

## Designing Language Tasks for Sustainability

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### Abstract

This paper describes the experience of practising teachers in designing a school textbook series for English that is aligned with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, key competencies, and learning objectives. We analyse sample tasks from two books of the series, to show how it is possible to integrate content across the language curriculum while encouraging and building competencies like critical thinking and showing empathy with and solidarity for those suffering from injustice. We make a case for using language tasks that can serve as a powerful curricular instrument that engenders changes at multiple levels: cognitive, social-emotional, and behavioural.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Goals, New Education Policy-2020, education for sustainable development, syllabus design, language learning materials

### Introduction

The UN General Assembly reaffirms education for sustainable development as an integral element of the Sustainable Development Goal on quality education and as a key enabler of all the other Sustainable Development Goals. (UN General Assembly Resolution 72/222, as cited in UNESCO, 2020, p. 8). The Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) framework instils knowledge, skills, values, and agency among learners which enable them to meet global challenges like conservation of biodiversity, climate change, sustainable use of resources, and inclusivity. Learners are empowered to be a part of actions taken to transform society and take care of the planet. Education, public awareness, and training were formally recognized as significant means

of implementing sustainable development in Chapter 36 “*Promoting Education, Public Awareness & Training*” of Agenda 21, the first global action plan to implement sustainable development in 1992 (UN Documents Cooperation Circles, n.d.). UNESCO works towards these goals by addressing five main areas which include advancing policy, transforming learning environments, building capacities of educators, empowering and mobilizing youth, and accelerating local-level action.

The article addresses the yawning gap between policy and materials and attempts to integrate the 17 SDGs into a syllabus of English for primary and secondary levels. It weaves together ideas proposed by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), UN Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), the Indian National Education Policy (NEP) (2020), and the intricacies of task design. Transforming learning environments by embedding sustainability issues into the curriculum regardless of the subject is a step in the right direction towards achieving holistic sustainable education.

### **Sustainable Development Goals**

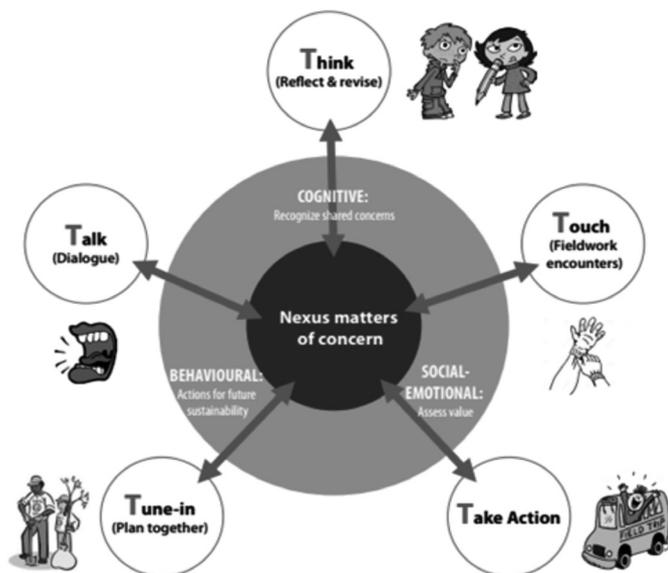
The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent a universal call to “redirect humanity towards a sustainable path” (UNESCO, 2017) by ending poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring prosperity for all by 2030. Introduced in 2015 by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, the SDGs, described as “an ambitious and universal agenda to transform our world”, build upon the preceding Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and comprise 17 interconnected objectives and their 169 associated targets (UN, 2015). This transition from MDGs to SDGs reflects a broader understanding of development that integrates economic, social, and environmental dimensions within a holistic framework, thus reflecting the complexities of contemporary global challenges.

One of the fundamental principles underpinning the SDGs is the recognition of the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. This holistic approach acknowledges that progress in one area cannot be achieved at the expense of another and emphasizes the importance of integrated solutions to complex global challenges. Education plays a pivotal role in advancing the SDGs by empowering individuals with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to contribute to sustainable development. As

articulated in UNESCO’s Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) framework, education is not only a means to achieve the SDGs but also an essential component of sustainable development itself.

Figure 1 below illustrates the interconnectedness between the learning objectives and competencies.

**Figure 1: WESSA in UNESCO Education for SDGs (UNESCO (2017))**



### ESD Through the Language Curriculum

The role of education as an instrument to achieve sustainable development is not a new idea. It has long been recognized as a critical factor in addressing environmental and sustainability issues and ensuring human well-being (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2016, p. 9). Sustainable Development Goal 4 aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UN, 2015). Under this goal, target 4.7 aims to “ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including...human rights, gender equality” (UN, 2015). ESD is a holistic and transformative approach to education that helps individuals develop ‘key cross-cutting competencies’ (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2016,) to reflect critically on the impact of their

actions on society, economy, culture, and environment both on a local and global scale. It integrates learning content with specific outcomes, pedagogy, and the learning environment.

From the perspective of the language curriculum, integrating the different SDGs into the curriculum creates opportunities to bring the outside world into the classroom and promotes increased interaction between learners and their environment. It shifts the focus from a traditional teacher-centred pedagogy to a learner-centred one that promotes a deeper linkage between language learning in formal and informal settings using themes, topics, and tasks that leverage learners' existing knowledge about issues of sustainability and promotes experiential learning helping develop linguistic competencies in the process.

The tasks described in this article, therefore, are an attempt to democratise language tasks by bringing in pressing issues of sustainability concerning us all. The tasks have a two-fold objective: (i) to address the language competencies described by the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) (NCERT, 2023), and (ii) to incorporate issues, themes and competencies as outlined by UNESCO (2017). In doing so, we not only liberate the language tasks from bearing the sole responsibility of providing the language learning experience but also enable a language task to be a holistic experience encompassing the non-linguistic aspects of life which otherwise are addressed as water-tight compartments. Communication in the classroom employing content-based themes that are not language-centric reduces the burden of language learning, creates a communication-focused learning environment, and is a good means of developing language competence (Prabhu, 1987).

### **NEP and Global Citizenship Education**

In 2020, the National Education Policy of India taking inspiration from Global Citizenship Education, proposed "to develop knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions that support responsible commitment to human rights, sustainable development and living, and global well-being, thereby reflecting a truly global citizen." The policy suggests that "environmental awareness and sensitivity towards its conservation and sustainable development" need to be integrated in the curriculum to make environment education "an integral part of school curricula" (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2020, p. 23). It is

envisaged that India will aim to impart Global Citizenship Education, a holistic approach that prepares learners for global challenges and prepares them to actively contribute to “a peaceful, tolerant, inclusive and secure world” (United Nations, n.d.). In the modern world of hyperconnectivity, this will prepare young Indians for contemporary global challenges by “empower(ing) learners to become aware of and understand global issues and to become active promoters of more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure, and sustainable societies” (MHRD, 2020, p. 37).

There are various ways in which the NEP (2020) and National Curriculum Framework for Secondary Education (2023) propose to impart Global Citizenship Education. Some of them are as follows:

1. Training for teaching and evaluating children with disabilities and special interests or talents.
2. Learner-centred and collaborative methodologies.
3. Credit-based courses and projects on community engagement and service, environment education, and value-based education in Higher Educational Institutions.
4. Principles and practices of inclusion across various stages of development.
5. Sustainability-related content across the board, for instance, sustainable agricultural practices in environmental sciences (NCERT, 2023, p. 349), the use of papier mache in Arts (NCERT, 2023, p. 373) and sustainable food production in Biology (NCERT, 2023, p. 484).
6. “The use of local resources for learning, including language, practices, experts, histories, environment, and more, as rich sources of illustrations or case studies” (NCERT, 2023, p. 144).

### **The Textbook and Tasks**

Tasks as conceptualized in particular sections of the textbook series such as *post-reading*, *Critical Thinking and Self-Awareness*, and *Sustainable Development Corner*, vary from the traditional definition of the task as one that involves problem-solving. The tasks here are designed/ conceptualised in such a way that two aspects/skills are addressed - every task aims at achieving linguistic competence by addressing one of the skills (e.g., reading, speaking) and one of the SDGs. Thus there

is a carefully designed/deliberate attempt to develop two kinds of competencies, i.e., communicative linguistic competence as suggested by the NCERT and sustainable development literacy as mandated by UNESCO.

The approach adopted towards Critical Thinking is not just employing problem-solving but also analyses, syntheses, and/or evaluation of information gathered through a reading of the text, learners' experiences, and reflection. Learners are encouraged to go beyond their own experience and think of culture, ethnicity, gender, religion, and so on. The level of critical thinking introduced in specific grades is determined by the cognitive maturity of the learners in the grade.

In this paper, we discuss two tasks from a textbook series titled 'Starlings' for Grades 1 to 8 designed to integrate the SDGs into a syllabus of English. Every book in the series was authored by a practising teacher. Closely aligned with the National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 and the National Education Policy 2020, the series adopts a samagra (holistic) competency-based approach (Vijaya, 2024). At the outset, it was felt that only one task in each lesson would address SDGs. However, as the authors began working with materials, themes about the 17 SDGs began to weave themselves into the fabric of the entire series, across lessons, across tasks. The protean themes gradually became all pervasive. The seed for this process of organic growth of sustainability issues and themes in the series was sown when we embarked on the process of text selection for reading, writing, listening, and speaking and task development for each of the books in the series.

Of the eight books in this series, tasks were chosen for this article from grades 4 (Raman, 2024) and 7 (Vijaya, 2024). In keeping with the NEP 2020 and SDG guidelines, the various themes in the textbook were chosen such that they could also be mapped onto the SDGs, key competencies, and learning objectives. We now present and discuss the two tasks in terms of the themes covered and the SDGs, key competencies for sustainability, and corresponding learning objectives that they map onto.

#### **Task 1: Grade 4**

**SDG 10:** Reduced inequalities: Reduce inequality within and among countries

**Lesson Theme:** Inclusivity, overcoming challenges

## Lesson Overview

This unit titled *Never Give Up* is based on the theme of inclusivity and inequalities such as poverty, gender discrimination, physical disabilities, and learning difficulties people face. The three short texts were carefully chosen so that learners would be introduced to the notion of “different dimensions of inequality” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 30), the cognitive learning objective for SDG 10. Of the three, two were short news articles, one about MC Mary Kom, who overcame poverty and gender discrimination to become India’s boxing phenomenon and the other about Emanuel Yeboah, the Ghanaian cyclist who rode 644 kilometres to prove that ‘disability does not mean inability’. The third was an information box to accompany the main texts and briefly discusses dyslexia, a difficulty with reading, writing, and maths. Texts on physical and social inequalities are quite common in textbooks. However, texts on learning difficulties do not often find a space in textbooks, and its inclusion as an information box, while being a welcome change, also points to a general reluctance to make it a part of the main reading text.

The texts are followed by post-reading questions that not only elicit personal opinions from the students but also require them to apply what they have read to real-life situations. In the *Let’s Listen* section, learners listened to an interview with an athlete and completed a table to help them draw up a daily routine. In the *Let’s Talk* section, they had to speak with a family member who had faced a challenge and had overcome it or turned it into a strength. Writing a short description of a person they admire, after completing a description wheel, formed the writing task in the *Let’s Write* section.

We now discuss the sample *Critical Thinking and Self-Awareness* task that was designed to align with SGD 10, the key competencies and learning objectives. The task described here has been excerpted/extracted from the English textbook for Grade 4. As stated earlier, the themes for each of the units were carefully selected to mesh closely with the SDGs.

### Key Competencies for Sustainability

*Collaboration Competency:* the ability to learn from others; to understand and respect the needs, perspectives, and actions of others (empathy); to understand, relate to and be sensitive to others (empathic leadership).

*Critical Thinking Competency:* The ability to question norms, practices, and opinions (UNESCO, 2017, p. 10).

## Learning Objectives

*Cognitive Learning Objectives:* The learner knows the different dimensions of inequality.

*Social-Emotional Learning Objectives:* The learner can feel empathy for and show solidarity with people who are discriminated against; The learner becomes aware of inequalities in their surroundings as well as in the wider world (UNESCO, 2017, p. 30).

**Figure 2:** *Critical Thinking and Self-Awareness Task from English Textbook for Grade 4*

### Critical Thinking and Self-Awareness



Get into pairs. One of you will be blindfolded and the other will be the guide. Your teacher will help you with this. The person with the blindfold will have to walk from one end of the classroom to the other with the help of the guide.

- A. Once you complete your activity, get back to your places and prepare to tell the class about your experience. You can use these questions to help you.

person with the blindfold
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How did it feel to walk with your eyes closed and to depend on someone else?</li> <li>2. What difficulties did you face and how did you overcome them with your guide's help?</li> </ol>
guide
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How did it feel to offer help and guide your partner?</li> <li>2. What strategies did you use to help your partner navigate safely?</li> </ol>

- B. Do you think it is important to treat everyone with fairness and empathy, regardless of their abilities? Why?

The task which is presented in the role-play format, requires learners to assume roles. Through this role play learners become aware of the challenges that visually impaired people face as they go about the business of daily living and the inequalities that exist in their surroundings as well as in the world around them, one of the social-emotional objectives of SDG 10. Those who are blindfolded gain an understanding of what it is like to depend on others, and how it feels to be treated roughly or gently with understanding. They also develop insights into how difficult it is to navigate a space that sighted people are accustomed to, without having any concessions made for them. Similarly, those who act as guides get a sense of what it takes for someone to have 'blind' faith or trust in them and depend on them to lead them to safety. Learners learn

how to be more accommodating and considerate of others 'disabilities or 'inabilities'.

The role play emphasizes the importance of collaboration, one of the key competencies for sustainability, as the goal of reaching the other side of the classroom can only be achieved if the 'blindfolded' and the 'guide' work together. It sets the platform for a wider discussion on the importance of collaborating to achieve personal and social goals. The collaboration competency also emphasises the ability to understand and respect the needs of others as well as facilitate problem-solving. By finding ways to guide their peers safely, learners are constantly engaged in arriving at solutions for problems that might arise (in the context of the activity) such as misunderstanding an instruction, miscalculating the amount of space available, and so on. This activity therefore realizes two goals: the collaboration competency and the social-emotional objective.

On the completion of the role play, guiding questions are provided to the learners to help them reflect critically on their experience, another key competency for sustainability. Learners have to reflect on their emotions, the strategies they used to help fellow learners, and the challenges they faced in the entire process. This is followed up by another critical thinking question which requires learners to question existing practices and opinions and take a position. Through the process of critical reflection, collaboration learners become aware of the inequities and inequalities that exist in society today. Through tasks such as the one discussed above, learners can create a more just and equitable world, one that argues for and supports the discourse on sustainability.

**Task 2: SDG 16: Definitions of Justice: Retributive and Rehabilitative** (UNESCO 2017, p. 42)

**Lesson Theme:** Concept of home vs. prison, justice, empathy with prisoners, prisons in other cultures

**Lesson Overview:**

'At Home' is a poem by J.P. Das that was chosen for the issues of justice and empathy it raises. The poem compels the reader to think of various kinds of homes, leading them to think of the concept of prison as a home for prisoners, a cage as a home for birds, and a footpath as a home for the homeless.

But, the footpath is no home for men.  
 The animals' home is never the zoo.  
 If the cage isn't a bird's home, then  
 nobody's home is the prison too.

The poem encourages students to compare the concept of home with prison, cage, and footpath. This evokes sympathy and an understanding of suffering, justice, and inclusion. The purpose of reform is critically evaluated as well. They think of such issues at a global level. Learners compare the system of justice in their own countries with other countries by comparing India with Norway. There is also an attempt to help learners explore the idea that some prisons have been home to freedom fighters and therefore, have been symbols of liberty. The Cellular Jail of the Andamans and the prison at Robben Island in South Africa have been home to famous freedom fighters like Nelson Mandela.

In a later question, the lesson connects the idea of home architecturally with sustainability and learners think about the impact of earthquakes on homes and their architecture. They explore earthquake-safe architecture in India. Learners think of different words for animal homes in the vocabulary task: anthill, open web. The listening section provides practice in identifying words with two consonant sounds at the end: dwells, build, and stamp.

### **Key Competencies for Sustainability**

*Normative Competency:* the ability to understand and reflect on the norms and values... in a context of conflicts of interests and trade-offs... and contradictions.

*Critical Thinking Competency:* the ability to question norms, practices and opinions, to take a position (UNESCO, 2017, p. 10).

### **Learning Objectives**

*Cognitive Learning Objective:* The learner can compare their system of justice with those of other countries.

*Socio-Emotional Learning Objective:* The learner can show empathy with and solidarity for those suffering from injustice in their own country as well as in other countries.

*Behavioural Objective:* The learner can assess issues of peace, justice, inclusion and strong institutions in their region, nationally and globally.

**Figure 3:** Task from English Textbook

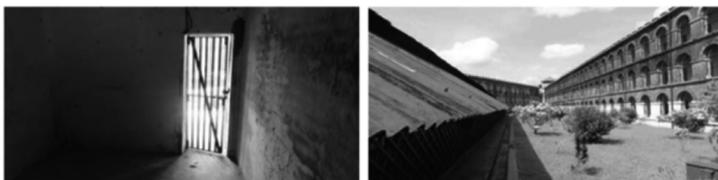
Competency-based Questions

**Post Reading**

A. *If the cage isn't a bird's home, then nobody's home is the prison too.* (extrapolation)

1. This refers to long prison sentences. What is the purpose of long prison sentences?
2. One of the reasons for prison sentences is reform. What does that mean?
3. Norway has open prisons. It means you can go to work and serve your punishment time as well.
  - a. Do you think that helps the prisoner?
  - b. Do you think it is a good model? Discuss this in class.

B. The Cellular Jail in the Andamans, known as Kala Pani, and the prison at Robben Island in South Africa are famous historical monuments. What are they famous for?



The National Educational Policy of India (MHRD, 2020, sec. 4.28) envisions educating learners in making ethical decisions. In later years of development, this is meant to expand into themes like empathy and formulating an argument from multiple perspectives on ethical issues. In the section on 'NCF Commitment to Values and Dispositions Aligned to NEP 2020', the NCF-SE refers to developing a commitment to liberty and freedom, justice and fairness, and being compassionate and showing empathy (NCERT, 2023, p. 159). These coincide with the key competencies for sustainability laid out in *Education for Sustainable Development Goals* (UNESCO, 2017).

## Conclusion

This process of materials development was a journey of learning and growth for the team of authors. The selection of texts and the development of tasks encompassing the 17 SDGs were driven by authors' internal voices as empathetic teachers, their ethos, and cultural and environmental concerns surrounded by a world that requires conservation and restoration.

This article encapsulates the journey of the MDGs to ESDs and the role of education not only as one of the SDGs but as a critical player in the

realisation of all the other SDGs. Initially conceptualised as a 'regular' textbook series for language teaching, this series metamorphosed into a vehicle of change by incorporating themes from content subjects embedding sustainability issues into the language curriculum, and aligning tasks with the key competencies and learning objectives outlined in the UNESCO document.

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