

Teaching English for Global Citizenship: The Role of English Language Pedagogy in Advancing SDG4 in Multilingual Contexts

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Abstract—In multilingual educational contexts such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), English functions both as a school subject and as a medium of instruction, creating both opportunities and challenges for inclusion and engagement. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a universal framework for promoting inclusive, equitable, and quality education by 2030, with SDG 4 focusing specifically on lifelong learning and fairness in education. This article explores the role of English language pedagogy in advancing SDG 4 by fostering global citizenship and integration sustainability themes into classroom practice. Based on four-week exploratory study with 58 middle school students in the UAE --using CEFR-based oral assessments, SDG-awareness quizzes, and reflection journals-- the findings show that embedding SDG-related content into English lessons enhances both communicative competence and awareness of sustainability issues. When thoughtfully designed, English class can function as transformative spaces for cultivating critical thinking, intercultural dialogue, and global engagement.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the evolving discourse on education and sustainability, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) emerges as a cornerstone, advocating for inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all (UNESCO, 2015). While expanding access—particularly for marginalized or disadvantaged groups—remains a priority, achieving SDG 4 depends significantly on the content and delivery of education and, crucially, on the language through which it is taught.

In multilingual classrooms across the United Arab Emirates (UAE), English is taught not only as a subject but also serves as the medium through which various courses are delivered (Al-Hamly, 2020). This dual role creates both opportunities for global engagement and challenges for linguistic equity and cultural relevance. For example, the UAE Ministry of

Education has integrated moral education and sustainability into the curriculum, while several schools in Dubai and Abu Dhabi use project-based bilingual models to address themes such as climate change and gender equality through English-medium lessons.

This article argues that English classrooms can serve as sites of transformation, moving beyond grammar instruction to advance the broader objectives of SDG 4 by fostering global citizenship, enhancing sustainability awareness, and promoting inclusive education.

II. REDEFINING SDG-BEYOND ACCESS TO AUTHENTIC LEARNING:

SDG 4 aspires to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UNESCO, 2015). This goal goes beyond increasing enrolment figures; it demands learning experiences that are relevant, empowering, and connected to real-life challenges (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2020).

In multilingual educational settings, language proficiency becomes essential for accessing quality learning. Students who struggle in the dominant language of instruction—in this case, English—face barriers to participation and achievement. As a result, linguistic inequities can reinforce broader patterns of exclusion, even for students with high potential. Addressing these barriers is essential to redefining SDG 4. Language education should extend beyond skill development to empower learners, promote inclusion, and foster global engagement.

III. ENGLISH LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY AND GLOBAL COMPETENCE

As it is the language of the world today, English has a dual function in education: a threshold to global knowledge as it serves as a means of cultivating intercultural understanding. Some studies emphasize that English classrooms designs must evolve competencies beyond vocabulary and grammar.

According to the OECD (2018) *global competence* is defined as ‘the ability to look at local, global, and intercultural issues, to understand and value other people’s points of view and worldviews, to interact with people from different cultures in an open, appropriate, and effective way, and to work for collective well-being and sustainable development’. Therefore, *global competence* refers to the ability to critically examine global issues, understand different perspectives, and communicate effectively across cultures.

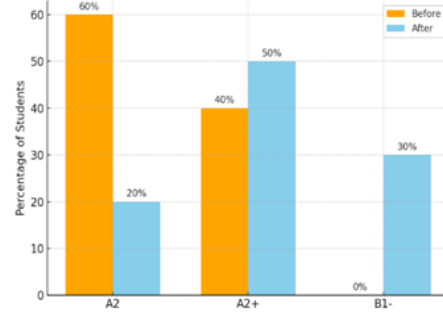
Byram (1997) outlines five dimensions of intercultural communicative competence: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting/relating, skills of discovery/interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Many scholars, building on Byram’s outline, highlight empathy, reflexivity, and ethical engagement as core learning outcomes of intercultural competence.

Hence, English classrooms’ unique atmosphere nurtures learners’ ability thinks globally and act locally. They are positioned to raise discussions around sustainability, inequality, and peace—aligning with both SDG4 and the principles of global citizenship education (UNESCO, 2017).

IV. A SMALL-SCALE EXPLORATORY STUDY

An exploratory intervention was conducted in two middle schools in the United Arab Emirates, involving 58 students aged 12–15. Over a four-week period, English lessons were redesigned to integrate SDG-related themes such as climate change and gender equality. The study aimed to capture both linguistic and cognitive outcomes, using a mixed-methods approach. Speaking proficiency was assessed through CEFR-based oral tasks administered before and after the intervention.

Figure 1. CEFR Speaking Proficiency Distribution Before and After Intervention



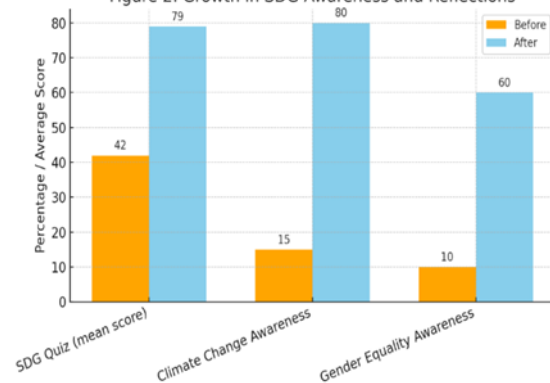
Note. Percentage represents student proficiency levels at A2, A2+, and B1-, based on CEFR oral tasks (N=58)

As shown in *Figure 1*, there was a clear upward shift in proficiency levels. While 60% of students initially performed at the A2 level, by the end of the program 30% had progressed to B1-, and the proportion at A2+ increased to 50%. In total, 74% of students demonstrated an improvement of at least one CEFR sublevel, indicating that embedding sustainability themes into English lessons did not impede, and may indeed have facilitated, linguistic development.

SDG awareness was measured using a short multiple-choice quiz. Mean scores rose substantially from 42% at baseline to 79% post-intervention (*Figure 2*). This improvement suggests that sustainability content integrated into English lessons effectively enhanced students’ knowledge of global issues.

Note. Quiz scores represent mean percentage (pre=42%, post=79%).

Figure 2. Growth in SDG Awareness and Reflections



Reflection themes coded as frequency of student mentions (climate change, gender equality)

Student reflections provided complementary qualitative insights. Thematic analysis of post-intervention journals revealed significantly greater engagement with sustainability concepts: climate change was explicitly mentioned by 80% of students,

and gender equality by 60% (*Figure 2*). Compared to the baseline reflections, which contained limited references to such issues, this shift indicates heightened global awareness and critical engagement. Taken together, these findings suggest that integrating SDG-related themes into English language pedagogy not only strengthens communicative competence but also broadens learners' socio-cognitive horizons. The results provide initial evidence that English classrooms, when purposefully designed, can serve as transformative spaces for fostering both language proficiency and sustainability awareness.

V. NAVIGATING COMPLEXITY IN MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOMS

Despite this potential, English language education in multilingual contexts remains fraught with complexity. While our study showed gains in CEFR proficiency Gallagher (2011) reminds us that English-dominant instruction can marginalize learners from non-English-speaking households. This creates what Creese and Blackledge (2010) call a “double learning burden,” where students must grasp both content and language simultaneously.

Furthermore, when English is prioritized over students' home languages, it can lead to identity erosion and disengagement (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Teachers are often unprepared for this linguistic diversity and lack the tools to create inclusive, multilingual learning spaces.

To advance SDG4, education systems must embrace plurilingual pedagogies—ones that validate learners' full linguistic repertoires and use them as assets rather than obstacles (Cummins, 2000).

VI. ENGLISH AS A MEDIUM FOR TRANSFORMATION

Cates (2002) was among the first to argue for *global education* through language teaching, proposing that global themes—peace, environment, human rights—be embedded into language curricula. Today, UNESCO MGIEP (2020) promotes similar models that position learners as active agents in sustainable development.

For example:

- A reading activity on clean water access can prompt vocabulary acquisition (e.g., *scarcity, sanitation*) while also sparking critical discussion.
- A group presentation on climate justice develops speaking fluency and teamwork while cultivating ethical awareness.

The success of such practices depends largely on teacher agency and preparation. McKay and Brown (2016) argue for context-sensitive pedagogy, where teachers are trained not only in language instruction but in sustainability education, equity, and global citizenship.

VII. LIMITATION

The short duration of the intervention (four weeks) restricts the ability to assess long-term language gains or sustained changes in students' global awareness. Also, the sample size (58 students) and focus on one middle school in the UAE limit the generalizability of the findings beyond this specific context. Finally, the study was exploratory in nature, without a control group for comparison, which constrains the strength of causal claims. Future research should therefore employ longitudinal and comparative designs, incorporate more diverse populations, and triangulate findings with additional data sources to strengthen the evidence base on how English pedagogy can support sustainable development goals.

VIII. CONCLUSION

English language pedagogy, when grounded in inclusion and global awareness, can meaningfully contribute to the realization of SDG 4. This study shows that integrating SDG themes into English lessons enhances both communicative competence and sustainability awareness. Nonetheless, the limited duration, modest sample size, and single-country scope indicate the need for further research. Future studies could adopt longitudinal designs, engage larger and more diverse populations, and include cross-country comparisons to better understand how English pedagogy supports sustainable education. Ultimately, classrooms that integrate real-world global issues into language teaching provide a powerful platform for linguistic development and the cultivation of responsible global citizens.

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