

Sustainability in Language Teaching

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University of Turku

EC2U, Discourses in Europe, 10.11.2025



University of Turku * Turun yliopisto



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Ethical and Sustainable
(EKKO), funded by the K
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Photo: Mediabank, University of Turku

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Getting to know each other!

- Name...
- I am studying at the University of...
- How are you feeling right now?
- (Rating 1-10, 1 = no energy, 10 = super energized)



EC2U-vierailu Coimbrassa – historiaa, kauneutta ja lepakoita

24.10.2025 Maarit Mutta & Minna Maijala

EC2U-vaihto-ohjelman myötä pääsimme tutustumaan yhteen Euroopan vanhimmista ja arvostetuimmista yliopistoista – Coimbran yliopistoon Portugalissa. Vierailu antoi meille arvokkaan näkökulman kansainväliseen opiskelijayhteisöön ja vahvisti tunnettamme siitä, kuinka ainutlaatuinen ja monimuotoinen tämä verkosto on.

Opettajina Euroopan yhteisellä kampuksella – kokemuksia EC2U-verkostosta



(Kuva: Minna Maijala)



(Kuva: Minna Maijala)



(Kuvat: Minna Maijala ja Maarit Mutta)

Research projects

EKKO

[English](#) [Suomi](#)

[Frontpage](#) [Researchers](#)

Ethical and Sustainable Language Teaching (EKKO)



The river Aura; the cathedral of Turku

<https://sites.utu.fi/ekko/>

SustainLANG

[English](#) [Suomi](#) [Deutsch](#)

[Frontpage](#) [Researchers](#) [Events](#) [Publications](#)

Implementation of sustainable development goals in language teaching and learning



SustainLANG

<https://sites.utu.fi/sustainlang/en/>

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Today's Agenda

- Sustainability in other subjects vs. in language teaching
- ESD = Education for Sustainable Development
- Sustainability in higher education and school curricula
- What is sustainable in language teaching?
- Sustainability as a future direction in language teaching: Why and how?



Sustainability in other subjects and in language teaching

- Sustainability has become a topical issue in many disciplines -> concerns also language education.
- ESD = Education for Sustainable Development is the key to reach the global goals for SD.
- Teaching traditions have influence on the consideration of ESD (e.g., Sund, Gericke, & Bladh, 2020)



SDG 4 (quality education) -> "By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development [...]" (UNESCO 2015, p. 21)

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

- sustainable development as the dynamic process of achieving sustainability
- includes ecological, social, cultural, and economic dimensions
- ESD functions as a tool for supporting UNESCO's agenda 2030 goals of sustainable development
- ESD is key enabler in education in achieving the SDGs.
- values and behavioral outcomes - transformation



Sustainability in higher education

- In the last decades, the number of studies on sustainable development in higher education has increased.
- Not much research on the link between teaching practices and their impact on students' sustainability skills.
- Focus on alternative ways of working that activate students
- Research particularly in the field of science education
- Sustainability education has also been defined differently in different contexts, with more focus on biodiversity or global health.

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Posch & Steiner 2006; Fortuin ym. 2010; Lozano ym. 2017;
Wals 2009; Murillo-Vargas ym. 2020; del Carmen
Pegalajar-Palomino ym. 2021

Sustainable development in the strategy of the University of Turku

Strategic research and education profiles



Biodiversity and sustainability

Stopping climate change and biodiversity crisis as well as securing sustainable food production are humanity's greatest challenges and crucial for not exceeding the boundaries of the Earth system. With research and research-based education on bioenergy, biodiversity, climate change, food, and circular economy, we can create prerequisites for a sustainable future and innovations.

Strategy 2030 of the University of Turku

<https://www.utu.fi/en/university/university-strategy-2030>

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Cross-cutting objectives of the Finnish general upper secondary education

- ✳ Wellbeing
- ✳ Interaction skills
- ✳ Multidisciplinary and creative skills
- ✳ Societal competences
- ✳ Ethics and environmental competences
- ✳ Global and cultural competences

<https://www.oph.fi/en>



Sustainability in other subjects and in language teaching

- Science teaching, history, philosophy, literature, religion, arts, cultural studies, education, language education etc.
- Sustainability also concerns language education and research.
- Is ESD integral part of language teaching?



Brainstorming in breakout rooms (10 min.)

Reflect on your language lessons in school or university: What aspects of language teaching can be considered sustainable?

Discuss and write to Padlet!

<https://padlet.com/majjalaminna1/reflect-on-your-language-lessons-in-school-or-university-wha-ktu1kj71ng9bwbd>



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Photo: Unsplash

Sustainability topics include...

Table 1. Themes of sustainability for the five-point Likert scale evaluation in the questionnaire for pre-service teachers.

✓ safe neighbourhood	✓ equal education and possibilities for lifelong learning
✓ saving energy/water	
✓ adverse environmental effects due to use of natural resources	✓ adverse environmental effects of traffic
✓ peace and justice in society	✓ preserving biodiversity
✓ nearby nature and its wellbeing	✓ increasing vegetarian food in diet
✓ healthy diet	
✓ democratic society	✓ internationality
✓ actions to prevent climate change	✓ gender equality
✓ preventing and intervening in bullying	✓ sustainable industries and innovations
✓ adverse agricultural effects on the environment	✓ consumer habits based on personal lifestyle
✓ human rights and equality	✓ cultural environment and heritage
✓ sustainable economic growth	
✓ responsible travel	✓ cultural diversity in Finland
✓ tolerance	✓ linguistic diversity in Finland
✓ recycling	✓ personal financial situation
✓ ensuring healthy life and wellbeing for everyone	✓ personal social health and wellbeing
✓ responsible and sustainable consumer habits	✓ personal mental health and wellbeing
✓ securing renewable energy for everyone	✓ personal physical health and well-being
✓ societal involvement	✓ sorting waste
✓ adverse industrial effects on the environment	

Maijala, M., Heikkola, L. M., Kuusalu, S. R., Laine, P., Mutta, M., & Mäntylä, K. (2023). Pre-service language teachers' perceptions of sustainability and its implementation in language teaching. *Language Teaching Research*, 13621688231170682.

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Reflect on your language lessons in school or university: What aspects of language teaching can be considered sustainable?

Nath
1 hour ago

Room 4

Talking about sustainable topics in the foreign language

0

Add comment

Nath
1 hour ago

Room 4

Teaching all the aspects of a language (variations and dialects of a language)

0

Add comment

Nath
45 minutes ago

Room 4

Intergenerational language teaching (bringing elderly, adults and children in the same language class)

0

Add comment

Nath
44 minutes ago

Room 4

Using online resources to prevent printing on paper

0

Add comment

Room 3
44 minutes ago

Room 3

Language classes can be used for cross-cultural exchanges, presenting policies for sustainability that are taking place in other countries and introducing cooperation and exchanges of ideas.

0

Add comment

Enrica, Guilherme, Leonie and Franc
43 minutes ago

Project

not using papers , do some presentations about sustainability and teaching something about biodiversity, recycling clothes and so on. Teaching about equality (for example feminism, feminist study is a sustainable discourse).

1

Add comment

Playful Otter
43 minutes ago

room 3

* cooperation across countries as a way of promoting sustainability

- cross-cultural competences: different ways in which different cultures face sustainability concerns

0

Add comment

Isabelle
42 minutes ago

Room 3

Using online content to promote accessibility for students - can be accessed from anywhere, at anytime.

0

Add comment

room 1
41 minutes ago

- providing free online materials instead of printed materials
- working in groups to promote sustainability by sharing ideas, thus improving critical thinking
- promoting sustainable traveling supported by the university

0

Add comment

Playful Otter
41 minutes ago

room 3

having outside classes with natural sunlight

0

Add comment

GROUP 2
39 minutes ago

reading newspapers, poems, listening to podcasts about sustainability in a specific language

0

Add comment

Our reflections 10.11.2025

Reflecting on your language lessons in school or university, what aspects of language teaching can be considered sustainable?

- Consider disabilities in hearing and sight. So increase sustainability in teaching with taking into account these types of disabilities

Increase the use of technology instead of books so to not waste paper

When teaching languages always consider dialects not only standard languages

online classes can be a way to include people who can attend in person classes

aspects of a culture linked to a language, in order to fully integrate in the society and understand what's behind the problems in a specific country and be able to understand all aspects of a language. It promotes respect and tolerance for other cultures

Digital libraries to increase teaching sustainability so that everyone from uni can access the library from anywhere

Involve international and Erasmus students in language teaching activities to make the process of learning a new language more interesting stimulating.

Using languages to get to know other culture's mindsets about the world problems could help finding new strategies to develop a sustainable world

more digital content

Peer to peer teaching: group project and have interaction could be useful for learning a language more easily

Knowing a language can allow you to read and comprehend articles and researches from a different country and use it to study different approaches

through the teaching of a foreign language we could enable children to have a broader view of the world

more sustainable language practices: contextualized learning

Video conferencing and some virtual classrooms

Language learning as a form of breaking boundaries among people and pushing towards integration

Sustainability in language teaching?

- equality
- language awareness
- digital materials
- sustainable topics
- peace
- multilingualism
- ethics
- future

Photo by [Tobias Weinhold](#) on [Unsplash](#)



Distinctive features of language teaching

- Language is both the medium and the content in language learning and teaching (Halliday 1980)
- Hammadou & Bernhardt (1987, p. 301): “the content and the process for learning the content are the same”
- The subject matter is difficult to define because its content is more complex and differs from that of other subjects (cf. Borg 2006).
- Compared to other subjects, language teachers have more “freedom” to choose the topics. (CEFR guidelines & textbooks).
- Textbooks as the major source for topics (e.g., Bandura & Sercu 2005)
- In Finland: language teachers tend to choose cultural topics from textbooks (e.g., Hahl 2020).

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Challenges in language education

- subject matter different from other subjects: language both medium and content
- Nordic language teachers thematise sustainability issues less than other subject teachers
- sociocultural dimension most common (i.e. cultural heritage, cultural identity, and multiculturalism)
- lack of criticism considering economic growth and sustainability
- normative teaching tradition
- Importance of teacher education and textbook content on student learning of ESD



Possible explanations

- inadequate competence to teach environmental or sustainability topics
- not enough time
- not a core area in language teaching
- fragmentation inside the discipline
- unmotivated faculty members
- division of language and content in the curricula
- target language use in class
- textbook dependency



Post-method language education

- language as a dynamic process
- goal to teach how to reflect on cultural differences and understand the representatives of other cultures
- different cultures of various groups
- a multifaceted approach to global languages
- a democratic approach



Strengths of language teachers in teaching sustainability

- Language teaching promotes understanding between people through communication and interaction
- Communicative competence is the ability to negotiate and act as a mediator (Council of Europe, 2018)
- Mediation emphasises an interpretive and reflective approach to languages and cultures (Scarino, 2021)
- Communicative competence is a key skill in creating a sustainable society (Barili & Byram, 2021)
- Professionals in dealing with multilingualism and multiculturalism



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Sustainability as a future direction in language teaching: Why and how?

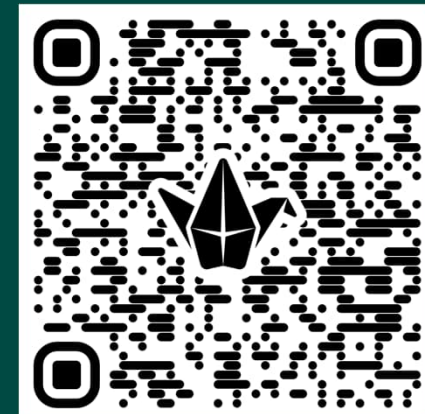
- Language teachers share the responsibility for ESD
- Language a suitable tool for many goals in ESD
- How can languages be taught and learned in a sustainable way?
- How can sustainability become a natural part of language education?
 - ✳ Systems thinking, wider perspectives, curricular changes, teaching methods
 - ✳ Need of education for language teachers
- Content of teaching: choice of topics related to ESD
- Democracy goals: every student should have the possibility to use language, be able to communicate well and be part of decision-making in the society

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For the next lecture: Sustainability Snapshots: Capturing sustainability on Campus

- Before we meet in my next lecture, I have an engaging task for you all. It's called 'Sustainability Snapshots', and it's a simple way for us to explore how sustainable development is happening on our campuses. As you move around the university, I'd like you to take a photo of something that demonstrates sustainability in action. It could be anything from eco-friendly infrastructure, to green spaces, or even a project linked to social sustainability like inclusion or equality, or something related to your studies or campus life.
- Once you've taken your photo, I'll ask you to write a short description explaining how it relates to sustainability and why it's important. Please upload your photo on the [Padlet wall](https://padlet.com/maijalaminna1/sustainability-snapshots-ipx9vggl4wj70s56) by the 12th of November:
- *I'm very excited to see your perspectives on how sustainability touches different aspects of the university life!*
- Link: <https://padlet.com/maijalaminna1/sustainability-snapshots-ipx9vggl4wj70s56>



For the next lecture

Please read the article:

- Maijala, Minna and Kuusalu, Salla-Riikka. "Promoting sustainability in European language teaching" *European Journal of Applied Linguistics*.
- Link to the article (in Moodle): <https://doi.org/10.1515/eujal-2024-0036>

Questions to reflect:

- What is the potential of language teaching in promoting ESD?
- How is ESD implemented in language teaching across different countries? How is ESD integrated into language teaching in your own country?

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Get inspired.



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