

Sustainability Competence: Raising Ecological Awareness

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The present paper aims at exploring the sustainability competence via English. Considering the connection of English Language Teaching and Education for Sustainable Development (EfSD), it is important to reflect on the mission of the English language in promoting sustainable development ideas. In the present paper an attempt has been made to draw the parallels between sustainable development and language learning, sustainable development and teaching and to answer the questions what is sustainability competence, and why it is significant for university students. We believe that building the capacity of students on EfSD to reflect a sustaining world view is of great importance. We have done the literature review and its analysis of various researchers working on sustainability competence. To support theoretical findings, research has been done on students' attitude to ecological problems. By comparing Lithuanian and foreign researchers' study, we synthesized and interpreted their findings. A special emphasis has been made on the sustainability competence and its constituents. We hope to give university teachers and students impulse to understand the significance of sustainable development practices, as well as to make choices, take actions in English language teaching and learning practices at universities.

Education for Sustainable Development, sustainable development competence, English Language Teaching and Learning

Introduction

Higher Education plays a significant role in manifesting sustainability competence, a vital tool necessary for creating a just and sustainable society. To support this concept, we have made an attempt to do literature analyses on sustainable development to gain more insights into the promotion of sustainability competence in a foreign (English) classroom. Based on the analysis of the various expert contributions (Scott, 2002; Wals & Jickling, 2002; Barth, 2007; Bereiter, 2010; Wiek, 2012), three broad categories of sustainability competence related to complex demands of modern life have been modified: acting autonomously; using language as a tool interactively; joining into dialogues to function in socially heterogeneous society. The three constructs are located at a very general level of abstraction, and should be thought of either as generic (in the sense that they do not provide specifics) or as ideal types. They are applicable to a wide variety of contexts and domains, and are considered relevant for an effective and successful interaction. EfSD means the creation of space for transformative social learning. Such space includes: space for alternative paths of development, space for new ways of thinking, valuing and doing, space for participation, space for pluralism, diversity and consensus, but also for respectful disagreements, and for contextual differences. Sustainability education emphasizes 'learning for being', alongside with 'learning for doing' (Wals and Jickling, 2002). Moreover, it requires permeability between disciplines, university and the wider community along with the competence to integrate, connect, confront, and reconcile multiple ways of looking at the world (Wals, 2002). Therefore, EfSD enables students to view the issues on sustainability and ecology evolving from interdisciplinary links from holistic perspective. Highlighting the place of English in achieving this goal, Stibbe (2008, 2014) points out that 'EfSD requires an understanding of the role that language and culture play in the construction of social, economic, cultural and religious systems, and the impact of these systems on the larger systems which support life'. For this reason, it could be stated that English language instruction can help students broaden the concept of sustainability, offer the ways to

develop sustainability competence while being engaged in learning activities related to sustainability and ecological issues. In EfSD the curriculum aims to build students' language skills as they learn about issues related to sustainable development. According to Jane Gawthrop, *Green* approaches have influenced the curriculum in many areas, giving rise to eco-criticism and eco-linguistics. Students can be encouraged to ask questions about how far humanity is represented as part of or apart from the rest of nature in a particular work or how we relate to our physical environment (Gawthrop, 2010). The application of the above mentioned *green* approaches of eco-criticism and eco-linguistics 'with their respect for the environment, on mutuality and on the habitats in which cultural reproduction takes place, have major implications not just for the content of the curriculum but for forms of pedagogic interaction' (Gawthrop, 2010).

It means that the educative process, English instruction in particular, may be used as a tool to raise ecological awareness needed to attain sustainability competence.

According to M. Teresevičienė (2006), lifelong learning in formal, informal and non – formal setting is important in interpersonal sustainable development. For the participation in various international projects and/or virtual mobility one crucial element such as the linguistic competence should be signified as an underlying background component. It is absolutely necessary to communicate in foreign languages, English in particular, in order to meet modern life requirements for a successful realization of one's goals on sustainability at personal, national and international levels. What is more, a number of international texts and conventions related to sustainable development constitute a solid basis for describing life and society as they should be. Thus, the principles postulated in research by the authors from Lithuania (Ciegis, 2002, 2004, 2008; Galkute 2008; Jociute, 2013, etc) and major documents, e.g. *National sustainable development strategy 2007 - 2015 (Nacionalinė darnaus vystymosi strategija)* can serve as a starting point for the discourse on sustainability competence. The desired outcomes of sustainability competence is a successful performance of an individual and, consequently, a well-functioning sustainable society. In this sense, an effective performance implies

modification of strategy or skills and learning involves modification of students existing competences in the context of new situations. The demands of modern life call for an active and reflective approach to life. Drawing on these assumptions sustainability attributes are holistic systems thinking, sustainability knowledge, awareness, integration and acting for positive change. What is more, EfS has been in the focus of our attention as teachers of English for a long time. However, every semester with the enrollment of new students in our classes, we feel a strong need to educate our students in the field of sustainability taking into consideration new approaches and new realities. While manifesting sustainability values in the English classroom, it is also necessary to reconsider our former methods, take a critical look at what has been achieved and formulate new perspectives.

Research actuality - A number of studies (ČIEGIS, 2004, 2008; Gawthrop, 2010, Galkutė, 2008; Stibbe, 2008; Wiek, 2012; Jociūtė, 2013) reveal that integration of sustainability themes in the study programmes is of vital importance at universities. Learning environment can (Teresevičienė, Gedvilienė, Zuzevičienė, 2006) make a great impact on students' success gaining proficiency in their fields of study and competences development.

Research problem - Language is particularly important in the context of EfSD. However, language education has been slow in integrating issues of sustainability at universities.

Research object - EfSD at Vytautas Magnus University (VMU).

Research aim - to contribute to EfSD by providing a literature review and empirical analysis of students' attitude to ecological and sustainability issues;

- to analyze the importance of sustainability competence, and show the parallels of English language learning and sustainability competence.

Research objectives

- to analyze present day teaching/learning situation and identify future developments in the field of EfSD;
- to analyze language curriculum aiming at raising ecological awareness through English;
- to analyze students' attitude to English language learning and sustainability competence;
- to compare the research on embedding sustainability issues in the English classroom at VMU during the fall semester of 2011 and 2014.

Research methods

Our respondents were 132 VMU students. There were 121 female students (91,7%) and 11 male students (8,3%). All students were taking B2 level course of English during their first year of studies in the fall semester 2011 and 2014 at Vytautas Magnus University. They were mainly in humanities based subjects and the specialisms of Informatics, Natural Sciences, Economics, Law, Creative Industries, Musical Academy, Social Sciences, Politics and Diplomacy, Public Communication, Social Welfare and Catholic Theology.

The survey was designed as a needs analysis questionnaire which comprised two blocks of questions: first the respondents were asked the questions aimed at

defining their attitude to education on sustainability through lectures of different study programmes. Second, the students were questioned about the themes on EfSD which they assume need to be integrated in the language curriculum. Third, the comparative analysis of the findings of the 2011 and 2014 research was done.

Results

The findings enabled us to gain insights into the students' attitudes to sustainability competence and ecology issues.

The analysis of figures 1 and 2 makes interesting reading. It has revealed that almost half of VMU students (45 %) believe that it is important to take actions in promoting sustainability competence for raising ecological awareness (see Figure 1). What is more, they think that they need better proficiency (25%) in English on sustainability. This finding might be explained that generally all first - year students who are placed into English B2 level at VMU have already acquired very good language skills and can easily take part in discussions on ecological, economic, social and political issues in English. Their language proficiency is quite high to make presentations and do writing assignments on sustainability issues. The question on getting a better education on sustainability has enjoyed the third place in popularity (20 %). It may be interpreted by the fact that the respondents' knowledge on *green* issues has considerably increased while studying other subject matter. Doing writing assignments on sustainability has enjoyed the least popularity (10%), since writing has always been the most challenging and unpopular task among the students.

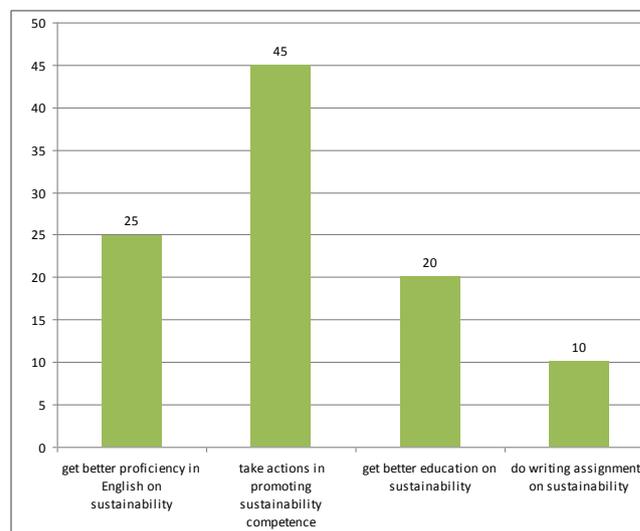


Fig 1. VMU students' attitude to education on sustainability

The VMU students would like to get more knowledge about ecology (27%) in English (see Figure 2). Similarly, they are inclined to develop their social skills (20%) and equity (13%) while interacting with each other which might be accounted for their great need to communicate on ecological and social issues with their colleagues and friends locally and internationally. They would like to study not only English, but also cross - cultural

communication (15%), building up their understanding of other cultures and people's behaviour. In comparison with the themes on Ecology and Social Issues, the theme on Economy has enjoyed less popularity (12%). It can be explained by the fact that the respondents are mostly students of Humanities (specialisms: History, Arts, Lithuanian Language and Literature, etc).

Apart from that, very little importance is attached to interdisciplinary studies (10%) and institutions (3%), supposedly due to their lack of knowledge about institutional involvement in the promotion of sustainability ideas and the role of interdisciplinary studies in academic settings. The topic on institutions which has gained the least popularity could be explained by the respondents' little concern about the institutional dimension and its significance in the creation of sustainable learning environment.

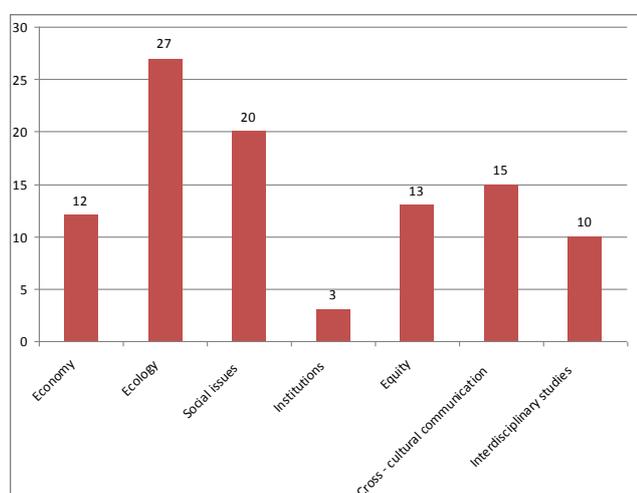


Fig 2. Issues to be integrated in the language curriculum

The graphic representation of the results and findings demonstrates students' interest in sustainable development for education. For this reason languages, English in particular, could be as a means for raising awareness of sustainable development ideas and in the view of their professional future: international practice – participating at international seminars, conferences, studying and/or working abroad.

A great number of respondents from VMU would rather study the topics on Ecology and Social Life, therefore teachers should seek various ways of integrating environmental issues in the language curriculum. The need for promoting EfSD in the classroom is of paramount importance in view of raising students' academic motivation in times of social changes. In addition, we believe and the study proves that national and institutional curriculum specifics of higher education should all be taken into consideration when designing *green* curriculum within the framework of EfSD. For this reason English classes are supposed to be more interdisciplinary, contextualized and glocalized. Therefore, alongside with such themes as economy, social inclusion, environment and pollution, more emphasis should be laid on the issues of ecology at a glocal level and linked to the specialisms they are majoring in. The English curriculum should

include the themes on climate change, as well as on actual political issues, the elimination of inequality and poverty. Round-table discussions, group presentations and writing assignments on glocal problems would enable the students to develop their sustainability competence and, as a result, raise their ecological awareness.

Table 1. Results on the comparison of 2011 and 2014 research

Issues	2011	2014
Economy	13 %	12 %
Ecology	31 %	27 %
Social issues	28 %	20 %
Institutions	2 %	3 %
Equity	8 %	13 %
Cross – cultural communication	10 %	15 %
Interdisciplinary studies	8 %	10 %

The comparison of research results (see Table 1) of the years 2011 and 2014 can draw the attention to the following tendency: there is no big difference in the percentage of students' attitude to the significance of the issues on economy, ecology, institutions and interdisciplinary studies in the years 2011 and 2014. According to the students' opinion, institutions and interdisciplinary studies play an insignificant role in their education of sustainability. On the other hand, the decrease in numbers on ecology and social issues can be interpreted by the fact that students' background knowledge on these problems has increased during their schooling. Whereas in relation to equity and cross – cultural communication, the importance of these themes has risen due to the changes in employability at local and international levels. This demonstrates the respondents' concerns about their opportunities in the changing labour market.

Conclusions

The consolidation of a framework for defining, emphasizing and developing sustainability competence as well as raising ecological awareness call for a holistic approach and ongoing efforts of university academia. Combining a 'top-down' – educators' and 'bottom-up' – students' attitudes is essential in order to promote sustainability competence as an emergent property of higher education. EfSD cannot be achieved without acquiring sustainability competence. Therefore, sense of permeability, interconnectedness, and the ability to influence the world in shifting it for sustainability should be fostered via English instruction. We believe that foreign language education is an empowering tool that will promote various kinds of sustainable communication since it provides students with an opportunity for face – face and virtual sustainable communication. Nowadays, the world is full of threats to survival, such as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes and other calamities. In our view, sustainability competence will provide our students with the skills and competences how to protect environment, save nature, avoid different kinds of natural disasters and conflicts in order to survive in the changing world.

Therefore, we are striving to identify what a successful sustainability and ecology literate student will be able to do as a result of the courses English B2 level : English for General Purposes (EGP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP):

- develop sustainability competence by raising ecological awareness;
- acquire sufficient knowledge about sustainable development in different dimensions;
- be able to identify present day and future perspectives in the field of EfSD;
- integrate projects in action in the language curriculum;
- use innovative methods and tools to raise ecological and sustainable development awareness.

Consequently, sustainability competence will provide our students with the skills how to avoid different kinds of crisis, how to solve problems and make solutions. The young generation should be prepared via language education to be responsible for their actions to create a more sustainable society for future generations. Success of sustainability ideas depends on the context and efforts of teachers and learners. It is our belief that we can help advance the spread of sustainable development ideas raising ecological awareness. If we do not find solutions to protect nature against perils of economic development and other factors, the planet will be in a dangerous situation. We, educators, have a special role to play in this endeavor.

The ecological awareness must therefore be taken into consideration in dealings with every sphere of human activity. Therefore, it is our mission to assist our students to acquire and use sustainability strategies via language instruction and getting them more actively engaged in contributing towards sustainability competence development in their everyday life.

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Ekologinio sąmoningumo ugdymas darnaus vystymosi kompetencijos aspektu

Santrauka

Besikeičiantis mokymosi kontekstas skatina žmogiškąjį ir aplinkos tarpusavio priklausomumą, vertybių ir etikos klausimų nagrinėjimą visose mokymosi disciplinose. Tokiu būdu yra ugdomas besimokančiųjų suvokimas, kad visa žmonija yra neatskiriama gamtos dalis. Studentai yra skatinami įgyti naujų žinių ir kompetencijų, kurių pagalba galėtų spręsti jų profesijos problemas kartu veikdami darnaus vystymosi idėjų plotmėje. Akivaizdu, kad darnaus vystymosi švietimas anglų kalbos paskaitose yra ypač svarbus. Dėl tos priežasties mokymo turinio bei metodų, susijusių su ekologija ir aplinkosauga integravimas į anglų kalbos mokymo programas universitete yra būtinas siekiant ugdyti studentų ekologijos sąmoningumą bei skatinti ir propaguoti darnaus vystymosi idėjas anglų kalbos paskaitose vietiniu ir tarptautiniu lygmeniu. Darnaus vystymosi kompetencijos plėtojei mokymosi procese turėtų būti taikomos ekologijos strategijos. Universitetų indėlis ugdant darnaus vystymosi ir ekologijos sąmoningumą yra svarus, tad kuo didesnis bus institucijos įsitraukimas į darnaus vystymosi kompetencijos ugdymą, tuo studentams bus sukuriama geresnė mokymosi sąlygos jų darnaus vystymosi kompetencijos bei ekologijos sąmoningumo ugdymui.

Darnaus vystymosi švietimas, darnaus vystymosi kompetencija, anglų kalbos mokymas ir mokymasis

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