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The Impact of English Language Proficiency on Achieving Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Societies of the modern world face pressing global challenges like climate change, resource scarcity, and poverty. ESD is viewed as a transformative tool that enables individuals to address these issues, making sustainable living possible for all. This study aims to understand how proficiency in English can contribute to advancing the SDGs by empowering individuals to participate in global discussions, access critical information, and collaborate on problem-solving initiatives. The study employed QCA as the primary method to explore EFL teachers' views and understanding of Education for Sustainable Development. The overall results indicate that the teachers' responses highlight a nuanced understanding of the relationship between English language proficiency and sustainable development. While there is recognition of the potential for English education to facilitate greater awareness of sustainability issues, significant challenges remain in terms of implementation and teacher training.

Keywords: Education for Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Goal, Content and Language Integrated Learning, English Language Teaching, Language Proficiency

1. Introduction

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) emphasizes the importance of quality education and lifelong learning opportunities, positioning it as a cornerstone for achieving global sustainable development (UNESCO, 2021). This goal highlights Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which equips persons with the required set of skills and the knowledge to foster a more sustainable, peaceful, and prosperous world. By promoting awareness of sustainability challenges, ESD plays a crucial role in advancing other SDGs, such as combating climate change (SDG 13), improving health and well-being (SDG 3), and promoting gender equality (SDG 5).

Stibbe (2015)^[13] was the first to explain the concept "ecolinguistics," positioning it as a framework for integrating environmental issues with the practice of language education. This approach emphasizes the pivotal role language plays in shaping perceptions and attitudes toward the natural world, as well as influencing behavior and thought regarding environmental matters. Ecolinguistics posits that through the analysis and critical examination of language, we can identify and face entrenched thinking patterns and actions that cause the grave problems for our environment.

Stibbe provides a robust theoretical base for exploring how language instruction can effectively talk about sustainability. Later studies have investigated different methods, such as Project-Based Learning (PBL), critical pedagogy, and Content and Language-Integrated Learning (CLIL). These methodologies are recognized as effective strategies for embedding sustainability themes into English language teaching, thereby enhancing students' awareness and engagement with ecological issues.

In today's world, societies face pressing global challenges like climate change, resource scarcity, and poverty. ESD is viewed as a transformative tool that enables individuals to address these issues, making sustainable living possible for all (UNESCO, 2012). As a result, there is a growing demand for educational systems worldwide, including those in the Arab world, to integrate sustainability into their curricula. ESD's interdisciplinary nature allows it to be incorporated across academic fields and levels of education (UNESCO, 2010). While traditionally applied in subjects such as STEM and geography (Li & Tsai, 2022)^[6], ESD's reach extends beyond these fields.

In the context of English language education in the Arab world, English serves as a powerful medium for embedding sustainability concepts within the language learning process. By fostering English proficiency, students can gain access to global knowledge, including sustainability practices. The Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach, which involves teaching academic subjects through a foreign language (Coyle *et al.*, 2010) [2], has shown particular promise in combining language acquisition with sustainability education. Research shows that integrating ESD into English language teaching (ELT) enhances the knowledge of the learners about the content and of SDGs and their language skills. In this way, improving English proficiency contributes directly to achieving sustainable development by expanding learners' access to critical global discourses and solutions.

1.1. Significance of the Study

This study holds significant importance as it investigates the intersection between English language proficiency and the achievement of sustainable development goals (SDGs). In an increasingly globalized world, English functions as a lingua franca, enabling communication across borders and fostering international collaboration. As sustainable development requires cooperation among governments, organizations, and individuals worldwide, language proficiency, particularly in English, plays a vital role in facilitating dialogue, collaboration, and knowledge sharing on key issues such as climate change, poverty eradication, and social equality. The study provides valuable insights into how proficiency in English can contribute to advancing the SDGs by empowering individuals to participate in global discussions, access critical information, and collaborate on problem-solving initiatives. Moreover, it explores how English language education can be enhanced to better support sustainable development efforts, making the findings useful for policymakers, educators, and language practitioners. By addressing a gap in existing research, this study highlights the potential of language proficiency as a tool for sustainable development and provides recommendations for integrating SDG-related content into language education.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the impact of English language proficiency on achieving sustainable development goals. It aims to explore how the ability to communicate effectively in English influences individuals' capacity to engage with and contribute to global initiatives related to sustainable development. The study seeks to determine the extent to which English proficiency enables individuals to access resources, participate in international forums, and contribute to discussions and decision-making processes on sustainability issues.

Additionally, the study aims to assess the role of English language education in promoting sustainability by investigating how English teachers and curricula can incorporate sustainability-related topics into language instruction. By identifying the relationship between language proficiency and sustainable development, the study hopes to provide actionable insights for educators and policymakers to enhance the role of English language teaching in supporting global sustainability efforts.

1.3. Problem of the Study

The problem addressed by this study is the lack of understanding regarding the role of English language proficiency in achieving sustainable development goals. While much attention has been given to the importance of education in promoting sustainability, little research has focused on the specific contributions of language education, particularly English, to this global agenda. In many regions, English is considered the gateway to international communication and collaboration, yet its potential to facilitate sustainable development remains underexplored. Furthermore, there is limited evidence on how English language education can be adapted to support sustainable development efforts. This gap in the literature raises critical questions about the integration of sustainability-related content in language curricula and how language proficiency impacts individuals' ability to engage in global initiatives. Addressing this issue is essential for ensuring that language education plays an effective role in advancing the SDGs.

1.4. Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions

1. How do English language teachers perceive the role of English proficiency in promoting global collaboration and achieving sustainable development goals?
2. What strategies do English teachers currently use to incorporate sustainable development topics into their teaching practices?
3. How do teachers assess the impact of English proficiency on students' ability to engage with global sustainability issues?
4. What challenges do teachers face in integrating sustainable development goals into their English language instruction?
5. What are the teachers' perceptions of the potential of English language education to contribute to achieving sustainable development goals at both local and global levels?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Education for Sustainable Development

The idea of sustainable development evolved from 1987 to 1992, Education for Sustainable Development ESD was introduced and formalized by UNESCO (2006). ESD goes beyond simply teaching sustainability knowledge—it seeks to empower learners to engage in critical thinking and problem-solving to address global challenges such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation (UNESCO, 2012). This transformative educational approach equips individuals with the skills to make informed decisions that support social, economic, and environmental well-being. Contrary to common misconceptions, ESD is not solely focused on environmental concerns. It encompasses a holistic view that includes societal, economic, and cultural dimensions, making its interdisciplinary component essential. To tackle complex global issues, knowledge from various fields is required, yet many educational systems worldwide, including those in Arab countries, have not fully embraced this broader understanding of sustainability. Recognizing this, UNESCO devised the Global Action Programme on ESD in 2014, which provides guidance for implementing ESD across various educational levels

(UNESCO, 2018). This initiative calls for a redesign of national curricula to promote sustainability education and prepare future generations to contribute to a more sustainable world.

Recent years have witnessed increased efforts to integrate ESD across disciplines, including STEM, social sciences, and language education. The integration of ESD in EFL classrooms is particularly relevant, as it allows learners to acquire language proficiency while engaging with sustainability-related content. Studies such as Pauw *et al.* (2015) ^[11] demonstrate that embedding ESD in the curriculum helps students develop sustainability awareness and fosters a sense of social responsibility. Similarly, Nayar (2013) ^[9] highlights that ESD not only enhances environmental consciousness but also promotes essential life skills like communication and leadership.

However, teachers often face challenges in implementing ESD effectively. Support through ESD-focused teaching materials, partnerships, and professional development is critical to overcoming these obstacles (Waltner *et al.*, 2020) ^[19]. Additionally, frameworks like the Systemic Framework (Kioupi & Voulvoulis, 2019) ^[4] and the global OECD competence framework (OECD, 2018) provide practical tools for linking SDGs with educational outcomes and improving ESD integration. Globally, there has been significant momentum around ESD recently, driven mainly by similar frameworks.

2.2. Sustainable Development Goals and SDG 4

As global challenges like industrialization, technological advances, and population growth place increasing pressure on ecosystem resources, the world is facing critical issues such as poverty and food insecurity. In response to these crises, the United Nations launched the 17 Sustainable Development Goals to be achieved by 2030. These goals address a wide range of social, economic, and environmental issues, from justice and equality to climate change and sustainable consumption.

SDG 4 underscores the importance of education in building a sustainable future. It not only emphasizes access to education but also the need to equip learners with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to promote sustainability on a global scale. Quality education plays a pivotal role in raising awareness of the world's challenges, making SDG 4 integral to the achievement of all other SDGs.

The link between SDG 4 and sustainable development is clear: education is central to fostering the knowledge and skills required to address global issues. ESD can be used in more than one subject, including language education. In particular, teaching English as a Foreign Language offers a unique opportunity to introduce learners to sustainability concepts, as the EFL classroom exposes students to global issues, including those that are connected with the concept of sustainability (J.J. Jodoin, 2020) ^[3]. By embedding ESD into the EFL curriculum, educators can contribute to both language proficiency and sustainability awareness, reinforcing education's central role in designing a sustainable future.

2.3. English as a Foreign Language and Sustainable Development

Effective communication is critical to implement Sustainable Development Goals, as it promotes different governments, organizations and communities to collaborate with one

another and to negotiate the different domains. Given the global nature of these challenges, language, particularly foreign languages, serves as an essential tool for fostering international dialogue (Zygmunt, 2016) ^[20]. Teaching a foreign language is crucial in improving communication and collaboration, which are key to addressing sustainability issues (Bowden, 2010). Among foreign languages, English, as the global lingua franca, is especially well-suited for facilitating discussions and decision-making on sustainability in English as a Foreign Language classrooms (Mohammadnia & Moghadam, 2019) ^[8].

A common misconception is that sustainability pertains exclusively to environmental issues. This limited perspective fails to detect other factors such as economic, social, and environmental factors that constitute the broader scope of sustainable development (Bowden, 2010) ^[1]. With this more comprehensive understanding of sustainability, foreign language classes can incorporate sustainability-related themes, allowing students to engage with global challenges and develop solutions for a more sustainable future. EFL classrooms, in particular, are conducive to raising awareness of sustainability, as they offer opportunities for students to engage in meaningful discussions about these global concerns (J.J. Jodoin, 2020) ^[3].

Despite the increasing tendency to integrate sustainability to EFL education, limited research has been conducted on how teachers will understand and integrate SDGs in their classrooms (Mambu, 2022) ^[7]. Just a small number of studies have focused on the perceptions of the teachers about integrating sustainable development into English language teaching. For example discovered that Turkish teachers had only little knowledge about the concept of sustainable development and struggled to connect it with language teaching. On the other hand, Kwee (2021) reported that Hong Kong teachers were more positive about using SDGs in classrooms and demonstrated strong commitment to integrating these goals into their teaching.

It is clear that the current literature highlights the urgency for more studies in this area to make sure that EFL educators possess both the knowledge and the required skills to incorporate sustainable development into the teaching process. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the role of English proficiency in promoting sustainable development and exploring how EFL teachers can better integrate SDG-related content into their lessons.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed qualitative content analysis (QCA) as the primary method to explore EFL teachers' views about Education for Sustainable Development. The objective was to investigate their ideas about the importance of ESD and its relevance within the context of English language teaching. QCA served as both the methodological framework and the analytical tool for this research (Schreier, 2012). This method was selected for its ability to systematically transform the large amounts of data from different texts into a more manageable set that can be considered to be more holistic and specialized in order to represent all of the different and diverse perspectives.

QCA is particularly effective in analyzing the relationship between ESD and EFL within Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) contexts. Through this approach, the study offers an in-depth exploration of participants'

experiences, perspectives, and conceptualizations of integrating ESD into language education via content-based instruction. Given the novelty of the ESD concept in the field of language education, this study fills a gap by providing insights from the perspective of EFL teachers. These insights have the potential to inform curriculum developers and policymakers about the knowledge, skills, and strategies necessary to effectively integrate ESD into EFL teaching, as well as the challenges encountered in this process.

3.2. Participants

This study involved 10 in-service EFL teachers who volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews. The sampling method used was convenience sampling, based on the availability and willingness of the participants. This sampling approach was employed because the researcher had existing connections with the participants, helping to establish trust-based relationships. These relationships were expected to facilitate the collection of richer, more in-depth data as was proposed by (McConnell-Henry *et al.*, 2010).

3.3. Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with all 10 participants. Each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes and was conducted in the participants' native language to facilitate comfortable and authentic responses. The interviews were then analyzed and reanalyzed in order to get accurate and reliable results.

4. Results

The responses of the participating teachers are summarized below, organized by the main themes:

1. The role of English proficiency in promoting global collaboration on sustainability issues: The majority of teachers (7 out of 10) strongly emphasized that English, as a global lingua franca, plays a crucial role in facilitating communication between diverse nations, enabling students to engage in cross-border discussions about sustainability. Teachers highlighted that English proficiency provides students with the ability to participate in international forums, access global resources, and collaborate with peers worldwide on SDG-related projects.

Three teachers, however, expressed concern that many of their students, particularly those at lower proficiency levels, are not yet able to fully engage in these discussions. They emphasized the need for tailored language instruction that integrates sustainability topics to build both linguistic and content knowledge.

2. English proficiency and student engagement with global discussions on sustainability: All 10 teachers agreed that English proficiency enhances students' ability to engage with international discussions on sustainability. They noted that students with a higher command of English are more likely to participate in global initiatives, access academic articles and reports on sustainability, and follow international media coverage of SDG-related issues.

Some teachers (4 out of 10) also mentioned that English allows students to critically evaluate different perspectives on global issues such as climate change, poverty, and social justice. This broadens their understanding of sustainability

beyond local contexts and fosters a more global mindset.

3. Contribution of English language teaching to sustainable development goals: Eight teachers believed that English language teaching can significantly contribute to achieving SDGs, particularly through content-based instruction that integrates sustainability topics into language lessons. Teachers reported using texts and discussions related to climate change, environmental conservation, and global inequality to enhance both language skills and awareness of SDGs.

Two teachers expressed the need for more structured guidance on how to incorporate SDG content into their English language curriculum. They felt that while the potential for integrating sustainability into lessons is high, they lacked concrete resources or training to do so effectively.

4. Impact of English proficiency on student engagement with global issues: More than half of the teachers (6 out of 10) observed that students with higher English proficiency are better equipped to engage with global issues such as climate change, poverty, and social justice. They noted that these students are more confident in participating in discussions, writing about sustainability topics, and collaborating on global initiatives.

The other four teachers reported limited engagement among students with lower proficiency levels, suggesting that these students often struggle to connect their language learning with broader global issues. These teachers emphasized the importance of scaffolding, ensuring that language instruction is accessible while gradually introducing more complex SDG-related content.

5. Changes in the interest of students or engagement with sustainability issues: Six teachers noted a positive change in students' interest and engagement with sustainability issues as a result of integrating SDG-related topics into their language lessons. They observed that students became more curious about global issues and began initiating discussions about sustainability both inside and outside the classroom.

The remaining four teachers felt that while some students demonstrated increased interest, others were less motivated, particularly if the topics did not directly relate to their personal experiences or interests. These teachers suggested incorporating more locally relevant sustainability issues to better engage students.

6. Challenges in integrating sustainability topics or SDGs into language lessons: Teachers identified several challenges in integrating sustainability topics into their English lessons. The most commonly mentioned challenges included:

- **Lack of resources:** Seven teachers pointed out that there are limited resources or materials that effectively combine language learning with sustainability content. They expressed the need for more textbooks, online platforms, or lesson plans that align with SDGs.
- **Time constraints:** Six teachers reported difficulty in balancing language instruction with the incorporation of sustainability topics, especially given the pressure to cover other curriculum content and prepare students for

exams.

- **Varied levels of proficiency among different students:** Five teachers noted that lower-level students struggle to grasp complex global issues, making it difficult to meaningfully integrate sustainability discussions into beginner or intermediate classes.
7. Opportunities for English language education to promote sustainable development:

All the teachers agreed that there are significant opportunities for English language education to play a larger role in promoting sustainable development. They suggested several strategies, including:

- **Project-based learning:** Teachers recommended the use of collaborative projects focused on sustainability topics, where students can work together to research, discuss, and present solutions to global challenges.
- **Use of authentic materials:** Teachers highlighted the potential for using real-world materials, such as news articles, documentaries, and podcasts, to engage students with current sustainability issues while developing their language skills.

8. Teacher Support and Curriculum

Six teachers felt that the curriculum does not provide sufficient guidance or materials to address SDGs in language lessons. These teachers called for curriculum revisions that explicitly include sustainability as a thematic focus.

The other four teachers mentioned that while the curriculum does not directly address sustainability, they have been able to adapt existing materials and incorporate SDG-related content into their lessons.

9. Professional Development and Resources: The majority of teachers (8 out of 10) expressed a need for professional development opportunities focused on integrating SDGs into English language teaching. They suggested workshops, training sessions, and access to teaching resources that would help them better incorporate sustainability topics into their lessons.

Two teachers noted that while professional development would be beneficial, it is also important for schools and educational institutions to provide teachers with sufficient time and flexibility to experiment with new approaches and content in their lessons.

4.1. Analysis of the Results:

Several teachers highlighted the significance of English proficiency as a gateway to accessing global discourses on sustainability. This aligns with the notion that effective communication is critical for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. As English is recognized as a global lingua franca, proficiency in the language enables students to engage with international frameworks and initiatives (Mohammadnia & Moghadam, 2019) ^[8]. Teachers noted that students with higher English proficiency could better understand and discuss sustainability topics, thereby contributing to a more informed and engaged populace capable of addressing global challenges (Zygmunt, 2016) ^[20]. Responses from the teachers indicated a growing awareness of the interdisciplinary nature of ESD, which encourages

integrating sustainability concepts across various subjects, including language education. Many teachers expressed a desire to incorporate ESD principles into their English lessons but recognized that professional development and appropriate teaching materials are crucial for this integration (Waltner *et al.*, 2020) ^[19]. This resonates with findings that emphasize the necessity for support structures in ESD-focused teaching (Schreier, 2012). Some teachers mentioned initiatives that allow for collaboration and resource sharing, reflecting the collaborative aspects of ESD that can enhance their teaching practices (UNESCO, 2018).

While teachers acknowledged the potential benefits of embedding ESD into their curricula, they also identified significant challenges, such as a lack of awareness and training on ESD concepts. For instance, one teacher noted that many colleagues were unaware of how to connect sustainable development themes with language teaching, highlighting a gap in understanding that mirrors the broader trend in EFL education where sustainability is often overlooked (Mambu, 2022) ^[7]. This suggests that further training is essential to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to teach ESD effectively within an EFL context.

Interestingly, some teachers expressed optimism and commitment toward integrating SDGs into their teaching practices, similar to the findings from Kwee (2021) ^[5] regarding EFL teachers in Hong Kong. They believed that by fostering English language proficiency, they could cultivate a generation of learners equipped to tackle sustainability challenges. This aligns with the perspective that ESD not only enhances language skills but also develops critical thinking and problem-solving abilities essential for addressing complex global issues (UNESCO, 2012).

5. Conclusion

The overall results indicate that the teachers' responses highlight a nuanced understanding of the relationship between English language proficiency and sustainable development. While there is recognition of the potential for English education to facilitate greater awareness of sustainability issues, significant challenges remain in terms of implementation and teacher training. Addressing these challenges is crucial for fostering an educational environment that not only improves language skills but also equips students with the knowledge and competencies necessary for a sustainable future. The insights gathered from this analysis underscore the need for ongoing research and development in integrating ESD into English language teaching, ensuring that both educators and students are prepared to meet the demands of sustainable development.

5.1. Limitations of the Study

This study suffered some limitations that could affect the accuracy of the results. Firstly, the qualitative content analysis (QCA) methodology, while providing in-depth insights into EFL teachers' perspectives on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), may limit the generalizability of the results. The sample size and selection criteria could influence the outcomes; hence, the findings may not reflect the views of all EFL educators in the Arab world or other regions.

Moreover, the study focuses primarily on the perceptions and understandings of EFL teachers regarding ESD, which may overlook the views of other important members in the

educational process, such as students, administrators, and policymakers. This exclusion may limit the comprehensiveness of the analysis and understanding of the ESD integration process within the broader educational framework. Furthermore, the study's scope may not encompass all relevant dimensions of ESD and its implications for EFL teaching, potentially leading to an incomplete picture of the challenges and opportunities present in this integration.

5.2. Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study underscore several important pedagogical implications for EFL educators and curriculum developers aiming to integrate Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) within language teaching. First and foremost, the study highlights the necessity of equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills required to effectively incorporate sustainability concepts into their lessons. Moreover, educators should consider adopting the CLIL approach, as it presents a viable framework for merging language acquisition with sustainability education.

Finally, the study emphasizes that the developers of the curriculum should prioritize the inclusion of ESD principles in English language teaching curricula across educational levels.

Appendix I: The Semi-Structured Interview Questions

- How do you perceive the role of English language proficiency in promoting global collaboration on sustainability issues?
- In your opinion, how can English proficiency help students engage with international discussions and initiatives related to sustainable development?
- How do you see English language teaching as contributing to the achievement of sustainable development goals?
- How do you think English language proficiency influences your students' ability to engage with global issues such as climate change, poverty, or social justice?
- Have you noticed any changes in students' interest or engagement with sustainability issues as a result of your teaching?
- What challenges do you face in integrating sustainability topics or SDGs into your language lessons?
- Do you think there are opportunities for English language education to play a more significant role in promoting sustainable development? If so, how?

Teacher Support and Curriculum

- Do you feel that the current English language curriculum provides adequate support for addressing sustainability issues? If not, what improvements would you suggest?
- What professional development or resources would help you better integrate SDG topics into your English language classes?

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