UNIVERSITY OF TURKU

Sustainability in Language Teaching

Minna Maijala, School of Languages and Translation Studies
University of Turku



EC2U, Discourses in Europe, 9.11.2026

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)





UNIVERSITY OF TURKU

TURUN YLIOPISTO

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)

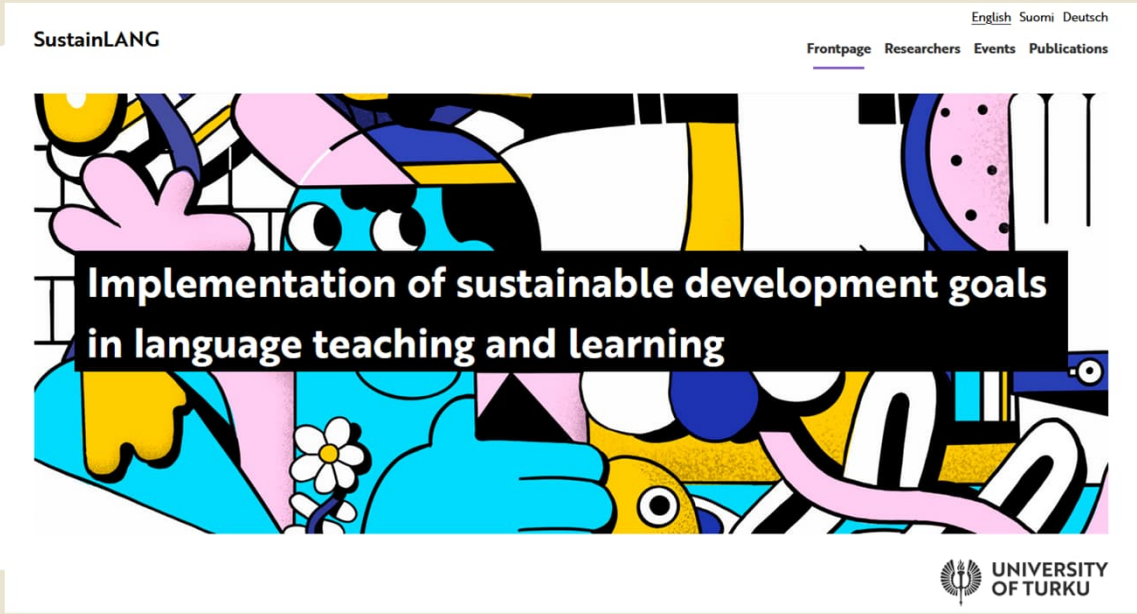
UNIVERSITY OF TURKU

Research projects



The river Aura; the cathedral of Turku

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



SustainLANG
https://sites.utu.fi/sustainlang/en/

Minna Maijala, School of Languages and Translation Studies,
University of Turku

UNIVERSITY OF TURKU

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)

Minna Maijala, School of Languages and Translation Studies,
University of Turku

UNIVERSITY OF TURKU

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.

Minna Maijala, School of Languages and Translation Studies, University of Turku



Photo by Alexander Grey on Unsplash

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.



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

Minna Maijala, School of Languages and Translation Studies,
University of Turku

UNIVERSITY OF TURKU

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?



Sustainability topics include...

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

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

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.

Minna Maijala, School of Languages and Translation Studies,
University of Turku

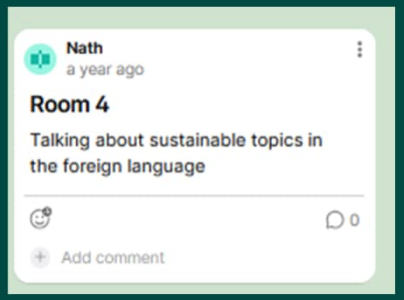
UNIVERSITY OF TURKU

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/maijalaminna1/reflect-on-your-language-lessons-in-school-or-university-wha-s02546ap9msi92yi1d6t



Minna Maijala, School of Languages and Translation Studies, University of Turku



Photo: Unsplash

Sustainability in language teaching?

- equality
- language awaress
- 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).

Minna Maijala, School of Languages and Translation Studies, University of Turku



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



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

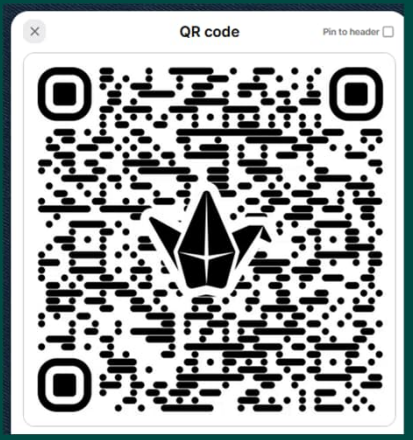
- Language teachers share the responsibility for ESD
- Language a suitable tool for many goals in ESD
- How can languages be taught and learned in a sustainable way?
- How can sustainability become a natural part of language education?
  - Systems thinking, wider perspectives, curricular changes, teaching 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

Minna Maijala, School of Languages and Translation Studies, University of Turku



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 you photo on the Padlet wall by the 11th 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-capturing-sustainability-on-campus-s02546fnu1qln3yqcoxf



Minna Maijala, School of Languages and Translation Studies,
University of Turku

UNIVERSITY OF TURKU

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?

Minna Maijala, School of Languages and Translation Studies, University of Turku



Get inspired.

UNIVERSITY OF TURKU