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Cultivating Global Citizens: Sustainable Development in Foreign Language Education

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Abstract

This paper examines classroom practices at a private mid-size university in Japan, illustrating how environmental, social, and cultural aspects of sustainability can be integrated into an intermediate-level English course. Through a content-based approach, students research global issues, developing language skills, research abilities, and critical thinking. The curriculum promotes learner autonomy through self-awareness, vocabulary development, and collaboration. Students explore topics such as pollution, water scarcity, and social justice, presenting their findings in diverse formats. Despite challenges in language proficiency and research skills, the integration of sustainability education enhanced linguistic and cultural competence, promoted autonomy, and encouraged critical engagement with local and global issues. The paper emphasizes the importance of institutional support, teacher training, and reflective teaching for the effective implementation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). This adaptable approach fosters global citizenship and prepares students to tackle sustainability challenges.

Keywords: ESD, SDGs, sustainable development, foreign language education, global citizenship, sustainability literacy, learner autonomy

1. Introduction

Global challenges like climate change, the destruction of ecosystems, the depletion of natural resources and wasteful consumption, pollution, the denial of fundamental human rights, and extreme poverty affect billions of people worldwide. Addressing these urgent and complex problems requires a globally aware and socially responsible workforce committed to sustainable development. Sustainability aims to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs (Brundtland, 1987). It encompasses environmental, social, and economic dimensions of sustainable growth, which are interconnected and mutually dependent.

Given the scale and intricacy of these issues, education is seen as a critical factor in building the capacities and practices that promote sustainable development. There has been a growing understanding that achieving a sustainable future requires more than technological advancements — it demands a deep understanding of the historical and structural causes of

inequality and environmental degradation (Barbas-Rhoden, 2022; Prádanos, 2018). The UNESCO *Education 2030 Incheon Declaration* emphasizes the importance of equipping young people with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to navigate the complex dynamics of the physical and socio-economic environment and human development. These objectives include education on sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, peace and non-violence, global citizenship, as well as the role of culture in achieving sustainability (UNESCO, 2016, p. 79). In other words, what is needed is a holistic, interdisciplinary approach that "integrates the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning" (UNESCO, 2005, p. 6).

2. Education for Sustainable Development and Foreign Language Learning in Higher Education

Institutions of higher education are expected to play a major role in promoting the objectives of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Brain studies have shown that between the ages of 16 and 20, strong connections are formed in the frontal lobes, the brain areas responsible for problem-solving and higher-level thinking skills (Kennedy, 2006). This developmental stage aligns with the period when many students enter higher education, highlighting the importance of engaging them with complex global challenges that require critical thinking, creativity, and interdisciplinary problem-solving. Universities, therefore, have a unique opportunity to foster these cognitive skills through ESD-centred curricula that not only impart knowledge but also enhance students' ability to analyse, evaluate, and develop solutions to sustainability issues. Recognizing this role, UNESCO's *Shaping the Future We Want: DESD (2005–2014) Final Report* outlines key responsibilities for higher education institutions in advancing ESD. These include preparing students for the future, identifying the causes of global challenges and their possible solutions, and leading by example through good developmental practices in governance, community relations, and environmental impact (UNESCO 2014, p. 141). The SDGs represent a comprehensive framework that encompasses a broad spectrum of interconnected issues (Barber, 2023). Therefore, SDG-focused instruction provides intellectually stimulating experiences by encouraging students to apply knowledge from their majors, explore real-world problems from multiple disciplinary perspectives, and challenge personal biases and assumptions.

In addition to their educational role, universities are hubs for research and innovation, playing a crucial role in developing new technologies, sustainable practices, and policy recommendations. They also demonstrate sustainability through campus operations, including energy-efficient buildings, waste reduction programmes, and sustainable transportation, reinforcing the theoretical knowledge imparted in classrooms. This dual role—both as educators and role models—shapes how institutions integrate ESD into their curricula. However, ESD integration varies considerably across disciplines, institutions, and course types

(compulsory vs. elective), with its effectiveness influenced by factors such as the specific SDGs targeted and the nature of the subject areas (Fiel'ardh et al., 2023). For instance, it has been more successfully implemented in engineering programmes than in fields like nursing, drama, or architecture. Likewise, campus sustainability initiatives, such as ecological landscaping, have been easier to implement compared to other aspects of ESD (Jodoin, 2019).

Foreign language classes offer unique opportunities to foster sustainability literacy. The Incheon Declaration emphasizes that all students should learn at least one foreign language to better engage with the increasing social, environmental, and economic interdependence of the modern world (UNESCO, 2016, p. 37). Multilingualism and multiculturalism enable students to appreciate diverse cultural perspectives on environmental and social issues. In contrast, monolingualism and monoculturalism hinder sustainability efforts by limiting exposure to alternative perspectives. As Yankelovic (2005) observed, language education reduces ethnocentrism and promotes openness to other cultures. Viewing the world through multiple perspectives is essential for addressing global challenges, as conflicting social values and worldviews often fuel hostility toward humanity and nature (Ferry, 2022). SDG-based foreign language classes raise learners' awareness of global challenges and create a more meaningful learning experience (Alcantud-Díaz & Lloret-Catalá, 2023).

Case studies on sustainable development in language education highlight the effectiveness of this approach. For example, de la Fuente (2022) and other contributors demonstrate how sustainability content has been successfully integrated into German, Spanish, Japanese, and other language programmes. They argue that advanced language proficiency is not a prerequisite for incorporating sustainability into the curriculum. Instead, the key to success lies in instructor commitment and collaboration, supported by institutional structures. Barber (2023) argues that EFL teachers are particularly well-positioned to incorporate global issues and sustainable development into their lessons, given the global status of English as a lingua franca. Integrating SDGs into EFL classes facilitates communication among people from diverse backgrounds and helps learners develop a sense of global citizenship.

Yet, although foreign language classes are a promising platform to meet ESD objectives, efforts to integrate SDGs into their curricula have been slow, inconsistent, and narrow in scope. First, university language departments are underfunded and struggle with declining enrolment. In the United States alone, 651 college and university language programmes closed between 2013 and 2016 (Stein-Smith, 2020). Second, universities often face institutional and policy-based challenges, compounded by the prevailing instrumental view of language as simply a tool for communication. Traditional foreign language curricula, which focus on fundamental skills like vocabulary and grammar at the beginner and intermediate levels, leave global issues for advanced courses. This structure limits opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with the social and cultural dimensions of sustainability. Many non-language

majors also find foreign language courses uninspiring, especially when focused on clichéd topics like "food, fun, and fiestas" (Hernan, 2007, p. 126). When textbooks do address global issues, the coverage is often superficial, focusing primarily on environmental topics such as global warming, renewable energy, and recycling. Environmental issues are frequently framed as a dichotomy between pristine nature and economic growth, neglecting considerations of justice and ethics (Armstrong, Krasny, & Schuldt, 2018). As a result, students rarely engage deeply with target-language communities or reflect on the broader social and cultural implications of sustainability (de la Fuente, 2019).

This paper explores how the environmental, social, and cultural dimensions of sustainability can be integrated into foreign language instruction, with a focus on a compulsory intermediate-level English class at a university in Japan. After a brief overview of the learning context, the paper presents specific examples of sustainability-focused language learning principles and practices. It further examines how content-based and inquiry-based approaches foster language development, learner autonomy, and sustainability literacy. Finally, the paper acknowledges challenges in implementing ESD within foreign language curricula and advocates for the integration of ESD into teacher training programmes.

3. Present Study

3.1. Context

The programme described in this paper has been implemented at a mid-size private university in Japan. The teaching context in Japan is noteworthy for three reasons. First, despite numerous revisions to educational policies and substantial government investment, Japan continues to lag behind other countries when it comes to foreign language education. In the 2024 English Proficiency Index report Japan was ranked 92nd out of 116 countries (EF EPI, 2024). A major factor contributing to this issue is the inclusion of English in university entrance exams, which has led to a rigid curriculum mandated by the Ministry of Education and a strong emphasis on rote learning. As a result, many students perceive learning English as merely passing a test, which has adversely affected both their communicative competence and motivation.

Second, Japan’s education system traditionally emphasises a teacher-centred approach. In this model, teachers are regarded as the primary authority, responsible for imparting knowledge, organising activities, and assessing learning outcomes, while students have minimal input into course content or classroom management. Consequently, students often struggle to take initiative or develop strategies for engaging with material beyond what the teacher provides.

Third, Japan was the first country to propose the concept of ESD at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. The SDGs have become a key driver of national policies, and Japan currently holds the 18th place out of 167 countries in global SDG rankings (Sachs, Guillaume,

& Fuller, 2024). ESD is considered crucial for building sustainable societies, and the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) emphasizes global citizenship, environmental concern, and critical thinking in its curriculum guidelines for all educational levels (MEXT: "Curriculum Guidelines and ESD"). However, despite these achievements, the only SDG that is currently rated as "Achieved" is "Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure" (Goal 9). Japan consistently receives the lowest rank for "Gender Equality" (Goal 5), "Responsible Consumption and Production" (Goal 12), "Climate Action" (Goal 13), "Life below Water" (Goal 14), and "Life on Land" (Goal 15) (Sachs et al., 2024). Significant challenges also remain in the areas of "Zero Hunger" (Goal 2), and "Affordable and Clean Energy" (Goal 7).

3.2. Course Description and Classroom Practices

The ESD-focused approach described was implemented in the *Basic Seminar in English Studies*, a 15-week compulsory first-year course for English majors. Most students taking this course were at an intermediate level, corresponding approximately to levels A2+ to B1 on the CEFR scale. While instructors had some flexibility regarding classroom materials and course structure, the shared objective was to improve students' academic writing, with a particular focus on paragraph structure. *Paragraphs to Essays* by Oshima and Hogue – a Level 3 textbook in the five-level *Longman Academic Writing Series* – was selected as the main textbook for this class. The book aims to introduce intermediate students to the writing process and various genres of academic paragraphs, while providing training in grammar, mechanics, vocabulary, and sentence structure. The textbook was primarily used for in-class activities, while students wrote paragraphs of various genres for homework. These paragraphs were peer-reviewed in every class, and students also received regular feedback from the instructor once every three weeks.

This approach proved successful in teaching students the basic paragraph structure and raising their awareness of different types of sentences and common writing mistakes, such as sentence fragments and run-on sentences. However, several shortcomings were also observed. First, while the model paragraphs in the textbook were easy to understand, they often concerned everyday topics and were somewhat casual in tone, making them less suitable as models for academic writing. Second, although general topics made it easier for students to generate ideas, they did not encourage engagement with real-life issues, critical thinking, or problem-solving skills. Finally, although many students put genuine effort into their homework paragraphs, some submitted machine-translated or AI-generated texts. In response, modifications were made to the course after six weeks.

Lesson 7 of the course became an orientation session in which students were formally introduced to the 17 SDGs and the concept of the research cycle. Students were expected to

choose one goal to research over the following four weeks, using online or published resources in written or audio form. Each week, they were required to complete a project sheet with information about the source(s) they used, prepare notes to assist in sharing their findings, write a one-paragraph summary of the content, and record some words and phrases encountered during the research. In class, students shared their research with two classmates and were expected to take notes while listening to their peers' presentations. In the final 15 minutes of each class, they were expected to write a brief summary of what they had learned from their peers. Lesson 4 of each cycle was dedicated to final presentations, for which students prepared PowerPoint slides that they printed out and shared with their group members. This approach was modelled on and adapted from practices used at the author's previous place of employment, where the primary goals of the English programme were to develop students' comprehensive communicative competencies, critical thinking skills, and autonomous learning practices. A detailed description of classroom procedures, activities, and the philosophy behind the programme can be found in Vasiljevic (2013).

In the remaining eight lessons of the course, students completed two research cycles. As expected, the transition from the textbook to Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Inquiry-Based learning (IBL) was challenging. The research process is a complex activity involving many sub-skills, each of which requires focused instruction and ample opportunities for practice. Students encountered difficulties in finding suitable sources beyond Wikipedia or the top result of a search engine, taking notes (rather than copying entire sentences from the text), speaking about the content (instead of reading aloud prepared summaries), and recording new vocabulary in ways that would aid memorisation and use (rather than simply noting English–Japanese translation pairs in the order of appearance).

Each week, a portion of class time was devoted to research practice, feedback, and strategy training. Specifically, students received explicit instruction and practice in using keywords, symbols, and abbreviations. They also learned about different ways of organising information, such as chronological order, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and problem–solution structures, as well as the importance of using section headings. In addition, guidelines were provided regarding the evaluation of online sources. Students were advised to verify authors' credentials, the timeliness of sources, and potential biases. Attention was also given to vocabulary learning strategies. Many Japanese students rely on bilingual electronic dictionaries (Baxter, 1980; Schmitt, 1997). While these dictionaries can certainly support the learning process, students often fail to make full use of the rich information they offer. They tend to focus on individual words and record the first translation equivalent, regardless of whether it matches the context. Furthermore, they rarely pay attention to collocations, which leads to difficulties and errors during language production. Therefore, efforts were made to enhance students' understanding that vocabulary learning involves more than simply expanding vocabulary size, emphasising that knowledge of collocations is vital for effective language

production. Guidance was also provided on vocabulary selection, as students often recorded all new words encountered, rather than prioritising core vocabulary that recurs across texts related to their research topics.

3.3. Observations and Outcomes

Observations of students' class performance showed that while challenges in research practices and vocabulary learning strategies persisted, the research cycle approach proved conducive to the development of students' critical thinking, research skills, and language proficiency. Through self-reflection, peer feedback, and instructor guidance, students learned to critically evaluate sources, refine their research questions, synthesise information, challenge preconceived ideas, and form informed opinions. Weekly presentations further supported the development of students' listening skills and speaking skills, particularly their fluency. The requirement to write a short summary of the content they had heard in class encouraged students to take careful notes and request repetition or clarification when needed. Working on conceptually related materials for several weeks provided students with multiple exposures to contextualized vocabulary, improving word retrieval and long-term retention. The need to share research results transformed grammar from a list of rules to be memorized into a set of discourse tools for conveying specific meanings, as advocated by Swaffer and Arens (2005). Finally, the students were able to articulate their newly acquired knowledge and insights on the issues through writing in a foreign language.

Work with SDG content also proved valuable for student engagement. The students chose a variety of topics, including access to education, poverty, food and water shortages, gender equality, and life on land. The selection of "Gender Equality," "Life on Land," and "Zero Hunger" as research focuses is particularly noteworthy, as these are areas where Japan lags behind other countries. While reporting on their research, students often used images and graphics to present their findings. Occasionally, they expressed surprise at the facts they discovered and reacted to the information presented by their peers. In addition to summarizing the content, some students included personal reflections and related the issues to their local contexts.

However, it is important to recognise that the approach also had its limitations. First, without expert teacher guidance, students did not always achieve the same depth of understanding as they might have in instructor-led, content-based classes. Furthermore, despite the diversity of topics explored, certain SDGs remained notably underrepresented in students' research. Across the two research cycles, no student selected "Sustainable Cities and Communities" (Goal 11), "Responsible Consumption and Production" (Goal 12), "Climate Action" (Goal 13), or "Partnership for the Goals" (Goal 17). The omission of "Climate Action" may be explained by its coverage in the Japanese high school curriculum, leading students to explore other subjects

instead. However, for goals such as "Sustainable Cities and Communities" or "Responsible Consumption and Production," it remains unclear whether their exclusion resulted from a lack of interest, insufficient understanding of these goals, or simply limited time. Finally, while students discussed potential solutions to the problems they researched, they did not have the opportunity to engage in fieldwork or directly collaborate with individuals or organizations working in these areas.

4. Discussion

The integration of the SDGs into foreign language classes provides a flexible and practical framework, especially in contexts where interdisciplinary collaboration between subject and language teachers faces institutional constraints, limited resources, or scheduling conflicts. It equips students with the knowledge and skills necessary to deal with the complexities of a globalised world. As Kennedy (2006) points out, engagement with social, cultural, and environmental issues of both local and global significance makes learning more meaningful. Working with current and intellectually challenging materials helps students develop sustainability literacy and prepares them to be informed and responsible global citizens.

Another advantage of this approach lies in its ability to address global challenges while meeting individual student needs. As Méndez Seijas and Parra (2022) highlight, global challenges often have local roots, with significant global changes beginning at local levels. By linking sustainability issues to students' immediate contexts, this method encourages them to critically assess their beliefs, cultural practices, and policies. This connection underscores the interconnectedness of local and global communities, fostering values of social responsibility, justice, and sustainability (Patel & Lynch, 2013).

The approach also helps overcome the limitations of commercial textbooks. As Caravita et al. (2008, p. 99) observe, "textbooks represent one of the pillars of formal education and they often represent the actual curriculum, since they may heavily influence the content, the approach and the teaching style." As such, they can either enhance or impede the learning experience. Japanese tertiary EFL programmes tend to rely heavily on textbooks. To align with official educational policies, titles that claim to promote learner autonomy, critical thinking skills, and the development of academic English are often favoured. However, many of these textbooks fail to deliver what they promise. They often offer limited academic content, which students find uninteresting or forgettable. They rely on multiple-choice and gap-fill tasks, doing little to intellectually engage students, promote their critical thinking skills or challenge their values, beliefs and norms (Jodoin, 2019). Environmental issues dominate the content, while other SDGs are marginalised. Following a comprehensive review of SDG coverage in EFL textbooks commonly used at Japanese universities, Jodoin (2019, p. 45) concludes that "ESD and EFL in their current form are mostly discordant." They do not lead to the development of new beliefs and values or bring about changes in students' behaviour. Furthermore, the images in these

textbooks often fail to connect the topics to students' experiences; about 23% of the images are not directly related to the topics, and in 19% they appear to serve only a decorative purpose (Jodoin, 2019, p. 55). The proliferation of superficial references to SDGs in foreign language manuals is more likely to alienate students from sustainability practices than inspire them to engage with global challenges. By contrast, student-centred, research-based content provides a holistic, rich learning and personalized learning experience, engaging students with global challenges at academic, intellectual, and emotional levels. As they explore topics of personal interest, students learn to align global objectives with individual needs, fostering sustainable values and developing a sense of global and personal responsibility.

Research-cycle-based content and language-integrated learning also has a notable positive impact on student engagement, autonomy and confidence in using a foreign language. Students can work with authentic, current, and intellectually challenging materials presented in formats that align with their learning styles. Presentations of research results promote the negotiation of meaning, emphasising the role of social interaction in language learning (Vygotsky, 1986). Collaboration and co-construction of knowledge are essential for the development of learner autonomy as "learner autonomy does not arise spontaneously from within the learner but develops out of the learner's dialogue with the world to which he or she belongs" (Little, 1994, p.431). While sharing their research results, students have opportunities to compare their topic selection approaches, data collection strategies, visual aids and presentation skills. Observation, imitation, and modelling play a very important role in human learning (Murphy & Arao, 2001), and through the process of collaborative reflection students take control of their learning and build confidence in language use.

While the benefits of ESD-motivated language learning are clear and multifaceted, the successful implementation of research- and content-based learning requires meeting several preconditions.

First, the research cycle approach should be implemented over the course of at least one academic year. SDGs are complex issues, and research is a multilayered skill. To develop research skills, vocabulary strategies, presentation and writing abilities, as well as a comprehensive understanding of SDGs, students require consistent guidance for each of these sub-skills, ample opportunities for practice, and regular feedback on their performance. Achieving these outcomes requires time and sustained effort.

Second, SDG research databases specifically designed for EFL learners should be made available. While there is no shortage of SDG-related authentic materials, these texts are often too complex for second language learners. This challenge is one of the main reasons why content and language integrated learning is frequently postponed until learners reach advanced proficiency in the target language. However, delaying exposure to such content deprives learners of the opportunity to engage with meaningful material and fully immerse themselves

in the learning process. These databases could be developed through government-funded projects or at the institutional level. With the assistance of advanced technologies such as AI, texts could be adapted and simplified to suit different proficiency levels relatively quickly and easily. Additionally, institutional resource centres could house samples of student work, including lexical maps, research notes, essays, and posters, providing valuable references for learners.

Third, where resources permit, classrooms with fixed seats should be replaced with active learning classrooms with flexible layouts that encourage peer and group collaboration while enabling instructors to move freely and actively participate in student discussions.

Fourth, further efforts are needed to enhance students' understanding of the interconnectedness of the SDGs and their collective impact on global sustainability. Students should be given opportunities to explore solutions to global challenges through internships and fieldwork. Practical experiences and hands-on learning not only deepen their understanding of the content encountered in the texts but also spark an interest in sustainability-related careers and foster lifelong engagement with sustainability issues.

Fifth, teachers are central to achieving the SDG-4 2030 agenda, and the successful implementation of ESD-based foreign language education requires schools to be sufficiently staffed with well-trained teachers. Addressing the issue of teacher shortages is essential and demands immediate action. In addition to replacing retiring teachers, UNESCO (2016) estimates that by 2030, 3.2 million teachers will be required to achieve universal primary education, and 5.1 million will be needed to provide universal lower secondary education. A failure to secure adequately trained staff often results in classrooms being led by unprepared non-professionals.

This issue is not limited to developing countries. According to data from April 2024, 64% of Japanese elementary schools and 56% of junior high schools are experiencing teacher shortages (*The Mainichi,* 2024). As a consequence, teachers are either required to conduct lessons for two classes simultaneously, or students are left to engage in self-study for an entire day. Inadequate compensation and excessive working hours have been identified as the primary causes of this crisis. These statistics highlight the urgent need for reforms, including improved training, competitive remuneration, and ongoing support for teaching professionals. Such measures are essential to attract and retain both current and prospective educators.

Reforming teacher education is equally critical. Education for global citizenship requires well-trained teachers committed to sustainability education. Integrating sustainability education into teacher training programmes is vital, as it directly impacts society. As Goodwin (2020) states, the purpose of teacher education is not merely to produce certified teachers but to equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to prepare young people to address global challenges. This does not imply that teachers must become experts in every area of sustainable

development; however, they should possess a solid understanding of sustainability's complexities and interconnectedness to guide their students effectively. They must recognise the value of ESD and commit to fostering sustainable values and global citizenship in their students. Therefore, teacher training programmes should not only focus on language proficiency, lesson planning, and classroom management skills but also include interdisciplinary training that promotes a deeper understanding of global issues. Teachers must acquire the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary to contribute to sustainable development.

Fostering learner autonomy in the classroom is challenging. Teachers require specific skills and training to support this process effectively. Without proper preparation, even teachers who value the concept of learner autonomy may feel frustrated and discouraged when attempting to implement it (Martinez, 2008; Graves & Vye, 2012). Despite advances in autonomous learning theories, many teacher training programmes still rely on lecture-based methods that reinforce hierarchical knowledge transmission rather than promoting engagement. Such programmes often fail to provide opportunities for collaboration, decision-making, or critical thinking. Furthermore, teachers educated in traditional systems are often accustomed to a quantitative model of learning, where content is acquired in separate academic disciplines, information is presented in isolated chunks, and evaluation is based on the number of correct answers—essentially, the amount of memorised information (McCarthy & Schmeck, 1988). It is often said that teachers teach the way they were taught, which perpetuates this fragmented approach and shapes students' learning behaviours. The transition from student to teacher can be challenging, as it requires a fundamental reconceptualisation of education and the schooling system (Ovens, Garbett, & Hutchinson, 2016). Without this shift in perspective, new teachers may unconsciously replicate the same rote-based instructional methods they experienced as students. As a result, many students adopt a "learn and forget" mentality. Learners with low self-concept and self-esteem in particular tend to adopt superficial, passive strategies and are less likely to engage deeply with content. They often limit their learning to memorisation, perceiving it as less threatening to their self-concept (McCarthy & Schmeck, 1988). In contrast, deep learning—or qualitative learning—requires integrating information into learners' belief and value systems. Unlike memorisation, it encourages students to critically reflect on both the content being learned and the learning process itself. However, this approach can challenge established beliefs and established cognitive frameworks, which some learners may perceive as threatening. Consequently, fear of failure often leads them to reject this approach. Providing opportunities for reflection and exploration can help learners engage more meaningfully with the material and reach their own informed conclusions. As McCarthy and Schmeck (1988) observe, teachers cannot force students to develop, but they can cultivate a supportive, non-judgmental environment where diverse answers and viewpoints are accepted.

Such an environment encourages students to express their ideas freely, fostering intellectual curiosity and confidence.

For teachers to fulfil this new and challenging role, they themselves must be autonomous learners. Teacher trainees should experience learning environments that value diversity and respect individual autonomy, guided by educators who recognise multiple pathways to problem-solving and knowledge acquisition. One potential solution is *Jugyo Kenkyu,* or *Lesson Study*-based teacher education, a well-established approach with a long history and widespread acceptance in Japan. *Lesson Study* is a form of educational research rooted in classroom practice and grounded in collegiality within professional communities, where "teachers collaboratively plan, observe, and analyse actual classroom lessons" (Lewis, Perry, Hurd, & O'Connell, 2006, p. 273). The approach emerged after the Second World War, when Japan required a new model of teacher education free from political intervention (Isozaki, 2018). Teachers were expected not only to adhere to government policies but also to develop a deep understanding of teaching techniques and acquire the skills necessary to conduct academic research as specialists (Mitsuishi, 2011). Since then, *Lesson Study* has become an integral component of both pre-service teacher training programmes and voluntary professional development for in-service teachers, serving as an effective means of bridging theory and practice. This approach provides teachers with opportunities to create and share knowledge as practitioners, fostering their growth not only as educators but also as teacher mentors. The majority of Japanese teachers hold a positive attitude towards *Lesson Study* (Isozaki, 2018). Therefore, offering them opportunities to observe and reflect on ESD-motivated foreign language instruction conducted by experienced professionals, as well as their own teaching practices, should support them in refining their pedagogy and developing effective strategies to integrate SDGs into their classrooms.

Fifth, integrating SDGs into foreign language classes successfully requires institutional support. Efforts by individual teachers alone will have minimal impact. Without institution-wide backing, students may perceive research-based classes as a burden rather than a valuable opportunity for personal growth.

5. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates how ESD-focused learning and inquiry-based methodology can be integrated into the foreign language classroom, creating a framework for purpose-driven, 21st-century education. Each teaching situation is unique, and there is no universal formula for incorporating ESD into foreign language curricula. However, the approach outlined in this paper can be adapted to diverse teaching contexts, encouraging educators to reflect on their practices and explore ways to integrate language proficiency, learner autonomy, and global citizenship into the foreign language classroom.

This approach bridges the gap between academic learning and students' future roles in society. It enables students to acquire sustainable practices, develop knowledge and empathy, and cultivate the skills needed to address global social, economic, and environmental challenges. Through this process, they learn to find sustainable solutions and actively engage in shaping a more responsible future.

Moreover, students gain a wide range of transferable skills, including analytical, problem-solving, cognitive, interpersonal, and social competencies, which guide them towards lifelong learning. This aligns with the vision of global citizenship education outlined in the *Incheon Declaration*. Learner-centred, research-based classes become transformative experiences that encourage students to take a proactive role in their education, make informed decisions, and respond effectively to local and global challenges. Such an approach promotes tolerance, civic engagement, and the long-term relevance of learning.

However, efforts limited to individual teachers will have minimal impact. Without institution-wide support, students may view research-based classes as an added burden rather than a valuable opportunity for personal growth. To ensure meaningful educational outcomes, both teacher quality and curriculum design play a crucial role in fostering environments that support student development (Darling-Hammond, 2009). In this context, SDG 4 ("Quality Education") is fundamental to achieving all other SDGs, as it encompasses learning content and outcomes, pedagogy, and the learning environment (European Commission, 2022). Therefore, integrating SDGs into teacher education, alongside incorporating CLIL principles, is essential to creating cohesive, future-oriented curricula that meet the demands of 21st-century education.

As David Perkins (2014) insightfully states in *Future Wise*, "we have little prescience about where the world is going and even less about where particular students in particular conditions might be going" (p. 249). Consequently, he claims, educational content should be both life-worthy and life-ready—relevant to students' lives and readily applicable in various contexts, enabling them to solve problems, make decisions, and navigate an increasingly complex world. What is taught in schools should have direct applicability beyond the classroom, ensuring that students gain a meaningful understanding of the world. By focusing on life-worthy and life-ready content, fostering critical and creative thinking, and embracing interdisciplinary and global perspectives, ESD-oriented foreign language education empowers learners to confidently navigate contemporary and future challenges with insight and adaptability.

Author's note: *While the content, analysis, and conclusions of this paper are the sole responsibility of the author, generative AI (ChatGPT) was used to assist with editing and proofreading of the manuscript.*

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