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Ecological sustainability in foreign language lessons for young learners

In this article, I discuss ecological sustainability in early language education from two perspectives. First, I provide examples of how sustainable development is considered in the early language learning curricula implemented in Finland, Poland and Germany. Second, I include my experiences in how to teach a foreign language using a children's book that contains ecological topics. The presented method of reading aloud in German, the target language, was applied in this study, involving two groups of kindergarten and primary school children in Poland.

Julkaistu: 4. joulukuuta 2024 | Kirjoittanut: Hanna Jałozza

Ecological sustainability in Finnish, Polish and German early language learning curricula

The concept of sustainable development is relatively well established in the context of school education (United Nations 2015; UNESCO 2010). Despite existing international guidelines regarding the integration of the concept into school curricula vary per country (see e.g., Sund & Gericke 2021). Such differences are even more visible in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programmes, as exemplified by the guidelines included in individual national curricula worldwide and in early teacher education (Davis & Davis 2020). In this article, I aim to cite

examples of how sustainable development is considered in early language curricula and to reflect on experiences with reading aloud German books in Polish kindergarten and primary schools.

In the case of the Finnish ECEC Core Curriculum, the terms *sustainability* and *sustainable development* appear many times – right next to *respect for life, human rights and the inviolability of human dignity* (Finnish National Agency for Education 2022, 18) – as highlighted in the foundations of ECEC (Norðdahl et al. 2024). The situation slightly differs in Poland and Germany. The Polish regulation (Minister of National Education [Minister Edukacji Narodowej] 2017) on the core curriculum for preschools and other types of preschool education does not mention sustainable development directly but focuses on children's specific skills in distinguishing and naming natural elements and living things. Due to individual federal states' broad autonomy in Germany, the ECEC teaching guidelines also depend strictly on the region. In the case of guidelines for preschool education, the noun *Nachhaltigkeit* (*sustainability*) or the adjective *nachhaltig* (*sustainable*) appears in almost all federal state guidelines but with varying frequency (Bildungserver 2024).

Presentation of sustainable development in foreign language classes

The topic of sustainable development in foreign language classes is a niche issue (Müller 2022), also encountered in early language learning (Davis 2009). This stems from different approaches to teaching second or foreign languages in ECEC in European countries. For example, preschoolers in Poland often experience their first exposure to a foreign language through play during the additional language classes. In Finland, unless parents decide on a second-language immersion kindergarten, the first contact with foreign language education can occur in the first grade of primary school.

Second and foreign language teachers of young learners have the privilege of almost freely adapting the contents of their lessons to contemporary topics of relevance to students and their needs. Thus, language classes seem ideal for introducing sustainable development, offering a unique opportunity to inspire and motivate future generations to engage in issues related to their future and that of planet Earth (Maijala et al. 2023; Müller 2022).

How then can the topic of sustainable development be dealt with in early foreign language classes? The German programme MINT Vorlesepaten (<https://www.telekom-stiftung.de/aktivitaeten/mint-vorlesepaten>) funded by the Deutsche Telekom Stiftung and Stiftung Lesen was offering methodical support for the implementation of sustainable development concepts in early language teaching by immersing children in storytelling sessions (2015–2021). This programme, which cooperated with libraries, kindergartens and schools, has shown a promising way to integrate sustainable development activities into early childhood education. The programme's objective was to connect mathematics, informatics, nature science and technology (MINT) subjects and reading aloud, sparking interest in MINT topics among children and youth.

The programme developed lists of selected and valuable German books, applications and games on MINT and reading aloud, divided into age groups and specific topics. In addition to material and book support, the foundation implemented an extensive training program. For instance, a kindergarten in Poland received Gravett's (2018) book *Aufgeräumt!* (originally titled *Tidy*; see Figure 1), which is an example of a children's book emphasising the importance of ecology. Next, I will write about my experiences of using this book with young learners.



Figure 1. The book *Aufgeräumt!*.

The story of *Aufgeräumt!* follows a badger who is known for his love of order and spends his free time bathing birds and polishing stones. When autumn arrives and the leaves fall, he becomes dissatisfied with the appearance of the forest and uproots all its trees. After heavy rains cause mudslides, he decides to pave the entire area with concrete to maintain cleanliness. However, he accidentally blocks the entrance to his pantry full of worms and spends a cold night hungry in his concrete creation. Realising his mistake, he teams up with other forest animals to restore the environment, breaking the concrete and replanting trees. The story ends on a positive note with a joyful picnic among the greenery. Example 1 shows how an environmentally important theme is presented.

Example 1

German version	Original
<i>Keine Blätter,</i>	<i>No mud</i>
<i>Kein Stamm,</i>	<i>No leaves</i>
<i>Kein Chaos,</i>	<i>No mess</i>
<i>Kein Schlamm.</i>	<i>No trees.</i>
<i>>>Alles schön sauber, Beton und Asphalt<<, dachte der Dachs. >>Welch ein herrlicher Wald.<<</i>	<i>Perfectly tidy and perfectly neat "This forest is practically perfect," said Pete</i>
<i>(...)</i>	<i>(...)</i>
<i>Der Boden war hart und er hatte Schmach.</i>	<i>As he lay in his mixer, wide, wide awake</i>
<i>Er wusste: Ich hab einen Fehler gemacht!</i>	<i>He started to think, "I have made a mistake!"</i>
<i>(Gravett 2018)</i>	<i>(Gravett 2016)</i>

Aufgeräumt! is written as a poem, with humour hidden in its text and pictures. The book has a few pages with holes through which the parts of other illustrations can be seen. This novelty inspired me to create the first part of the lesson in my kindergarten class – to awaken the interest

of my very young learners. When using the book as a teaching material, I applied Angelika Lundquist-Mog's a reading aloud method by Lundquist-Mog & Widlok (2017) which integrates language skills, fosters a sense of community among students and allows teachers to quickly observe and respond to students' reactions, enhancing engagement and discussion. Based on this knowledge and my own experiences, I developed ABC steps to implement the reading aloud method for the purpose of teaching German in Polish kindergarten and primary school (see Table 1). The letters A, B and C denote the verbs *awake (interest)*, *bring up (rules)* and *create (scenarios and drawings)* respectively.

Table 1. ABC steps to implement reading aloud method for teaching German in Polish kindergarten and primary school.

<p>A – AWAKE INTEREST</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make a small keyhole on a large sheet of paper; put it on top of the book <i>Aufgeräumt!</i>.• Let the children look at the partially revealed book cover and try to guess what they can see in this picture.
<p>B – BRING UP THE RULES BEFORE READING</p>

<p>Rules for the group:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep concentration during reading. • Maintain (relative) silence – allow spontaneous, emotional reactions, and children should express the content in their native language. • Use direct feedback on how the children understand the book's content; interact with them if needed. • Ensure that all listeners and viewers can hear and see the reader well. • For larger groups, make the members sit in a circle as the best form of presentation. 	<p>Rules for the teacher:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not rush. • Use proper intonation. • Build up the tension with one's voice. <p>Illustrations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose a book intentionally – illustrations can facilitate understanding the plot or single words. • For ECEC children, 2–3 sentences per page are sufficient.
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C – LET CHILDREN CREATE SCENARIOS AND DRAWINGS

- Invite the children to think and say what will happen next in the most significant scenarios in the plot (see Figures 2 and 3).
- Pause for breaks intentionally to keep the children's concentration.
- Let the children speak freely also in their first languages (interact with them in the target language).
- Allow them to prepare their answers in their notebooks (i.e. in picture form).

When dealing with more complex texts, it is beneficial to introduce new vocabulary playfully. This approach can significantly facilitate students' comprehension of the text.



Figure 2. An example of children's creativity in finding new and sustainable methods to rehabilitate the degraded forest.



Figure 3. Examples of the story's happy ending. Children find diverse ways to revive nature, involving robots rescuing the forest (drawing on the left) and a positive change of badger mindset (drawing on the right).

Discussion

In the case of German-language books, it is worth looking for proven materials, such as the above-mentioned list of MINT books. The children were deeply focused while reading and discussing the book. I let them have a break during reading to give them the opportunity to think about how the action might unfold when the badger cut down all the trees, paved the entire forest area with concrete and spent the night alone in his cold concrete creation without food. The children's comments were spontaneous, and they expressed emotional reactions to the story. During the lesson some children tried to persuade the badger abandon his idea of destroying the forest, showing their deep understanding, empathy and emotional investment in the story and its sustainability theme. They became agents of change (Davis 2009). The presented method of using a book for promoting sustainable development shows a significant potential for direct application in language classes in ECEC and the first years of school education. More practice-based methods are definitely needed to introduce the concept of sustainability in the most fundamental way by talking about complex topics using simple stories and basic words to facilitate children's understanding of the challenges in the modern world.

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w stopniu umiarkowanym lub znacznym, kształcenia ogólnego dla branżowej szkoły I stopnia, kształcenia ogólnego dla szkoły specjalnej przysposabiającej do pracy oraz kształcenia ogólnego dla szkoły policealnej. [Regulation of 14 February 2017 on the core curriculum for preschool education and the core curriculum for general education for primary school, including for students with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities, general education for vocational schools of the first degree, general education for special schools preparing for work and general education for post-secondary schools].

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Artikkeliin viittaaminen

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