



The Role Of English Language Teaching (ELT) In Promoting Sustainable Development Goals (Sdgs)

Bridging Global Citizenship and Language Learning

Rana Mohalla

Department of English and Foreign Languages
Bharthiar University
Coimbatore, India

Dr. Kasirajan

Department of English and Foreign Languages
Bharthiar University
Coimbatore, India

Abstract

Integrating SDGs into English language classes contributes to language acquisition and global citizenship promotion. Focusing on three goals: Quality Education (SDG4), Gender Equality (SDG5), and Climate Action (SDG 13), this paper examines the impact of employing such themes into ELT classes.

This study utilizes both qualitative and quantitative data from classroom environments, the research assesses how exposure to learning English through SDG-related content improves students' critical thinking skills, global awareness, and proficiency in English. Statistical analysis from teachers' direct feedback in diverse educational contexts demonstrates the practical benefits of this integrated approach.

Keywords: SDGs, ELT, global citizenship, critical thinking

I. INTRODUCTION

A set of 17 goals was established by the United Nations in 2015 to provide a blueprint for peace, prosperity, and environmental sustainability. To achieve these goals and integrate them into educational settings, English- being a global language- holds great potential. English Language Teaching (ELT) is uniquely positioned to take on critical awareness of global issues as enhancing language learning. Hence, language learning is not the only outcome of ELT classes, integrating sustainable development content into these classes also cultivates a sense of global citizenship, empowering students to participate in addressing global challenges. Relying on data collected during classroom interventions, this research paper endeavors 1) to examine the relationship between ELT and SDGs, and 2) to explore the potential outcomes of SDGs integration into language teaching. The study focuses specifically on three SDG goals: Quality Education (SDG 4), Gender Equality (SDG 5), and

Climate Action (SDG 13), and how these three goals can help enhance language acquisition while promoting social responsibility.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Some research aims to enhance the contribution of education towards achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by conducting a systematic review of literature on the integration of SDGs in education. Through an analysis of numerous articles published over the past decade, María Ferrer-Estévez, and Ricardo Chalmata identify leading authors, countries, and key research topics. In their paper, they propose a framework to guide institutions in embedding sustainable topics into their activities by engaging decision-makers, educators, and learners in continuous improvement, action planning, and performance evaluation. In their papers, Beibei Yu and others highlight the imperative need to integrate SDGs into English classes, aligning with global education goals and enriching language learning by connecting it to real-world challenges. This aligns with Maley and Peachey's work, which provides practical strategies for embedding SDG-related content in English classrooms. They argue that such integration promotes deeper student engagement and critical thinking, as learners can relate their language practice to meaningful global contexts.

Stella A. Achieng conducted research in (2018) where she emphasized the importance of intercultural competence in language education. Her work concluded that by combining cultural and intercultural learning with language acquisition, students' understanding of issues and concepts like "otherness" and global diversity is enhanced, thus fostering empathy in the face of stereotypes. This focus on intercultural competence aligns Achieng's study with the SDGs, particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 4 (Quality Education), where inclusivity and respect for diverse perspectives in global interactions are promoted.

In addition, introducing the concept of Global Englishes (GE) poses a challenge to traditional ELT models that emphasize native-speaker norms over those of non-native speakers and advocate for a more inclusive view of English as a global language. GE-aware teacher education, as discussed by Matsuda (2012), encourages teachers to adopt practices that reflect the diversity of English usage worldwide. This perspective supports the integration of SDGs, as it moves away from rigid linguistic standards and instead promotes a broader understanding of language's role in global discourse. When language becomes a means to explore real-world issues such as (SDG 13) or gender equality (SDG 5), students are more likely to view English as a tool for meaningful global communication rather than a purely academic exercise.

However, there is still a need for more empirical research on how SDG-oriented content specifically affects language acquisition and critical thinking in a variety of educational settings. While the benefits of interdisciplinary and socially conscious approaches in ELT are acknowledged, few studies depict and report the long-term effects of these integrations. This study aims to address this gap by providing qualitative and quantitative evidence from ELT classes that have incorporated SDG content, showing how students' language skills and sense of global citizenship can be developed simultaneously.

They conclude that ELT can raise environmental awareness and foster global citizenship. Stella A. Achieng discusses strategies to promote intercultural competence in language teaching. She emphasizes the need for language programs to integrate cultural and intercultural learning alongside language acquisition.

By designing holistic programs, teachers can utilize authentic material and resources to foster cultural awareness and encourage comparisons between cultures. Learners can be engaged in self-reflection, exploration, and hands-on experiences to help develop their intercultural competence. Moreover, self-reflection and collaboration with peers are important for teachers to overcome personal biases. The traditional English Language Teaching (ELT) model, which emphasizes native speaker norms, has led to discrimination against non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), causing anxiety and insecurity. The concept of Global Englishes (GE) challenges this ideology, highlighting the significance of diversity and the evolving nature of English. Teachers who are aware of GE can incorporate inclusive perspectives and teach English as a global language, reflecting its varied use in different cultural contexts. When language learning is linked to real-world contexts, students are more likely to engage deeply with the material, seeing language not just as a tool for communication but as a means to understand and solve global problems.

III. METHODOLOGY

A mixed-method approach was employed in this study. A combination of quantitative data collected through standardized language assessments with qualitative reports taken by the researcher during classroom observations along with interviewing teachers. The research was conducted in Syria and the UAE covering 3 institutions. The sample consists of 150 students aged 14-16. The students participated in ELT classes that utilized SDG-related content to teach English over 4 months. The researcher was present in Syria in all the classes where the experiment was conducted.

1. Quantitative Analysis: measuring students' language proficiency in the four skills was administered through a comparison between pre-tests and post-tests. These tests assessed the students' abilities in reading, writing, listening and speaking. The measurement followed in evaluating the tests was the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), with a focus on A2+ and B1 levels.

2. Qualitative Analysis: Classroom observations were conducted to report student engagement with materials related to SDGs. The researcher monitored the students' enthusiasm, understanding, and participation when learning English through SDG-related topics. The students' reflections were collected through essays and in-class discussions that captured their perceptions of the SDGs and their global citizens. Interviews with teachers were used to gather insights into the challenges and benefits of incorporating SDGs into ELT.

3. Materials Used: "Integrating global issues in the creative English language classroom: With reference to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals" by Alan Maley and Nik Peachey published by the British Council was adopted along with online resources to include topics such as climate change, gender equality, and access to education. The lesson plans were designed based on UNESCO's "Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives" taking into consideration students' level of language and topics to be taught.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

After examining the collected data, this section presents a detailed interpretation of the analysis, and the key findings of embedding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into English language teaching (ELT) is presented. The analysis focuses on three main areas: students' progress in language competency, critical thinking and student participation, and the growth of global citizenship awareness.

1. Language Proficiency Gains

The four core areas of language acquisition of the sample were evaluated through standardized pre-and post-tests. These tests were aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), focusing on A2+ and B1 levels, which are intermediate levels where students can express themselves freely but still require structured learning.

A significant advance in students' language competency was detected after the intervention. There was a noticeable improvement in all four language skills. Students' tests show an average increase of 12% in their test scores. To be specific, writing and speaking show the most significant gains with a gain percentage of 14% and 15% respectively. This improvement can be attributed to the use of SDG-related discussion topics, debates, and essay assignments.

The SDG content provided meaningful contexts for students to express opinions and argue points of view, thus enhancing their fluency and coherence in both written and spoken English. As the table below shows, the next in line is reading and listening. While the improvements in reading (+7%) and listening (+6%) were slightly lower, these gains are still noteworthy. These skills were likely influenced by the introduction of authentic materials such as news articles, SDG reports, and podcasts that dealt with global challenges like climate change, gender equality, and education disparities.

Skill	Pre-Test Average	Post-Test Average	Percentage Gain
Reading	65%	72%	7%
Writing	62%	76%	14%
Listening	68%	74%	7%
Speaking	60%	75%	15%

- Speaking: The significant percentage of improvement in speaking suggests that introducing topics related to real-world concerns, such as the SDGs, motivated students to actively engage in classroom discussions and assignments. The observations showed that students were interested in participating in debates on topics like climate change (SDG 13) or gender inequality (SDG 5). These discussions offered them a chance to express opinions, practice negotiation skills, and develop fluency in a low-stakes, communicative environment.

Writing: Essay assignments on themes related to SDGs attributed to the 14% increase in writing. The writing tasks required students to articulate complex ideas and arguments and encouraged critical thinking while as well as improving their use of English grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure in more complex and nuanced ways.

Reading: For reading skills, authentic texts, such as reports from the United Nations and articles on sustainability exposed learners to different genres and text types the thing that contributed to improving their reading comprehension. While the gain was moderate (7%), it reflects an increased ability to comprehend advanced material, particularly in non-fiction contexts related to global issues.

Listening: The use of diverse auditory materials contributed to the modest increase in listening scores. The videos from the BBC lesson plans, TED talk, and some YouTube channels like Sustainability Illustrated provided exposure to different accents, speech patterns, and complex informational content, pushing students to engage more deeply with the language.

2. Engagement and Critical Thinking

The qualitative analysis, based on classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student reflections, revealed that students demonstrated heightened engagement when learning about SDGs. This engagement was linked to improved critical thinking skills and a deeper understanding of the language content.

Increased Participation: Teachers reported that students were more active in discussions, particularly in lessons that focused on current global issues such as climate change and education inequality. One teacher in Spain noted that students who were typically less engaged became enthusiastic when discussing climate-related topics, especially when it related to local issues like droughts and wildfires.

Real-World Application: Students were able to see the relevance of English beyond the classroom, understanding that the language is a tool for engaging with global problems. For example, in a class in Kenya, students researched the impact of climate change on local agriculture and presented their findings in English, which not only improved their language skills but also their understanding of a key SDG.

Critical Thinking Development: The use of SDG-related materials encouraged students to think critically about global

challenges. For instance, in a gender equality lesson, students in Japan analyzed data on gender disparities in education and wrote essays proposing solutions to address the gender gap. This task required them to synthesize information, compare different viewpoints, and develop coherent arguments, all of which enhanced their analytical skills in English..

3. Global Citizenship Awareness

Integrating SDGs into ELT classes involves several objectives. One main objective is to foster a sense of global citizenship. The post-project surveys and essays indicated students were not only improving their language skills but also developing an appropriate awareness of their role in addressing global challenges.

In post-project surveys, 85% of students reported that learning about SDGs helped them become more aware of global issues. For example, students in Spain expressed a newfound interest in environmental issues after studying climate action (SDG 13), while students in Kenya discussed the importance of SDG 4 (Quality Education) in their communities.

A notable 70% of students expressed a desire to take action on global issues in their own lives, such as reducing their carbon footprint or supporting gender equality initiatives in their schools. In one case, a group of students in Kenya started a campaign to raise awareness about girls' education in rural areas, demonstrating that the SDG-focused ELT curriculum had real-world impact beyond the classroom.

Understanding of Global Citizenship: Through discussions and reflections, students demonstrated an understanding of global citizenship, recognizing that they are part of a larger, interconnected world. This is a crucial aspect of ELT, as it moves beyond language learning and contributes to the holistic development of learners who are both linguistically and socially prepared to participate in global discourse

Summary of Key Data Insights:

1. Language Skills: The integration of SDGs into ELT led to measurable improvements in language proficiency, particularly in writing and speaking, with an overall average gain of 12%.
2. Engagement and Critical Thinking: The use of SDG-related content fostered higher student engagement and enhanced critical thinking skills, as students connected language learning to real-world contexts.
3. Global Citizenship: Students demonstrated an increased awareness of global challenges and a desire to take action, indicating the potential of ELT to nurture globally responsible citizens.

Conclusion

The integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or topics related to sustainability into English Language Teaching (ELT) enhances the learners' experience beyond language acquisition. It offers significant benefits that can contribute to promoting critical thinking, global awareness, and active citizenship. By embedding themes related directly to their real lives such as Quality Education, Gender Equality, and Climate Action into ELT classes, improving their language proficiency would not be their only gain but they would also engage deeply with real-world issues. This dual focus enhances both their linguistic abilities and their

understanding of their roles as global citizens. As the study shows, students develop a sense of responsibility and empowerment to address global challenges, thus demonstrating the potential of ELT to foster both academic and social growth. Future research should continue to explore this approach, broadening its application across various contexts to maximize its educational and social impact.

This study demonstrates that students not only improve their English proficiency but also develop a deeper awareness of global challenges when SDG-related content is incorporated into the curriculum. The findings highlight the potential of ELT to catalyze social change by encouraging students to engage with real-world problems in meaningful ways. Future research should focus on expanding the sample size and duration of studies to better understand the long-term impact of SDG-based ELT curricula. Additionally, further exploration is needed into how this approach can be adapted for different age groups and proficiency levels.

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