

Adding a Touch of Sustainability to EFL Lessons

Alina Popov, Școala Gimnazială "Otilia Cazimir" Iași

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Abstract

The world we live in has been ravaged by armed conflicts, pandemics, inequity, poverty or scarcity of resources. It is widely expected that holistic, cross-curricular education that integrates the social, environmental and economic pillars of sustainability and empowers learners to contribute to a more sustainable society will play a crucial role in addressing these challenges. This material is intended to briefly explain what Sustainable Development and Education for Sustainable Development are and to provide some examples of how teachers can adapt existing topics in the curriculum to meet the goals of EDS.



Short history of sustainable development

Sustainable development was originally defined in the Brundtland Report (1987) as the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The Earth Summit (UN Conference on Environment and Development) in 1992 introduced the need for the integration of economic development, environmental protection and social justice and inclusion. Its result was *Agenda 21*, a voluntary sustainable development plan of action towards achieving it in the 21st century, which contained suggestions in the field of education, preservations of natural resources and sustainable ways of managing economies.

What is now known as the 2030 Agenda was formally approved in 2015, in New York, during the United Nations Summit on Sustainable Development. The new plan included a declaration, 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) and 169 targets (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>), aiming to *find new ways to improve the lives of the world's people, to eradicate poverty, to promote prosperity and well-being for all, to protect the environment and to fight against climate change* (<https://rb.gy/ngvx9>). During COP21, the plan was signed and then ratified by 187 countries, including Romania.

Education for sustainable development (EDS)

The ambitious 2030 Agenda has approached global issues, such as environmental emergency, climate breakdown, inequity, energy sources, education, scarcity of resources, fragmented communities, pandemics, conflict, but the plan cannot be put into practice without deeper involvement of all the members of our global community. One side of the solution is *sustainability education* often referred to as *Education for Sustainability Education*. According to UNESCO [5], [6], EDS „allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future. EDS means including key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning, for example, climate change, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity, poverty reduction, and sustainable consumption.” Therefore, EDS is not

just about the environment but it also incorporates social and economic issues. The aim if EDS is to develop sustainability competence, defined by the authors of GreenComp as a “competence that empowers learners to embody sustainability values, and embrace complex systems, in order to take or request action that restores and maintains ecosystem health and enhances justice, generating visions for sustainable futures.” [1]

In a time when information is readily available everywhere and their position is drastically changing, UNESCO explains that teachers still have a crucial role in helping students transition to a sustainable lifestyle. [5]

A brief analysis of the Romanian curricula [3] for children aged 6 to 15 years reveals that the concept of sustainable development appears in only 2 subjects- Biology and Geography, while it is recommended to be taught during the two special weeks of our school year [2], *Scoala Altfel* and *The Green Week*. When it comes to the EFL curricula for the same age group, one may notice that they are missing. However, our textbooks contain plenty of lessons that can be directly linked to sustainable development, even if they do not explicitly refer to it. The Art Klett textbook for 6th graders [4] contains a two-page *Skills and Culture* section at the end of each unit, usually consisting of a text followed by tasks, such as answering questions, matching, creating dialogues. Many of these texts could be exploited through the lens of EDS: *The Power of Nature* (pp. 30-31)- SDG 13-Climate action, *Wildly Glamorous* (pp. 70-71)- SDG 12- Responsible production and consumption (sustainable tourism) , *Going GeoCatching* (pp. 82-83)- SDG 14- Life on Land, *Greener Transport for London* (pp. 96-97)- SDG 11- Sustainable cities and communities.

Teachers can include EDS in their school activities in the following ways [4]: adapting existing curriculum topics, adding SDG units, creating independent curricula for elective classes or connecting the SDGs with local, national or international events (e.g. Earth Day, World Water Day, International Day of Women and Girls in Science, etc.).

The following activities are examples of adapting existing topics in the curriculum so that they have a touch of sustainability. Our goal was to provide our students with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to address interconnected global challenges such as consumerism, fast fashion, lack of basic facilities, and unsustainable resource use to enable them to make informed decisions and act individually or collectively to transform our society.

Suggested activities

Activity 1- Who's hiding under the picture?

Level: A1

Topic: *The verb to be- interrogative*

SDG connections: SDG 12- Responsible production and consumption, SDG 13- Climate action

Description:

Teacher prepares pictures of replicas of works of art created by Jane Perkins [8]. The images are covered with small squares and they can be created easily using

<https://www.classtools.net/reveal/>.

Students must guess who is hiding under the picture by asking *yes/no* questions using the verb *to be* (e.g., *Is it a man?*). The teacher clicks on a box at a time to reveal the picture. After the picture is discovered, the activity can continue by asking *yes/no* questions about the materials used (e.g., *Is it a button?*). The word "upcycling" (giving a used item or waste product a new life

to create a new, more valuable product) can be introduced. Finally, students can create their own artwork.

Activity 2- Guess!

Level: A1

Topic: *How much?/ How many?*

SDG connections: SDG 12- Responsible production and consumption

Description:

This is an approximation game where students do not have to give the exact answer. The goal is to practice answering *How much/ How many* questions and using large numbers. In terms of sustainability, it triggers students' feelings (but it is recommended to avoid eco-anxiety) so that they become aware of the resources used to make everyday objects. The teacher prepares slides with questions. Students form groups of four. One representative from each group stands facing the screen in front. The teacher projects one question at a time. Each student writes the answer on a piece of paper and shows it to the teacher. The team is not allowed to help. The answer with the number/amount closest to the correct answer gets a point. Students take turns until the questions are finished.

Examples of questions:

How much water is needed to produce a pair of jeans? (10,000 litres)

How many trees do we save by recycling one tonne of paper? (17)

How many new smartphones are sold worldwide per year? (1.4 billion)

How much water is needed to produce 1 litre of cow milk? (628)

How much water is needed to produce 1 litre of soy milk? (28)

Students do online research, create similar quizzes and play the game in class.

Activity- 3 Jenga questions

Level: any

Topic: any

SDG connections: SDG 2- Health and well-being (or any, depending on the topic)

Description:

This activity requires the use sets of ®Jenga (depending on the number of students in class), but cheaper alternatives can be found on the market. Each block is numbered starting with 1, according to the number of pieces in the set, usually up to 54.

Students are presented with the general rules of the game (a video work well): build the tower, decide who goes first, remove one block from the tower, put the block on top of the tower in a direction perpendicular to the layer below it, complete the turn, continue play, end game when tower falls, declare the winner.

The class adaptation of this game is that each group is given a list of numbered questions/tasks that correspond to the topic of the lesson. Each time a participant draws a wooden block, he/she must solve a task that corresponds to the number on the block.

Examples of tasks:

Put the verbs in brackets into the correct tense.

Find the odd-one out.

Answer the question.

Activity 4- Senses

Level: A1

Topic: *Verbs of perception*

SDG connections: SDG 2- Health and well-being

Description:

After teaching vocabulary related to the five senses, students are asked to go outside and complete the following task: find 2 items that you can smell, taste, touch, hear and see. When they are back, the students share their findings and discussions take place. They can be guided towards different SDGs. For example, unpleasant smells might have been caused by pollution or they might have heard disturbing noises made by cars, which signifies that there is heavy traffic.

Activity 5- Food miles

Level: A1 and above

Topic: *Food and drinks*

SDG connections: SDG 12- Responsible production and consumption, SDG 2- Health and well-being, SDG 13- Climate action

Description:

This activity can be used after teaching vocabulary related to food and drinks. Students bring food and drinks packaging in class. One label is projected so that everyone can see. Teacher explains that *food miles* represent how far food has travelled before we are able to consume it. Students identify the country of origin and, using an online map, they calculate the distance the product was transported to their place. They can use a calculator to determine the carbon footprint of that item.

Questions that can be asked:

What is it made of?

Where does it come from? Show on the map.

How is it transported?

Can it be recycled?

What are the workers paid? Is it a fair wage?

What can we do to reduce food miles?

There are also patterns that can be applied to build sustainability into any lesson. Arizona State University [9] suggests answering the following questions when planning lessons:

1. What is a particular lesson, activity, or unit you already use that you wish to incorporate sustainability?
2. What sustainability topic might it cover?
3. Backward Design: What is your end learning goal with this lesson?
4. What environmental, social, and economic issues will your lesson now cover?
5. How will your lesson address at least one of 5 key concepts: interconnectedness, scale (space and time), long-term development (future thinking), trade-offs, or collaboration?
6. How might you utilize the skills and knowledge of a subject area other than your own to help students understand the topic? (For example, if you are teaching about population growth in a math class, you might also work with social studies teachers to discuss social inequities in a world with a growing population.)

Conclusions

Embedding EDS in EFL lessons can bring rewarding results if the methods used are appropriate for the learning context. This does not mean that we have to ignore grammar or other components of the curriculum. Including EDS in lessons not only helps our students to develop sustainable lifestyles, but also provides unique learning opportunities, increases participation due to the connection to the real world, while promoting problem-solving and critical thinking skills.

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Biodata

Alina Popov has been an EFL teacher for 18 years and she works with children aged 6 to 15. She is interested in using project-based learning, CLIL and cooperative learning. One of her latest preoccupations is embedding sustainable development into her lessons. This article has been the result of her participation in the *Education for Sustainable Development* training course held in Cyprus, within the Erasmus+ project entitled *Hands on our Future* (reference number 2022-1-RO01-KA121-SCH-000055602). At the same time, she has been involved in 9 Erasmus+ projects, including the 2021-2027 Accreditation at her school, as coordinator, since 2014.