DEVELOPING AN AWARENESS OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN EFL

Philip Cardiff
Kanda University of International Studies

ABSTRACT

The challenges of sustainable development presented by the Anthropocene have had a tremendous impact on our world, and education is widely recognized as one of the most important tools to mitigate these global problems. The following paper presents an overview of the development of an EFL course taught over a semester at a Japanese university. Specifically, it attempts to demonstrate how the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be utilized in an EFL context to provide a framework to raise students' awareness of sustainability issues, while helping them acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to take action for sustainable development. Finally, the paper outlines some of the key issues that should be considered by EFL practitioners who are interested in implementing the SDGs into their classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of the Anthropocene, the challenge of sustainable development is recognized as an issue of global concern. In 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015). At the forefront of this agenda are the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a "universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity" (United Nations Development Programme, 2018). The 17 goals (see Figure 1) include 169 associated targets, representing a vision for sustainable development to be "incorporated into national planning processes, policies and strategies" around the world (United Nations, 2015, p. 13).

Education is widely recognized as a key strategy in the pursuit of sustainable development, since it is both a goal in itself (SDG 4) as well as a means for achieving the other SDGs (Rieckmann et al., 2017). In addition, Target 4.7 of SDG 4 specifically calls for a greater focus on the teaching of sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). In Japan, the Ministry of Education,

Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has responded by outlining a plan to implement education for sustainable development across educational institutions, and has highlighted both educators and learners as major stakeholders in their commitment to achieve the SDGs (MEXT, 2021).

Figure 1. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015)

This paper outlines the process of curriculum development and materials design for an elective English course (*The UN Sustainable Development Goals: Key Issues & Taking Action*) taught over a semester at a private language university in Japan. The author will demonstrate how studying the SDGs can help learners to not only acquire knowledge and skills but also to cultivate the values and attitudes necessary to take action towards sustainable development.

THE CASE FOR SDGS IN EFL

Educators are tasked with preparing future generations to face the challenges of the world, and as such, it has been argued that all educational institutions "can and should consider it their responsibility to deal intensively with matters concerning sustainable development" (Rieckmann et al., 2017, p. 7). Regardless of any sense of responsibility, there are a number of reasons to consider integrating the SDGs into an EFL classroom.

Firstly, the SDGs are engaging. The goals provide a clear framework through which to explore a range of fundamental social, economic and environmental issues, such as climate change, gender equality, poverty and discrimination. Learning about the SDGs may help students develop insight into global issues they are familiar with, while also shedding light on those they are unaware of.

The SDGs are also a rich educational resource in terms of content. The United Nations and associated organizations publish a significant amount of research on each of the goals. This research is consistently updated and often includes supplemental videos and further reading materials, all of which can be utilised by teachers and provide meaningful content for learners.

A further rationale is provided by Cates (2002, p. 45), who makes the point that teaching about global issues in an EFL context provides an opportunity to shift from "language as structure to language for communication around the world". Teachers can use the SDGs as a platform to experiment with a range of communicative tasks, such as creating a campaign for policy change or writing to a government leader.

APPROACHES TO TEACHING THE SDGS

While it does not provide a definitive pedagogy for teaching about sustainable development, the 2030 agenda specifies "education for sustainable development" (ESD) as a means for helping learners to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to promote the SDGs (United Nations, 2015). According to Rieckmann et al. (2017, p. 7), ESD aims to develop "competencies" that "empower individuals to reflect on their own actions, taking into account their current and future social, cultural, economic and environmental impacts", from both a local and a global perspective. These competencies include self-awareness, critical thinking, and integrated problem solving (see Appendix). They "cannot be taught, but have to be developed by the learners themselves," through action, experience and reflection (Rieckmann et al., 2017, p. 10). Consequently, ESD has been said to constitute a holistic approach to learning through a combination of content with "participatory teaching and learning methods" (UNESCO, 2012).

Participative teaching methods aim to "promote a more active role of students in the learning process" through group discussions and critical reflections in addition to involving them in practical activities, to "connect

29

academic achievement with real-life issues and to understand the impact of the individual actions on the community" (Concina, 2019, p. 1250). In an EFL context, such practical activities may include role playing (UNESCO, 2012), sustainability excursions (Rieckmann et al., 2017) and leading SDG focused projects (Steele & Rickards, 2021). Further examples are provided by Maley and Peachey (2017), who have edited an extensive collection of creative teaching ideas applicable to a variety of contexts and age groups.

In terms of content and themes to include in SDG focused teaching, Rieckmann et al. (2017) have provided a comprehensive list of suggested topics as well as specific learning objectives for each of the goals. In addition, Jodoin and Singer (2019) highlight the potential for applying the SDGs to a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) context, such as linking industry, innovation and infrastructure (Goal 9) to an engineering or architecture course. The SDGs can easily be connected to students' fields of study, adding depth and context to a range of academic subjects such as geography, technology, politics and global citizenship studies.

COURSE DESIGN

The design and pedagogical approach of this course takes much of its influence from Rieckmann et al. (2017), while themes and topics have been informed by various educators and sustainability experts including Bolster and Levrai (2017), Brennan (2017), Green (2018) and Brinkmann (2021).

As outlined by Rieckmann et al. (2017), in order to acquire the skills and competencies necessary to take action for the SDGs, learners are required to engage in critical reflection in combination with practical activities. Consequently, a range of self-awareness and reflection tasks are integrated throughout the course, in addition to participative activities such as group discussions, presentations and projects. Each unit includes a variety of topics representing the three dimensions of sustainability (environmental, economic and social) as well as lessons focused around specific SDGs.

The course is divided into three units over a 15-week semester:

Unit 1: An Introduction to the SDGs
Unit 2: Making Connections
Unit 3: Taking Action

Unit 1: An Introduction to the SDGs

In Unit 1, students begin by exploring the topic of sustainable development through the frame of the SDGs and the Millenium Development Goals which preceded them. The goals are broken down into simplified definitions and overarching targets. Students then form groups and rank the SDGs in order of perceived importance before rationalising their choices. The aim here is to raise students' awareness of the SDGs in addition to the challenges governments, institutions and individuals face when deciding which goals to prioritise. As students negotiate their answers, they also become more aware of the interconnectedness of the SDGs, and how achieving one goal can have an effect on others. This is followed by a reflective writing exercise in which students consider which SDG(s), if achieved, would have the biggest impact on their lives and why.

From here, the focus shifts to some of the challenges to achieving the SDGs. In a TED Talk titled *The global goals we've made progress on - and the ones we haven't* (Green, 2018), students listen to the economist and social progress expert, Michael Green, evaluate the success of the SDGs in their early stages. Students reflect on the issues his research highlights such as the lack of measurable data to assess the progress of the goals, and how realistic it is to reach the target of the 2030 agenda. The progress of SDG targets in Japan are explored before the final unit assessment, which requires learners to critically evaluate the success of an existing SDG initiative in Japan and present their findings.

Unit 2: Making Connections

Unit 2 looks at the central promise of the 2030 agenda to "leave no one behind" (United Nations, 2015), with lessons and content focused around gender equality (Goal 5), inequality (10), inclusive cities and communities (11) and peace and justice (16). In addition to being highlighted as areas where progress has been limited globally (Green, 2018), these concepts have been identified by previous students of the course as being of particular interest. The unit begins with a focus on these issues within the context of Japan, before considering how they have been compounded by global matters such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and various conflicts around the world. This is explored further in an extended interaction in which students choose a specific example to focus on, such as how COVID-19 has impacted on gender inequality, and conduct their own research before leading a group discussion.

The theme of community runs throughout the unit and at various stages, students are encouraged to reflect on which communities they are a part of

and their underlying norms and values. These reflections often mark a turning point in terms of how tangible the SDGs are for the learners, as they begin to demonstrate a deeper awareness and understanding of their actions, and how they can impact and be impacted by the goals. As the unit draws to its conclusion, Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) is explored in greater depth, and students evaluate the positives and negatives of the areas they live in before researching some of the sustainability initiatives being implemented in various cities around the world. For the unit assessment, learners prepare a presentation based on how one specific city is demonstrating sustainability practices.

Unit 3: Taking Action
In Unit 3, focus turns to taking action for the SDGs. Students examine an approach to practical sustainability (Brinkmann, 2021) which is broken down into lifestyle changes, leadership and education. Students evaluate their daily practices and look at what steps they could take to live a more sustainable life, ranging from the products they consume to the energy they use and their recycling and disposal habits. They then reflect on the inter-linkages between these practices and how they can contribute towards climate action (Goal 13).

To explore leadership, students listen to a series of TED talks by climate activists (Thunberg, 2018; Neubauer, 2019), and brainstorm ways to take action for the SDGs they are most interested in. Finally, they look at education, both as a goal of sustainable development (SDG 4) and as a means for achieving the other SDGs. Students review a series of campaigns and approaches to sustainability education in schools around the world, before examining the role of universities in achieving the SDGs. They reflect on what their own university is doing to practice sustainability, such as recycling, and consider areas for further progress. This is explored through the lens of Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) and in particular, the concept of multi-stakeholder partnerships in the pursuit of sustainability. In other words, students are encouraged to think about potential local level actions between their university and other stakeholders, such as local businesses or volunteer groups, while also recognizing their own role as responsible citizens in the pursuit of sustainable development. This forms the basis for their final course project.

COURSE ASSESSMENT

Presentations

In Units 1 and 2, students create a research presentation based on class content. For Unit 1, students are tasked with identifying an initiative that contributes to the achievement of the SDGs by a Japanese corporation, organization or citizen group. The assignment utilizes higher order thinking skills, as students must critically analyze the success of the initiative based on available data and evidence, before presenting their findings and conclusions to the class.

The Unit 2 assignment requires students to explore what makes a city sustainable before researching and preparing a presentation based on how one chosen city is demonstrating sustainable practices. The presentations must also outline how one aspect of these sustainability practices could be realistically implemented in the students' home city.

In both assignments, students are assessed on the content of their presentation in addition to the appropriateness of their language, the quality of their slides, and presentation delivery. The assignments are scaffolded with examples from previous students who have given permission to share their work, with further guidance provided in the form of potential sources for learners to use in their initial research.

Final Course Project

In the final course project, students are tasked with researching, planning and pitching an initiative aimed at helping their university to make progress in one or more of the SDGs. Students are free to focus on any particular issue and the initiative can be original or an adaptation of an existing idea, but their presentations must include the stages of implementation, details of resource requirements such as time and money, and how realistic the initiatives are with reference to expected outcomes. Students must also include details of any potential risks and challenges of their proposals.

The project builds on students' knowledge of SDG initiatives from Unit 1, while consolidating the focus on communities (Unit 2) and multi-stakeholder partnerships (Unit 3) as they are required to specify how their initiative would benefit the local community and which stakeholders are involved. The project gives students the autonomy to explore the aspects of sustainability they are most interested in, while also motivating them to become "experts" and share their knowledge. In addition, Steele and Rickards (2021, p. 190) have suggested that such student-led SDG projects can also enhance

students' "capability and confidence to engage with SDG issues beyond the classroom". Some example final project initiatives are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample Final Research Projects

Initiative	Summary	SDG(s) focus
Global Education Circle: SDG workshops for local Children	Students majoring in languages and teaching provide free workshops on campus to teach local children about the SDGs.	Goal 4 (Quality Education) Goal 8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth) Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities & Communities) Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals)
Inter-University SDG Festival	Collaborating with student organizations in other universities to implement SDG awareness and fundraising campaigns.	Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities & Communities) Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals)
Multilingual Community Beach Clean-up	Students and local residents collaborate to clean up local beaches while practicing various languages.	Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities & Communities) Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption & Production) Goal 13 (Climate Action) Goal 14 (Life Below Water)

Reflection Tasks

As previously mentioned, reflection is considered a key requirement to develop the skills necessary to understand and promote sustainable development (Rieckmann et al., 2017; Concina, 2019). Throughout this course, students are encouraged to reflect on the themes and topics covered in class both through group discussions and by responding to reflective questions in various lessons and at the end of each unit.

Anecdotally, responses from students at the beginning of the course often outline their interest in the SDGs and a desire to 'take action', yet they lack an understanding of the goals and of their connection to them or how they can contribute towards their progress. By the end of the course, however, students demonstrate a deeper connection to sustainability issues, which helps them consider how they can take action in a more tangible way. They can reflect on the values that underlie their practices and are better able to understand how these actions can impact sustainability both positively and negatively. This self-awareness is perhaps the first step towards making intentional choices, as students begin to recognize themselves as stakeholders in the pursuit of sustainability.

DISCUSSION AND CONSIDERATIONS

A key consideration for the design of this course has been deciding which SDGs to focus on specifically and which to omit. While each goal is important in itself, it would be impractical to touch on all of them, given the plethora of SDGs and their associated targets. Consequently, decisions about which SDGs to include in the curriculum are informed by existing literature and student preferences. Climate change and environmental sustainability, enshrined in SDG 13, is prioritized throughout the literature (Rieckmann et al., 2017; Brinkmann, 2021; Steele & Rickards, 2021), while goal 4 (Quality Education) is considered essential both as a stand-alone goal and as a means for achieving the other SDGs (Rieckmann et al., 2017). In addition, Green (2018) has highlighted goals 1 (No Poverty), 5 (Gender Equality), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), 11 (Sustainable Cities & Communities) and 16 (Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions) as the most challenging to achieve globally, warranting their inclusion in the curriculum. Student reflections in previous iterations of the course have provided insight into which SDGs they are particularly interested in, which also forms the basis for much of the course content. In every semester to date, goal 5 has emerged as the most popular SDG, followed by goals 13 and 8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth). For students who have an interest in other SDGs, the end of unit assignments give them the autonomy to explore themes and goals that are not covered in detail in the course.

Another issue worth considering is the English ability necessary for learners to engage with SDG themes and 'authentic' content that has not been developed specifically for language learning. Jodoin and Singer (2019) have suggested that in order to effectively engage with SDG content, students require an intermediate or at least B1 level of English on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe,

35

2001). There is no language tier system for this particular course, and while some students have found it more linguistically demanding than others, this has not significantly impacted class participation or the quality of assignments. Nevertheless, after each iteration of the course, content is reviewed based on student feedback from their reflections.

Finally, while the Unit 3 project is often described as the most challenging aspect of the course, for many learners it has also proven to be a meaningful experience. The main difficulties cited include the amount of planning and research involved and the challenges of proposing initiatives that are realistic in terms of resource requirements (human and financial). Nonetheless, by participating in this assignment, learners are able to draw on content from the course and apply it to a real-world context. As previously mentioned, such practical activities are considered an essential aspect of sustainability education (Concina, 2019). Anecdotally, many students have stated in their final reflections that one of the highlights of the course was learning about SDG initiatives from their classmates.

Some of the stronger final assignments have demonstrated an awareness and understanding of local level actions that often exceed expectations. Accelerating local level partnerships towards achieving sustainability has been highlighted as a priority in Japan, with learning institutions and local communities "expected to actively cooperate with each other" (MEXT, 2021, p. 14). With this in mind, it would be interesting to explore the viability of implementing some of the student-led SDG initiatives with other local level stakeholders, and any potential role their university could play as a facilitator.

CONCLUSION

The advantages of and rationale for integrating the SDGs into an EFL classroom are multiple. Firstly, SDG content is informed by critical issues which are both engaging and applicable to a range of academic subjects and contexts. Moreover, this content is readily available and consistently updated in line with global events, which can be utilized to make lessons up-to-date and meaningful for learners. In addition, the SDGs afford EFL practitioners the opportunity to combine this content with participatory teaching methods to offer students a holistic learning experience.

The course introduced in this paper was designed to introduce critical social, economic, and environmental issues to learners, while also imparting the communicative skills necessary to reflect on their own actions and engage

effectively with the SDGs. In raising students' awareness and understanding of the challenges of local and global sustainable development, the course develops students' language and social competencies that empower them to take intentional and effective action towards sustainable development. It is the author's hope that this paper provides inspiration for the SDGs to be incorporated into English language curricula as a step toward achieving sustainable development.

REFERENCES

Bolster, A., & Levrai, P. (2017). Using the Sustainable Development Goals in the EAP classroom. In N. Peachey & A. Maley (Eds.), *Integrating issues in the creative English language classroom: With reference to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*. British Council https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/PUB_29200_Creativity_UN_SDG_v4S_WEB.pdf

Brennan, D. (2017). Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. In N. Peachey & A. Maley (Eds.), *Integrating issues in the creative English language classroom: With reference to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*. British Council https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/PUB_29200_Creativity_UN_SDG_v4S_WEB.pdf

Brinkmann, R. (2021). *Practical sustainability: A guide to living a more sustainable life*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Cates, K. A. (2002). Teaching for a better world: Global issues and language education. *Human Rights Education in Asian Schools, 5,* 41–52. https://www.hurights.or.jp/archives/pdf/asia-s-ed/v05/06cates.pdf

Concina E. (2019). Participative teaching methods for sustainable development. In: W. L. Filho (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Sustainability in Higher Education*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-11352-0_411

Council of Europe (COE). (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR)*. Retrieved May 21, 2022, from https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/home

Green, M. (2018). *The global goals we've made progress on - and the ones we haven't* [Video]. TED. https://www.ted.com/talks/michael_green_the_global_goals_we_ve_made_progress_on_and_the_ones_we_haven_t?language=en

Jodoin, J.J., & Singer, J. (2019). A framework for integrating education for sustainable development. *Osaka JALT Journal, 6*, 51-66. http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/462558/28147796/1561380686093/OsakaJALTJournal2019.pdf?token=WMb3pHaILDK3%2B7p3GJEBUnb1nc8%3D

Maley, A., & Peachey, N. (Eds.). (2017). *Integrating issues in the creative English language classroom: With reference to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*. British Council. https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/PUB_29200_Creativity_UN_SDG_v4S_WEB.pdf

MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Japan). (2021). *Implementation plan for education for sustainable development in Japan (The second ESD implementation plan).* Retrieved May 1, 2022, from https://www.mext.go.jp/en/content/20211208-mxt_koktou01-1373244_1.pdf

Neubauer, L. (2019). *Why you should be a climate activist*. https://www.ted.com/talks/luisa_neubauer_why_you_should_be_a_climate_activist?language=en

Rieckmann, M., Mindt, L., & Gardiner, S. (2017). *Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives*. UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000247444

Steele, W., & Rickards, L. (2021). *The sustainable development goals in higher education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Thunberg, G. (2018). *The disarming case to act right now on climate change.* TED. https://www.ted.com/talks/greta_thunberg_the_disarming_case_to_act_right_now_on_climate_change?language=en

UNESCO. (2012). *Education for sustainable development: building a better, fairer world for the 21st century.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000216673

United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Resolution_A_RES_70_1_EN.pdf

United Nations Development Programme. (2018). *Sustainable development goals*. https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals

APPENDIX

Key competencies for the SDGs (Rieckmann et al., 2017, p. 10)

Systems thinking	The abilities to recognize and understand relationships; to analyze complex systems.
Anticipatory	The abilities to understand and evaluate multiple futures - possible, probable and desirable. To assess the consequences of actions.
Normative	The abilities to understand and reflect on the norms and values that underlie one's actions.
Strategic	The abilities to collectively develop and implement innovative actions that further sustainability at the local level and further afield.
Collaboration	The abilities to learn from others; to understand and respect the needs, perspectives and actions of others (empathy); to understand, relate to and be sensitive to others (empathic leadership); to deal with conflicts in a group; and to facilitate collaborative and participatory problem-solving.
Critical thinking	The ability to question norms, practices and opinions; to reflect on one's own values, perceptions and actions; and to take a position in the sustainability discourse.
Self-awareness	The ability to reflect on one's own role in the local community and (global) society; to continually evaluate and further motivate one's actions; and to deal with one's feelings and desires.
Integrated problem-solving	The overarching ability to apply different problem-solving frameworks to complex sustainability problems and develop viable, inclusive and equitable solution options that promote sustainable development.