

ELT and Sustainability

What should we be doing?

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What is sustainability?

Definitions of sustainability are complicated, but in terms of English language teaching, the best approach is to look at the issue from two perspectives. Firstly, to consider the impact that we as the global ELT community have on the environment, but also the opportunities that we have as teachers to help our students understand the issues and participate in the debates.

However, it's important to remember that sustainability is not just about climate change, and the best way to understand fully the nature of sustainability is to look at the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and by exploring the website <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>. The SDGs cover a wide range of issues and challenges that face global humanity and many of these can be relevant to the way we run our institutions, and also make exciting and motivating topics for our classes. Some examples are given below.

Embedding sustainability into your teaching practice

Increasingly, ELT course books make specific reference to sustainability and these references give teachers a strong base to build on, and also ideas to replicate in future lessons. A look through the book map or contents pages will often quickly help you find any references to sustainability in the lessons. Some course books actually label activities or whole units with a relevant SDG, so cross-referring your course book with the SDG website can be a very powerful way to create motivating and focused lessons.

However, most course books do not have specific references to sustainability so teachers need to develop the skill of making small changes to activities or even to a whole unit to introduce a sustainability focus. This takes time initially, but very soon teachers find it quite straightforward and not too time-consuming. and of course the benefits of embedding some sustainability themes are very significant.

For example a primary lesson around shopping can very easily be adjusted slightly to discuss the importance of paper or cloth bags rather than plastic bags. A lesson with teenagers around the subject of citizenship can be adjusted slightly to include reference to SDG 16, Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. You can include content from the website in your teaching.

Many teachers are interested in writing their own materials around sustainability and this can be a really useful approach as it allows you to customise the content to the needs of your learners, their interests and the overall context that you work in. It is of course potentially time-consuming, and an effective way of producing materials is to work with groups of teachers - maybe four or five - working on a series of lessons. The sharing of ideas and collaboration can be an effective way of getting things done more quickly, and do remember to keep and share anything that you produce so colleagues can use the materials in their classes as well. This is also a good way of being time efficient.

In our schools, colleges and universities

It's not only in the classrooms where we need to think about sustainability in English language teaching. We also need to consider how to make our institutions more sustainable. The best way to do this is to make sure that sustainability is always in people's minds, and a useful technique is to have a sustainability item on the agenda for every staff meeting or training session. It could be a very small thing or it could be a much more significant thing. The point is to always keep sustainability in the back of peoples' minds.

The sustainability hub maybe in the lobby of the school or in an area where staff and students regularly pass through is an excellent idea to reinforce the idea of sustainability in all that happens in the school.

Sustainability within an institution can relate to a number of the SDGs for example SDG 3 Good Health and Welbeing, SDG 4 Quality Education, and SDG 12 Responsible Consumption.

Challenges

There are a number of challenges around integration of sustainability into both your teaching and your institution. Three that spring to mind are:

making sure teachers and colleagues have enough time to implement the integration of sustainability issues into their classes;

ensuring the student motivation is always at the forefront, bearing in mind that people relate more easily to things that are relevant to them and their communities, so urban areas will relate well to SDG 11, Sustainable Cities and older teenagers and university students to SDG 8 Decent Work;

a recent challenge has been the arrival of AI into our classrooms and our institutions. AI is an excellent tool for collecting information and for guiding our thinking. However, it does have a significant climate impact and we need to bear this in mind as we develop AI policies for our institutions.