

## Integrating Sustainable Development in ELT Classes

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### Abstract

In a world where English is needed for enriching the prospect of development in all the areas of one's life- personal, social and professional, it is no wonder that it is being considered as one of the life skills for learners' comprehensible development. However, English is being taught as a stand-alone subject bereft of the social responsibility that learning a language and communicating in that language carries with itself. This dissociation of language from the social context and social responsiveness makes learning English a tedious affair for children. Yet, parents are opting for the English medium schooling with only hope that it will uplift their status in the society and fetch lucrative jobs to their children. What is being ignored is that a child can climb the social and economic ladder only when the world around them is developing in harmony with nature. While the importance of having competence in English and its role in social and economic upliftment is almost irrefutable now, the question is what the English Language Teaching (ELT) classes should do, so that students along with sustaining their own well-being may also help in sustaining a healthy, harmonious and happy future for themselves and also for generations to come.

This paper maintains that English is a means towards attaining the sustainable development for oneself. While sustenance of the future prospect of individual has been the nucleus of English language teaching, this paper argues that there is a need that teachers of English, besides teaching the language skills, also teach for the sustainable development. Integration of sustainable goals of education in English classes will engage students meaningfully not only in language production but also in solution of real life problems. Hence, the present paper will explore, firstly ideas of sustainability and the emergence and prevalence of this term into international discourse. Secondly, it will discuss how English classes can integrate the goals of Sustainable development in its stride. Finally, the paper will suggest some methods and strategies that can be used for the purpose of Education for Sustainable development in ELT classrooms.

**Keywords:** English Language Teaching, Sustainable Development, Language Skills, Critical thinking

## Introduction

Since the inception of English Language Teaching (ELT) in India, the status and position of English has come a long way - from a language of library and literature to language of trade and commerce to language of livelihood and language of social upliftment and empowerment. In a world where English is needed for enriching the prospect of development in all the areas of one's life - personal, social and professional, it is no wonder that it is being considered as one of the skills-set needed for learners' sustainable development. However, English is being taught as a stand-alone subject bereft of the social responsibility that learning a language and communicating in that language carries with itself. This dissociation of the language from the social context and social responsiveness makes learning English a tedious affair for children. Yet, parents are opting for the English medium schooling with only hope that it will uplift their status in the society and fetch lucrative jobs to their children. What is being ignored is that a child can climb the social and economic ladder only when the world around them is developing in harmony with nature. While the importance of having competency and its role in social and economic upliftment in English is almost irrefutable now, the question is how far ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms can help in inculcating the students with the values of Sustainable development enshrined in the UN documents and also empowering them so that they can take the responsibility of their own sustainable development in particular; what the ELT classes should do so that the students along with sustaining their own well-being can also help in sustaining a healthy, harmonious and happy future for themselves and also for generations to come.

## Sustainable Development

Sustainable development, although much in vogue in the current discourse on development, is a difficult concept to define as it is also continually evolving since the time of its conception in the UN General Assembly in 1987. Nevertheless, one of the original and widely used definitions of sustainable development is given by the Brundtland Commission: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p 43). Hence, Sustainable Development or Sustainability can be defined as the development that improves the standard and quality of life of individuals while inhabiting within "the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems" (Daly & Cobb, 1989).

Sustainable development is generally ascribed with three components: environment, society, and economy. All the three areas are not separate rather interdependent. In other words, a rational sustenance of one area will certainly have a positive effect on the other areas as well. For example, a society needs a healthy environment to secure food and resources, safe drinking water, and unpolluted air for its citizens. Thus, a proper sustainable development is one where development of an individual, or the pursuit of quality of life are based on the balanced environmental, societal, and economic development.

## **Situating ELT in Education for Sustainable Development**

Since 1987, when sustainable development was first endorsed at the UN General Assembly, there has been intense effort on how it can be promoted world- wide. In this aim to achieve sustainable development, education has been ascribed a major and vital role. From 1987 to 1992, the concept of sustainable development grown as committees discussed, negotiated, and drafted the 40 chapters of *Agenda 21*. Initial thoughts concerning Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) were captured in Chapter 36 of *Agenda 21*, "Promoting Education, Public Awareness, and Training." Education for Sustainable Development means that every individual has the opportunity and freedom to access the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes required to build a sustainable future.

ESD is a vision of education that strives for economic development with complete well-being of people along with preserving cultural traditions and the earth's natural resources. In this effort, ESD resorts to shattering the disciplinary boundaries by using transdisciplinary methods and "approaches to develop an ethic for lifelong learning" (MGIEP, p.82); this acclaims those human needs which are "compatible with sustainable use of natural resources and the needs of the planet; and nurtures a sense of global solidarity." (ibid, p. 82)

The relationship between education and sustainable development is not linear rather very complex. Research shows that basic education is foundation to a nation's endeavour for achieving sustainability targets. Studies have emphasised that education can have a vibrant/ pervasive effect on all walks of life which is inevitable for a person's prosperity and growth.

The UN declared 2005 to 2014 as the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). The goal of UNESCO campaign for integrating the principles and values of sustainable development with education and learning has now been adopted by all the educational institutions globally. However, there are two basic issues that need to be pondered on: the first is what are the contents that a learner needs to learn and the second is, what strategies, activities or process to undertake for those contents to be successfully acquired, accommodated and embraced by the learners.

The answer to the first question can be addressed by the various recommendations given by the national and international bodies, namely United Nations, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Organization of American States and by including those into the curriculum of the schools and also colleges; chapters on climate change, disaster management, biodiversity, poverty annihilation, sustainable consumption, globalization, multiculturalism, economic growth etc. So far as the answer to the second question, "how can it be learnt?" is concerned, it needs a little brainstorming on part of the curriculum planners and also the teachers. Teaching about sustainable development differs in different contexts. However, this paper is concerned with learning of sustainability at school levels, or preparing children to lead their lives with sustainability, so the question can be addressed in school contexts. The school students can be sensitized about the importance and principles of sustainable development through

the materials, contents and instructions in different classroom hours. While lecture and instruction may make them aware about the theories and principles of Sustainable development, there is doubt whether this kind of instruction can actually help them in sustaining and harnessing their own individual development. It is needless to say that the individual development decides to a very significant level, the social and global development. Therefore, if an individual's development cannot be sustained for a longer period of time; if they are deprived of the opportunities to choose the life they value, the vision of global development cannot be sustained. In such scenario, English is a major help. Although it is true that English has attained this position by endangering the status of so many indigenous languages, in fact all the other languages of the world, it cannot be denied that English is needed if one needs to achieve an overall development - personal, professional and economic.

While education is central to improving quality of life, competence in English language opens the opportunities that a person can choose from. If education helps in upgrading the economic status of families, improving life conditions including access to health facilities and increasing life span, English ensures better access to more sustainable economic resources, making informed choices about health and life conditions, thereby raising the chances for economic and social well-being of the forthcoming generations . Quality education, while holds both individual and national implications, English language education ensures that the desired goals are achieved.

### **English and Sustainability**

Literacy and education have always been considered as key to Human development. Development has been construed variously. Exploring the nature of development, Sen argues that it is the expansion of freedoms and capabilities that create opportunities for people to lead lives that they value and have reasons to live (Sen, 2001). In other words, the aim of development is to reduce poverty - social, economic, academic, or psychological (Bruthiaux 2000, Sen 2001).

So, development, which embraces the enhancement of freedom is a positive change or improvement in people's living standard because it generates opportunities for the individuals to lead the life they value, (Street 2001, UNESCO 2005). In today's context, there is no denying of the fact that education that imparts proficiency in English to communicate successfully in academic as well as in real life, can, to a great extent, create those opportunities which will bring a change in people's living standard. This is because, English has pervaded all walks of life. Ukoyen (2005) comments "One look at the map of the world reveals that English now exists in every strategic corner of the globe, either as a mother tongue or as an official or second language" (as cited in Owolabi & Nnaji, p.124). Besides, more than half of all the academic texts in higher education is available only in the English language. The language "functions across the world as the language of power and of inclusion and exclusion in participation in global activities" (Egwuogu, 2011, p. 31).

The growing popularity and status of English has made an inevitable distinction between the people who can sustain their development for long and those who cannot; between people who can earn a respectable livelihood and those who cannot. The importance of English language in the economic upliftment has been underlined by various reports and studies. The higher the proficiency in English, better the prospect of climbing the socio-economic ladder.

The impact of globalisation and economic development has made English the ‘language of opportunity’ and a vital means of improving prospects for well-paid employment. **(British Council, p.3)**

Even the empirical studies reveal that there is a great difference in the social and economic access of people who know English and those who do not. For example, Chakraborty and Kapur (2008) found that the individuals who had any proficiency in English were paid better wages compared to the people who did not possess any competency in English even when the education for both the group was same. This trend certainly has repercussions on all the policies and actions related to development as Bruthiaux (2002) believes all developmental plans are ‘inextricably linked in governmental and academic circles as well as in the media with English language education’. (p. 289)

Apart from the role that English plays in the economic sustenance of the people, it also plays a role in what Grin (2003, p. 36) calls the ‘non-market value’; that is, the social and cultural effects that are associated with the language. This is because English is now considered a global language and competence in this language is one of the important skills set needed for an individual to participate successfully in the knowledge society of the 21st century. As Graddol (2006, p.72) believes, information and communication technology (ICT) and English are the ‘basic skills’ besides the basic literacy, namely, reading in the mother tongue and medium of instruction and numeracy; English is the ‘generic skills’ required in the future to accrue new skills set and knowledge. English language education, hence, can play a vital role in human development by providing skills which will help both individuals and institutions to participate actively with the current era of globalization where they will not deplete the resources rather engage in generating new resources.

The goal of Education for Sustainability is to sensitise people towards making such changes in their lives as can ensure a sustainable future not for the present generation but for the generations to come. This requires that the individuals develop new knowledge and skills which are based on problem solving and critical thinking and learn to work collaboratively. Hence, it is essential that such curriculum is devised which offers children sustainable skills required in future and also those skills which they can employ towards ensuring sustainable future of the world as a whole.

While the onus of preparing the curricula lies with the curriculum planner at the national and institutional level, an ESL teacher can extend their help by bringing into the class topics

related to issues of sustainable development, namely climate change, natural disaster and its management, biodiversity, population control and poverty amelioration, sustainable habits related to production, consumption and recycling. This demands a change in teachers' and students' teaching and learning behaviour - teachers need to bring such topics and activities that can bring consciousness among children towards issues of sustainability; students need to take full participation in the activities so that they can grow up to a responsible global citizen. This kind of curricula will have dual purpose to serve- one, the students will get sensitized about the various issues current in their daily lives. Since it will be related to their own lives; something that is affecting or going to affect their lives, this will motivate them towards reading and thinking critically about these issues. Second, it will meaningfully engage the students in the class and consequently develop competencies like critical thinking, imagining future scenarios and making decisions in a collaborative way.

“Education for sustainable development is situated within the sphere of critical or pluralistic environmental learning tradition.” (WWF Sweden, 2008, p.10) Such education requires that the disciplinary boundaries of knowledge to be loosened. It also demands that education along with knowledge offers values which are needed for creating a sustainable future.

The sustainable education depends not on lecture method but on participatory practices where the transformation of the world is the real goal. Such transformatory goal is achievable only when the students are imparted with critical and problems solving attitude during the classroom instructions and they are engaged in more meaningful and issue based dialogues and activities. Thus, the aim of sustainable development is neither completely local nor completely global, rather it intends for Glocal- Global perspective with local issues. In this transformatory aim of glocal sustainability, English has a lot to offer since the basic element that defines English language today is its global spread and local acceptance and its ability to make the local issues visible at the global level.

### **Integrating sustainable goals in English language skills development**

Today's English classes are not just confined to developing academic literacy rather it has gone beyond. Even the academic literacy is not confined to just passive reading which involved read aloud and silent reading sessions and answering a few factual and inferential questions based on the text. Rather it demands that the students not only read and understand the text but also through the text they understand the world- reading 'word to world'. This type of reading requires the students to go beyond their memory level and exercise their higher order thinking skills, viz. evaluation, critical thinking and even creative thinking. So far as writing is concerned, it expects the students not to copy the text or reproduce the text as answers rather develop their writing slowly and steadily. This writing also requires that students are able to transfer their thinking and knowledge into the written script.

Teaching and learning of English involves not only reading and writing in the language but also communicating in the language. This communication requires active listening on the part

of the learners: processing the information, building their own value judgement about the topic or issues and then responding. A meaningful communication involves more than just yes and no answer. To develop the Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW) skills of the students, an ELT class needs to involve learners in group work and collaborative learning. This is because language is not an individual action. For language development to happen in learners, a group and society is a prerequisite. So, an ESL classroom which focuses on developing and nurturing the LSRW of the students are basically preparing the learners with sustainable skills as well.

Besides the activities undertaken in the classrooms, the activities that involve tasks of real nature, for example, surveying neighborhood with respect to their consumption habits of water, electricity etc. along with giving the learners real practice in communication skills also sensitise them about the sustainable living.

Hence, the need in the ELT classrooms is to organise teaching learning activities with a focus on sustainable goals. Such practices will help in dual objectives-it will build up students' language skills, namely, reading, writing, speaking and listening; it will also inculcate them with the value of sustainable development and also help them to become critical learners.

## Conclusion

Education for sustainable development underscores the need of knowledge, values and action. While education system provides students with knowledge and values, what most of the curricula is failing at is in making them act; to take action for the real issues and for sustainable change. There is a gap in transforming the knowledge they have acquired into action. As language requires performance, English language classes can help in this regard to a great extent. Besides the simulated scenario for practicing the skills, students can be trusted with undertaking projects which require them to think for sustainability while using the target language. Such practices will not only help the learners in gaining confidence in using language but will also bring a sustainable change in their behaviour as they start seeing meaning in their activities. Therefore, the ELT classes need to integrate the issues of sustainability in their curriculum with a focus on learners' critical faculties in a collaborative setting and global context.

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