depression (Ward, 2016). Due to the original article's length and its use of Yorkshire dialect, it's recommended that the teacher simplify the article. This can be done with the aid of readability measurement software which is available

for free online. When each group's summary is complete, the teacher can ask students to write their section on the board so that the whole class can read the completed summary together. This will give a sense of cohesion to the activity and reinforce the fact that even strong, successful athletes – as the students themselves described the players earlier in the lesson – can struggle with mental health issues.

3. Video comprehension and discussion

Students next watch a video created by the *World Health Organization* (2012) and, while watching, answer basic comprehension questions. The task that follows draws attention to something that the video's narrator mentions – that we should think about things we are grateful for. The task asks students to make a list of 5 things they are grateful for, then share their list with a classmate.

4. Discussion

Students next follow a link to a list of tips for mental health improvement on the *State of Mind* website (2015). Their task is to skim the list, choose a piece of advice and write 3 reasons why they think this is a good idea. Then, they must explain to their classmates (one-to-one or in small groups) which tip they chose and why. *State of Mind* is a rugby league charity but the tips on their site are taken from the *Mental Health Foundation* and are written for a general audience. As such, these have relevance for high school students.

Conclusion

Rugby league is a sport that Japanese students are unfamiliar with, but this was one of the reasons I chose it. It's also a sport that's closely connected to many mental health awareness initiatives. The students' initial impressions of rugby league players' physical attributes allow a contrast to be drawn with the discussion of mental health issues and in particular with Ward's (2016) article.

This unit calls upon students to use and develop all four of the key language skills through engagement with authentic materials: their reading and writing skills will be called on for the article summary; listening skills will be required for the WHO video (2012); and their reading skills will be developed as they skim advice on the *State of Mind* website (2015). The students' speaking skills will be used frequently as every activity requires the sharing of ideas and opinions orally with classmates.

High school students are under considerable pressure regarding their studies, final exams, and job hunting. The lessons here can help them to realise that mental health issues, such as stress and depression, are common and affect people from all walks of life, so they need not suffer alone.

References

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<p>This new British Council book (free to download!) features creative EFL activities designed to promote language skills and awareness of the 17 UN Goals:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere 2. End hunger and achieve food security 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being 4. Ensure inclusive quality education for all 5. Achieve gender equality and empower girls 6. Ensure sustainable water use and sanitation 7. Ensure access to reliable sustainable energy 8. Promote sustainable growth and employment 9. Build infrastructure and foster innovation 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, sustainable 12. Ensure sustainable consumption & production 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change 14. Conserve the oceans, seas & marine resources 15. Protect land ecosystems (forests, biodiversity) 16. Promote peaceful societies and social justice 17. Strengthen global partnerships for development <p>The book includes chapters on the following topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Developing Kids’ Understanding of Global Goals</i> ▪ <i>Content & SD Goals: Beyond Language Learning</i> ▪ <i>Extensive reading for equality and social justice</i> ▪ <i>Storytelling for a Better World</i> ▪ <i>Using the SD Goals in the EAP Classroom</i> 	