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# Promoting sustainability in European language teaching

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**Abstract:** Sustainability has become a topical issue in many disciplines and increasingly also concerns language education and research, but the role of sustainability remains understudied in the field of language teaching. Consequently, language education could concentrate more on education for sustainable development (ESD) as it is considered crucial in reaching the sustainable development goals of Agenda 2030. Language education has immense potential to promote ESD because it deals with a wide range of cultural and societal themes and uses interactive teaching methods that contribute to democratic goals. Various language teaching methods are related to the components of the action-oriented ESD framework. Therefore, there are several features in language teaching that are already consistent with the principles of ESD. The Special Issue “Global goals for sustainability in European language teaching” aims to widen the perspectives around ESD in relation to language teaching, about its practical implementations in different countries and educational systems and open a discussion concerning what aspects in European and global language teaching could be promoted and further developed to support both the global sustainability goals and the future demands of language education. In this introduction, we discuss the principles of sustainability and ESD and the necessity of their implementation in foreign language education and elaborate on the gaps in understanding and implementation of sustainability in language teaching. Finally, we summarise the main points in each article of this Special Issue.

**Zusammenfassung:** Nachhaltigkeit ist in vielen Disziplinen zu einem aktuellen Thema geworden und betrifft somit zunehmend auch den Sprachunterricht und dessen Erforschung. Dennoch ist die Rolle der Nachhaltigkeit im Kontext des Sprachunterrichts bislang nur unzureichend untersucht. Folglich könnte sich der

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Sprachunterricht stärker auf Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung (BNE) konzentrieren, da diese als entscheidend für die Erreichung der Ziele für nachhaltige Entwicklung der Agenda 2030 angesehen wird. Sprachunterricht hat ein großes Potenzial zur Förderung von BNE, da er sich mit einer Vielzahl kultureller und gesellschaftlicher Themen befasst und seine interaktiven Unterrichtsmethoden zu demokratischen Zielen beitragen. Verschiedene Arbeitsweisen des Sprachunterrichts beziehen sich auf die Komponenten des handlungsorientierten BNE-Rahmens. Mehrere Merkmale des Sprachunterrichts sind bereits mit den Prinzipien der BNE vereinbar. Das vorliegende Themenheft „Global goals for sustainability in European language teaching“ zielt darauf ab, die Perspektiven rund um BNE in Bezug auf den Sprachunterricht zu erweitern, ihre praktische Umsetzung in verschiedenen Ländern und Bildungssystemen zu erläutern und eine Diskussion darüber zu eröffnen, welche Aspekte des europäischen und globalen Sprachunterrichts gefördert und weiterentwickelt werden könnten, um sowohl die globalen Nachhaltigkeitsziele zu erreichen als auch den zukünftigen Anforderungen des Sprachunterrichts zu entsprechen. In dieser Einführung zum Themenheft werden die Prinzipien von Nachhaltigkeit und BNE und die Notwendigkeit ihrer Umsetzung im Fremdsprachenunterricht diskutiert. Abschließend werden die wichtigsten Punkte in jedem Artikel dieser Sonderausgabe zusammengefasst.

**Resumen:** La sostenibilidad es un tema actual en muchas disciplinas y, cada vez más, también afecta a la enseñanza y la investigación de idiomas, pero el papel de la sostenibilidad se estudia poco en la enseñanza de idiomas. En consecuencia, la enseñanza de idiomas podría centrarse más en la Educación para el Desarrollo Sostenible (EDS), ya que se considera crucial para alcanzar los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible de la Agenda 2030. La enseñanza de idiomas tiene un gran potencial para promover la EDS, ya que aborda una amplia gama de temas culturales y sociales y utiliza métodos de aprendizaje interactivo que contribuyen a alcanzar los objetivos democráticos. Varios métodos de enseñanza de idiomas están relacionados con los componentes del marco de EDS orientado a la acción. Por lo tanto, hay varias características en la enseñanza de idiomas que ya son coherentes con los principios de la EDS. El número especial sobre “Global goals for sustainability in European language teaching“ tiene como objetivo ampliar las perspectivas en torno a la EDS en relación con la enseñanza de idiomas, sobre sus aplicaciones prácticas en diferentes países y sistemas educativos, y abrir un debate sobre qué aspectos de la enseñanza de idiomas en Europa y a escala global podrían promoverse y desarrollarse para apoyar tanto los objetivos mundiales de sostenibilidad como los requerimientos futuros de la enseñanza de idiomas. En esta introducción, discutimos los principios de sostenibilidad y la EDS y la necesidad de su implementación en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, y profundizamos en las brechas en la comprensión e imple-

mentación de la sostenibilidad en la enseñanza de idiomas. Por último, resumimos los puntos principales de cada artículo de este Número Especial.

## 1 Introduction

Education for sustainable development (ESD) is an approach developed and promoted by UNESCO (2018, and 2020) as the leading tool for achieving the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) set by United Nations (2015) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The main goal of ESD is “to build a more just and sustainable world” and by year 2030, reach specifically SDG Target 4.7:

ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development. UNESCO (2020, p. 14)

Transformative action, structural changes in societies, and technological advances are the key reflections that are highlighted in the roadmap for ESD implementation, and emphasis is put on the role of educational institutions and educators to provide learners with opportunities to acquire all the knowledge and skills they need for achieving the 17 SDGs and to be able to participate in societal transformation for a sustainable future (UNESCO 2020). This would require, among other actions, policy changes to educational systems, transforming the learning environments to support change agency, a whole-institution approach to sustainability, and improving the ESD capacities of educators (UNESCO 2020).

Language education has tremendous untapped potential to implement ESD because the pedagogical processes of contemporary language teaching and transformation-oriented ESD are commensurate with one another. The integration of ESD into language teaching has been recently acknowledged by research (e.g., Melin 2019; Goulah and Katunich 2020; de la Fuente 2021; Maijala et al. 2023, 2024, and 2025; Kuusalu et al. 2024), but not capitalised, highlighting the need for further, especially empirical, research to explore how this potential can be effectively implemented in practice. Although studies have shown that ESD has a positive effect on students’ action competence for sustainability (e.g., Olsson et al. 2022), there is still limited research on the connection between how language courses promote ESD and how language teaching affects students’ sustainability competences (Gordon et al. 2023; Micalay-Hurtado and Poole 2022; Rafiee Moghadam et al. 2022). During the last decade, more attention has been paid to sustainability in the field of applied linguistics and recently this has become visible also in the topics of confer-

ence symposia, such as the symposium ‘Sustainability in language teaching’ organised by the editors of this Special Issue in the AILA 2023 World Conference of Applied Linguistics. Subsequently, sustainability was highlighted in the theme of AILA 2024 World Conference, where linguistic diversity, equity, inclusion, and sustainability were the key topics of the symposia. The theme of the AILA 2024 symposium held by the editors, was the implementation of sustainability and the principles of sustainable development in language teaching and learning. The focus was on the possibilities and challenges related to the implementation of ESD in language learning contexts worldwide.

In language education, it is vital to understand ESD-related attitudes and views of learners and teachers, and to assess their educational needs to be able to promote the achievement of SDGs. In response to global challenges and the call for action outlined in Agenda 2030, ESD has been increasingly integrated into curricula at all educational levels (e.g., Sund and Gericke 2020). As is the case at all levels of education, language education also has a responsibility to promote ESD. Integration of ESD into language education is motivated in part by increasing multilingualism and multiculturalism worldwide. As a holistic educational approach advancing the SDGs, ESD involves action-orientated and learner-centred teaching methods, student leadership, and interaction with peers and communities (Sinakou et al. 2019). The contribution of language teaching to the implementation of ESD is, particularly, to enhance learners’ abilities to understand and tolerate linguistic and cultural diversity, and to mediate between cultures (Council of Europe 2018, 2020). Moreover, language teaching can include environmental and social sustainability issues that support and deepen related topics taught in other subjects. In a world facing challenges, the importance of languages and cultures has become even greater. If the aim of sustainable development is to leave this planet in a condition that future generations can live on, we cannot afford *not* to implement ESD in language teaching.

In this article, we discuss the role of sustainability in European language teaching and globally in the teaching of languages spoken in Europe, the themes of this Special Issue. First, the principles of sustainability and ESD are presented and the necessity of their implementation in foreign language education discussed. Second, the understanding of sustainability and the implementation of ESD in foreign language education are elaborated on. Finally, each article and their contribution to the Special Issue are shortly introduced.

## 2 Principles of sustainability and education for sustainable development

Sustainability as a policy concept can be traced down to the United Nations (UN) World Commission report on Environment and Development, also known as the Brundtland report (WCED 1987). The document gained much attention as it proposed a new reasoning for conserving natural resources: instead of highlighting the intrinsic value of nature itself, the report suggested that we need to consider future generations and their ability to continue using the same resources. This argument was later used by the UN to define a new term, sustainable development. Sustainable development goals were determined by the UN, and they are the core of Agenda 2030 action plan across its member countries (UNESCO 2018, 2020). The concept of sustainability has since gained multiple interpretations, such as the recognition of its dimensions: social (often including cultural), economic, and environmental, which all underscore different viewpoints (Strange and Bailey 2009).

ESD was launched by UNESCO (2018) as the main tool for achieving societal changes toward a more sustainable future at a global level, and its framework is used by universities around the world as a guideline for integrating sustainability in their curricula and pedagogical practices. Concerns have been raised toward the two main approaches of educating about sustainability as they both are problematic when used separately: the environmentalist approach relies on a strong action policy imposed from above, and the democratic approach relies on developing sustainability competencies of learners which increase their ability to make informed decisions in future societies (e.g., Bonnett, 2002). The UNESCO (2018, 2020) recommendations for ESD imply a solution for this by suggesting that governmental policies be accompanied with a holistic pedagogy which not only focuses on cognitive knowledge but also engages students with action-oriented, transformative teaching methods at both social and emotional levels. Thus, ESD can be taught as transversal competencies across all subjects (Bertel et al. 2021; EDUFI 2019) and as such, has been included in the curricula in many UN member countries.

The principles of ESD stem from the same idea as in all environmental education approaches in history: developing an understanding of how humans affect the surrounding nature that they simultaneously depend on and are affected by. Underneath the surface of describing environmental phenomena and raising awareness of the negative effects of human actions, there lies a deeper goal of making people take responsibility through concrete actions. Research has shown that to make an impact at the societal level, it is not enough to have environmental issues visible in lessons solely as content teaching and instead, transformative learning (e.g., Mezir-ow 2009) should be enabled. Consequently, multiple frameworks have been sug-

gested to develop approaches of ESD that are more transformative and have a higher potential to influence learners' actions in society (e.g., Vare and Scott 2007; Sina-kou et al. 2019).

The transformative approach to language teaching is characterised by learner-centredness, whereby learners become active participants in their language learning process, with the teacher acting as a facilitator, guiding the development of language skills. Transformative activities in language classrooms include those that promote the ability to use language, such as role plays, or other real-life activities (Leaver et al. 2021). Although environmental aspects are being increasingly introduced in national curriculum frameworks, the inclusion of topics such as climate change and biodiversity in subjects other than biology, geography, or science is still relatively low according to a global survey conducted in 2020 (Schneegans et al. 2021). This leads to an assumption that globally, this underlying and even more pressing aim of catalysing transformative action has still a long way to go before reaching its fulfilment.

### **3 Understanding of sustainability and implementation of ESD in foreign language education**

#### **3.1 Potential of language teaching in promoting ESD**

As sustainability is gradually becoming a more topical issue across disciplines, it will increasingly concern foreign language education. Kuusalu (2025) found multiple mutually supportive links between ESD and language learning in the global context of language education, for example, ESD has been shown to increase the quality of education and the meaningfulness of learning in certain local contexts by providing effective processes of learning and relating to learners' topics of interest (Lupele and Lotz-Sisitka 2014). Because a range of transferable skills are already practised in language lessons, language teaching has substantial potential for promoting ESD (de la Fuente 2021a). There are some distinctive features of language teaching that influence how ESD can be implemented within it (Majjala et al. 2024). As an example, language is both the medium and content of teaching (Hammadou and Bernhardt 1987; Halliday 1993). In language classrooms, the content is learned by the target language as medium. For instance, compared to science teachers, language teachers often use the target language as the language of instruction, which can lead to misunderstandings, since students often do not yet fully understand, what the teacher is saying (cf. Haukås et al. 2022).

Although teachers are key actors in driving societal change (Bürgener and Barth 2018; Weinberg et al. 2020), there is not much research available on how language teachers consider SDG-related issues and use ESD methods in their lessons. There are some studies available mostly in the Nordic context (Borg et al. 2012; Sund and Gericke 2020; Uitto and Saloranta 2017) about the implementation of ESD by subject teachers that include data concerning language teachers. In these studies, language teachers' ESD practices differed markedly from the practices of other subject teachers. For instance, language teachers seemed to deal with sustainability content less than other subject teachers, but they considered topics related to sociocultural dimensions, that is, cultural heritage, cultural identity, and multiculturalism. More than other subject teachers, language teachers seemed to focus on communication, procedural knowledge, and problem-solving skills; They also offered complementary media materials (Sund and Gericke 2020; Uitto and Saloranta 2017). To sum up, the strengths of language teachers in the ESD implementation seem to be their extensive use of communicative teaching methods (Korolyova et al. 2021) which enable being in close contact with their learners (Borg 2006), and their expertise in cultural sustainability (Sund and Gericke 2020; Uitto and Saloranta 2017).

In the European context, the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001, 2020) gives guidelines for the planning of curricula and textbooks, and accordingly, also for the choice of topics in language teaching (Byram 2022). The CEFR does not directly address sustainable development goals and how these should be integrated in language teaching. However, the updated CEFR companion volume (Council of Europe 2020) was completed with new descriptors for mediation and plurilingual or pluricultural competence (Piccardo et al. 2019), which are relevant skills for the achievement of SDGs and the implementation of ESD (Maijala et al. 2024). In addition, the GreenComp framework, developed by the European Commission, incorporates learning for environmental sustainability into the educational programmes through interrelated competence areas: 'embodying sustainability values', 'embracing complexity in sustainability', 'envisioning sustainable futures' and 'acting for sustainability'. The European Commission defines a sustainability competence as empowering "learners to embody sustainability values and embrace complex systems, in order to take or request action that restores and maintains ecosystem health and enhances justice, generating visions for sustainable futures" (Bianchi et al. 2022). As GreenComp is designed to support education and training programs for lifelong learning, and is written for learners of all subjects, it can be adapted in language teaching contexts at different educational levels. Student-centred activities, discussions and problem-solving tasks are shared competences in the CEFR (Council of Europe 2018b), ESD literature (Sinakou et al. 2017 and 2019; Wiek et al. 2011) and in research literature in the field of language teaching and learning (e.g., Maijala et al. 2024). Language education already deals

with a wide range of cultural and societal themes and uses interactive teaching methods that contribute to democratic goals (Barili and Byram 2021).

Several studies have shown that language teachers tend to rely on the content presented in the textbooks when designing their lessons (e.g., Tomlinson 2012). This makes the content of textbooks relevant for the ESD. The content in language textbooks often mostly focuses on linguistic and cultural aspects (e.g., Weninger and Kiss 2013). Thus, topics related to the cultural and social dimensions of sustainability are common in language textbooks (e.g., Mohammadnia and Moghadam 2019). Although sustainability content can to some extent be found in language textbooks (e.g., Lasekan et al. 2023), there is a global need to integrate SDG-related content and ESD-methods in language teaching (Micalay-Hurtado and Poole 2022). The work in language classrooms could benefit from materials that contain holistic views and action-based activities motivating students to engage actively in their daily lives to promote sustainability (Stibbe 2019; Kuusalu and Stibbe 2025).

When implementing ESD in teaching, student-activating, interactive teaching methods that promote change-agency have been found beneficial (Brundiens et al. 2011; Sinakou 2019). There are some examples of ESD teaching methods that have been applied to language teaching and proved to have potential in promoting ESD. One example from the US, based on the framework of ecolinguistics (Stibbe 2014 and 2021), is the study by Micalay-Hurtado and Poole (2022) that presented examples of eco-critical pedagogical practices integrated to Critical Language Awareness (Fairclough 2013). In their study, learners were given opportunities to critically engage with texts of environmental relevance, identify and share solutions as well as call their peers to act. They were also encouraged to engage with nature experimentally, for instance, by walking to a park or garden and then writing poetry about their experiences in nature. ESD favours teaching approaches that are learner-centred (e.g. project-based learning, task-based learning), allowing the learning process to be enriched. These methods have also been widely used in language teaching (Majjala et al. 2024).

### **3.2 Implementation of ESD in language teaching – global and European perspectives**

The number of studies on the promotion and implementation of sustainable development in language learning has increased significantly in recent years. However, this does not imply that no studies have been conducted previously. Some examples of ecological approaches in the field of applied linguistics are projects dealing with language ecology (Do Couto 2014) or ecolinguistics (Stibbe 2014). Most studies focus on the teaching of English as a second language (ESL), with a review of this topic

provided by Katunich and Goulah (2020). There is a *de facto* need for more studies on the teaching of languages other than English.

Recently, edited volumes Goulah and Katunich (2020), Melin (2019), and de la Fuente (2021) from the United States demonstrate that teaching projects related to sustainability enable students to develop links between sustainability issues and the study of languages (see Valnes Quammen and Afitska in this Special Issue). The volume by de la Fuente (2021) presents case studies from different approaches of how ESD teaching methods were adapted in higher education language teaching contexts throughout the US. Among others, Ferry (2021) shows how sustainability issues can be learned through project-based learning. Barbas-Rhoden (2021) implemented language integrated learning (CLIL) by connecting environmental humanities in an advanced Spanish course. Reisinger et al. (2021) integrated sustainability topics in language and culture tutorials among high-intermediate and advanced-level learners and speakers of French, Mandarin Chinese, and Spanish. The volume by Melin (2019) presents projects in the field of environmental humanities that integrate language teaching and environmental issues. The volume showcases, for instance, a curricular project that addresses the teaching of literature in French (Carrico 2019) and a conception of an oral communication course in Spanish on environmental and social sustainability in Latin America (de la Fuente 2019). The examples in both volumes demonstrate that sustainability-related teaching projects enable students to establish connections between sustainability topics and language studies. Moreover, students' perceptions of the relationship between sustainability and language studies were mostly positive, as their language proficiency and understanding of environmental studies improved. The edited book by Goulah and Katunich (2020) explores the biospheric sustainability, climate change, and the Anthropocene era with the focus on language and ecology specifically in teaching of English as a second and foreign language. The book provides several articles dealing with teaching English and climate change in not traditional language classroom contexts, such as English voluntarism programs in rural communities (Jakubiak and Hastings 2020) or among indigenous Amami people on the Island of Tokunoshima in Japan (Nakagawa 2020).

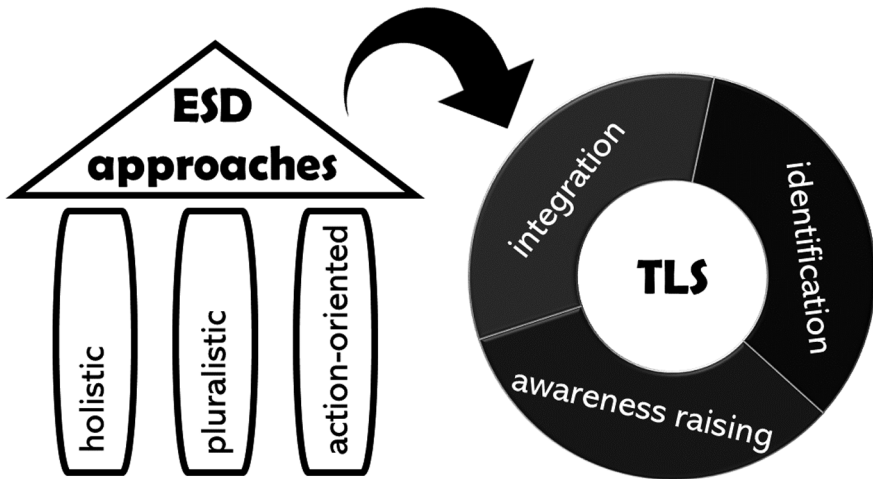
One other global example of how language learners perceive the ESD in language learning is the study by Jodoin (2020) in the Japanese context. This study examined the effectiveness of ESD teaching in English as a foreign language (EFL) in a university-level CLIL course that was run over two semesters. The first course was lecture-based and the second was a similar course that integrated best practices of teaching ESD. The aim of the case study was to see if there could be a measured significant difference between the semesters. Several datasets (student marks, surveys, and reflection tasks) were collected during the courses. The survey measured students' values, beliefs, and norms. The findings showed a meaningful change in

the ascription of responsibility and personal norms during the ESD best-practice course and displayed the positive impact of ESD teaching on student environmental values, beliefs, and norms in a language course. According to the findings of the study by Gunina and others (2021) conducted among Russian and Turkish English learners, Russian English learners considered economic growth, employment, and job opportunities as the most important content, while in Türkiye, social issues, equal educational opportunities, and the possibility of continuous learning were considered important. There seemed to be a close link between the subjects and skills taught in language teaching and the social and cultural structures of the surrounding society.

Recent studies have focused on how in-service and pre-service language teachers understand the role of ESD in language teaching and learning. Studies conducted in the North European context have shown that in- and pre-service language teachers have positive attitudes towards promoting ESD in language teaching but lack knowledge and skills related to the practical implementation thereof (Laine et al. 2023; Maijala et al. 2023). Alcántud-Díaz and Lloret-Catalá (2023) examined how SDG-based approach could be included in the English course of Spanish pre-service English teachers ( $N = 55$ ) by using inquiry-based teaching methods. One outcome of the study was that pre-service teachers saw the work with sustainability related content as a chance to work interdisciplinary by combining language learning and global issues. Moreover, they were more aware of the SDGs after the course. In Hong Kong, Kwee (2021) examined English teachers' ( $N=10$ ) describing their experiences of implementing SDGs in their teaching and the reasons why they decided to integrate it. The analysis of interview and classroom observation data revealed that teachers' personal beliefs influenced the implementation of SDGs positively and they were motivated in integrating SDGs into their teaching. Supportive school management, clear school policy, and teacher collaboration were other factors that motivated English teachers to implement SDGs in their lessons. In Türkiye, Yılmaz Fındık et al. (2020) studied pre-service English language teachers ( $N=133$ ) understanding of sustainable development. They found out that pre-service English language teachers mostly had a unidimensional view of sustainable development and firstly saw it from the point of view of economic growth of a country. The findings indicated also that pre-service English teachers were interested in receiving schooling in sustainable development, but that it would have needed to be specifically designed for language teaching needs. Another study by Bedir (2018) in the Turkish context, showed that 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 implement it in their lessons.

Theoretical work on the subject has so far been negligible. Recently, Maijala and others (2024) developed a theory-based interdisciplinary didactic model for the

implementation of transformative language teaching for sustainability (TLS) to be used in language education. The model consists of three phases: 1) identification of ESD in language teaching, 2) awareness raising towards ESD, and 3) integration of ESD in teaching practice (see Figure 1). According to the principles of contemporary ESD approaches, the model emphasises holistic content, pluralism, and action-oriented teaching. In the TLS-model, both content and method level are considered. On the content level, sustainable and global topics are central, such as environmental degradation and climate change, stressing both individual and collective responsibilities for various actions. According to the model, language teaching methods can be combined with action-oriented ESD, and more attention should be paid to sustainability content in language learning materials. On the method level, the TLS-model highlights action-oriented activities that increase learner participation and the development of skills like conflict management, decision-making, and overall action competence. In this thematic issue, the TLS-model is used as a framework for the analysis of the effectiveness of dialogue practice in English as a *lingua franca* (see Hämäläinen in this Special Issue).



**Figure 1:** Aspects of the approaches of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) integrated in the Transformative Language Teaching for Sustainability -model (TLS) and the three phases of the model: identification, awareness raising, and integration.

In conclusion, incorporating sustainable development into language teaching appears to have a beneficial effect both on the language learning process and on students' environmental awareness. The challenge for the research of practical ESD implementation is that the priorities for sustainable development vary not only according to disciplinary traditions but also according to educational and social con-

texts. At present, the results of research provide a very fragmented picture of the current state of implementation of sustainability education in European and global contexts. The studies, often focusing either on the content or the teaching methods, indicate that the role of sustainable development in language teaching is understood differently in different societal contexts. This Special Issue brings new perspectives to this discussion by offering examples of ESD implementation in language teaching in the language teaching context.

## 4 This Special Issue

The Special Issue contains articles written by researchers of the project Ethical and Sustainable Language Teaching (funded by Kone Foundation 2021–2025) and its collaborators as well as speakers at the AILA World Congress 2023 symposium ‘Sustainability in language teaching’. The symposium called researchers and scholars to bring forth recent advances in the study of sustainable development and its implementation in language teaching. The aim of the symposium was to widen the perspectives around ESD in relation to language teaching, change ideas about its practical implementations in different countries and educational systems, and open a discussion concerning what aspects of language teaching can already be regarded as sustainable and which language teaching methods could promote the achievement of SDGs. The objective of this Special Issue is to present how ESD has been applied in different countries and educational systems, thus contributing to the discussion on how ESD can be integrated into language teaching, i.e. what methods and contents can be used when implementing interdisciplinary teaching of transversal competences. Most articles are empirical research projects from a variety of educational settings, with a strong focus on applied linguistics and education. The articles examine the concept of sustainability in language teaching from a broad perspective, encompassing case studies and perspectives from a range of European and global educational contexts. The set of articles in this Special Issue presents the perspectives of language learners, teachers, and curriculum developers on the topic of sustainability in language teaching.

## 5 Special Issue contributions

All articles in this Special Issue have a direct link to promoting and implementing ESD in language teaching either in terms of reviewing research literature (Valnes Quammen and Afitska), examples of how both pre-service language teachers understand ESD (Heikkola et al.), how agency in ESD relates to its integration (Kuusalu et

al.), how ESD is included in language courses in higher education (Imai, Hämäläinen, and Peluso), and how language learning is connected to linguistic and social sustainability experienced by multilingual students with varying heritage language backgrounds (Rose et al.).

In their article “Language teachers as educators for sustainability in Finland – Factors influencing teachers’ perception of their agency”, Salla-Riikka Kuusalu, Maureen Patzelt, and Minna Maijala investigate what factors contribute to how language teachers perceive their agency in ESD, and how they use agency to integrate ESD in their classes. The data were collected through in-depth individual semi-structured interviews of six Finnish language teachers in Finland and analysed using a modified inductive paradigm model. The authors’ findings demonstrate that teachers feel empowered to implement ESD when they get support at school, have sufficient guidance, and proactive students. The analysis revealed that teachers possessed several operational strategies for solving the challenges in integrating ESD.

The article by Leena Maria Heikkola, Minna Maijala, Maarit Mutta, Päivi Laine, and Soila Merijärvi, “Finnish pre-service language teachers’ perceptions of culture – from cultural humility to social justice”, deals with cultural humility, a concept that has not so far been used in the field of language teaching. In supporting the achievement of SDG 4 ‘Quality education’, teachers need to have skills to work with linguistically and culturally diverse learners and to understand their backgrounds. These skills can be described as ‘cultural humility,’ that is, the capacity to acknowledge one’s own cultural prejudices and to remain open to seeing things from another culture’s point of view. The analysis reveals that pre-service language teachers tend to have a clear understanding of social justice, but their understanding of cultural humility is still evolving.

In their article “Addressing linguistic and social sustainability: morphological awareness among multilingual students with varying first-language literacy levels”, Judi Rose, Maarit Mutta, and Minna Maijala explore morphological awareness in young language learners. Their research sheds light into the relations of morphological awareness and English reading comprehension, supporting the assumption that the level of morphological skills reflects the level of English reading comprehension of adolescent EFL learners. The article shows that there is a need for improving the tools to strengthen the morphological awareness of learners with a migrant background in their heritage languages to support their English reading comprehension.

Junko Imai deals with teaching English in higher education context: “Incorporating SDGs in an English for global citizenship curriculum in an international liberal arts university in Japan”. The article shows the development of an English course that focuses on international English and intercultural communication, and how the course was gradually modified through the inclusion of the SDGs in relation to the individual global module themes. Imai presents the findings of student feedback

surveys that were conducted regularly throughout the curriculum to identify student needs, assess the quality of teaching, and further develop the curriculum.

The article “Analysing the effectiveness of dialogue practice in English as a lingua franca using the model of transformative language teaching for sustainability” by Mirja Hämäläinen displays one practical example of a transformative language teaching approach in English courses in a Finnish university by using the TLS model by Maijala et al. (2024) as a theoretical framework. The data consisting of 94 student self-assessments were collected in a university English course based on a theory by Bohm (1996) on ethical dialogue and were analysed for the possible transformative effects. The findings of the study indicate that ethical dialogue in a higher education English course has the potential to facilitate ESD, particularly in enhancing awareness of the skills and competencies required when collaborating. The ability to engage in constructive discourse is of utmost importance when discussing complex issues such as sustainable development.

From the perspectives of ecocriticism and posthumanism, Monica Peluso analyses three picture books in Italian, English, and Spanish, demonstrating their potential to foster ecological awareness within the context of language education. The discourse analysis illustrates how children’s literature can elaborate on the relationship between humans and non-human nature. Based on the findings, Peluso also briefly discusses pedagogical implications for designing a training course for foreign language teachers on how to promote sustainability through the encouragement of ecological thinking.

Sandra Valnes Quammen and Oksana Afitska engage in their review article “Incorporating sustainability into American postsecondary modern foreign language classrooms: exploring current practice and identifying future directions” with recent research literature about interdisciplinary integration of sustainability-related content focusing on American higher education curricula. They draw on the article the concept of sustainability as an interdisciplinary curricular construct in a postsecondary context and discuss recent research in education for sustainability (EFS), ESD, and content-based second language (L2) instruction. In addition, the article focuses on the specific challenges and on how sustainability content can be promoted among intermediate level language learners. Valnes Quammen and Afitska make suggestions on how language and content can be integrated in L2 settings at all levels by simultaneously supporting student linguistic development. In this way, they introduce new perspectives into theoretical discourse on the topic. Finally, they demonstrate how sustainability-related content can be practically integrated into language teaching materials.

In sum, the articles show that there are many ways how to implement ESD in foreign language education. This Special Issue highlights the importance of ESD in language teaching and will encourage further studies that will enhance our under-

standing of the role and implementation of sustainability education in language teaching.

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