
DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION IN EFL CLASSROOM AT HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract. The article aims to introduce the role of foreign language teaching in fostering sustainability communication (SC) in higher education (HE) institution. Foreign language learning enable students to analyze actual topics about sustainable development, to discuss problems, to share personal emotions and experiences. On one hand, English as a foreign language (EFL) curriculum aims to build students' basic language communicative skills with the focus on sustainability communication when students recall gained information. The present paper analyzes the problems of SC development in EFL studies in the system of HE. The article overviews the importance of the SC development on the theoretical level as well as introduces the challenges of SC development in foreign language classes on the empirical level. The research was planned and performed in 5 universities of Lithuania, in which the respondents studying English (average age of participants was 22 years old) expressed their opinions on the SC ideas and usefulness of SC. The results of the research demonstrate that students are more engaged in topics and materials on SC and it is challenging for pedagogues to constantly update their materials, to apply innovative EFL teaching strategies related to SC in foreign language classroom. Therefore, the research findings with the embedded elements for SC development encourage educators to search for innovative ways of EFL teaching in HE.

Keywords: Sustainability communication (SC), English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching; Higher Education, development.

INTRODUCTION

The aim to introduce the role of foreign language teaching in fostering sustainability communication (SC) to analyze the challenges the EFL teachers face for the development of SC in higher education institution.

Methodology of the Research. The research was planned and performed in 5 universities of Lithuania, in which the 185 respondents studying English (average age of participants was 22 years old) in various levels (A1 – C1) of English expressed their opinions on the SC ideas, topics and their usefulness for their linguistic and personal development.

Higher education institutions play a significant role in the attainment and demonstration of SC in which proficiency in a foreign language is an essential prerequisite for acquiring desired results for sustainability communication competence development. In today's globalised world there is an increasing need for students to improve foreign language

competences at university. There has been an ongoing discussion on how to help students be more adaptable to the new environment and more focused on SC. Drawing on literature analysis of various authors (Godemann, 2011, Tilbury, 2011; Wiek et al, 2014) the four dimensional (economical, environmental, social and institutional) concept of sustainable development has been determined. Furthermore, the fourth SDC dimension, which is related to the complex challenges of contemporary society, has modified the SDC structure including institutional dimension and emphasizing an autonomous activity, the use of interactive foreign language through participation in dialogues for the present and future of global society. These constructs are thought to be used in different environment and contexts as they are assumed to be significant elements of communication. Highlighting the place of EFL in achieving this goal Sterling (2014)¹ points out that ‘EFL requires an understanding of the role that language² and culture play in the construction of environmental, social, economic, institutional, cultural and religious systems, the impact of these systems which support life’. Therefore, it could be stated that EFL might ensure students to become more motivated to develop their SDC through English learning activities. The problem is how to foster the development of SDC through the EFL curriculum within the context of tertiary level. In the system of higher education of Lithuania the EFL curriculum, which is based on Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001)² aims to build students’ language skills, to improve their knowledge about SC and to enable them to apply sustainable development ideas with respect for the environment, in which cultural reproductions have major implications not just for the content of the curriculum, but for forms of pedagogic interactions. For this reason, it is challenging for pedagogues to believe that EFL will improve students’ SC. Thus, the aim of the paper is to analyze the development of SC strategies and EFL studies in the system of HEI in Lithuania.

The variety of dimensions can suggest that sustainability communication is a wide and complex interdisciplinary phenomenon and covers many social, economic, environmental, institutional, emotional and spiritual spheres of human life. Moreover, the internal structure of SC (knowledge, talents, abilities, skills, moral values, attitudes, behavioral intentions and their interrelations) is profound as well as external elements - institutional, social, economic and environmental dimensions – emphasizing their role which they play in designing the needs to

¹ Sterling, S. (2014). *An Analysis of the Development of Sustainability Education Internationally: Evolution, Interpretation and Transformative Potential*, In Blewit.

² Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (2001). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

be acquired by students in HEI. However, researchers have not accepted the SC definition or unifying SC theory and concept. For this reason interpretations are different, based on ideological and educational perspectives involving aims related to the application of the concept both in scientific and policy making discussions. Therefore, a rather pragmatic approach drawing on Godemann (2011)³ who defined the SC as a complex process of information and knowledge exchange between sender and receiver. Its structure comprises language, knowledge, abilities, skills, moral values, potential, and talents, all of which allow learners to achieve mutual understanding in communication and undertake various activities or tasks (which is referred to as competency) related to challenges of sustainable development and education. What is more, the notion of the SC might be referred to the necessity and desire to fulfill the needs of leadership, professional career, social status, and/or other personal achievements. Drawing on this definition of SC, which is based on the concept of the needs, facing the challenges in the professional and personal life and highlighting the fact what are individuals' aims, as well as on how learners act to reach their foreseen goals. Furthermore, it is also significant to figure out if learners, who have some targets, are able to establish a possession of certain level of competences to overcome obstacles in order to reach their goals. This need, ability and activity could be related to an inner part of the SC as well as moral values are essential components which combined together could enable a successful performance and communication possible. Therefore, it is important not to limit the development of competences to their cognitive elements and learners should be informed about internal elements of a desired competence, too. This conceptualization is essential for SC as it is based on holistic and humanistic philosophy combining all necessary elements such as moral attitudes, internal and external motivation, learning environment and mentors' support that are significant for an effective performance. Therefore, pedagogues have a very important mission in empowering students to contribute to a more sustainable world while equipping them with the ideas of SC as a forceful and useful tool. The sustainable development paradigm ensures a concrete context of university mission and vision signifying a new stage of study quality achievement. Following Talloires' Declaration in 1990⁴ a sustainable university was defined, and since 1990 several declarations and innovations on the conception of a sustainable university in which a sustainable development curriculum (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. 2001) and sustainable HE system have been

³ Godemann, J. (2011) *Sustainability Communication*. Nottingham: Springer

⁴Talloires Declaration (1990). 21/04/2019 [ulsf.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/06/TD.pdf](https://www.ulsf.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/06/TD.pdf)

formulated and agreed. Moreover, based on Bologna Declaration on the European Space for Higher Education (1999)⁵ and developments by European Commission (2017)⁶ researchers of the institutionalism (Filho et al, 2013)⁷ and social constructivism theories Tilbury (2011)⁸ analyzed activities of institutions, their structure, formal rules and informal rituals as well as relationships between HEIs and their importance. A university is an organizational unit which foresees and ensures university sustainable development and sustainability communication at all institutional levels. The university carries out social, economical, environmental politics: uses energy, transport and performs other activities related to infrastructure. In order to improve the learning environment of students, the university infrastructure is constantly renewed

THEORETICAL FRAMING OF SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION

Aiming to equip students with the possibility to develop their SC competence is a big challenge of HEIs. When presenting the study programmes it is important to introduce students with the concept of SC, its elements, teaching methods and learning strategies that could be used to provide effective SC competence development through EFL learning processes. Drawing on Godemann (2011)⁹, Flowerdew (2013)¹⁰ and Wiek, et al. (2014)¹¹. it could be claimed that the content of sustainable development is connected with communicative (native and foreign language skills), cross-cultural (foreign language skills and knowledge about different cultures) personal (ability to manage internal and external elements), methodological – instrumental (knowledge and skills of a particular profession), social (demonstrating ability of environment protection), transformative (demonstrating ability of positive change) as well as core competences (IT, mother tongue, mathematics and etc.). Similarly to sustainable development competence and its components, SC is strongly influenced by social and mass media and therefore has a variety of characteristics which are shown in Figure 1.

⁵ Bologna Declaration on the European Space for Higher Education (1999). Association of European Universities. 21/04/2019 <http://www.unige.ch/cre>

⁶ European Commission (2017). Recent Developments in European Higher Education Systems. European Commission staff working documents (SEC, 1063 final). Retrieved 21/04/2019 from <http://ec.europa.eu/education/pub/df/higher/modernisation.pdf>

⁷ Filho, L.W.; Caeiro, S.; Jabbour, Ch.; Azeiteiro, U., M. (2013). *Sustainability Assessment Tools in Higher Education Institutions*. Springer International Publishing.

⁸ Tilbury, D. (2011). Are We Learning to Change? Mapping Global Progress in Education for Sustainable Development in the Lead up to „Rio Plus 20“. In *Global Environmental Research. Education for Sustainable Development: Promises and Challenges*, 14 (2), 101- 107.

⁹ Godemann, J. (2011) *Sustainability Communication*. Nottingham: Springer

¹⁰ Flowerdew, J. (2013). *Discourse in English Language Education*. NY: Routledge.

¹¹ Wiek, A.; et al. (2014). Studying, teaching and applying sustainability visions using systems modelling. *Sustainability*. ISSN 2071 – 1050, No. 6, 4452-44695 doi:10.3390/su6074452.

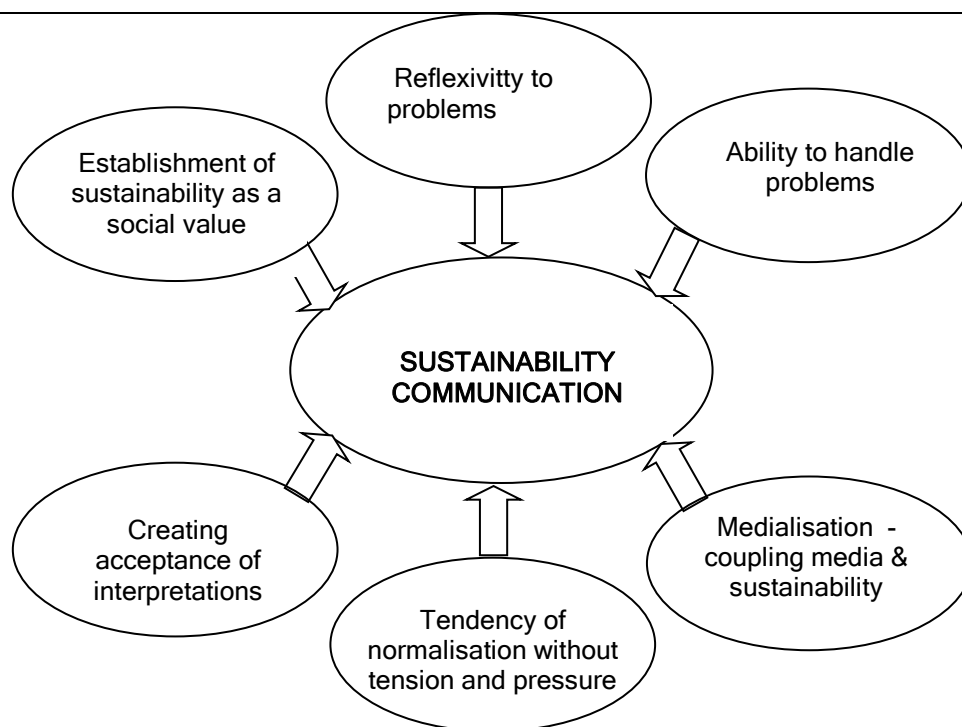


Figure 1. Sustainability communication characteristics according to Godemann (2011)

The characteristics of sustainability communication encompass:

Reflexivity in relation with various problems;

Successful ability to deal with difficult situations;

Medialisation as an effort to counter the tendency to normalization in sustainability discourse by matching it with the forms of mass media;

Tendencies to normalization with the possibility that the more sustainability becomes a topic and norm, the less stress and pressure there is to reach mutual understanding;

Establishment of sustainability as an intrinsic social value and the related issue of creating agreement, the possibility of various interpretations of sustainability have significant influence and should be taken into considerations when curriculum development processes are made and EFL teaching processes are designed. Moreover, social networks, made up of individual and group actors with their “bridges”, are increasing. The examples in the mediated forms of communication and social interaction processes are part of these ties with their own specific online practices, rules, network relationships and technical possibilities. Therefore, handling this complexity of interdisciplinarity plays a crucial role in the discussion about sustainability. Moreover, communication about sustainable development is sustainability communication about sustainable development knowledge and experiences. However, simply emphasizing the importance of the concept of sustainability is not enough to raise students awareness about

sustainable development. Knowledge needs a practical value, for this reason systemic knowledge must be acquired, i.e. the knowledge of functions, processes and interrelationships. Sustainable development knowledge needs to be assimilated with values, ethical orientations towards the links between humans and nature, with direct experiences that involve emotionality and meaningfulness. EFL teaching has the medium and a long-term goal to assist students not only to improve their foreign language skills, but also to acquire basic knowledge about sustainability to actively communicate its ideas and link them with actions. Teaching EFL at HE aims at developing and enhancing communication about sustainability that allow students to sharpen their awareness in both private and working life of what is ecologically responsible, economically feasible, socially acceptable as well as enabling them to discuss their ideas in classroom, social media, home and etc. SC is classified as a “soft” tool, and is one of a number of popular instruments, therefore, involving students in the solution of their own problems opens up opportunities for them making corresponding changes in their behavior for influencing the present and future life.

METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

In order to analyze the correlations of SC between EFL studies in HE quantitative research methodology was used. Based on scientific literature the research instrument – a questionnaire was designed and applied to identify the SC tendencies and students opinions about SC. Questionnaire survey was disseminated among students of VMU, VU, KTU, KU and MRU. The questionnaire was used to identify challenges of English (A1 – C1/C2 levels) learning with the structure (which is based on theoretical background) of SC.

Table 1. Disclosure of Block Content of Questionnaire

Blocks	Number of questions	Disclosure of Block Content
I block	8	Demographic data of respondents
II block	11	Statements which disclose reflexivity to problems
III block	14	Statements which disclose ability to handle problems
IV block	16	Statements which disclose medialisation
V block	12	Statements which disclose tendency of normalisation
VI block	12	Statements which disclose acceptance of interpretations
VII block	18	Statements which disclose establishment of sustainability as a social value

The structure of the questionnaire comprises instructions, demographic data statements and 6 diagnostic blocks of questions disclosed in Table 1.

All blocks of the questionnaire (I block demographic data) correspond with characteristics of sustainability communication, shown in figure 1: reflexivity to problem solutions, demonstrating problems management skills, showing normalization that sustainability becomes a popular topic of communication, medialisation which is the tendency in sustainability discourse by coupling it to the forms of social media, approval of the possibility of different interpretations of sustainability and sustainable development, the establishment of sustainability communication as a 'soft' tool and an intrinsic social value which is related to personal development. The questionnaire consists of 91 statements/questions, the first 8 statements of I block are designed to analyze students' demographic data. The statements of II block aim to reveal the students' ability to react and reflect about their problems, the statements of III block – the students ability to handle problems, the statements of IV block – the students ability to medialisation, the statements of V block – the tendency of normalisation, the statements of VI block – the acceptance of interpretations, and the statements of VII block – the establishment of sustainability as a social value. The statements/questions in all diagnostic blocks were orientated towards the elements of sustainability communication, which have been measured according to a Likert-type scale where students expressed their opinions by choosing *strongly agree; agree; neither agree, nor disagree; disagree; strongly disagree* options.

Aiming to find out more about the respondents' viewpoint on the relationships of English studies and SC characteristics, quantitative research was performed at the five main universities of Lithuania. The data obtained from the questionnaire survey was made using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) statistical methods. Descriptive statistics, Chi – square distribution, Kendall tau, Fisher's criterion were used to compare the data obtained direct Oblimin with Kaizer normalization as well as Spearman and Pearson's correlation coefficients to evaluate relations between variables and statistical significance. The internal consistency and reliability of the questionnaire was tested by Cronbach alpha which is $R^2 = 0.046$, $p=0.025$. Following the statistical analysis, the findings of the study were investigated, synthesized and summarized.

Quantitative (questionnaire survey) research was performed in 2017. The respondents were students, who were learning the English language in the bachelor study programs in five main universities in Lithuania. The aim of the quantitative (questionnaire survey) research was

to find out students' opinions and knowledge about SC, its characteristics and to express their ideas about the usefulness of SC development during the EFL studies at HE..

Totally, 177 respondents were first year students, 21 – second year students, and 6 – were in the third or fourth year of their studies. The distribution of respondents according to the level of English achieved is displayed in Figure 2.

The majority of students (87%) who took part in the survey were in the first year of their studies, the smallest number were in their third year (0.5%). The students were classified according to their level of English – A1, A2, B1, B2. Altogether 53.7% of students were at a B2 level or less; B1 (10,80 %), and the least amount – C1/C2 English level. (See Figure 2).

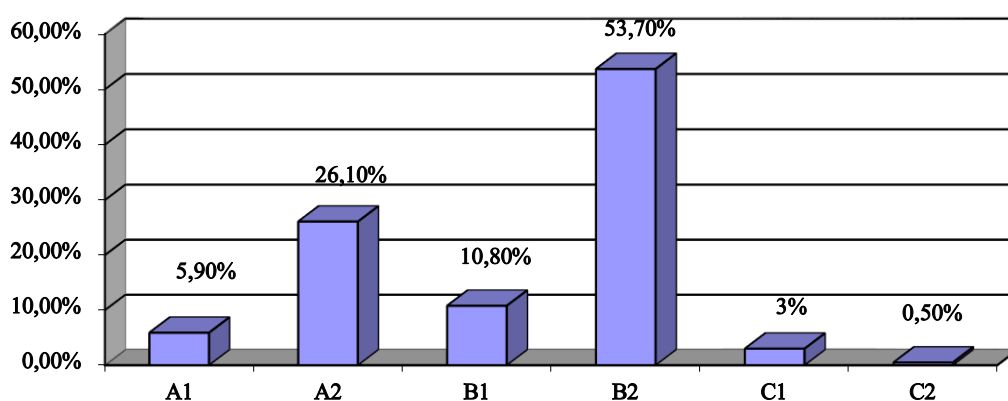


Figure 2. Students' distribution in English levels (A1-C2)

A total number of 109 students who achieved a B2 level (53.7 %), with less percentage of students achieving A1 (5.90 %) and A2 (26,10), demonstrates a high level of students' language proficiency.

INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

Those most important findings, which were defined by factors analysis, revealed that education of SC is not the phenomenon which is taken for granted, but on the contrary, has to be developed by pedagogues and supported by students at HE. Moreover, the acquisition of SC through English language learning is the privileged experience gained while studying at universities. The impact of the research is manifested in the comprehensive analysis of sustainable communication concept towards its characteristics, the visualization of the model of SC, and students' opinions for the development of SC within the context of English learning at HE. Therefore, a favourable impact of foreign language learning with integrated content into English A1 – C1/C2 level curriculum could be signified.

The theoretical significance of the study lies in that the education of SC expands the spectrum of foreign (English) language teaching and promotes students' opportunities of foreign language learning at all stages at HE. The practical significance of the research is that it addresses students needs for the education of sustainability communication and sustainable development that affects students' efficacy of acquisition of SC knowledge and skills. The results obtained during the research treatment of the integrated SC instruction into the syllabus of English A1 –C1/C2 level at VMU validate the necessity of knowledge and understanding of SC concept. Embedding SC content and innovative methods of teaching into foreign language (English) classes, pedagogues are encouraged to update their teaching strategies with innovative approach to discuss SC. The possibility to apply this novelty for foreign (English) language learning is estimated on empirical study results and such practice is proved to be successful for the development of students' linguistic skills and knowledge about SC.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the conducted research reveal the complexity, diversity and multidisciplinary of the SC conception. Therefore SC challenges could be analyzed emphasizing the involvement of all language pedagogues for the implementation of SC at university.

1. The findings of the research show language teachers involvement in SC problems solutions.
2. The findings of the study demonstrate university important impact on planning, coordinating and performing activities. for the development of SC.
3. The findings demonstrate the necessity of the development of SC.
4. The findings of the statistical data have revealed that English language learning makes a positive impact on students' knowledge and skills about SC.
5. The findings of the research show that students comprehend the significance of SC development as a valuable tool for their personal and career development.

The results of statistical analysis show that the respondents who are the first level study program students at university have mostly enhanced their cognitive element of competence – they attained knowledge, experience about SC as well as they improved their sustainability communication skills. The students raised awareness and perception about the significance of sustainability communication while discussing about sustainable development issues.

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