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Article Title: Educating for Sustainability in Language Degrees: A Tale of 2 Case-Studies

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Abstract:

Purpose

According to the 2014 joint report drafted by the Quality Assurance Agency and Higher Education Academy (QAA/HEA), universities have a key role to play in the development of sustainability literate graduates who can contribute to an environmentally responsible society. In this paper, the authors aim to assess language students' understanding of sustainable development (SD) issues.

Design/methodology/approach

Study 1 surveys two cohorts of final year language students about to enter the graduate job market, and Study 2 surveys first year language students before and after the inclusion of SD content in one of their modules. The questions to the students are provided along with qualitative and quantitative results.

Findings

Results suggest that only 48% of language graduates are currently aware that they will need to take account of the environmental impact of their work as professional practitioners, and 52% do not consider it appropriate to learn about SD during their degree. However, results also suggest that incorporating SD early on in the language curriculum could contribute positively to the development of sustainability literate graduates.

Originality/value

While many language departments are aware of the importance of integrating sustainability into their curricula, and while employers are increasingly demanding sustainability literate graduates, there is little evidence that language students leave university with a real understanding of sustainability issues. This paper presents evidence of the current situation as well as a novel way to integrate sustainability into the language curriculum in order to remedy the situation.

Keywords: sustainable development; languages; ESD; employability; higher education.

Article Classification: Case study

I hope that I am not wrong in believing that language students believe in the intrinsic value of the peoples whose languages they seek to acquire and whose cultures they seek to learn about. (Canning, 2005)

Introduction

Sustainable Development (SD) can be defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (WCED, 1987) At the United Nations World Summit in 2005, the idea was mooted that sustainability consists of three overlapping and interconnected pillars: economic, social and environmental (c.f. Fig 1). Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is the process of equipping students with the knowledge and understanding, skills and attributes needed to work and live in a way that safeguards environmental, social and economic wellbeing, both in the present and for future generations (QAA/HEA, 2014).

Figure 1. The three pillars of sustainable development (CIEC, 2005)
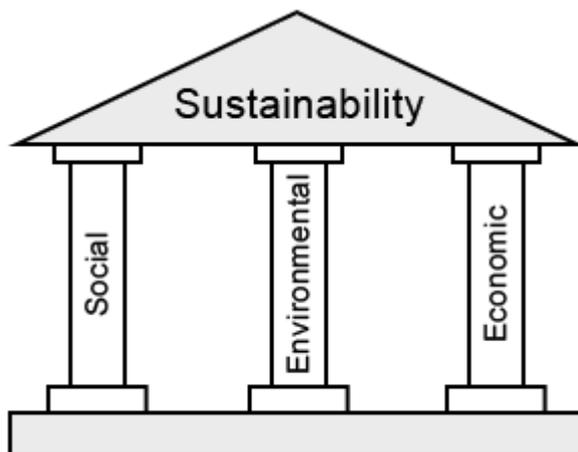
Sustainability and environmental issues are high on the agenda for EU Member States, as can be seen by the EU's ambitious 2020 objective to create a resource efficient, sustainable, greener and more competitive economy, with each Member State adopting its own national targets in this area ultimately enabling the delivery of high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion (European Commission, n.d.). In the UK, universities have been identified as key players in the pursuit of this agenda and, over the past decade, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has led a number of initiatives and

projects aiming to promote ESD through quality assurance and enhancement, several of which highlight the strategic need to reorient graduate skills towards the challenges of SD (HEFCE, 2005, 2009, 2012). Indeed, it has been acknowledged that ESD involves "raising awareness among students […] and providing them with the opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills to engage in critical debate about the issues." (Gordon, 2009a)

In other parts of the world, the relevance of ESD has also been highlighted by several scholars. Savageau (2013) argues that universities have a duty to teach sustainability as broadly as possible across the curriculum. In her study of undergraduate students participating in the creation and use of a personal Resource Consumption and Waste Audit, she found that the audit helped counteract the feeling of helplessness that students often express in the face of the large-scale environmental problems facing the world. Educating students for SD gave her students a sense of empowerment and of responsibility for the environment (2013, p. 22). Similarly, Shephard (2008) highlights that higher education has a particular function to produce graduates who value their environment and appreciate that they have a responsibility to help to sustain it. According to her, this education must go beyond mere knowledge and skills, and incorporate the learning of values and personal attributes that require students to behave sustainably (2008, p. 90).

In 2013, the Higher Education Academy published a report entitled "Student Attitudes Towards and Skills for Sustainable Development". The report describes the results of a longitudinal study highlighting that over eight in every ten students (1) want to learn more about SD, (2) consistently believe that SD should be actively incorporated into courses and promoted by universities, and that (3) students are more likely to accept reduced starting salaries for a job in a company with a positive performance on sustainability (Drayson *et al.*, 2013). Amongst other recommendations, the report suggests that academics should embed SD across the curriculum and subject-specific disciplines, and develop sustainability skills in students in order to produce graduates who can contribute to a green economy. In their 2014 guidance document, the QAA/HEA also indicate that higher education institutions have a key role in the development of sustainability literate graduates who have the skills, knowledge and experience to contribute to an environmentally and ethically responsible society. The guidance they provide is not meant to be prescriptive, but to be of practical use to higher education providers working with students.

Employers and professional bodies in the field of languages also acknowledge that "practitioners, in recognition of their responsibility to society, their clients, their colleagues

and the professional bodies of which they are members, shall always act with integrity and in accordance with the high standards appropriate to practitioners within the profession." (CIOL, 2007) Cade (2008) found that a majority of employers had at some time referred to social and environmental responsibility in their selection of recent graduates. A number of learning and teaching projects in various disciplines have successfully highlighted that it is possible to have an impact on students' awareness of both sustainability and environmental issues through embedding this content within teaching (e.g. Martin and Weltz, 1999; Gordon, 2006, 2009b; Hanson, 2010). However, SD work undertaken in the field of Languages and Area Studies has produced mixed results[1]. In her study, Phipps (2005) has shown that sustainability requires languages, as she argues that sustainability emerges through engagement with environmental, linguistic, cultural and often politically tricky, issues. According to her, sustainability may be successfully encountered through experiential curricula, but other research findings are somewhat less confidence-inspiring: "There is a real danger of ESD being seen as something that is 'bolted on' to the curriculum [...] but I am optimistic that the ESD agenda will encourage students to think about their own values and the values of others more emphatically than ever before." (Canning, 2005) Language students in particular are seen to be at risk of missing the ESD point:

> Failure to address sustainability in our languages and area studies curricula can only increase the likelihood that solutions to environmental problems are seen as the answers to wholly technical questions which are conceptually divorced from a concern for (sometimes) fragile cultures. (Canning, 2005)

In light of these various drivers and the relative lack of recent research on Languages and SD, it seemed appropriate to investigate current language students' attitudes towards this topic. In addition, one of Aston University's 2020 strategic aims relates to Sustainability and Social Responsibility, highlighting that this is a central issue in the university's work (Aston, 2015a). According to the university's literature on the topic, Sustainability and Social

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[1] It is of note that SD has never been applied systematically in language classes, and it is therefore difficult to define what SD in language teaching actually entails. In fact, Canning (2005) highlights that the Subject Centre for Languages and Area Studies was reluctant to settle on a particular definition of SD for languages because it seemed unwise to impose a definition, which could exclude practitioners who may have an important contribution to make to the debate.

Responsibility are based on ethical values and underpinned by the idea of economic, social and environmental obligations to a range of stakeholders. As such, the university aims to develop curriculum changes to enable all graduates to be "literate in social responsibility and sustainability." (Aston, 2015b, p. 55)

In the present study, the authors aimed to address the following research questions: to what extent are SD issues already covered in our language modules and degree programmes? Do students perceive SD as solely or primarily an environmental issue, or do they understand the balance between society, economy and environment? Do students understand the need for ESD and its importance for graduate employability? How can students be encouraged to understand a range of cultural perspectives on problems relating to SD?

The authors carried out two case studies in 2013 and 2014, which surveyed students as regards their attitudes towards SD and its role in language studies. Study 1 reports on final year undergraduates' views, and Study 2 focuses on first year students, before and after material relevant to SD was embedded within one of their Spanish degree modules. Ethical approval for the studies was granted by Aston University's Research Ethics Committee. The research aims were threefold:

(1) To assess whether language students believed it appropriate to learn about SD at university;
(2) To compare first year and final year students' views on SD;
(3) To evaluate the impact of developing the language curriculum to include sustainability learning.

Participants and procedure

Study 1

Two cohorts of final year students (17 females, 8 males), registered for a Bachelor degree in Modern Languages (French, Spanish, and/or German) were surveyed in the second semesters of 2012/13 and 2013/14. Ages ranged between 21 and 24 years, with the exception of one mature student (33 years old). In terms of origins, 4 students were classed as European non-British, 1 African, 1 American, and 19 from the UK.

Although it was assumed that students nearing the end of their degree progamme might have encountered SD issues during their time at university, there had been no deliberate

strategy to introduce SD materials into their curriculum. As a result, these students' views can be considered as genuine and representative of their understanding of SD issues upon entry to the graduate job market.

Study 2

First Year students also registered on a Modern Languages degree programme were surveyed on two occasions during the academic year 2013/4 (n1=22[2], n2=23). 16 females and 6 males aged 18 to 20 completed the first questionnaire (Q1). In terms of origins, 21 reported to be from the UK and 1 was classed as European non-British. The second questionnaire (Q2) was completed by 17 females and 6 males (18 to 21 years), with 21 from the UK and 2 from another European country. Q1 was completed in November 2013 and Q2 in April 2014 after the SD intervention.

Students were asked to complete Q1 online at the end of one of their 'Introduction to Latin America' module classes. Again, no deliberate strategy to introduce SD materials into their curriculum had yet taken place and students' views from Q1 can be considered as genuine and representative of their understanding of SD issues.

Five months later, in April 2014, material relevant to SD was embedded in one class of the abovementioned module. The class was organised in three parts: the first part consisted of interactive discussions in small groups about the students' understanding of Sustainable Development, as well as their perceptions of their personal engagement at home and on campus. These discussions were followed by a short ten minute lecture about SD and the impact of SD on the Future, using the 1987 definition as well as an excellent presentation, "Desarrollo Sustentable en 3 Minutos" [Sustainable Development in Three Minutes] (2011)[3] which highlights the three pillars of SD as well as the importance of taking a future-oriented perspective. As this specific module dealt with Latin American culture, and the lesson plan from previous years included a 2 hour lecture on architecture, it was decided that while

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[2] One outlier was removed from the sample because s/he did not fully complete the questionnaire.

[3] The presentation was in Argentinean Spanish, which was appropriate as classes are taught in the target language at Aston University.

tackling the planned topic, i.e. the work of Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer[4], students would be asked to decide whether his architectural creations could be considered sustainable. The emphasis in class was to discuss the issue, and not to lobby students with a particular viewpoint.

In order to test the long lasting effects of the SD intervention on students, three weeks elapsed before they were asked to retake the SD survey (Q2).

Measure

For both studies, the survey was carried out online using Google Survey software. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. In order to replicate work on SD that had been carried out in other disciplines, and to compare our results with those of other scholars, the questionnaire that Atkinson *et al.* (2009) employed in their study of ESD in computing and management courses was adapted to suit language students. A copy of the survey questions discussed in this paper can be found in Tables 1 and 2. The survey included a mixture of questions, thus enabling the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data, and was broadly divided into three sections: (1) awareness and personal relevance of SD, (2) role of university and course in teaching SD, and (3) professional relevance of SD. For Study 1, both student cohorts completed the survey at the end of their degree programme, in May 2013 and 2014. Their combined views are reflected in Table 1. For Study 2, students were surveyed twice, as indicated above, and their views are reflected in Table 2. Due to space constraints, a selection of relevant questions are analyzed and discussed in the present paper.

Analysis and discussion

Study 1

Table 1. Final year student views on SD and ESD

Questions	May 2013 / 14 (n=25)
1. Have you heard the term SD before?	Yes: 84%

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[4] It is noteworthy that the lesson wasn't drastically altered to incorporate SD - the class about Latin American architecture was taught as in previous years, and the SD component was seamlessly integrated within it.

Questions	May 2013 / 14 (n=25)
2. Which of the following best describes your approach in living in an environmentally sustainable way?	I put a lot of effort: 8% I do a few things: 76% I could do more: 16% I don't try live in a SD way: 0
3. Do you think the University has a duty to educate students on issues of SD, even if these are not an 'official' part of your course/degree?	Yes: 72%
4. Do you consider it is appropriate to include content about SD within Uni classes that you attend, either translation or language related?	Yes: 52%
5. Are you aware of any requirements to demonstrate an understanding of social and ethical issues within your discipline?	Yes: 56%
6. Do you think that your future employer is likely to care about environmental issues?	Yes: 68%
7. Were you aware that as a professional practitioner you will be expected to take account of the social and environmental impact of your work?	Yes: 48%

Note. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest decimal place.

Results of Study 1 were surprising in several respects. Somewhat worryingly, 16% of final year students professed that they had never heard of the concept of SD and 16% of students did not, or could not, provide a definition for it. Nonetheless, as can be seen in Table 1, an important majority of final year students (84%) were aware of the concept and showed some level of engagement with it in their daily lives, though 16% admitted that they could do more in this respect. Despite having, for the most part, some awareness and knowledge of the concept of SD, final year students about to enter the graduate market seemed relatively unclear about what SD entailed. Indeed, the qualitative data highlighted a range of ideas about how SD might be defined, most of which showed limited understanding (e.g. "developing things for the future", "finding infinite sources of energy and fuel", "may be language development"). Some definitions were more elaborate, though only 4 students made reference to the three pillars of SD. Out of 25 students, only 1 belonged to an environmental group. These findings are in stark contrast with the QAA/HEA guidance (2014, p. 6) which states that students already have a high level of awareness of SD issues.

Table 1 also demonstrates that only a small majority of students (56%) are aware that understanding social and ethical issues are a requirement for their discipline and, although 72% of students agreed that the university has a role to play in terms of educating students, nearly half of the students (48%) reported that they did not consider it appropriate for SD to be included in their language classes. It is interesting to note that a high proportion of final year students lack awareness of the impact and role of their discipline on the well-being of future generations and do not understand or see the links between language teaching and SD. When asked to describe how SD may be relevant for language studies, students' comments reflected this skepticism: "I'm not entirely sure", "I don't think it is particularly relevant to language studies", "I don't really understand how it fits in." Again, the statistics here contradict the wider literature on ESD, which suggests that over two-thirds of final year students believe that SD should be covered in their degree courses (Drayson *et al.*, 2013).

Finally, Table 1 illustrates that 68% of students are aware that their future employer may care about SD issues, but that less than half of the students surveyed believed that they would be expected to take these into account in their work. This is a troubling finding, when considering the fact that employers often refer to social and environmental responsibility in their selection of recent graduates (Cade, 2008).

Table 2. First year student views on SD and ESD

Questions	November 2013 (n=22)	April 2014 (n=23)
1. Have you heard the term SD before?	Yes: 55%	Yes: 96%
2. Which of the following best describes your approach in living in an environmentally sustainable way?	I put a lot of effort: 18% I do a few things: 73% I could do more: 9% I don't try live in a SD way: 0%	I put a lot of effort: 26% I do a few things: 74% I could do more: 0% I don't try live in a SD way: 0%
3. Do you think the University has a duty to educate students on issues of SD, even if these are not an 'official' part of your course/degree?	Yes: 59%	Yes: 91%
4. Do you consider it is appropriate to include content about SD within Uni classes that you attend, either translation or language related?	Yes: 64%	Yes: 83%
5. Are you aware of any requirements to demonstrate an understanding of social and ethical issues within your discipline?	Yes: 41%	Yes: 61%
6. Do you think that your future employer is likely to care about environmental issues?	Yes: 73%	Yes: 74%
7. Were you aware that as a professional practitioner you will be expected to take account of the social and environmental impact of your work?	Yes: 59%	Yes: 70%

Table 2 shows that, pre intervention, just over half of the first year students had heard of the term SD. Here again, the data reveals a discrepancy with the QAA/HEA guidance, which highlights that students already have a high level of awareness of sustainable development issues (2014, p. 6). The students' lack of understanding of what SD entails is also evident in the qualitative responses provided. Although there were a number of relatively accurate definitions (e.g. "Developing but making sure there is enough for future generations", "Creating an environment where resources are used to a minimum and reused as often as possible") most remained vague and focused mainly on the environment. It is also of note that 36% of the students left the question blank.

Post intervention, however, only one student failed to recognize the term. This student may not have attended the SD lecture or, arguably, did not benefit from it. More students

provided definitions, and the quality of the definitions also improved significantly: "Maintaining or improving the daily lives of others and also for the future. This includes environmental aspects, social aspects and economic aspects", "SD is the maintenance and protection of the environment but also the protection of social advances such as human rights protection. It is the consciousness for the wellbeing of future generations." It is noteworthy that a majority of students mentioned the three pillars of SD in Q2, and took into account concepts such as social justice and wellbeing. Students had also clearly developed more of a future-facing outlook as the word "future" appeared in 70% of the responses. These definitions therefore more closely mirror the HEA's understanding of ESD (QAA/HEA, 2014, p. 5). The acquired SD literacy is also reflected in the fact that a higher percentage of students (+8%) professed that they placed a lot of effort in living in a sustainable way.

In terms of the role of the University in relation to ESD and embedding SD content in the classroom, Q1 results showed that 59% of the students agreed that SD should be integrated in their degree courses - Q2 results revealed an impressive 32% increase in this respect. A similar trend could be seen in relation to embedding SD content in language classes, with results rising from 64% to 83%. In addition, whereas only 41% of the participants reported being aware of the requirements to demonstrate understanding of SD within their discipline prior to the intervention, Q2 showed a 20% increase in discipline-specific awareness. The qualitative data illustrates this progress well; when students provided answers as regards the relevance of SD for languages in Q1, these tended to remain at a superficial level (e.g. "Learning a language is an international study and therefore it is important to understand Sustainable Development"). Q2 answers to that same question, however, were much more elaborate and demonstrated the students' new understanding of the links between SD and language classes, as well as their responsibility as global citizens. For example: "As well as language learning, we focus a lot of our study on social aspects within Hispanic countries such as poverty, sexism, and racism. These all link with our need to sustain a social development", "We learn about the culture and development of other countries so it's important to understand how we can protect their wellbeing as well as our own", "Learning how the world works and how we can work together using language skills." Clearly, having an ESD agenda can therefore encourage language students to think about the kinds of social values that Canning (2005) referred to in his article.

Finally, Table 2 illustrates an 11% increase in the level of awareness as regards taking into account social and environmental issues in professional practice. However, when asked whether they believed that their future employer would care about these issues, no change

was noted in students' responses between Q1 and Q2. This could be a result of the fact that the lecture did not focus on employability issues specifically.

General discussion

In relation to the research questions posed at the start of the study, it can be said with some degree of confidence that (1) more progress can be made in terms of embedding SD issues to an appropriate extent in our language modules and degree programmes, (2) without an SD intervention our students do not generally have a balanced view or full understanding of SD, and (3) a significant number are not fully aware of the importance of ESD for graduate employability. As it stands, final year language students about to enter the job market are not keen to learn more about SD (in or out of class) and most are unlikely to take into account their future employer's performance on sustainability.

These results highlight a disjunction between, on the one hand, the expectations of various stakeholders (universities, employers, governments) and, on the other, the concerns of students taking a Modern Language degree at university. The current lack of positive engagement with SD when considering professional development and future careers is particularly worrying, and future research could usefully find ways to bridge this gap and improve students' understanding of how issues around sustainability link to their future employability, as it has been argued that SD is increasingly being included in professional requirements in the UK (e.g. Grant, 2009).

Figure 2. Survey responses for final year (FY) and first year (Y1) students pre and post intervention
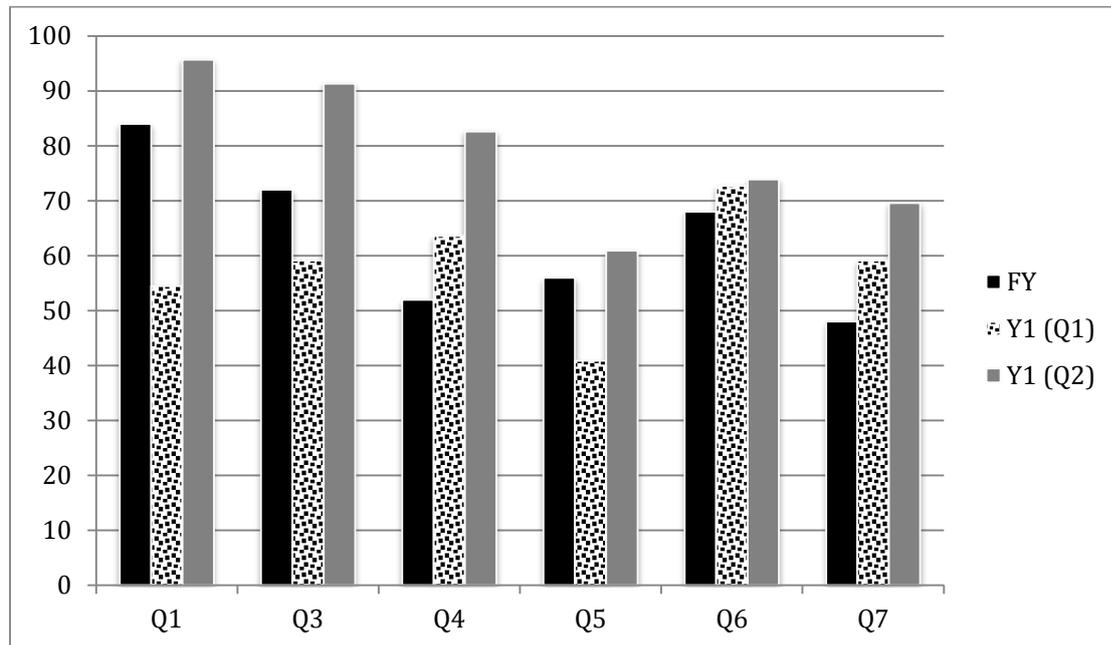
Our evaluation of language students' understanding of ESD, and the comparison of final year and first year views on SD, led the authors to develop an intervention whereby the language curriculum could be slightly developed to include sustainability learning. The results (Fig. 2) convinced us that, in order for our graduates to be sustainability literate and to contribute to a green economy – thereby matching the goals of the QAA/HEA – only an active embedding of SD will alter language students' attitudes and encourage them to understand a range of cultural perspectives on problems relating to SD.

In addition to this finding, it could also be argued that ESD is best initiated at an early stage of students' degree programme for two reasons. First, it is a great advantage if language students are already sustainably literate before spending a year abroad in a foreign culture, during which it is expected that they critically engage with other students, or employers in the case of work placements. Second, ESD is not something that can be simply or effectively "bolted on" to the final year curriculum, as several final year students expressed their concerns about an SD overload (e.g. "after a while it becomes repetitive and rather uninteresting"). A progressive integration of SD that is spread out over the course of a degree programme therefore seems more appropriate.

In their guidance document for UK HE providers, the QAA/HEA (2014) make only one reference to foreign language learning, suggesting that simulation activities (e.g. role plays) conducted in a foreign language can help develop focused thinking around SD issues, and

contribute to the formation of student attitudes. This kind of simulation activity is already a common feature of many language classes, and we would suggest that embedding SD scenarios in these contexts would not be too difficult. However, again, we would recommend that this type of specific activity needs to start at an early stage of the degree programme, i.e. early on in a student's journey through university, in order to make a real difference. Students need to be made to reflect on the links between SD, language and culture before they go on their year abroad, so that the information can sink in and mature over time. As highlighted by Grant (2009, p. 2), SD and ESD are not the easiest of issues for people to engage with, and helping students to understand from the outset that it is part and parcel of language and cultural learning should, in theory, ease their engagement with it.

Like other scholars (e.g. Sterling, 2004), we believe that sustainability should be a gateway to a different view of curriculum, of pedagogy, and of ethos. Although in languages, there isn't the kind of mature sustainability literacy and discourse that other disciplines such as the Built Environment or Bioscience may have, linguists are naturally interested in how contested discourses translate (or fail to translate) into other languages and cultures (Canning, 2005). Clearly, language students need to be made to see how their use and understanding of this discourse can impact foreign societies and environments. With this in mind, the authors agree with Gordon (2006) that belief and active demonstration of the importance of SD by teaching staff is essential for students to take SD on board as part of their own learning. But we disagree with the statement that "in the modern HE environment, where students are often assessment driven, SD may most effectively be promoted by ensuring that [it] is included in materials that are assessed." (Gordon, 2006) Our formative intervention in the students' first year demonstrated that it is possible to make a positive difference to students' awareness and engagement with SD issues simply by tweaking the curriculum and integrating an SD discourse within it. In fact, the qualitative data revealed that including SD in assessments may actually be counter-productive, as one final year notes: "maybe we can read about [SD], but it should not be included in the assessment part."[5]

Conclusion

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[5] Admittedly, the role of assessment in encouraging student behaviour can be a function of class size as well as mode of teaching. We thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to our attention.

This study presented a strong case for actively integrating ESD within the first year of the language curriculum, but in an unobtrusive way, which works with the planned module content. As such, it is possible to increase student awareness of SD and its relevance within social and linguistic contexts, something which will hopefully influence their attitudes to their future career path and sense of social responsibility as they become Europe's citizens of the future. Our findings are in line with those of other researchers who argue that ESD can be made relevant to students in any discipline using relatively simple methods that foster personal and affective engagement (e.g. Shephard 2008; Savageau 2013).

The study is not, however, without its limitations. First, the data was collected via self-report measures, which can be affected by the social desirability bias. Although it could be argued that participants had little to gain from lying on an anonymous questionnaire, it would be useful to triangulate methods of data collection in future studies, for example by employing interviews or focus groups to obtain a more complete picture of the students' views on SD. Second, the long-term benefits of embedding SD at an early stage of the language degree programme can only really be evaluated once the students return from their year abroad and complete their degree. As such, it would be interesting to extend this study longitudinally and monitor their progress in terms of SD engagement over time.

As Grant (2009, p. 11) highlights, "the prize for the University is to be known for excellence in linking students who have sustainability values and aptitudes with employers, and a society, which will increasingly need and appreciate such characteristics." Conversely, if language teachers ignore the issue and fail to engage with this agenda, we are at risk of creating selfish and uncaring professionals in the future, simply because nobody ever made them reflect on the importance of living in a sustainable society when they were studying at University. The stakes are high. The gauntlet has been thrown.

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