

## **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN NIGERIA**

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### ***Abstract***

The pursuit of sustainable development in education has prompted a re-examination of English Language Teaching (ELT) as a vehicle for advancing global sustainability goals. This paper investigates the intersection between ELT and sustainable development, focusing on the pedagogical, institutional, and ideological challenges that influence the integration of sustainability principles into language education. Drawing on qualitative insights from recent empirical studies and theoretical frameworks in sustainability education, the paper explores how ELT can promote learners' critical consciousness, intercultural understanding, and social responsibility. Major challenges identified include curriculum inertia, inadequate teacher preparation, and the prevailing emphasis on linguistic performance over socio-cultural engagement. These constraints often limit the capacity of ELT to address issues such as environmental awareness, equity, and social justice. Nevertheless, emerging opportunities exist in the form of sustainability-informed curricula, digital and collaborative learning environments, and transformative pedagogies that connect language learning to real-world global concerns. The paper argues that reorienting ELT toward sustainable development requires systemic change encompassing teacher education, curriculum design, and institutional policy. Such transformation positions English not merely as a tool for communication but as a means of empowering learners to participate ethically and effectively in a rapidly changing world. The study contributes to the growing discourse on sustainability in education by proposing a framework for integrating sustainable development goals (SDGs) into ELT practice and research.

**Keywords:** English Language Teaching, Sustainable Development, Pedagogical Innovation

### **1. Introduction**

Sustainable development has become a global educational priority, particularly under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which articulate a comprehensive vision for equitable, peaceful, and environmentally responsible societies. SDG 4 emphasizes inclusive and quality education, while SDG 4.7 specifically mandates that learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including environmental stewardship, human rights, gender equality, peace, and global citizenship.

In Nigeria, where demographic pressures, environmental degradation, economic inequality, and linguistic diversity pose significant educational challenges, the English language occupies a central role. English functions not only as a medium of instruction across most levels of education but also as a lingua franca of national unity, global communication, academic progression, and employability. Consequently, English Language Teaching (ELT) becomes a crucial platform for cultivating sustainability competencies.

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) encourages learners to think critically about real-world socio-environmental problems, engage in collaborative problem-solving, develop ethical reasoning, and take informed action. These competencies align well with pedagogical shifts in ELT toward communicative learning, critical literacy, and project-based instruction. Yet, despite this alignment, the degree to which ELT in Nigeria integrates sustainability remains underdeveloped.

This study investigates the challenges and opportunities for integrating sustainable development into ELT in Nigeria using a qualitative research approach. This is timely because many Nigerian teachers express uncertainty about how to embed sustainability content and competencies into an already crowded and exam-driven curriculum. At the same time, a number of innovative practices are emerging in Nigerian classrooms particularly in urban schools with access to digital resources that point toward promising new directions.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an empirically grounded understanding of teacher experiences, including the structural factors that shape their practices. The findings are meant to support policymakers, curriculum developers, teacher educators, and classroom practitioners seeking to align ELT practices in Nigeria with global sustainability goals.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Sustainable Development and Education**

Sustainable development is widely defined as development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland Commission, 1987, p.43). Contemporary interpretations emphasize three interwoven dimensions: environmental integrity, social justice, and economic viability. Education plays a mediating role by equipping learners with the skills and dispositions necessary to navigate these complexities. Sustainable development is a process of achieving a mutually reinforcing balance between economic, social, and environmental objectives, thereby ensuring the long-term sustainability of human well-being” (Kates et al, 2001, p.641) while, Education is known to be a social institution that enables individuals to acquire knowledge, skills, and values that are necessary for their social and economic development” (Boudieu, 1986, p.47). Education is also a process of teaching, training and learning, especially in schools or colleges that leads to the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes.” (Dewey, 1938, p.5)

UNESCO’s ESD 2030 framework highlights eight key competencies essential for sustainability and relevant to all Sustainable Development goals (SDGS). These competencies are: Systems

Thinking, Anticipatory Competence, Normative Competence, Strategic Competence, collaboration competence, Critical Thinking, Self-Awareness Competence, and Integrated Problem-Solving Competence. These competencies provide a foundation for pedagogical transformation across subjects including language education.

## 2.2 ELT and Sustainable Development

English Language Teaching (ELT) is defined by Richards and Schmidt (2010) as “the teaching of English as a foreign or second Language, focusing on the development of learner’s language skills, including listening, speaking, reading and writing” (p.184). Similarly, Brown (2014) describes ELT as a field of study that deals with the theory and practice of teaching English to non-native speakers, encompassing the development of language curricula, instructional materials, and assessment procedures” (p.12). On the other hand, the United Nations (2015) further elaborates that sustainable involves the “integration of economic, social, and environmental objectives to achieve long-term sustainability and well-being for all” (p.3). Globally, scholars argue that ELT can contribute substantially to ESD by fostering:

Critical literacy through,

- Multimodal communication which has to do with the use of multiple modes or channels to convey meaning effectively, these modes includes, verbal or spoken words, nonverbal (body language or facial expressions), visual (images, videos, graphics), written (texts, emails, messages) etc.
- Intercultural understanding approach is to be embraced because it will help learners to communicate effectively across culture and develop global citizenship and awareness because intercultural understanding refers to the integration of cultural awareness, sensitivity, and competence into language instruction. By incorporating intercultural understanding, English language teaching can prepare learners for an increasingly globalized world.

Furthermore, there’s the Dialogue around global citizenship, Collaborative problem-solving, Project-based learning on local sustainability issues. Studies in Europe, Asia, and Africa suggest that ELT classrooms can integrate sustainability themes through task-based learning, content-based instruction, environmental storytelling, debates, digital media analysis, and community engagement projects.

## 2.3 Nigerian Educational Context

Nigeria’s education system is characterized by:

**Large class sizes:** this has to do with Overcrowding which leads to reduced individual attention, increased noise levels, and decreased teacher-student interaction. The Teachers struggle to manage classes, assess student progress, and provide feedback. Students may feel lost, disconnected, and less motivated.

**Limited infrastructure in rural areas:** Inadequate classrooms, libraries, laboratories, and technology hinder effective teaching and learning. Rural schools often lack basic amenities like electricity, water, and sanitation facilities. This perpetuates educational disparities and inequalities.

**Curriculum centralization through the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC):** While standardization has benefits, over-centralization can limit flexibility and adaptability to local contexts. The curriculum may not account for regional differences, cultural nuances, or emerging issues. This can lead to disconnection between what is taught and the needs of the local community.

**Examination-Focused Instructional Culture:** The emphasis on passing exams can lead to teaching to the test, rather than fostering critical thinking and creativity. Students may prioritize rote memorization over deep understanding and application.

**Linguistic diversity:** With over 500 languages, Nigeria's linguistic landscape is complex and rich. While multilingualism is an asset, it can also create challenges for instruction, particularly when English is the primary language of instruction. Teachers may need additional support to address language barriers and incorporate local languages into instruction. These conditions create complex challenges but also unique opportunities for sustainability pedagogy (teaching method or instructional approach).

## 2.4 Gaps in the Literature

The gap in literature on English Language Teaching (ELT) in Nigeria is quite significant, especially when it comes to understanding the experiences of teachers in the classroom. Most research tends to focus on theoretical aspects or policy-level discussions, leaving a void in knowledge about the day-to-day realities faced by ELT teachers. This gap is particularly noticeable in the Nigerian context, where cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic factors greatly influence teaching and learning processes. Qualitative classroom-level experiences could offer valuable insights into how ELT teachers navigate these complexities, but such studies are scarce. Understanding these experiences could help in developing more effective teacher training programs and support systems tailored to the Nigerian educational context.

Teacher perceptions of sustainability literacy also represent an area that requires more exploration. With increasing emphasis on integrating sustainable development goals into education, understanding how ELT teachers perceive and implement sustainability literacy in their practice is crucial. This includes how they incorporate environmental, social, and economic sustainability themes into their teaching, and how these themes are woven into language instruction. Given the critical role teachers play in shaping students' worldviews and behaviors, their perceptions and practices regarding sustainability literacy can significantly impact the next generation's understanding of and commitment to sustainable development. Locally adapted pedagogical models are essential for addressing the unique challenges faced by ELT teachers in Nigeria. Generic teaching methodologies may not adequately account for local cultural nuances, linguistic diversity, and socio-economic realities. Therefore, developing and implementing pedagogical

models that are context-specific can enhance the effectiveness of ELT instruction. These models should draw on local knowledge, languages, and cultural practices to make learning more relevant and engaging for students. By incorporating elements that resonate with students' lived experiences, such models can improve learning outcomes and make English language instruction more meaningful and impactful. This study addresses these gaps by foregrounding teachers' voices.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two key frameworks:

#### 3.1 ESD Competency Framework

The ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) competency framework by UNESCO outlines the essential competencies required for individuals to contribute to sustainable development. Let's dive into the six key competencies.

**Systems thinking competency** enables learners to analyze complex systems, understand the interconnections and relationships between different components, and predict the potential consequences of actions. This competency helps individuals recognize the intricate web of causes and effects in social, environmental, and economic systems. Critical thinking competency allows learners to assess information, evaluate evidence, and make informed decisions. It involves analyzing data, identifying biases, and considering multiple perspectives to develop well-reasoned conclusions.

**The values and ethics competency** focuses on cultivating a sense of responsibility, empathy, and respect for human rights, cultural diversity, and the environment. Learners develop a moral framework to guide their actions and decisions, prioritizing the well-being of both current and future generations. Future thinking competency enables individuals to imagine and envision desirable futures, anticipate potential challenges, and develop strategies to mitigate risks and capitalize on opportunities. This competency helps learners think long-term, consider potential scenarios, and make informed decisions that promote sustainable development.

**Collaboration competency** involves working effectively with diverse stakeholders, building partnerships, and facilitating collective action to achieve common goals. Learners develop skills in communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution to foster cooperation and drive sustainable development.

**Integrated problem-solving competency** brings together the other competencies to address complex, real-world problems. Learners apply systems thinking, critical thinking, and creativity to develop innovative solutions that balance social, environmental, and economic considerations. By integrating these competencies, individuals can tackle complex challenges and contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These competencies map naturally onto communicative language learning.

## **3.2 Sociocultural Theory of Learning**

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes sustainability learning in English Language Teaching (ELT) through social interaction, mediated tools, and contextual meaning-making. Social interaction fosters collaborative learning and peer-to-peer discussions on sustainability topics, promoting critical thinking and language development. Mediated tools, such as language and digital resources, facilitate learning and interaction on sustainability issues. Contextual meaning-making is achieved through authentic materials and culturally relevant examples, making learning more meaningful and applicable. This approach enables learners to develop language skills, critical thinking, and sustainability awareness, empowering them to contribute to a more sustainable future. By integrating sociocultural theory into ELT, educators can promote holistic learning that addresses both linguistic and sustainability goal. This combination provides a strong foundation for evaluating how teachers implement and interpret ESD in practice.

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Research Design**

This study adopted an interpretive research design to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences, beliefs, and practices regarding the integration of sustainable development into English Language Teaching (ELT) in Nigeria. By employing an interpretive approach, the research aimed to explore the subjective meanings and interpretations that teachers ascribe to sustainable development and its role in ELT, rather than seeking to measure or quantify these aspects objectively. Through this design, the study focused on understanding the social contexts and personal experiences that shape teachers' beliefs and practices, allowing for a nuanced exploration of how sustainable development is perceived and implemented within the Nigerian educational setting. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used to gather rich, qualitative data that would provide insights into teachers' perspectives and practices, enabling the researcher to interpret and understand the complex realities of integrating sustainable development into ELT in this specific context.

### **4.2 Participants**

Fifteen English language teachers were selected using purposive sampling. Participants included:

10 secondary school teachers

5 tertiary institution lecturers

#### **Locations:**

Lagos (urban)

Enugu (semi-urban)

Kaduna (southern urban)

kano (Northern urban)

katsina (Northern urban)

Participants had 3–27 years of teaching experience.

### **4.3: Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes. The interview protocol included questions on:

1. Understanding of sustainable development (what does sustainable development mean to you? How do you think that sustainable development relates to education?)
2. Classroom practices (can you describe your current teaching practices or approaches? What activities or projects have you used to promote sustainable development in your students?)
3. Challenges faced (can you share any personal or professional challenges you've faced in promoting sustainability? What challenges do you face in incorporating sustainable development into your teaching practices?)
4. Required support (what kind of support or resources do you think would help you effectively integrate sustainable development into your practices?)
5. Perceived opportunities (what opportunities do you see for promoting sustainable development in your institution or community? How can sustainability education contribute to achieving the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals?)

### **4.4: Data Presentation and Interpretation:**

The table below represents coded data from 15 English Language Teachers, including 10 secondary school teachers and 5 tertiary institution lecturers. The columns categorize participants' responses based on location, years of experience, understanding of sustainable development, classroom practices, Challenges faced, required support and perceived opportunities. The table provides a structured overview of the teachers' perspectives and experiences, allowing for thematic analysis and identification of patterns.

Participant	Location	Years of Experience	Understanding of Sustainable Development	Classroom Practices	Challenges Faced	Required Support	Perceived Opportunities
T1 (SS)	LU	10 (Mid)	“SD is about meeting our needs without compromising future generations”	Project-based learning group discussions	Limited resources	Training supports	Collaborate with NGOs
T2 (SS)	EN	5 (Early)	“SD is about environmental conservation”	Role-plays debates	Curriculum constraints	Supportive admin	Integrate SDGs into curriculum
T3 (SS)	KD	18 (Late)	“SD is about holistic development”	Inquiry-based learning, and presentations			
T11 (TI)	KN	20 (Late)	“SD is about integrating social, economic and environmental aspects”	Case studies, and group projects	Resistance from colleagues	Policy support	
T12 (TI)	KT	12 (Mid)	“SD is about sustainable livelihoods”	Problem-based learning and service learning	Limited funding	Grants, partnerships	Community engagement

### Participant Codes-

- T1-T3: Secondary school teachers
- T11-T12: Tertiary institution lecturers

### Location Codes:

- LU: Lagos (urban)
- EN: Enugu (semi-urban)
- KD: Kaduna (southern urban)
- KN: Kano (northern urban)
- KT: Katsina (northern urban)

### Years of Experience Codes:

- 3-5 years: Early career

- 6-15 years: Mid-career
- 16-27 years: Late career

#### **4.5: Data Analysis**

This study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework to analyze the qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews. The analysis began with familiarization, where the researcher immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to gain a deep understanding of the content and identify initial patterns or themes. The researcher then systematically coded the data, identifying and labeling meaningful units of text that related to the research question. The codes were examined to identify potential themes, which were developed by grouping related codes together based on their shared meaning or concept. The themes were refined and revised through an iterative process to ensure they accurately reflected the data. The themes were reviewed against the coded data and entire dataset to ensure accuracy and relevance. Once refined, each theme was defined and named, capturing the essence of the theme and its relevance to the research question. Finally, the findings were reported, presenting the themes supported by vivid examples from the data, and contextualized within the broader literature on sustainable development in education.

NVivo 12 facilitated data organization in this study by enabling the researcher to systematically manage and analyze qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. The software allowed for efficient coding, theme development, data linking, and querying, ultimately contributing to a rigorous analysis of teachers' experiences and perspectives on integrating sustainable development into English Language Teaching (ELT) in Nigeria.

#### **4.6: Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in this study was ensured through several measures. Credibility was established through triangulation of data sources and methods, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, and member checking, which allowed participants to verify the accuracy of the findings. Dependability was achieved through maintaining an audit trail, documenting all research decisions, procedures, and findings to ensure transparency and accountability. Transferability was facilitated through rich, thick descriptions of the research context, participants, and findings, enabling the application of the study's results to other similar contexts. Finally, confirmability was promoted through reflexive memo writing, where the researcher documented their thoughts, biases, and reflections, fostering self-awareness and transparency throughout the research process.

### **5. Findings**

Six major themes emerged.

#### **Theme 1: Limited Teacher Preparation for ESD**

Teachers consistently reported inadequate training.

> “We were never taught sustainability in our teacher training. Even now, workshops focus on WAEC and NECO exams.” (Teacher, Lagos)

Many teachers expressed enthusiasm but felt ill-equipped.

## **Theme 2: Curriculum Rigidity and Examination Pressure**

NERDC's curriculum is perceived as rigid.

> “The curriculum is jam-packed, and we must finish it for WAEC. Sustainability topics are not part of the scheme.” (Teacher, Oyo)

WAEC and NECO were repeatedly identified as barriers.

## **Theme 3: Infrastructure and Material Shortages**

Participants cited:

Overcrowded classrooms

Lack of project materials

Limited digital access

> “How do I run sustainability projects when there is no electricity for weeks?” (Teacher, Kaduna)

## **Theme 4: Sociocultural and Political Sensitivities**

Topics such as gender equity, climate activism, or corruption were sometimes seen as controversial.

> “Some parents don't like us discussing climate policies or gender issues. They think it is political.” (Teacher, Rivers)

## **Theme 5: Teacher Innovation and Adaptive Creativity**

Despite challenges, teachers found ways to innovate.

Examples:

Environmental poetry writing

Debates on waste management

Analyzing newspaper articles on flooding

School-based sanitation projects

## **Theme 6: Emerging Opportunities**

Opportunities identified:

Digital resources (YouTube, WhatsApp, radio)

Local NGO project-based learning

Community storytelling

Climate-related local experiences (flooding, erosion, heat waves)

Teachers believed these opportunities were underutilized.

## **6. Discussion**

Nigeria's ELT landscape is ripe for sustainability integration, but systemic barriers persist. This study reveals an interesting contradiction: teachers understand the urgency of sustainability issues especially because they directly affect Nigerian communities but lack structured support. Examination pressure creates a misalignment between ESD values and assessment realities. Curriculum rigidity further discourages innovation. Nevertheless, teachers' willingness to

improvise indicates significant potential. Digital tools, even when used informally (e.g., WhatsApp audio stories), demonstrate that technology can provide a pathway for sustainability pedagogy. Sociocultural factors must be navigated sensitively with culturally responsive teaching strategies.

## **7. Implications**

### **For curriculum developers**

Embed sustainability competencies explicitly into ELT curriculum outcomes and provision of sample lesson plans should be made.

For teacher education institutions, Inclusion of ESD modules in NCE, B.Ed., PGDE, and in-service programs should also be made.

### **For policymakers**

There should be Provision of grants for school sustainability projects.

Review alignment between national exams and 21st-century competencies should be encouraged.

### **For teachers**

Use local sustainability issues (waste, flooding, transport, energy) as authentic materials.

## **8. Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that while Nigerian ELT teachers face significant challenges in implementing sustainability-oriented pedagogy, the opportunities for transformative learning are considerable. With strategic policy adjustments, teacher training, and resource support, ELT can become a powerful platform for advancing the SDGs and strengthening Nigeria's long-term development agenda.

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