SUSTAINABILITY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Edited by:
Daniel Xerri
Aleksandra Popovski Golubovikj
Christopher Graham

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About the Editors

Daniel Xerri is an Associate Professor in Applied Linguistics and TESOL at the University of Malta, and the Chairperson of the ELT Council. He has published widely on different areas of English language education. He has co-edited eleven books and authored over 250 publications. His work has appeared in research anthologies, scholarly journals, magazines, and newspapers. His publications have generated a substantial number of citations. He has delivered plenary talks and keynotes in 20 countries and his research has been awarded international prizes. His main research interests are teacher research and professional learning. www.danielxerri.com

Aleksandra Popovski Golubovikj is a teacher, teacher educator and consultant with over 25 years of experience. She holds an MA in Professional Development for Language Education from the University of Chichester, UK and is currently pursuing her PhD at the University of Ss.Cyril and Methodius, Skopje. Her interests include teacher professional development, multimodality, visual arts and language teaching, and exploring effective reading comprehension strategies. She is particularly interested in reading as a tool for exploring and discussing issues such as social (in)justice, diversity and inclusion with learners of English. Aleksandra is also passionate about 'no single stories', i.e., writing and exploiting stories about countries, cultures, and communities that are usually excluded from published ELT materials.

Christopher Graham is a freelance ELT consultant and author based in the UK. He has worked in the field since 1981 in over 30 countries for the British Council, ministries of education, and international publishers. He works extensively on Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning projects, and CPD design and delivery. He has a specific interest in teaching contexts in fragile and fractured societies, and in the role that ELT has in engaging with the climate crisis. Christopher was one of the founders of ELT Footprint and is also on the committee of Green Action ELT. He is the current President of IATEFL and is a member of the Board of Trustees. He has also been a judge for the British Council's ELTons awards.

About the Authors

Patricia Bergström is a dedicated educator, Neurolanguage Coach®, and advocate for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), committed to fostering intercultural understanding and sustainable practices. After more than 26 years in teaching, leadership and teacher training, she now runs Effective Learning 4 Life, where she combines neurolanguage coaching, personal and professional development, intercultural awareness and ESD to help individuals and organisations grow with purpose. She is also Project Officer for Alumni Relations at the UN SDSN Global Schools Programme and a Solutionary Coach on the IHE solutionary teaching micro-credential, supporting global networks of educators. Her experience as an IB Diploma and CAS Coordinator, alongside MA degrees in Modern Languages and TESOL, strengthens her holistic approach to learning.

Josianne Block holds an M.A. in Applied Linguistics and TESOL from the University of Malta, where she currently works as a senior teaching associate. Her research interests include language dynamics in multilingual contexts and teacher development. She has presented at multiple conferences and contributed to publications on these topics. She is also the co-editor of the IATEFL Research SIG newsletter. www.josianneblock.com

Kirsten Borg Cardona is an English language teacher and conference speaker passionate about creating inclusive, student-centred learning environments. She enjoys helping learners build confidence and communication skills, and employs innovative strategies in her pedagogy to engage and support diverse learners.

Savannah Davis is an educator, international conference speaker, and published writer. Passionate about innovation, she advocates for elevating academic standards through creative, technology-enhanced, and evidence-based practices. Her research interests include the intersection between language and cognition, digital literacies, and generative AI.

Anca de Vries has degrees in communication, English, and education from VU University Amsterdam and Leiden University. She has worked in education since 2012 and is currently a lecturer at the Aeres University of Applied Sciences, Almere. She has written for educational magazines and gives workshops (inter)nationally about game-based learning and motivation, and intercultural sensitivity. She has published several books on sustainability with her students, was nominated Sustainable Teacher of the Year twice, and received an honorary pin for her work in promoting plant-based food and sustainable behaviour through voluntary work.

Marissa Foti is a tri-lingual American educator passionate about global education, sustainability, and social-emotional learning. With over a decade of experience in New York public schools, she led the Seal of Biliteracy programme and twice guided Model UN delegations to the World Summit of Nobel Peace Laureates. A Fulbright alumna, she conducted fieldwork at Cree Bilingual Schools in Canada. Currently, as an English Language Fellow in Albania, she teaches university courses and leads professional development across the Balkans. An avid traveller, she enjoys biking, hiking, yoga, and live music, believing in lifelong learning and the power of language to connect.

George Kokolas is an experienced educator and advocate for Positive Education, holding Level 5 Practitioner certification in the field. With a background as Academic Director and Teacher Trainer at Express Publishing for 25 years, he has consistently sought to integrate well-being practices into educational settings. He holds a LEVEL 7 Diploma in TEFL and Advanced Neurolanguage Coaching® certification, complemented by a BA in English Literature. Producer and co-host of the *Teachers Coffee* podcast and founding member of IPEN Greece, Kokolas' work explores the intersection of character strengths, sustainable behaviour, and educational innovation.

Abel Eleojo Ochika, based in Bauchi, Nigeria, serves on the British Council's Social Media Moderators team, and Africa ELTA's board as Vice President (elect). With 15 years of experience, he supports teachers in Sub-Saharan Africa through professional development activities. He helps to organise the British Council's English Connects webinars and workshops in many teacher-clusters in Nigeria. His research interests are Critical Discourse Analysis, TESOL, English for Specific Purposes, Corpus Linguistics, and Syntax.

Linda Ruas has been teaching and training teachers for many years, in London, Brazil, Japan and Guinea Bissau. She now also works as a British Council consultant, with teachers in Sub-Saharan Africa and Wider Europe. Some of the highlights of her career so far include delivering plenaries at the traveling SPELT conference in Pakistan, setting up https://eewiki.newint.org/, being IATEFL Global Issues SIG coordinator, training teachers in French and Greek refugee camps, joint-running pre-conference GISIG events at Africa ELTA conferences in Senegal and Nigeria, and running a small charity: Action Guinea Bissau.

Carol Samlal currently works as an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) practitioner and also teaches Functional Skills English and Essential Digital Skills. She is the present chair of NATECLA's East of England branch, sits on the organisation's Management Council, and is one of its trainers. She is involved in other climate groups, working to raise awareness in the Further Education and ELT communities. She is passionate about encouraging conservation and raising awareness of environmental issues through lessons, workshops, and her blog.

Vicky Saumell is a teacher, trainer, materials writer and presenter. She holds a Diploma in TESOL and a Specialisation Degree in Educational Technology. She has worked for major publishers, especially in the areas of project-based learning and the meaningful use of technology for language learning. She was also the IATEFL Learning Technologies SIG Coordinator. She has had an extensive career teaching at primary and secondary level schools in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and continues to work as a freelancer for publishers and educational institutions.

Armanda Stroia holds a Ph.D. in Philology and has over 15 years of teaching experience. She actively contributes to the field through action research, teacher training, and materials development. Her current research interests span critical media literacy, collaborative multimodal composing, eco-media pedagogy, and the neuroscience of atomic reading habits. She has delivered talks and workshops at various international conferences and authored publications on these topics, including a book entitled *Linguistic Clichés in Romanian Media Discourse*.

Zarina Subhan first qualified as a scientist before working in the field of ELT. With a natural propensity for teaching EAP and ESP for science and engineering students, she also taught general English to young learners. She has worked worldwide both as a teacher and teacher educator with educational institutions, policy makers, NGOs, community leaders, local and state governments. Zarina's time is now spent researching, writing, creating, and delivering materials, continuing professional development (CPD) courses, workshops, and conference presentations. Her passions are the neurology of learning, CLIL/EMI, CPD, and inclusive and sustainable education for all.

Rrita Suli is an English Skills teacher with more than 10 years of dedicated service in middle and high school. Passionate about innovative teaching methods, she has authored several insightful articles on project-based learning, experiential learning, and task-based approaches, emphasising the importance of active, hands-on education. With a deep interest in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) methodology, Rrita continually strives to enhance students' learning experience. In addition to her teaching career, Rrita has a background as a former TV presenter, bringing a strong foundation in communication and media skills to her work in education.

Marcela Villan is an experienced educator from Argentina, who specialises in English Language Teaching and Education for Sustainability. With over 30 years in education, she has served as a teacher, coordinator, examiner and teacher trainer. Marcela holds a TESOL certification and a Bachelor's degree in English Language. She is a TeachSDGs Ambassador and UN SDSN Global Schools Advocate and Mentor. She is also field facilitator for the Institute for Humane Education.

Passionate about integrating sustainability in the classroom, Marcela has written articles on the topic and frequently delivers workshops and webinars in her own country and abroad.

Harry Waters wears many hats, both literally and figuratively. He is a multi-award-winning teacher trainer, educator, climate activist, podcast host, TEDx speaker, and author of *Activities for a Greener Mindset* (2024). His journey into sustainability-focused education led to the creation of Renewable English, a platform uniting language learning with environmental consciousness. Despite his many titles, Harry's down-to-earth approach and passion for the planet are what truly define him. An advocate for sustainable practices, he champions second-hand shirts and systems thinking with equal enthusiasm. Harry's mission? To weave sustainability into every classroom, empowering students and teachers alike to become changemakers for a better world.

Preface

Daniel Xerri, *Editor*

Sustainability in English Language Teaching brings together leading educators, researchers, and practitioners to reimagine the role of ELT in an era defined by ecological, social, and digital transformation. Spanning classrooms across the globe, this volume demonstrates how ELT can cultivate critical thinking, global citizenship, intercultural competence, and learner agency while addressing the urgent challenges of the Anthropocene. Through innovative chapters exploring ecopedagogy, student voice, teacher development, AI's environmental impact, stereotype literacy, indigenous perspectives, digital wellness, and more, the book provides practical frameworks and inspiring case studies that empower teachers to embed sustainability meaningfully into their work. Whether integrating the Sustainable Development Goals, fostering well-being, or amplifying student-led action, the book's contributors show how ELT can become a catalyst for personal, social, and planetary flourishing. This is an essential resource for language educators committed to shaping a more just, inclusive, and sustainable future.

Repositioning English Language Teaching for a Sustainable Future

Daniel Xerri
Aleksandra Popovski Golubovikj
Christopher Graham

Abstract

This introductory chapter outlines the conceptual foundations of *Sustainability in English Language Teaching* by situating ELT within the broader ecological, social, and educational challenges of the Anthropocene. It traces the field's recent evolution through key professional events that signal a growing recognition of ELT's responsibility to contribute to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Drawing on contemporary research in ecopedagogy, foreign language education, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the chapter argues that ELT is uniquely positioned to foster ecological literacy, criticality, intercultural competence, well-being, and learner agency. It also identifies the systemic, curricular, and professional challenges that constrain implementation, providing a way of understanding both the potential and the complexities of sustainability integration.

Introduction

The origins of *Sustainability in English Language Teaching* lie in a moment of collective recognition within the international ELT community: that language education must respond meaningfully to the accelerating ecological and social challenges of the Anthropocene. This recognition was the impetus behind the organisation of the ELT for Sustainability Conference, held in Sarajevo in 2024, where practitioners, researchers, and policy-makers gathered to articulate how ELT could contribute to a more just and sustainable world. The Sarajevo conference foregrounded the urgency of repositioning ELT as a discipline capable of fostering the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for planetary stewardship, opening a space for educators to reconsider the social purpose of language teaching beyond linguistic goals alone.

This momentum was strengthened a year later at the 14th ELT Malta Conference, whose theme, 'ELT for a Sustainable World: Empowering Learners, Teachers, and Schools', expanded the Sarajevo discussions into a broader call for systemic transformation. In Malta, sustainability was approached not merely as an add-on topic but as a framework for reimagining classroom practice, curriculum design, professional development, and institutional policy. Together, these conferences (and many other events)

signalled a paradigm shift: ELT increasingly recognises itself as a field with both the responsibility and the capacity to contribute substantively to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

Research trends in the wider educational landscape reinforce this shift. Dağtaş (2025), through a large-scale bibliometric analysis of 374 Web of Science–indexed publications (2014–2024), shows that ecopedagogy has grown rapidly as a global research field, particularly after 2020, as educators respond to climate concerns and the UN's (n.d.) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Ecopedagogy scholarship – traditionally dominated by countries such as Australia, the United States, and Canada – has generated robust work in areas including environmental education, sustainability education, place-based learning, and climate change. Yet Dağtaş (2025) highlights that this expanding field remains largely peripheral to ELT, despite the discipline's enormous potential to cultivate ecological literacy, critical awareness, and meaningful environmental action. This book directly responds to that call, situating ELT as an active contributor to ecopedagogical innovation.

Higher education scholarship echoes this reconceptualisation. de la Fuente (2023a) argues that universities must embed ESD across all disciplines and identifies foreign language programmes as uniquely positioned to take a leading role. Their inherent interdisciplinarity, cultural orientation, and focus on global communicative competence make language classrooms fertile ground for engaging learners with sustainability issues. de la Fuente (2023a)

calls for a rethinking of traditional divides and advocates for content-based, learner-centred pedagogies such as project-based language learning (PBLL), problem-based learning (PBL), multiliteracies, and community engagement. These approaches allow language development and sustainability literacy to advance in tandem, positioning language education as a key actor in institutional sustainability agendas.

This broader reorientation resonates with the conceptual foundations of the SDGs themselves. Beasy et al. (2023) situate the SDGs within the context of escalating ecological and social crises, acknowledging both their value and their limitations, particularly their grounding in Western, growth-oriented models. Despite these tensions, the SDGs offer a globally recognised framework through which education can cultivate the critical understanding, hope, and transformative action needed to move toward human and planetary flourishing. Education, in both formal and informal modes, is indispensable for equipping learners with the capacities required to navigate and respond to these interconnected crises.

These developments underscore a pivotal shift in how ELT understands its role in the world. Conferences like the ones in Sarajevo and Malta as well as many other sustainability-oriented ELT initiatives across diverse global contexts have amplified practitioners' voices and energised new pedagogical directions, while research in eco-pedagogy, sustainability, and language education points to an expanding consensus: ELT can and must contribute to building more sustainable futures. This book emerges

from that shared commitment, aiming to map the possibilities, challenges, and transformative potential of integrating sustainability into ELT.

As the remainder of this chapter demonstrates, repositioning ELT for a sustainable future requires not only recognising these global shifts but also understanding their concrete pedagogical implications. Section 2 examines the wide-ranging benefits of integrating sustainability into English language education, highlighting how such work enhances linguistic proficiency, criticality, global citizenship, well-being, and learner agency. Section 3 then turns to the persistent challenges – curricular, discursive, institutional, and professional – that constrain meaningful implementation. By outlining both the promise and the complexity of sustainability-oriented ELT, this introductory chapter provides the conceptual foundation for the contributions overviewed in Section 4, each of which offers a distinct perspective on how the field can respond to the urgent demands of our time.

Benefits of Integrating Sustainability in English Language Education

The integration of sustainability issues into English language education represents a profound pedagogical shift, transforming the classroom into a space where linguistic mastery is inextricably linked to global awareness and responsible citizenship. This integration moves ELT programmes beyond their traditional focus on purely linguistic skills, recasting them as a dual-purpose pedagogy

capable of fostering both advanced language proficiency and essential sustainability competencies (Kumari, 2020; Usama & Tarai, 2024). Scholars such as de la Fuente (2023b) argue that sustainability provides the ideal 'critical content' for language courses, offering complex, real-world case studies that necessitate sophisticated linguistic and cognitive engagement. Furthermore, embedding the UN SDGs and ecocritical themes grounds language learning in a tangible and relevant context, significantly boosting intrinsic motivation and student engagement, which are key predictors of learning success (Kazazoglu, 2025; Usama & Tarai, 2024). This synergy of language acquisition and critical global content is best realised through action-oriented methodologies, such as PBLL and PBL, which engage students in authentic, collaborative, inquiry-based work that culminates in meaningful outcomes (de la Fuente, 2023b; Ferry, 2023).

Enhanced Linguistic and Academic Proficiency

A primary benefit of integrating sustainability content is the demonstrable improvement in core academic and linguistic skills. Studies have consistently shown that an ecolinguistically enriched curriculum – featuring sustainability-themed texts, critical discourse analysis, and environmental tasks – can significantly improve English language proficiency and overall academic gains (Usama & Tarai, 2024). For instance, an experimental study by Rafiee Moghadam et al. (2022) found that integrating sustainability education into reading instruction improved both reading comprehension and empathy among young

EFL learners. The complex, interdisciplinary nature of sustainability topics requires students to engage with new and unfamiliar ecological terminology (Kazazoglu, 2025), which, with explicit vocabulary support, expands their lexicon and technical language use.

Moreover, the problem-solving tasks inherent in sustainability work demand the production of advanced, high-level linguistic forms. de la Fuente (2023b) highlights that structuring complex sustainability case studies pushes students to use more sophisticated language – such as hypothetical clauses, counterarguments, and nuanced persuasive language – as they engage in role-based debates and real-world decision-making. These activities provide a purpose-driven context for practising academic language that is often lacking in traditional curricula. By providing content that is universally relevant and intellectually demanding, sustainability-infused ELT fosters a dynamic learning environment where students use language as a tool for critical analysis and advocacy, leading to deeper, more durable linguistic competence (Kumari, 2020; Mondal & Khalid, 2025).

Development of Critical and Cognitive Competencies

The complexity of global environmental and social challenges requires a shift from linear to systems thinking, which is a core cognitive benefit of integrating sustainability into language learning (Ferry, 2023; Sun, 2025). Rather than simply learning about isolated facts, students use sustainability issues as a lens for critical thinking,

connecting causes, effects, and solutions across disciplinary boundaries. This approach transforms students into active meaning-makers and critical interpreters of the information they consume (Römhild, 2023).

Furthermore, sustainability education is a powerful vehicle for developing various multiliteracies. Römhild (2023) proposes a comprehensive framework for using eco-documentaries in ELT, arguing that these films, as multimodal, factional texts, simultaneously support environmental learning and the development of critical media and discourse literacies. Students learn to balance emotional engagement with critical analysis, enabling them to deconstruct the narratives and rhetorical strategies used in sustainability discourse. Similarly, Mambu (2023) shows that embedding the SDGs into an undergraduate ELT course fostered multidimensional criticality – linguistic, cognitive, pedagogical, and philosophical – as students applied Marxist, poststructuralist, and decolonial lenses to global issues like poverty and environmental justice. The requirement for students to analyse real-world policy and propose solutions promotes superior problem-solving and real-world application of knowledge, preparing them for the complexities of adult life and global citizenship (Cordova, 2024; Davari et al., 2025).

Fostering Global Citizenship and Intercultural Competence

The global nature of sustainability issues makes their integration a natural pathway to Global Citizenship Education (GCE) and enhanced intercultural competence (Mondal &

Khalid, 2025; Römhild, 2023). By exploring climate change, social equity, or resource management, students are compelled to view these issues through cross-cultural lenses. Sun (2025), for example, demonstrates that integrating sustainability content alongside culturally embedded values significantly enhanced Chinese university students' intercultural competence when learning a foreign language. This approach moves beyond superficial cultural facts to foster a deeper understanding of how different cultures conceptualise and address shared global challenges.

The UN's SDGs provide a concrete, universally recognised framework for this process, allowing students to engage with topics such as poverty and gender inequality while simultaneously connecting these global issues to their own local contexts (Mambu, 2023). For instance, Xerri (2017) demonstrates how creativity-based ELT can meaningfully support SDG 4 (Quality Education) by engaging students with global and local inequities in education through imaginative, multimodal classroom activities. This glocal perspective strengthens social awareness and an understanding of global systems (Alcantud-Díaz & Lloret-Catalá, 2023; Xerri, 2025). Furthermore, Saiful and Shein (2025) found that ecocritical approaches to instruction, particularly those centred on ecosystem-spirituality, profoundly influence students' sense of connectedness to nature. By engaging with these diverse perspectives, learners develop the sophisticated communicative and mediation skills necessary to collaborate effectively across linguistic and cultural boundaries for a more just and sustainable world (Ferry, 2023).

Boosting Learner Affect, Motivation, and Well-Being

The emotional and psychological benefits of engaging with sustainability are increasingly recognised as a key pedagogical outcome, particularly in combating the rising prevalence of climate anxiety. Mondal and Khalid (2025) argue that Green ELT provides supportive spaces for reflection, hope, and action, actively helping to reduce this anxiety. By channelling feelings of fear or helplessness into constructive, solution-oriented projects, educators empower students and shift their perspective from passive consumers of news to active changemakers.

This action-oriented approach fuels intrinsic motivation, making the learning process more engaging and personal (Kazazoglu, 2025; Usama & Tarai, 2024). Students report feeling empowered to take initiative and apply their learning beyond the classroom, fostering personal accountability and a stronger sense of responsibility (Cordova, 2024; Davari et al., 2025). The learning also transcends academic boundaries to impact socio-emotional development. Rafiee Moghadam et al. (2022) demonstrate that sustainability-infused instruction leads to markedly higher empathy scores and pro-environmental behaviours. By promoting an ecocentric worldview, ELT can help students develop more caring attitudes and even move toward an ecocentric identity, strengthening their personal and collective well-being (Davari et al., 2025).

Empowering Agency and Action-Oriented Learning

Perhaps the most transformative benefit is the cultivation of learner agency, which is central to effective ESD. Integrating sustainability moves learning from passive reception of information to active, action-oriented learning (Cordova, 2024; Kumari, 2020). Methodologies like PBLL combine language development with real-world, inquiry-based sustainability work, resulting in tangible public products that give students a voice and a platform (Ferry, 2023). Whether through climate-action campaigns, local clean-up initiatives, or role-based debates on policy, students are given a framework to effect change.

This empowerment is vital: by structuring complex case studies and using PBL, teachers guide students through a process that culminates in real-world decision-making, where their opinions matter (de la Fuente, 2023b). In a Philippine teacher education laboratory school, students who experienced SDG-infused lessons reported feeling empowered to apply learning beyond the classroom and advocated for a whole-school approach to sustainability, illustrating how this content catalyses systemic thinking and personal initiative (Cordova, 2024). Sustainability integration in ELT is designed to make students solution-oriented global citizens (Mondal & Khalid, 2025), equipped not only with the language to describe the world's problems but with the tools to actively participate in solving them.

Benefits for Teacher Development and Pedagogy

Finally, the integration of sustainability provides significant benefits for educators themselves, impacting both pre-service training and in-service professional identity. Studies show that embedding the SDGs into inquiry-based EFL teacher training courses significantly increases pre-service teachers' awareness of global issues and their readiness to integrate sustainability into future lessons (Alcantud-Díaz & Lloret-Catalá, 2023). By linking linguistic objectives with real-world concerns, novice teachers begin to see English not merely as a subject but as a tool for social change and interdisciplinary teaching.

For practising teachers, using environmental communication pedagogy makes language learning more tangible and relevant, which in turn strengthens their students' engagement and sense of responsibility (Davari et al., 2025). Teachers themselves report developing more ecocentric identities through this work, despite a lack of formal training, suggesting that the content is so impactful it can reshape the educator's professional self-concept. The process of integrating sustainability fosters a sense of personal accountability among teachers and empowers them to lead contextualised, interdisciplinary lessons, thereby enhancing pedagogical innovation within the field (Cordova, 2024; Davari et al., 2025). This mutual benefit underscores the holistic nature of sustainability integration, which simultaneously enriches the student experience, advances academic goals, and revitalises teaching practice.

Challenges of Integrating Sustainability Issues into Language Education

Despite the clear pedagogical benefits and the growing global mandate to integrate ESD into all disciplines, the field of ELT faces significant and persistent challenges in its practical implementation. These obstacles stem from systemic issues, curricular shortcomings, discursive limitations, and a critical gap in teacher preparedness, all of which constrain ELT's potential to contribute meaningfully to the SDGs. The current state of practice, as revealed by extensive research, is often characterised by well-meaning grassroots efforts from highly motivated teachers that frequently run up against institutional inertia and a lack of coherent policy (Mercer et al., 2023).

Curricular and Materials-Based Obstacles

A major category of challenge lies within the very materials and curricular design used in ELT globally. A pervasive issue identified by researchers is that, even when environmental issues are included, they often promote only shallow environmentalism and fail to cultivate genuine critical ecological literacy. For instance, an analysis of Brazilian EFL textbooks revealed that environmental texts – often repurposed photos, posters, and commercial articles – overwhelmingly originate from aesthetic or commercial spheres and offer minimal affordances for critical engagement or action (Cristovão et al., 2022). While these materials may raise basic eco-awareness, they leave students unprepared to interrogate the structural and root causes of environmental crises, thus limiting the development of

transformative sustainability-oriented behaviours (Cristovão et al., 2022).

This problem of superficiality is often compounded by a narrow framing of the issues. Studies of Indonesian textbooks, for example, show a heavy reliance on eco-lexicons connected almost exclusively to waste management (Pratolo et al., 2024). While essential, this narrow focus can exclude crucial social, economic, and political dimensions of sustainability, such as climate justice, poverty, or resource exploitation, leading to an incomplete and limited understanding of ESD (Arslan & Curle, 2024). This limitation also creates a risk of demotivation among students if the content is perceived as overly negative, repetitive, or solely focused on overwhelming global problems, necessitating a balance of content that includes local relevance and hopeful solutions (Davari et al., 2025).

Perhaps more insidious than outright omission is the hidden curriculum embedded in teaching materials, which often acts to normalise and valorise unsustainable practices (Brown, 2024). For instance, content analysis of teacher-produced materials in Japan found a frequent and routine valorisation of consumerism, mass tourism, urban lifestyle preferences, and meat-heavy food choices (Brown, 2024). These behaviours are typically presented as unmarked, everyday practices, implicitly teaching students to view them as normal and desirable, thereby undercutting explicit lessons on sustainability (Brown, 2024). That is why sustainability-oriented materials that encourage teachers and learners to question such behaviours and engage in greener practices are essential (e.g., Barber et al., 2022; Graham, 2022).

Practical challenges in curriculum design also exist. Scholars repeatedly identify issues such as the misalignment between sustainability content and explicit language objectives (CT & N, 2025; Yu et al., 2024). Teachers struggle to reconcile the demands of a standardised language curriculum with the interdisciplinary depth required by ESD. Compounding this, the reliance on centrally produced textbooks can often marginalise minority and tribal learners by privileging mainstream cultural content, thereby undermining the social and cultural dimensions of sustainability (Toppo & Rahman, 2021). This implies that to support cultural continuity and equity, teachers must be empowered to develop supplementary, locally grounded materials that reflect learners' diverse identities and lived realities (Toppo & Rahman, 2021). The underdeveloped status of sustainability within adjacent pedagogies, such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), further exemplifies the gap in quality, structured materials (Penny & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2024). Hence, teachers require structured guidance related to materials development so as to integrate sustainability effectively while simultaneously supporting language development and learner agency.

Discursive Limitations and Criticality Deficits

A deeper, more critical challenge stems from the ideological framing and discourse present in many ELT materials, which often reflect and reinforce dominant, non-transformative ideologies. Research consistently shows that environmental narratives in ELT texts rely heavily on a neoliberal framing that disproportionately emphasises

individual responsibility for systemic problems (Lee & Nguyen, 2024; Pratolo et al., 2024). Pratolo et al. (2024) found that Indonesian ELT textbooks repeatedly frame environmental problems as matters of individual choice, using evaluative adjectives and modal verbs of suggestion while employing passive grammatical constructions that effectively obscure corporate, political, and structural dimensions of environmental degradation. Similarly, in Vietnamese ELT textbooks, discourse often anonymises major polluters – such as large factories or government actors – while placing undue blame on vulnerable or less powerful actors, such as farmers, tourists, or truck drivers (Lee & Nguyen, 2024).

This rhetorical strategy, rooted in anthropocentric ideologies, presents superficial solutions like technological fixes, eco-tourism, or individual lifestyle changes as sufficient (Lee & Nguyen, 2024). By limiting the discourse, the materials restrict students' ability to develop the necessary critical ecological literacy that would enable them to question the root causes, power structures, and systemic inequities driving environmental crises (Pratolo et al., 2024). Mambu (2023) highlights that achieving genuine criticality requires actively encouraging students to engage with texts through ideological lenses, an approach rarely supported by mainstream published materials.

Teacher Preparedness and Professional Development Gaps

Even where materials or curricular mandates exist, the implementation of sustainability in ELT is profoundly

hampered by inadequate teacher training and a lack of systemic support. A primary finding across multiple studies is that while teachers are highly motivated – often driven by ethical concerns – to address environmental issues, the majority lack the necessary formal training and suitable resources to do so effectively (Mercer et al., 2023; Nurhaliza et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2024). Teachers frequently express a strong willingness to teach climate change and see English lessons as an ideal space for fostering environmental literacy, yet they must rely heavily on improvisation (Nurhaliza et al., 2024). This reliance on grassroots improvisation, while demonstrating teacher commitment, is inherently unsustainable and leads to uneven integration across the system.

The lack of formal training results in teachers having limited confidence when addressing complex, interdisciplinary environmental content, making them less likely to move beyond basic vocabulary and discussion (Kazazoglu, 2025; Mercer et al., 2023). Arslan and Curle (2024) found that Turkish EFL teachers, despite conceptualising ESD as multidimensional and an important part of lifelong learning, felt it was insufficiently embedded in the national curriculum, constraining them to narrow environmental topics and superficial coverage. To fully leverage the potential of ELT, a call is consistently made for comprehensive teacher training to effectively embed sustainability into curricula (Kazazoglu, 2025).

The consensus among researchers is a pressing need for systemic support, professional development, and the development of coherent frameworks to guide practice (CT

& N, 2025; Mercer et al., 2023). For example, Maijala et al. (2024) propose the Transformative Language Teaching for Sustainability model precisely to address this gap, aiming to help teachers systematically integrate action-oriented ESD principles. Without such models and the corresponding training, teachers struggle with a lack of guidance and institutional backing, which is consistently identified as a major barrier (Mercer et al., 2023).

Systemic and Institutional Constraints

Finally, the integration of sustainability is challenged by deep-seated institutional and systemic issues that operate at the policy and administrative level. Two critical systemic barriers are disciplinary silos and the pressure of assessment (CT & N, 2025; Yu et al., 2024). Sustainability is an inherently interdisciplinary topic, yet educational systems often retain rigid subject boundaries that make cross-disciplinary collaboration difficult. While scholars advocate for interdisciplinary curriculum design (de la Fuente, 2023b; Yu et al., 2024), the reality in many institutions is constrained by existing structures and a lack of mechanisms for collaboration. Furthermore, the pressure of standardised linguistic assessment often dictates classroom focus, leading teachers to prioritise content directly tied to high-stakes exams over the time-consuming, open-ended nature of sustainability-focused projects (CT & N, 2025).

Practical constraints such as limited class hours and general time constraints are frequently cited by teachers as significant obstacles to implementing hands-on, action-oriented activities necessary for ESD (Arslan & Curle, 2024;

Mercer et al., 2023). Beyond the classroom, institutional commitment itself can be inconsistent. For example, Kapranov (2022) found that the representation of sustainability on an institution's ELT-specific webpages often only partially aligned with its broader institutional sustainability goals. This suggests that the interpretation and implementation of ESD are often shaped by disciplinary priorities rather than a unified, top-down institutional policy, resulting in fragmented and diluted efforts. Consequently, there is a strong call for stronger policy frameworks and systemic support to fully leverage ELT's potential, moving it from a collection of isolated, motivated efforts into a coherent, institutionalised practice (Arslan & Curle, 2024; CT & N, 2025).

Overview of the Book

This collection of chapters brings together an international group of scholars and practitioners whose work demonstrates how ELT can meaningfully advance sustainability, equity, and global citizenship across educational contexts.

In Chapter 2, Patricia Bergström and Harry Waters explore how ELT can serve as a vehicle for cultivating sustainability mindsets and empowering students as changemakers. By integrating ESD with Self-Determination Theory, the authors demonstrate how fostering intrinsic motivation enhances both language acquisition and ecological literacy. Central to this chapter is the LEARN Framework – Listen, Encourage, Amplify, Respect, Nurture – introduced as a practical approach to embedding student-led sustainability projects into curricula. Through real-world

examples like the Plastic Clever Schools initiative and the 'Pen Hospital,' the chapter illustrates how educators can scaffold solution-oriented activities that build student agency. It concludes with actionable guidance for teachers, institutions, and policymakers, reimagining the ELT classroom as a launchpad for critical thinking, global citizenship, and meaningful climate action.

Building on this call for holistic transformation, Zarina Subhan argues that ELT must move beyond superficial environmental topics to address the inequities between the Global North and South. The chapter advocates for a holistic approach centred on three pillars: Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes. Subhan draws parallels between the circular economy and language acquisition, urging educators to foster global citizenship and intercultural competence rather than static cultural knowledge. The chapter highlights the importance of collaborative skills in developing empathy and noticing skills essential for cross-cultural dialogue. Furthermore, Subhan challenges the industry's avoidance of 'political' topics (PARSNIP), arguing that engaging with complex issues like climate justice promotes transcendent thinking and cognitive development. The chapter calls for sustainability to be woven into the very fabric of ELT curricula to empower future leaders.

Extending this critical engagement with global systems, Vicky Saumell and Marcela Villan in Chapter 4 examine the complex role of Generative AI (GenAI) in education, weighing its transformative potential against its substantial environmental footprint. The authors detail the often-overlooked ecological costs of GenAI, including the

massive energy consumption, carbon emissions, and water usage required to train large language models and cool servers. To reconcile these conflicts, the chapter outlines practical strategies for the ELT classroom, such as teaching prompt engineering to reduce digital waste and integrating projects that measure digital carbon footprints. By aligning these efforts with SDG 4 (Quality Education), the chapter advocates for a balanced approach where educators empower students to use technology ethically. It calls for a shift toward eco-friendly AI practices that support both pedagogical innovation and planetary well-being.

Turning from technology to teacher preparation, Christopher Graham examines the critical need to integrate sustainable thinking and practices into ELT initial teacher training (ITT). Drawing on survey data, Graham reveals a significant gap: the majority of current ELT ITT programmes offer minimal or no specific sustainability content, despite the global mandate for education to tackle environmental challenges. Where sustainability is included, it often remains peripheral, focusing narrowly on coursebook adaptation rather than systemic institutional change or climate action. The chapter asserts that practically engaging with sustainability themes can profoundly enhance student teachers' motivation, confidence, and language development. Graham identifies key barriers, including time constraints, lack of institutional support, and limited expertise among trainers. The chapter concludes with crucial recommendations for policymakers and curriculum designers, advocating for the systematic embedding of sustainability across ELT ITT to prepare a new generation of environmentally conscious educators.

Shifting from teacher training to learner identity and equity, Josianne Block and Armanda Stroia explore the vital role of stereotype literacy in fostering social sustainability and equity within English language classrooms. Focusing on SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), the authors present stereotype literacy as a critical skill that empowers learners to recognise, analyse, and actively challenge stereotypes that perpetuate social injustice. The chapter introduces a three-stage pedagogical approach – Understanding, Deconstructing, and Critically Producing alternative narratives – to systematically build this skill. Through practical, classroom-tested activities, Block and Stroia demonstrate how educators can create more equitable and inclusive learning environments. This approach goes beyond simple recognition to actively encourage students to "restory the self" by challenging oppressive narratives, thus fostering a mindset open to diversity and safeguarding the needs of future generations.

Connecting equity with learner engagement, Anca de Vries in Chapter 7 examines the power of play and intrinsic motivation in engaging English language learners with the critical topic of sustainability. The chapter is grounded in the principle that play is a fundamental right, linking a lack of it to potential mental health issues, and asserting that it is a key driver of intrinsic motivation, which, in turn, boosts the quality of learning and work. de Vries connects established research on motivation to practical teaching strategies, offering ways for educators to make climate and sustainability discussions more engaging and less overwhelming. By introducing game didactics and providing specific activity examples, the chapter demonstrates

how ELT professionals can integrate elements of play to foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This approach not only enhances language acquisition but also transforms emotionally challenging subjects like the climate crisis into opportunities for positive and empowering student engagement.

Expanding the conversation to global teacher development, Abel Eleojo Ochika and Linda Ruas address the critical challenge of providing sustainable teacher development for ELT professionals in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The authors highlight the current unsustainable model, characterised by reliance on external experts, costly face-to-face training, and a lack of local professional autonomy. To create an equitable and scalable system, the chapter advocates for a shift toward decentring and cascading training. Key strategies include empowering local teachers to lead sessions, utilising diverse online training modalities to reduce travel and cost, and fostering strong Communities of Practice (CoPs) via digital platforms like Telegram and WhatsApp. Drawing on successful initiatives by the British Council and Africa ELTA, Ochika and Ruas demonstrate how a mentorship-based, localised approach can ensure quality training reaches those in need, thus addressing the severe inequities in access to professional growth (aligned with SDG 4: Quality Education).

From teacher development, the book turns to classroom practice, as Marissa A. Foti explores innovative ways to integrate the SDGs into the ELT curriculum using speech analysis as a core methodology. Drawing on the UN's definition of sustainability, Foti champions speech analysis

as a dynamic tool that connects language learning with critical global issues. The chapter offers practical, adaptable approaches, both teacher-guided and student-led, for weaving SDG themes into English language lessons. Examples include analysing impactful speeches, such as Greta Thunberg's address to the UN, to simultaneously teach rhetorical devices and foster critical awareness of climate action. By blending linguistic theory with real-world practice, the chapter demonstrates how educators can contextualise global challenges, fostering learners' critical thinking, effective communication, and deeper engagement with global issues. The ultimate goal is to equip students to be thoughtful global citizens who can contribute to a sustainable future beyond the classroom.

Chapter 10 deepens the focus on the personal and emotional dimensions of sustainability, as George Kokolas explores the concept of sustainable well-being by integrating principles from Positive Education into school curricula. The chapter argues that empowering students to develop their character strengths is essential for shaping environmentally conscious attitudes and behaviours, linking personal happiness with collective responsibility for the planet. Using the widely recognised Character Strengths classification developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004) as a core framework, Kokolas discusses practical strategies for implementing Positive Education interventions in ELT and broader educational settings. This approach aims to foster a mindset where individual flourishment naturally aligns with environmental and social consciousness. The chapter illuminates pathways for cultivating a more equitable and sustainable future by equipping students

with the psychological tools necessary to address global challenges and thrive as responsible citizens.

Continuing the theme of inclusion and social sustainability, Savannah Davis and Kirsten Borg Cardona explore the vital, yet often overlooked, intersection of sexuality, equity, and sustainability within ELT. Aligned with SDG 10.2 (Reduced Inequalities), the authors critically analyse how heteronormative biases in ELT materials marginalise diverse sexual identities. The chapter argues that the omission or misrepresentation of LGBTQ+ experiences reinforces social inequalities, undermining the goal of creating inclusive communities. Davis and Borg Cardona provide practical, evidence-based strategies for teachers to adapt and queer existing coursebooks, integrate inclusive content, and cultivate a classroom environment that celebrates all learners. By addressing sexuality explicitly, educators can significantly contribute to students' critical awareness of social diversity, promoting acceptance, dignity, and a sustainable future where no one is left behind.

From social inclusion, the book turns to ecological and spiritual perspectives, as Carol Samlal in Chapter 12 champions the integration of Indigenous wisdom and reciprocity into English language lessons to foster a deeper, more spiritual connection with nature, specifically focusing on water conservation. The chapter argues that water should be treated as a sacred gift and not a commodity, a view shared by Indigenous cultures globally. Samlal advocates for adopting and adapting Native American teachings about 'water-bearers' or 'keepers of the water,' which traditionally link the life-giving role of women and girls to

the sustenance of the community. Practical ELT activities, such as using storytelling and the Water Song, are proposed to raise awareness of threats to water and encourage conservation. By giving greater presence to women's voices, supported by the wider community, the chapter shows how ELT can teach sustainability through kindness, leading students and teachers to embrace the spiritual connection with this vital resource.

The book concludes by returning to the challenges of contemporary education, as Rrita Suli addresses the critical issue of digital wellness in the ELT classroom, driven by the increasing integration of technology. Aligned with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), the chapter investigates how the demands of contemporary, digitally integrated education can affect students' mental, social, and emotional health. Suli highlights that while digital tools are necessary for developing digital literacy, their irresponsible or excessive use can negatively impact overall well-being, particularly by reducing social interaction and immediate interpersonal support. The chapter explores key factors that shape student well-being in digital environments and advances the understanding of digital wellness within ELT contexts. Suli provides thoughtful guidance and recommendations for educators on cultivating healthy digital habits and creating learning opportunities that foster well-being alongside effective language learning outcomes.

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Nurturing Sustainability and Student Voice in ELT

Patricia Bergström
Harry Waters

Abstract

This chapter explores how English Language Teaching (ELT) can serve as a powerful vehicle for cultivating sustainability mindsets and empowering students as changemakers. By integrating Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) into language education, teachers can foster critical thinking, global citizenship, and real-world problem-solving. The chapter introduces the LEARN Framework (Listen, Encourage, Amplify, Respect, Nurture), a practical, student-centred approach to embedding sustainability in ELT contexts. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory, the chapter shows how intrinsic motivation and student agency can be enhanced through methodologies such as Project-Based, Inquiry-Based, and Problem-Based Learning. Through practical examples like the Plastic Clever Schools initiative and the Pen Hospital project in India, the chapter illustrates how educators can

scaffold student-led, solution-oriented projects that build both language skills and ecological literacy. It also provides guidance for institutions and policymakers seeking to embed sustainability more deeply into curricula, teacher training, and school culture. The chapter ultimately reimagines the ELT classroom as a launchpad for student agency and climate action.

Keywords: Sustainability; Changemakers; Student Agency; Education for Sustainable Development

Introduction

Sustainability has become a critical focus for education systems worldwide, driven by the increasing urgency of the climate and nature crises. English Language Teaching (ELT) offers a unique platform for integrating sustainability into learning, where language acquisition becomes a vehicle for fostering awareness, critical thinking, and action. By empowering students as changemakers, ELT can prepare learners not only to engage with the world in English but also to address some of its most pressing challenges.

This chapter explores how ELT educators can help students grow from individual power to meaningful collective responsibility that promotes systemic change, so as to step away from the mantra Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. Anchored in ideas around the UN's (2015) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it provides a practical framework for embedding sustainability into language teaching while simultaneously enhancing students' linguistic and critical thinking skills.

Central to this discussion is the LEARN Framework (Listen, Encourage, Amplify, Respect, Nurture), which serves as a guiding principle for educators seeking to connect sustainability themes with student engagement. This framework emphasises listening to students' passions, encouraging them to explore solutions, amplifying their voices, respecting diverse perspectives, and nurturing their sense of agency. In addition to this, there are various other existing frameworks that can be utilised to help aid learning and empowerment in the classroom.

Apart from the theoretical underpinnings, this chapter presents real-world examples and case studies from primary and secondary ELT classrooms, showcasing collaborative, student-led projects that engage learners in real environmental challenges. These activities not only build linguistic competencies but also cultivate the confidence and motivation necessary for students to see themselves as active participants in creating a more equitable and sustainable world.

By the chapter's conclusion, educators will be equipped with actionable recommendations to foster meaningful connections between sustainability and language learning. In doing so, they can inspire the next generation to think critically, act responsibly, and contribute to shaping a better future.

Background

Motivation is paramount in all learning situations. We see this time and again in the classroom when students manage to go above and beyond for a specific reason. For

teens, quite often this motivation is extrinsic rather than intrinsic, as the motivating force tends to be achieving acceptable grades, accessing university, or avoid being left without their mobile phone. Intrinsic motivation, however, provides a more powerful drive as it comes from within. Would it not be wonderful if we could engage our teens in this type of motivation rather than just using learning as a means to an end?

There is a psychological framework focused on understanding human motivation that could help with this. Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (2017), identifies three basic psychological needs as essential for fostering intrinsic motivation, personal growth, and well-being. These are:

1. autonomy (control over one's actions);
2. competence (mastery of skills);
3. relatedness (connection with others).

These needs are innate and they are paramount for intrinsic motivation, as well as for internalised forms of extrinsic motivation.

In education, SDT emphasises the importance of intrinsic motivation over external rewards, like grades. When students feel autonomous, competent, and connected to peers, teachers, or the task at hand, they become more engaged, curious, and self-directed learners. Teachers can foster this by creating autonomy-supportive environments, encouraging mastery, and building meaningful relationships with students.

So, where does Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) come into the equation? ESD aims to empower learners to make informed decisions and take responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability, and social equity. SDT aligns with ESD in the following ways:

- Autonomy: Students are encouraged to take ownership of sustainable practices.

- Competence: Skills are enhanced to address complex sustainability challenges.

- Relatedness: Collaboration is fostered parallel to a sense of global responsibility.

By integrating SDT principles, ESD programmes can create motivated learners who are not only knowledgeable but also committed to sustainable actions. Empowering students to adopt sustainable mindsets begins with building their confidence and encouraging them to find their voice. When learners feel supported, they are more willing to take risks, engage deeply, and ultimately become change-makers. Three recommended and effective methods for this are: Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL), and Problem-Based Learning (PBL). They all create opportunities for meaningful, student-led exploration and integrate well into other approaches, such as Cooperative Learning, which further empowers students to take responsibility for their own learning.

All three methodologies encourage students to tackle real-world problems through collaborative projects, fostering a sense of ownership and agency. For example,

designing solutions to reduce food waste at school or creating campaigns to promote water conservation allow students to see the tangible impact of their work. Studies show that PjBL not only improves academic outcomes but also builds self-efficacy as students witness their ability to effect change (Bell, 2010). Similarly, IBL invites students to ask questions, investigate, and draw conclusions, cultivating curiosity and critical thinking, while PBL focuses specifically on engaging students with real-world problems in authentic, collaborative contexts starting with a challenge (Yew & Goh, 2016). Like IBL, PBL encourages learners to ask their own questions and draw conclusions through investigation. Common to all three methodologies is that they can align closely with ESD, incorporating systems thinking, creativity, and innovation.

Developed by Heidi Pan and Harry Waters, the LEARN Framework offers a practical guide to help educators scaffold these approaches (Waters, 2024b):

- **Listen:** Encourage students to articulate their interests, particularly those connected to sustainability, to ensure lessons are personally meaningful. Pay close attention to their answers.

- **Encourage:** Celebrate small successes and progress to build confidence, especially during early project stages. Students might fail the first few times, but they need to know how to keep going.

- **Amplify:** Showcase student voices through presentations, exhibitions, or online platforms, reinforcing their impact. Share their work far and wide.

- **Respect:** Create a safe, inclusive environment where all ideas are valued, fostering trust and collaboration.

- **Nurture:** Support students in exploring their passions, helping them connect these interests to actionable sustainability goals.

Teachers play a vital role in guiding students to recognise their strengths and passions, turning these into the foundation for impactful sustainability projects. By creating a supportive environment and scaffolding tasks, educators can empower students to see themselves not just as learners, but as active participants in shaping a more equitable and sustainable world.

Applying the LEARN Framework: Plastic Clever Schools in an ELT Classroom

By adapting the Plastic Clever Schools (2025) initiative from the youth-led charity Kids Against Plastic (2024), we can help provide an excellent opportunity for students to explore sustainability through language-rich activities. The LEARN Framework can guide teachers in turning this initiative into a dynamic, student-led project while still meeting linguistic objectives.

L: Listen

Objective: Discover students' interests and prior knowledge about plastic pollution.

Language Activity Example:

a. **Brainstorming Vocabulary Webs:** In groups, students create mind maps using keywords like *plastic,*

pollution, *recycling*, and *sustainability*. They then share their ideas using target phrases such as:

- *I think plastic pollution is harmful because…*
- *In my opinion, we should…*

b. Discussion Questions: Use sentence stems like:

- *What do you know about plastic pollution?*
- *Which areas of school are most affected by single-use plastic?*
- *How does it affect animals, people, and the planet?*
- *What do you want to know about plastic?*

Students practise expressing opinions while the teacher takes notes on their interests.

E: Encourage

Objective: Support students in early successes to build their confidence.

Language Activity Example:

a. Poster-Making with Language Support: Students create posters to raise awareness about reducing single-use plastics. Provide sentence starters like:

- *Plastic is a problem because…*
- *You can help by…*
- *Let's stop using… and start using…*

b. Role-Playing: Pair students to practise persuasive dialogues. One student acts as a concerned citizen, while the other as someone resistant to change.

- *Example language:*
  - *Have you thought about using a reusable bottle instead?*
  - *I understand, but plastic bags create a lot of waste.*

A: Amplify

Objective: Give students opportunities to share their ideas with a broader audience.

Language Activity Example:

a. **Presentations:** Students deliver a short presentation about their Plastic Clever campaign to the class or other school groups. Provide a framework for organising their ideas:

- **Introduction:** *Did you know…?* (Start with an interesting fact.)
- **Main Points:** *First, we need to…*
- **Conclusion:** *Together, we can make a difference by…*

b. **Video Creation:** Students record and edit short videos for social media, using scripts to ensure accuracy. Encourage them to include phrases like:

- *Join us in making our school plastic clever!*
- *Together, we ca*n reduce plastic waste.

R: Respect

Objective: Foster an inclusive and respectful environment for collaboration.

Language Activity Example:

a. **Debates:** Organise a debate on topics such as banning certain plastics in school. Provide useful phrases for respectful disagreement:

- *I see your point, but…*
- *Have you considered…?*
- *I agree with you to some extent, however…*

b. **Cultural Comparisons:** Students research how different countries tackle plastic pollution and present their findings. Language focus: comparative structures (*In Spain, they… but in Japan…*).

N: Nurture

Objective: Help students connect their passions to sustainability and take ownership of their learning. Encourage them to continue with the work beyond the school.

Language Activity Example:

a. **Reflection Journal:** Students write weekly journal entries about their progress, answering prompts like:

- *What have I learned about plastic pollution this week?*
- *What can I do to help reduce plastic waste at home or in school?*

b. **Sustainability Plans:** In pairs or small groups, students design their own 'Plastic Clever Plan' for the school. Use functional language to guide them:

- *Our goal is to…*
- *We will achieve this by…*
- *This will help because…*

Scenario: Plastic Clever Schools in an ELT Classroom

Context: A secondary school English class is launching a Plastic Clever Schools campaign as part of their curriculum.

a. **Listening:** The teacher kicks off the project by asking students what they know about plastic pollution, using vocabulary-building and discussion activities. Students then discuss the main areas of concern for plastic pollution in the school and how to tackle those problem areas. Students discuss the impact of plastic production and pollution both at school and beyond.

b. **Encouraging:** Students create posters and practise dialogues to promote plastic reduction efforts in school, with scaffolded language support.

c. **Amplifying:** They organise a school-wide presentation and share their campaign on the school's social media.

d. **Respecting:** The class engages in debates and research projects, comparing international approaches to plastic waste. All ideas should be listened to throughout the campaign.

e. **Nurturing:** Students take ownership of the campaign, designing personalised plans for their school and writing reflective journals to document their learning journey.

Implications for Practice

For Teachers

More recent SDT-based work in education recognises that every student is different. Students enter the classroom with diverse backgrounds, goals and personality characteristics. A truly motivating style essentially refers to a curious, receptive, flexible, warm and open attitude, which allows teachers to gain deeper insights into their learners' individual differences, providing opportunities for teachers to tailor their motivating strategies to their students' individual skill sets, interests, values, and preferences. This needs-supportive attitude then pervades everything teachers say or do with their learners.

An efficient way to then foster sustainable mindsets in the ELT classroom could be to take the LEARN Framework as a practical guide and apply SDT to each strand (see Figure 1), while incorporating sustainability models such as the Solutionary Framework (Institute for Humane Education [IHE], 2025), the Sustainability Compass (Compass Education, 2022), the Systems Iceberg (Evbuoma et al., 2021), or the UN's (n.d.) SDGs as the starting point, roadmap, and prompt for deeper thinking. When all these aspects are fused together, we have a workable framework for the classroom that teachers could apply either for a standalone project, or to integrate into their existing lesson plan.

Figure 1:

Applying Self-Determination Theory to the LEARN Framework

Models that foster sustainability and increase autonomy, competence and relatedness
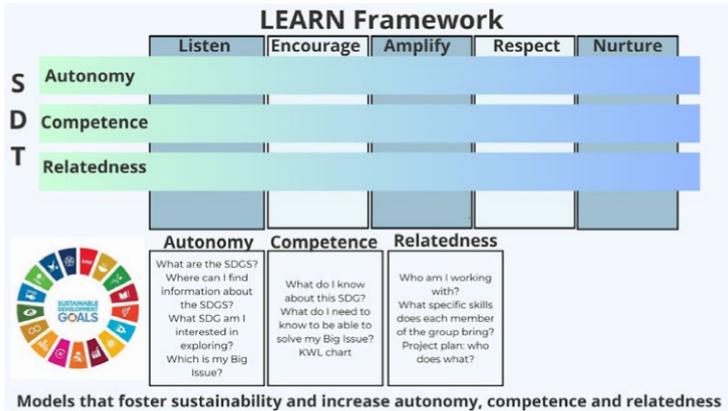
If we break down the framework and focus on each strand separately, we can also see how different learning methodologies and approaches, such as the aforementioned PjBL, IBL, PBL and Cooperative Learning, can be used while fostering intrinsic motivation through SDT and education for sustainability as the focus of the project through models such as the UN's SDGs, the Solutionary Framework, the Systems Iceberg, and the Sustainability Compass.

LEARNing from Ritik's Pen Hospital: A Framework for Language, Sustainability, and Student Agency

Ritik, a teacher at SNS GSSS Mehuwala in India, decided to take part in the Kids Against Plastic, Plastic Clever Schools initiative. When doing their plastic audit students noticed how many pens were being thrown away each week. Instead of ignoring the problem, they turned it into an opportunity. His students launched a Pen Hospital, where they repair, refill, and reuse old pens rather than discard

them. The initiative is part of the student-formed group 'Saturdays for Solutions' programme, where students take action on real environmental issues. This work offers a rich example of how teachers can use the LEARN framework to foster both language development and global citizenship, while helping students develop autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Listen

- **Autonomy**: Ritik allowed his students to identify a local issue that felt relevant and achievable.

- **Competence**: By reflecting on their environment, students developed the ability to spot problems and suggest workable solutions. These are essential skills, both academically and in life.

- **Relatedness**: The project was rooted in shared classroom experience, making it immediately relatable and engaging.

- **Language Skills**: Students expanded topic-specific vocabulary and practised expressing opinions, asking questions, and describing issues clearly and confidently.

Encourage

- **Autonomy**: Students led the setup of the Pen Hospital, from planning collection points to designing procedures.

- **Competence**: They improved their ability to troubleshoot, communicate and adapt. When a repair did not work, they tried another method.

- **Relatedness**: Encouragement came from both the teacher and peers, creating a positive team atmosphere.

- **Language Skills**: Students used English in posters, dialogues, and presentations. Activities included practising persuasion, giving instructions, and responding to problems.

Amplify

Autonomy: Students took charge of how they presented the Pen Hospital to the wider school.

Competence: Speaking in front of an audience or writing for the school blog helped them grow in confidence and clarity.

Relatedness: Their work gained recognition from peers and adults alike, reinforcing their place in the school community.

Language Skills: Amplification gave them a real purpose for using English. Public speaking, writing captions, and scripting announcements helped develop fluency, structure, and vocabulary range.

Respect

- **Autonomy**: Students had the freedom to take on different roles according to their strengths and interests.

- **Competence**: They learned how to listen, negotiate, and compromise during group discussions and decisions.

- **Relatedness**: Respect formed the foundation of the group's success. All ideas were considered, and no one was left out.

- **Language Skills**: Students practised turn-taking, active listening, polite disagreement, and collaborative planning – all useful for real-world communication.

Nurture

- **Autonomy**: Students selected areas of the project to lead, whether it was data collection, art and design, or logistics.

- **Competence**: Each student developed new skills and deepened existing ones, from technical problem-solving to persuasive communication.

- **Relatedness**: Working toward a shared goal created a strong sense of belonging and mutual respect.

- **Language Skills**: Students reflected on their progress through journals or class discussions. These reflections supported personal expression, goal-setting, and the use of meaningful, contextualised language.

Ritik's group's Pen Hospital is more than an environmental project. It shows how a teacher can guide students to solve real problems while developing their English and key life skills. The LEARN framework helps make this kind of work intentional, empowering, and transformative.

Take this other wonderful hands-on project that a very committed educator in Cameroon devised to engage her young students to learn English vocabulary by showing them how to plant seeds and take care of them until they

germinated. Veronica integrated a focus on SDG 15 (Life on Land) into the language activity, and then, in the reflection that followed on the economic and environmental importance of planting seeds, she also managed to have these young learners focus on SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 13 (Climate Action). It became a lovely project that the students obviously really enjoyed.

If we apply the LEARN–SDT framework, it would basically cover the E, A, R, N which is already great. With the L(isten) at the beginning, it could become even more empowering and transformative as students get more agency through expressing their own concerns and interests, which could then further deepen the N(urture). Projects, like the one Veronica carried out, could also prove to be important stepping stones for students to start thinking about sustainability, as this might not come naturally in our society. Later projects could then take the full framework into account to help empower students further.

For Institutions

Embedding sustainability into English language education is not solely the responsibility of individual teachers. Institutions play a vital role in creating the conditions for meaningful and lasting change. This requires moving beyond isolated initiatives and incorporating sustainability into school culture, strategic planning, and professional development pathways. To support changemaking in the classroom, institutions need to explicitly recognise sustainability as a core educational value. This can begin with the inclusion of ESD and Global Citizenship Education in

Strategic Development Plans and curriculum frameworks, aligning school-wide goals with global imperatives such as the UN's SDGs. Leadership teams must prioritise sustainability as an integrated educational outcome, and not just an extracurricular theme.

One effective way to operationalise this vision is through initiatives such as Plastic Clever Schools, which offer a structured and student-led model for embedding sustainability into daily school life. In the ELT classroom, such initiatives become not only environmental campaigns but also language-rich, skills-based learning opportunities. When institutions back these campaigns with time, space, visibility, and integration into broader school policy, they become transformative. Through projects like this, students simultaneously develop agency, leadership, and language.

Moreover, institutions should commit to continuing professional development for teachers in the area of sustainability education. Initiatives like the Global Schools Program (Sustainable Development Solutions Network [SDSN], n.d.), workshops on ecoliteracy and systems thinking, and frameworks such as the Sustainability Compass, the Systems Iceberg, or the Solutionary Framework, can equip staff with the skills and tools to integrate sustainability meaningfully, without taking time away from the ELT focus.

Investment in resources and infrastructure is equally important – from sustainable school procurement to support for PjBL. Institutions can build partnerships with local NGOs, businesses, or global education platforms like Eco-Schools (Foundation for Environmental Education, 2023),

Ages for Globalisation (n.d.), or eTwinning, offering students authentic opportunities to apply English and sustainability knowledge in real-world contexts.

Ultimately, when sustainability becomes embedded in the institutional DNA, reflected in values, policies, and practices, ELT classrooms are no longer isolated spaces for language learning. They become hubs of global citizenship, innovation, and collective action.

For Policymakers

ESD cannot rest solely on the shoulders of educators. Much like we cannot place the plight of the future of humanity on younger generations. It requires structural support through national and international policy frameworks. Policymakers play a crucial role in embedding sustainability within education systems, ensuring it becomes a core part of language curricula, rather than an occasional classroom theme.

A key step is integrating sustainability into teacher training programmes and curriculum design. Governments and educational bodies should develop clear sustainability education guidelines deeply embedded in national curricula in subjects other than Global Citizenship or Environmental Studies, where there is already a more direct focus, and make sure it is also integrated in the curricula of content subjects such as English, MFL, Sciences and Humanities. ICT can further ensure that students gain language skills while engaging with real-world global challenges, reducing costs as classrooms can open up to networking without moving beyond their geographical borders.

Many educators want to bring sustainability into their classrooms but lack time, resources, or institutional backing. Increased funding for sustainability-focused materials, professional development, and extracurricular initiatives can bridge this gap. Financial support is important but not essential. While the allocation of grants for teacher-led projects, school-wide sustainability initiatives, and cross-cultural exchange programmes that embed environmental awareness into ELT would be transformational, there are also a great number of easy to access programmes available to teachers and students alike, to help develop their awareness of sustainability and how to include ESD into their daily lives. Projects like Erasmus+ can fund international collaborations where educators use English to discuss and address sustainability issues with peers across borders, reinforcing both language acquisition and global citizenship.

Equally important is amplifying student voices in environmental policymaking. Education systems should actively support youth participation in decision-making processes, whether through school councils, youth advisory boards, or climate-focused student panels. Policies could also encourage schools to connect students with activist networks, allowing them to learn from young changemakers already leading sustainability efforts worldwide.

The focus for sustainability-focused ELT policies should not be to just teach students *about* climate issues; they should equip them with the skills, confidence, and opportunities to act. A whole-system approach, where governments, schools, and teachers work together, ensures that

sustainability becomes a fundamental part of language education, preparing students to navigate and shape this rapidly changing world.

For Students

Students are not just passive recipients of knowledge; they are key drivers of change. Schools, and education in general, are key to empowering students to see themselves as active participants in tackling global challenges, equipping them with the confidence, skills, and opportunities to make a meaningful impact.

One way to foster this mindset is through youth programmes and conferences that connect students with peers from different regions, allowing them to share sustainability projects and solutions. Platforms and programmes, like the UN SDSN Global Schools Program, UN at your Doorstep, and eTwinning, provide opportunities for international collaboration, where students use English as a lingua franca to exchange ideas, solve problems, and build global networks. Schools can also create local initiatives, such as classroom exchanges, where students share sustainability actions with other schools in their community, or cross-country initiatives where classrooms open up to collaborations with schools in other areas of the world.

For instance, an ESL class at the Liceo Artístico Apolloni-Fano in Italy working on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* connected their literature class to the global issue of child marriage by exploring the play in relation to the SDGs. The focus of the class was on the character of Juliet and her

relationship with her parents, leading to a broader discussion about child marriage, which remains a pressing issue in many parts of the world and connects to SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 4 (Quality Education). To enhance students' understanding of this issue, their teacher, Stefania, invited a fellow teacher from Turkey called Parvin, to share insights and data, via Zoom, regarding child marriage in her country, highlighting the cultural, economic, and educational factors that contribute to the prevalence of child marriage, as well as the efforts made to combat this practice. The Zoom conference with Parvin provided valuable information and personal anecdotes that resonated with the students and helped them connect the historical context of *Romeo and Juliet* with modern societal challenges, fostering a deeper understanding of the relevance of literature in addressing contemporary issues. The inclusion of external perspectives further enriched the learning experience, encouraging students to think critically about social justice and equality, and served as a reflection on the importance of integrating literature with real-world issues, ultimately empowering students to become informed global citizens.

Beyond school projects, sustainability education should also introduce students to real-world changemakers. Learning from young activists like Vanessa Nakate, Alicia Waters Galán, Melati Wijsen or Greta Thunberg can inspire students to see their own potential in driving change and appreciate the power of using English as their means to communicate. Volunteering opportunities, whether in local conservation efforts, community clean-ups, or social enterprises, can be vital in helping students apply their

learning in meaningful ways, reinforcing both language skills and sustainability literacy.

Participating in youth-led environmental projects also provides valuable transferable skills, including teamwork, problem-solving, communication, and leadership. These are not just crucial for activism but also enhance academic applications, job prospects, and scholarship opportunities. Sustainability-focused projects can be showcased in personal statements (for university applications or when applying for a job), demonstrating critical thinking, initiative, and a commitment to global issues.

Incorporating ESD into our classrooms also fosters systems thinking, helping students move beyond simplistic cause-and-effect reasoning. Many sustainability challenges are complex and interconnected, and without a bigger-picture approach, students risk developing tunnel vision, focusing only on surface-level solutions. Encouraging systems thinking helps them analyse how various factors interact, allowing for more effective, long-term problem-solving.

Moreover, ESD cultivates empathy. By engaging with real stories, diverse perspectives, and global challenges, students develop greater understanding of different cultures and experiences, improving their ability to collaborate across borders. Critical thinking also plays a key role, encouraging students to question sources, assess arguments, and develop informed opinions about environmental and social issues.

When sustainability is embedded in their education, students gain more than just awareness. They go a few steps

further in gaining agency, resilience, and, most important-ly, a voice. The classroom becomes a launchpad for action, helping them transition from learners to leaders, capable of tackling real-world challenges with confidence, adaptability, and a deeper understanding of the world around them.

Conclusion: From Learners to Leaders

Motivation and confidence are the cornerstones of helping students become changemakers (Waters, 2024a). When learners are driven by a sense of purpose and feel empowered to act, they begin to see themselves not simply as language learners but as capable agents of real-world change. This combination allows them to take ownership of their learning, engage critically with sustainability challenges, and develop the skills to contribute to a more just, equitable, and sustainable world.

The LEARN Framework offers educators a practical, student-centred approach to embedding sustainability into ELT. By listening to students' interests, encouraging their efforts, amplifying their voices, respecting diverse perspectives, and nurturing their sense of agency, teachers can create environments where students thrive – linguistically, emotionally, and intellectually. These are not just classroom strategies; they are building blocks for lifelong engagement with sustainability.

Alongside LEARN, tools like the Sustainability Compass and the Solutionary Framework provide powerful ways to cultivate systems thinking and solutionary mindsets.

By guiding students to consider nature, economy, society, and well-being in tandem, we help them 'connect the dots' between the local and the global, the personal and the political. The Solutionary Framework, in particular, empowers learners to investigate real-world issues through a justice-oriented lens, identifying root causes and proposing meaningful, compassionate solutions. As 16-year-old Ludmila from the Modern School of Lanus in Buenos Aires, Argentina, says about working on SDG 12 using the IHE Solutionary Framework to deepen thinking:

> The best thing about IHE projects is that we don't just learn in the classroom – we actually take action! We get to create real solutions, like starting awareness campaigns, developing sustainable ideas, or even working with communities to make positive changes. It's not just about talking about the problems; it's about doing something to fix them.

As educators, our role is not just to teach English; it is to equip students with the tools to think critically, collaborate effectively, and act responsibly. Sustainability in ELT is not a 'nice-to-have' add-on; it's a transformational approach that places relevance, agency, and impact at the heart of language education.

So, let us reimagine our classrooms as launchpads for changemakers. Let us embrace sustainability not as a topic, but as a mindset, a way of teaching, thinking, and being. Let us support students to discover their passions, use their voices, and take bold, informed steps toward a better future. Because when students believe they can make a difference, they usually do.

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A Holistic Education in English Language Teaching

Zarina Subhan

Abstract

Life in many rural communities or lower economically developed countries means that sustainable practices are commonplace out of necessity. Gender inequalities and established roles may also mean that some women are less likely to have disposable incomes than their male counterparts, resulting in a greater ability to live within their means. Yet, when the global English Language Teaching (ELT) community is heavily reliant on ELT resources produced by higher economically developed countries, there can be a mismatch between the idea of what is sustainable. Such a mismatch sometimes appears to mirror the current political discussions of whether the global north should be preaching to the global south about how to live sustainably, which is reminiscent of their colonial pasts. This chapter will argue that there should not be one kind of sustainability for some and a middle-of-the-road kind

of sustainability for others. It will suggest that the inequity that exists between different English language learners around the world should be used to raise awareness by policymakers, publishers, institutions, and educators (of both teachers and students) to begin to redress the balance. Throughout, the focus will remain on strengthening awareness of the environmental impact through English.

Keywords: ELT; Awareness; Inequity; Balance

Introduction

According to the International Commission on the Future of Education (2021), "Education is the foundation for the renewal and transformation of our societies" (p. 10). This quote reflects how formal education is the vehicle through which we first learn about the wider world. As very young children our world is very much confined to our families and guardians, who see to our basic physiological needs. By providing us with food, water, shelter, and safety, our primary caregivers are automatically the only world we need as vulnerable infants. It is only when we are fortunate to progress onto a formal education system that we discover there are many other children living similar lives to ourselves. However, it takes us time to comprehend that they all have unique realities and live in slightly different settings to our own. Secondary and higher education provides us with a better appreciation for an even wider community and the planet we live on.

The English language being the language of choice for a Lingua Franca, plays a vital role in how we interact with

that wider community and learn about the lives of others on our planet. It is only then that we can begin to appreciate the damage we have thus far inflicted on our shared home, enough to begin to consider how to undo it.

Fifty percent of all technical and scientific periodicals are in English, and learning the English language has become as important as studying the sciences, mathematics, and digital technology when it comes to accessing a knowledge base required for transforming our societies. *The Guardian* newspaper recently reported on research that revealed that "UK institutions had educated 50 world leaders who were in posts in 2022, with the US in second place with 41" (Weale, 2025). Therefore, English must recognise its responsibility in the way it influences not only future thinkers and creators, but also future leaders.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the wars in Ukraine and Palestine have highlighted how countries are interdependent for energy, food, technical commodities, health solutions, and the global cargo lines that we use to deliver them all. This is one major reason why we need to be more conscious of building a cooperative mindset into our educational settings. It is also where skills play a vital role because simply focusing on knowledge while ignoring the skills required to apply that knowledge does not move us forward. This is apparent from many students' experiences of English language learning, with one such learner having reported, "I spent over 5 years studying the verb 'to be' at school and still can't speak English!"

Even when we tackle both knowledge and skills in ELT, it may not be enough if there is a negative attitude towards

English. For example, some learners may not wish to be studying English because their parents enrolled them, because it is a compulsory component of their further education, or because they associate the language with Western imperialism, or at worst, with a government that has interfered in their country's democratic processes. Therefore, for ELT to be genuinely sustainable, it must cultivate in learners the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that allow them to employ English constructively – for their own development, for the benefit of their local communities, and, consequently, for broader global advancement. Hence this chapter will focus on these three same areas of knowledge, skills, and attitudes to discuss how we can build sustainability into ELT.

Knowledge

Sustainability has come to be associated with the environment and being greener. However, it is easy to forget that by caring for our environment and the health of the climate, we also care for our own mental health and well-being. To successfully do so, it cannot be ignored that the design and functioning of financial and economic systems need to also align in a sustainable way. This has given rise to the term circular economy. The European Parliament's (2023) understanding of it being: "a model of production and consumption, which involves sharing, leasing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing and recycling existing materials and products as long as possible."

There is a strong resemblance between a circular economy and the way we teach language – building into our

lessons reusing, repairing (when students make natural errors during the learning process), refurbishing (when we allow students to experiment with new language), and recycling (in order to reinforce language learning). Successful learning and language use can result in positive mental health and well-being in the intrinsic motivation which becomes evident when students are able to use language effectively for their own purposes. So, it could be argued that a circular economy is the perfect fit for sustainability in ELT.

ELT, having gone through many transitions, has moved from focusing on the knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure to that of how to use this knowledge as a foundation for communicating your ideas. Hence the emphasis is more on being able to use language to logically and clearly present, connect, and support one's opinions to be able to represent who one is. This links directly to citizenship and global issues of discrimination, equal opportunities, and the problems of exclusion, human rights, social injustice, conflict and peace, poverty, and exploitation (both of people and natural resources) (Yakovchuk, 2004).

If ELT is to extend its impact beyond the attainment of an internationally recognised English qualification, and thereby be considered truly sustainable, it must foster in learners the ability to use English to widen their perspectives and develop their full potential. What better way of doing it than to shape students into global citizens?

To be a citizen of the world, one needs to learn about the world, but not one that is narrowed down to situational

scenarios or topics such as air travel or holiday destinations. If people are required to interact in English in any number of settings, the more valuable knowledge would be how to navigate miscommunication and prevent communication breakdown. The global nature of EFL implies that it is unlikely to take place with someone who speaks English as a first language, given that second language speakers of English (L2) far outnumber first English language (L1) speakers. The website lemongrad.com states that little more than 4 per cent of conversations involve L1 speakers of English, with the remainder including "at least non-native speakers [of English]" (Yadav, 2018). This is presumably why Pauwels (2000) shows disapproval of approaches that assume intercultural communication is going to occur between English language learners and L1 speakers.

Despite such data on the likelihood for cross-cultural interactions, culture remains a background for linguistic content and can be viewed as "time off from the 'real' context of language learning" (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 147). Yet, culture can be the driving force behind wanting to interact with another speaker of English, as Holliday (2017) states about interculturality being a "seamless process whereby we employ our existing cultural experience to engage with new cultural domains within which we can also find ourselves, and we make sense of the existing cultural identities of ourselves and others" (p. 214).

If we are to coexist sustainably on one planet, there needs to be an understanding of each other's local environments and realities. Such progress depends on mutual

understanding and dialogue, which are most likely to occur in English. It also requires English speakers to recognise that, although they may identify with communities that share particular practices, culture remains a fluid construct that is not anchored to the physical territory they inhabit. As Victoria and Sangiamchit (2021) point out, "culture is not 'what is' but 'what one does.'" (p. 7). Such a definition lends itself perfectly to intercultural competence, with the emphasis very much on 'inter'. Thus, it can only occur through interactions with others and is another argument against depicting cultures "as separate and independent entities that do not interact or connect" (Abid, 2021, p. 136). Similarly, the climatically induced problems many societies face can only be solved by people from distinct parts of the planet interacting and finding solutions that include very varied populations and cultures. Otherwise, a solution can become irrelevant if it does not take into account different perspectives. Unless we are all onboard, the sustainability bus is not going to be able to carry everyone for the whole journey.

Skills

To be able to accommodate everyone, the metaphorical bus needs to take a responsible direction and allow for many differences. These are just two of the essential skills required to be able to use English language in a respectful way to form the necessary dialogues that Holliday (2017) referred to. Unless solutions to combat and mitigate climate change are realistic and achievable for all, they are not going to be implemented. For example, if higher

economically developed countries are able to increase their use of renewable energies, should they be able to criticise lower economically developed countries that are still dependent on fossil fuels or communities that still cook on woodfires?

For such complex scenarios, future generations who can lead the innovative solutions necessary to combat the problems in existence today need to be able to understand the perspectives of those living in parallel realities to themselves. This is impossible to achieve without first having acquired some basic level of empathy. In a typical English language classroom, such practices can be fostered through collaborative tasks, which demand only modest adjustments to established teaching methods.

It is through the commonplace use of the development of collaborative skills that students can also become aware of their peers' use of English. Nation (2001) refers to this as noticing skills, that is when one makes a mental note of other people's knowledge of English and can, as a result, reflect on their own use of the language. This strengthens greatly the neuronal connections made to the initial input of vocabulary and grammar elements, as well as giving a multi-sensory method of recall while interacting with their peers. Such socialisation of learning has long been highlighted as an essential part of the learning process by Vygotsky (1978), Krashen (2003), and supporters of the behavioural approach.

Through such interactions, learners develop key communicative competencies, including turn-taking, seeking clarification, and negotiating – rather than presuming

– meaning. Collaboration in pairs or small groups provides a more intimate and supportive environment than situations in which students are compelled to produce language before the whole class. This offers students a safer environment to produce and experiment with the language available to them, removing the assumption that they need to produce perfect and correct spoken or written production. It also places an emphasis on interactive communication that automatically puts careful learning skills at the forefront in order to be able to respond appropriately. Thus, this shifts the focus from preparing what to say or the need to 'rehearse' the language, which allows for using English in the real world. When language is unprepared it allows for the negotiation of meaning, repairing and refining of ideas and opinions in a more creative manner. It also lends itself to the exploration of information, topics, or perspectives that may be new or rarely visited.

While in the past publishers and teachers alike may have considered the exploration of 'serious' topics as creating a cognitive overload on students, it can be recognised as opening the door to the development of cognitive skills. This is when the level of language is stretched slightly beyond students' current levels. Krashen (2003) referred to it as linguistic i+1, Vygotsky (1978) described it as the Zone of Proximal Development, and Dweck (2015) described it in terms of developing a growth mindset. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) methodology sees it as an important element of learning content matter through English.

It is therefore reasonable to conclude that, since a significant proportion of scientific, mathematical, and technological knowledge is accessible in English, using climate change and its varied impacts on global communities as a focus of study can meaningfully contribute to learners' cognitive development through ELT. When combined with a sense of responsibility and comprehension of the deep connectedness of a convenient lifestyle with that of the effect of climate change on communities halfway around the world, we can play an integral part in providing a platform on which students can develop their citizenship skills.

Citizenship can be explored on a global level rather than only on a local one, similar to what has been discussed about intercultural competence, where there is a greater proximity felt towards a fluid idea of behaviour that is less associated with nations than with the contexts of people's lives. Holliday (2014) suggests that having an intercultural awareness allows you to decide on how you fit in the world in terms of ideologies. The reality is often that we develop identities depending on the groups of people we spend regular time with, rather than those that we may come into contact with for a period of time and never again. These experiences give us our cultural values, and similarly, we may feel a strong sense of being a citizen of that group. Equally, we may feel close to and a citizen of a distinct group of people at another time of day. For example, I could feel a strong sense of empathy for the Pope's health leading up to the festival of Easter in 2025, having witnessed my own mother suffering from pulmonary infection and pneumonia without having an ounce of Catholicism in me. The same day on a videocall with teacher

trainers in Bangladesh, who were due to be working with teachers in Madrasahs (schools that place a great deal of emphasis on Quranic teachings), I was able to feel a deep sense of kinship in their wish to provide awareness raising of the difficulties of girls being educated while facing numerous biases in their society.

Attitudes

My attitude would determine how I reacted to news of a Catholic Pope's ill health or to the Islamic traditions within a Madrasah teaching context. Attitudes are profoundly influenced by an individual's upbringing, religious beliefs (or absence thereof), life circumstances, intercultural familiarity, and economic background, each of which contributes to their understanding of what is deemed 'normal' within the communities and circles they engage with. These people and their ideas all filter down into the sediments of one's own biases and preferences. Some of the biases can conveniently disguise themselves as tradition or culture, such as the girl child being responsible for her younger siblings and thus getting overlooked for enrolment into primary education.

However, the introduction of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which evolved into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), has had a huge impact on the greater inclusion of girls in primary education worldwide. Similarly, SDGs have helped to bring climate change education into the realms of ELT, with many publishers signing up to the SDGs Publishers Compact (UN, 2020), with the signatories agreeing to sustainable practices in their industry.

Although the publishing industry has recognised the need for action to help accelerate the likelihood of achieving the SDGs by 2030, it still considers politics to be a topic that should be avoided. The acronym used to remind authors of such topics that need to be treated as taboos is PARSNIP, which stands for Politics, Alcohol, Religion, Sex, Narcotics, -isms, and Pork. Depending on one's attitude toward climate change and gender equality, these issues may be perceived as political. Consequently, it can be argued that the publishing industry exhibits contradictory attitudes in determining what should or should not be classified as political.

Climate action could be viewed from the perspective of equity, because it is widely accepted that the biggest polluters of our planet are countries with high industrial outputs or petroleum production (Our World in Data, 2022). Oxfam (2023) states that it is the lifestyle of the richest 10 percent of nations that are responsible for the production of 49 percent of carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions. When viewed through this lens, climate action can be considered a moral responsibility of those who have thus far benefitted from a surge in their incomes, standards of living, and ability to make lifestyle choices, regardless of the environmental impact of their decisions.

From a climate point of view, vegetarianism could be seen as a political act, and some might even view it as a 'religion' because it can govern a person's whole way of life. It is improbable that a topic such as vegetarianism would be omitted from an ELT publication due to concerns about misrepresentation or offending those who hold stereotypical views of vegetarians. In contrast, there is a tendency to treat other ways of life, particularly those classified as

religions, with considerably more caution. Thus, I would argue that we should include such topics without presenting them as correct or incorrect beliefs or faiths. Instead, the ELT field must recognise that learners need opportunities to engage with a wide range of lifestyles, norms, and practices. It is time to abandon the notion of prohibited topics or a so-called blacklist and focus instead on representing diverse traditions, cultures, and alternative 'norms,' enabling people from all backgrounds to articulate their own realities and to interact with others with tolerance, respect, and acceptance.

Gotlieb et al. (2024) characterise such topics, which enable adolescents to engage cognitively with the concepts that structure our social world, as instances of "transcendent thinking." Their research followed 65 teenagers from low-income, urban communities over a period of 5 years. They found that when regularly given tasks of deliberating at a deep level about ethical, widely accepted societal systems, and more personal-level case studies, it resulted in the brain undergoing an increased development of connections and coordination between two key areas of the brain. One being the default mode network (DMN) and the other the executive control network (ECN). The research findings suggest that the DMN helps to engage at an emotional level with stories and scenarios, allowing for reflection, while the ECN governs goal-oriented thinking. The study showed that by engaging the teenagers with relevant, interesting, and social topics, it helped them discuss and develop parts of the brain that subsequently helped them to critically consider societal norms. This allowed them to construct value-based inferences that made

them curious about their own beliefs and values, as well as their participation in society. Developing such thinking assisted in their perception, awareness, and acceptance of self, which, at the end of the study, revealed better mental health and well-being.

Therefore, if we use examples that help students explore contexts relevant to their own lives while also fostering empathy for worlds entirely unfamiliar to them, they can begin to develop greater curiosity about the systems that create and sustain existing inequalities.

Conclusion

We need to engage English learners cognitively with more than superficial aspects of sustainability, such as how to recycle plastic, when the root issue is that plastic production is a profitable by-product of an overreliance on fossil fuel industries. In many global regions, those who are privately educated reach sufficiently high levels of English to go on to study in universities around the world. English is clearly a language that can enable many to fulfil their potential and reach decision-making roles that can greatly influence the direction and progression of our societies at a global level.

Imagine the impact if, alongside teaching English language knowledge, we also fostered the skills and attitudes required to ensure that sustainability is treated as more than a surface-level topic. It must be approached in a way that allows students to gain a nuanced understanding of the economic and social structures that have consolidated power among a small minority while permitting the climate catastrophe to go unchallenged. Sustainability must

not be viewed as a topic that appears in one of many units in an ELT textbook; instead, it must be woven into the very contexts of every unit. It is high time we ensured that real change occurs, rather than continuing to rely on the same ELT material templates that have been used in the past. Only then can real, sustainable change occur.

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The Role of Generative AI in Sustainability-Conscious Classrooms

Vicky Saumell
Marcela Villan

Abstract

This chapter examines the dual role of Generative AI (GenAI) in modern classrooms: as a transformative educational tool but also as an emerging technology with significant environmental implications. While it seems that AI enhances learning and creative engagement in many ways, its heavy environmental impact in terms of energy and water consumption as well as its carbon footprint challenge sustainability goals in an era in which sustainability practices should also be present in the classroom. The chapter outlines GenAI environmental issues and proposes strategies to integrate the technology responsibly, both for teachers and students, emphasising more energy-efficient practices, and curricula promoting critical awareness of AI's ecological impact, among other issues. By aligning these efforts with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education),

educators at all levels can balance technological innovation with environmental, economic and social consciousness, equipping students to navigate the challenges of a sustainability-driven world.

Keywords: Sustainability; GenAI; Artificial Intelligence

Introduction

Global urgency to make sustainability a priority in today's classrooms cannot be denied. The term sustainability was initially used in the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) when referring to the idea that sustainable development "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Sustainability encompasses three key dimensions: the environmental, the social, and the economic. There is a clear interdependence among these three dimensions, without any hierarchical relationship among them. These dimensions comprise multifaceted issues that call for interconnected solutions. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the UN in 2015, provide a holistic framework to address these interconnected challenges, especially when Goal 4 – Quality Education – specifically Target 4.7 (UN, n.d.), is considered. It focuses on education for sustainable development and global citizenship. This target aspires to ensure that by 2030, all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, human rights, gender equality, peace and non-violence, and global citizenship.

As far as Generative AI (GenAI) is concerned, its use by teachers and students alike has become unavoidable. It is widely acknowledged that the presence of GenAI in classrooms is inevitable, whatever its specific applications may be. Yet, not all things are that easy when it comes to integrating GenAI into sustainability-focused education. The environmental cost of GenAI is quite high: high energy consumption and high carbon emissions raise questions about the critical usage of this technology in the classrooms. Large language models (LLMs) are usually extremely computationally intensive to train and run; some studies estimate hundreds of tons of CO_2 emissions from training a single model and water consumption to cool GenAI systems is significant, among other issues as well (Bashir et al., 2024).

This chapter aims to cover two important issues: first, it will provide reasons why GenAI could be inserted in a sustainability-focused classroom; secondly, it will evaluate how GenAI tools could be integrated in those classrooms considering their own environmental impact. This chapter will also highlight the need to balance the pedagogical benefits of AI with its ecological footprint and calls for responsible and ethical use. It will, therefore, consider the importance of placing GenAI awareness at the centre of achieving sustainable development. By placing GenAI into the wider context of both English language teaching (ELT) and sustainability, this chapter hopes to add to the emerging debate that exists at the nexus between technology, education, and global citizenship. It calls upon educators to take on their dual role as facilitators of language learning and stewards of sustainable practices in a manner that

will prepare a generation of learners capable of working with and resolving the challenges of the 21st century.

Background

A few key theoretical frameworks underpin the integration of sustainability and GenAI into education as a whole. On the one hand, sustainability education is at the core, enabling learners to acquire the knowledge, values and skills to assist in solving some of the most complex global issues our world faces. Education for Sustainable Development is an approach endorsed by UNESCO (2020), which provides guiding principles on how to fit sustainability into school curricula. This mandate takes special relevance in the field of ELT. Taking into consideration its very own nature, ELT has the possibility to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers, fostering global awareness and critical thinking among learners. Integrating sustainability into ELT goes beyond language skills; it empowers students to become informed, responsible global citizens. Sustainability issues linked to climate change, social inequalities, and resource depletion provide meaningful content for discussions, debates and projects. This will enable students to develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Sustainability topics are relevant and engaging, making learning more meaningful and impactful. Moreover, sustainability-focused classrooms help learners connect local actions with global consequences, fostering a clear sense of responsibility. They help develop all life skills in learners. Last but not least, sustainability-focused classrooms

support language learning with a purpose: they prepare learners for academic and professional future needs.

On the other hand, GenAI is a disruptive technology that holds great promise to assist education. GenAI tools are believed to foster personalised, student-centred modes of learning. Supporting these principles, such technologies enable active engagement and adaptability for educators to tailor content to diverse learner needs and contexts, an extremely significant value in a world looking for inclusion. Therefore, the potential of GenAI to improve educational outcomes in ways consistent with sustainability imperatives is also encouraged by most AI experts. For example, complex topics, such as climate change, can be represented through interactive simulations and data analysis. AI-driven platforms enable students to chart environmental data trends in order to build their critical thinking/problem-solving skills. Thus, GenAI in a sustainability-focused classroom could be used for individualised reading materials, conversational practice scenarios, and even cultural simulations that enhance language proficiency as well as global awareness.

However, as mentioned before, the adoption of GenAI is not without challenges. Among the issues of acceptance of GenAI is the environmental impact that these systems have, as will be enumerated later in this chapter. Another critical point of discussion concerns the ethical implications of using GenAI in education, particularly issues of unfairness and lack of transparency. These encompass questions relating to biases inherent to GenAI-generated output, propagandist misinformation, and overreliance on technological equipment for pedagogical purposes.

Furthermore, the existing digital divide hinders equal access to GenAI tools. Inequality in infrastructure, connectivity, and digital literacy can reduce the potential of GenAI-enhanced education to reach the most marginalised communities. Such gaps urgently need to be dealt with if the introduction of GenAI in ELT and sustainability education is to be truly inclusive and effective. The principle that "no one will be left behind" sits at the core of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development (UN, 2015), meaning that all people, especially the most vulnerable and marginalised, must benefit from global progress.

Generative AI and Sustainability

GenAI plays a dual role in ELT classrooms. It can be considered an agent of change for sustainability education or it can be seen as part of the big environmental challenges to address. The ecological footprint brought on by these AI systems raises an urgent challenge that educators have to consider and address. It does, however, require a balanced approach wherein the ELT benefits that come with GenAI are at par with trying to minimise environmental and ethical downsides.

Among some of the issues related to GenAI, there is the environmental impact. The facts and figures related to AI's environmental impact cannot be ignored. The carbon footprint of GenAI training and prompting is considerable, both in terms of the electricity and water resources needed to run and cool down the servers used for their operation (Xiao et al., 2025). In addition to water and

energy consumption, data centres also produce large carbon emissions and generate e-waste at a faster rate. These aspects of running GenAI servers are definitely at odds with a much-agreed sustainability stance.

Energy Consumption

Training and running large GenAI models require massive computational power. Most of the energy used by GenAI is attributed to data centres needed to run the complex models. High-performance Graphic Processing Units (GPUs), often used for AI processing, are particularly energy-intensive, contributing significantly to the overall power consumption. Historically, data centres relied mainly on Central Processing Units (CPUs), which ran at roughly 150 watts to 200 watts per chip. GPUs for AI ran at 400 watts until 2022, while 2023 state-of-the-art GPUs for GenAI ran at 700 watts, and 2024 next-generation chips were expected to run at 1,200 watts (Ramachandran et al., 2024).

Studies indicate that training a model like ChatGPT can require approximately 1,300 megawatt hours of electricity, roughly equivalent to the annual power use of 130 average US homes (Calvert, 2024). Image generation is even more energy-intensive, with a single AI-generated image consuming as much electricity as fully charging a smartphone (Dhanani, 2025). The scale of potential demand becomes clearer when considering that if Google's 9 billion daily searches were replaced by AI chatbot queries, the energy required would be comparable to the power consumption of an entire country such as Ireland (AI for Education, 2025). Recent research further shows that GenAI

models like ChatGPT may use up to ten times more electricity than traditional search engines, with data centres operating these systems projected to reach 1.5% of global electricity consumption by 2029 (Ligozat & De Vries, 2024). Echoing these concerns, the International Energy Agency (2025) forecasts that data-centre energy use could double by 2030, with AI a major contributor to this growth.

Factors Influencing Energy Consumption

- Model size: Larger and more complex GenAI models generally require more energy to train and operate.

- Usage frequency: The number of times a model is used directly impacts its energy consumption.

- Hardware efficiency: Advances in chip design can improve energy efficiency of AI models.

Potential Mitigation Strategies

- Optimising models: Researchers are working on developing more efficient AI architectures to reduce energy consumption.

- Renewable energy sources: Powering data centres with renewable energy can help offset the environmental impact of AI.

- Responsible usage: Promoting a mindful use of GenAI models can help reduce unnecessary energy usage.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Carbon emissions are closely tied to energy consumption, making the environmental cost of GenAI systems a critical

concern. Research suggests that training a single large model such as GPT-3 required approximately 1,287 mega-watt hours (MWh) of electricity and produced around 552 tons of CO_2, equivalent to the annual emissions of about 110 petrol-powered cars or the lifetime emissions of five average passenger vehicles (Saenko, 2023). In contrast, Google has estimated GPT-3's annual carbon footprint at a much lower 8.4 tons of CO_2 (Net Zero Business, 2024), illustrating how reported impacts can vary depending on methodology and underlying assumptions. The environ-mental burden is expected to increase further with newer, larger models, and carbon intensity ultimately depends on the energy mix of the grid powering the data centres where training and usage occurs.

More broadly, data centres currently account for an esti-mated 2.5% to 3.7% of global greenhouse gas emissions, surpassing even the aviation industry, which contributes around 2.4% of global CO_2 emissions, a figure that has remained relatively stable since 1992 (Lavi, 2025). These comparisons highlight the growing environmental foot-print of GenAI and the urgent need for sustainable strate-gies in AI development and deployment.

The carbon footprint of a GenAI prompt is significantly higher than a search-engine query. The equivalent of each query was estimated at 4.32 g of CO_2. A Google search is 0.2 g per query (Net Zero Business, 2024). According to this calculator, 16 queries equal the emissions generated by boiling a kettle. If each unique visit results in an average of 10 queries, that amounts to 15 trillion queries per month. However, Google has recently implemented AI overviews

powered by their GenAI model Gemini, which cannot be turned off. A single Google search with AI integrated in it will consume 10 times more energy (3 KWh) than the traditional Google search (Kerr, 2024). There exists a complex way of managing not to see it, but the operation is still conducted in the background, so you would not be avoiding the impact. A second workaround is to use another web browser other than Chrome, like Safari or Firefox. But this only works on your computer, rather than your mobile phone. It is also important to point out that model size matters. Larger AI models with more parameters generally have a larger carbon footprint.

Factors Contributing to High Emissions

- Hardware production: The manufacturing process of specialised chips needed for AI training can be energy-intensive and generate significant emissions.

- Data centre cooling: Maintaining optimal temperatures in data centres requires significant energy consumption.

- Power grid reliance on fossil fuels: If the electricity powering the data centres comes from fossil fuels, it contributes to higher carbon emissions.

Potential Mitigation Strategies

- Improving energy efficiency: Developing more efficient AI algorithms and hardware.

- Renewable energy sources: Utilising renewable energy sources to power data centres.

- Model optimisation: Reducing the size of AI models while maintaining performance.
- Carbon offsetting: Investing in carbon credits to offset emissions from AI operations.

Water Consumption

Water consumption is another significant environmental concern associated with GenAI. According to recent studies, GenAI, particularly LLMs like those behind ChatGPT, can consume a large amount of water due to the energy needed to power data centres used to train and run them, with estimates suggesting that AI could use between 4.2 and 6.6 billion cubic meters of water annually by 2027, equivalent to the water consumption of a country like Denmark (Ren, 2023). This water is primarily used for cooling systems in data centres, with up to 12 litres of water potentially being used per kWh of energy consumed (Ren, 2023). Data centres' server rooms must be kept cool, typically between 10–27 degrees Celsius, to prevent equipment malfunctioning. Moreover, data centres must use clean freshwater sources to manage the heat generated by processing large amounts of data and to avoid the corrosion and bacteria growth associated with seawater. Freshwater is also necessary for humidity control in the rooms.

Training large models contributes heavily to this excessive demand for water. For instance, training GPT-3 has been estimated to consume as much water as the production of 370 BMWs or 320 Teslas (McLean, 2023). Microsoft's global water use increased by 34% between 2021 and 2022, reaching nearly 1.7 billion gallons, the equivalent of more than

2,500 Olympic-sized swimming pools (O'Brien & Fingerhut, 2023). Even everyday use carries a notable footprint, with a single series of 5 to 50 ChatGPT prompts requiring approximately 500 millilitres of water, roughly the volume of a standard 16-ounce bottle (O'Brien & Fingerhut, 2023).

These pressures are amplified when data centres are located in regions already experiencing water scarcity, where heavy industrial water use can further strain local supplies. As the adoption of AI technologies continues to expand, so too does their water footprint, raising urgent questions about the long-term sustainability of GenAI in a world facing increasing water insecurity.

Potential Mitigation Strategies

- Data centre location: Choosing locations with abundant water resources can mitigate the impact on local water supplies.

- Water efficiency technologies: Implementing advanced cooling technologies and water recycling systems in data centres can help reduce water consumption.

- Transparency and reporting: Technology companies are increasingly being called upon to be transparent about their water usage and take steps to minimise their environmental impact.

E-Waste and Resource Extraction

GenAI operation also requires more hardware than other types of computing. And it cycles through that hardware faster, meaning the replacement cycle is also more

intensive than in other types of computing. So, more e-waste is also a byproduct of GenAI. According to Ren (2024), Gen AI, particularly LLMs, could potentially generate between 1.2 and 5 million metric tons of e-waste by 2030, representing a significant increase in e-waste due to the growing demand for powerful computing hardware needed to run these AI models. This could equate to up to 2.5 million tons of e-waste annually if no waste reduction measures are implemented. Furthermore, the necessary rare earth metal extraction involved in building these devices causes ecosystem destruction and generally entails exploitative forms of labour.

Potential Mitigation Strategies

- Extending the lifespan of hardware.
- Improved recycling practices.
- Designing more energy-efficient AI chips to reduce e-waste generation.

Classroom Applications: Strategies and Classroom Tasks

The sustainable integration of GenAI into ELT requires well-designed strategic interventions that enhance learning while minimising environmental impact. When used responsibly, GenAI can support teachers, especially those without prior training in sustainability, by helping them create effective lesson plans that link language learning with sustainability education.

One advantage of GenAI is its ability to generate contextualised content. Drawing on culturally relevant case studies, GenAI can produce accessible texts on topics such as renewable energy or sustainable agriculture, complete with comprehension questions and vocabulary activities. Furthermore, GenAI can recommend resources tailored to learners' proficiency levels, making complex issues like climate change or biodiversity loss more understandable for diverse groups of students.

Digital literacy is now an essential competency in the GenAI era. Educators can use AI-enhanced tools to develop students' digital skills while simultaneously raising awareness of environmental issues. For example, AI-powered tools can measure a user's digital carbon footprint, helping learners understand the environmental impact of their online activities.

GenAI can also facilitate innovative, project-based learning linked to the SDGs. Students might use GenAI to brainstorm solutions to local environmental challenges, design community recycling campaigns, or propose green infrastructure projects for local planners. Such tasks support both language development and citizenship education.

However, the most important classroom strategy is perhaps learning to prompt effectively. Prompt engineering is becoming an essential skill across education, work, and creative industries. GenAI output is only as good as the input it receives; well-crafted prompts lead to accurate and relevant responses, while poorly constructed ones often yield generic or misleading information. Ineffective prompting also increases environmental impact through

repeated re-prompting, making efficient prompting a matter not only of academic precision but also of sustainability. Teaching students how to prompt well simultaneously improves their questioning skills, an ability central to critical thinking and research.

Ethics must also be embedded into GenAI use. Effective prompting includes awareness of bias, misinformation, and potential harm. Students who understand how GenAI operates are better equipped to produce inclusive, accurate, and ethically sound outputs.

Prompt-focused classroom tasks can support these goals. For example, students could be given a vague prompt such as "Tell me about climate change" and asked to predict how GenAI might respond. They then refine the prompt step by step, discussing how added details change expected outcomes. Once the final version is ready, students test it with a single prompt, thus reducing unnecessary AI use and conserving energy.

Ethics-focused prompting tasks may include scenario analysis, such as: "GenAI can optimise energy use, but data centres require massive electricity. Should companies prioritise AI efficiency over sustainability? How can they reduce AI's carbon footprint?" Students explore potential risks, benefits, and solutions, then share strategies for reducing environmental impact, such as limiting unnecessary online activity or adopting more sustainable digital habits. Another valuable activity is having students critically evaluate GenAI-generated content, identifying bias, inaccuracies, or ethical issues to better understand its limitations.

Teachers play a central role in ensuring GenAI is used responsibly. They must help learners understand the technology's potential and limitations while modelling responsible digital citizenship themselves, including limiting unnecessary GenAI use.

At the institutional level, schools should be aware of GenAI's environmental footprint when selecting tools and should prioritise providers committed to renewable energy. Academic leaders need to embed sustainable GenAI practices into curricula by developing frameworks for digital sustainability, training teachers in responsible use, and monitoring implementation in alignment with green technology initiatives.

Policymakers also have a responsibility to integrate sustainability into digital education policy. This includes ensuring equitable access to GenAI tools, supporting research into low-energy GenAI models, and collaborating globally to establish shared standards for sustainable AI. By fostering ethical awareness, advancing the SDGs, and embedding lifelong learning skills, sustainable GenAI integration empowers students to address global challenges, thus ensuring that GenAI supports both educational advancement and environmental responsibility.

Conclusion

While contemplating the rapid strides AI is taking and its rising prominence in ELT (Edmett et al., 2024), one has to recognise the dual challenge: how to capture the transformational potential of GenAI while reducing its

environmental impact. This chapter has discussed how GenAI can play a key role in the revolution of language education by making learning personalised, increasing accessibility, and providing teachers with new tools. At the same time, however, the environmental footprint of GenAI, in particular energy and water consumption and electronic waste, should not go unnoticed.

Balance holds the key. While GenAI brings a great opportunity to improve learning experiences and open up more access to education, the development and application of GenAI in ELT should be done sustainably. The accelerating pace of change in this era presents significant ethical challenges and requires thoughtful decision-making from both educators and policymakers. At this stage of our adoption of GenAI, solutions that promote a low carbon footprint are essential, ensuring that its integration remains environmentally sustainable and does not harm the planet.

Directions for further work emerge across several dimensions. One of the most critical is the development of eco-friendly GenAI tools that support more sustainable educational practices. Prioritising energy-efficient algorithms and hardware is essential for reducing the environmental footprint associated with GenAI. Moreover, decentralising AI systems to improve energy efficiency, along with developing and adopting smaller, less resource-intensive models, represents another important avenue for mitigating the environmental challenges linked to current technologies.

Added to that, teacher training programmes must invest in addressing educators' concerns about sustainability

and ethical issues surrounding GenAI use. Teachers play a central role in shaping future generations, and the next wave of learners will inevitably encounter GenAI as part of their education. It is therefore essential that teachers develop a clear understanding of both the potential benefits of GenAI and the risks associated with its application. Professional development that foregrounds sustainability, ethics, and the environmental implications of technology will help ensure that GenAI is integrated into ELT in a thoughtful, informed, and responsible manner.

On the other hand, the call to action is unmistakable: educators must promote the integration of sustainability principles into GenAI solutions so that the tools used in the classroom are not only effective but also environmentally responsible. School leadership should institutionalise policies that ensure GenAI is deployed ethically and with minimal ecological impact, embedding responsible technology use into the culture and practices of the institution.

This journey toward a more integrated and ethical use of AI in ELT is only just beginning. We have the opportunity to harness the enormous potential of GenAI in ways that benefit learners while safeguarding the environment for future generations. This should serve as a collective call to responsibility: as educators, we must ensure that the tools entering our classrooms contribute meaningfully to sustainability, equity, and civic responsibility. Responsible practice is essential for shaping a future in which GenAI and sustainability coexist, supporting both high-quality education and the well-being of our planet.

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Chapter 5

'To Begin, at the Beginning': Integrating Sustainable Thinking and Practices Into Initial ELT Teacher Training

Christopher Graham

Abstract

This chapter examines the integration of sustainability within English Language Teaching (ELT) initial teacher training (ITT) and identifies significant gaps in current provision. Drawing on survey data and desk research, the chapter reveals that most ELT ITT programmes include little or no sustainability content, despite growing global expectations for education to address environmental and social challenges. Where sustainability is incorporated, the focus is often limited to adapting coursebooks or addressing broad social issues, with less attention paid to institutional sustainability or climate action. The chapter demonstrates that practical engagement with sustainability can enhance student teachers' motivation, language development, and confidence. However, challenges persist, including limited time, insufficient institutional support,

and a lack of expertise. The chapter concludes with policy, curriculum, and advocacy recommendations for embedding sustainability more systematically across ELT ITT.

Introduction

Initial teacher training (ITT) in English Language Teaching (ELT) varies widely across global contexts, yet it generally falls into three broad categories. The first comprises short, intensive courses – traditionally delivered face-to-face but now increasingly available online – such as the four-week Cambridge CELTA and the Trinity College CertTESOL. Both qualifications are widely recognised and provide accredited pathways into the profession. The second category includes undergraduate university programmes in English or related language disciplines, which incorporate ELT pedagogy into three- or four-year degrees. These programmes typically supply the majority of teachers working within state-sector education systems. The third category consists of the numerous unaccredited ITT courses offered online or occasionally face-to-face. While these programmes may not hold formal recognition, they nevertheless provide access to employment opportunities in many parts of the world.

As these diverse entry points into the profession indicate, newly qualified teachers emerge with varied levels of experience and pedagogic knowledge. However, given the increasingly urgent need to embed sustainability within education, it is reasonable to consider what baseline understanding early-career ELT teachers should possess regarding sustainability and its role in language teaching.

While further development can occur through ongoing continuing professional development (CPD), establishing core expectations at the initial training stage is essential.

The foundational knowledge required of new teachers can be organised into two interrelated themes. The first focuses on the environmental impact of the ELT profession itself, including the ways in which institutions, teaching practices, and learning materials contribute to or mitigate environmental harm. The second centres on the educational dimension: how sustainability can be integrated meaningfully into classroom practice and learning processes.

Within the first theme, new teachers should understand how institutional environments influence sustainability, such as the energy consumption of school buildings and students' modes of travel. They should also be aware of broader institutional commitments to equity, inclusion, student well-being, and the provision of sustainable food options where applicable. Additionally, teachers need insight into the environmental cost of teaching processes, including heavy reliance on printed materials, the expanding role of classroom technologies, particularly AI, and the environmental footprint of coursebook production and distribution.

The second theme highlights pedagogical considerations. Teachers should be able to identify any sustainability-related content already present in their coursebooks, such as references to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or related learning objectives. They also need an understanding of how linguistic content – grammar,

phonology, and functional language – can be harnessed to support meaningful engagement with sustainability issues. Beyond language structures, teachers should recognise how skills such as critical thinking, digital and information literacy, and collaborative problem-solving can be developed through sustainability-focused tasks. Even small modifications to existing coursebook units, such as reframing a lesson about fashion to explore the environmental cost of fast fashion, can provide accessible entry points. Furthermore, new teachers should appreciate how both in-class and out-of-class project work can empower learners to explore sustainability topics in depth. Finally, they should understand how sustainability themes such as poverty reduction, gender equity, or health and sanitation are addressed across the wider institutional curriculum, and how these can be meaningfully integrated into their own classrooms.

These areas form a foundational knowledge base for integrating sustainable thinking and practices into initial ELT teacher training, ensuring that new teachers enter the profession prepared not only to teach language, but also to contribute to the broader educational mission of building a more just and sustainable world.

Research Undertaken

The aim of this research was to investigate the extent to which sustainability is currently incorporated into pre-service ELT teacher training, with particular attention to how student teachers are supported in understanding the relationship between sustainability and ELT. As outlined

earlier, initial ELT training typically falls into two broad categories. The first includes short, intensive pre-service qualifications designed primarily for recent graduates entering the profession. The second category comprises longer, three- or four-year bachelor's degrees in English, often with integrated teacher-training components, as well as postgraduate teacher-training programmes undertaken by graduates of English or related disciplines.

To gain a clearer picture of the current provision of sustainability-related content within these forms of initial training, an online survey was developed and distributed across relevant social media platforms. The survey remained open from 23 January to 19 March 2025 and generated a total of 29 responses. These findings provide insight into how sustainability is being addressed within existing ELT pre-service contexts.

In addition to the survey, desk research was conducted to situate the findings within the broader landscape of sustainability education. This review examined resources from England, Scotland, Pakistan, and Libya, alongside materials produced by international organisations, in order to offer comparative perspectives on current practices and emerging trends. The key findings from both the survey and the literature review are summarised below and form the foundation for the discussion that follows.
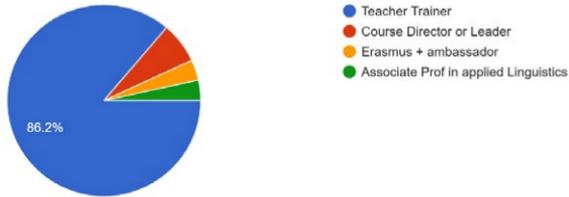
Respondents' Backgrounds

To contextualise the survey findings, the respondents' professional roles and institutional settings are illustrated

in the figures below. Figure 1 details their job titles, and Figure 2 categorises the institutions they represent.

Figure 1:

Respondents' Job Titles

What is your job title?
29 responses

- Teacher Trainer
- Course Director or Leader
- Erasmus + ambassador
- Associate Prof in applied Linguistics

86.2%

Figure 2:

Respondents' Institutional Settings

What type of institution do you work for?
29 responses

- Private language school/training provider
- University
- Ministry of education or other government body
- NGO
- College
- Teachers Training College - Higher Education
- an university college offering undergrd…
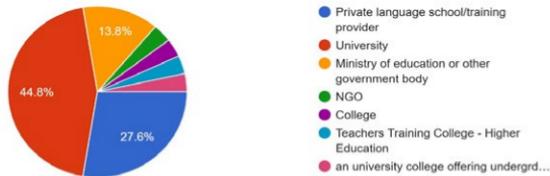
13.8%
44.8%
27.6%

Table 1 provides an overview of the principal course types delivered by the respondents.

Table 1:

Main Categories of Courses Taught by Respondents

Cambridge CELTA	31%
Trinity CertTESOL	14%
Undergraduate degree in education with some initial ELT teacher training	14%
Undergraduate degree in English with some initial ELT teacher training	24%
Postgraduate degree in education with some initial ELT teacher training	28%

Current Provision of Sustainability Topics in ELT ITT

This section examines the extent to which sustainability-related themes are currently incorporated into ELT ITT. Survey responses reveal significant variation in provision, with a majority of programmes including little or no dedicated sustainability content. Where such content is present, it spans a range of environmental and social themes. This overview is complemented by data on future plans for integration and by insights from a Libyan case study illustrating how pre-service teachers engage with sustainability-focused pedagogies.

59% of respondents reported that there was no sustainability content integrated into their ELT ITT provision. Of those reporting that there was sustainability content, the specific types of content were as outlined in Table 2 below.

Table 2:

*Sustainability Themes Being Integrated into ELT ITT Provision*

Sustainability theme	Percentage of respondents reporting the integration of this theme
The environmental impact of the ELT community and ways to begin to mitigate it	42%
The 'greening' of schools and classrooms	17%
Ways of integrating climate topics into classes by adapting coursebooks	75%
Ways of integrating climate topics into classes by creating materials	67%
Ways of integrating climate topics into classes through in/out of class projects	33%
Ways of exploring broad sustainability topics in class such as gender equity, educational access, or social justice as well as climate issues	83%
The issues around students taking direct climate action	17%

Figure 3 shows that known plans to introduce sustainability topics into ELT ITT were only reported by around 28% of respondents, who had previously reported no provision being in place.

Figure 3:

Plans to Introduce Sustainability Topics into ELT ITT Courses

Are there any plans to introduce sustainability topics into courses?
29 responses
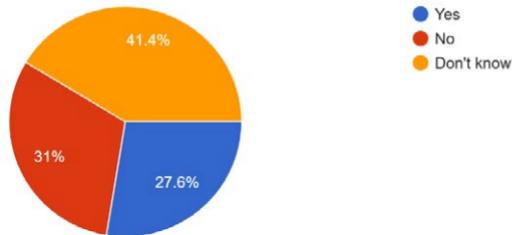
The case study from Libya in Table 3 offers valuable insights into student teachers' motivation, their reactions to integrating sustainability into ELT, and the challenges they experienced throughout the project. It highlights not only their initial apprehensions and emerging confidence, but also the ways in which practical, hands-on engagement helped shape their attitudes toward environmental themes in language teaching.

Table 3:

The Benefits of Integrating Sustainability into ELT ITT: A Libyan Case Study (Suwaed, 2024)

Background

This project was conducted with 31 third-year pre-service teachers enrolled in a College of Arts teacher education programme at Sabratha University, Libya. In the Libyan context, sustainability topics are only minimally incorporated into both pre-service and in-service teacher education, as well as into wider ELT classroom practice. This lack of integration provided a compelling rationale for exploring how sustainability themes might be introduced and how student teachers might respond.

Approach

To provide hands-on experience with sustainability-related teaching, participants took part in a microteaching activity designed to familiarise them with practical ways of embedding sustainability into ELT. The project centred on two core tasks. First, student teachers were asked to design and deliver an environmentally focused lesson, including creating lesson plans and accompanying materials. Second, they engaged in sustainability-related activities outside the classroom, such as tree planting and litter collection, to raise awareness and reinforce the real-world relevance of environmental stewardship. Data were collected through student-teacher reflection sheets and a follow-up focus group discussion.

Teacher Reactions

Overall, the project generated high levels of engagement among the student teachers, although some expressed concerns about teaching environmental topics. Several participants who were already doing some teaching independently reported that they had begun incorporating climate-related themes into their classes. Examples included storytelling activities on endangered species for young learners and leading tree-planting initiatives in school gardens. The project also fostered active collaboration among participants, particularly in the development of teaching resources.

Benefits of the Project

Participants reported a range of benefits. Many noted improvements in their English language proficiency, particularly in vocabulary development, as a result of preparing sustainability-focused lessons. They also described gaining new knowledge about sustainability and a clearer understanding of local and global environmental initiatives. Because the project required independent work, teachers reported an increased sense of autonomy and responsibility toward environmental protection. Importantly, many expressed the intention to integrate climate-related topics into their future teaching once qualified.

Challenges

Despite these positive outcomes, several challenges emerged. Some teachers felt that sustainability was an unconventional and unfamiliar topic, and one that would require substantial additional effort. Others expressed

uncertainty about their own content knowledge and vocabulary related to environmental issues. A number of participants also felt that their level of English was not strong enough to engage confidently with the topic.

Current Approaches to Integrating Sustainability Content into Non-ELT ITT

To contextualise the situation in ELT, it is useful to consider how sustainability is currently embedded in ITT more broadly. Internationally, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE, 2016) reports substantial progress in education for sustainable development (ESD): "Most member States report that ESD is now part of initial training (33 member States—87 per cent) and in-service training (34 member States—89 per cent)" (p. 91). However, national approaches vary considerably.

The United Kingdom – England

Within the United Kingdom's devolved system, England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland each operate distinct education structures. In England, notable advances in integrating sustainability into ITT have been led by the University of Reading, which has undertaken significant work across teacher education programmes. In 2021, Reading's Institute of Education helped establish the National Climate Education Action Plan, in which external partners collaborated to develop, pilot, and embed a Climate and Sustainability Education (CASE) framework across all disciplines (Advance HE, 2025). A central recommendation from the Action Plan states: "All teacher

trainers and initial teacher trainees should be able to access training that empowers them to effectively incorporate climate education within their teaching across all levels and subjects" (University of Reading, n.d.).

The CASE framework emphasises local action, contextualisation, and reflective practice. At the time of writing, it was being implemented across 18 ITT programmes within the Institute of Education (Advance HE, 2025). Importantly, the UK's Department for Education has supported the wider rollout of the framework by encouraging its licensing across English ITT providers, and it has also been adopted by institutions internationally.

The framework is structured around three key developmental areas for trainee teachers (Majid, 2022):

1. Their positionality as educators addressing climate issues;

2. Their approach to teaching climate change;

3. Their knowledge and understanding of climate and sustainability content.

Specific areas of study within Reading's ITT curriculum include:

- Impacts of climate change;

- Accessibility and age appropriateness of sustainability education;

- Climate justice;

- The impact of climate issues on teachers themselves;

- Linking theory to community and individual action.

While broader sustainability themes are acknowledged, the framework places a particular emphasis on climate-related issues.

The United Kingdom – Scotland

Scotland provides a strong institutionalised example of sustainability integration in teacher training. For over a decade, Learning for Sustainability (LfS) has been embedded within Scottish teaching standards for both ITT and CPD.

The General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) embeds sustainability directly into its regulatory teaching standards, stating that these standards are underpinned by three interdependent themes: professional values, Learning for Sustainability, and leadership. LfS is positioned as central to teacher professionalism, supporting educators in preparing young people with the skills needed for learning, life, and work. GTCS (2021) emphasises that sustainability requires: "understanding and valuing environment, culture and heritage, developing a sense of place and belonging to the local, national and global community. It also means having a deep connection to the natural world and understanding the significance of the choices we make – now and in the future" (p. 3). Crucially, sustainability is framed as a whole-school commitment, embedded across all stakeholder roles and across the professional expectations for every teacher in Scotland.

Pakistan

In stark contrast, research by Kalsoom et al. (2019) indicates limited integration of sustainability in Pakistan's ITT curriculum. Only around 5% of the Bachelor of Education programme is dedicated to sustainability-related content, and national teaching standards include very little focus on the area. Recent educational reforms have also not strengthened sustainability education. Additionally, levels of "sustainability consciousness" – a combination of knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours linked to sustainability – among Pakistani pre-service teachers remain low. This reflects a substantial gap between policy aspirations and the preparedness of new teachers to address sustainability issues in their future classrooms.

Barriers and Challenges to Integrating Sustainability in ELT ITT

The survey results highlight several significant barriers that limit the integration of sustainability topics within ELT ITT. As shown in Table 4, the most frequently cited obstacle is time constraints (72%), indicating that many programmes already feel pressured by existing curriculum demands and struggle to incorporate additional content. Closely related to this is the issue of curriculum or syllabus restrictions (48%), suggesting that sustainability is often not embedded within programme structures or assessment frameworks, leaving teacher educators little flexibility to introduce new themes.

A further challenge relates to institutional capacity. Over one-third of respondents (34%) reported a lack of institutional knowledge about sustainability issues, and nearly one quarter (24%) noted a lack of staff with appropriate skills. This highlights a systemic issue: institutions cannot meaningfully integrate sustainability into ITT unless teacher educators themselves have the training, confidence, and resources to teach it effectively.

Institutional culture also plays a role. Over one-fifth of respondents (21%) pointed to insufficient support from institutional leaders, which may undermine efforts to prioritise sustainability or invest in relevant professional development. Additionally, 38% of respondents felt that sustainability topics are not viewed as relevant to ELT teacher training, reflecting persistent misconceptions about the relationship between language teaching and broader global competencies.

Finally, a smaller but notable proportion (17%) indicated that sustainability themes are sometimes perceived as 'political', which may lead to reluctance or caution in certain educational contexts, especially in settings where political sensitivities influence curriculum decisions.

These barriers illustrate that the challenge is not simply one of adding new content; it involves shifting institutional priorities, expanding staff expertise, and reframing sustainability as a legitimate and essential component of ELT teacher education.

Table 4:

Barriers and Challenges

Perceived barrier or challenge	Percentage of respondents reporting
Lack of support from institutional leaders	21%
Lack of institutional knowledge of the issues	34%
Lack of staff with the appropriate skills	24%
Curriculum/syllabus restraints	48%
Time restraints	72%
These topics are not seen as relevant to ELT teacher training	38%
These topics are seen as 'political'	17%

Conclusions

Findings from this study indicate that ELT ITT continues to lag behind mainstream education in its integration of sustainability topics. Although comparisons across sectors are not straightforward, the contrast remains clear: while sustainability education is increasingly embedded across general ITT frameworks, 60% of respondents in the ELT ITT cohort reported that their programmes include no sustainability content at all, and fewer than 30% indicated that plans were in place to introduce such content.

Among institutions that do embed sustainability, engagement is uneven. Topics such as the 'greening' of institutions and direct climate action appear to be the least

frequently addressed, suggesting a gap between broader sustainability ambitions and the specific practices promoted within ELT teacher education.

Nevertheless, evidence from both survey respondents and the Libyan case study suggests that when student teachers are exposed to sustainability-related learning, they report a range of benefits. These include improved English language and vocabulary skills, enhanced subject knowledge, increased collaboration with colleagues, and an intention to integrate sustainability themes into their future teaching. This indicates that properly designed sustainability inputs can have a significant pedagogical and motivational impact.

At the same time, teacher anxiety surrounding sustainability remains a considerable barrier. The most common sources of concern include:

- a perceived need for further training;
- insufficient knowledge of sustainability themes;
- a lack of appropriate teaching materials.

Structural constraints also play a substantial role. Respondents identified limited time for content creation and materials adaptation as a major obstacle, alongside pre-existing syllabi that are either overloaded or insufficiently flexible to accommodate sustainability themes. Finally, concerns about the relevance of sustainability – both within ELT and within the wider institution – continue to inhibit deeper engagement.

These findings suggest that meaningful progress will require not only additional training and resources but also system-level alignment, regulatory support, and sustained advocacy.

Recommendations

The following recommendations outline practical steps for strengthening the integration of sustainability within ELT ITT.

Policy-Level Considerations

- Secure cross-sector and cross-stakeholder agreement on the importance of embedding sustainability within ELT ITT. A shared understanding across institutions and stakeholders is essential for long-term progress.

- Identify and empower key stakeholders – including ministries of education, teacher associations, school networks, NGOs, activist groups, and international organisations such as the British Council – to lead and sustain integration efforts.

- Embed sustainability within national ITT frameworks and teacher validation processes wherever possible, particularly for state-run systems. Regulatory integration ensures continuity and institutional commitment.

- Align ELT ITT with broader national and regional sustainability goals, even when direct alignment is not possible for short, intensive programmes such as CELTA or Trinity CertTESOL. Accreditation bodies

should be encouraged to consider how sustainability principles can be incorporated into supporting materials and guidance.

Learning Outcomes and Course Content

- Establish clear sustainability-related learning outcomes for ELT ITT, developed in consultation with relevant stakeholders. These outcomes should be sensitive to local needs and contexts, acknowledging potential cultural sensitivities, especially around climate activism or critiques of hydrocarbon industries.

- Require accreditation bodies for international one-month courses (e.g., CELTA, Trinity CertTESOL) to take responsibility for integrating appropriate sustainability outcomes into their frameworks.

Advocacy

- Promote sustainability inclusion in ELT ITT where government or regulatory structures have not yet mandated it. Advocacy from institutions and professionals can drive change from the ground up.

- Raise awareness among student teachers of the importance and relevance of sustainability topics in ELT, in order to strengthen motivation and engagement.

- Address concerns about time and workload by emphasising practical strategies, accessible materials, and small classroom adaptations that do not require major course redesign.

- Encourage publishers to integrate sustainability into ELT materials, ensuring that teachers have access to high-quality, pedagogically sound resources that support the inclusion of sustainability across levels and contexts.

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Restorying the Self: Building Social Sustainability through Stereotype Literacy

Josianne Block
Armanda Stroia

Abstract

The chapter explores the potential of stereotype literacy as a transformative tool to promote sustainability and social inclusion in English language classrooms. It emphasises the social dimension of sustainability in relation to the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 10, which aims to reduce inequality within and among countries. Stereotype literacy equips learners with the ability to recognise, analyse, and challenge stereotypes which may perpetuate social inequalities, helping learners become agents of positive social change in increasingly diverse societies. The chapter presents a three-stage approach to developing stereotype literacy in the classroom. The first stage focuses on understanding stereotypes, the second on deconstructing them, and the third on critically producing alternative narratives. Classroom-tested activities which aim to create more equitable and inclusive learning environments, aligning with

sustainability principles, are proposed for each phase. The chapter demonstrates how stereotype literacy can address the current challenges of social inequality and foster a mindset among learners that is open to diversity and that safeguards the needs of future generations.

Keywords: Stereotype Literacy; Deconstructing Stereotypes; Social Sustainability; Inclusive Education; Reducing Inequalities

Introduction

The World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) defines sustainability as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." However, sustainability goes beyond conserving the environment. Buller and Waters (2024) describe sustainability as a holistic approach that takes into consideration not only the planet but also the well-being of its people. Its three key pillars, the environment, society, and the economy, often referred to as the 3Ps (Planet, People, and Profits), are in fact interdependent (Wahyuni et al., 2023). Despite this, the importance of the social factor is often undermined as emphasis is put on environmental aspects such as the climate crisis. The chapter aims to focus on this social aspect and explore how English language teaching (ELT) can empower learners to create a more sustainable world by addressing the UN's sustainable development goal (SDG) 10.

The UN's SDGs are a set of 17 objectives targeted towards pressing challenges such as poverty, inequality, climate

change, and environmental degradation, while promoting peace and sustainability by 2030. SDG10 aims at "reducing inequalities and ensuring no one is left behind" (UN, 2025). However, it does not stop at economic inequalities between and within nations: it also aims at reducing social injustices and inequalities suffered by vulnerable communities. One of SDG10's objectives is to foster the social, economic and political inclusion of all individuals, no matter their age, sex, race, ethnicity, religion, or economic status. A way of achieving this is by encouraging students to reflect on their social contexts and helping them transform into active world citizens geared towards making positive change for more equitable societies. This can be done through stereotype literacy.

A stereotype is often regarded as a schema, or a preconceived idea based on generalisations, that can be expressed in different ways depending on the context or the individual using it (Valade, 2019). Amossy (1991) defines stereotypes as a key component of social representation, arguing that they are collective beliefs or images that groups hold about other groups. A positive function of stereotypes is that they simplify complex social realities, categorising people based on perceived characteristics and inferences (Greenberg et al., 2020). However, stereotypes can be harmful, especially in a world in which misinformation is widespread, borders are closing to migrants, and xenophobia is increasing (Vasquez et al., 2019). Stereotype literacy is the ability to recognise and critically engage with stereotypes in various forms of social interaction. Shaped by the lived experiences of students and teachers, it adopts a holistic view of education which views students

not only as foreign language learners but as agents of social change.

This chapter highlights the benefits of stereotype literacy in the classroom. It begins with an overview of stereotypes' effects on social sustainability and existing efforts in ELT to address stereotypes. It then examines the link between stereotypes and their potential to develop students' critical literacy and transform their cultural perspectives for more equitable and sustainable environments. The chapter proposes a three-stage approach, including examples of interactive, reflective, and creative tasks, to support teachers in developing stereotype literacy in their contexts. Finally, it outlines how this approach can contribute to building more inclusive societies, targeting SDG 10.

Literature Review

Stereotypes' Impact on Social Sustainability

Stereotypes, described by Barbéris (1994) as "familiar tunes", are different in nature than a prejudice. Prejudices are usually unfounded positive or negative opinions about someone or something which are often shaped by societal influences or personal experiences. On the other hand, stereotypes are more systematic since they revolve around repeated patterns (Valade, 2019). These representations are often simplified and inaccurate; however, they also serve as cognitive shortcuts that help individuals navigate social interactions (Amossy, 1991). In fact, Valade (2019) claims that, "Although they are stigmatized, stereotypes are necessary for social life and any cognitive

undertaking" (p. x). However, stereotypes can also perpetuate biases and influence how people view and treat others. This may shape social dynamics and reinforce prejudices and inequalities (Légal & Delouvée, 2008).

The teaching of English, or any subject taught in English, is a highly contextualised and non-neutral activity in which certain inequalities may be embedded. This is because English is deeply intertwined with social, cultural, historical, economic, and political aspects (Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003). According to a Eurostat report (2024), inequality harms society by disrupting social unity, limiting opportunities, hindering economic activity, and undermining democratic participation. Political conflicts in recent years, including crises in South American countries, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the Syrian war, have led to a spike in migration. The social inclusion of migrants is crucial for the future well-being of European societies, and this requires creating conditions that support their active involvement in society, such as active participation in education. This has the potential to reduce inequalities within and across countries. However, there is still a big disparity between EU nationals and non-EU migrants. For instance, among the latter there are more early school leavers (Eurostat, 2024). This highlights the need to move away from foreign language teaching as a distinct subject and view it in connection with the world's diversity (Porto, 2013).

Individuals start developing stereotypes, and their assumption of what is right or wrong, from a very young age. This leads to the formation of an identity based on what

is traditionally and culturally accepted (Whitford, 2024). Students from groups subject to negative stereotypes may feel anxious about being judged or treated according to those stereotypes, or about being the ones who unintentionally reinforce such negative representations. This concern can negatively impact their academic performance (Cohn-Vargas, 2015). To counteract this issue, Thomas and Stornaiuolo (2016) talk about "restorying the self" (p. 313), the process of reconstructing one's identity in response to societal norms or existing stereotypes. In order to do so, an individual needs to reject harmful narratives and assertively reshape the narratives that silence and exclude diverse perspectives. Certain educators would rather avoid addressing stereotypes out of fear that these might be politically charged and therefore trigger unwanted controversies (Lowe, 2014). However, linking literacy practices, such as vocabulary, reading, and writing skills, to the social world creates opportunities to address issues of equity and inclusion (Whitford, 2024). Stereotype literacy has the potential to create an 'identity safe' zone in which students' individualities are a valuable resource for learning (Cohn-Vargas, 2015).

Stereotypes influence social sustainability by shaping the participation of diverse groups in society. When promoting sustainability, the link between the social aspect and the environment is often under looked. Consequently, efforts for a more inclusive society are undermined and social trust may be destroyed (Ghosh et al., 2023). In order to challenge this, students should engage in broader sustainability debates and connect education to real-world issues. On the other hand, curricula should emphasise

skills like critical thinking, creativity, adaptability, and collaboration, rather than isolating fact-based subjects, to promote social transformation and sustainability-focused learning (Wahyuni et al., 2023). For instance, in a study which examined the integration of SDGs in English language and literature classes at university level, Cordova (2024) revealed how SDG-embedded tasks encouraged students to take initiative, address problems proactively, and foster a sense of ownership of their learning, rather than merely focusing on language comprehension. Social justice initiatives at all levels of educational practice, from personal teaching approaches to institutional policies, can challenge the norms of language education, creating more equitable communities for all (Aylett, 2024).

Stereotypes Literacy as a Critical Literacy Practice

A culture of dialogue in the classroom encourages students to establish shared norms while different perspectives are expressed openly, with both students and teachers feeling that their voices are heard and valued (Ferdman & Graham, 2024). Stereotype literacy, which is one aspect of critical literacy, encourages open conversation. The concept of critical literacy dates back to Freire (1970/2005) who emphasised that in both productive and receptive instances of language use, an individual needs to reflect on the significance of language in day-to-day experiences. This critical reading of the language that surrounds us is crucial to "unpack myths" and "act upon the world" (Luke, 2014, p. 22). Lewison et al. (2002) propose four dimensions of critical literacy: disrupting the commonplace (by looking

at the world through a different set of lenses); interrogating multiple viewpoints (trying to make sense of experiences not only from one's own perspectives but even those of others); engaging with sociopolitical and sociolinguistic issues of a given context; and taking action to promote social justice. Although critical literacy is usually associated with the fourth stage, all stages are interconnected, and it remains an ongoing process of development.

Critical literacy promotes social justice and challenges unequal power relations, giving voice to those in minorities (Zembylas, 2018). Stereotypes are a consequence of unequal power, often created by those in power. Therefore, teachers should challenge these barriers to social justice which often exist implicitly in students' thoughts (Whitford, 2024). Indeed, students' natural sense of fairness and justice may conceal underlying biases, and while students may openly advocate for fairness and individuality, they may still hold subconscious beliefs about how people should behave or look (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016). For students to develop their critical literacy, they do not need to merely be exposed to texts on concepts such as power, inequality, and justice. They need to actively design and produce multimodal texts themselves so that they reflect on their own position and beliefs (Vasquez, 2017). Adopting such practices may transform the world into "a socially constructed text that can be read" (Vasquez et al., 2019, p. 307).

Transforming Students' Cultural Perspectives

Language learning is inherently connected to broader contexts and encompasses more than just linguistic

elements. As learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds come together in a shared learning environment, learners need to develop the ability to navigate between different cultural perspectives and gain an awareness of cultural diversity, transforming their own cultural understanding (Byram, 1997). Stereotype literacy may help individuals recognise, question, and move beyond oversimplified or biased views of other cultures in an iterative process of constructing and deconstructing one's perceptions (Wang, 2008). In doing so, students develop their criticality, which is composed of four elements: critical skills, reflexivity, refashioning of traditions, and transformatory critique (Byram, 2012). Criticality has the potential to transform our classrooms into more equitable environments. For instance, in South Africa, Janks (2009) raised students' awareness of how language was used to oppress and exclude, transforming them into citizens who challenged apartheid. In the United Kingdom, Marsh (2016) used tablets with students aged five or less for them to create their own virtual world and critically reflect on their choices and the reasons behind including or excluding certain elements of society. During Rodriguez Martinez's (2017) read-alouds, students had to critically reflect on well-known fairytales and make connections to their own contexts, leading to interesting discussions on inequality and other social issues in Colombia. Such opportunities led to the development of the individual as a member of society whose conceptualisation of the world is constantly being evaluated and transformed (Byram, 2012).

It is our duty to "recalibrate education so that it serves, rather than undermines, the future" (Sterling, 2021). Teachers

may wish to do so by adopting a framework or model of instruction. Kellner and Share (2019) propose a critical media literacy (CML) framework for students to examine the structures, ideologies, and power dynamics in media that ultimately shape culture and society. The framework involves questioning how media messages perpetuate or challenge oppression, discrimination, and inequality, so that individuals become conscious consumers and creators of media. Muhammad (2020) proposes five pursuits of education: identity, skills, intellectualism, criticality, and joy. Her equity framework for culturally and historically responsive teaching challenges marginalisation and deficit discourse regarding minority communities to honour and build learners' humanity, as they learn to understand themselves and others (Reed Marshall & Bouffard, 2021). Promoting greater equality between and within countries requires a shift in the classroom from viewing culture as a static collection of facts to embracing its multifaceted nature (Porto, 2013). Stereotype literacy can foster a deeper understanding of the complexities of the cultural interaction that happens in the diverse world we live in.

Stereotype Literacy in Action: A Three-Stage Approach

Stereotype literacy facilitates the development of key skills and values such as cultural awareness and criticality (Houghton et al., 2013). These are the foundation for more inclusive classrooms and ultimately more sustainable societies. Given the multiple benefits of integrating stereotype literacy into the ELT classroom, we should be shifting the

attention from *why* to the practical *how*. However, teachers might face significant challenges when trying to incorporate stereotype literacy into their teaching practices, especially due to the salience of deeply ingrained stereotypes shaped by family, media, and experiences. Teachers also struggle with limited teaching resources, as textbooks tend to reproduce rather than challenge prevailing stereotypes (Global Education Monitoring Report Team et al., 2021). To address some of these challenges, we propose a structured, three-phase approach to support teachers' endeavours to develop stereotype literacy. This is based on classroom-tested activities informed by CML (Kellner & Share, 2019) and Muhammad's (2020) equity framework for culturally and historically responsive teaching.

Phase 1: Understanding Stereotypes

This rudimentary phase focuses on developing awareness of stereotypes and is the stage where teachers prioritise tasks that help learners understand how stereotypes contribute to inequality, "a major driver for societal problems and individual dissatisfaction" (UNESCO, 2017, p. 29). Through a series of activities, students can explore some aspects related to the core nature of stereotypes: understanding what stereotypes are, recognising their wide variety, examining the way they function, and acknowledging the effects they have on society.
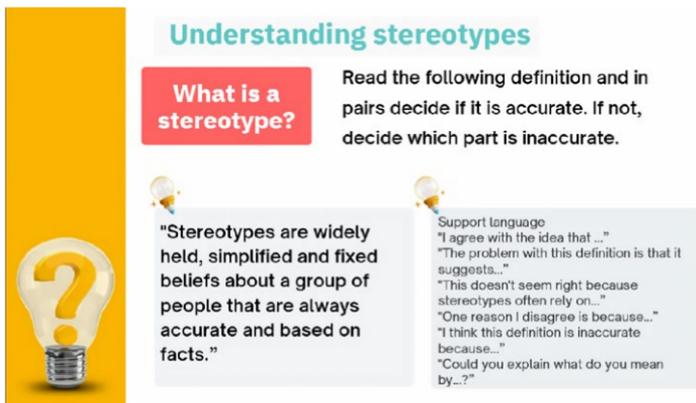
Fact-Checking the Definition

Teachers can share a definition of stereotypes which contains deliberate inaccuracies, such as "Stereotypes are widely held, simplified, and fixed beliefs about a group of

people that are always accurate and based on facts." This definition can be easily adapted to include various terms such as 'bias', 'prejudice', and 'implicit stereotype,' depending on learners' levels and age. Students can discuss the definition in pairs and then collaboratively refine it to provide a more accurate definition. Support language frames can be provided to guide learners' discussion (see Figure 1). Encouraging learners to question the given definition also means enhancing their critical thinking skills, including being analytical, evaluating information, and fact-checking. Through discussions that challenge one-sided, narrow or inaccurate perspectives, learners will be advocating for a more inclusive and equitable society.

Figure 1:

Fact-Checking the Definition of Stereotypes

Using Reflective Prompts

At this stage, it is also essential to make students aware of the dual nature of stereotypes. According to cognitive psychology, stereotypes serve as "energy-saving devices"

and mental shortcuts that simplify and organise social information (Macrae et al., 1994). However, they contribute massively to discrimination and inequality by reducing and distorting the richness of individuality and cultural diversity (Whitford, 2024). Thus, a stereotype literate person needs to understand both their positive cognitive role and their harmful effects on identity and society. To address this, teachers can prepare some reflective prompts that enable learners to become aware of their automatic thinking, generalisations, and implicit bias related to professional roles, gender, culture, and so on. These can include:

- When I think of a scientist/CEO/nurse/teacher, I automatically imagine someone who looks like…

- People usually say that all boys/girls are good at…

- When I travel and meet new people, they often assume things about me based on my nationality, such as…

- I think stereotypes come from…

Sorting Stereotypes Into Categories

A simple exercise like sorting stereotypes into different categories can enable learners to understand the wide variety of stereotypes and become aware that "stereotyping is a natural cognitive process of categorization" (Houghton et al., 2013, p. 1). Through this task, learners can also practise specific language structures to justify their choices. Teachers can provide jumbled lists of various stereotypes belonging to different categories, including but not limited to gender (e.g., Ballet is for girls), culture (e.g., Italians are talkative), race (e.g., African-Americans are gangsters),

and religion (e.g., Muslims are terrorists). Students' mission is to sort them into categories, whereas fast finishers can also create a new category and provide at least one example for it. However, it is important to encourage learners to share the reasoning behind their choices. To maximise the cognitive benefits of such an activity, teachers might also wish to use the *odd one out* variation. Moreover, for lower-level students, providing language support and sentence stems is essential (see Figure 2). This task should end with a reflective discussion on why the stereotypes in each category are harmful or misleading.

Figure 2:

Odd One Out Variation for Stereotype Categories

Useful phrases

- "I think this example belongs to the category of _____ because _____."
- "This doesn't seem to fit here because it's more about _____ than _____."
- "Could this example go under _____ instead?"
- "I'm not sure about this one—what do you think?"
- "Let's compare it with the other examples in this category."

Which one doesn't fit? Exploring stereotype categories

Gender stereotypes	Cultural stereotypes	Racial stereotypes	Socioeconomic stereotypes
All girls like pink.	French people are romantic.	Black people are athletic.	Wealthy people are greedy.
Men are not emotional.	Asian people are good at math.	Women are bad at sports.	Rich people are obsessed with status.
Young people are addicted to social media.	Germans are punctual.	Asians are good at technology.	Black people are less intelligent.
Women can't be scientists.	Italians are talkative.	Immigrants are uneducated.	Poor people are lazy.

Stereotypes can be deeply ingrained, and many of them often "rest on shaky foundations, widely shared but rarely questioned" (Grant, 2021, p. 138). This core stage of stereotype literacy aligns well with Muhammad's (2020) pursuits of education, especially the pursuit of identity. Exploring

their own biases might result in students experiencing 'aha moments' that can lead to changes in their identity. During the planning stage, educators might want to keep a driving question in mind, such as "How can I design my task so that students learn something about themselves and/or others?". This makes learners aware of their own assumptions, even if they believe they are not prone to stereotyping. Going through Phase 1 of stereotype literacy is essential, and if it is treated in a superficial way, learners may lack the essential base on which stereotype literacy can be developed. Without a solid understanding of stereotypes and their impact, students will struggle in later stages to contribute to a "vision of a just and equal world" (UNESCO, 2017).

Phase 2: Deconstructing Stereotypes

During this phase, teachers need to create opportunities for learners to be exposed to a wide range of materials so they can identify and critically analyse stereotypes. For instance, they can break down age-appropriate stereotypes found in commercials, books, and films. These may range from cultural stereotypes in food ads to stereotypical characters in fairy tales or their favourite animated films. Learners can also analyse travel guides from their own culture or target culture. In this case, stereotypes can play a positive educational role, that of "analytical devices to understand a given culture"; however, students can also evaluate how often do stereotypes distort cultural realities (Borghetti, 2013, p. 120). Another way to deconstruct stereotypes is by critically examining coursebooks and other multimodal texts to explore which voices, stories, and

perspectives are represented and which are omitted. This can be done by adopting a CML framework and posing a series of questions, which can be modified depending on students' age and level (Kellner & Share, 2019):

- Who are all the people who made choices that helped create this text?

- How was this text created and distributed?

- How could this text be understood differently?

- What values and cultures are presented in the text?

- Which points of view and ideologies are missing in the text?

- Why was the text created?

- Whom does the text benefit or disadvantage?

In this phase, teachers should go beyond surface-level assumptions which can be easily spotted and provide learners with opportunities to understand and deconstruct the nature of deep-down stereotypes while encouraging them to reflect on their own implicit biases (Grant, 2021; Whitford, 2024).

Phase 3: Flipping the Stereotypical Script

The final phase of our stereotype literacy approach underlies transformative potential because here learners become true agents of social change (Vasquez, 2017). Once learners attain a good level of awareness and understanding, the next step is to create alternative media responses to existing stereotypes in the form of essays, poems, and other multimodal compositions. This action-oriented

stage prompts learners "to plan, implement, and evaluate strategies to reduce inequalities" (UNESCO, 2017). One way to do so in the classroom is by rewriting narratives or fairy tales without stereotypical roles such as 'the handsome white prince' and 'the poor and ignorant black man'. Another possibility is to generate alternative media through original multimodal tasks, such as developing counter ads.

The Unstereotyping Glasses: Counter Ads

Since this is the production phase, classroom members are encouraged to put on these metaphorical 'unstereotyping glasses' which give them a different perspective of the world, allowing them to see what's beneath deeply-ingrained beliefs and to produce ads which challenge existing stereotypes in the media. While students will have already been exposed to stereotypical commercials during the second phase, in this final stage they are given the opportunity to make positive change by creating more equitable and inclusive ads. First, the key parts of an advertisement are elicited from learners: the problem, solution, and call to action. Teachers can also conduct a short class discussion on key persuasion strategies used in commercials, such as emotional appeal, exaggeration, and impactful catchy slogans. Working in groups, learners use a storyboard to identify a stereotype they want to address (the problem), how this can be addressed (the solution), and how others can be encouraged to address it (the call to action). They can be given the freedom to choose the medium they want for their advert; for instance, it can take the form of a poster, short video, or meme. To ensure

adequate language choices, teachers can share support phrases, such as 'Are you tired of seeing stereotypes everywhere you look?', 'Are you ready to truly see the world?', and 'Wear these glasses to see beyond labels!' (see Figure 3). Once their multimodal compositions are ready, learners are encouraged to share them not only within but even beyond the classroom walls; for instance, via the school's website. Creating such counter-stereotypical narratives can reduce unconscious bias by up to 40% and is more attention-grabbing than actual stereotypical narratives (Uhls, 2018).

Figure 3:

Sample Counter Ad Storyboard

Language classes are spaces where students frequently engage with various cultural products. Incorporating stereotype literacy within English language lessons yields

significant implications for language learners, particularly in developing criticality. Learners "may have difficulty resisting the lure of stereotypes, as stereotypes are human normal cognitive processes reinforced by social factors" (Borghetti, 2013, p. 131). Moreover, the root of bias lies in decision-making processes that are fast, unconscious, and intuitive (Kahneman, 2012). Stereotype literacy aims to build more inclusive classrooms, and ultimately more sustainable societies, by enabling students to understand the implications behind common stereotypes, deconstruct them, and create content which is more equitable and just.

Conclusion

In education, there may often be a tendency to prioritise knowledge acquisition, skill development, test preparation, and college readiness over fostering student identity and criticality (Reed Marshall & Bouffard, 2021). This narrow focus undermines the principles of sustainability, which encourage students to address present social challenges as global citizens while ensuring the well-being of future generations. Fostering stereotype literacy is not merely an educational pursuit but a societal necessity that addresses inequalities and fosters more inclusive and diverse societies. Educators should nurture skills which are vital for social sustainability, among which there is the ability to challenge social constructs such as stereotypes and to transform cultural perspectives. The proposed three-phase framework – developing an awareness of prevailing stereotypes, critically deconstructing them,

and producing alternative narratives – provides educators with a clear roadmap for embedding stereotype literacy in their classrooms. As professionals, we need to move beyond traditional approaches to language teaching and embrace methods that empower learners to become agents of change for a more sustainable world. After all, as Freire (1970/2005) aptly says, "Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention; the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (p. 72).

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Playing with Climate: Enhancing Student Motivation while Discussing Sustainability in the ELT Classroom

Anca de Vries

Abstract

We know play is important, in fact, it is so important the United Nations has included the "right to engage in play" in its Convention on the Rights of the Child, and psychologists have linked a lack of play in childhood to mental disorders later in life. Play is also one of the ways to address children's intrinsic motivation to learn, and we know both the quality of their learning as well as that of their work increases if they are more intrinsically motivated. This is important in education in general, but especially when addressing a topic as vital to our students as sustainability. This chapter examines research on motivation and connects it to how ELT teachers can engage the intrinsic motivation of their students through play. For each aspect of motivation identified and discussed, examples will be provided to illustrate how it can be applied when teaching English through the topic of climate. At the end of the

chapter, examples will be given of how to combine these aspects into multiple activities.

Keywords: Motivation; Game Didactics; Play; Classroom Activities

The Importance of Play

Play is important; in fact, it is a right to be able to engage in play when you are a child (UN, 1989), listed in between the other essential rights to have adequate living standards and the right to not be exploited or forced into child labour. Psychologists have argued for a while now that lack of play results in disorders, and studies show that play increases growth, learning, and development. For instance, Barros et al. (2009) show that simply having recess and time to play improves children's behaviour in class, let alone what happens when play is included in classroom activities. In this case it is not play, but game didactics that are being referred to. Adding game elements to classroom activities heightens student motivation and learning. Historically we have always learned through experience and play, and this is still very much the case (Koops, 2017). The difference between play and game didactics has in that sense nothing to do with learning, but with who decides what is learned. When children play, they learn, but they have the freedom to decide what and how. When game didactics are applied in class it is teachers who turn the scheduled learning goals into games, making sure that the play and learning aspects are directed to what students need to learn.

What needs to be included in our classroom activities to have these game-like effects? According to Myers (2009), a goal, obstacles that we need to overcome in order to win, and limiting rules that set us a challenge are vital; all of this needs to take place in a reality that does not directly affect our own reality. The obstacles one needs to overcome can be in the form of other players, but this can also be a chance element, something that is out of a player's own control. Especially for educational games, it is important that students learn from playing a game, but that their success is not necessarily tied to their skills. Take a grammar game, for example. In one version of the game the students actively play with grammar and have fun, as the classroom reality is far away. In another version, there are no chance elements and the outcomes and winning depend completely on the student's grammar. Losing to your classmates would mean you are the worst at grammar or you will get a lower grade, which would be demotivating.

The motivation with which something is done affects how it is done, and also how it is experienced. When talking about motivation the names that come to mind are Deci and Ryan (1980), who since their original study have done multiple studies that all show the same thing: intrinsic motivation is more significant than extrinsic motivation, with motivation coming from having autonomy, addressing a level of competency, and relating to others. Moller and Sheldon (2020) show that this applies to all sorts of settings in their study on intrinsic motivation in sports. One could assume that if you are so good at a sport that it pays for your education and you get to perform on a high level, you will like that sport. After all, you score high on competency

and are part of a team of people that are performing at the same level. However, their study shows that students who had gotten into university on an athletic scholarship not only liked that specific sport less, but they liked it less for years after their studies. Why? Extrinsic motivation. The students in their study simply had to play in order to follow an education and lost the sense of autonomy and the benefits of play and intrinsic motivation. They were not playing to challenge themselves in what Myers (2009) describes as a reality separate from their own; rather, their success in the game directly influenced their chances of receiving a good education and, consequently, securing a better-paying job later in life. They were playing for their future and lost the sense of play.

Playing with Sustainability

But should sustainability be fun? Before we dive deeper into the mechanics of motivation, a valid question is whether we should turn sustainability topics into a game in the first place. Is this how we want to motivate our students to engage with sustainability? The answer is simple: yes. Studies that have been done on climate communication are quite clear: the doomsday scenario does not work. In fact, one can argue that the framing of climate communication focusing on the end of the world or on personal losses has created a paradox. Stoknes (2014) discusses this phenomenon of everyone knowing the world is ending, but because it is so big, no one wants to talk about it. One of the most popular solutions is to make communication about climate change more positive and to propose or

support action. Stoknes (2014) adds that we should also make it easier to act sustainably, that we need to include more storytelling that focuses on hope and inspiration, and also, that we need a new way of measuring and communicating progress. The latter is very much promoted by Hannah Ritchie (2024) in her book *Not the End of the World*. She states that though current generations are doing significantly better than previous ones, communication still focuses on losses instead of progress. For example, agriculture and mining are still responsible for a decrease in natural environments, but less than before and in other areas there is an increase in replanting natural environments. How come newspaper headlines focus on the idea that we are killing ourselves by losing 'the lungs' of our planet, instead of talking about the progress that is being made? Why are new inventions not mentioned? This is a paradox that needs to be broken in order to make sustainability accessible to the masses. In order to do that positive communication and clear statistics that show true pricing and true impact are needed.

Another aspect to keep in mind is the school environment. An educational facility has the obligation to educate. Some of the biggest challenges future generations will have to deal with are linked to the environment and climate change, and teachers have a moral obligation to prepare our students for that future. At the same time, a word such as ecorexia, the overwhelming feeling of not being able to do enough to save the planet, has been added to several dictionaries already. There is a paradox at play. UNICEF (2020, 2022) conducts yearly studies on the mental health of students and includes education in these

reports. Although figures vary by region and year, between 40% and 70% of students report feeling unmotivated by their education, with many even stating that schooling contributes to a decline in their mental health. This shows that both education as well as sustainability often fail to motivate students, even though it is vital that they are motivated for both. If anything, this emphasises the importance of motivation and engaging in play in the classroom, both in general and especially when discussing the topic of sustainability.

Returning to the question at the start of this section, should sustainability be made fun? Yes, keeping it positive, inspiring and easier to act with will actually enhance engagement with this topic. This is important in everyday life and for everyone, but studies show it is especially important for our students.

The Role of Autonomy

So, we have established that play and motivation are important, and so is sustainability, but what do we do with this and how do we motivate our students for sustainability and education in general? First, there is autonomy. Autonomy means having the right to make your own choices or decide for yourself. In education this means that students take ownership of their own products and learning and, to a certain extent, can decide what and how they want to learn. Ownership of learning is very important to address a student's intrinsic motivation to learn (Deci & Ryan, 1980). As a teacher this means one can acknowledge

students' perspectives and preferences, provide students with meaningful choices, or even more, give them a role in decision making. In terms of giving students a role in decision making, Evans and Boucher (2015) have established that a choice has to be relevant and competence-enhancing. To what extent we can allow a student autonomy depends on our teaching context, but wherever possible it is advisable to allow students the right to choose on aspects that matter to them or the task. Irrelevant choices might actually affect the students' motivation negatively.

Classroom activities that heighten a sense of autonomy are first of all class discussions and topic introductions in which students are invited to share their opinion and discuss how they feel about the topic. What would they want to learn about climate change? What do they feel has the biggest impact? There is a reason that most course books when introducing a new topic start with discussion questions; they're a great way to get students involved in the topic and to have them express their views and preferences. Ideally, a teacher can use this input later to really adjust the assignments, but even if not, asking for their input and referring back to it is important for a sense of autonomy.

Giving students choices is another way to heighten their sense of autonomy, and one that might make the teaching job easier too. Teachers make innumerable decisions every day and in every class. Why not have some of these decisions made by students? How they want to do the assignment or plan their time, whether they want to write out an assignment by hand or type it on a computer: these are all choices that students will feel better about making

themselves. If any choice comes with implications, make students aware of those and they can make an informed decision as a group. Even if we cannot offer them a voice in the decision-making process, offering them individual choices within assignments is always an option. A letter of complaint to a polluting company, for example. As teachers of English, we might need a letter to give students feedback on language and style, but it usually does not matter which company they write to. Why not have students pick their own polluting company, or have them choose from a list of pre-selected ones? In this way we still decide on the parameters of the assignment, but within those borders students will perceive a right to make meaningful choices and have a sense of autonomy that will make them more motivated to complete the assignment.

The Role of Competence

Competence is another determining factor for intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1980). To feel motivated to do anything, one first needs to feel as if this is possible. This applies both to the level with which we perceive success when we do something, and to the results we receive. Competence ties in with our need to feel effective interacting with our environment; in other words, do we make progress and do we make a difference? If we have to work on a new language ourselves and we are constantly confronted with the fact that we are not competent and are indeed failing, this will not motivate us to keep learning and to keep making an effort. The opposite applies too. If we are learning a new language but already know some of

the basics, having to do the easiest assignments will not motivate us because we do not feel as if doing this contributes to our learning and level of competence. The same is true for assignments. If we are asked to do an assignment, but the assignment does not contribute to a grade and is not seen by anyone, not even the teacher, what do we do it for? In fact, studies show that most of a student's perceived competence is based on evaluation (Elliot et al., 2000), and that competence rises with positive feedback.

Assignments that will address students' sense of competence are, for example, open assignments that allow them to work on their own level. Restrictive assignments, such as filling in the gaps or answering questions about a text, leave little room to bring in one's own vocabulary or adapt to one's level. Instead, have students read a text and write a summary or make their own reading comprehension questions that they can test on their classmates. Not only will students learn more from creating a reading test and approaching it twice; they can do the assignment on their own level. Writing is usually an activity that allows students to bring their active vocabulary to the table and offer them a chance to work on their individual levels.

Another important aspect of writing to keep in mind is that competence also has to do with the need to interact with the environment. In other words, real world assignments that allow students to feel like they are being heard can have a motivating effect. Have students write a letter to a polluting company, or the government, and actually encourage them to post these letters. Not only will this motivate students to focus more acutely on quality, but the

fact that their letter will be read and potentially answered will motivate them with respect to the topic as well. Any response to this letter will also count as feedback that can heighten a student's competence (Elliot et al., 2000), though more likely based on content than language.

The Role of Relatedness

Relatedness has to do with our feeling of connecting to others while we are in the activity we are doing (Deci & Ryan, 1980). We are, of course, always connected to others, but imagine doing an individual sport such as swimming. There might be people by the poolside, there will be people you interact with about your sport, and of course during tournaments you will swim against others. But at what point are you really connecting with them? Even during a race, it is usual for both swimmers to stick to their own lanes and not interact. Now imagine water polo. There are still people by the poolside, but you are also now a part of a team that you are constantly communicating with and with whom you share a common goal. Even your opponents will be interacting with you, trying to take the ball or overtake you. During a game of water polo, you are connecting with others and that activates our sense of relatedness.

Connectedness in our assignments or classrooms is easy to emphasise or create. Have students work together. Even if the nature of an activity is individualistic, such as reading or studying vocabulary, it is still possible to add an interactive element. Have students study together, for

example. Exchanging notes or giving each other feedback is adding a sense of relatedness to an individual assignment. Discussing reading texts or questions is another way to add connectedness to an activity, even if this is held after the main activity itself. Another form of connectedness to consider using is competition; however, this might not work well for everybody as some are keener on collaborative play (Koops, 2017).

What cannot be missed is that when discussing connectedness and the 'other', this does not just mean classmates. Though direct and interactive connectedness might be strongest, sustainability is a global issue that concerns everybody. So, when Deci and Ryan (1980) first identified relatedness and the importance of connecting to others in activities, this does not exclude anyone outside the classroom. This ties in with what Stoknes (2014) said on the importance of positive storytelling. We need to put faces on experiences for them to matter to us, and our students need to connect not just to the natural phenomena relating to climate change, but to the people that it affects.

The Role of Play

Play is vital in the classroom and as discussed at the start of this chapter, play has a few characteristics that are important to keep in mind. These include a goal and limiting rules, obstacles to overcome, and that play does not affect our actual reality. Every educational activity tends to have a goal and limiting rules. Other elements are easy to add and we can even take those from existing games

or game-like activities. Think of a game that all students know and like to play, and rework (aspects of) this into an educational activity. It is important to keep in mind the difference between gamification (i.e., turning an entire activity into a game) and game didactics (i.e., applying game elements to classroom situations). Creating games can be time consuming, especially if you are just starting, but it is well worth it and they can often be reused. Adding game elements to classroom activities is easier. Think of a competitive or chance element, or slightly changing the setting of the assignment so there is a clear different reality in which the future of our planet depends on good use of grammar or doing a vocabulary builder assignment.

Examples of this in the classroom are adding a chance element to presentations and having students' order of presentations or topics being decided by a small lottery. There are websites that offer visually appealing name pickers and wheels of fortune that students can spin themselves. Another option is adding a price for whichever aspect of your assignment you want to highlight; the fastest student or the one making the fewest errors will get a small treat or bonus. Even working with levels can enhance the game element. After all, we measure our success in a lot of online games in terms of how many levels we have reached and completed, receiving rewards and bonuses as we go.

Challenge 1

It is ideal to combine all four roles and create activities that will actively get our students involved with the climate and climate change. One way you could do this is by combining

an element of language learning with an aspect of climate information. Did you know, for example, that Bolsen et al. (2019) discovered that the source of a text on climate communication affects how we read it and to what extent we believe it? This could make a good starting point for a mini study. Tell students about climate communication, discuss what it does to them, and have them research and read about the climate. What do they notice about language use? Which words convey negativity and how could they be replaced? Now ask them what progress or aspects of climate change they would like to write about. Give them limiting rules and some obstacles. For instance, they have to use reported speech, certain tenses, and at least three different sources. Have all final texts presented in class, and have students or parents vote anonymously on which text they find the most appealing. Assignments like these are easily adapted for younger learners by focusing on appropriate news sources. They can even be adjusted to academic contexts by having students first research the field of climate communication.

Challenge 2

As discussed previously, it is important in both climate communication as well as in creating a level of competence that students focus on what they can do about the issue themselves. Ask students to first discuss the climate and what they feel matters, then add elements to this list yourself. Then have them come up with solutions that they themselves could enact, and solutions the school or educational facility could engage in to fight climate change and

make us look after our planet. Have them write out these suggestions and make them present them, either verbally, graphically, or in writing, to school management. Management, or the teacher, will choose the most practical ideas and these will be implemented. One can even add the need we have to measure and evaluate climate actions and have students come up with a way to measure success and reflect critically on our environmental actions. The beauty of competence and making sure that students do real world activities is that whatever is done in the classroom, will have an effect outside of it too. Whatever activities they come up with will be seen and hopefully inspire other students or school staff.

Challenge 3

In most cases giving students autonomy can take some of the pressure off us teachers. Instead of coming up with a game ourselves, why not have students do it themselves? Discuss with them the need for positive storytelling and hearing examples of progress and hope, or have them research such positive narratives. Next, have them focus on an aspect of climate change they themselves care about; whether that is air quality, biodiversity, or plastic waste, have them create a positive game based on it. Instead of a card game on animals going extinct, have them make one on animals that almost went extinct but that we have been able to rescue. Or do a 'who am I' game involving climate advocates and activists, or a boardgame on happy climate stories or tips on how to avoid using plastic. Students will experience a lot of autonomy, connectedness

and competence while creating these games, and they will think about the issues at hand while making them. Of course, it is important that all games are played in a way that makes sure that there is positive climate communication in our classroom.

Conclusion

Play is fundamental to learning and is recognised as a universal right. When intentionally facilitated by educators, play promotes well-being and supports more effective and efficient learning by activating learners' intrinsic motivation. For play to serve this function, it must meet students' needs for autonomy, competence, relatedness, and playful engagement. While intrinsic motivation is important across educational contexts, it is particularly salient when addressing sustainability, a topic of immense significance for all learners, yet one that remains overshadowed by negative associations. Emphasising these negative aspects does little to empower or inspire students. Accordingly, this chapter has sought to demonstrate the value of integrating play into sustainability-focused learning experiences in the English language classroom.

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Sustainable Teacher Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: Reaching Those in Need

Abel Eleojo Ochika
Linda Ruas

Abstract

Due to the general lack of training opportunities from Ministries of Education across Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), many teachers of English rely on external experts for training and financial support for travel to events, struggle with adapting resources, and lack autonomy in their professional development – a model that is unsustainable. Recognising this, this chapter highlights the need for sustainable approaches to address the huge inequities in access to quality training in SSA. Empowering teachers to cascade training and knowledge to others is crucial, alongside reducing reliance on costly face-to-face training by transitioning to diverse forms of online training. Decentralising professional development through communities of practice (CoPs) and mentoring local teachers to lead sessions is also essential. Initiatives by the British Council SSA, TeachingEnglish resources, and Africa ELTA,

exemplify these goals through courses, funding for projects, and decentralised practices. This chapter explores teacher association projects, Telegram and WhatsApp CoPs, mentoring courses, and webinar faculties, highlighting their challenges and successes.

Keywords: cascading, decentring, mentoring, training, Sub-Saharan Africa

Introduction

Do English Language Teaching (ELT) professionals in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) need to be trained by outsiders? Do Ministries of Education provide enough support? Or can teachers – with the help and support of English Language Teacher Associations (ELTAs) and related organisations – manage and deliver training themselves in sustainable ways? In this chapter, we plan to review and discuss several on-going initiatives that are moving in a more sustainable direction.

Many organisations and individuals have been inspired to research this area as part of plans to achieve the UN (n.d.) Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education – to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. This is clearly an enormous challenge in SSA. UNESCO's (2025) Institute for Statistics (UIS) observes that the region experiences the greatest levels of educational exclusion worldwide. More than 20% of children aged roughly 6 to 11 are not attending school, and this figure rises to around one-third for adolescents aged 12 to 14. UIS data show that nearly

60% of those aged 15 to 17 are out of school. Without swift and targeted interventions, these numbers are expected to increase, as the region's school-age population continues to grow and places additional pressure on already strained education systems. Teacher training and professional development are often limited or under-resourced, and the digital divide remains particularly stark, with high internet costs and low connectivity. Recent cuts to international aid are likely to further reduce available funding.

From a postcolonial perspective, responsibility for training English teachers has traditionally been assumed by English-speaking countries, particularly through major ELT industries in the UK and the US – for example, commercial publishers, the British Council, and the American Embassy. However, the distinction between native and non-native varieties of English has increasingly blurred, and there is now much greater acceptance of Englishes beyond British and American norms, with many contexts shifting toward English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) as the primary target.

Historically, native-speaker trainers were often flown long distances to deliver training based on methodologies, materials, and assumptions developed in very different educational environments – approaches that were not always appropriate or relevant. Class size is a clear example: while European classrooms may average 20–30 learners, classes in parts of SSA can reach 50–60 students or more. Investing instead in the development of local trainers and drawing on their contextual knowledge and lived experience has far greater potential for long-term impact.

Furthermore, the shift to online delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic, which reduced international travel and associated costs, demonstrated the feasibility of more sustainable models of teacher development.

One notable initiative in this area is 'Decentring ELT,' an initiative launched in 2018 by the A. S. Hornby Educational Trust. Its aim is to empower teachers worldwide to draw on their own knowledge, experience, and local expertise rather than relying on external 'experts,' often from the UK or the US. The British Council has collaborated closely with the Trust in developing resources, delivering training events, and funding projects that align with these principles of sustainable, locally grounded continuing professional development (CPD).

In the remainder of this chapter, we examine the successes and challenges emerging from work undertaken with teacher associations, the British Council, the A. S. Hornby Educational Trust, and Africa ELTA – the award-winning network of English language teachers across the continent. These examples highlight both the potential and the complexities involved in fostering sustainable, context-sensitive teacher development.

Background, Definitions and Literature Review

The *Cambridge English Dictionary* offers two definitions of sustainability: "the quality of being able to continue over a period of time" and "the quality of causing little or no damage to the environment and therefore able to continue

for a long time." In this discussion, both dimensions are relevant. A key question, then, is how sustainability can be meaningfully measured. One recent and highly relevant study addresses this issue in an area that remains under-researched: the carbon footprint of teacher training in Rwanda (D'Rozario et al., 2024). Surprisingly, the study found that the online components of the programme generated more carbon emissions than the face-to-face training. This was largely due to the purchase of new software required for the project, illustrating that assumptions about the lower environmental impact of online learning need closer scrutiny. The authors make several recommendations, including prioritising the use of existing digital tools, maintaining hardware carefully, re-using equipment whenever possible, and incorporating the carbon footprint of devices and infrastructure into programme evaluations – factors often overlooked in sustainability assessments.

Cascading, Communities of Practice (CoPs), decentring, and mentoring – where do these practices come from? And how do they relate to making the training of English teachers more sustainable?

Cascading, the practice of training a small group of people who then go on to train others in successive waves, has its roots in large organisations – such as Adult Education in the UK – that have been required to train increasing numbers of teachers with limited funding. This model has often been viewed as suitable for SSA and other developing contexts, and has been widely used in the British Council's (2018) Train the Trainer programmes. However, a key

challenge with cascading is the risk of dilution: as training is passed from one group to the next, essential content, quality, or methodology may be lost or altered.

To counter this, an effective strategy is to support cascading with CoPs, which offer ongoing support, opportunities for clarification, and collaborative development, helping ensure that the original training is reinforced, adapted appropriately, and sustained over time. CoPs were first named and described by Lave and Wenger (1991) while studying apprenticeship as a learning model. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) define CoPs as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (p. 2). These groups can of course be online, usually on WhatsApp or Telegram.

Decentring can be effectively connected to both cascading models of teacher development and CoPs, helping to ensure that teachers' cultural and contextual realities are fully respected and represented. Grounded in critical pedagogy and postcolonial theory, the concept of decentring draws heavily on the work of Paulo Freire (1970/2005), who emphasised dialogue, local agency, and the dismantling of top-down, externally imposed educational models. The A.S. Hornby Educational Trust has placed decentring at the heart of its practices, events, and funding initiatives. This approach represents a deliberate shift away from Eurocentric or Western-dominant methodologies and training paradigms toward the valuing of local expertise, lived experience, and community-driven practices. Through the Trust's Decentring conferences and webinar series,

teachers worldwide have showcased small-scale, contextually responsive projects that demonstrate how locally grounded knowledge can enrich and transform ELT practice (Padwad & Smith, 2023).

Local practices, contexts, and ideas can serve as powerful sources of inspiration for others. This is evident in the Hornby/British Council publication on creating change through English language teaching (Ruas, 2020), which documents teachers' efforts to address pressing community issues. For example, one teacher in Cabo Verde developed lessons to tackle teenage pregnancy, while others in Cameroon focused on drugs awareness and disease prevention. Similar work includes integrating climate action into English lessons in Kenya and supporting learners in areas affected by conflict in Sudan and Mali. Such initiatives demonstrate how addressing local challenges through English teaching can contribute to long-term sustainability in teacher development. When teachers see themselves as capable of identifying relevant issues and designing context-appropriate solutions, they gain a sense of agency and ownership. This, in turn, strengthens the sustainability of training programmes by grounding them in local realities and empowering teachers to use English as a tool for meaningful social impact.

Mentoring, closely connected to cascading models of professional development, plays a crucial role when introducing teachers to new practices such as classroom research, conference presenting, and blogging. Typically, a more experienced mentor supports one or more mentees over a sustained period, helping them build confidence and

gradually develop independence. This approach has been implemented successfully in several contexts. For example, the British Council's STEM (Supporting Teachers' English through Mentoring) project in Rwanda used mentoring to develop teachers' linguistic and pedagogical skills. Similarly, Africa ELTA, initially in collaboration with EVE (Equal Voices in ELT), has run mentoring programmes designed to support more women teachers in preparing and delivering conference presentations. Over the past four years, these women have, in turn, mentored many others across SSA, and the organisation has now recognised the importance of extending the model by encouraging these women to mentor male teachers as well. Additionally, IATEFL's Research SIG (RESIG) has been particularly active in supporting teachers to engage with action research. As demonstrated by Ekembe (2024), structured mentoring can be pivotal in helping teachers begin their research journeys and build sustainable habits of inquiry.

Another important area is digital upskilling, essential for helping teachers bridge the digital divide (Lightfoot, n.d.). Strengthening teachers' digital competence is crucial for expanding their access to online resources, enabling participation in virtual training opportunities, and improving overall efficiency in their professional practice. This priority has been central to the recent round of British Council–funded Teacher Association projects across SSA, in which trainers travelled to remote regions to provide digital skills training and support teachers in accessing TeachingEnglish materials. Looking ahead, attention is increasingly turning to artificial intelligence and its potential to support teaching and learning (Edmett et al., 2024).

However, meaningful engagement with AI requires far more than simply introducing new tools: teachers need reliable access to devices and data, as well as training that is grounded in decentred, context-sensitive approaches such as cascading models and mentoring within CoPs. Without targeted investment in these areas, the digital divide risks widening further, limiting teachers' ability to benefit from emerging technologies.

Practical Initiatives

There are many practical ways that we have direct experience of. It seems logical to divide these into different sections: digital solutions; bottom-up empowerment and support; and funding and enabling.

Digital Solutions

One of the most successful and sustainable digital solutions for teacher development is the shift from face-to-face training to online delivery. Moving training online significantly reduces travel and accommodation costs for both course providers and participants, eliminates the need for physical venues, and allows for more frequent and flexible professional development sessions. The ELTAN webinar faculty offers an excellent example of a self-sustaining model of online training.

Established by Abel Ochika, the faculty was created to ensure quality control within the English Language Teachers Association of Nigeria's (ELTAN) expanding professional development programme. Inspired by the preparatory

sessions the earliest presenters completed with a consultant, ELTAN introduced a formal rehearsal system. Every webinar presenter now participates in a mandatory dry run, guided by faculty members, many of whom were themselves recruited after demonstrating strong presentation skills during these rehearsals. A dedicated WhatsApp group allows faculty members to share feedback, updates, and useful tips, while also coordinating the moderation and facilitation of webinars in line with ELTAN's standards.

Access to high-quality resources is also essential for teachers' professional growth. However, while the British Council's global TeachingEnglish website provides extensive materials, its broad focus can be overwhelming or less relevant for teachers in SSA who often work with limited resources. To address this gap, the Africa TeachingEnglish website was launched in 2021. The site serves as a repository of African-centred content – lesson plans, classroom materials, resource books, research reports, and case studies – many produced through teacher association initiatives in partnership with the British Council's English Connects programme. Its consistently high traffic reflects the success of sustained efforts to populate the platform with relevant, contextualised resources.

Another British Council initiative, Explore TeachingEnglish, supports teachers in navigating both the global and African TeachingEnglish websites. Many teachers are unfamiliar with using smartphones to access online materials, so free four-week training courses delivered through Telegram and WhatsApp provide daily tasks that help

participants learn how to search, select, and adapt digital resources for their own lessons. These courses have reached up to 350 teachers at a time, demonstrating the scalability and effectiveness of mobile-based professional development.

Social media has also proven to be a powerful tool for connecting teachers across the region. The SSA Teachers' CoP on Telegram functions as a dynamic space for ongoing professional dialogue. Here, experts lead text-based discussions on topics aligned with the English Connects programme, enabling teachers to share experiences, strategies, and challenges in a supportive environment. The CoP has become a hub for some of the most intrinsically motivated educators in SSA, offering opportunities for both synchronous engagement around webinars and asynchronous participation before and after events. Its text-only format ensures accessibility for new and existing members alike, fostering an inclusive community rooted in collaboration and shared learning.

Bottom-Up Empowerment and Support

While online solutions offer significant benefits, they cannot meet every professional development need. Many teachers require personalised support, which is more effectively delivered through initiatives such as country-wide CoPs. The latter, whether meeting face-to-face or through WhatsApp groups, enable trainers to cascade learning from workshops, monitor how teachers are applying new practices, and provide tailored support for ongoing development. Two ELTAs, ATER in Rwanda and SEELPA in

Ethiopia, centred their 2024–2025 British Council–funded projects on establishing and strengthening CoPs. Their approach involved training CoP leaders first and then ensuring sustained, context-sensitive support. This model enhances sustainability because assistance reaches the teachers who need it most, and responsive guidance is built into the structure.

The British Council has increasingly prioritised sustainability in its SSA ELTA project grants, encouraging ELTAs to create self-perpetuating systems that remain active after funding ends. Several ELTAs, including CAMELTA in Cameroon, have used their grants to send trainers to remote, underserved regions to deliver face-to-face digital upskilling workshops. Training has often been aligned with TeachingEnglish pathways – theme-based, now quarterly collections of courses and resources including free online courses, webinars, articles, lesson plans, and more for teachers and teacher educators. Teachers were guided step-by-step through registering for courses, accessing materials, and using them effectively in their own classrooms. Small stipends for mobile data enabled participation, and post-training support was provided through WhatsApp groups. Similar initiatives by ELTAN (Nigeria), SEELPA, and WVAAE (Ethiopia) have seen high engagement; in some remote Ethiopian regions, teachers trained by WVAAE completed more than ten online courses each.

Working closely with the British Council, the A.S. Hornby Educational Trust also funds decentring-oriented ELTA projects. Recent grants have supported small-scale, locally driven initiatives in the DRC, Nigeria, Cameroon, Zambia,

Rwanda, Malawi, Mozambique, and beyond. ELTAs receive guidance in designing sustainable, collaborative projects and share their outcomes through reports, webinars, conference presentations, and publications. The Trust prioritises projects that address local challenges with locally developed solutions. One example is the ELTA-GB project in Guinea-Bissau, which established face-to-face CoPs to explore implementation of a new syllabus (Padwad & Smith, 2023). The Trust also funds selected teachers to study for an MA in ELT in the UK, after which they return home to implement similar capacity-building initiatives.

The authors have worked with a range of mentoring programmes in the region, including Africa ELTA's (n.d.) mentoring for female conference presenters, small-scale action research, and the development of Open Educational Resources (OERs). Other notable initiatives include the mentoring of women teachers through ATES in Senegal and teacher-research mentoring projects in Cameroon, organised in collaboration with IATEFL RESIG and CAMELTA. These programmes demonstrate how targeted mentoring can empower teachers, strengthen professional communities, and sustain long-term development across SSA.

Funding and Enabling

A third essential form of support for sustainable teacher development is funding and enabling, both of which remain highly valued and necessary. While ELTA members, mentors, and trainers contribute voluntarily to the initiatives described above, it is unrealistic to expect them

to shoulder financial responsibility for projects on their own. Thoughtfully managed funding can significantly enhance the sustainability and long-term impact of professional development programmes.

The U.S. Regional English Language Officers (RELOs) provide a strong example of such enabling support. Operating American Corners, American Centers, and Binational Centers across nearly every African country, they offer physical spaces equipped with computers and Wi-Fi that local trainers can reserve for training events. These centres are often staffed by English Language Fellows, who also contribute through courses, teacher support, and resource sharing. In addition, the OPEN (Online Professional English Network) programme offers free webinars and MOOCs accessible to teachers remotely. RELOs also provide financial support to ELTAs for training events and projects, promote awareness of American culture, and coordinate regional upskilling initiatives such as the 2024 ELTA leadership course. Furthermore, they fund exchange programmes, including the Fulbright Teacher Exchanges, which broaden teachers' professional horizons.

Funding and expert guidance for small-scale action or exploratory research have increasingly become powerful mechanisms for teacher engagement and capacity building. Programmes run by IATEFL Research SIG and Africa ELTA have supported teachers in developing basic research skills, addressing local challenges, and disseminating their findings through publications, webinars, and social media. One British Council–supported initiative in 2022 involved teachers from Sudan, Nigeria, and

Ethiopia investigating issues such as strategies to increase girls' participation in class and ways to improve learner motivation.

The British Council's PRELIM (Partnered Remote Language Improvement) series further illustrates successful funding-supported collaboration. Across three project cycles, UK institutions partnered with several SSA ELTAs to improve teachers' language proficiency, provide pedagogical training, and co-create locally relevant teaching materials. Examples include Grade 7 lesson plans for Mozambique (MELTA) and a set of freely available lesson plans for Grades 7–9 developed with ELTAN.

Finally, the 2024–2025 Sub-Saharan Africa British Council ELTA projects, supporting 11 ELTAs, represent a comprehensive model of sustained, well-guided development. Led by Julia Stanton (English Connects Lead, SSA) and Steve Diop (Open Learning Manager, SSA), these projects were supported from the proposal stage through implementation, with additional guidance from British Council SSA consultants. A clear emphasis was placed on sustainability, underpinned by a wide range of high-quality resources and institutional support, an approach that offers a strong model for future initiatives.

Implications for the Future

Sustainable teacher development remains a critical issue in SSA, where educators face numerous challenges in accessing CPD. The responses from the dataset elicited via a Google Form shared on the English Connects WhatsApp

CoP for teacher educators and Telegram CoP for teachers reveal key themes related to sustainability, effectiveness, and accessibility of teacher development programmes, as well as the structural and systemic barriers encountered by educators.

The survey included responses from educators in Nigeria, Kenya, Egypt, Ethiopia, Cameroon, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, and Morocco. They provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities for sustainable teacher development across SSA.

What Constitutes Sustainable Teacher Development?

Our respondents broadly define sustainable teacher development as a continuous and long-term process that ensures teachers remain professionally equipped. Many emphasise that sustainability requires structured, recurring opportunities rather than one-off training sessions. To them, the notion of sustainability is tied to programmes that provide ongoing engagement, follow-up mechanisms, and opportunities for collaboration. Several respondents cite the British Council's and U.S. Embassy-sponsored workshops, online courses, and peer-learning networks as effective development programmes.

Importance of External Expertise and Resources

In SSA, access to quality resources and training often varies, hence the traditional reliance on external trainers. The first poll indicates that 90% of respondents consider

external expert training "very important" to their professional development. This may be because 83% of the respondents consider "lack of resources" as a primary barrier to taking charge of their development. These findings suggest the need for affordable, scalable, and context-specific interventions, such as partnerships with international organisations like the British Council, US RELO, IATEFL and TESOL International to provide localised training and materials. A blend of both external and local training may well be the answer.

Confidence in Adapting and Using Teaching Resources

Our data also reveals that 61% of respondents "feel confident" in adapting teaching resources to meet their students' needs, while others seek occasional guidance. This reflects a foundational skill set among educators but also highlights the need for periodic support to ensure effective resource utilisation. Sustainable strategies could include structured mentorship programmes and online platforms offering adaptable materials and tutorials. Many educational contexts are switching from analogue systems to more digitised systems; hence, educators need to be equipped with the tacit knowledge of maximising accessible technology for their classroom experiences.

Comfort with Professional Development

While 88% of the teacher educators reported feeling "very comfortable" with taking charge of their professional development, some teachers (especially inexperienced) are

"not comfortable" with managing their development. Sustainable strategies must, therefore, be adaptable, considering the varied confidence levels and access to support across SSA. As much as possible, advocacy to government officials and education-based initiatives should be made to encourage support to teachers who really want to improve themselves but do not have the resources.

Barriers to Self-Directed Development

The data reveals significant barriers to educators independently managing their professional growth. Alongside a lack of resources, "lack of guidance" and "lack of time" also rank highly. This indicates systemic issues, such as overloaded schedules and insufficient institutional support. Addressing these barriers requires strategies like flexible, microlearning opportunities, which allow educators to engage in development activities at their convenience. A recurring challenge highlighted in the responses is the financial burden of professional development. Many teachers lack the necessary funding to enrol in CPD programmes, attend conferences, or acquire relevant teaching materials. Time constraints, logistical barriers, and uneven opportunities across regions further limit access. In underserved areas, limited internet connectivity and lack of government support hinder participation in online CPD programs. Additionally, some respondents indicate that development programmes often favour certain groups, leaving out a significant portion of educators who may benefit.

The respondents suggest several strategies to improve CPD accessibility in more remote communities. Peer-learning models, where trained teachers cascade knowledge to their colleagues, are considered effective. Structured mentorship programmes and professional learning communities provide opportunities for teachers to engage in continuous improvement. The responses highlight that fostering a culture of knowledge-sharing and mentorship strengthens teacher efficacy and professional resilience. Some also propose increasing interactive online training to accommodate those who cannot travel for in-person workshops, together with financial support for broadband data. Respondents emphasise that CPD should integrate localised content to ensure contextual relevance. Follow-up mechanisms, such as mentorship and evaluation systems, are necessary to measure programme impact and improve implementation.

Implications for Policy and Institutional Support

The discussion around who should fund CPD is crucial. While some respondents believe institutions or governments should bear all the costs, others express the need for shared responsibility. Governments and institutions could subsidise essential training, while educators take ownership of specific skill-building activities. Policies that integrate CPD into school schedules and budgets can reduce dependency on external funding and encourage long-term investment in professional growth.

Recommendations

Sustainable professional development in SSA hinges on addressing systemic barriers such as resource scarcity, lack of guidance, and time constraints. By leveraging technology, fostering partnerships, and implementing context-sensitive policies, educators can be empowered to take charge of their growth. These strategies will not only enhance teaching quality but also contribute to the broader goal of educational excellence in the region. Here are some recommendations for sustainable practices in ELT in SSA:

- Collaborative Partnerships: Encourage continuous partnership with organisations like the British Council, US RELO, TESOL International, A. S. Hornby Educational Trust and IATEFL to create resource hubs and training tailored to the SSA's needs.

- Microlearning Models: Develop bite-sized, flexible learning modules that accommodate educators' time and budget constraints.

- Blended Learning: Combine online and in-person training to maximise accessibility and cost-effectiveness.

- Institutional Policies: Advocate for mandatory, budgeted CPD programmes within schools and educational systems.

- Localised Mentorship: Establish peer-to-peer mentorship networks to provide ongoing guidance and support. This is needed especially for the on-going training and support of new ELTA committee members to take over the momentum created.

- Exchange programmes: Improve on existing exchange programmes (for teachers and students) within SSA and more educationally advanced contexts.

Conclusion

Sustainability in professional development for teachers in SSA requires long-term well-structured planning, effective monitoring, and stable funding. All this relies on the sustained motivation of teachers and other volunteers to devote time and effort in spite of very low salaries, often teaching with few resources, where data and electricity is often not the norm. Whatever else can be done to maintain the motivation and generally excellent engagement and interest of ELT teachers in SSA is to be highly recommended. Although many teachers in SSA suggest that sustainable teacher development depends on government policies that prioritise teacher education as an ongoing investment rather than an occasional intervention, teachers themselves, and all stakeholders must work in-sync to prioritise quality education for their students. While several initiatives show promise, barriers such as financial limitations, logistical challenges, and unequal access must be addressed by a commitment to collaborative learning, digital integration, and long-term strategic planning to make teacher development in SSA more sustainable, equitable, and effective.

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Connecting English Learners to the SDGs through Speech Analysis

Marissa A. Foti

Abstract

This chapter explores innovative strategies for integrating the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms and curricula. Framed by the United Nations' definition of sustainability, it highlights speech analysis as a dynamic tool to connect language learning with critical global issues. The chapter offers adaptable approaches, teacher-guided or student-led, to weave SDG themes into lessons, fostering critical thinking, effective communication, and real-world application. By blending theory with practice, this chapter offers educators tools to contextualise global challenges, fostering learners' engagement with global issues and preparing them to address pressing risks and contribute to a sustainable future beyond the English classroom.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals; ELT; Sustainability; Speech Analysis; Practical Activities

Introduction

Imagine stepping into a classroom where language learning goes beyond grammar and vocabulary and becomes a means to make a real difference in the world. Where every lesson connects learners to global topics, inspiring them to think critically and communicate passionately about the issues that shape their future. This is the power of integrating the UN's (2015) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into English Language Teaching (ELT) – an approach that transforms the classroom into a meaningful learning space and prepares students for a resilient future.

Sustainability extends beyond environmental concerns to include economic stability, social equity, and the well-being of our future generations. The UN defines sustainability as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This aligns with what we aim to do as educators: to empower, enlighten, and equip the next generation with the tools and skills they need to thrive in an increasingly complex and uncertain future.

In recent years, a growing sense of unease about an "uncertain future" has spread worldwide, driven by compounding global crises. As societies grapple with instability, the need for education that fosters critical thinking, ethical responsibility, and global citizenship has never been greater. The World Economic Forum's *Global Risks Report* (2025) identifies the most pressing risks we will face in both the short and long term, dividing the risks into 2-year and 10-year subsets. Educators should be aware of these risks to

better prepare students, equipping them with the insight to navigate future challenges and the skills to participate responsibly in shaping a sustainable future.

According to the report, the most urgent risks the world will face in the next two years include the spread of misinformation and disinformation, extreme weather events, armed conflict, societal division, and cyber threats (World Economic Forum, 2025). These challenges are already influencing students' perceptions, behaviours, and futures. They also present critical opportunities for us as educators to integrate discussions on media literacy, digital ethics, climate resilience, conflict resolution, and global cooperation. Addressing these topics can empower students to think critically and engage responsibly with these issues. While these 2-year risks demand urgent responses, they also foreshadow deeper, more systemic crises looming in the coming decade.

Over the next ten years, the top global risks are projected to shift almost *entirely toward environmental concern*s, with extreme weather events, biodiversity loss, critical change to Earth's systems, and natural resource shortages dominating the list (World Economic Forum, 2025). The transition in priority from immediate geopolitical and technological threats to climate-related existential risks underscores a sobering reality: without intervention, environmental degradation will become the defining crisis of the 21st century. This crisis transcends borders, affecting all nations, economies, and societies, making it imperative that global education frameworks prepare learners not only to understand these risks but to take whatever

action possible toward sustainable solutions. It is an SOS from Planet Earth and we as educators need to heed the call.

Amid these global challenges, the UN introduced the SDGs in 2015, a set of 17 global objectives designed to address poverty, climate change, and social inequalities by 2030. More than just policy targets, the SDGs serve as a framework for ethical decision-making, problem-solving, and global collaboration. As English remains the world's lingua franca, it serves as a powerful vehicle for cross-cultural dialogue and international cooperation, making ELT a dynamic space for such discourse. By integrating the SDGs into ELT, educators equip students with the linguistic tools, ethical grounding, and analytical skills necessary to engage with and contribute to solving the world's most pressing challenges.

To translate these broad objectives into meaningful classroom experiences, ELT serves as a platform for powerful discussions and real-world engagement. Drawing from strategies that I have implemented successfully in my classrooms, this chapter demonstrates how SDG-themed speech analysis can expose students to authentic language while amplifying the voices of inspiring change-makers. This approach sparks curiosity, deepens empathy, and empowers students to become informed global citizens. After all, what better way to teach a language than to give students the language to change the world?

My Personal SDG Journey

My introduction to the UN SDGs came while taking my Model UN students on a field trip to the UN Headquarters in New York City in 2016, just one year after their launch. The students and I toured the building, sat in on live negotiations with headphones on, listening to professional translations, soaking in the weight of international diplomacy in action.

After lunch in the UN cafeteria, we were unexpectedly ushered into a small screening room and shown a promotional video on the 17 SDGs. At the time, the message felt like polished advocacy: important, yet distant. I struggled to see how these broad, ambitious goals related to my role as an educator, especially as they initially seemed more political than pedagogical.

It was not until I studied Global Education Theory, particularly Fernando Reimers' (2009, 2020) work, that I realised the SDGs were not just aspirational targets – they were a framework that could be adapted across disciplines, subjects, and educational settings. The SDGs offer a flexible instructional framework that can be adapted to diverse teaching styles, learner needs, and curriculum goals. Teachers can introduce them through structured, teacher-guided lessons or use them as launchpads for student-led, project-based learning. They can be leveraged for quick background-building activities or expanded into comprehensive, interdisciplinary units that connect subjects like math, science, history, psychology, and language arts. Educators can zoom out for a broad, global perspective or zoom in to make learning personally relevant – an

approach often referred to as 'glocalisation' (Robertson, 1995), which examines global challenges through a local lens to promote meaningful community action.

In ELT settings, the SDGs align naturally with established frameworks such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) models (Short & Echevarria, 1999), enriching instruction through listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities centred on meaningful global topics. With 17 goals covering diverse themes, students can explore issues that resonate with their lives, communities, and personal passions, fostering deeper engagement and service learning. No matter how they are incorporated, the SDGs provide a pathway for students to think critically about global challenges, recognise their role within interconnected systems, and feel empowered to contribute to solutions, both locally and globally.

That same week, I printed and laminated all 17 SDG icons and created a vibrant 'SDG wall' in my classroom – a visual reference that became central to engaging students with sustainability throughout the year (see Figure 1). What began as a vague awareness quickly evolved into a guiding structure that anchored my ELT curriculum. The SDG wall consisted of free printable communications materials from the UN (n.d.) website. My students have used this resource in different ways. For instance, they have analysed a presidential campaign speech and matched quotes to appropriate SDGs.

Figure 1:

SDG Wall in My Classroom
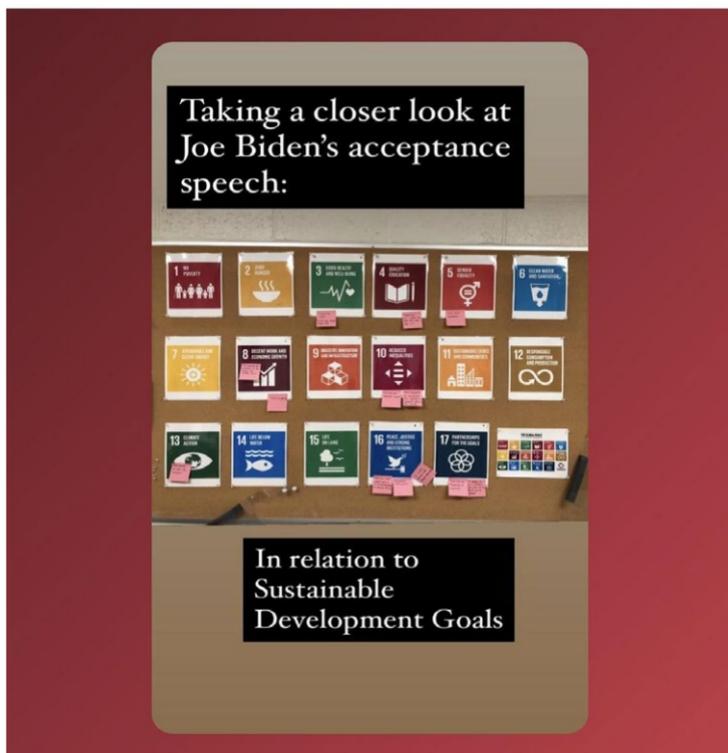
Grounding Principles

Thinking 'glocally' was the catalyst I needed to begin incorporating the SDGs into my classroom. Teaching is not just about delivering content, but about preparing students for the world they will inherit. Language classrooms, in particular, serve as spaces where students develop not only linguistic skills but also the ability to think critically, engage across cultures, and respond to pressing issues.

According to Boix Mansilla and Jackson (2023), global competence is built upon four key domains:

- explore issues at local, global, and intercultural levels;
- recognise and value diverse perspectives and ways of understanding the world;
- participate in respectful, meaningful, and effective intercultural communication;
- contribute to shared well-being and support actions that promote sustainable development.

In the ELT classroom, this translates to examining global issues, understanding how cultural and societal perspectives shape them, articulating ideas clearly through speech and writing, and applying students' knowledge to create meaningful change.

Speech analysis and sustainability discussions in ELT are grounded in global education theory. As Reimers (2017) argues, global education requires students to develop the skills necessary to address complex, interconnected challenges:

> To be a competent global citizen is to understand the forces bringing the world together at accelerating speed, and to have the capabilities to operate effectively across the boundaries of a single nation-state, to address the challenges they create, or to seize the opportunities they afford. (p. 3)

Viewed through this lens, ELT becomes a conduit for global education, enabling students to examine social justice,

human rights, and sustainability issues both locally and globally through meaningful language use. Integrating the SDGs into ELT transforms the classroom into a space where language serves as a bridge between knowledge and action.

Research further underscores the practical benefits of integrating the SDGs into language teaching. Cordova (2024) found that when ESL teacher-interns implemented SDG-based lessons in state university laboratory school classrooms, both educators and students benefited. Students who engaged in SDG-centred lessons not only built content knowledge but also developed problem-solving skills, took ownership of real-world challenges, and moved from passive learning to active participation in addressing societal issues. Additionally, pre-service teachers designed contextualised and interdisciplinary learning activities that encouraged students to apply knowledge in meaningful ways and develop a participatory mindset toward global challenges (Cordova, 2024). This research reinforces the idea that integrating SDGs into ELT fosters not just linguistic competence but also social responsibility and civic engagement, improving both teaching and learning.

However, scholars also point out that SDG topic selection in ELT remains inconsistent. Bekteshi and Xhaferi (2020) found that more social topics like gender equality and education frequently surface in ELT curricula, whereas critical themes such as climate action and responsible consumption are often underrepresented, likely due to their perceived complexity or ties to scientific discourse. Taking that a step further, Kapranov (2022) critiques ELT

materials for presenting sustainability topics in a superficial manner, focusing on abstract concepts such as 'lifelong learning' and 'digital sustainability' versus actionable goals – failing to provide deep engagement with real global issues. These findings highlight the need for a more intentional and interdisciplinary approach to SDG integration in ELT, ensuring that sustainability topics are not merely referenced but deeply explored through critical discussions, language-based inquiry, and meaningful classroom activities.

Speech Analysis as a Pedagogical Approach (Why Speech Analysis in ELT Works)

Luckily, speakers like Greta Thunberg, Severn Cullis-Suzuki, Malala Yousafzai, and António Guterres have delivered impassioned speeches on topics ranging from climate action and social justice to education and international cooperation – all which are readily accessible online. Speech analysis architects a strong pedagogical bridge between ELT and sustainability education. These speeches serve as rich linguistic resources, providing powerful examples of persuasive techniques, rhetorical strategies, and impactful storytelling, while also challenging students to reflect on sustainability, ethics, and advocacy. Beyond linguistic benefits, speech analysis fosters student motivation and self-efficacy in ELT classrooms.

In her research, Kwee (2021) observed that students participating in SDG-themed discussions and speech analysis

developed greater confidence and agency when expressing their views on global issues. By engaging with activist speeches, students shift from passive language learners to active participants in meaningful discussions. This impact is echoed in the testimony of an educator from the study, who shared,

> Teaching English is challenging. Students felt that spelling and learning vocabulary are boring...Some of them don't know phonics...It's really hard. While teaching gender equality [SDG#5], I showed them videos of Emma Watson and Malala...We read an excerpt from Aung Saan Suu Kyi's Freedom from Fear. That's the first time I saw them search the meaning of the words from the dictionary. Somehow we are also in a patriarchal society. Somehow we are also facing social injustice. Perhaps they can connect with their powerlessness and their plight. (Karen, as cited in Kwee, 2021)

This study illustrates that exposure to real-world speeches enhances students' engagement by connecting classroom learning to students' lived experiences and cultivating language acquisition and critical consciousness simultaneously.

Practical Applications

The first time I introduced Cullis-Suzuki's (1992) iconic speech at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) to my students, I watched as they leaned in, transfixed by the powerful words of a 12-year-old speaking truth to world leaders. Some of them

had never seen a young person command a global stage like that before. As Cullis-Suzuki stood before the UN, her voice unwavering, she spoke of climate change, deforestation, poverty, and the need for urgent action, and in doing so, she seamlessly connected to multiple SDGs without ever naming them outright.

After watching, I asked my students: "Which SDGs do you think Severn Cullis-Suzuki is talking about?" Hands shot up. "She's talking about SDG 13: Climate Action!" one student said, referencing her plea for adults to stop destroying the environment. "I think she's talking about SDG 1: No Poverty," another noted, pointing to Cullis-Suzuki's words about children starving around the world while wealthier nations waste resources. "She mentions SDG 15: Life on Land," a third student added, recalling Cullis-Suzuki's concern over the rapid loss of biodiversity. Students were engaged, analysing what they had just seen in real time.

To deepen the experience, I passed out transcripts of the speech, along with highlighters to the class and asked students to highlight quotes that directly related to an SDG as we listened again. It became a treasure hunt for them. Their enthusiasm grew when I handed out post-it notes and had them write their favourite quote from the speech and paste it to the corresponding SDG on our classroom SDG wall. This was the moment I realised that speech analysis could be one of the most powerful tools for connecting language learning with real-world global issues. Below is a step-by-step approach to bringing this practice into the ELT classroom.

Step-by-Step Implementation

The following step-by-step approach outlines how speech analysis can be effectively integrated into ELT classrooms to enhance language development, critical thinking, and global citizenship. Each step builds on the previous one, scaffolding students' progress from understanding and analysing speeches to creating their own powerful message. Keep in mind students' proficiency levels and adapt as necessary.

Step 1: Selecting a Speech

Choose authentic, impactful speeches that align with SDG themes. Provide students with transcripts and/or video/audio versions for multimodal learning. Many of these speeches are available on YouTube. A recommended resource is the 'English Speeches' channel, which provides high-quality subtitled content. These are some examples:

- Severn Cullis-Suzuki's 1992 UNCED Speech (SDG 15: Life on Land, among many others)

- Greta Thunberg's 2019 UN Climate Action Speech (SDG 13: Climate Action)

- Malala Yousafzai's 2013 UN Speech on Girls' Education (SDG 4: Quality Education)

- António Guterres' 2019 UN Address on Global Sustainability (SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals)

Step 2: Pre-Speech Activities (Building Context & Comprehension)

Begin by introducing the speaker and the broader context. Explain who the speaker is, why they are delivering the speech, and the specific issue they aim to address. Depending on learners' prior knowledge, it may be necessary to devote one or more lessons to building essential background understanding of the topic.

Next, prompt predictive engagement by asking questions such as: "What do you think this speech will be about?" and "Why might this issue be important on a global scale?" This encourages learners to activate prior knowledge and anticipate key themes.

Before listening or reading, provide a brief vocabulary and rhetorical preview. Highlight important terms, expressions, and rhetorical devices that students will encounter, ensuring they are prepared to understand and analyse the speech effectively.

Step 3: Guided Listening & Initial Reactions

Play the speech once without interruption and ask students to note their initial impressions. During a second listening, provide a guided worksheet or a transcript to support deeper analysis. This should prompt students to:

- Connect the content to relevant SDGs and identify the speech's key messages and themes.

- Highlight persuasive techniques such as repetition, rhetorical questions, and emotional appeals.

- Observe the speaker's tone and delivery style, noting how these contribute to the overall impact of the speech.

Step 4 (Optional): Rhetorical & Linguistic Analysis

For more advanced classes, the activity can be extended through deeper linguistic analysis that encourages critical engagement with the speech. Students may focus on:

- Structure: Examine how the speaker introduces their argument, develops key points, and brings the speech to a close.

- Persuasive techniques: Identify instances of *ethos* (credibility), *pathos* (emotional appeal), and *logos* (logical reasoning).

- Figurative language: Highlight the use of metaphors, similes, and analogies and discuss their effect.

- Repetition and parallelism: Analyse how these stylistic features help reinforce the speech's central ideas.

Step 5: Small Group or Whole Class Discussion & Interpretation

Students then work collaboratively to:

- Compare their findings and annotations.

- Discuss how the speaker's language choices shape the overall impact of the speech.

- Connect the speech's themes to relevant SDGs and relate these ideas to their own experiences and contexts.

Step 6: (Optional): Comparative Speech Study

Once students have a strong grasp of analysing individual speeches, comparative speech analysis offers an opportunity to enhance critical thinking. Consider repeating the activity again with Severn Cullis-Suzuki's speech from the 2012 Climate Summit, delivered 20 years later. Compare and contrast the similarities and differences in her tone, rhetoric, and main points. There is a great deal of benefit in analysing two speeches from the same speaker 20 years apart. You may even wish to focus on tenses with your language learners, or to make a visual timeline of climate activism in the span of the two speeches. The possibilities are endless.

Step 7: Personal Reflection & Written Analysis

Encourage learners to reflect on these questions:

- What message stood out most and why?
- How does the speech connect to an SDG or many?
- If it relates to multiple SDGs how would you rank their importance?
- How effective was the speaker's use of language?

Step 8: Student Speech Creation & Delivery

Using insights from their analyses, students craft their own speeches on a sustainability-related issue. You can decide to use Severn's as a template or give students the freedom to focus on other SDGs. Depending on students' proficiency level you can offer scaffolds such as word banks and sentence starters and frames. Guide students to:

- Choose a focus.
- Incorporate persuasive techniques and rhetorical devices.
- Deliver their speech with effective tone, body language, and emphasis.

Step 9: Peer Feedback & Class Discussion

Students present their speeches and provide constructive peer feedback. Facilitate a discussion on how language can drive action and awareness.

Lesson Extensions That Encourage Students to Take Action

Building upon speech analysis, lesson extensions such as debates, collaborative discussion, and role-playing simulations provide students with dynamic opportunities to apply their linguistic and analytical skills to real-world sustainability challenges. These activities move students toward more collaborative participation. Through these activities students engage in thoughtful conversations, challenge diverse perspectives, and feel empowered to take action alongside one another.

One effective extension involves structured debates, where students take a stance on an SDG-related issue and defend their arguments with evidence. For example, following the analysis of Severn Cullis-Suzuki's speech, students might debate the question: "Should governments enforce strict environmental regulations, even if it impacts economic growth?" Working in teams, students are assigned opposing positions, where they must articulate

their viewpoints, support claims with evidence, anticipate counterarguments, and engage in respectful dialogue. The debate process not only refines their rhetorical skills but also fosters teamwork, unity, and critical reasoning. Other relevant topics could include:

- Is banning deforestation the most effective way to combat climate change?

- Should single-use plastics be banned worldwide?

- Should wealthier nations bear more responsibility in addressing global climate issues?

By using speech analysis as a foundation, these debates guide students to approach sustainability issues with linguistic precision and informed reasoning.

Another way to extend speech analysis lessons is through collaborative discussions such as Think-Pair-Share, which allows students to examine case studies on sustainability challenges and collectively propose solutions. For instance, after analysing a speech related to deforestation or biodiversity loss, students can individually reflect on the speaker's main arguments before pairing up to discuss potential solutions or actions individuals and governments could take. These smaller discussions prepare students to engage in a larger whole-class conversation, where they must present their insights, listen to diverse perspectives, and refine their arguments in real time. Think-Pair-Share fosters student-centred learning by ensuring that every student has a voice in the discussion, regardless of their confidence level in English. Other potential case studies might explore issues such as urban food insecurity, the

ethical responsibility of multinational corporations, or the long-term effects of climate migration.

To deepen engagement, role-playing simulations allow students to take on the perspectives of policymakers, scientists, activists, or business leaders, engaging in negotiations and discussions related to sustainability. A powerful example is a mock United Nations climate summit, where students represent various nations and negotiate policies based on economic and environmental priorities. Some students, representing those nations most affected by climate change, may push for urgent international agreements, while others representing major industrial economies may argue for a more gradual transition. These role-playing exercises encourage empathetic engagement, as students must advocate for viewpoints they may not personally agree with, challenging them to analyse the complexities of real-world decision-making.

Another variation of this exercise involves students engaging in role-play as corporate leaders debating the balance between profitability and sustainability. One particularly effective tool for promoting critical thinking and collaboration is the Thingamabob Simulation, a free role-play activity developed by the Zinn Education Project (2025). In this simulation, students represent various stakeholders such as business leaders, environmental advocates, and government officials while negotiating solutions to economic and environmental challenges. By engaging in this simulation, students practise argumentation, persuasion, and ethical decision-making while grappling with real-world dilemmas. These real-world simulations not

only build language fluency and negotiation skills but also allow students to experience how policy and economic forces interact in shaping sustainability outcomes.

These dynamic activities and extensions build language fluency, negotiation skills, and awareness of how policy requires persuasion and precise language. By defending policies, debating dilemmas, or representing stakeholders, students recognise that their voices matter – and that language is a powerful instrument for civic participation and global impact.

Scaffolding Speech Analysis for Higher-Order Thinking with Bloom's Taxonomy

Let us move together from the base to the peak of Bloom et al.'s (1956) taxonomy, using SDG-themed speech analysis as our guide (see Figure 2). From identifying SDG themes to analysing, evaluating, and creating original speeches, each stage builds on the last. Watching students deliver impassioned speeches on topics they care deeply about is one of the most rewarding aspects of this process.

We begin at the foundational level, where students engage in knowledge recall and comprehension by identifying and categorising the 17 SDGs and recognising how they are thematically embedded within a speech. For example, they might link Cullis-Suzuki's concerns about deforestation to SDG 15 (Life on Land), or her emphasis on global hunger to SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). This stage builds essential background knowledge and ensures students understand key concepts. Depending on proficiency level, achieving this might be a big win.

Figure 2:

Bloom's Taxonomy Used to Elevate Learning Utilising Speech Analysis
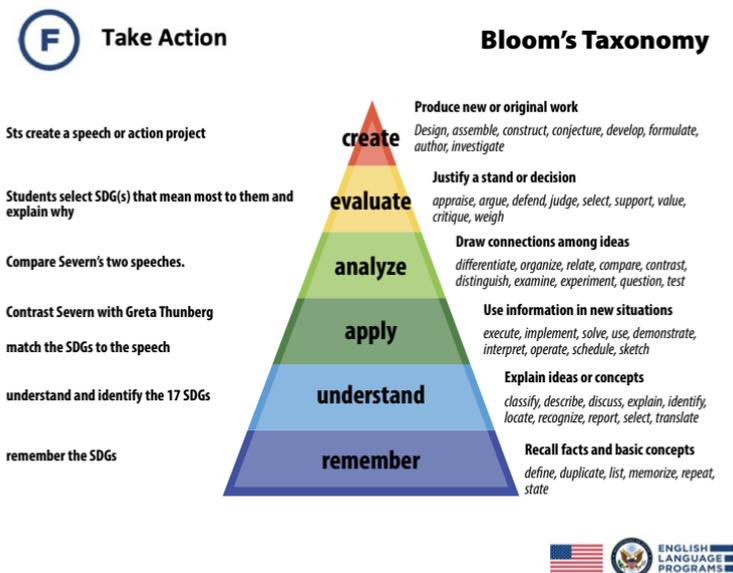
Moving up to the application stage, students apply their knowledge by comparing and contrasting speeches across different contexts. They might analyse Cullis-Suzuki's climate speeches from 1992 and 2012 or compare her rhetoric with Greta Thunberg's. This process reveals patterns in activist discourse and helps students recognise how messages and delivery evolve over time.

The analysis stage involves deconstructing rhetorical techniques and persuasive strategies. Students assess how Cullis-Suzuki appeals to ethos, pathos, logos to convey urgency, while also considering how language choices shape the effectiveness of an argument, identifying key phrases that evoke emotional responses and encourage action. They may also analyse how the language choice and tone

differ between Cullis-Suzuki's speeches from 1992 and 2012 and consider what factors may have influenced these shifts.

The evaluation stage challenges students to critique arguments, defend positions, and weigh solutions through debates and discussions. Students evaluate the validity of various viewpoints and consider the complexities of policymaking. For instance, debating whether governments should impose strict environmental regulations compels students to evaluate trade-offs between environmental protection and economic growth. Additionally, students might select the SDG goals that they believe are top priority (personally or at a global level) and defend why using evidence.

Finally, students reach the creation stage by producing original work such as writing speeches, designing advocacy projects, or crafting social media campaigns to address an SDG. This synthesis of knowledge and skills culminates in authentic, impactful expression. If your school engages with service learning, this is a perfect opportunity to extend students' creations beyond the classroom. Projects can be adapted to address local challenges, collaborate with community organisations, or raise awareness about global issues through school-wide presentations or events.

As educators, our goal is to move students beyond passive listening toward critical thinking, creation, and action. While SDG-themed speech analysis offers a powerful framework, it can easily become a passive exercise if not paired with opportunities for meaningful engagement. The true value lies in guiding students from comprehension to analysis, evaluation, and creation, empowering

them to critique what they hear, formulate their own ideas, and produce authentic calls to action. When students move from listening to doing, they gain the confidence to use their voices, collaborate with others, and contribute to a more sustainable and just world. Through this approach, students do not just *study* sustainability, but learn how to *apply* language and skills as a force for meaningful change.

Conclusion

Just as my journey with the SDGs began with a sense of detachment that transformed into passionate integration, I have witnessed my students' own journeys evolve from passive learning to active participation. By integrating SDGs into ELT, we expand language education beyond grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, empowering students to think critically, engage thoughtfully, and advocate for change.

Integrating sustainability themes into ELT transforms classrooms into spaces where language bridges knowledge and action. Through SDG-related speech analysis and practical lesson extensions, educators can guide students toward critical inquiry, civic responsibility, collaboration, and meaningful engagement.

Looking ahead, educators must continue innovating their approaches to SDG integration within ELT. Future research could explore interdisciplinary collaborations that merge language learning with science, technology, and social studies to deepen students' understanding of sustainability. Additionally, making use of digital tools such as AI-driven speech analysis, collaborative online platforms,

and virtual exchange programmes can expand access to authentic materials, broaden connections, and foster meaningful cross-cultural dialogue.

As Captain Jean-Luc Picard observed in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Menosky & Kolbe, 1991), "The Tamarian was willing to risk all of us, just for the hope of communication...connection. Now the door is open between our peoples." This sentiment underscores the power of striving for understanding and connection, even amidst challenges – a skill essential to confronting the global risks we collectively face. In the same spirit, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his 1967 Christmas Sermon on Peace, reminded us that "we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." Where Dr. King envisions humanity as threads woven in a "garment of destiny," Picard highlights how language and communication serve as the needle stitching collaboration and progress. This interconnectedness reveals that every action toward a goal, no matter how small, contributes to the broader tapestry of progress. Just as language opens doors to understanding and collaboration, so too does every effort to educate and empower students ripple outward, strengthening the fabric of education.

More than ever, the world needs individuals who can listen, articulate, negotiate, and advocate for a sustainable future. Just as Cullis-Suzuki's words resonated decades after she spoke them, our students' voices have the power to shape the future. It is our job as educators to help them find and amplify those voices.

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Sustaining Well-Being Through Positive Education Interventions Aimed at the Development of Students' Character Strengths

George Kokolas

Abstract

By integrating Positive Education principles into school curricula, we can aim to empower students to become active contributors to sustainable well-being. This chapter delves into the potential of character strengths development in shaping environmentally conscious attitudes and behaviours, and discusses practical strategies for promoting a sustainable well-being ethos. In this process of mindset formation, the Character Strengths classification developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004) serves as a valuable measure, reference point, and essential framework for implementing positive education interventions in classroom settings. This chapter explores the intersection of individual well-being and environmental sustainability, examining how educational frameworks can foster a mindset that aligns personal happiness with collective responsibility for the planet. Ultimately, this research

seeks to illuminate pathways for cultivating a more equitable and environmentally conscious future through Positive Education interventions, based on the Character Strengths framework.

Keywords: Sustainable Well-Being; Positive Education; Character Strengths

## The Need for Common Ground between Positive Psychology and Sustainability

'Well-being' encompasses many meanings, referring to collective and individual attitudes, mindsets and actions. According to Oades and Mossman (2017), the definition of well-being is seen differently from the perspective of health practitioners, economists, philosophers, psychologists or sociologists, leading to diverse perspectives, definitions and ideas. By reading the definition of well-being included in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 and its targets (United Nations, 2015), we can see that the concept is connected to areas like global maternal mortality, preventable deaths, epidemics, access to clean water, etc. It seems that the definition of well-being for SDG 3 is related to a collective improvement of life conditions worldwide rather than to individual states of happiness, beneficial atomic habits or people's positive mindsets, as positive psychology theories propose. In other words, there seems to be a gap between the definition of well-being as defined by positive psychology literature and the definition of well-being proposed by the sustainability development goals for 2030.

For positive psychologists, and more specifically for one of its founders, Martin Seligman (2011), well-being is a construct consisting of several measurable elements, which contribute to its nature but none of them defines it. The five measurable elements of well-being are: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement (Seligman, 2011). Ryff and Keyes (1995) define the characteristics of people with well-being as self-acceptance, positive relationships with other people, mastering of the surrounding context for their needs and desires, autonomy, purpose and growth.

As Ronen and Kerret (2020) affirm, there seems to be a need to integrate "positive psychology and environmental sustainability using cognitive-behavioural therapy principles and offering a new language of sustainable wellbeing literacy" (p. 2). The discipline of Positive Psychology and the practice of sustainability can find a common connection under the term 'sustainable well-being' as was proposed by Ronen and Kerret (2020) and as depicted in Figure 1. It is noteworthy that their definition seems to coincide with the World Health Organization's (2025) definition of 'mental health,' which describes it as a state of emotional well-being in which individuals recognise their strengths, effectively handle typical life challenges, and function efficiently and productively, while also making positive contributions to their communities and the natural environment. The need for a global point of reference regarding sustainability and well-being seems to have been covered by these definitions.

Figure 1:

Sustainable Well-Being (Ronen & Kerret, 2020)
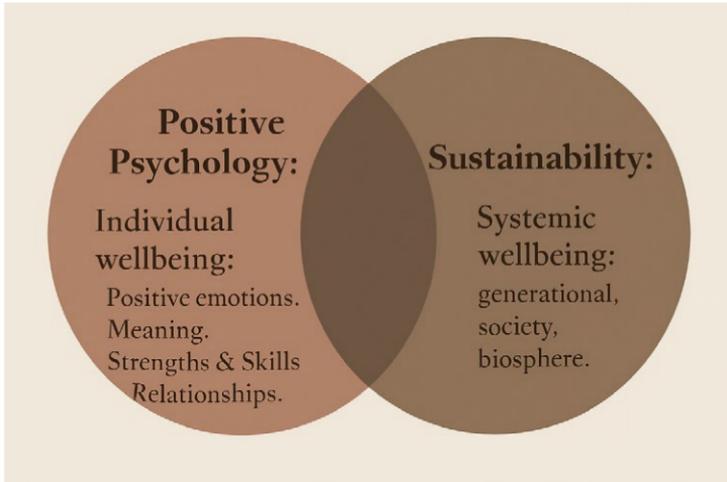
Misconceptions Regarding Sustainability in Connection to Well-Being

A well-worded definition is not always a guarantee for implementation, but it can serve as a target and point of reference for some action towards a thorough and effective training of people for understanding and practising sustainable well-being. In terms of practice, it looks as though the cultivation of a sustainable well-being mindset seems to be impeded by several problems or misconceptions in everyday life, making the need for positive psychology practices perhaps more imperative than ever.

Some of the "misconceptions" of sustainability in connection to well-being are the following:

- People in today's societies tend to equate happiness with the high consumption of goods. As Kasser (2006) points out, individuals tend to confuse the "path to the goods life" as the "goods life".

- The lifestyles and consumption patterns of the wealthiest nations are contributing to environmental degradation, which disproportionately affects poorer countries (Sachs, 2012).

- The Happy Planet Index (HPI) reveals that numerous affluent countries are placing significant strain on natural resources and consuming a disproportionate share of these resources (Abdallah et al., 2009).

- The increasing prevalence of obesity in wealthy nations may give another indication that a prevalent misconception, among those populations, is that well-being is associated with the extreme, mindless and unhindered consumption of any type of food (Sachs, 2012).

Positive Education as the Right Channel to Sustainable Well-Being

Even if we assume that none of the above misconceptions are true, we still need to cultivate educated, trained and knowledgeable individuals on sustainable well-being. For this purpose, we will have to start with promoting the basic ideas of sustainable well-being through the right channels. As Ronen and Kerret (2020) maintain, at an operational level, it would be great to target children and adolescents through the school education system. Students

can develop and control their own agency of self-care and they can become the future influencers of global well-being. Schools can also play a significant role both in defining and achieving well-being goals (Ronen & Kerret, 2020).

If schools and institutionalised education can be the channel, the place and the framework for sustainable well-being to blossom, positive education can be the curriculum and the programme to follow to achieve the systematic development of well-being practices. Seligman (2011) defines Positive Education as education that encompasses both conventional academic abilities and skills that promote well-being. Positive Education is the common zone in which Positive Psychology practices and institutionalised education merge to enrich well-being and enhance the unique opportunities and challenges of focusing on the strengths of individuals in educational environments (Norrish, 2015). Kokolas and Bruce (2023) go one step further by stating that Positive Education is an approach and a value system that inspires not just optimism but also a sense of purpose and motivation which are "the foundation for lifelong learning" (p. 3). The notion underpinning all of the above definitions is that instead of trying to cure people and students after hardships and weaknesses visit them, it is better to try to procure their well-being before they are struck by adversity (Norrish, 2015).

The idea of *procuring before* instead of *curing afterwards* is very much aligned with the idea of happiness before success, as expressed by Lyubomirsky et al. (2005). It reflects on the medium of instruction that we will use to achieve the teaching of sustainable well-being via positive

education programmes. In other words, the students who will become evangelists and promoters of sustainability need to first be happy about sustainability themselves and then be successfully trained to spread the word and practise sustainable techniques in their communities. Students need to experience the concept of positive affect because positive emotions motivate people to pursue success by focusing on their goals and engaging in behaviours that lead to positive outcomes (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

Character Strengths: The Core of Positive Education

Professor Nansook Park defines the discovery, development, and practice of Character Strengths projects in schools as the core of Positive Education (as cited in Norrish, 2015). However, the development of students' character seems to have been largely neglected by scholars in the 20th century (Park & Peterson, 2009). On the contrary, the trait of 'good character' is what we all look for in leaders, parents, teachers, students and the people around us, maybe because good character can serve as a guarantee for a healthy and beneficial relationship. In a school context, when we talk about nurturing conscious individuals with a capacity for critical thinking and agency, we need to ensure that before action there is "a virtuous character to will the good" (Baumrid, 1998, p. 13). We need to ensure prompt action is taken by individuals with good character. And maybe the students with good character will be the first ones to care more about sustainability.

In 2004, Peterson and Seligman assembled a team of 55 distinguished scientists and scholars. After three years of extensive research, historical reviews, and analysis of the best insights on character from various disciplines – including ethics, psychology, and theology – spanning over 2,500 years, they developed a classification system comprising six virtues and 24 character strengths. These strengths serve as pathways to the six virtues mentioned earlier (Niemec, 2017).

The classification stands as follows:

- **Virtue of Wisdom –** Creativity, Curiosity, Judgement, Love of Learning, Perspective

- **Virtue of Courage –** Bravery, Perseverance, Honesty, Zest

- **Virtue of Humanity –** Love, Kindness, Social Intelligence

- **Virtue of Justice –** Teamwork, Fairness, Leadership

- **Virtue of Temperance –** Forgiveness, Humility, Prudence, Self-Regulation

- **Virtue of Transcendence –** Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, Gratitude, Hope, Humor, Spirituality (Niemiec & McGrath, 2019, pp. 26–27)

Seeking the connection between Character Strengths and Sustainable Well-Being, we can assume the Character Strengths act as a medium of instruction in Positive Education programmes; they can bring forward more opportunities for upskilling the well-being of students and teachers hopefully leading them to more environmentally

friendly, sustainable attitudes. This hypothesis is strongly supported by the VIA Institute of Character, which defines Character Strengths as a starting point for self-reflection on our identity, a scheme for helping people to produce positive outcomes for themselves and others and most important of all, as solid contexts for promoting individual contributions to the collective good (Niemec, 2017).

Is Sustainable Well-Being a Virtuous Behaviour?

It is understandable that before using character strengths as routes to virtuous living, we may have to first define sustainable well-being as virtuous behaviour. There have been several successful attempts to frame this definition. According to Corral-Verdugo (2012), sustainable behaviour is a "positive behaviour originated by positive dispositional factors and maintained by psychological benefits" (p. 1). Hilbig et al. (2013) define it as an act related to tendencies of having a disposition towards moral virtue and pro-social orientation, while Kaiser and Byrka (2011) have found that pro-environmental action is highly connected to pro-social behaviour and actions. All the above descriptions seem to consider sustainable behaviour as a rather virtuous behaviour (Corral-Verdugo et al., 2015).

Access to Virtues through Character Strengths

Virtues help us grow and co-exist positively with other people, raise the level of our psychological well-being,

and help us adapt to the environment around us (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). On the other hand, adapting to the environment around us, also presupposes virtuous behaviours, especially if we are to ensure its preservation (Corral-Verdugo, 2012). Thus, the pathways to environmentally virtuous behaviours could be discovered through the scheme of Character Strengths (Niemec, 2017), which contribute to many Positive Education programmes around the world. Virtuous behaviours are inherent in a way of living that challenges the primary factors contributing to environmental harm, particularly consumerism and inequality. This implies that individuals committed to sustainability must utilise their personal character strengths to fulfil objectives related to environmental conservation. In other words, the personal strengths of each individual can support and instigate pro-environmental, virtuous behaviours (Corral-Verdugo, 2012).

The following overview attempts to identify character strengths that seem to be more related to the development of environmentally sustainable behaviours. Each strength is defined and a connection to environmentally sustainable behaviours is made, followed by a suggested classroom activity related to English language teaching curricula. The overview can serve as a suggested manual for English teachers who would like to apply positive education techniques related to Character Strengths to develop more environmentally sustainable attitudes in the future. The activities are adaptable according to the language level of the students and sometimes they may simply require activities outside the limits of the classroom.

Virtue of Wisdom

Character Strength of Creativity

Definition

Doing and conceptualising things in novel and productive ways (Niemiec, 2017).

Connection to Sustainable Behaviour

The beginning of pro-environmental competency (Fraijo-Sing et al., 2013).

ELT Activity Related to the Character Strength of Creativity (B1/B2 Level)

Divide students into teams and assign each team a specific environmental problem (e.g., water pollution, water conservation, plastic waste, high gas emissions). Each group is given a specific time to brainstorm novel, creative solutions to their assigned problems. They create a poster or a presentation where they outline the issue, describe the solution proposed, and explain how this solution can contribute to sustainable behaviour.

Character Strength of Curiosity

Definition

To explore and discover, and "to take an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake" (Niemiec & McGrath, 2019, p. 49).

Connection to Sustainable Behaviour

Curiosity can become an intrinsic factor in generating and sustaining motivation for pro-environmental behaviour (He et al., 2010).

ELT Activity Related to the Character Strength of Curiosity (B1/ B2 Level)

- Give the class a text either from your textbook or any other source that contains facts/data/information/trivia that your students may not know about an environmental problem.

- Encourage them to spot the information they did not know or the things mentioned in the text that they would be curious to learn more about. Ask them to form specific questions to request more information about the things they are curious to learn more about regarding the specific problem.

- Ask them to mingle and for 10 minutes ask as many of their classmates as possible their questions and gather as much information as possible about the topic.

- Write the problem mentioned in the text on the board and ask students to provide you with possible solutions, ideally generated from the information gathered after interviewing each other. Write the solutions on the board.

- Encourage students to write an essay or a paragraph on the problem and solutions they see on the board.

Virtue of Courage

Character Strength of Bravery

Definition

Not feeling disheartened in front of threat, seeing difficulty or pain as challenges, speaking up and supporting what is right, taking action on convictions even if unpopular (Niemiec & McGrath, 2019).

Connection to Sustainable Behaviour

Sustainable attitudes and behaviours require effort and an ability to overcome obstacles (Karlin, et al., 2014).

ELT Activity Related to the Character Strength of Bravery (B1/ B2 Level)

- Prepare some scenario cards with certain situations featuring a challenging situation related to sustainability, that requires acts of bravery. As challenging situations, you can use the following scenarios:

- Littering in Front of Your Eyes: You are with your friends when you witness a young person throwing trash on the ground. Your friends are laughing and saying nothing. How do you respond to them? Do you say anything to the person littering and, if yes, what exactly would say to them?

- A Call to Action for Recycling: You notice that your school has no recycling bins and all the students throw recyclable materials into trash bins. You want to raise the issue with the school administration. Write an

essay or report denoting the problem, providing examples and specific data, and urging the school for a call to action. Do not forget to add recommended solutions.

- Community Clean-Up: A local eco-group is organising a beach cleanup event, but very few people have registered to attend. You believe this is an important activity for the local community and want to encourage higher attendance. Prepare a promo poster with the main reasons why your fellow citizens should support this sustainable initiative.

Virtue of Humanity

Character Strength of Social Intelligence

Definition

Being aware of human feelings both in others and oneself. Knowing how to fit in different social situations. Knowing what makes other people tick (Niemiec, 2017).

Connection to Sustainable Behaviour

Necessary factor in pro-environmental competency (PEC). Pro-environmental competency is defined as the skills that fulfil pro-ecological requirements. These specific requirements are norms set by social groups to guarantee the protection of environmental resources (Fraijo-Sing et al., 2013).

ELT Activity Related to the Character Strength of Social Intelligence (B1/ B2 Level)

Organising a Community Project on Sustainability

Students need to become sufficiently prepared to engage in conversations with fellow citizens to inform them and convince them to join an initiative on collecting litter from a specific area in their city.

- Direct questions can be prepared that can spark a conversation with the citizens. For example, "Are you aware that [name of the city area] is full of litter? Do you know that nobody from the municipality or any other authority has taken the initiative to clean this waste? Would you help us, the students, clean this area on [date] at [time]?" Ask the students to brainstorm more questions.

- Students develop an argument on how important it is to contribute and participate in collective initiatives that promote sustainable attitudes. For example, they consider the power of collaboration since the protection of the environment cannot be done only by one individual. The building of communal resilience with the formation of ecosystems which can stand as building blocks against pollution and the drive for policy change as collective initiatives by civilians may sensitise the authorities to seek proactive solutions to the problems affecting the environment. Ask students to brainstorm more arguments.

- Ask students to prepare the content for a poster and a leaflet that will contain all the details for the littering

project (date, time, etc.), a motivational slogan calling for participation, and a paraphrase of the arguments developed in this activity.

Once the above part is prepared, students can practise this activity in action by contacting civilians, engaging in pro-environmental conversations, and inviting people to this cleanup activity. The actual engagement in real-life conversations can provide a more realistic out of classroom extension for the activity and generate more motivation for students.

Virtue of Justice

Character Strength of Leadership

Definition

Encouraging groups to get things done, while maintaining good relations within the group. Organising and carrying out group activities (Niemiec, 2017).

Connection to Sustainable Behaviour

The fundamental element of environmental activism (Werder, 2006).

ELT Activity Related to the Character Strength of Leadership (B1/ B2 Level)

Organising a Sustainable Pitch Initiative

The main objective of the activity is for students to create a pitch for a three- to five-minute presentation for a sustainable, clear and measurable goal. Students need to

form teams, collaborate and commonly decide on the topic, respecting the principles of leadership.

- Divide the students into groups of 3 or 4.

- Ask them to brainstorm on some hot environmental issues that they would like to pitch about.

- Ask them to decide on specific actions to be taken and ensure that there is a reasonable timeline for implementation.

- Coach them that all the ideas of the team should be heard and if there are any disagreements, they should be resolved peacefully and respectfully.

- The whole team prepares a 3- to 4-minute presentation on the topic.

- Each team presents its pitch in front of the entire class.

- After each presentation, there should be time for questions and constructive feedback from classmates. Feedback should ideally focus on how clear the plan was, how feasible was the implementation of the plan, and how effective was the group's competence to promote their pitch.

- After each presentation, allow time for questions and constructive feedback from the audience. Focus feedback on the clarity of the plan, the feasibility of the activities, and the group's ability to promote their initiative effectively.

Conclusion

This chapter has emphasised the critical intersection of individual well-being and sustainable behaviour. By addressing different misconceptions that equate happiness to individual pleasures and limitless consumption, the chapter tried to demonstrate that individual happiness and collective environmental responsibility should go hand-in-hand. Positive Psychology can act as a helpful framework of action for cultivating and promoting more collectively sustainable behaviours. If we want the change to start early and start nurturing virtuous actors for sustainable well-being, then we should be integrating more Positive Education practices into our schools. A pivotal and fundamental ingredient of Positive Education programmes is the cultivation of a Character Strengths framework. The nurturing of Character Strengths can be a promising pathway in developing more environmentally sustainable attitudes and behaviours, and contributing to a more sustainable future for all.

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Inclusive English Language Teaching: Sexuality, Equity, and Sustainability

Savannah Davis
Kirsten Borg Cardona

Abstract

This chapter explores the representation of sexuality in English language teaching (ELT) materials, emphasising its significance for promoting social inclusion and equity, as aligned with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10.2. By critically analysing coursebooks and other teaching resources, the chapter highlights how diverse sexual identities are often marginalised or omitted, reinforcing heteronormative perspectives. It argues for the integration of inclusive content that reflects a broad spectrum of sexual orientations and identities, fostering a more accepting and equitable learning environment. The chapter provides practical strategies for teachers to adapt materials and create inclusive classrooms that support all learners, thereby contributing to reducing inequalities. By addressing sexuality in ELT, educators can play a pivotal role in cultivating learners' critical awareness of social diversity,

promoting greater societal acceptance and inclusion, and supporting the broader goals of sustainable development by ensuring no one is left behind.

Keywords: Inclusive Language Teaching; Sexuality; Equity

Introduction

Calls for equity, representation, and human dignity in education have gained considerable traction in recent years (Pérez Berbain et al., 2021; Smith, 2024), catalysed by global frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Among them, SDG 10's second target is particularly salient to this chapter's focus. It calls for the promotion of the social, economic, and political inclusion of all people, regardless of identity or status (UN, n.d.), reinforcing the principle that education must actively empower rather than merely make accommodations for diversity (Bollas, 2021). These principles are directly relevant to the educational domain, where the redistribution of representational power (who and what is seen in the curriculum) can play a vital role in reducing social inequality. In English Language Teaching (ELT), the urgency is compounded by the fact that learners are not merely acquiring linguistic forms but engaging with cultural narratives embedded in materials that subtly construct, affirm, or exclude aspects of identity.

Despite an increasingly global recognition of the need for inclusive and socially just education (UNESCO, 2017), ELT materials often fall short of reflecting the pluralistic realities of contemporary learners (Selvi & Kocaman, 2021).

While there have been measurable gains in how race, nationality, and gender are represented, LGBTQ+ identities remain conspicuously underrepresented or tokenised. This sustained omission reflects not simply an oversight but a systemic pattern of exclusion rooted in market-driven publishing practices and institutional silences. It reinforces a version of language education that privileges dominant sociological norms and sidelines those perceived as controversial or culturally sensitive. If ELT is to align with a more expansive and socially sustainable vision of education, it must move beyond traditional framings of sustainability as environmental and economic, and embrace the cultural and representational dimensions. This chapter explores how the marginalisation of LGBTQ+ identities in ELT materials stands in contrast to the principles of inclusion embedded within SDG 10.2, which emphasises the need to empower and promote full inclusion. It positions the English language classroom as a potential site for equity-building and cultural transformation, provided educators and institutions are willing to confront the limitations of mainstream materials and practices.

To illuminate these tensions, the discussion first examines a recent incident in Malta. Although this country is frequently commended for its robust legal protections of LGBTQ+ rights (*Times of Malta*, 2024), inconsistencies persist within its social and educational contexts. This case is not just contextually significant but pedagogically instructive: it offers a microcosm of how national policy, parental attitudes, and educational practice can clash, and how public discourse can both expose and challenge exclusionary norms. Following this contextualisation,

the chapter interrogates the representational landscape of mainstream ELT coursebooks, identifying recurring patterns of omission and sanitisation. It argues that the scarcity of LGBTQ+ content is symptomatic of a deeper reluctance to confront sexuality as a legitimate component of cultural literacy. Drawing on research and practitioner perspectives, the chapter then explores how inclusive materials can foster more engaged, critically literate, and interculturally competent learners. In the final section, a set of classroom activities is presented as a practical intervention, illustrating a way forward for educators to foster equity and inclusion in their teaching. These activities are designed to support not only vocabulary acquisition and discourse skills, but also reflective engagement with issues of gender, family, and identity, components too often missing from traditional ELT syllabi.

Contextualising the Problem in Malta

Malta has made considerable progress in LGBTQ+ rights, regularly topping the ILGA-Europe (2025) Rainbow Index for its legislative protections and anti-discrimination policies. The LGBTIQ+ Equality Strategy & Action Plan (2023–2027) outlines a vision for a society where all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, are assured equal opportunities, dignity, and protection. Its Equality Act (2016) explicitly prohibits discrimination within educational settings, situating Malta as a legislative leader in the European Union (Government of Malta, 2023; European Education and Culture Executive Agency, n.d.). However, as is often the case, legal progress does not automatically translate into social acceptance or institutional

practice. Public attitudes remain uneven, and the classroom continues to reflect and reproduce broader social tensions. In this regard, a 2025 incident at St. Clare College Primary School became emblematic of the lingering gap between policy and practice. When a family withdrew their child from the class of openly gay teacher Stefan Vassallo, citing discomfort with their child being taught by someone who is 'not straight', it laid bare a crack in inclusive progress in education (Magri, 2025). The case captured national attention, provoking widespread media coverage and a wave of public solidarity with the teacher.

Vassallo's public letter in response to the discrimination was both poignant and political. He wrote:

> Teaching children to fear, exclude or dismiss a group of people is not protection—it is an attempt to blind them to the diversity and complexity of the world around them, keeping them in the dark and limiting their ability to develop the empathy and respect they need to thrive. (Vassallo as cited in Diacono, 2025)

His words resonated deeply with the Maltese public, and in a rare reversal, the parents ultimately rescinded their decision and allowed their son to return to the classroom.

This incident is significant for two reasons. First, it reveals how strong public sentiment can challenge discriminatory actions, particularly when framed around harm to the educational environment. Second, it demonstrates that despite strong legislative frameworks, institutional mechanisms often lag behind. The incident thus acts as a bellwether, signalling a broader disconnect between national

aspirations for equity and the lived realities. For ELT practitioners, the relevance is profound. The incident raises the question of what learners are implicitly being taught about identity, normalcy, and social inclusion through the materials and methods used in language classrooms. It also provides a natural segue into examining how these same silences and exclusions manifest in global ELT materials.

The Status Quo in ELT Materials

A critical examination of contemporary ELT coursebooks highlights a concerning erasure of LGBTQ+ identities. Despite modest advances in racial and gender diversity – typically expressed through surface-level imagery – sexuality remains notably and consistently excluded. Gray (2013) argues that most coursebooks operate within a presumed heterosexual norm, with representations of romantic or familial relationships almost exclusively featuring heterosexual pairings. When LGBTQ+ individuals are included, they tend to appear in isolated culture notes, detached from the main grammar or vocabulary content, reinforcing their perceived marginality. This absence is not merely coincidental; it is a strategic form of omission. Gray (2002) discusses how materials are often *sanitised* by publishers to maximise global market appeal, particularly in regions where LGBTQ+ representation could provoke controversy or jeopardise sales. This leads to self-censorship at multiple levels of the publishing pipeline, from manuscript drafting to editorial review, resulting in materials that appear 'neutral' but are, in effect, politically conservative.

Compounding this issue is teacher uncertainty. Educators in many contexts may experience uncertainty when addressing LGBTQ+ topics in the classroom, often due to a lack of formal training, unclear institutional guidance, or concerns about social sensitivities. In a study by Ulla and Paiz (2023), Thai ELT teachers reported receiving no formal instruction related to gender or sexuality during their training yet many expressed a willingness to be inclusive within the limits of their institutional context. Systemic exclusion has significant pedagogical implications. It not only limits the linguistic and cultural scope of learning but also sends a powerful message about whose lives and relationships are deemed worth learning about. For LGBTQ+ students, the absence contributes to a sense of invisibility and may reinforce internalised stigma. For heterosexual students, it perpetuates narrow worldviews and inhibits the development of intercultural sensitivity.

Reconceptualising Sustainability in ELT

The persistence of such exclusions reveals a narrow understanding of sustainability within education. Sustainability is often framed in ELT materials as an environmental concern, focused on recycling, green technologies, and climate change. While these are vital topics, they represent only one dimension of the UN's sustainability agenda. SDG 10, and specifically Target 10.2, urges us to consider how education can become a vehicle for the active inclusion and empowerment of all learners, particularly those whose identities have historically been marginalised (UN, n.d.).

Social sustainability involves creating inclusive institutions and curricula that reflect and affirm diverse lived experiences. As Ulla and Paiz (2023) argue, educators must engage critically with questions of identity, power, and equity in TESOL practice. This involves not simply slotting in diverse voices to meet a quota, but rethinking who is represented in ELT materials and how. Such an approach would reflect the evolving social landscape in many parts of the world, where support for LGBTQ+ rights is growing. In Malta, for instance, public backlash against the Vassallo case illustrates that while institutional inertia remains, public discourse has shifted. ELT materials, however, have not kept pace. They continue to offer an outdated model of society, limiting learners' ability to engage with the complexities of real-world communication. In this light, the question is not simply one of inclusion but of educational quality and relevance. A socially sustainable ELT curriculum must help learners develop the linguistic resources to talk about identity, difference, and social issues. It must prepare them to participate in diverse communities, not just grammatically but ethically and relationally.

The Cost of Erasure in Education

The exclusion of LGBTQ+ identities from ELT materials has wide-reaching consequences, not only for those directly affected but for the broader educational aims of global citizenship, empathy, and intercultural communication. For LGBTQ+ students, a lack of representation in classroom materials often translates into a feeling of invisibility. As Evans and Fisher (2022) argue, learners' perceptions

of their own identities are deeply intertwined with how they engage with language and what is presented in the classroom context. When learners never see themselves mirrored in dialogues, characters, or reading passages, they receive an implicit message that their identities are not valid or appropriate for the classroom. This can lead to disengagement, lowered self-esteem, and reluctance to participate, especially in settings where the classroom is one of the few public spaces for self-expression.

Moreover, The Trevor Project (2024) found that inclusive school environments significantly reduce rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among LGBTQ+ youth. In contrast, silence and erasure increase the likelihood of internalised shame and isolation. These findings support the argument that representational equity in education is not a luxury; it is a protective factor. For heterosexual and cisgender students, their exposure to reductive or monolithic models of identity limits their ability to engage meaningfully in intercultural communication. As Sauntson (2019) notes, ELT's stated mission is to prepare learners for real-world interaction across cultures and, in an increasingly globalised world, this includes interacting respectfully with LGBTQ+ individuals and communities. Materials that exclude or minimise such identities undermine that very goal.

Teachers, too, are affected. The lack of integrated LGBTQ+ content, and accompanying pedagogical support, creates a professional dilemma. As Paiz (2018) and other scholars note, even educators who are personally committed to inclusion may feel unprepared or unsupported

in implementing inclusive practices. This often results in well-meaning avoidance, which can reinforce the status quo. Without institutional backing or professional development, inclusivity remains a personal burden rather than a systemic goal. Moreover, these representational gaps may become embedded in teacher practice over time.

Commercially produced textbooks often play a foundational role in shaping early-career teachers' beliefs about what counts as appropriate classroom content (Paiz, 2019). This tendency is reinforced when educators limit their professional self-conception to teaching only the technical mechanics of English, rather than embracing their role in students' broader socialisation processes. These assumptions may habitually persist even after teachers stop relying on such materials, leading to the continued erasure of LGBTQ+ perspectives in classrooms long after the initial training period. This underscores the need not only for inclusive materials, but also for teacher training and critical engagement with how those materials shape pedagogical habits and professional identities.

The Benefits of Inclusive ELT Materials

In contrast to the harms outlined above, inclusive ELT practices offer tangible pedagogical, psychological, and intercultural benefits. These extend beyond LGBTQ+ students, supporting the development of more open, reflective, and linguistically competent learners across the board.

Improved Learner Engagement and Critical Thinking

Research shows that learners engage more deeply with materials that reflect a diverse range of human experiences. Paiz (2019) observes that inclusive dialogues not only resonate more personally with students but also open up richer spaces for discussion and reflection. Students using inclusive materials demonstrate higher levels of engagement, creativity, and emotional intelligence, particularly when grappling with real-world dilemmas around identity and equity. Similarly, Gray (2021) argues that addressing LGBTQ+ erasure through content enables non-LGBTQ+ students to relativise their worldview and foster empathy. This leads to more nuanced student contributions and greater participation (Selvi & Kocaman, 2021). When students are encouraged to question assumptions, analyse stereotypes, and explore unfamiliar perspectives, they develop transferable skills that extend beyond the language classroom.

Strengthened Intercultural Competence

A key aim of ELT is to prepare learners for communication in global settings. This includes not only language proficiency but also the ability to interpret, adapt to, and respect cultural differences. Yet, as Bollas (2021) and Selvi and Kocaman (2021) argue, intercultural competence cannot be fully realised when coursebooks exclude large swaths of the human experience. Inclusive materials support the development of empathy by presenting learners with narratives and characters that challenge monolithic

representations of family, gender, and love. As Sauntson (2019) maintains, these encounters are essential for preparing students to be global citizens who are capable of understanding, not just tolerating, differences.

Enhanced Linguistic Accuracy and Awareness

Inclusion is not only a cultural or ethical concern; it is also linguistic. Contemporary English increasingly incorporates gender-neutral language, neopronouns, and vocabulary related to diverse relationship structures. Yet most ELT materials lag behind, continuing to prioritise binary pronouns and heteronormative pairings.

Bollas (2021) and Tarrayo and Potestades (2024) note that failing to expose learners to real-world linguistic practices, such as singular 'they', or terms like 'partner', 'chosen family', and 'non-binary', creates a gap between classroom English and the English spoken in diverse communities. This not only hinders learners' communicative competence but also risks embarrassing or offending interlocutors due to outdated language use. By including these forms in coursebooks, educators provide learners with the tools to navigate a changing linguistic landscape. Moreover, doing so sends a powerful message: that language is not static, and that inclusivity is a vital component of communicative clarity and social respect. This gap is particularly striking in an era where learners are exposed to inclusive language outside the classroom through social media, streaming platforms, and global digital discourse. As learners increasingly encounter diverse linguistic forms in everyday contexts, whether on TikTok,

in YouTube comment threads, or in TV series featuring non-binary characters, among many other examples, the discrepancy between authentic language and classroom models becomes increasingly difficult to justify.

Transformative Pedagogy and Classroom Culture

Inclusive materials also open the door to broader pedagogical transformation. When classrooms become spaces where identity is explored critically and respectfully, they also become spaces of healing, connection, and growth (Ulla & Paiz, 2023). Lessons that challenge stereotypes or introduce underrepresented family structures not only build vocabulary but reframe what the classroom is for. This vision aligns with Freire's (1970/2005) principles of critical pedagogy, which position education as a tool for empowerment and social change. In this model, the language classroom becomes a site for exploring who gets to speak, who is listened to, and what kinds of lives are deemed worth narrating. Including LGBTQ+ narratives is not merely representational but a structural shift toward equity in knowledge production.

Practical Applications: Inclusive Classroom Interventions

As a practical response, the final section of this chapter presents two lesson frameworks piloted with adult multilingual learners in a communicative ELT setting. These activities are suggestions which seek to bridge the

disconnect between legal frameworks advocating equality and the actual classroom experience, providing students with language tools to articulate and engage with contemporary issues related to inclusivity (Bollas, 2021).

Challenging Stereotypes through Critical Thinking

This lesson invites learners to critically examine gender and sexuality norms while developing vocabulary and reflective discussion skills. It begins with a riddle designed to provoke implicit bias, such as the known 'Surgeon's Dilemma', in which students are asked to resolve a logical puzzle that reveals unconscious assumptions about gender roles. The riddle involves a father and son in a car crash, with the father dying and the son needing surgery, but the surgeon says, "I can't operate on this boy, because he's my son."

This is followed by a vocabulary pre-teaching task and a guided critical analysis of media content (such as short written texts, advertisements, or videos) that portray or challenge stereotypical representations. Finally, students undertake a group-based research task exploring individuals, public figures, or narratives that defy traditional expectations around gender or sexuality. This scaffolded sequence helps foster lexical acquisition and listening or reading comprehension while also promoting deeper critical engagement with representational justice.

Student reactions often range from surprise to self-reflection. In one instance, a medical professional in the group expressed astonishment at having failed to realise that a

potential answer to the riddle was that the surgeon was the boy's mother, despite being a female surgeon herself. Such discussions act as a catalyst for broader discussion on how internalised hierarchies can shape even our unconscious language responses. Students reflected on how expectations around who occupies certain social roles – doctor, parent, partner – are linguistically and culturally constructed, and how language both reflects and reproduces these assumptions.

This activity is not intended as an isolated intervention but as an example of how critical reflection on how social sustainability and inclusivity can be embedded into everyday classroom practice. Its structure is easily adaptable to different topics, language aims, and teaching methodologies. In this way, it provides a flexible model for interweaving inclusive thinking into the broader curriculum. By normalising such critical discussions rather than reserving them for special units, teachers help position equity and representation as fundamental dimensions of communicative competence. Learners are not only engaging with grammar or vocabulary, but with the social forces that shape language use, identity formation, and real-world interaction.

Expanding Family Vocabulary and Identities

This lesson encourages students to explore the linguistic and social diversity of family structures, including same-sex parents, foster families, blended households, and chosen families. It begins with a vocabulary-matching task designed to activate prior knowledge and introduce

inclusive terms. This is followed by a reading of a previously mentioned real-world news article which details the public response to a Maltese teacher who experienced discrimination based on his sexual orientation. The article serves not only as a reading comprehension task but also as a launchpad for a class discussion on how public discourse can shape, challenge, or reinforce social norms around family and identity. Depending on the proficiency level of the class, this reading can be replaced or adapted, illustrating the flexibility of such a lesson framework across contexts.

The lesson then transitions into a student-led reflection in which learners are invited to consider how the vocabulary introduced relates to their own lived experiences. Many participants identified with terms they had previously lacked language for, such as adopted siblings, blended family, or estranged relatives, revealing how lexical expansion can enable personal storytelling and foster a sense of validation. This shift illustrates how language functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a mechanism for affirming identity.

As with the previous example, this lesson is not conceived to be a discrete unit or one-off intervention. Rather, it reflects a broader pedagogical commitment to integrating inclusive content into the everyday workings of the curriculum. The foreign language classroom is one of the few educational spaces where students regularly discuss relationships, family, and personal life as part of communicative tasks. As such, it holds particular potential for expanding learners' conceptual frameworks. By embedding

inclusive representations into tasks that would otherwise default to normative examples – e.g., "my mother and father", "my brother and sister" – teachers can create space for more accurate, representative, and empathetic dialogue. Importantly, these shifts do not require altering the core syllabus, but re-seeing what already exists and making conscious choices that reflect the real-life diversity of learners.

Sustained Impact Through Everyday Pedagogical Choices

While structured lessons on inclusivity can create powerful learning experiences, it is equally important to recognise the potential for meaningful change through habitual, embedded choices in our day-to-day teaching. Inclusive pedagogy does not require elaborate lesson planning or thematic units. In fact, some of the most effective shifts happen in small, often overlooked moments, those that, over time, accumulate into a classroom culture that reflects and respects diversity.

It is also important to acknowledge the realities many language teachers face: limited time, high workload, and a lack of institutional support. Not every teacher has the space or capacity to design entire lessons around themes of diversity. But most have the autonomy to shape how topics are introduced, how examples are chosen, and how questions are framed. In this sense, inclusive teaching becomes less about adding new content and more about re-seeing what is already there, and how it might be used differently.

One such moment might arise during a grammar-focused lesson on pronouns. Many traditional grammar tables still present only the binary options 'he' and 'she', leaving little room for alternative linguistic forms. Yet, the singular 'they' has been widely used in English for centuries when a person's gender is unknown or irrelevant, a fact long documented in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (n.d., section I.2.a). This historical reality, however, is often overlooked in coursebooks and pre-service teacher education, where linguistic sensitivity is still narrowly defined. Simply drawing attention to this usage, explaining that 'they' can function as a gender-neutral singular pronoun, and modelling it naturally in example sentences can gently challenge assumptions while providing all students with a more accurate reflection of authentic English.

A related opportunity arises when teaching possessive determiners. Typical examples often default to heteronormative assumptions, such as "John lives with his wife" or "Anna called her sister". These can be reframed to include a wider range of identities and relationship types – e.g., "Alex lives with their partner", or "Taylor called their sibling". These adaptations reinforce the target structure while broadening to encompass the broad spectrum of social realities, and thereby influencing what is seen as acceptable and 'normal' in the classroom. When presented matter-of-factly, such choices invite inclusivity not as an exception but as a standard practice. This builds an environment in which all students can see aspects of their identity reflected in the language they are learning.

This does not require a radical departure from the syllabus, but noticing where inclusivity is absent in materials and making a conscious decision to fill those gaps, however briefly. These moments are especially powerful because they are incidental, they do not present inclusion as a special topic or political stance but as a natural part of language and communication. Over time, they signal to students that all identities are part of the everyday landscape of learning. When inclusion becomes something that is habitually interwoven into classroom interaction, rather than something exceptional or thematic, it becomes more sustainable and impactful. Teachers do not need to wait for the perfect unit to introduce representation. They simply need to notice the opportunities that are already present and understand the value of taking them.

Conclusion

Inclusive ELT practices are not just about representation for representation's sake (Bollas, 2020, 2021, 2024). They are about transforming the classroom into a space where all learners feel seen, valued, and equipped to participate fully in linguistic and social life. As this chapter has shown, the marginalisation of LGBTQ+ identities in ELT materials is neither accidental nor trivial; it is a structural feature of publishing, pedagogy, and market logic. But it is also something that educators can begin to challenge.

By embracing a broader understanding of sustainability, one that includes SDG 10.2's call for the redistribution of opportunity and voice, ELT can move toward practices

that affirm the dignity of all learners. Inclusive materials foster not only stronger linguistic skills but also deeper intercultural awareness, critical reflection, and emotional resilience. The classroom activities presented here are not exhaustive solutions, but they demonstrate what is possible when educators align their practice with principles of equity and recognition. Creating socially sustainable ELT spaces requires more than policy; it requires a shift in everyday practice that recognises representation as central to language education.

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Adapting the Idea of Native American 'Water-Bearers' to Our Sustainable Consumption of Water for ELT Lessons

Carol Samlal

Abstract

Water is a gift. It is the source of life and the sustainer of all life, and we are encouraged to value its sacredness. Water is not a commodity for profit or a resource to be exploited. ELT practitioners reach a wide audience of varying ages and access an ideal setting for embedding lessons in sustainability around the topic of water. Ideas include raising awareness of threats to our water as well as ways in which we can as individuals and communities protect and conserve water. In order to accomplish the latter, we could learn and adapt the teachings of Native Americans. Their beliefs about the 'water-bearers' or 'keepers of the water' provide rich literature and messages for protecting our waters – freshwater and oceans. It also goes deeper to include the heart-based wisdom of women. Just as life is created in water within women's bodies, indigenous teachings link this to their role as givers and sustainers of

life in the community. Thus, we can adopt and adapt these ideas in our ELT classrooms to encourage a greater presence of women's voices that is supported by the rest of the community.

Keywords: Water; Indigenous; Storytelling; Reciprocity; Wisdom

Introduction

Water is the source of life and the sustainer of all life; it is everyone's responsibility to protect it. Indigenous people around the world have known this for millennia, and although they have been marginalised, their wisdom is resurfacing for us to learn from. It is a restoration of our relationship with the earth and a "re-story-ation"[1] for us to write a new story to live by.

For a planet that is mostly covered by water, that which is available for us to use is shockingly small. According to the charity, WaterAid (2019), "if a bucket contained all the world's water, one teacup of that would be fresh water, and just one teaspoon of that would be available for us to use" (p. 3). To add to this astonishing fact is that twenty percent of all lake water (which forms a major source of surface freshwater) is held, rather unattainably, in one lake, Lake Baikal, in Siberia, Russia. Plus, freshwater is also stored in the ground (soil moisture), atmosphere, and living beings (biological water).

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1 "Re-story-ation" is a term first used by ecologist Gary Nabhan (1991) for the retelling of the land's stories to build a strong connection with the natural world.

Indigenous people did not need to be told these facts to consider water to be sacred and an integral part of all life. Some Native American creation stories hold water at its foundation, as will be explored later on. They also believed that women played a crucial role in protecting water, as they are the 'water-bearers' or, the more modern, 'water warriors'.[2] As Earth Mother gives life from her waters, (which modern science has since echoed), so too human (and indeed mammalian) life comes from the water within a woman's body. Hence, women were given the special role of keepers of the water.

Fast forward to modern day society. We use six times as much water as we did a century ago. This is mostly due to expanding industry and industrial farming practices, the growth of massive data centres for cloud storage and AI, as well as overall mismanagement of water. In the UK, for example, domestic households make up half of total water users. Despite this, it means the average person has the power to do something to help save and protect water.

Therefore, lessons in sustainability should include ideas on improving our relationship with water. By telling a new story based on an old one, then we stand a chance of protecting our Earth's water. According to Mitchell (2018), "If we hope to survive long enough to solve all the challenges that we face, then we have to ensure that the source of our lives is protected" (p. 123). In 2002, the Water Song Project was launched to encourage women from all around the

2   Water warriors: Warriors are not soldiers. They serve to protect and when called upon to fight, do so with honour and respect. Their actions come from a deep place within their hearts, not from obeying militant orders.

world to become keepers of the water, both in spirit and in action. Thus, we can adopt and adapt these traditional ways of sharing through stories and songs in our ELT classrooms. It could foster a sense of community, as well as a greater presence of women's voices through conversation and conservation, and awareness and awakening.

Water Scarcity: A Critical Challenge for Our Time

Many countries are facing a water crisis, and many more have water shortages. According to UNICEF (n.d.), half the world's population could face water scarcity by as early as 2025 and the issue could lead to the displacement of 700 million people by 2030. All countries face some level of risk, and already China, India, Portugal, Germany, and the UK are at risk of water shortages. The threats to water include pollution, wastage, and shortages (as aquifers and other natural sources are depleted due to mismanagement and drought). In England, for example, the waterways are heavily polluted due to unregulated activity by the water companies themselves.

As we pursue a path of economic growth at the cost of the planet's finite resources, anthropogenic activity will continue to add to rising global temperatures and hydroclimate volatility.[3] Through wastage and lack of respect for this precious resource, water will continue to become

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3   Hydroclimate volatility broadly refers to unusually rapid and/or high magnitude swings between unusually wet and dry conditions (or vice versa) relative to what is typical for a given location and season.

polluted and unsafe for sustaining all life.[4] This constant taking without a thought for reciprocity will only lead to a deepening water crisis.

What follows next is uncomfortable, but understanding the threat to our water is the bedrock to sustainable and effective action on our part. Extreme weather events have accelerated over the last few years. Within the recent months, rapidly melting polar sea ice is accelerating the albedo effect. A longer-term problem is the slowing of the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Current (AMOC), which threatens the distribution of global rainfall affecting all life. There are also more reports about microplastics in the rain, fish, embryos, and the human brain to name a few. So, to say there is a water crisis is to put it mildly.

The issue of water then is one of extreme importance. Any opportunity to raise awareness of its incredible value to life should be taken. Teachers have an extraordinary platform to reach a wider audience, and they (mostly) have licence to be as creative as possible.

Such creativity needs inspiration, and as science is turning increasingly to indigenous wisdom for inspiration and guidance, so too should ELT teachers. There are many teachings, oral and written, that are available to learn from. Of particular note, writers such as Sherri Mitchell (*Sacred Instructions: Indigenous Wisdom for Living Spirit-Based Change*, 2018) and Robin Wall Kimmerer (*Braiding*

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4   Polluted and unsafe water comes from plastic, agricultural and industrial waste, as well as flooding and tidal surges affecting the salinity of fresh water sources for domestic and agricultural use.

Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants, 2020) have used the art of storytelling to share the old ways of protecting and caring what we have now for generations to come. In other words, their ethic of taking only what is necessary while ensuring ample resources remain for grandchildren and generations yet unborn represents a fundamentally sustainable way of living.

The Native Peoples of North America have beautiful stories from a past that spans tens of thousands of years. Their struggle to keep their culture and way of life since the arrival of Europeans has woven itself into their stories. They teach us more than just how integral water is to our lives, but also resilience and forbearance. Their approach has been to continuously choose community over individual needs, and forgiveness and love as a means to decolonise our thinking away from the blind, capitalist mindset marked by overconsumption that has become Western society's norm.

As economies shrink, governments are increasingly focusing on their growth, thus extracting even more from Earth than it can afford to give. In recent times, we have seen governments roll back on climate pledges and promising to drill for more oil. Yet, the struggle to protect nature has been ongoing for decades. In November 2016, a group of young men and women from the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation stood up against the construction of the Dakota pipelines that threatened the Mississippi River and all the lives that depended on it. The Standing Rock's heartfelt protest garnered support from around the world which

led to them winning the case against the oil companies. Although the following presidency overturned the ruling, their steadfast passion for protecting nature remains exemplary, with global supporters joining the 'water warriors' to stand in solidarity with Earth Mother.

In the face of any challenge that threatens our environment (local or countrywide), people can protect nature and share sustainable ideas. They can accomplish this by building communities and fostering togetherness. What better place to invest in this than in the classroom?

ELT Lessons Inspired by Indigenous Water Teachings

Given the creativity of ELT teachers, there are countless ways to share ideas on protecting nature and more essentially, water. However, the focus here will be on two select stories and a song to help students reshape their views on water – not as a commodity or resource, but as a gift from Earth Mother.

According to the Indigenous Americans, water is life because all life came from water and all life depends on water to survive. They have passed on this ancestral knowledge down the generations through oral tradition or storytelling. Such story-based wisdom constitutes a rich resource from which we can deepen and refine our teaching on sustainability and the preciousness of water for all life.

Indigenous Creation Story: All Life Springs from Water and the Birth of Turtle Island

Story Sequencing, Reading and Discussion

Although there are very many versions of the creation story across the different peoples of North America, the ideas presented here revolve around the water-based stories. These stories carry strong messages, and the lesson focus is sequencing events and analysing the meanings within the narrative.

The Creation Story of the Indigenous Peoples of the Northeastern Woodlands Region

In all the versions of this particular creation story, there is Sky Woman who is like Mother Nature. In one of the versions, Sky Woman is a celestial being and she wanted to know more about the Underwater World. Driven by a desire to create, she descended from Sky World to the Underwater World. There she met powerful water spirits, and they granted her permission to enter. Sky Woman set to work to create life. She planted a sacred tree which magically bore two fruit (twin brothers) who then created Earth and all life to inhabit it.

In another version, Sky Woman was looking down at the Underwater World when she fell through a hole in the sky. A flock of waterbirds flew up and rescued her. But they could not hold her indefinitely in their wings, so they landed her safely on the back of a giant turtle. When Sky Woman fell, she had with her a small bag of seeds. All the water creatures took turns diving to the bottom of the water to

bring her precious soil. However, the water was deep, and they all tried and failed. After a while, only one water animal was left – the muskrat. It was the smallest and weakest of the animals, but it had decided to try. So, it dived down and after a long time, the other animals became worried. After a long while the muskrat came to the surface; it had in its paw some precious soil. Sky Woman then took the soil and with her foot spread it across the shell of the turtle. Then she planted the seeds. Thus, the first plants grew in the ground, and the turtle became Turtle Island where plants, land animals and humans co-existed in harmony.

Story Sequencing and Reading

In order to help develop literacy and reading, these stories could be divided into sentences. Working in small groups, students are then tasked with putting them together in the right order. Each story should be done separately. After this task, they then feed back to the class with each group reading out what they produced. At this point, support in pronunciation could be addressed, and any unfamiliar vocabulary items could be discussed and their meanings elicited. This then leads into a discussion about the stories' versions.

Discussion

The discussion about the two versions could explore the similarities and differences between them. For example, one seemed to speak of an intentional descent whereas the other seemed more accidental. The language and choice of verbs around how Sky Woman came down from the sky could be noted.

Another point for discussion would be the symbolic meanings. For instance, the magical fruit/twin brothers represent the masculine. The story seeks to show there is a balance between the feminine (Earth Mother) and the masculine. This presents an opportunity to raise awareness in class that feminine and masculine energies are not synonymous with gender, and that different genders co-existed peacefully in pre-colonial America.

Alternatively, students could discuss the success of the muskrat, the weakest of all the animals who dived to the bottom of the water to retrieve soil. Why didn't the other stronger animals succeed? Some example answers could include pride, ego, etc., but students are encouraged to think why this might be and there is no one correct answer. Another discussion question could be: what is the significance of the smallest animal being able to deliver in the face of a seemingly impossible situation? A possible answer is that no person is too small to make a difference when it comes to protecting water.

The idea of reciprocity should be noted as Sky Woman did not come empty handed. With her seeds, she was able to give back to the water creatures. The idea that we can simply take from nature is not sustainable – we need to always remember to give back so that there will be plenty for future generations.

Summary

Both versions identify water as a powerful source of creation and the beginning of life. They form the foundation for the belief that water is sacred. There needs to be a

balance between nature and human activities, and that no action is too small. Indigenous Peoples understand that water needs to be honoured and respected if life is to continue for generations to come. This belief underlies what it means to be sustainable.

The Water Song Project: Water is Life

Singing, Brainstorming, Presenting and (Song) Writing

The Water Song Project emerged from the Circle of All Nations Gathering in 2002. The song was written by Irene Wawatie Jerome, an Anshinabe/Cree, on instruction from the Elders present at the Gathering. Its purpose was to share the song globally to encourage women from around the world to connect with Mother Nature's greatest gift. By singing The Water Song, women would deepen their own relationship with water through their daily interactions; for example, in the shower or doing the washing.

The Algonquin Grandmothers' message for women of all generations is:

> Granddaughter, the water can hear you, the water has memory. Water is the life blood of Mother, the Earth. Water is the life blood of our own body. To continue to pass on the knowledge, it needs to be given unto the other generations. You are the keeper of the water. (*Sing the Water Song*, 2018, 0:10)

The song translates, "water is the life's blood of our mother the earth. Water is the life's blood of our own bodies".

Singing: A Warmer and/or Phonics

Although this song is not in English, it is wonderful for both understanding and teaching phonetics at lower levels, as well as providing a lovely melody as a sing-along exercise to help with the sequencing of sounds. My class sang this together and the feeling of togetherness and peace was palpable. As a teacher, take the lead and sing – they will follow! You can play the song on YouTube for learners to listen to. Watching the video is optional but sets the context for the following brainstorming activity.

Brainstorming: Problems and Protectors

In the video, grandmothers from different backgrounds gather with younger women and girls to share sacred teachings and a song. The message from the grandmothers emphasises the value of our role, especially of girls and women as water bearers and protectors. A more subliminal point reminds us of the grace and wisdom of our elders in a society that promotes the longevity of youth.

For the first part of the activity, students need to consider what/who are damaging our water. Question prompts could include industrial effluent (e.g., dyes from fast fashion), agricultural run-off (e.g., synthetic nitrogen fertiliser), oil spills, desalination (e.g., unregulated knock-on effect), and corporate and individual consumption habits (e.g., over-use of plastics). Using these prompts, students could be tasked to identify any global and local examples.

For the second part of the activity, students need to think about how they can protect water from the problems identified. Ideas could be at an individual, community and

national level including more conscious buying of goods and services or efforts to reduce pollution of waterways. Students should be encouraged to give tangible ideas. For example, as fast fashion is one of the biggest polluters of water, we should buy pre-loved clothing instead. Or how to reduce pollution by adopting more ecological-friendly habits at the beach (no plastic waste, for instance). However, ideas should not just be a change of habits, but also activities to clean and protect. Community groups to clean local waterways is one way of raising awareness and protecting water. There are many other ideas, of course, which range from contacting your local MP and writing to the local newspaper to individual action.

Presenting (and Song/Writing)

Using all the suggestions from the brainstorming activity, students are then given a chance to present their findings through some form of creative expression. An idea could be to use presentation software, where digital skills could be embedded. Or they could create through more traditional art, paintings, and posters. They would then present their findings in groups to the rest of the class as a speaking and listening exercise.

Even better, given the nature of the class, you could get them to write a simple (rhyming) song promoting a water protection message. It could be short and sweet (and in English!), echoing the spirit of The Water Song.

Summary

The Water Song shared here is one of many across North America. With reverence to the original song and in keeping

with the ultimate goal of the Algonquin Elders (Circle of All Nations Gathering, 2002), students are encouraged to create and share their own 'water songs'. The idea here is to build language and community through discussion and art. The water songs could be interpreted visually or performatively. Taking action gives us a sense of agency, rather than relying solely on an academic approach to protecting water.

Depending on college guidelines, students' water songs could even be videoed and shared to move the awareness outside of the classroom to the wider community. Artwork and presentations could be shared online. In this way, the message of being water protectors reaches a wider audience, which is rather the point.

A Children's Story: We are Water Protectors

Exploring Language Features and Writing

We are Water Protectors is a children's story written by Carole Lindstrom (2020); it tells the story of Water[5] as the first medicine, because it affects and connects us all. The premise of the story is about the metaphorical black snake that threatens to destroy the Earth and poison all the water. But one brave young water protector decides to defend Earth's most sacred resource. The language within this story is rich in language features and imagery that could be used at all levels. This is an excerpt from the story:

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5   'Water' is deliberately capitalised as it is an important character in the story, the life-giving entity that is being threatened by the Black Snake.

The Black Snake.[6]

My people talk of a **Black Snake** that will destroy the land, spoil the water, poison plants and animals, wreck everything in its path. When my people first spoke of the Black Snake, they foretold that it wouldn't come for many, many years. Now the Black Snake is here, **its venom burns the land**, courses through the water making it unfit to drink. Take courage. I must keep the Black Snake away from my village's water. I must rally my people together to stand for the water, to stand for the land, to stand as one against the Black Snake. We stand with our songs and our drums we are still here. It will not be easy. We fight for those who cannot fight for themselves **the winged ones**, **the crawling ones**, **the four-legged**, **the two-legged**, the plants, trees, rivers, lakes, the Earth – we are all related.

Tears like waterfall stream down, tracks down my face, tracks down my people's face. Water has its own spirit, Nokomis told me, water is alive. **Water remembers** our ancestors who came before us she said, we stand with our songs and our drums, we are still here.

On YouTube, there are many examples of the story being read aloud for learners to listen to.

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6   The full story is available on YouTube. It was written in acknowledgement of Native American Heritage Month. There was no way to contact the author, Carole Lindstrom, to whom full credit is given for the story, *We are Water Protectors*.

Exploring Language Features

The highlighted words and expressions in the above excerpt are examples of the use of language features throughout the story. In looking at the full version of the story, you will find it rich in descriptive writing to explore with students.

The selected language features in the excerpt are, respectively, metaphor, imagery, repetition, simile, and personification. Students can explore these language features and discuss their meaning and use in the story. They can give their opinions as to whether they think they are good or not. If not, they could try to suggest their own example of a language feature as a replacement.

Writing

Taking this a step further, students are encouraged to use (as suggested by the teacher) language features in their own writing. The activity would be for them to plan a short story together about a young person who rallied others to resolve a water problem in their local area. Each person is then tasked with writing a portion of the story and must choose from a set of pre-taught language features. The pieces are put together and read as a whole to the class.

Summary

Protecting our water, both locally and globally is a message that should be shared outside of the classroom. If possible, stories could be shared in the school magazine, a dedicated blog or even in the local paper to reach more people and garner community action.

Implications for Practice

The water crisis affects separate groups in society and countries differently. For some, it is more apparent when there are prolonged periods of drought and water shortages, or for others, torrential rain, and flash flooding. Yet no one is unaffected – not students, ELT practitioners, or their managers.

It follows therefore that everyone stands to benefit from redefining their relationship with water. Water should not be regarded simply as a convenient commodity in our taps, but as a life-giver and life-sustainer. It is not to be simply regarded as something healthy to be had eight glasses of, but as something emotionally and spiritually connected to our wellbeing.

If everyone is genuinely interested in sustainability, then it means going deeper than simply adopting green practices. It is a paradigm shift in the way we regard our relationship to water. It would ensure that there is always clean water for us, our children, our grandchildren, and the generations we will never meet.

Conclusion

As ELT practitioners, we should take this message forward to teach and encourage our students to appreciate the importance of water through storytelling. All Indigenous people around the world, including pre-Christian Europe, have believed that water is life and a connection to the natural world. If we strive to rebuild and keep this connection

strong and pure, then we will be teaching sustainability through kindness. The outcome is twofold: students (and teachers) not only embrace the importance of protecting water for themselves and for all life, but also create space for a spiritual connection with one of Gaia's greatest gifts. Women and girls can raise their voices with the support of men and boys. In so doing, we create a better Earth for everyone, both now and in the future.

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Ensuring Students' Well-Being in the Digital Age: The Path to Digital Wellness in the ELT Classroom

Rrita Suli

Abstract

The demands of contemporary education and the increasing integration of technology in the English language teaching (ELT) classroom have raised important concerns regarding students' well-being and digital wellness. It is therefore essential to promote healthy digital habits that support balanced and purposeful engagement with technology. While students must utilise digital tools to develop their digital literacy, irresponsible or excessive use can negatively affect their overall well-being. Moreover, some learners may struggle with language tasks in digital environments due to reduced social interaction and the absence of immediate interpersonal support. In response to these challenges, this chapter emphasises the need to guide learners thoughtfully by creating opportunities that foster well-being alongside effective learning outcomes. It explores how technology and digital tools influence

students' mental, social, and emotional health and advances understanding of well-being within digital ELT contexts. Finally, it outlines key factors that shape student well-being and offers recommendations for cultivating healthy digital habits, aligning with the aims of Sustainable Development Goal 3.

Keywords: Student Well-Being; Digital Tools; Emotional Intelligence; ELT Classroom

Introduction

In recent years, interest in student well-being has grown significantly, reflecting a broader recognition that it is both a key contributor to effective learning and a fundamental component of 21st-century education (Gavrova et al., 2020). Its importance is further underscored by its central place in the United Nations' (n.d.) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3, which promotes good health and well-being for all. At the same time, the rapid expansion of digital technologies has introduced new responsibilities for educators, who must ensure that students' engagement with digital tools does not negatively affect their emotional or social health. Supporting learners in building a healthy, balanced relationship with digital devices has therefore become an essential aspect of contemporary English language teaching (ELT).

To understand how well-being can be fostered in this context, Raz (2004) defines well-being as "the successful pursuit of valuable goals and relationships" (p. 292). Applied to ELT, this definition highlights the importance of helping

learners set meaningful, achievable goals while cultivating positive teacher–student relationships throughout the learning process. This chapter argues that these principles are especially critical in the digital classroom, a technology-enhanced learning environment where digital tools, online resources, and interactive platforms are used to support, enrich, and extend teaching and learning (Michaelsen, 2020).

The Role of Well-Being in the Digital ELT Classroom

Although well-being is difficult to define due to its complex and multifaceted nature, it is widely recognised as essential to human happiness, growth, and holistic development (Pentón Herrera et al., 2023). In the context of language education, Mercer (2021) argues that "ELT now needs to work towards a contemporary, professional, and meaningful agenda of theoretical, empirical, and practical work on well-being" (p. 20). This perspective highlights the growing importance of integrating positive psychology into ELT, positioning it as a vital component of the theory–practice continuum.

It is also important to emphasise that education extends far beyond academic achievement. As the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE, 2015) notes, learning is fundamentally connected to learners' overall personal well-being. Supporting emotional, social, and psychological health is therefore not an optional add-on but an essential dimension of effective and humane ELT practice.

In today's rapidly evolving digital landscape, technology "gives the teacher a classroom tool that comes from the real world, and towards which most students feel a great deal of goodwill" (Chandler & Stone, 1999, p. 83). As a result, supporting learners in developing strong digital literacy skills is more important than ever. However, technology use without clearly defined pedagogical goals can negatively impact learners' well-being, contributing to social detachment, anxiety, and isolation. This makes it essential for educators to foster healthy and intentional engagement with digital tools.

At the same time, technology offers significant opportunities when integrated thoughtfully. Dudeney (2000) highlights several benefits, including providing access to global knowledge, enabling communication with peers around the world, and facilitating participation in international collaborative projects. When used in moderation and with purpose, these online connections can enrich learning and even enhance students' well-being by supporting positive social interaction.

Promoting well-being in digital ELT environments also requires explicit instruction in digital literacy. As Moje et al. (2000) note, literacy instruction must increasingly support learners in negotiating digital meaning, using helpful features of software tools and adopting a critical, analytical stance toward digitally mediated communication. In doing so, EFL learners become critical media consumers who can navigate digital spaces responsibly and confidently, while safeguarding their mental and physical well-being.

As illustrated in Table 1, the effects of digital technologies on well-being warrant careful consideration. Both the quantity and quality of digital engagement matter, particularly in terms of exposure and maintaining a balanced use of digital media. Ultimately, students' health, safety, and social connections remain essential components of their overall well-being. For this reason, ELT teachers play a crucial role in modelling and encouraging healthy digital habits, helping learners cultivate balanced, responsible, and supportive practices within digital environments.

Table 1:

Analysing the Relationship Between Digital Technologies and Well-Being (Adapted from Lee & Žarnic, 2024)

Digital experiences analysed by the studies reviewed in this paper		Selected well-being dimensions / Measurement
Technologies	Digital devices (e.g., computers, smartphones, IT gadgets), Internet, social networking sites (SNS), video games, tech-enabled healthcare, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT), etc.	Health, social connections, civic engagement, safety, subjective well-being, work-life balance; inequalities.

	Measured as:		
Human interactions	Digital use (e.g., cellphone use, texting), Internet use/access, digital exposure, screen time, social media use (e.g., time spent on social media, time spent browsing), AI use, smartphone application use, etc.	In terms of quantity (e.g., intensity of use or exposure, availability of access); andIn terms of quality (e.g., active or passive usage).	

Promoting Well-Being Through Emotional Intelligence

It is widely recognised that learners who experience high levels of pressure or who struggle with self-awareness and social-awareness skills are unlikely to perform as well as those who can navigate their emotions more effectively. While conventional intelligence (IQ) has long been debated as a predictor of success, it has become increasingly evident that academically capable learners may still lack emotional assertiveness. In other words, success cannot be determined solely by cognitive ability; it is profoundly influenced by the emotional intelligence individuals develop, particularly since "teaching and learning involve human relations" (De Ruyter et al., 2022, p. 115).

Emotional intelligence is commonly defined as the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate one's own emotions, as well as recognise and respond appropriately to the emotions of others. Mayer and Salovey (1997) describe it as the capacity to monitor feelings and use this information to guide thinking and action. Often measured as an emotional intelligence quotient (EQ), this construct has gained prominence in behavioural research, reflecting its significant impact on both personal and professional environments.

Being emotionally intelligent involves understanding both the emotions of others and the impact of one's own emotional responses, enabling individuals to act appropriately across a range of situations. Goleman's (1995) theory of emotional intelligence emphasises that without self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and the ability to build effective relationships, even highly intelligent individuals will struggle to succeed. In other words, emotional abilities, rather than just cognitive skills, are essential for maintaining healthy relationships and functioning effectively in both personal and professional contexts.

Emotions are closely tied to reasoning, and individuals who struggle to regulate their emotions often find it difficult to perform effectively under pressure. Goleman (1995) identifies five key skill areas that shape emotional intelligence:

- Self-awareness – the ability to recognise one's own emotions and understand how one's actions affect others;

- Self-regulation – the capacity to manage emotions and their consequences;
- Motivation – an inner drive to improve and engage positively;
- Empathy – the ability to understand and respond to the emotions of others;
- Social skills – the ability to connect, communicate, and interact effectively with others.

Unlike intelligence quotient (IQ), these skills can be developed and strengthened over time. Learners who expand their emotional intelligence often become more successful, resilient, and effective in academic and interpersonal contexts. Emotional intelligence helps individuals navigate high-pressure situations, sustain positive relationships, and cultivate both self-awareness and social awareness, these being core competencies for reading and responding to emotions constructively.

Stimulating Well-Being in the ELT Classroom

ELT has continually evolved in response to shifting trends, pedagogical innovations, and changing societal needs. As a result, "training foreign language teachers demands more than teaching skills and language proficiency" (Mewald, 1999, p. 249). Today, ELT practitioners are no longer viewed merely as transmitters of knowledge; they also play crucial roles as mentors who comfort, guide, and support adolescents (Wentzel, 2016). This expanded professional

identity calls for educational institutions to function as dynamic "learning communities," collectively adapting and growing as the world changes (Leung et al., 2001, p. 6). In line with this shift, schools are increasingly embracing a holistic approach to education, one that prioritises not only academic achievement but also the broader personal development and well-being of learners.

As demonstrated by the European School Education Platform (2025), a whole-school approach to well-being and mental health is necessary. Factors such as classroom climate, student voice, the creation of safe spaces, and engagement in extracurricular activities all play a significant role in shaping learners' well-being and, consequently, their academic performance. Equally important is the well-being of teachers. The effectiveness of any class is strongly influenced by teachers' emotional intelligence, their overall well-being, and their ability to manage workload demands in order to prevent burnout.

Within the ELT classroom, Foster (2009) notes that "teachers are required to mix and match their class activities to embrace all kinds of learner styles" (p. 257). In other words, ELT teachers must attend to the diverse needs of their learners and design lessons that extend beyond language proficiency alone, incorporating elements that nurture students' emotional and personal well-being.

Teaching English requires a holistic approach, as "each classroom is unique in the particular dynamics that exist among the participants in the lesson" (McKay, 2002, p. 116). In digitally supported ELT contexts, teachers can leverage a range of multimedia resources to help learners

connect with peers, collaborate on meaningful projects, and contribute to their communities. When used intentionally, technology becomes a tool that supports students rather than a source of distraction, anxiety, or unhealthy habits.

As summarised in Table 2, it is crucial to integrate topics related to student well-being and health into English teaching. Addressing real-life situations enables learners to build meaningful connections between language development and themes related to well-being. For example, an activity such as 'Interviewing a Nutritionist' encourages students to research health-related issues and practise relevant vocabulary in context. More broadly, ELT teachers can organise campaigns centred on stress management, the benefits of physical activity, or balancing technology use with well-being, thereby promoting holistic development alongside language proficiency.

Table 2:

Summary of Practical Ideas (Adapted from EFL Café, 2024)

Exercises and projects	Aims
Food Label Reading	Teaching students how to identify and understand terms such as 'calories,' 'sodium,' 'protein,' 'fibre,' and 'ingredients.'

Exercises and projects	Aims
Healthy Meal Planning	Students work in pairs or small groups to create a balanced meal using specific vocabulary words.
Using Multimedia Resources	Showing students videos or podcasts about healthy eating habits can also be an effective way to reinforce vocabulary and comprehension.
Healthy Living Diary	Students keep a daily record of their eating habits, exercise routines, and sleep patterns for a week.
Interviewing a Nutritionist	Role-playing presentations.
Health Awareness Campaign	Students create informational posters, brochures, or digital presentations on a specific health topic, such as 'The Benefits of Regular Exercise,' or 'Managing Stress Effectively.'

Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests that learners experiencing stress or anxiety have greater difficulty processing and retaining language input. For this reason, ELT teachers must be attentive to students' emotional states. Creating a positive, supportive classroom atmosphere lowers the affective filter, enhances motivation, and leads to greater learner engagement.

Recommendations

The following recommendations outline practical strategies for supporting student well-being and fostering digital wellness within the ELT classroom.

- Adopt a Balanced and Purposeful Use of Technology: Teaching English to digital natives requires intentional and balanced technology use that promotes learning without overwhelming students. ELT practitioners should purposefully select digital tools that enhance engagement, reduce cognitive load, and minimise stress or screen fatigue. Building healthy digital habits, such as structured device use, mindful engagement online, and screen-time breaks, must be embedded into daily classroom routines to support students' overall well-being.

- Implement a Competency-Based and Emotionally Responsive Curriculum: English learners benefit from a curriculum that integrates both linguistic competencies and emotional intelligence. Teachers should include tasks that foster self-awareness, collaboration, and empathy while developing language skills. Topics related to health, mental well-being, and emotional regulation can serve as rich sources for vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and communicative activities, helping learners connect language use with relevant life skills.

- Integrate Digital Wellness and Online Safety into ELT Objectives: Since learners spend increasing amounts of time online, ELT lessons should incorporate explicit

instruction on digital wellness, including responsible device use, recognising online stressors, managing digital distractions, and maintaining healthy online relationships. Embedding discussions about cyberbullying, digital identity, and critical media literacy helps learners navigate digital spaces safely and thoughtfully.

- Embed Sustainability Themes Within ELT Content and Materials: Curriculum designers should include materials that connect language learning with sustainability issues, enabling students to explore global ecological challenges through English. Lessons on climate action, biodiversity, recycling, and responsible digital consumption support both linguistic development and global citizenship. This integration also aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 3 (well-being) and SDG 4.7 (global citizenship).

- Provide Professional Development Focused on Digital and Emotional Well-Being: ELT teachers need ongoing professional development to confidently address digital wellness, emotional well-being, and sustainability in the classroom. Training should equip teachers with strategies for fostering safe learning environments, supporting students' emotional needs, and integrating digital tools responsibly. Access to mentorship, professional learning communities, and resource networks strengthens teachers' capacity to respond to the diverse challenges of the digital age.

- Cultivate a Classroom Environment That Promotes Agency, Belonging, and Well-Being: The digital ELT

classroom should prioritise positive classroom climate, student voice, and safe spaces where learners feel valued and emotionally supported. Encouraging collaborative projects, reflective activities, and peer support helps build social connectedness, a crucial aspect of student well-being in technology-rich environments.

- Foster Responsible Global Citizenship Through ELT: The digital ELT classroom should prepare learners not only to communicate effectively but also to act responsibly in a complex, interconnected world. By engaging with sustainability, digital ethics, and global well-being issues through English, learners develop both linguistic proficiency and the dispositions needed to participate as thoughtful, ethical, and informed global citizens.

Conclusion

Contemporary methods of language instruction, coupled with the demands of a rapidly evolving digital era, make the integration of technology in the ELT classroom unavoidable. Consequently, ELT teachers must develop learners' digital literacy while maintaining a healthy balance between technology use and language learning. Numerous studies indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on students' emotional well-being and academic performance. Beyond affecting learners' social skills, it also resulted in increased isolation, an overload of remote tasks, and excessive screen time. Thus, while digital tools offer significant pedagogical advantages, their integration into ELT also raises concerns regarding student well-being and health.

For this reason, student well-being must remain central to ELT instructional practices. Incorporating topics related to well-being can help teachers create a positive classroom climate, one in which every learner feels valued, understood, and socially responsible. Such an approach aligns with the broader goal of ELT: not only to support learners in achieving their language objectives but also to equip them with the skills and dispositions needed to navigate real-life challenges in a healthy and balanced way.

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