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Paint It Green: Using Environmental Themes in the Language Classroom

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Environmental awareness is a topic that can be easily woven into the content of language courses. The major goals of introducing “green” topics into language lessons are to raise consciousness about environmental conditions and to promote environmentally appropriate behavior. Since environmental attitudes are formed by many influences over a long period of time, it is fitting for language teachers to integrate content relevant to global or local environmental challenges into lessons and curriculum. Furthermore, since the commitment to learning a language is an affirmation of global citizenship, it naturally follows that a language learner’s worldview should include a knowledge and interest in global issues such as environmental stewardship. Therefore, this paper will discuss how a didactic approach, combining green themes with linguistic skill building, can help students form an environmental ethic and develop critical thinking skills while acquiring relevant vocabulary and grammatical structures.

INTRODUCTION

“Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.” – Dr. Seuss, from *The Lorax*

In his book *The Lorax*, Dr. Seuss ingeniously communicates a message about environmental stewardship through witty rhymes from his colorful cartoon characters. The message is obvious, but delivered via his unique brand of edutainment. Seuss creatively uses a children’s book as a vehicle to raise awareness of sustainable development among the young generation. In the same way, language teachers can help to raise awareness about current environmental issues by incorporating environmental themes into lesson materials. Such topics can be suitable content for all levels of language courses. Therefore, this paper proposes that the commonalities between environmental education and language education merit the consideration of using “green themes” in content-based instruction. In addition, this paper will offer suggestions for designing green lessons that facilitate language acquisition.

The key connections between environmental education and language education invite the didactic approach of combining green themes with linguistic skill building. These key connections relate to a commitment to global citizenship, a process of life-long learning, and the goal of a better future. It could even be argued that both language education and environmental education have the intrinsic purpose of strengthening bonds across borders so that people can

communicate more effectively to ensure a more peaceful future.

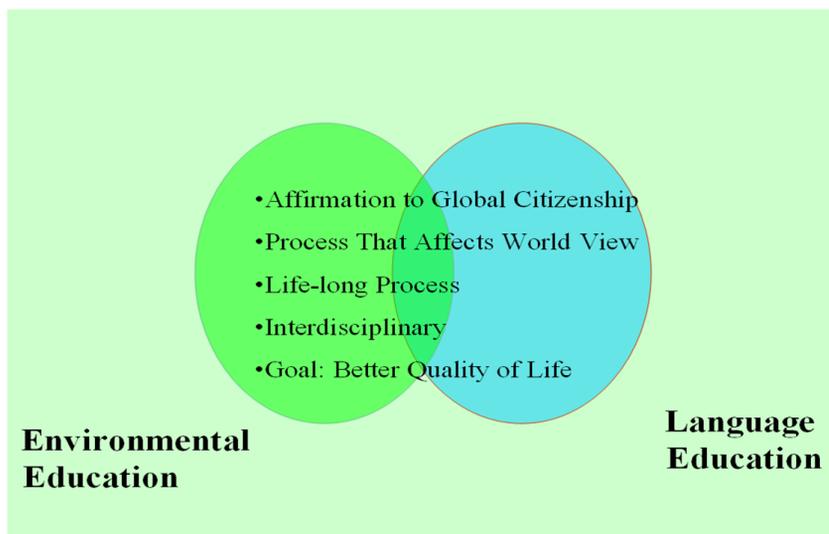


FIGURE 1. Commonalities of environmental education and language education.

GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

The commitment to learning a language is an affirmation of global citizenship hence, it naturally follows that a language learner's worldview should include a knowledge of, and interest in, global issues such as environmental stewardship. Learning a widely used second language is essentially a passport to global citizenship. When an individual decides to study a second language, they are affirming their interest to interact with people from other cultures or regions. Thus, studying a second language equates with expanding one's view of the world.

The acquisition of language and the acquisition of environmentally appropriate behavior are similar in that they are both processes that affect a person's view of the world. As a person's view of the world expands, it becomes easier to understand how environmental issues transcend political and cultural borders. Addressing those environmental issues and planning sustainable global development require communication among all members of the international community. Therefore, people learning a second language have the opportunity to become ambassadors for environmental stewardship.

Second language learners (SLLs), as global citizens, are a prime audience for disseminating information about environmental issues for several reasons. First, SLLs are more likely to travel abroad or visit countries where they are able to compare and share ideas about environmental stewardship. Having ample background knowledge about the issues concerning the health of people and the health of the planet, SLLs who travel globally are empowered to become ambassadors for environmental education. Furthermore, SLLs in the corporate world who have achieved high levels of language fluency, as well as developed crucial critical thinking skills, are more likely to receive promotions to decision-making positions in international companies. If these decision-makers

have also gained sufficient environmental knowledge, they will be prepared to consider corporate deliberations with a greener perspective.

LIFE-LONG PROCESS

Developing communication skills in a second language and gaining awareness of environmental issues are both life-long processes. Therefore, by incorporating green themes into the language curriculum, educators can reinforce and teach valuable lessons about environmental stewardship to the millions who choose to study a second language. Since environmental attitudes are formed by many influences over a long period of time, it is fitting for language teachers to integrate content relevant to global or local environmental challenges into lessons and the curriculum. By doing so, language educators are contributing to the betterment of society by helping develop an environmental ethic. Language teachers who contribute to the betterment of society are also being socially responsible role models for global citizenship.

The concept of social responsibility is consistent with the notion that education should be for the good of society as well as for the good of the individual. Whether education is attained formally or informally, learning is a life-long process that involves the acquisition of skills and knowledge from a variety of disciplines. Language education and environmental education both contribute to the goals of life-long learning because they are each interdisciplinary and holistic in nature, as well as in application. Language learning and environmental education both aim to teach critical thinking skills that involve problem solving and decision making; occupation-specific skills; and attitude development based on community morals and ethics.

COMMON GOALS

The benefits of this didactic approach become more lucid when considering environmental education as an approach to education as a whole, rather than just a subject. The aim is to create an environmental ethic that fosters awareness about the ecological inter-dependence of economic, social, and political factors in a human community and environment. Thus, it is important to integrate environmental education into the language education curriculum because a heightened awareness of environmental issues and their implications can initiate new patterns of behavior towards the environment. Changes in values, attitudes, and behavior toward the environment can ultimately result in a better quality of life. Basically, incorporating green themes into language lessons is another approach to language education that is good for society.

PEDAGOGICAL RATIONALIZATION

Although the major goals of introducing “green” topics into language lessons are to raise consciousness about environmental conditions and to promote

environmentally appropriate behavior, there are several pedagogical reasons to do so, too. Lesson materials for green themes are often authentic in that they represent real-world issues and real-world vocabulary and rhetoric. The use of authentic materials in second language teaching lends meaning to content. Meaningful content can be a factor that facilitates the acquisition of language in content-based instruction because meaningful learning increases retention of new knowledge and information.

Additionally, including green topics in language courses can heighten levels of interest, thus increasing intrinsic motivation for the SLL. Whether a language course focuses on conversation skills, listening skills, reading skills, or writing skills, a specific topic is needed as a venue to practice those skills. Green topics add to the variety of themes that teachers can use to promote communication in a second language. Often SLLs lose motivation when the same topics of family, clothes, celebrities, music, weather, and hobbies are used to practice linguistic structures. New topics may revive waning levels of interests for students. If topics rouse a learner's interest, there will be an increase in motivation to use the target language in a classroom setting, as well as in real-world communication.

However, not all topics about environmental issues will pique the interest of SLLs. It is the teacher's responsibility to carefully choose topics that are appropriate for the target group of students. For example, lessons for young SLLs can include songs and games that promote environmental awareness. A quick Internet search can provide teachers with a variety of appropriate activities for children's language classes. Language lessons for middle school or high school students can include short readings on environmental issues that help to build their vocabulary with useful words. Likewise, speaking and listening activities can focus on themes about forest preservation, recycling, or local issues that are familiar to students in that age group.

Finding the appropriate green lessons for university and adult SLL may be more challenging than for younger learners. Although adults have greater cognitive development and keener critical thinking abilities than teens and children, fluency levels differ greatly among individual adult SLLs. Lessons for the beginner and intermediate levels should not include difficult vocabulary or complex sentence structures – but the content also needs to be interesting enough to keep students engaged. Perhaps simple questionnaires about environmental practices or simplified readings with environmental themes would be appropriate for the acquisition of new vocabulary and grammatical structures. University students and adults with higher levels of fluency are able to combine their background knowledge and language ability to discuss or write about a great number of green topics in depth. Using language structures that focus on specific rhetorical modes such as cause and effect, or argumentation, lessons can encourage students to develop their critical thinking skills while examining environmental issues from a variety of perspectives.

Using content focused on promoting environmental awareness, language teachers can become agents of change for a greener future. Just as Dr. Seuss used his books as a vehicle to deliver a valuable message to children, the language classroom can be a vehicle that empowers global citizens to realize a new environmental paradigm of thinking in order to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world. As teachers, we are the “they” in “they need to do something.”

THE AUTHOR

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AUTHOR NOTE

A list of resources for developing language lessons with environmental themes can be found at: <http://www.brianenglish.net/greeneduc.htm>

