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# Language teachers as educators for sustainability in Finland – Factors influencing teachers’ perception of their agency

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**Abstract:** Agency enhances teachers’ professional development and influences their capability of integrating education of sustainable development (ESD). This study focuses on language teachers’ agency as educators for sustainability both at the institutional system level and in language classes. We investigate how language teachers perceive their agency in ESD, how their experiences affect their perception of agency in ESD, and how they use their agency in the integration process. Data were gathered with individual semi-structured interviews of six language teachers in Finland and analysed using a modified inductive paradigm model. The teachers considered having agency in ESD when they received enough support, had sufficient guidance, could affect teaching materials, and had proactive students. Teachers had many operational strategies for solving the challenges in integrating ESD, but negative experiences and lack of support were reflected as a diminished capability for agency and decreased capacity to integrate ESD.

**Keywords:** Education for sustainable development, teacher agency, language teaching

**Abstrakti:** Toimijuus parantaa opettajien ammatillista kehitystä ja vaikuttaa heidän kykyynsä integroida kestävyyskasvatusta. Tässä tutkimuksessa keskitytään opettajien toimijuuteen kestävyyskasvattajina sekä institutionaalisen tason että luokkahuoneessa tapahtuvan vaikuttamisen kautta. Tutkimme miten kielten opettajat kokevat toimijuutensa kestävyyskasvatuksessa ja miten he käyttävät toimijuuttaan sen integroimisessa opetukseen. Aineisto koostuu Suomessa haastateltujen kuuden

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kieltenopettajan haastatteluista ja se analysoitiin soveltamalla induktiivista paradigmamallia. Opettajat kokivat toimijuutta kestävyyskasvatuksen aikana, kun he saivat riittävästi tukea, heillä oli riittävästi ohjausta, he saattoivat vaikuttaa opetusmateriaaleihin, ja heillä oli proaktiivisia oppilaita. Opettajilla oli monia operatiivisia strategioita kestävyyskasvatuksen integroinnin haasteiden ratkaisemiseksi, mutta negatiiviset kokemukset ja tuen puute näkyivät vähentyneenä toimijuutena ja heikentyneenä kykynä integroida kestävyyskasvatusta opetukseen.

**Zusammenfassung:** Handlungs- und Gestaltungskompetenz fördert die berufliche Entwicklung von Lehrenden und beeinflusst ihre Fähigkeit zur Umsetzung von Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung (BNE). Diese Studie konzentriert sich daher auf die Handlungsfähigkeit (Agency) von Sprachlehrern als Pädagogen für Nachhaltigkeit sowohl auf institutioneller Systemebene als auch im Sprachunterricht. In dieser Studie wurde untersucht, wie Sprachlehrer ihre Handlungsfähigkeit im Bereich der BNE wahrnehmen, wie ihre Erfahrungen ihre Wahrnehmung der Handlungsfähigkeit im Bereich der BNE beeinflussen und wie sie ihre Handlungsfähigkeit im Umsetzungsprozess nutzen. Forschungsdaten wurden durch individuelle, halbstrukturierte Interviews mit sechs Sprachlehrern in Finnland erhoben und mithilfe eines modifizierten, induktiven Paradigmenmodells analysiert. Die befragten Sprachlehrer waren der Ansicht bei ausreichend Unterstützung und Anleitung über Handlungsfähigkeit bezüglich der BNE zu verfügen. Dies traf auch zu, wenn Lehrer Einfluss auf die Unterrichtsmaterialien nehmen konnten und über proaktive Schüler verfügten. Die Lehrkräfte verfügten über zahlreiche operative Strategien, um die Herausforderungen bei der Umsetzung von BNE zu bewältigen. Negative Erfahrungen und mangelnde Unterstützung führten jedoch zu einer verminderten Handlungsfähigkeit und einer geringeren Kapazität zur Umsetzung von BNE.

## 1 Introduction

Education for sustainable development (ESD) is defined by UNESCO (2018) as a lifelong learning process that aims at solving interlinked global challenges by providing learners with “knowledge, skills, attitudes, competences and values”. In ESD, it is important that teachers feel they can promote positive changes through their students (Bonner et al. 2020), which can be achieved for example by developing the competencies of teachers. According to the most recent analysis of past research in education that aims toward societal sustainability transition by Redman and Wiek (2021), critical competencies in sustainability that contribute to change are the so-called planning competencies, which develop thinking for possible futures (Chen and Hsu, 2020), values and strategies. These include systems thinking, which in-

volves a set of abilities that help to understand and analyse complex systems. The key professional competence, however, was defined to be interpersonal competence that involves an ability to engage with stakeholders and do collaborative teamwork; other important professional competencies mentioned were the ability for compassionate communication and responsive project management (Redman and Wiek 2021).

Agency is a vital component of a meaningful and satisfactory teaching experience, and it enhances teachers' professional development (Kayi-Aydar et al. 2019). Our view on teacher agency follows the ecological approach of Priestley and others (2019), which connects agency with the surrounding environment and conditions, including social relations, emotions and situations at any given moment in time. According to this view, agency is seen as relational and dynamic, and the dialogical nature of agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) is highlighted, rather than viewing it as an isolated and independent feature. However, teachers may perceive agency in many ways, e.g., as an individual experience of autonomy, which can be viewed as an intrapersonal aspect of agency, or an interactive experience, which reflects a more interpersonal aspect (Baer 2024). Furthermore, Baer (2024) found that positive affect was linked to feelings of positive control of teacher's individual agency and negative affect was linked to their hindered capacity in enacting their agency as educators. This study considers both language teachers' role in the institutional system as educators for sustainability, i.e., the outward-oriented aspect of agency, and the way they connect with the learners during classes and influence the learners' actions, i.e., the inward-oriented agency (Kubanyiova and Crookes 2016: 120; see also Miller et al. 2018). This is valuable because if language teachers can reflect on their agency both within the classes and at the societal level, it can improve their "ongoing development in exercising agency for positive and transformative change in their teaching contexts" (Miller et al. 2018: 2).

In this study, we investigate the factors affecting language teachers' perception of agency in ESD and how these factors reflect on their efforts to integrate ESD into language lessons. In addition, we research the possible effects of their perception of agency in the integration of ESD. First, we explore some previous research literature on teacher agency and ESD. Second, we describe our research questions and methods, and finally, we present the results and discuss them, focusing on the factors influencing the language teachers' perception of agency and its effects on integrating ESD in language lessons.

## 2 Education for sustainable development and agency

Sustainable development in the context of its education follows the definition of the Brundtland Report (WCED 1987: Ch. 2), stating it is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. ESD has been launched globally by the UN as an effort to reach the sustainable development goals of AGENDA 2030 call for action and to enable the gradual transformation of societies from unsustainable toward sustainability: ESD raises awareness about the linkage of environmental issues to our lives and enhances understanding of the concepts and real-life applications of sustainable development through holistic teaching and transformative pedagogical methods (UNESCO 2021). Contemporary ESD, meaning the approaches that follow the UNESCO (2020) roadmap for educators, has evolved from traditional top-down content teaching into using more action-oriented tasks and socially involving pedagogical methods, such as student-led projects that aim at solving local problems related to sustainability (Sass et al. 2020). In this version of ESD, a holistic approach and a systems thinking perspective are essential to uncover the connection between the different dimensions of sustainability: social, environmental, and economic (Sinakou et al. 2019). The feature common to the contemporary ESD approaches is their orientation toward enabling social transformation via developing different sustainability competencies, such as action competence of both teachers and learners (Bürgeener and Barth 2018; Sass et al. 2020).

Agency is an important aspect when considering the integration of ESD in language education from the teacher’s viewpoint (Kayi-Aydar et al. 2019). Successful teacher agency requires a combination of professional skills and competencies, supportive beliefs and above all, consideration and guidance about the role of teachers at the level of educational institutions (Biesta et al. 2015). Although agency can be considered consisting partly of a person’s capacity for action, this capacity is often limited by unequal possibilities that create differences in how much agency a person has (Davies 1990). According to multiple studies, teachers’ autonomy is decreasing in many contexts due to increased demands of standardisation and measurability of impact, which steer the way teaching is performed and outcomes evaluated (Godley et al. 2019). Tao and Gao (2017) state that agency is an important aspect to consider when making changes to the institutional policies that involve education, as it can greatly contribute to its quality. This study addresses the interpersonal aspect of teacher agency by investigating common factors in how language teachers from various backgrounds perceive their agency in attempting to promote sustainability and integrate ESD in their classes.

Studies have shown that not all language teachers feel that they have a strong ownership of sustainability education or that they lack the knowledge base to teach it (e.g., Borg et al. 2012; Reisinger et al. 2021), which likely contributes to how much agency they consider having in implementing ESD. In the Turkish context, for example, many English language teachers acknowledged the importance of ESD in the curriculum and claimed to be willing to integrate it in their lessons but did not actually do so (Bedir 2021). Teaching a complicated set of sustainability competencies may, indeed, feel overwhelming (Kubanyiova and Feryok 2015), because it requires new skills from the teacher, commitment, and the willingness to act (Giddens 1984; Manuele 2015). Therefore, the development of language teachers' own sustainability competencies, especially those that advance positive transformations for a sustainable life, is essential and enables the integration of ESD in language lessons from the discipline's viewpoint. Student-activating, interactive and transformative activities have been found to contribute to ESD (Brundiars et al. 2010) and these have been applied to language teaching in the US (de la Fuente 2021), for example through project-based learning (Ferry 2021) and CLIL teaching that combines content and language learning (Jodoin 2020; Barbas-Rhoden 2021).

Maijala et al. (2024) developed a framework of transformative language teaching for sustainability and highlighted several pedagogical methods mentioned in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2018) that are compatible with ESD aims and principles, and this framework and theoretical viewpoints and practical approaches to transformative language teaching for sustainability have been further explored in a book edited by Maijala, Kuusalu, and Ullakonoja (2025). Concrete guidelines such as frameworks and pedagogical examples help language teachers to address the challenges in integrating ESD in practice. However, intrapersonal competence, which entails self-regulatory capacities such as developing resilience and avoiding burning out while advancing the goals for sustainability, was described by Redman and Wiek (2021) as an important emerging sustainability competence. These intrapersonal aspects that affect the implementation of ESD via teacher agency have been scarcely studied and the research lacks the perspective of language educators. This study includes an investigation of intrapersonal factors contributing to language teachers' capacity to implement ESD.

Due to its interdisciplinarity and wide range in the educational field, teacher agency has been extensively studied especially in the western societies (see e.g. Godley et al. 2019), and it is also considered valuable in promoting anti-oppressive education and bringing forth more versatile viewpoints, such as the non-western or Global South perspectives (Miller et al. 2018). Our study follows the view offered by Priestley and others (2019), which highlights the importance of beliefs in shaping teacher agency and offers a conceptual model that emphasises the temporal and

relational dimensions in achieving agency. The impact of learning interventions on language teacher agency relating to sustainability education was examined in two case studies in higher education settings by Kalsoom and Khanan (2017) and Kalsoom and Qureshi (2021). The conclusion of these studies was that inquiry-based methods can be used successfully for integrating sustainability education, they have the potential to change student teachers' attitudes and behavior, but that courses focusing on ESD would be needed in teacher education to strengthen the agency of teacher educators in these matters. Tao and Gao (2017) raise two factors that seem to have the greatest effects on promoting language teacher agency: building teacher communities that support agency and developing the critical and reflective thinking of language teachers. When considering this from the ESD viewpoint, language teacher communities consisting of like-minded individuals could help to overcome possible resistance encountered among co-workers and provide a stronger sense of meaningfulness, while self-reflection could direct the teacher to see past the prevailing, historical language teaching traditions and re-evaluate their values on sustainability in language education. We approach these aspects in this study by considering how language teachers position themselves in their working community and how they perceive their agency, and how this affects their capacity to integrate ESD.

Teachers' personal skills, values, attitudes, interests, priorities, and other personal factors are very likely to affect the level of ESD they are willing to or capable of integrating (e.g., Yılmaz Fındık et al. 2021; Kwee 2021). Teachers have reported several barriers and obstacles to teaching sustainability, including a lack of teaching materials, training, and knowledge about the practical implementation of ESD (e.g., Waltner et al. 2020). Language teachers may also leave ESD out of their lessons because they think it is exclusively related to environmental issues (cf. Sinakou et al. 2019; Berglund and Gericke 2016). Language teachers may not be able to identify the link between their own subject matter and sustainability (Yılmaz Fındık et al. 2021). Based also on prior studies on ESD in language education (e.g., Majjala et al. 2023, 2024), one should also take into consideration the social and cultural dimensions of sustainability when considering language teacher agency in ESD instead of focusing on the ecological dimension. This is because social and cultural topics often take priority in language education (e.g., Borg et al. 2012; Gunina et al. 2021; Kuusalu et al. 2024) but are not always considered as part of ESD even by the teachers, and acknowledging their involvement might give teachers a stronger sense of agency in promoting sustainability through their work.

Studies have shown that many language teachers feel that they do not have a strong ownership of sustainability education or that they lack the knowledge base to teach it (e.g., Borg et al. 2012), which seems to hinder its implementation, and institutional support has proven vital in implementing ESD (Kalsoom and Khanam 2017). The conclusion of study by Kwee (2021) among 10 English teachers in Hong

Kong was that teachers' personal beliefs, attainment of teaching goals and school support influenced positively their self-efficacy and motivation to integrate sustainable development goals in their teaching. Emotions and affect behind teacher agency have received far less attention in research than cognition and beliefs, although they are often mentioned to be likely to contribute to teacher agency (Zemblyas 2006). According to Benesch (2018), emotions can be a powerful tool to enable teacher agency, because they can, e.g., serve as indicators for conditions that need to be changed and prompt teachers to act toward meaningful transformations. Therefore, as teachers' personal feelings and experiences about their capabilities to integrate ESD are likely to affect their actualised agency in the matter, this study focuses on studying the factors influencing teachers' perception of agency and their experiences of integrating ESD into language lessons. The following research questions were assigned:

1. How do language teachers perceive their agency in ESD?
2. How do language teachers use their agency to integrate ESD in their classes?
3. What factors affect language teachers' perception of agency in ESD?

## 3 Materials and methods

### 3.1 Context of the study

There were several causal prerequisites for language teacher agency in ESD that could be determined prior to the content analysis of the interviews. In the background, there is the global AGENDA 2030 call (UNESCO 2018) to advance sustainability goals through ESD. How and how much ESD is integrated into language lessons is dependent on many factors on several hierarchical levels (personal, classroom/study group, school culture, school management, material producers, the national curriculum), which can all play their part (Kwee 2021). Firstly, Finnish national curricula (Finnish National Agency of Education 2016, 2020) include many parts, where sustainable development and environmentally friendly conduct are mentioned and these serve as a binding guideline to the teachers, who are civil servants in the Finnish education system. The national curricula also affect the content of textbooks produced for the schools. In addition, the higher officials such as headmasters, and teacher communities have a significant role in what practices are supported at the educational institutions (Biesta et al. 2015; Tao and Gao 2017). The learners are a variable group, and their attitudes and interests may also affect teachers' possibilities and success in ESD (Tsui 2009; Farrell 2013).

## 3.2 Participants of the study

The participants represented a group of teachers with variable backgrounds and teaching environments and were chosen to examine their perception of agency and to find possible common denominators. The participants of this study were six language teachers of various ages between 25 and 65 years from different regions of western and southern Finland. There were four English as a foreign language teachers, one Swedish and one French teacher among the participants. They all had more than ten years of teaching experience and were interested in environmental issues and had integrated some form of environmental education / ESD in their lessons or had been part of a team working toward sustainability goals in language education. Three participants were higher education teachers, and one teacher each was teaching in primary, lower secondary and upper secondary schools. All teachers shared a common will to promote sustainability and were chosen to represent language teachers, who are positive toward ESD and active in its integration in their lessons or working communities. Consent to participate in the study and data processing according to GDPR was given in written form by all participants in a background questionnaire. Results are reported anonymously and all personal data as well as data that could identify individual participants by their hometown, school or other personal information have been erased from the transcripts.

Because of significant differences in the available resources between different language subjects, including materials and time allocation within curricula, and because of the within-subject differences based on geographical location and the language levels taught by the teachers, this study focuses on similarities common to all the interviewed teachers despite their language subject or location. From the acquired data, it was not possible either to deduct causalities related to agency in ESD based on language subjects.

## 3.3 Data collection and analysis

Participants for the interviews were approached by the researchers via email and asked to participate in a study on sustainability content in language teaching. Data were gathered with individual interviews, where one or two researchers asked questions based on a pre-planned script (see Appendix 1). The interviews were conducted between May 2022 and January 2023. The main questions were asked from all participants, but the script allowed for additional topics and questions. The participants received the questions prior to the interview and thus, had time to consider them in advance. The interviews were conducted via an online platform in a secure university account with a video connection. The language used in the inter-

views was Finnish, and the analysis was made using the original language, but the examples highlighted in this article were translated into English by the first author. In the translations, speaking styles and features of spoken language, such as connector words, were chosen such that they would resemble the conventions of the target language. However, the audio files were transcribed without marking e.g., pauses, tone or intonation, because the analysis focused on content of the text rather than elements of discourse (Ruusuvaori and Nikander 2017). The interviews served two main purposes: acquiring data for content analysis studies and gathering ideas for developing pedagogical ESD tools for language teachers. In this study, the content of the interviews was analysed based on a modified inductive paradigm model (Corbin and Strauss 1990, Luomanen 2010), where data are first categorised and coded longitudinally before a more profound analysis.

The core focus in the model was assigned as agency in ESD including all environmental and sustainability-oriented activities. The phenomenon under investigation was defined as *language teachers as educators of sustainable development*, and causal prerequisites of ESD were determined for agency in ESD (Table 1). Data were then categorised based on three factors: the features of ESD in language teaching, teachers' operational strategies in ESD, and factors affecting the perception of agency in ESD. Under these factors, data were coded into further subcategories at two levels (see Table 2). NVivo software (Jackson and Bazeley 2013) was used to organise data and visualise the results during the analysis. The participants were identified with identification numbers ID 1 – ID 6. This study is a small-scale investigation into some of the factors that influence language teachers' perception of agency, and due to the limited number of participants and a localised context, it can only reflect a part of this phenomenon. Alternative research methods could reveal other interesting aspects of teacher agency regarding ESD and complement the results of this study.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Prerequisites for agency in ESD

Prerequisites for agency were examined in the interview data to provide answers for the first research question asking how language teachers perceive their agency in ESD. These aspects were analysed to be factors the teachers felt were enabling their ESD agency. There were three aspects that all teachers mentioned as important in being able to integrate ESD in their lessons: continuous education, solving practical matters and establishing some pedagogical baselines, namely having credibility, and using action oriented, subject based approaches and systems thinking

(see Table 1). The need for teacher education in ESD was pointed out by 3/6 teachers and the importance of having enough knowledge about sustainable development was also mentioned by 3/6 teachers. All but one teacher considered supporting factors to play a critical role in their ability to integrate ESD: One teacher highlighted learner ownership (cf. Tsui 2009; Farrell 2023) as an important way to get learners activated and invested in the topics of ESD, 5/6 teachers considered the meaningfulness of the teaching to themselves or to the learners to increase the successful integration of ESD, and 4/6 teachers felt that the teacher's interest in ESD was essential as both the driver for integrating ESD and for students to take it seriously, see (1):

- (1) *[...] so the teacher should change their role such that they would be the ones who get excited and who believe in the cause [...]*  
(ID 4)

Extra work needed for integrating ESD was highlighted, as teachers expressed their concern about the work (5/6) and time (3/6) needed for planning and learning about ESD, often on top of what was considered the normal working hours. One teacher described their efforts in making a creative assignment for learners, see (2):

- (2) *I did it really the whole weekend such that I was running through different places and tried to search for everything, like, what [materials] one could use for it.*  
(ID 3, explanation in brackets added by the authors)

Many of the teachers (4/6) thought that the values and topics related to ESD come mainly from the Finnish national curricula, from where they transfer into teaching materials and institutional strategies in the form of their environmentally friendly principles of conduct. Involving the parents (1/6) and other teachers' attitudes (1/6) were also mentioned as aspects affecting the successful integration of ESD.

## 4.2 Features of education for sustainable development in language teaching

Features of ESD were examined to address further the question of how language teachers perceive their agency in ESD. The question was approached in more detail by looking at both positive and negative experiences and their contexts from the interviews (see Table 2: a). All teachers brought up both types of experiences, but there were considerably more mentions of the negative (69 times) than positive (22 times) ones. Some teachers (3/6) considered the overall positiveness of ESD teaching an important factor influencing its outcome and concluded that approaching difficult issues through the joy of discovery or positive influencing is the way learners should be activated. There were also teachers (3/6) who felt inspired and excited,

when they could combine language teaching and ESD, for example by using innovative methods, see (3):

- (3) *I got so excited, when this colleague of mine showed it [a new teaching method] that I went, like, through the roof.*

(ID 3, explanation in brackets added by the authors)

Some of the teachers (2/6) also felt they were vanguards in ESD, experienced solidarity with the learners, and some considered the topics and ESD to be natural parts of education.

There were ten different categories of negative experiences that could be detected from the interviews. The teachers were quite unanimous (5/6) in naming insecurity in teaching ESD topics and the problem of having these topics taught as separate issues to be causing negative feelings around the integration of ESD, see (4):

- (4) *[...] how trustworthy this information is, this data, and can I, like, trust that this here is a system that has been thoroughly considered [...]*

(ID 1)

More than half of the teachers (4/5) expressed negative feelings toward outdated materials and the time needed to integrate ESD. They felt that they were alone against other teachers, the learners, and even the management. They had also experienced negativity toward external projects that change from one year to the next, and oftentimes the negativity emerged from the attitudes and opinions of other teachers, see (5):

- (5) *[...] some say that this global warming doesn't, like, happen, that it is bogus. There are people among teachers as well, who can think like this, or that there are conspiracy theories or whatever. One goes into like really difficult areas in people's lives with this [ESD].*

(ID 4)

Other experiences of negativity were linked to the discouraging views of other teachers in the community, the lack of time to be allocated into ESD, frustration due to the inability to act, age-related differences in the worldviews and practices of teachers, and anger or even sadness due to the contrast between the need of ESD and the actions that are possible for the teacher.

### 4.3 Teachers' operational strategies in education for sustainable development

Teachers' operational strategies were studied to answer the second research question on how language teachers enact agency to integrate ESD in their classes. Opera-

tional strategies show how the teachers were using their agency in practice. The operational strategies the teachers used could be divided into pedagogical devices and strategies, which enhanced either coping with the workload or increased the overall well-being of the teachers (see Table 2: b). All teachers mentioned implementing existing pedagogical tools for ESD in an innovative way. The tools mentioned included peer assessment, reflections, collaborative learning, critical linguistics, problem-oriented approaches, designing of infographs, group assignments, and even combining music and language learning via writing rap lyrics. One teacher used critical content analysis methods with the learners for outdated materials in textbooks, and together they exposed the stereotypes embedded in them and contacted the publisher as a transformative action, see (6):

- (6) *[...] the task was to search for harmful stereotypes that could be found from that chapter – so now there was no covert indoctrination, meaning that the textbooks would somehow enhance such harmful stereotypes, like, as if it would be kind of given by the authority status of the school. Thus, then we wrote a letter, which we sent to the publisher.*  
(ID 3)

Materials were considered a valuable tool in ESD by 5/6 of the teachers and especially textbooks were used, and free internet-based materials were implemented and modified. Some teachers made all their materials themselves and used applications and video materials that were freely available online.

Involving learners and enhancing their participation was mentioned by 4/6 teachers. This included exploratory tasks, learners' freedom of choice both in the topics and the form of reporting, learner activism, exercises in creative thinking, and connecting the tasks into the world outside the school environment. One teacher explained using this type of increased learner autonomy and learner-centred teaching in the following way, see (7):

- (7) *Well, I think that by doing it by oneself, that they [students] can dive into something and present their findings, that, I think, is the best [way of learning].*  
(ID 5, explanation in brackets added by the authors)

Three teachers considered leading the way with one's actions as a good strategic tool for implementing the principles of ESD, and pointed out the importance of concrete actions to support the message of equity and equality embedded in ESD, see (8) and (9):

- (8) *At the level of, like, everyday conversation, and the same goes for environmental issues, that if there are recycling bins at the work community and I see that someone has done it wrong, I do go and try to fix it and also voice it out, that hey, actually these should go into the bio waste bin, and the like.*  
(ID 6)

- (9) [...] *if everyone around you is just that “You will become a bus driver at best”, then you won’t aspire to become a medical doctor. That the environment affects that [aspiration].*  
(ID 1, explanation in brackets added by the authors)

Other strategies that were linked to pedagogical devices were using topics for ESD spontaneously as they emerge during lessons and integrating the topics of ESD into other subjects and the lives of the learners.

Strategies involving coping at work encompassed continuous teacher education, such as lectures, workshops and seminars (6/6), getting organised through projects, teacher groups, and unions (3/6), and collaborating with other teachers of the same or different subjects from other schools and countries (5/6). Overall, the teachers considered it important for their capabilities to integrate ESD that they have supportive groups and like-minded people around to plan, work and reflect with. The ideal situation was described by one of the teachers as such, where the learners themselves could collaborate with others, see (10):

- (10) [...] *they made like these energy solutions in collaboration with some foreign super expert. So, the ecological things also integrate such that we, like, collaborate to make the content, two subjects effectively together.*  
(ID 3)

#### 4.4 Factors influencing the perception of agency in education for sustainable development

To examine research question three, both supporting (9 topics) and discouraging (4 topics) factors influencing their perception of agency in ESD were identified in language teachers’ interviews (see Table 2: c). Teacher collaboration, involvement of the school or other institution, the possibility to influence the learners, and active learner participation were the most frequent topics in the category of supporting factors (4/6 teachers mentioned these topics). Four of the teachers were contemplating on the different ways they could promote sustainable choices in the language class. One of the teachers described their aspiration to influence how pre-service language teachers view their position in the following way, see (11):

- (11) *What I taught was more like a type of empowerment, and that people would become aware of for example how to listen to others, who have totally different viewpoints to the same issue.*  
(ID 4)

When elaborating on the ways they were influencing the students, the teachers were mentioning trying to increase their students’ awareness of sustainability and

their possibilities of action, for example by promoting responsible consumer behaviour, see (12), and voting, see (13):

(12) *I would add, that in the same context we also go through the student's own everyday life, such that how environmental knowledge is visible there, meaning if they recycle and how they buy products, clothes, do they consider responsibility then. And how do they commute? How do they eat, travel and and ... exactly this reflecting together, such that there's no judging.*

(ID 5)

(13) *Yes, of course I'm also telling them that, that save the planet and now, when the elections are approaching, so of course I say to them that they should vote, for goodness's sake, vote. In that way I've been trying to make an impact, that, that try to at least vote for someone, who would give money to education, that, that I feel, that it is inherently so, that education also, like, works toward improving sustainable development.*

(ID 6)

Half of the teachers felt that being able to act in a concrete manner toward sustainability and to contribute to the development of teaching materials affected positively how they perceived the integration of ESD. Tangible actions mentioned by the teachers included ways of making concrete changes in the school buildings to lower energy consumption, recycling of materials and waste, planning of school-provided meals toward increased use of vegetables and plant-based products, decreasing biowaste by using scales, educational campaigns, theme events, and innovative student-led activism projects. Activism was considered by two of the teachers to be a very important part of inspiring the students and enabling their action competence.

Enabling learners to participate was considered by four of the teachers to be a highly important part of ESD, and they gave examples of some of the ways in which they had succeeded in involving their students: some students had planned an advertisement to a sustainability theme event, others had participated in making multilingual story books in small groups using their home languages, and others had acted as teachers of sustainability for other students. Teacher collaboration was highlighted to be helpful especially between teachers of different subjects, but also among other language teachers, and the most active teachers had organised collaborative study groups and meetings, where all teachers could share their ideas and knowledge in matters related to sustainability.

One aspect considered to be vital by four teachers in making change possible was the involvement of the institution and its leaders, starting from the policy level: They described how sustainability should start from within, and how all actions should be targeted to the whole school community, including educators, administrators, learners, and other staff, see (14):

- (14) [...] *it [sustainability] is visible in all the activities. That there's recycling, and it's in the strategy, and we even fought to get bicycle parks back, as they were planning on reducing the space for bicycle parking, which was maybe a bit against the strategy, so yes [...]*  
(ID 5, explanation in brackets added by the authors)

On the other hand, there were several discouraging factors that hindered the teachers in implementing ESD, including lack of training, fear of change in others, such as teachers, co-workers, and employers, as well as difficulty to motivate the learners (2/6 teachers mentioned these topics). One teacher summarised their experience with some co-workers in the following way, see (15):

- (15) *Resistance to change. So, people were worried, rather, of the possibility that life changes, that their life changes.*  
(ID 2)

## 5 Discussion

This study addressed interpersonal aspects of teacher agency by investigating factors in how language teachers from various backgrounds perceived their agency when integrating ESD in their classes. The perception of agency during the efforts to integrate ESD into language lessons or in the practices at an institutional level naturally had many parallels to the factors that were determined as prerequisites of agency in ESD, as prerequisites were aspects the teachers felt were enabling their ESD agency. For example, the influence of the Finnish national curricula, and textbooks created based on these guiding documents, was shown in the emphasis the teachers placed on the materials and exercises included in textbooks in helping them integrate ESD in language classes. However, some language teachers reported using considerable time making suitable materials, because their textbooks were not incorporating ESD, which might indicate differences in material development needs between the language subjects.

Language teachers' perception of their agency suggested possible bottlenecks that could hinder the widespread integration of ESD in language education, such as lack of understanding among fellow colleagues or the institution, insufficient schooling on how to integrate ESD, and challenges in allocating enough time to plan the integration. As previous studies suggest (Kwee 2021; Waltner et al. 2020; Yilmaz Findik et al. 2021), many language teachers such as the interviewees of this study, might be more willing to integrate ESD into their lessons, would they have the support to do it. The operational strategies revealed practical ways how language teachers used their agency to integrate ESD and how they managed difficulties, which

reflected the importance of a supportive network of people including coworkers, employers, collaborators, family members and friends, to mention a few. This result is in line with the findings of Tao and Gao (2017), who concluded that supportive teacher communities are effective in enhancing agency, and the key to teacher agency appears to rely heavily on the active participation of teachers, schools and other institutions, and the learners themselves (similarly Kwee 2021). By supporting ESD in language classes through curricular guidance, institutional enhancement, and material development, and by enabling learners to participate rather than being passive receivers, language teacher agency could be promoted, which would further enhance the integration of ESD.

Negative experiences in integrating ESD were mentioned three times more often than positive experiences during the interviews. Some teachers felt that the negativity arose from their insecurity in teaching some ESD topics (Borg et al. 2012; Reisinger et al. 2021) and the fact that the topics were brought into language teaching as separate issues taken out of the context of their teaching. Functional, inspiring materials were highlighted in the results as good motivators for the integration of ESD that made the teachers feel inspired and excited (Waltner et al. 2020): Some teachers even produced their ESD materials themselves. The teachers felt that the best teaching materials for ESD were learner-centred and action oriented, which is in line with the UN recommendations of ESD (UNESCO 2021) and supports the suggested pedagogical practices of transformative language teaching for sustainability (Maijala et al. 2024). However, the teachers also stated that the available materials were often outdated, and it took too much time for them to produce new materials. These results indicated that some of the language teachers found it difficult to integrate ESD (Kwee 2021; Tao and Gao 2017). Would that reflect the overall experience of language teachers, facilitating the integration process by producing ESD-compatible materials and increasing schooling and time allocation for ESD planning in language teaching would be needed.

Our findings indicate that language teachers in this study considered having agency in ESD especially when they received support from their coworkers, sufficient institutional and governmental guidance, were able to choose and develop ESD teaching materials to fit their language subject and the proficiency level of their students, and when their students participated and were proactive. Promoting ESD included very tangible actions, such as being part of the sustainability transformation at the whole school level, and many of the ways in which the teachers were enacting their agency in ESD, such as promoting voting and activism, related more to the social and cultural aspects of sustainability. This observation supports earlier research concluding that holistic approaches of ESD, which include social and cultural sustainability among the ecological dimension, would be particularly suitable for language teaching (Gunina et al. 2021; Kuusalu et al. 2024, Maijala et al. 2025).

Experiencing negative attitudes, confrontations, or belittling of the teacher's efforts to integrate sustainability lessened their agency by making them highlight the challenges and problems and position themselves in the opposition against others. This is in line with a study by Baer (2024), who found that negative affect often arose when teachers experienced, that they were unable to enact their agency due to factors relating to their position or to institutional constraints. Contrastingly, as also indicated by Baer, teachers in our study who had a wide collaborator network, received support from the school or institution, or whose students were proactive in promoting sustainability, felt able to integrate ESD in their teaching and mentioned innovative practical solutions for possible challenges. These teachers also frequently referred to positive aspects of ESD and had a hopeful attitude toward the future of ESD.

In the light of these results, negative experiences during the integration of ESD and lack of support from colleagues and the rest of the working community may result in the teachers' lowered capability of enacting agency and consequently, increased work strain and lack of motivation toward ESD. It seems that the most beneficial action to support ESD in language education would be to enhance its integration from the top down, or rather, from within, meaning a substantial increase in curricular and institutional guidance and support. If the entire school or institution, including the language departments, is founded on supporting the principles of sustainability and its strategy includes ESD, teachers have a better chance of succeeding in their efforts to integrate ESD. Institutional support also facilitates the development of support networks and teacher collaboration. Another valuable supporting factor is up-to-date teaching materials that enable teachers to engage the learners with action-oriented and participatory teaching methods. This, in exchange, seems to make teachers perceive their agency in ESD more positively, which further supports their positiveness toward ESD and enhances their capacity to integrate it.

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**Table 1:** Causal prerequisites of agency in education for sustainable development (ESD).

<b>Prerequisites for agency in ESD</b>
1. Continuous education (6/6)
2. Solving practical matters (6/6)
3. Established pedagogical methods and materials (6/6)
4. Supporting factors (5/6)
5. Curricular guidance (4/6)
6. Extra work effort (4/6)
7. Time allocated to ESD (3/6)
8. Parental involvement (1/6)
9. Change in fellow teachers' attitudes (1/6)

**Table 2:** Main coding categories (a-c) and their respective subcategories in the analysis of language teacher interviews. Numbers in the table depict the number of teachers who reflected the topic at least once.

<b>a) Features of ESD in language teaching</b>			<b>b) Teachers' operational strategies in ESD</b>			<b>c) Factors influencing teachers' perception of agency in ESD</b>					
<i>Negative experiences</i>	<i>Positive experiences</i>		<i>Coping strategies</i>	<i>Pedagogical strategies</i>		<i>Discouraging factors</i>	<i>Supporting factors</i>				
Insecurity of one's competence	5	Becoming inspired	3	Training	6	Applying pedagogical tools	6	Lack of training	2	Teacher collaboration	4
Disconnected themes	5	Feeling positive	3	Collaborating	5	Using learning materials	5	Fear of change in others	2	Involvement of the school / institution	4
Negative attitudes	4	Naturalness of sustainability	2	Getting organised	3	Using engaging activities	4	Difficulty to motivate learners	2	Active learner participation	4
Outdated materials	4	Being a vanguard	2			Leading by example	3	Influence of learners' home environment	1	Possibility to influence learners	4
Polarisation of attitudes	4	Solidarity with learners	2			Being spontaneous	2			Possibility of material development	3

Table 2: (continued)

a) Features of ESD in language teaching		b) Teachers' operational strategies in ESD		c) Factors influencing teachers' perception of agency in ESD					
<i>Negative experiences</i>	<i>Positive experiences</i>	<i>Coping strategies</i>	<i>Pedagogical strategies</i>	<i>Discouraging factors</i>	<i>Supporting factors</i>				
Need of extra time	4	Feeling successful	1		Integrating sustainability themes	1	Discouraging factors	Tangible actions	3
Feeling frustrated	3							Practical teaching materials	2
Generational differences	3							Support network	2
Feeling frustrated	3							Research possibilities at work	1
Feeling sad	1							Experience	1

**Supplementary Material:** This article contains supplementary material (<https://doi.org/10.1515/eujal-2024-0022>).