Sustainable Development Goals: reinvigorating the immediacy of the underlying issues and how SDGs can be used constructively in the Japanese university classroom.

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ABSTRACT

It is the aim of this article to contribute towards the growing body of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) literature and inject a sense of urgency and authenticity into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a powerful tool and are becoming more prominent in Japan, but the facts do not support their success. Their predecessors, the MDGs failed and almost certainly so will many of the SDGs. In actuality, many aspects of our social and environmental life will almost certainly get worse, not better, as 2030 quickly approaches. I feel this reality needs to be communicated more effectively and honestly with our learners. This paper proposes two university-level lessons to bridge this gap. We must approach these essential crises of sustainability head-on and not shy away from the task at hand. I hope the lesson ideas presented here can play a role in the encouragement of this.

KEYWORDS: Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), Group Debate, Student-led Seminar, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

1. Introduction

SDGs are growing in visibility in Japan and contain many rich ideas for how to raise the awareness of our learners and integrate sustainability into their daily lives (Griffiths & Jodoin, 2023). Unfortunately, as this article will clarify, the

facts do not support their success by their proposed realization date of 2030. As a recent World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Living Planet Report makes clear, it would take 1.5 Earths to produce the resources necessary to support humanity's current ecological footprint (WWF, 2014). This is a long way from achieving sustainability. As such, meaningful and honest ESD is essential to raise much needed awareness of the perilous ecological situation we all face and inject urgency into the concrete social, environmental, and economic issues that impact our students (Jodoin & Singer, 2019). Before the SDGs, the United Nations (UN) devised the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 in a bid to tackle extreme poverty and hunger, prevent deadly diseases, and expand primary education to all children (UNDP, 2015). While these targets were commendable and did produce substantial results in some of the eight goals they set out to achieve, as McCloskey concludes, unfortunately, 'MDGs failed to meet all of their targets' (2015, p. 186). Leal Filho feels one of the main reasons that the MDGs did not succeed was that 'they were not visible enough and not as present in international discussions and debates as they should have been' (2020, p. 507). While there is a very distinct possibility that SDGs will also fail, it is the aim of this paper and the ardent view of its author that we as educators, attempting to inspire the future leaders of tomorrow, must try our very best to promote these vital issues so, for the sake of all our futures, the SDGs have the best chance to be visible and make lasting change.

Visibility, however, is only the first step. As I have been researching for this article, it has become apparent to me that SDG promotional signage is increasingly commonplace throughout universities and in Tokyo and Japan in general. When I ask classes, everyone is vaguely aware of SDGs, but very rarely can they name a specific goal, nor do they have many concrete ideas for how they could be realised in Japan or the world as a whole. More especially, learners certainly did not consider that SDGs could fail and that the majority of their targets will almost certainly not be realised by 2030 (Leal Filho, 2020). I strongly believe we need to arrest this casual, often indifferent, viewpoint and seek to instil a greater sense of realism and urgency in our ESD content. While Japan

grapples with the existential crisis of a dramatically declining birth rate, the world's population is projected to increase by 2 billion people from 7.7 to 9.7 billion in 2050 (United Nations, 2019). This dramatic increase in population, of course, places additional stress on humanity's capacity for providing food, fresh water, land, energy, and other resources essential to our survival on this planet. It is in this context that the UN (2017) developed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which consists of 17 goals; these are shown below in Fig. 1. One of the main stumbling blocks for their success is a lack of serious commitment from wealthy nations and international corporations to eradicate poverty in poor nations (Sengupta, 2018). As Guillaume Lafortune, Vice-President of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, makes clear, 'the main obstacle to achieving these goals is the lack of political will from some of the world's most powerful states, which refuse to mobilise financial flows, technology, and international cooperation for sustainable development' (2025). To question the SDGs even further, we must be open to the notion that 'it is already well established that economic growth is not sustainable and human progress is possible without economic growth' (Leal Filho et al., 2018, p. 133). If we continue to assume sustainability and economic advancement are compatible and do not relate persistent levels of poverty and climate change to the dominant neoliberal economic model, then the SDGs are doomed to follow the same path the MDGs did (McCloskey, 2015). These concerns outlined above are paramount and, while they are difficult and uncomfortable truths, if we neglect them in our classroom practice, we do our learners a great injustice. The goal of this article is to reinvigorate these underlying issues and give some practical examples for how they can be used constructively in the Japanese university classroom.

Fig. 1: The Sustainable Development Goals
(Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2020, p. 4).

2. Literature Review

Despite an increase in overall visibility and recent interest in SDGs in applied linguistics, it could be said that, there has been scant attention paid to their application in the English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom and how this can impact their success (Mambu, 2022; Jodoin & Singer, 2020). In the same vein as Underwood (2024), in this academic journal last year, I hope to add to this growing body of ESD literature and encourage and embolden learners to tackle these paramount concerns head-on. As Kwee identifies, 'teachers generally feel reluctant to incorporate sustainable development in their teaching due to a lack of skills, knowledge and interest, particularly language teachers' (2021, p. 1). This initially seems understandable, but we all have a vested interest in the consequential global and local issues which surround us. It is of my opinion that we should all strive to engage with these crucial issues of sustainability both inside and outside of the classroom. SDGs offer a vast array of topics that can be tailored to personal preference and be grounded in teacher and learner experience to promote meaningful and tangible lessons (Bekteshi & Xhaferi,

2020; Jodoin & Singer, 2019). I hope this paper can play a part in encouraging this. There are, however, many challenges which face us. Dobson's (1996) survey of the literature found more than 300 available definitions of sustainable development and sustainability, many of these diverge greatly. This demonstrates clearly how it is our role as educators to encourage students to unpack, question and deconstruct, not simply build our lessons on this supposedly solid foundation of 'sustainability'. In fact, 'sustainable development' can be seen in an oxymoronic light. This is explained quite eloquently by Jickling and Wals, 'comparing the sustaining of ecological processes with the sustaining of consumerism reveals inconsistencies and incompatibilities of values, yet many people, conditioned to think that sustainable development is inherently good, will promote both at the same time' (2008, p. 14). It is important to be aware that the 'development' inherent in a neoliberal ideology, which underpins many of the governments and corporations so keen to be seen to be a part of the SDG campaign, could be said to be that of private capital accumulation, market leadership and economic dominance. This neoliberal imperative, where the drive to consume is greater than the drive to sustain, must be seen as a fundamental part of the problem, not a path towards positive change for the majority. Many governments and corporations adopt SDG signage and rhetoric as, 'a defensive response and a strategy of obfuscating the structural sources of these manifestations of social injustice' (Bello, 2015, p. 155). This is crucial to acknowledge if we want to get to the heart of the matter and deliver honest ESD in our classrooms.

Not only is there a certain amount of disingenuousness and even deceit from some governments and corporations who claim an allegiance with the SDGs, but it is now becoming clear that we are moving towards a world where some of the most powerful political and business leaders on the planet are openly hostile to these goals. This is the reality we must convey to our classes. During the 2008 financial crisis the U.S. and U.K. once again failed to reach the forty-five-year-old target of 0.7% of their Gross National Income (GNI) for Official Development Assistance (ODA) with 0.18% and 0.43%, respectively, yet were

able to find a king's ransom to bail out the failed banking sector (McCloskey, 2015). Gordon Brown, who has since done a lot of prominent work for the UN, and Barack Obama have often been portrayed as liberal, or even left-wing by their political opponents, yet when they had the chance to let parts of the private sector die by the same free market philosophy they themselves so aggressively espoused, they instead introduced rescue packages to keep the banks afloat. In the years that followed, this led to belt-tightening austerity programmes to pay for the bailout. In the years preceding the crisis, profits were privatised, then, due to this unprecedented government financial injection of public money, the debts were then socialised. While this may seem like a bit of a tangent, I believe it is an excellent example to illustrate how centrist leaders can pay lip service to good causes such as economic disparity, SDGs, Net Zero by 2050, etc., but when they are faced with implementing them in practice, they will kick the can down the road and fight for their own political survival. As Naomi Klein makes clear, many political and business leaders are perpetually 'using words as intended, yet with no intention of acting on them' (2023, p. 155).

We should not teach SDGs to make ourselves feel better or give credence and trust to the UN or our elected political leaders, but to establish an immediacy, and even an anger, in our students to encourage them to be aware of and question why their long-term social and environmental future is being jeopardised for private profit. The cold hard reality we now face is where the apparent leader of the free world can address the United Nations General Assembly with the following statement: 'renewable energy projects and climate change are the greatest con job ever perpetrated on the world. All of these predictions made by the United Nations and many others, often for bad reasons, were wrong' (Trump, as cited in Tait, 2025). Compare this directly to SDG sub-goal #4.7, which aims to, 'by 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's

contribution to sustainable development' (UN, 2015, p. 17). I do not want to be so explicit in my pejorative assessment of the staggering naivety and childlike generalised innocuousness of the language of the UN, but I feel these two divergent quotes illustrate aptly how little chance the SDGs have of succeeding by 2030. We must guard against this utopianism in our classroom and ground our work in concrete examples that impact our learners' lives. António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, called this year 'a masterclass in human destruction' (UN, 2024), and it is through this lens by which we must impart honest and meaningful ESD. It is in this grim reality where our classes take place. It is not our job to shy away from such looting of the natural world and contempt for scientific evidence. We must face it head-on and realise that the very fate of the planet and the wellbeing of the majority of the people living on it is at stake. Some productive classroom ideas and lessons will be offered in the second half of this paper, and I hope they prove to be illuminating and practical tools in the dark times through which we may well be heading.

3. Methodology

In the following section of this paper, I will propose two university English class lesson plans which I feel are compatible with the concerns outlined above. As Arslan and Curle clarify, 'guidance is required for the integration of sustainable development in educational practices' (2021, p. 6), and in addition to this I feel the ideas outlined in this article have a sincere commitment to topics and content that have social, economic, and environmental value (Amin & Greenwood, 2018; Jodoin and Singer, 2019). Jodoin (2020) outlines three competencies for ESD best-practice: (1) a student-centred approach, (2) problem-solving and critical thinking in real-world sustainability issues, and (3) communicating environmental and sustainability issues in a meaningful, accessible way. I have considered these suggestions carefully, and the following section of this paper hopes to bring some ideas to bridge this gap. These are the four general stages in the teaching of these lessons: (1) introduction of the task, (2) production (pre-task) phase, (3) performance, and (4) examples and feedback. I will not explain these four stages in full detail, as their relevance should

be apparent from the description below and their context in the explanation. Also, the focus of this article is on the content, rather than the method. However, if you are interested, I would recommend you read section three of a previous article which focuses explicitly on the methodology (Marsh, 2022).

4. Procedure

4.1 SDG debate.

1. Introduction of the task: Brainstorm SDGs on the board. You will often find that students cannot name many, or any, specific SDGs, so write one or two more accessible ones on the board in preparation, perhaps zero hunger and life below water, and, depending on their familiarity with the topic, give the class a few minutes to research to find some more.

2. Production (pre-task) phase: Once the most accessible/popular SDGs have been elicited from the class, you need to have individuals choose an SDG they want to debate about. Groups of 4/5 learners works best, with 2/3 students feeling it is achievable (for), while 2/3 feel that it is not (against). It is important to split the class into these specific factions, but reassure them that this is not an aggressive debate where one side will win, but an open discussion to promote criticality and reflexivity. Give the class 20-30 minutes to work in their 2/3-person teams to think/research and write five or more reasons or examples why their SDG will or will not be successful. Encourage the class to find concrete examples from Tokyo, Japan, or specific areas of the world. They will often give quite generalised examples if you do not make this clear. A suitable example you could provide to stimulate the class could be from SDG 3: good health and well-being. Highly processed foods (HPFs)/ultra-processed foods (UPFs) accounts for more than one-quarter of the energy intake of Japanese children and adolescents, and higher consumption of HPFs/UPFs was associated with lower diet quality (Shinozaki et al., 2024). Most learners are quick to extol a generalised positive impression of Japanese food and health, and this information may go some way to deconstruct their view that good health is not necessarily only an issue confined to lower Human Development Index (HDI)

countries abroad, but can also be found in Japan itself. A more advanced example could be from countries and their support for UN multilateralism. In general, I would certainly say, many learners are quite positive about America and often relatively negative about China. It could possibly be eye-opening for them to know that in actuality, from 2020 to 2024, the U.S. voted with the international majority only 30% of the time, withdrew from the Paris Agreement in 2025 and rejects the SDGs, while China voted with the majority over 70% of the time and has played a significant role in reducing the global cost of renewable energy (Lafortune, 2025).

3. Performance: Next, it is important to elicit some basic debate structure on the board for guidance and bring the differing factions together to sit in their whole debate groups of 4/5. So, for example, a class of 16 learners would suitably have 4 debates taking place simultaneously. This helps to soften the pressure of the teacher or other class members directly listening to them and creates a more relaxed, communicative atmosphere. This debate lesson could, however, be expanded to become a speaking assessment in the middle of the classroom with the rest of the class and the teacher as the designated audience. Please see a previous article for further information about how this could be conducted (Marsh, 2020). In the case of this standalone lesson example, however, many classes will find this task to be quite difficult, and the emphasis should be on fluency, asking questions and encouraging everyone to take part.

4. Examples and feedback: If time permits, encourage a volunteer from each group to give some examples to the whole class. Again, questions are important to show engagement and encourage negotiation of meaning and accommodation skills. It is not important to establish the winner of any of the debates, but to reinforce criticality and deepen an appreciation that most SDGs are well-meaning, but face many obstacles and challenges if they are to succeed.

4.2 Choose an SDG and prepare a 10-minute student-led seminar leadership task.

1. Introduction of the task: Brainstorm environmental or social problems on the board. Get one or two examples as a class, and then let the students work together and research on their phone or PC for a few minutes. Then elicit ten or more problems from the class. Some examples could be: microplastics, food loss, deforestation, light pollution, noise pollution, desertification, gender inequality, suicide, etc. This should generate the inspiration to fuel the class. Now, have learners choose an SDG that is of interest to them.

2. Production (pre-task) phase: Their job will then be to introduce their chosen SDG, give their opinion about it and ask questions to lead a 10-minute seminar. I would recommend the introduction be around 1 minute and then they will require around 6-8 questions for the remaining 9-minute group seminar. It is a good idea to provide some fruitful examples to encourage the class. A suitable example could concern SDG 1: no poverty. Often learners are predisposed to seeing poverty and hunger as an 'outside' problem and quite commonly offer generic, even crude, assumptions about starvation in Africa, etc. We must try to arrest and deconstruct this. It is easy enough to find some basic percentages through a google search to illustrate, for example, that Japan's relative poverty rate is higher than the average for Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Japan's phenomenon of "hidden" poverty, particularly among the elderly, and an increasing socioeconomic divide may perhaps surprise some learners and encourage them to seek examples which have a stronger connection to Japan and, therefore, their lives. This is one of the main goals of this lesson. I will not be specific here or show the references, as this information is easy enough to find online, and I encourage you to select issues which are personal to your individual worldview. These kinds of examples should hopefully provoke critical thinking and motivate learners to find authentic real-life information which could potentially question their underlying assumptions. With regard to the seminar questions, you should emphasise that this is a flexible discussion where they should try to connect their chosen SDG

to the lives of the fellow seminar participants and therefore make the questions accessible, rather than taking an overly formal or top-down approach. Their role is to inspire and stimulate a group discussion, not formally teach the group what they researched. Basically, open questions which stimulate discussion work better than closed questions with a fixed answer. They could additionally give their opinion of whether they think the SDG is achievable or not and teach any new words or concepts they learn during this 20-30 minute research period.

3. Performance: The performance stage of this lesson could take multiple classes depending on your preference. Basically, you split the class into groups of four or five learners, and in each group there will be one designated leader. The leader gives their introduction to inspire and inform the following seminar questions. The whole group seminar should last around 10 minutes, and then at this stage you can rotate the leader to the next group to repeat the process with different participants, or change the leader and forego the rotation, depending on time constraints and personal preference. For a more detailed discussion of how a leader-led seminar task like this could be expanded or even become a formal assessment, please see this previous article by the same author (Marsh, 2019).

4. Examples and feedback: There may be very little time for examples for the whole class to listen to, but the best kind of feedback, for me, would be to praise thought-provoking, open questions which encourage these crucial issues of sustainability to resonate with their fellow classmates and their lives.

5. Conclusion

There are times when I feel I am walking north on a southbound train. I teach the lessons presented in this paper with passion and vigour in a bid to inspire our learners to see the seriousness of the situation at hand and how the actions of today will lead to the consequences of tomorrow. Yet, I walk through countless corridors and past hundreds of classrooms with their lights on in the middle of the day and the air conditioning perpetually blaring, often even when they

are vacant. Unnecessary plasma TVs adorn every wall, excessive plastic signage and all the modern, unrecyclable trappings of contemporary Tokyo are normalised through their ubiquity in my places of work. This is not just in Aoyama Gakuin, but in all the universities I work for. We must not be peddlers of utopian illusion, which has little in common with the disintegrating ecological order which surrounds us, nor stooges, complicit in a sanitised corporate takeover. There are less than four years left until the SDG 2030 targets expire. Our job as university educators should not be to sugarcoat the truth or consistently talk about goals for the future, but to be clear that the majority of SDG targets will not be realised and many powerful people and overriding economic imperatives have no interest in sustainability and certainly do not see it through the paradigm of an existential crisis, which it is. I hope the ideas presented in this paper can play a role in encouraging us to face up to this uncomfortable truth and act with urgency and authenticity for the future of our fragile planet. I will finish with a final quote from the very same UN Assembly where Donald Trump made his wilfully ignorant and intentionally inflammatory remarks I referenced earlier in this paper. These words from Vanuatu's ambassador to the UN however, are far more insightful and filled with the required level of intent we need to convey to our learners:

> We call on all states to join the group of nations proposing to include ecocide as the fifth independent crime of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court....We believe that criminalisation of the severest forms of environmental destruction at the international level can and should play a crucial role not only in deterring harm, but also in protecting rights for present and future generations (Odo Tevi).

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