

Schools for a sustainable future. Improving green skills in the ESL classroom

Molnár Ildikó, Școala Gimnazială „Emil Isac” Cluj-Napoca



Abstract: This article aims to point out the importance of green skills within education, particularly in ESL contexts. It highlights the urgency of addressing environmental challenges such as pollution, deforestation, and climate change, and emphasizes the role of teachers in preparing students to become active problem-solvers. The article aims to show the responsibility of educators to move from conventional subject teaching to trying to develop skills necessary for addressing global issues. The integration of environmental education within language instruction is discussed as a means to stimulate interest, promote sustainability, and enhance language proficiency. The text advocates for Project-Based Learning (PBL) as an effective approach to fostering green skills through authentic problem-solving. The significance of Erasmus+ projects is highlighted as a collaborative form for developing green skills. The article concludes by pointing out the need to equip students with skills to confront contemporary challenges and cultivate a sustainable future.

Keywords: green skills, sustainability, Project-Based Learning, Erasmus+, collaboration, problem solving, final product, real-life solutions, meaningful learning

Why is it important to develop green skills?

Teaching green skills is becoming more and more important, not only in the ESL classroom but in all our classes and in the whole educational system. The world is facing an increasing number of environmental problems, such as global warming, pollution, deforestation, overconsumption, and depletion of resources. All these problems trigger an answer from us and we, teachers and students alike, need to be

prepared and to prepare our students to be ready to give an answer and find solutions to these problems.

Teaching is a great responsibility. No matter what subjects we teach, we must be aware that our job goes beyond only teaching Maths, History, or English as a foreign language. We develop skills and thus form the future citizens of the world. How they will act and react to certain problems and issues is our responsibility as well.

Helping our students to become environmentally conscious and active citizens of their communities is one of the objectives of the teaching act and for this, they need skills that can be used in order to cope with the challenges they will face in the future. By integrating environmental education into the language classroom, educators can (1) heighten students' interest in contemporary issues that might directly influence their futures; (2) teach students how to contribute to a healthier, more sustainable world; and (3) promote language learning and meaningful communication. (Hauschild, Poltavtchenko, Stoller, 2012, pg. 3)

The results of several studies, synthesized by the U.S. National Environmental Education Foundation (NEEF, www.neefusa.org), say that environmental education can improve students' academic achievement in science, reading, and writing and foster students' critical thinking skills, motivation, and attitudes about learning. Although these findings stem from first-language classrooms, they suggest that integrating environmental education into second or foreign-language instruction can deliver or be accompanied by additional advantages for our students. (Hauschild, Poltavtchenko, Stoller, 2012, pg. 4)

The question is what and how to teach in order to help our students develop these skills. As ESL teachers we have the advantage to cover different topics, to use the methods that we consider the best for achieving our goals. Many textbooks have lessons or whole units about environmental issues and the online resources we can find on the topic are very well designed and can be easily used, but in order to really develop green skills and make our students act on these problems, more is needed.

Given the necessity of sustainability, we should examine the types of learning that are implied. This includes understanding what needs to be learned, who needs to acquire this knowledge, and the methods of learning they should employ to achieve

sustainability. Learning is seen as an instrumental tool, essential for guiding society towards a sustainable path. We can also recognize that genuine learning is crucial for establishing a truly sustainable relationship between the present and the future of humanity. Our genuine obligations concerning the future, and our ability to fulfill them, depend on maintaining openness to emerging ideas and possibilities. (Reid, 2019)

Although designing and leading a sustainability-conscious learning community may be ambitious and inspiring, it is important to start with small steps that support a natural process of change because new values and attitudes will develop gradually. Research indicates that organizational change involves emotional elements and a shift in mindset, so forcing rapid and big changes beyond people's readiness can do more harm than good for the desired objectives. While some leaders may feel a significant responsibility and look for immediate, revolutionary change, school systems typically evolve slowly and in stages, adapting gradually over time. (Uline and Kensler, 2021)

So, the best way is to start step by step, first at the level of different classes, school subjects, optional courses, extracurricular activities, and school projects, and when we have a good foundation on a micro-level, we can move to a higher level, by implementing organizational changes and educational policies.

As ESL teachers we have the opportunity to work with a wide range of topics and use many different teaching methods, such as Project-based teaching and learning. I did this during my English language lessons, during our optional course, called “Projects” and also while we were implementing the activities of the Erasmus+ projects our school has been a part of. I consider that using the method of PBL (Project-based learning) is the best way to improve our students' green skills during ESL lessons or in extracurricular projects or activities.

Project-Based Learning - the best method for teaching green skills

According to Susan Boss, PBL does not imply adding more requirements to the schedule; instead, it involves using learning time in a different manner. Think of PBL as a positive approach: projects delve deeply into essential academic content

while offering students meaningful and relevant opportunities to develop new skills and literacies. (Boss, 2015)

We could not agree more with what Larmer says in *Setting the Standard for Project-Based Learning*, that interesting and relevant topics, issues, and challenges are central to every well-designed project. (Larmer, Mergendoller and Boss, 2015)

It is very important how we choose and set the title of a project. If it is a theoretical question, far from our students' life, their interests, or their problems, they might just google it or ask chat GPT and come up with a ready-made project from which they have not learned anything and they have not developed any important skills. So, if we want our students to really think about environmental problems and to come up with creative solutions we must ask them very good questions, connected to their life. For example, instead of asking them to make a project about recycling, we could ask them to design a poster in which they provide five clear steps to reduce waste in their school and start recycling efficiently. This way they will be triggered to think critically, to come up with solutions, to become problem solvers, and all this time they will be using English in a real-life situation, for a communicative purpose.

According to Elliott L., we should answer a fundamental question: are we preparing students to succeed in a project-based world? Are we giving students the opportunity to wrestle with real-world challenges, encounter roadblocks and regroup, and share the results with others? And if we agree that school should prepare you for life, what steps do we need to take in our classrooms to prepare our kids for a project-based life? (Elliott, 2021)

According to Susan Boss, when teachers design PBL experiences, they start with a thorough understanding of their content standards. Moreover, teachers consider the reasons why those standards matter. What are the big ideas of their discipline? How do those ideas connect to the world beyond the classroom? Good projects make content standards relevant. That makes learning more purposeful and concepts more memorable for students. <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/time-debunk-those-pbl-myths-suzie-boss>

Being authentic and true to ourselves is also very important. While engaging in projects, our aim is not only to enhance our students' skills but also to influence their

approach toward addressing specific issues and their conduct both within and outside school. In such instances, it becomes crucial for us, teachers, to truly believe in the concepts we advocate for and to truly regard these issues as significant. Without this genuine conviction, we run the risk of eroding our students' trust in the importance of the matters they are addressing and the value of their engagement in learning and working on them.

PBL aims to develop not only students' understanding but also their ability to use and apply that understanding in the future. Students need to be able to use their learning to think about and analyze current issues, solve new problems, and contribute to the solving of civic problems. Cognitive psychologists describe this as "transfer": students are able to transfer what they have learned to new situations and problems. The Hewlett Foundation uses the term "deeper learning" to communicate a very similar idea (Hewlett Foundation, n.d.; see <http://www.hewlett.org/programs/education/deeper-learning>). This is exactly what we do when we work on topics related to environmental issues. We transform the ESL classrooms into problem-solving places, where, our students try to come up with original ideas and solutions to the problems their communities and the world is facing.

We can find very good ideas and tips on how to use PBL on the website Buck Institute and one of them suggests that if we want our students to become problem solvers, then we have to give them problems to practice solving them. The same is true for critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and self-management. Students need structured opportunities to learn these competencies, as they do for learning anything else, and PBL provides these opportunities. (For more on using project-based learning to develop students' success skills, see Buck Institute for Education, PBL for 21st Century Success: Teaching Critical Thinking, Collaboration, Communication, and Creativity. http://bie.org/shop/product_detail/6777.)

Problems and questions provide the organizing structure for Project Based Learning and make learning meaningful because they give it a purpose - students are not just gaining knowledge in order to remember it; they are gaining knowledge in order to use it. This is the engine that makes them work and get involved in finding the best

solutions to their questions. By giving them real problems, from the real world, we will be able to give importance to their work. By focusing on a problem or question, students do not only master new knowledge but also learn when and how this new knowledge can be used. This makes it more likely that they will be able to use and apply this knowledge in the future and not only for environmental problems but also for other situations in which they might need to come up with a solution to a specific problem. (Brown, Bransford, Ferrara, & Campione, 1983; Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Many research studies and our own experience from class demonstrate that knowledge perceived as meaningful and purposeful is more easily recalled than random knowledge (Bransford et al., 2000; Ebbinghaus, 1913). Questions focus students' attention on what is important to be learned and help students distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information. They can also prompt students to activate their prior knowledge, which is a key part of the process of organizing new information and connecting it to what is already known (Dean, 2012). As students work to solve the problem, they generate knowledge and understanding that remain with them and that they can use again in the future. (Larmer, Mergendoller and Boss, 2015)

Erasmus+ projects as a great opportunity for teaching green skills

During my teaching career I have been implementing several Comenius and Erasmus+ projects, which have given me the chance to involve my students in truly interesting and engaging projects, dealing with challenging topics, such as practical skills, Euro-gardens, recycling and reusing, biodiversity, etc.

Our latest Erasmus+ project, still ongoing, is a small-scale partnership with partners from Spain, Greece, Lithuania, and Serbia, called *Facing and dealing with Change: a challenge for the future youth of Europe*. In this project, we are dealing with important topics, such as bioethics, biodiversity, endangered species of our planet, recycling and reusing, climate change, and Green classrooms. All these topics are very important and they have given us the chance to work collaboratively on them, trying to find solutions to problems we are dealing with. We have had the chance to use the Project Based Learning method almost all the time, because all topics required doing research, solution-finding strategies, and collaboration in local or international teams and the presentation of the final products not only in all schools, but also in the local community, local press, and social media.

In Erasmus+ projects, an important aspect revolves around the project's final product, which is collaboratively developed by the teams from the partner schools. The nature of this product can vary from one project to another, having formats such as websites, booklets, compilations of teaching materials, videos, presentations, brochures, and more. These outcomes reflect the collective effort and dedication of the participating teams.

According to Lenz, Wells, and Kingston, once a project is up and running, what motivates students even more than the driving question is their vision for an exciting final product. A practical way into the design of a project is to ask, “What is the final product of the students’ work, and how will they share that work with others? When the driving question is paired with a vision of a final product, it is easier to craft it into something that the students can honestly answer, due to creating that product. Sometimes, the product itself can serve as the answer to the question. (Lenz, Wells and Kingston, 2015)

An example of how we used PBL to cultivate green skills was while our students were working on the topic of climate change. This is an important topic and we were working on it for a longer time, and its dissemination being still in progress.

In each partner school, project teams were given the task to address the challenge of climate change on local, national, and international levels. First of all, students did research in local libraries and museums, then using the information they had gathered and their own ideas they made PPT presentations, in which they presented the effects of climate change in their country and they came up with viable solutions. After this, an online session followed, when all countries presented their work and as feedback, students had to select the best solutions and to put everything together in the form of a petition, which will be handed to the representatives of the European Commission, during our mobility to Brussels.

Erasmus+ projects are a great opportunity that gives us the chance to develop green skills through cooperation with other schools, thus adding cultural richness and extra value to our projects, but there are many other ways in which we can develop these skills, during our classes. Not all activities use the method of PBL, but they can still help us in achieving our aims.

We can simply sing songs or write poems about how wonderful nature is and how important it is to take care of it, or we can ask our students to describe the place they are living in, to compare it to other places or to a place they would like to live in. We can also decorate our classrooms with eco-friendly decorations, with plants or we can spend more time in nature, by moving our lessons outside the school walls, in the schoolyard.

The list of activities is endless, the resources are very diverse and easy to use, it is just a matter of will and trust that what we are doing is more than just teaching a foreign language, because we are preparing the future citizens of a world that will face many challenges, and the way they will answer to them depends on the skills we equip them with.

In conclusion, developing green skills holds an important significance across educational realms, including ESL classrooms. The environmental challenges of our days demand urgent action from educators and students alike, demanding readiness and problem-solving abilities. Integrating environmental education into language classes prepares students for sustainable actions.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) excels in cultivating green skills. The combination of driving questions and final products enhances relevance and motivation. Erasmus+ projects provide collaborative platforms for cultivating green skills through problem-solving.

In essence, fostering green skills responds to our times' urgency. Through strategic education and collaboration, we help students to face challenges and build a sustainable future.

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Biodata:

Molnár Ildikó is an ESL teacher at Școala Gimnazială „Emil Isac” since 2008, fostering effective language acquisition through innovative methods. She is a dynamic teacher who embraces Erasmus+ projects to enhance global awareness, cooperation and environmental education. Passionate about crafting optimal English teaching approaches, constantly exploring creative avenues for improved learning outcomes.