



TeachingEnglish

British Council: TeachingEnglish

A podcast series for teachers
of English



**Episode 7: How can I integrate
the Sustainable Development
Goals into my teaching?**

Transcript



Episode 6: How can I integrate the Sustainable Development Goals into my teaching?

Duration: 0:30:17

Chris: Hello, and welcome to Teaching English with the British Council, a podcast in which we try and provide solutions to some of the key questions being asked by English teachers around the world.

Chris: I'm your host, Chris Sowton. In each episode, we address one such question and attempt to answer it in two ways.

In the first part of each episode, we hear from a British Council project, programme or publication about something which is being done to address this issue. Across the 10 episodes of the series, we hear from teachers, trainers and researchers in a wide range of contexts, including India, Lebanon, Uruguay, and South Africa.

In the second part, a leading English expert and practitioner will provide practical solutions which you can immediately try out wherever you work. Each episode of Teaching English is accompanied by a full transcript and show notes. These show notes provide additional information, a glossary of keywords and links to relevant websites.

Chris: Welcome to episode Seven of Teaching English with the British Council in which we will try to answer the question: how can I integrate the sustainable development goals into my teaching?

In 2015, the United Nations adopted what are known as the Sustainable Development Goals, the SDGs, a set of 17 strategies aimed at ending global poverty. These strategies focus on areas such as improving health and education, reducing inequality and food insecurity, promoting gender equality and environmental sustainability and creating accountable and inclusive institutions. As teachers, we have the opportunity to help our students understand more about the world they are living in and what they can do to improve it. From the perspective of language teaching, the SDGs offer rich and interesting content, which can stimulate and motivate students. This said some teachers feel that it is not their job to be teaching things such as the SDGs, that language teaching is somehow separate from this. To try and challenge this view and show how the two can be closely connected, we begin this episode with a poem by Alan Maley.

Alan: This is a poem called 'Teacher'

What do you do?

I'm a teacher.

What do you teach?

People.

What do you teach them?

English.

You mean grammar, verbs, nouns, pronunciation, conjugation, articles and particles, negatives and interrogatives ...?

That too.

What do you mean, 'that too'?

Well, I also try to teach them how to think, and feel – show them inspiration, aspiration, cooperation, participation, consolation, innovation

help them think about globalization, exploitation, confrontation, incarceration, discrimination, degradation, subjugation,

how inequality brings poverty, how intolerance brings violence, how need is denied by greed, how –isms become prisons, how thinking and feeling can bring about healing.

Well, I don't know about that. Maybe you should stick to language, forget about anguish. You can't change the world.

But if I did that, I'd be a cheater, not a teacher.

Chris: This poem appears in a 2017 publication by the British Council entitled 'Integrating Global Issues in the Creative English Language Classroom'. This free resource book, which Alan co-edited, contains hundreds of activities for teachers to use in their classrooms. These activities show how global issues can be a very effective way of teaching English. And in this episode's field report we asked Alan and two other contributors to the book to talk a little bit about this topic.

Sylwia: My article 'End poverty in All its Forms Everywhere' focuses on sustainable development goal number one: no poverty. Poverty in our world is a huge and complicated problem. On the one hand, there is extreme poverty with more than a billion people living in humiliating conditions depriving them of fundamental human dignity. On the other hand, there is extreme wealth and lust for material goods in the Western civilization, that through unlimited exploitation of our planet has led to climate change in the past to the threat of people's survival. Let me quote Mahatma Gandhi: Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed. I deeply believe that teachers responsibility is complex acting to prepare children to cope well in their future lives. In this context, we should not only pass the knowledge of what is happening in today's world, but also develop students multiple intelligences, creative

thinking and skills to lead a safe, fulfilling and happy lives.

Chris: Which of the SDGs does your article focus on?

Alan: On goal 10. That is: Reduce Inequalities Between Countries. Partly because the world is, is so connected now. You only have to take the example of vaccinations against COVID, where in Nigeria which is one of the richest countries in Africa, only about 5% of the population has been vaccinated even once. And in Britain, it's about 80%. That eventually means that possibly there will be new variants, that this virus just moves around. It doesn't have any respect for borders. And so does inequality move around like that. So that's one reason. Second reason is because it's just plain wrong. If you look at statistics, the top 1% of the world population accounts for 20% of the pollution to the planet, the top 10% own 85% of the wealth and then you think about how obscene it is for people like Musk and Bezos to go shooting off into space. Bezos' space trip cost \$5.5 billion for four minutes in space. Just think how many people that would have fed, so you know, these are, it's wrong. I think also because it leads to conflict. These things come, they come back to bite us. Think about slavery in the United States, a gross example of inequality. And it's still, even after the abolition of slavery, look where we are now, we're still fighting that, that battle, it goes on and on and on you never come to an end of it if you're not careful. Another reason is because most of the people we're teaching are young, certainly younger than me, and that means that they have the most to lose if these things are not taken care of. And they have the capacity, because they're young, to do something about it. And I think that's important. And the last reason, I mean there are plenty of other reasons, but I'd like to mention one, which is that teachers have huge influence. They really do. They don't sometimes realise how much influence they have as role models and as, you know, guides and mentors, and they can be a means for change. So I think the, these are some of the reasons why I think, you know, this is this is important.

Carol: Well, my article aims to provide Upper Primary and Lower Secondary learners with an overview and understanding of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The idea is to integrate children's English language skills and vocabulary with the development of critical and creative thinking, a sense of social responsibility and social justice, as well as their ability to express themselves confidently and show a willingness to collaborate with others. 2030, this year for meeting the Sustainable Development Goals is not far away. And all those strides have been taken in some areas and regions of the world, such as in education and gender equality. There is I think, increased public awareness and urgency about what still needs to be done. The climate emergency is one obvious example. It's vital that students and children in particular, learn about the Sustainable Development Goals in a child-friendly and age-appropriate way in order to raise their awareness of global issues that touch their lives no matter where they live, and enable them to become reflective, active and responsible global citizens, both now

and in the future. In my experience, activities, lessons, whole units of work, and self-directed projects, based on content related to the goals can also have an extraordinarily positive impact on children's engagement in English as a school subject, rather than focusing on dull, trivial or meaningless activities to practice particular language structures, vocabulary or grammar. The Sustainable Development Goals provide a relevant and memorable context for a more holistic and personalised approach to children's language education. This has far reaching benefits that include things like empowering children with language to talk about global issues in a confident way, developing their social skills, such as listening, turn taking and cooperating with others, fostering positive attitudes such as empathy, tolerance, and respect for the views of others. And it also provides opportunities for problem solving and for inquiry based learning and encouraging children to think out of the box and come up with their own creative ideas, designs, products and solutions. And also of course, it's an opportunity to integrate values which help to promote reflective thinking, responsible choices, and principled behaviour.

Sylwia: In my article, I present five creative activities based on the varied forms of art, designed for eight- to ten-year-old learners of B1 level. I decided to build stimulating thinking activities around art, as art is a universal means of communication between people, no matter their origin, nationality, or material status. What is more, art develops imagination, sensitivity and empathy absolutely necessary features to cooperate and solve problems. Not only have the developing countries poverty problems leading to serious diseases, in the western world, ruled mainly by money, people suffer enormously from cancer and mental health problems. More and more young people need medical treatment to cure them from depression, and often suicidal attempts. Nowadays, when we face unprecedented challenges, we urgently need to be able to find innovative, new solutions in order to survive. We need to be able to think critically, to reflect what has gone wrong and why. Creative and critical thinking help deal with and overcome problems.

Alan: Very briefly, this is an activity where the students perform a text. I have an extract in the unit, which is from a novel called *I Am A Slave*. And it starts off 'my name is Ayesha, I am 14 years old, I live in London, I am a slave'. So it's written in very simple English. And what happens is that the groups of students, they read the text obviously, we make sure they understand it. And then in groups of about four or five, they perform the text for their fellow students, and they do it in the most effective way that they can, with everybody in the group involved in it.

Carol: A great activity to help children understand the Sustainable Development Goals and recognise the connections between different goals is one that I call Global Goals spidergrams, and this is suitable for 10 to 14-year-olds, actually for older students and even adults too, it's pitched at A2 plus level in terms of the Common European

Framework, and takes about 45 minutes to an hour. Learners can do this as a cooperative activity, in pairs or groups, either face to face or online. And it's also an activity that shows how thinking about the global goals can be integrated with specific language practice, in this case, conditionals. So, for each pair or group, you need a set of selected global goal icons, freely downloadable from the World's Largest Lesson website, and you get children to stick them randomly on a large piece of paper, A3 for example, you then explain and demonstrate that children should take turns to draw lines showing connections between the different global goals and give reasons as they do this. Now, you need to give or elicit several examples with the whole class first, in order to model the thinking process and the language. So, for example, a line joining Goal 2: Zero Hunger and Goal 4: Quality Education might be if children are hungry, then it is difficult for them to concentrate and learn at school. Another example a line joining Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth to goal 1: No Poverty. If people don't have jobs, they are poor. Or another example, a line joining Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation to Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being. If there isn't clean water to drink, or wash your hands with, people get ill. And once children get the idea of this, they begin to come up with their own ideas. And in my experience to start off with, they just can't think of things but then they get on a roll with it and come up with all kinds of things. If people aren't educated, they don't get decent jobs. If people are poor, they may not have access to clean water, and so on. And at the end of the activity, you get the pairs and groups to take turns to report back and compare the global goal spidergrams they have created. And if you're interested in more practice on conditionals, they can also write sentences about their comparisons. And this then leads to a discussion about how global problems and solutions are linked. And you can also get the children to come up with their suggestions for possible solutions.

Chris: Thanks to Sylwia, Carol and Alan for talking about their articles. And you can find a link to this free book in our show notes.

In the second part of this episode, we talk to Margarita Kosior, a teacher, writer, materials creator and storyteller, with a particular interest in how ELT can promote social justice issues. Margarita, thanks for joining us today.

Margarita: Thank you for inviting me, it's my pleasure.

Chris: So, Margarita, perhaps we could begin with just getting your reflections on the field report that you've just heard about the SDG publication.

Margarita: I love the way the reports began with a wonderful poem by Alan Maley, which I really like very much because it describes, it reflects exactly how I imagine education, how I understand the concept of teaching and being a teacher, which for the sake of distinguishing because I often call it educating and educator right so teachers, educators should focus not on the language but also on the messages that the language is meant to convey after all, because teaching a language is not only teaching

the grammar and the vocabulary but teaching how to use them. Teachers, educators should make sure that these messages are full of hope for the future, and that they are positive messages

Chris: And in your own materials, Margarita, how do you maintain that hope, hope can be a difficult thing to maintain sometimes especially in, sort of, COVID or post COVID landscape and so on, and certainly one of your own set of materials on the Sustainable Development Goals with the ELT Calendar of Special Days. How did you do it in there? How did you approach that task but also developing the student's critical understanding of the world in which they're living?

Margarita: So the full title of the publication is 12 Months of Social Issues, ELT Calendar of Special Days. So, the original idea behind this compilation of lesson plans, of teaching materials, they were not originally created with Sustainable Development Goals in mind, but the idea behind was international days. The idea behind international days is very similar to the idea behind Sustainable Development Goals. And if you look at the content placed in the compilation, you will see that each lesson plan in my calculation can be easily paired up with at least one Sustainable Development Goal. To give just a couple of examples, I have a lesson plan on International Day of Persons with Disabilities, which can be easily paired up with goal number 10, which talks about reducing inequalities. World Bicycle Day can be paired up with the goal number 11 Sustainable Cities, and just for the sake of this specific publication, I included lessons for levels B1, B2

Chris: But it is one, or one of the challenges isn't it, I think that sometimes teachers of lower levels students at A1 or A2 beginner elementary levels, they think I can't teach about these issues, I can't talk about social issues, I can't talk about Sustainable Development Goals, it's too difficult, they haven't got the language in which to do that. What would you say to teachers who think that?

Margarita: I think that teaching about Sustainable Development Goals is possible at any level and I think how Carol Read also analysed it very nicely in her part of the report, she also gave a couple of examples of very interesting activities. I remember Global Goals Spidergrams, an idea which I absolutely love and would like to try with my students at some point as well. And I have another idea; being a storyteller. I cannot not mention storytelling as an easy way to tackle just about any issue, I would say. So I think storytelling is the answer and off the top of my head really I could mention a couple of titles. The first one is definitely Malala's Magic Pencil. This is a story which I have used with my students, and it works very well and it engages them. Basically, I've used the story of Malala with students of any age and any level of English right. So, the story can be used to introduce goal number 4 which is to ensure quality education, but not only that because she also mentions the issue of gender equality. She says at

some point that she, she'll with her magic pencil she would like to draw the world, a peaceful world in which boys and girls are presented together as equals.

Chris: In that example, even if the input text is relatively simple you can make those extra tasks more complex according to the level of the students that you have in front of you on that particular day.

Margarita: Yes, but I would definitely emphasise the fact that younger students, but only younger students, I think images appeal to all of us, but I think that images are especially important for younger students in this case when we talk about Sustainable Development Goals. One of the presenters in the report mentioned using art, it helps convey difficult messages in an easy to interpret manner.

Chris: What using art also enables you to do is to allow students who are perhaps not as strong linguistically to still share their ideas but in a different way than they have done before.

Margarita: Yes, absolutely. I think that talk about art and then create art and they talk about their creations like creating art can be the first step before they actually talk about it, okay, it's an icebreaker

Chris: Helps almost to normalise some of the issues that we're talking about as well. They're not there they're not something difficult that we shouldn't be talking about that but they're part and parcel of our everyday lives. Why do you think the English language classroom is such a positive space for these sorts of issues to be discussed and developed amongst students?

Margarita: At some point one of the speakers in the report said that, why teach Sustainable Development Goals and they said most people are young so they have the most to lose, so they should be the ones to learn about global issues about global problems. And this instantly reminded me of that memorable speech that Sir David Attenborough gave at the Climate Summit in Glasgow, in which he said that perhaps the fact that people who are most affected by climate change are no longer some future generation, somebody in the future but they are the people who are actually living and maybe listening to the speech now. So maybe this gives us the power, the energy to actually rewrite the story to do something to, he said, turn that tragedy into triumph.

Chris: And we've got a link to your excellent book in our show notes Margarita, but it would be really interesting and helpful if you could perhaps just talk us through one of

the special days that you talk about and how you link learning about that special day with language acquisition.

Margarita: Alright, so I have a couple favourites here. But I'm going to talk to you about the example of the International Day of Charity, which is on the fifth of September. That's one of my favourite days because I always encourage young people and I'm really happy to see young people supporting a cause, supporting a charity and becoming volunteers, like children also volunteers, we have volunteers at a stray animal shelter

Chris: It sounds like they have no choice Margarita!

Margarita: So yeah, so in the same way, I like to influence, influence my students and also students whose teachers decide to use the materials right. So that's why I enjoy creating this lesson plan very much. So it's the lesson for a B2 level so it's, it starts with an activity, generating some vocabulary, but it also engages students in some reading and speaking tasks and develops, enhances their 21st century skills. So for example, they work in groups, they develop their negotiation skills, but also research skills just to give a couple of examples. So we start with this activity, generate some vocabulary and then the teacher asks students a few questions about helping others, how do you feel when you help others? Do you ever give to charity? Is it better to give time or money, to invest time or money and why? Do they have a favourite charity? We talk about types of charities and then students work in groups. So there is student A, student B and student C in each group. Student A gets a text about The Great Orchestra of Christmas charity, which is a non-profit in Poland and I'm from Poland. So it's a charity which I supported all my life, since I was a teenager when it started. Okay, then student B reads a text about a charity based in Spain taking care of abandoned dogs, and student C reads a text about Lifting Hands International, a charity dedicated to helping refugees in various places in the world. And then they discuss which charity they would like to, so they talk to each other about the charities that they read about and then they discuss together and negotiate which one they would like to support and why. So this is part of the, of the lesson. There is a lot of discussion about, later about, why people don't want to support charities, and how we can make sure that we donate money, that this money actually goes to this cause because there is so much fraud going on, people can easily become victims of this kind of charity fraud let's say

Chris: It's a really interesting question for a lot of students, because it may be one they'd never thought about before, to actually talk about why different charities do different things or why different people might be interested in supporting one charity rather than another. So it's really, if they're at a B2 level they're presumably, you know, sort of teenagers and so they're really starting to engage with these things in their in their own minds as well.

Margarita: Yeah, definitely. As a follow up task, I think I have find an existing charity, maybe a charity in your area. And also there is a question so where what charity would you like to start and why? So yeah, a lot of if you could take action, like real action, what kind of action would you take?

Chris: And again, that may spill over into their actual lives as well. It may be something that's motivating them through that research, they identify charities and then contact them or want to be part of what they're doing.

Margarita: Yes, absolutely. I think it is important for young, young people more and more important for young, young people to feel that they contribute, that they do something good for somebody else, a person or an animal. Like I participated in within the scope of my appeals of strays campaign about abandoned, neglected companion animals. I talked to a group of students about what I do as a volunteer at the shelter, and one of the students you meet just said like, we would like to visit the shelter where you volunteer, is it possible? So there was a spark in their eye that they want to do something to make things better

Chris: And it's also just saying to them, it's okay you can do that because they may not have any idea that they're allowed to visit that is sometimes for a teacher who's in a position of authority who that student likes and respects for a teacher to say that can be very empowering for a young person.

Margarita: Exactly, that they can be those role models, because in their mind very often it's adults who are role models, and they are followers, but I try to explain to them that they can be role models for adults and for their peers as well.

Chris: Absolutely. Margarita, thank you so much for your time today.

Margarita: Oh thank you.

Chris: Although the Sustainable Development Goals might seem quite remote or abstract in our daily lives, one of our main jobs as teachers is to prepare students for their future lives. This does not mean we should only talk about these issues, but it is important to discuss them in some way. Indeed, many of the issues related to the SDGs are of interest and vital importance to our learners and they can actually be very motivating for them. We should therefore see these issues as opportunities rather than as obstacles.

Thank you for listening to this episode of teaching English with the British Council. We hope you enjoyed it. Please do like subscribe, and review. And please do remember to download the show notes and transcripts. Join us next time for Episode Eight, where we will try to answer the question: how can I use different languages in my teaching? Until then, goodbye.