

# Teaching Sustainable Development Goals in the English Classroom

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## Abstract

Traditionally, education has been confined to classrooms and textbooks, giving students few opportunities to explore, analyse, understand, and solve real-world problems in authentic contexts. Classroom assignments did not focus on real-life tasks, and consequently, learners failed to integrate life issues with classroom learning. Emphasis on twenty-first-century skills created a paradigm shift in the teaching-learning process. The United Nations has established seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that require global implementation by 2030. The planet has been ravaged by man over the centuries and requires urgent healing if we want to bequeath a healthy world for posterity. 'UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development: A Roadmap' is an urgent call for action to prepare learners to win this 'battle of our lives', as the UN Secretary General calls it. Education for Sustainable Development cannot be implemented in totality, at least immediately, in all the schools; it would be worthwhile to explore if sustainability themes, goals, and values can be integrated with existing subjects. The English language provides ideal pathways to do this, as it lends itself well to such integration. Can English language learning contribute to 'Education for Sustainable Development'? How is the English language classroom best suited to promote sustainable development? This research paper attempts to answer these questions and also concludes by giving practical examples that integrate the LSRW skills with the SDGs.

**Keywords:** Development, Goals, Language, Learning, Sustainable

## Teaching Sustainable Development Goals in the English Classroom

### Teacher

*What do you do?*

*I'm a teacher.*

*What do you teach?*

*People.*

*What do you teach them?*

*English.*

*You mean grammar, verbs, nouns, pronunciation, conjugation, articles and particles, negatives and interrogatives ...?*

*That too.*

*What do you mean, 'that too'?*

*Well, I also try to teach them how to think, and feel – show them inspiration, aspiration, cooperation, participation, consolation, innovation, ... help them think about globalization, exploitation, confrontation, incarceration, discrimination, degradation, subjugation, ...how inequality brings poverty, how intolerance brings violence, how need is denied by greed, how –isms become prisons, how thinking and feeling can bring about healing.*

*Well I don't know about that.*

*Maybe you should stick to language, forget about anguish.*

*You can't change the world.*

*But if I did that, I'd be a cheater, not a teacher.*

Alan Maley (Maley, 2017)

## Introduction

The teacher in us acknowledges that teaching is a calling that goes well beyond what is in the text. Especially the English teacher! Preparing students for life success rather than school success and chiselling out the child's

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personality, much like a sculptor, teachers are best suited to promote sustainable development goals in the English classroom, which can form an important component of the Education for Sustainable Development- ESD. How can language learning contribute to ESD? This is the central question of this research paper.

India, like other developing nations, focuses on achieving literacy. Additionally, students want to learn English primarily for basic proficiency, as learning the language will help them advance socially and professionally. Whether one agrees or not, English has come to represent people's aspirations, and proficiency in the language helps them fully participate in national and international life. In a global world, English is seen as a binding force. Language learning thus helps learners participate meaningfully in multilingual communities. The emphasis shifts toward local and glocal approaches. In this interconnected era, the seamless integration of local and global perspectives requires thinking globally while acting locally.

All along, education in the traditional context was confined to classrooms and textbooks, and students had few opportunities to explore, analyse, understand and solve real-world problems in authentic situations. Classroom assignments did not focus on real-life tasks, and consequently, learners failed to integrate life issues with what was taught in the classroom. Stress on twenty-first-century skills created a paradigm shift in the teaching-learning process.

### The Sustainable Development Goals

In the year 2015, all the member states of the United Nations adopted a common agenda for sustainable development to be achieved by the year 2030. The UN provided a '*shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future.*' (United Nations, n.d.)

The UN has listed seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and has urged all countries to join the campaign to achieve these goals by 2030. The planet has been ravaged by humanity over the centuries and requires urgent healing if we want to bequeath a healthy world for posterity. These 17 goals, when reached, will help in the preservation of the planet and its people and save them from further destruction.

### Literature Review

'UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development: A Roadmap serves as an urgent call for action, posing the pertinent question: "How can we prepare learners of all ages for the 'battle for our lives,' as UN Secretary-General



Fig: Sustainable Development Goals

António Guterres calls it?" The document explains that ESD serves as a well-established framework that empowers learners with knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to make informed decisions and take responsible actions (UNESCO, 2020). However, since ESD cannot be implemented comprehensively and immediately in all schools, it would be worthwhile to explore whether sustainability themes, goals, and values can be integrated with existing subjects. The English language provides ideal pathways to do this, as it lends itself well to such integration.

In their book, '*Critical Pedagogies and Language Learning,*' Norton and Toolney advocate educating teachers for change. The final section of the book addresses the diverse means through which educators can introduce innovation and social change in teacher education practices, which can be reflected through creative action in the classrooms (Norton & Toohey, 2004). This sets the stage for teachers to incorporate sustainability themes in the English classroom innovatively.

CLIL, that is, 'Content and Language Integrated Learning' approaches, can integrate SDG-related content into English instruction without compromising language objectives. In '*CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning,*' Coyle et al. argue for the need to "regenerate content teaching so that it closely fits the requirements of the modern age, which has been closely linked to the 'learning brain.' To achieve this, the content teacher will need to adapt subject-specific methods to accommodate the additional language focus. It opens doors to alternative ways of using methodologies, which can be rewarding for both the teacher and learners (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010).

According to Langer, as stated in '*Envisioning Literature,*' the classroom is a social setting for envisionment building. Here, literary imagination can be used to explore options, solve problems, and understand

others (Langer, 1995). Thus, integrating sustainability themes into English language teaching opens new frontiers, bringing in a refreshing change in the English classroom.

### Language Learning and SDGs

In a language class, the stress needs to be given to learning, not teaching. Whatever is taught has to be practical; hence, the content that is designed may be geared towards achieving this end. In India, schools follow specific texts prescribed by the respective boards of the states where they are located. Thus, in teaching literature, schools have no choice but to follow the prescribed textbooks. But language is an area where teachers can bring in a lot of creativity, and this is an area that requires considerable teacher empowerment. Language serves as an excellent medium for conveying ideas about issues confronting society that are relevant to today's youth. An inspiring teacher can introduce significant issues like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and weave LSRW activities around these themes. Exploring them and finding meaningful solutions helps students find their identity and purpose in life.

For any learning to be meaningful and lasting, students have to explore the concepts and skills they have learnt in class by connecting them with their personal real-life experiences. Climate change, gender inequality, and the destruction and loss that follow senseless violence can all be discussed and debated in the language class. When students collaborate to seek solutions collectively, these lessons learned remain for life, potentially contributing to SDG achievement by 2030. Schools can take heart that they have been at the forefront of this fight and have inspired their students to take concrete steps. Teachers can plan activities around what students already know and connect them to the new things they are being taught in the class. Students will find it easier to retain what is taught if it is directly linked to real-life experiences.

### Problem-Solving Approach

Here, various problems that students are confronted with in the world at large can be discussed and taken up in the class, keeping the appropriateness of the age of the students carefully in mind. Language skills are assessed and developed while at the same time students connect to their daily life issues. This method of learning a language by placing stress on issues surrounding it has multiple uses as students gain recognition of topical matters, debate solutions, and learn the language in the process. Activities can focus on the SDGs, including eliminating poverty, eradicating hunger, ensuring good health and well-being,

providing quality education, promoting gender equality, ensuring clean water and sanitation, providing clean, affordable energy, creating opportunities for decent work, fostering innovation and improving infrastructure, reducing inequalities, creating sustainable cities and communities, promoting responsible consumption and production, addressing climate issues, protecting life below water and on land, ensuring peace and justice, and building enduring partnerships.

Language classes cannot be taught in isolation in today's world, as traditional approaches have to give way to a multidisciplinary approach, a key point made by the NEP 2020. Biasutti and Frate make a case in point for interdisciplinary learning as they point out that teachers have to transcend the traditional fragmented approaches to a holistic and interdisciplinary approach (Biasutti et al. 2018).

### What are the challenges faced by teachers in aligning the SDGs with language learning?

**Teachers unaware of SDGs:** Many teachers may not be aware of the urgency of meeting the SDGs, though, as the years go by, more and more regions are affected by climate vagaries. In 2023, a report published in *The Times of India* on August 20, 2023, titled "A Sinking Feeling Across Uttarakhand" ("A Sinking Feeling Across Uttarakhand," 2023), quotes data from the State Emergency Operation Centre (SEOC) showing 1,123 landslides through August 2023 compared to 245 in 2022. Death and destruction to property due to landslides and cloudbursts have now become part of the daily news in one part of the country or another. Unseasonal rains with raging fury, storms, and forest fires have become frequent occurrences. In his recent article 'Summer: No Happy Ending,' eminent climate activist Chandra Bhushan asks a pertinent question: 'How prepared are we to deal with the deadly impact of extreme heat in 2025?' (Bhushan, 2024) Thus, the call for action is no longer a luxury but one that has to be taken up on a war footing by all stakeholder groups, especially students, as they inherit the mantle of protecting the earth. Teachers need to play an active role in creating awareness by first becoming aware themselves.

**Indifference towards moving beyond the time-tested content and processes in the ELT-restricted syllabus:** A growth mindset willing to explore uncharted territory should be the hallmark of educators, and they should move beyond their comfort zones by giving assessments and assignments that shadow real problems.

**Lack of sufficient motivation:** Lost in the daily grind, teachers may not be motivated enough to explore themes pertaining to the SDGs. However, innovation is the

hallmark of educational pedagogy, and teachers should be exhorted to try out changes.

**Lack of training in the latest pedagogies:** This is the crux of the issue in most schools. Teachers who have not received adequate training will be quite confused if they are asked to stretch beyond what they know. Orientation sessions and refresher workshops should be organised in every school to help teachers make a smooth transition.

Teachers may believe that SDGs fall beyond their primary areas of expertise. Desirable learning outcomes can be achieved by empowered teachers.

**Time-consuming:** The fear that incorporating SDGs may eat into well-established schedules and lesson plans.

### How to overcome these challenges?

School heads should be made aware of the benefits of integrating sustainability themes with language goals. Awareness programmes that can help language teachers should be conducted in schools by experts in the field. The lessons in language learning can have a focus on sustainability themes right from the time a student enters the first grade in school and can be sustained in each language class till s/he steps out of the school proficient in the language as well as fully aware and equipped to tackle the various issues facing the world at large and their own societies in particular. All schools, without exception, can try and attempt to create such a developmental model if we want to create a harmonious world order. Education for sustainable development ESD has to become a part of language studies, and teachers can use a plethora of activities, ranging from debates, discussions, and presentations, *to stimulate learning and promote core competencies, such as critical and systemic thinking, collaborative decision-making, and taking responsibility for present and future generations* (UNESCO, n.d.). A few practical exercises are given to help teachers who are interested in integrating ESD with the skills of language.

### Listening and Speaking Skills

#### *Building the word bank (Any SDG)*

- Teachers can play audio clips of speeches by activists like Malala Yousafzai, Greta Thunberg, Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Mahatma Gandhi.
- Ask students to listen to the audio, mark the new words, find their meanings, and note them down as part of their assignment. Next, students can use the new words they have learned in sentences of their own.

#### *It happened thus: Story Recital (All SDGs)*

- Students are tasked with finding an inspiring real-life story of ordinary women and men who have done extraordinary deeds in their lives. (Saalumurada Thimmakka, the eco-warrior; Girish Bharadwaj, the bridge man of India, etc.)
- They should be able to narrate it with expression and voice modulation in the class.

#### *Poetry Recital: Poems based on observation, senses, and playscripts (All SDGs)*

- Teachers can display images about any of the 17 SDGs. For example, life under water, life on land, and gender equality, to name a few. Students pick any object that they observe—in short, anything that they are reasonably familiar with in the local surroundings.
- Students will compose a short poem in 4 to 8 lines on the chosen topic.
- Students will then present it in class.

#### *Suddenly, last summer, or when the rains came (SDG 13)*

- The teacher displays the newspaper report or an image of an extreme climate event that has happened in the recent past in the area.
- Students recall the horror of drought, rain, cyclones, and floods, whichever is topical.
- Students give a short speech on the event in the class.

#### *Persuasive Speech: How to ensure waste segregation at the source in my locality (SDG 11)*

- Students will give a persuasive speech for 3 minutes to convince the class to agree to their proposition.
- Students can make use of an attention-grabbing device to commence their speech. This can include narrating a humorous incident to elicit laughter, an intensely gripping personal experience, or an emotion-packed anecdote from their daily life.
- Students can understand that persuasive speeches can utilise the three modes of persuasion: ethos, pathos, and logos.

**Ethos:** Does the speaker have the credibility to present his or her views?

**Pathos:** appealing to the emotions of the audience

**Logos:** Is there a logical movement in the speaker's presentation?

#### *Reading*

**Literary Devices: Point of View** (To rewrite a text from another point of view) **(can relate to any SDG)**

- The different points of view are as follows:
  - first-person
  - second-person
  - third-person, limited point of view
  - third-person omniscient point of view.
- Teachers should choose a speech or passage by any industrialist, leader, activist, or eminent personality and give it to the class.
- Teacher to discuss the point of view it is written (by the author).
- Choose the point of view students wish to express.
- Students can use a graphic organiser to present their point of view.
- Reproduce the speech or passage in their notebook.
- Ensure that students read and reread their work for accuracy in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
- They can then submit the assignment.

## Writing

### *Non-chronological Report: Report Writing (SDG 6)*

- Teachers can select any one of the sustainable goals, for example, Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation, and then exhort students to understand the importance of clean water and sanitation by giving them an appropriate passage chosen from newspapers on the topic that may describe the hardships faced by citizens where such facilities are not available.
- Students are then asked to prepare a report.
- The report should be able to answer the five Ws and one H question.  
*What happened...? When did ---, Where did..., Who do you think ----, why was it that ----, How did it...*

### **Recount - Paragraph Writing (SDG 10)**

- Imagine you are a young child of ten years. Your parents have sent you to work in a bangle factory in the dark bylanes of a nearby village, where you have to work for 10 hours every day.
- Using the guidelines of paragraph writing, students will write a paragraph on the given topic: Recount a day in the life of a child working in the factory.
- Students will write a paragraph of 100 words and submit it to the teacher.

## Language Tasks – Activity-based learning

### **Wealth from Waste - Process writing / Instruction Writing (SDG 11)** **How to make a paper bag from old newspapers?**

- Students learn to write instructions for simple tasks.
- They will write the instructions for 'How to make a paper bag from old newspapers?' in ten to fifteen clear steps.
- Students can use the words commonly used for writing instructions like fold, cut, turn, first, next
- Students then use the instructions to create paper bags in the class.

### **Gratitude Tree (SDG 2)**

- Students have donated dry rations as part of celebrating their birthdays differently in the school.
- After collecting the dry rations for a full term, they donate the collection to a nearby orphanage.
- Students experience the joy of gratitude.
- Students create trees with messages of thanks for the various gifts they are blessed with.
- Students can create a tree or find a perfect tree branch that has multiple limbs.
- Next, students make and decorate different coloured leaves to adorn the branch with messages about thankfulness.
- Once the leaves are attached using glue, they place the branch in a vase or jar.

### **Dramatising a story (SDG 5)**

- Students will work in groups and choose a story with the theme of gender equality.
- Students will dramatise the story by adding elements of drama and writing dialogue for the characters.
- Students are free to introduce as many characters as possible.
- Students will try to assign a role to all members of the group.
- All the groups will finally present the drama in the class with the minimum props and available resources.

### **Creating Commercials (SDG 7)**

- Students will choose a type of product that promises clean energy and is affordable. (e.g., bulb, fan, refrigerator)
- Students are divided into small groups. Each group creates a prototype of a new product that they have selected.
- They list down the special features of their product and create a commercial to convince the rest of the class that their product is the best.
- All members of the group should take an active part in the presentation.

- Learners rehearse thoroughly and then present the commercial to the class.
- Other learners listen keenly to the presentation and give their feedback in a structured format that includes two things they liked about the presentation and one thing that could be done differently.
- After all the groups complete the assigned task, the class picks the product that was able to convince them as prospective users.
- Learners write the entire presentation as part of the writing activity and submit it to the teacher for assessment.

### Conclusion

As we are aware, today's students are the future inheritors of the earth, becoming thought leaders and decision-makers of tomorrow. The issues and problems that students will face in the coming decades may be vastly different from what we are seeing now. Each day brings fresh challenges, and education must be transformative, empowering students to be ready to face the challenges by developing their critical thinking and decision-making skills, adaptability, and innovation skills. Students should be able to use the skills required to find creative solutions to mitigate complex problems. They should be aware of the consequences of their actions and must not shy away from taking responsibility. The time to act is now, and, as language teachers, we can certainly future-proof the world that our children are going to inhabit in the years ahead.

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