JOURNAL OF EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE INNOVATION | ISSN 3025-1052
Vol. 3, No. 2, 2025, 156-168
https://doi.org/10.56916/jesi.v3i2.2795

Bridging the Gap: Integrating Sustainability-as-Practice in Japanese Business English Education

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Keywords
Higher Education
Education for Sustainable Development
English for Specific Purposes
Business English
Japan

Article History
Received 2025-11-04
Accepted 2025-12-30

Abstract
This action research sought to investigate the experiences and positions of Japanese college-level learners relating to sustainability to better embed education for sustainable development within departmental-level practice. Specifically, we analyzed the responses of students enrolled in a fourteen-week Business English course designed to prompt reflections and discussions of sustainability in English as a foreign language. Drawing on idiographic action research, data was collected through written reflections and semi-structured interviews throughout the semester, with final group interviews performed upon course completion. Results indicate significant improvement in students' capacities to reflect upon and discuss sustainability in English. More pointedly, critical awareness of corporate sustainability measures expanded throughout the course. Global pushes for sustainability extend beyond borders, cultures, and languages. Consequently, education for sustainable development should not be confined solely to native language instruction but integrated into second-and-foreign-language courses. Japan, a nation claiming a policy-level commitment to English education and sustainable development, lags in global assessments of English proficiency and in adopting forward-thinking pedagogical approaches designed to enhance sustainable awareness and action. Due to these insufficiencies, Japan's capacity to collaborate in sustainability efforts may be constrained. Thus, pedagogical initiatives like those detailed here may work to bridge gaps between policy and practice.

INTRODUCTION

Japan has long proclaimed its dedication to sustainability. At the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, then-Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi led calls for a "decade of ESD" (education for sustainable development), underscoring "people" as a crucial resource for sustainable action (cited in Nagata, 2017, pp. 29-30). This vision remains at the heart of Japanese ESD reform, with the 2019 G20 Osaka summit reaffirming investment in human capital as foundational to ensuring a sustainable future (G20 Development Working Group, 2019). Against this background, ESD policy extends from governmental agencies to classrooms; Japan claims the most UNESCO-associated schools worldwide, with over 1,000 institutions incorporating programs designed for ESD (Ohagi, 2019).). Moreover, as part of the 2005-2014 "Decade of ESD," Japan engaged in UN-led initiatives, synergizing its governmental and educational institutions to embed a sustainable ethos at all levels. Here, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) encouraged global leadership programs, focusing on sustainability and internationalism through pedagogy, research, and community activities (Elmassah et al., 2022; MEXT, 2016). Said efforts notwithstanding, these initiatives face significant constraints, most notably a disconnect between state and institutional-level policy and teaching practice. The literature points to a reliance on outdated pedagogical practices (Didham and Ofei-Manu, 2012), strict adherence to enduring social norms (Past and Smith, 2023), and a dearth of specialized teacher training (Ohagi, 2019). Thus, Japanese ESD efforts may be viewed as supplementing ingrained educational paradigms rather than constituting the transformative and emancipatory approach needed to secure a sustainable future (Nagata, 2017).

This failure, coupled with a decade-long decline in English education—ranking 92nd out of 116 assessed countries globally in terms of English proficiency (Education First, 2024)—threatens Japan's position at the vanguard of ESD and as an international partner in raising environmental, economic, and social awareness. Thus, Japan must reevaluate its ESD and English language learning (ELL) strategies to foster transcultural human resources and nurture future generations equipped to take action locally and abroad. Higher education (HE) is a critical juncture, offering meaningful and transformative ESD opportunities as learners enhance their English communicative competence (Past and Smith, 2023). Furthermore, integrating ESD into a foreign language program imbues the target language with significance and relevance (de la Fuente, 2021). Indeed, a convergence in best practices exists between the two fields. Student-centered learning, critical thinking, problem-solving, and negotiation—attributes conducive to ESD—are essential for intermediate-to-advanced-level language acquisition (Cosgun and Atay, 2021). Therefore, this idiographic action research seeks to explore the experiences and perspectives of Japanese college-level learners regarding sustainability to support ESD integration within departmental-level curricula. In doing so, it draws on surveys, semi-structured interviews, and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to examine the responses of students enrolled in a fourteen-week Business English course tailored explicitly to ESD and the case study approach.

BACKGROUND

Charting and Problematizing Japanese ESD

MEXT (2016) endorses ESD as a means of producing "next-generation leaders and innovators" (p. 9); yet, its concurrent focus on "strong leadership on the part of teachers" (MEXT, 2016, p. 10) is telling. More pointedly and, as noted by Past and Smith (2023), there is scant literature detailing how practitioners should engender collaborative leadership in a student body conditioned to "power distance and hierarchy between superiors and subordinates" (Egitim, 2021, p. 3). Additionally, Liu

(2023) notes a "lack of interdisciplinary, holistic and whole institutional approaches to ESD," wherein rigid subject boundaries hinder the development of the comprehensive perspectives required for addressing sustainability challenges. While said criticism is not without merit, one must also understand that ESD is not a stand-alone discipline, but one subsumed within the general "integrated studies" curriculum (Ohagi, 2019, p. 4). ESD shares time with health, information technology, and international understanding as part of integrated studies' 50-187 hours of contact time per annum (MEXT, 2015). Herein lies the issue facing Japanese ESD: while the State promotes sustainability, MEXT lags. Rather than being taught as a part of "integrated studies" or even as a standalone class, ESD values should be a underlying value across subjects.

Rationalizing Business English for Sustainable Development

While one can and, indeed, *should* consolidate ESD within various academic disciplines (Liu, 2023), Business English is especially conducive to an integrated curriculum. Following the extensive US-led marketization of the late 20th century, English emerged as the de facto global lingua franca, leading to the ascendancy of Business English in HEIs beyond the immediate anglosphere. Since ESD and Business English are inherently inderdisciplnary (Sacco el al., 2014), sharing similar pedagogical practices, Business English courses present ideal opportunities to teach and discuss sustainability. Gonglewski and Helm (2014) call for ESD to be integrative, experiential, and transformative. A well-designed Business English courses can meet these requirements by drawing from multidisciplinary content (economics, statistics, science, social sciences, etc.), facilitating interactive and engaging classroom activities that mimic work environments and problem-solving through case studies, and encouraging shifts in perspective through reflection on one's place and role in their local and global community. At the classroom level, meanwhile, this whole-curriculum approach may "encourage students to view sustainability as a day-to-day issue" (Poon, 2017, p. 149), instilling practical and ingrained understandings of global issues and the skills and mindset needed to make informed choices when confronting said issues outside of educational contexts. Therefore, we believe that by embedding the values of ESD within ELL, future graduates will be better prepared to uphold the axioms of sustainability in collaborative, cross-cultural settings.

Task and problem-based instructional methods are valuable additions to Business English curricula (Roell, 2019). Case studies—a popular tool in sustainability research (Poon, 2017)—allow Business English practitioners to bring issues facing the outside world into the classroom. Indeed, following efforts to align corporate practices with the UN's sustainable development goals (SDGs), Business English classes should embed sustainable practice in curricula to prepare students for an increasingly transcultural business sector. To that end, this inquiry situates the SDG framework within the case study method to raise student understanding and critical awareness of corporate sustainability and communicative competencies in Business English. As a part of an overlooked area of research in Japan, our idiographic study seeks to address the following 'open' research question:
How do Japanese college students experience and make sense of sustainability in their everyday lives and education?

METHODOLOGY

Research Setting and Case Study Course Design

This project was conducted in the International Studies department of a private university in Western Japan. Third-year students may take elective Business English classes to prepare them for internationally focused careers. As many third-year students in this program complete their English credits in the first semester, class sizes in the second half of the year are relatively small, with each of

the six sections having between four and ten students. This led to and underdeveloped and often neglected second semester of this course. Therefore, the teachers of the department implemented a newly-designed, ESD-focused syllabus whereby students completed three case study projects, each increasing in complexity and demand. The classes met twice a week, with one lesson being dedicated to the case study projects which required groups of two or three students to research and analyze a local company or corporation, identify ongoing problems, develop an action plan to address them, and present their findings as a group. Each project cycle followed Roell's (2019) framework for embedding case studies within ELL:

1. Teacher introduces the situation (or students generate a case).
2. Students read materials and analyze the situation.
3. Students discuss possible solutions in groups.
4. Students present and justify solutions to the whole class.
5. Class discussion and feedback session.
6. Students reflect on the case study procedure.

Alongside enhancing proficiencies in business English, the primary objective of each case study phase was to foster a deeper awareness of CSR and SDG practices. Implicitly addressing ethical and environmental concerns during phases one and two, students analyzed an example case study and reflected upon their part-time job experiences, exploring issues such as food loss, equitable treatment of employees and customers, and gender equality. In the final phase, groups selected a Japan-based international business and researched its CSR policies and SDG initiatives. Here, students conducted a comparative analysis of sustainability reports and associated literature on corporate websites, cross-referencing with current news articles and periodicals to identify gaps in sustainable policy and practice. Participants highlighted global issues that fit within the SDG's 17-goal framework, such as ethical sourcing of raw materials, manufacturing in developing countries, waste management, and human rights violations. After identifying issues, students were encouraged to contact their respective companies, seeking additional information that may be integrated into their case study analysis. Simultaneously, they gathered survey data from peers, assessing their knowledge of the company's policies, sustainability initiatives, and overall reputation. Armed with this data, students applied SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) to formulate solutions to the identified problems. Ultimately, each group presented their research findings and proposed solutions to the class for discussion.

Idiogrphaic Action Research

Action research, firmly rooted in a post-positivist ontological framework and aligned with idiographic-interpretive epistemology (Kock et al., 2008), is a well-established research approach within the social sciences. Operating under the premise that quantitative data fails to account for the intricacies of complex social phenomena, action research seeks to identify and address problems within a given setting and, utilizing qualitative data and analysis, describe the effect of introducing change to this context (Baskerville, 1999). Against this background, the idiographic approach does not overly concern itself with repeatability or transferable results (Smith et al., 2022), instead favoring in-depth case analyses that capture the essence of participant understandings. Action research is often a recursive approach wherein the researcher-practitioners diagnose a problem, plan and take action, evaluate outcomes, and document learning and change. In the present study, Smith et al.'s (2022) Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) served as the analytical lens through which this process took shape. As with idiographic research more broadly, IPA seeks to delve into the lived experiences of subjects and the meanings they derive from those experiences. Both IPA and action research acknowledge the inevitable involvement of researchers in the study. While bias is inevitable, IPA

requires the researcher to identify and 'strip away' preconceptions through bracketing, allowing for a more accurate interpretation of the participant experience (Smith et al., 2022). With a double hermeneutic in mind, this action research sought to 'make sense' of participants' experiences, opinions, and beliefs as told in their own words (Smith, 2023) while minimizing interpretive interference through an ongoing dedication to reflexive practice.

Sampling and Participants

Drawing on purposive sampling, Participants were selected from a single section of the third-year business English classes in the host HEI. Students demonstrated English language proficiency ranging from upper-intermediate to advanced (CEFR B2-C1) and reported varying exposure to ESD in their secondary education. Four learners (f=3, m=1) participated in the study, with this limited, homogenous sample following the principles of IPA, which seeks to delve into patterns of meaning-making across cases rather than prioritizing broadly applicable results (Smith, 1999; Smith et al., 2022). Indeed, IPA often involves relatively small sample sizes, with Smith et al. (2022) noting a preference for between three and ten Participants, depending on the project's scope. In doing so, IPA emphasizes the data's depth and richness rather than the sample's breadth. While not a strict rule, IPA often involves sampling Participants with homogenous experiences related to the research question, ensuring 'the study holds relevance and personal significance to respondents' (Noon, 2018, p. 76). In this instance, the study's inclusion criteria were fairly relaxed, as participants had all been raised in the Japanese education system, were in the same university faculty, and had previous experience of ESD and participation in the semester-long course, and therefore were deemed sufficient for inclusion. With this approach, we aimed to facilitate a nuanced analysis, fostering richer insights and meaning-making via interactions between Participants and Researchers. Participant demographic data are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Participant demographic information. *Note.* Pseudonyms used throughout.

Name	Gender	Age	Years of ESD
Mana	Female	21	6
Akari	Female	20	6
Ruri	Female	20	2
Shun	Male	21	0.5

Interview Protocols and Data Collection

Prior to data collection or interviewing and consistent with standard ethical practice (Smith, 2023), Researchers obtained written and verbal informed consent from each Participant. All consent, information, and interview documents were prepared in Japanese and English. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality in handling their responses, and guaranteed that their voluntary participation would have no bearing on their ongoing education. Participants retained the right to withdraw their consent at any stage before data analysis. Data was collected at three stages across the 14-week semester. Participants began by completing a free-response questionnaire to elicit their general awareness of sustainability, their view of companies' impact on the world, and corporate initiatives forging a sustainable society. Learners gave one-on-one semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45-60 minutes at the mid-point of the semester, during which they reflected on their educational experiences and exposure to ESD. Finally, at the semester's conclusion, students participated in a 30-minute group interview, which prompted them to reflect on the course and, more importantly, their emerging conceptions of sustainability. During interviews, Researchers utilized the

non-directive techniques deemed exemplary to IPA to facilitate open communication, including a flexible interview guide, minimal note-taking, and non-dichotomous questions (Smith et al., 2022).

Data Analysis

Data from the free-response written questionnaire was collected and analyzed at the beginning of the semester to gauge Participants' pre-existing knowledge of sustainable practices in the corporate sector. Data analysis of the mid-semester semi-structured and end-of-term group interviews, meanwhile, followed Smith et al.'s (2022) seven-step data analysis framework (Figure 1) for IPA. Audio from each one-on-one interview session and the final group interview was transcribed verbatim, with a copy of the transcript returned to Participants to confirm accuracy before proceeding to step 1. At this point, data from the written responses to the pre-semester survey task were also consolidated within each Participant's respective transcript. Once confirmed, data was analyzed using the seven-step strategy illustrated in Figure 1:

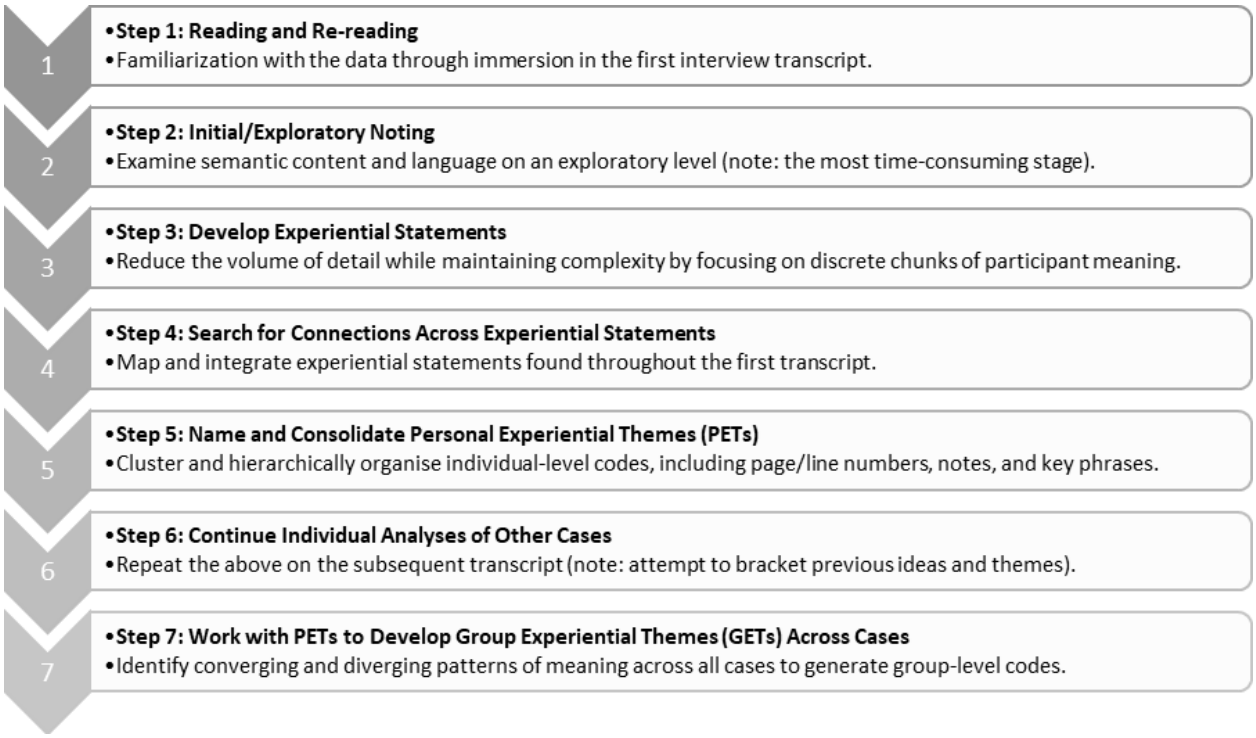

Figure 1. The seven steps of IPA. *Note*. Adapted from Smith et al. (2022).

RESULTS

Theme 1: Perceived Importance of ESD

The initial theme emerging from analysis was the Participants' attitudes and exposure to ESD and the evolution of those beliefs over the semester. As each student reported varying exposure to ESD at the study's onset, there was a significant discrepancy in awareness of sustainability in the initial short-response survey, which gradually homogenized by the second and third stages of data collection. Participants who completed their secondary education at private schools reported deeper exposure to ESD in class and via extra-curricular activities, including opportunities to volunteer in developing countries. Speaking on this, Mana recalled 'SDGs? I learned around high school and in English class, and yeah… a Canadian teacher taught me about SDGs.' Akari, likewise, recalled

meaningful ESD exposure in her private high school education, where she was able to participate in a global leadership program, recounting:

> It is the national government's project … [to] study about world problems after school. I joined it because I wanted to join the Cambodia trip, so I joined that group in first grade, and I studied about SDGs there.

In response to his knowledge of the SDGs, Shun, who undertook most of his secondary education in a public setting, responded, 'Sorry, I don't know anything,' and revealed later in his interview that he began formal ESD 'last semester when I studied about sea-level water'. Ruri, who also reported limited exposure to ESD in her public education, recalled, 'maybe [as a] high school student, I heard that [for the] first time.' Additionally, the results of her short-response survey and interview demonstrate a cursory familiarity with sustainability, specifically how the 'SDGs is 17 goals' and 'is a very important attempt because in the future, the world environment isn't very good and something needs to change'. She also exhibited hesitancy while speaking on her depth of knowledge or her ability to contribute to SDGs, reverting to Japanese to concede, 'Because I…*amari SDGs ni tsuite wakaranai* [I don't really understand much about SDGs]... about the SDGs. So many schools increase the learn[ing] about SDGS.'

When reflecting on the value of ESD and, perhaps, lending further credence to the public-private educational divide, Participants unanimously acknowledged a lack of understanding of sustainability among the Japanese populace. During her interview, Akari explained the limited awareness of sustainability in the Japanese public, stating, 'I think not that many people in Japan know about SDGs, so they must still know about SDGs is the first step.' She further commented that while 'students know about SDGs… they only know SDGs. Only a word. They don't know the contents,' highlighting a surface-level comprehension of sustainability despite state-level efforts to the contrary. Akari added that schools are responsible for going beyond surface-level knowledge when 'teach[ing] the students the contents of SDGs and real projects for solving SDGs.' Shun exemplified this trend while also hinting at the strength of corporate influence in Japanese sustainability endeavors, 'Oh, …SDGs logo? Yes. I often saw that logo in various companies' commercials. Yes. For example, Coca-Cola, Adidas,... Yes. Blah, blah, blah.' However, when asked if he knows *how* said companies take sustainable action, he promptly replied, 'Uh, no.' Shun, echoing the sentiments of the other Participants, nevertheless expressed the belief that schools should create more opportunities for ESD curricula to instigate meaningful change on the path towards sustainability. Reflecting on his limited opportunities to learn about sustainability, he explained:

> Teaching SDGs to students is a good idea. So, it is good for making it an opportunity to study for SDGs in weekly curriculum. Not only in university… but in high school, junior high school, every school [with a] SDGs curriculum is good.

Theme 2: Who is Responsible for Sustainability?

Conversations soon transitioned towards *who* should educate the public and lead the charge towards a sustainable society, with responses evolving over the semester. Initially, vague platitudes such as 'everyone in the world,' shifted towards influential intergovernmental bodies (i.e., the UN) before gradually developing into more thoughtful answers, such as powerful individuals and companies. Akari spoke to this change, 'Before this class, I thought SDGs responsibility is on the

government; however, after this class, I thought company has responsibility.' As Participants' awareness of sustainable practices increased, nuanced views of corporate initiatives emerged. While initial questionnaire responses indicated that corporate entities acted responsibly, opinions of these initiatives became more complex by the mid-semester and end-of-term interviews. At the onset of the study, Participants with previous exposure to ESD, including Mana and Akari, demonstrated their knowledge of SDG initiatives taken by large Japanese companies. While they *did* recognize the potential for corporate practices to be ecologically unjust, opinions remained generally positive, such as in Akari's explanation of the Meiji Holdings Company:

> Meiji agrees with the SDGs. Particularly, it considers economy, human rights, environment, health. For example, Meiji improved cacao producers' work environment. Also, Meiji supports the improvement of pollution and temperature change.

As previously described, the final case study project required students to scrutinize CSR reports accessible on corporate websites before comparing them to external news articles and online information. In contrast to earlier responses, comments from individual and group interviews exhibited critical perspectives on corporate efforts. While also articulating the positive impacts of these companies, Participants felt corporate efforts were 'not enough', with Mana noting that global 'temperatures still rise' and Shun pointing to injustices continuing worldwide. Shun criticized Uniqlo for 'human rights issues,' specifically, 'harsh and unfair working conditions in the Uighur Autonomous Region.'

Another outcome of investigating policy and practice was a heightened awareness of corporate attempts to 'greenwash.' Mana and Ruri highlighted this practice as *the* main reason for the SDG's lack of penetration, pointing to the 'Starbucks Green Cup,' ostensibly an eco-friendly design, by way of example: 'But the customer has to recycle the complicated way, and they aren't eager to do. So, it's not meaning[ful].' Mana further explained her belief that many companies greenwash because 'the situation doesn't improve, I think, and the temperature is getting high. So, I think we have to decrease the greenwashing company.'

In considering corporate impact on the environment and society, Participants also sought to question the role of individuals in sustainability. There remained, however, a divergence of opinions regarding which generation of Japanese society held greater responsibility. Considering the numbers, Shun contended that 'In Japan, older people also have to think about it because simply number, that number is more than us.' Yet, Mana took this further, stressing the importance of adults empowering youths, 'but of course, the government leads us to solve the problem, and also, the young people have to change their minds about it. So, to change their mind, the adult or the teacher has to teach about SDGs.' In doing so, Mana acknowledges democratic, anti-authoritarian education as the first step in equipping youth for this task.

Theme 3: The Sustainable Self

The third theme, the sustainable self, emerged as Participants considered *their* role in creating a more sustainable future. Indeed, as Participants became more aware of global initiatives, they further developed their sense of responsibility for sustainability and, in turn, personal identities as sustainable citizens. During both interviews, students reflected on their actions, disclosing the practice of sustainability through small actions, such as Akari's habits of 'bring[ing] my own ECO bag' and 'drinking from my bottle', yet the value and impact of these actions soon came into question. Ruri and

Akari conceded that such efforts remain insufficient, stating, 'Many people try to reduce plastic bags or wooden chopsticks, but I think this is a very small attempt. So, I think it's *imiganai* [meaningless]' and 'No (it's not enough), but I don't know what to do,' respectively. At the end of the semester, however, Ruri reported that she felt learning more about SDG initiatives would lead to a lasting change in her actions, stating:

> Before this class, I think SDGs is very important things, but I'm not interested in SDGs. But through research on Starbucks, SDGs is very important to us to live in the future, and I learn more and change my actions.

Moreover, some students highlighted that knowledge of corporate SDG policy may influence their future career paths. Mana, for instance, noted how when choosing a company, it is important for her to feel 'proud of her working,' noting a strong desire to 'work in the company where I feel useful for the society.' Shun indicated that ESD might better equip him to contribute to his future company's sustainable efforts, 'if the company thinks about SDGs, I can say the opinion so easily. And yeah, it is better so, uh… knowing something than knowing nothing.' Finally, in the group interviews, Participants believed that a company's respective commitment to sustainability might be valuable when assessing its corporate culture, values and, for that matter, working conditions. Akari summed up, stating: 'by knowing about SDGs, maybe I can *handan suru* [make a judgement]…decide if the company good or bad.'

Accompanying the theme of a sustainable self-identity was the perceived importance of the relationship between ESD and English. Reflecting on the class, Participants reported that learning English broadened their worldviews and fundamentally changed their lives. For instance, Mana recalled an episode of how being an English major allowed her to volunteer abroad:

> I am good at studying English, and when I was a high school student, I wanted to work in the foreign country. Also, when I was a high school student, I went to the Philippines and met street children. So, I want to study global problems in this major, and yeah, I want to be a person who helps people in the poor country.

Not only did interviewees view ESD as necessary for society, but most of the Participants reported feeling that English was essential for said content. Ruri noted, 'English is used worldwide, and SDGs is attempted worldwide; I think English class is good for studying SDGs.' Mana agreed, adding, 'we have to learn about it in English and have to know how the worldwide companies tackle it.' With this expanding global perspective, Participants recognized English as a lingua franca as central to transcultural collaboration when tackling sustainability and social justice. Shun, for example, highlights ELL as 'studying another country's culture' and cites English as essential in forming his views on stopping discrimination like 'racism and LGBT'. Finally, as Participants reflected on the value of the English-medium course and its focus on ESD, there was consensus that it was meaningful. Shun explained:

> So, this class make, let us study English, of course, and the thing[s] important for future society. So only studying English, for example, we study, we read the normal essay and have a normal conversation, but through this class I can learn English and other thing[s] important for society.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Notwithstanding the long-term promotion of ESD locally, a discernible gap between Japanese policy and practice has resulted in a populace condition for "shallow" efforts in sustainability. This observation is substantiated by existing literature, which reveals a lack of depth in Japanese ESD (Nagata, 2017; Liu, 2023). Participants in this study unanimously called for educational institutions to allocate more time to ESD. This consensus was grounded in the perceived lack of meaningful awareness regarding sustainability issues among the general population; as highlighted by Akari, there is a need to understand and 'know the contents' beyond just 'know[ing] the word'. This knowledge requires a sustainability pedaogogy that asks students to "reflect on personal roles, attitudes and responsibilities in relation to a range of sustainability issues" (Cotton & Winter, 2010, p. 47) not afforded by the integrated studies' allotted time of 50-187 hours per annum (MEXT, 2015). Instead, our study advocates for integrating elements of ESD holistically throughout the curriculum, wherever feasible. Thus, we believe fostering a space conducive to developing student competencies in sustainability necessitates a comprehensive overhaul of MEXT's traditional educational framework. This transformation entails a departure from the conveyance of knowledge rooted in single disciplines toward a competency-oriented, multidisciplinary approach (Wang et al., 2022). Importantly, this transformative shift must be pervasive across *all* levels of education, with HEIs no exception.

Considering this, it becomes imperative to reconstruct existing curricula with a heightened focus on ESD – the growing corporate impetus towards sustainability positions Business English as an exemplary candidate for such a redesign. Notably, this study provides evidence that an ESD-focused Business English curriculum positively impacts participants' sense of responsibility towards sustainability. For the participants in this study, our curriculum effectively engaged them with real-world issues, fostering a student-centered approach that necessitated agency and accountability in their learning. Data collected at three intervals demonstrated a notable increase in participants' knowledge and critical awareness of corporate SDG efforts. Simultaneously, it was observed that students developed a more pronounced sustainable self-identity. Participants exhibited a heightened proficiency in business English and the ability to assess corporate policies and practices. The anticipated outcome of this transformation is that students, now equipped with a deeper understanding of sustainability, may evolve into more responsible consumers, able to contribute actively and critically to a sustainable future via informed decision-making and responsible practices.

Furthermore, the symbiotic relationship between ELL and sustainability is mutually advantageous. In Japan, incorporating English-language ESD could inject new vitality and significance into a language that has experienced a prolonged decline locally (Education First, 2024). Participants in our study attested to the transformative nature of learning English, particularly when intertwined with themes such as equality, poverty, and global issues. This intersectionality highlighted the potential of ESD to imbue English language education with a renewed sense of purpose. By intertwining the learning of English with sustainability issues, educators can enhance language skills and instill a broader sense of global awareness and responsibility. This holistic approach may reinvigorate the perception of English as a subject of substantive importance. Not only does ESD infuse English language courses with greater meaning and relevance, but more importantly, a language course focused on sustainability 'constitutes the most significant contribution they can do to society' (de la Fuente, 2021, p. 65). Sacco et al. (2014) posit that successful global citzens have the following three qualities; knowledge of sustainability, critical thinking skills, and the ability to educate and inspire others in a multilingual setting. Therefore, we believe facilitating this transformative ESD through ELL is

a necessary step in achieving MEXT's goal of raising the future generation of leaders who are able to operate at a global scale.

In closing, HEIs are, for many, the final hurdle to navigate before entering the workforce. Educators at this pivotal stage are responsible for ensuring that students are duly prepared to face the challenges awaiting them in the outside world. With the increasing threats of climate change, loss of ecosystems, and extreme poverty, incorporating sustainability into the HEI curriculum is not a suggestion but an imperative. This action research study introduced how ELL courses, in this case Business English, can be reformatted to incorporate ESD as a foundational tenet of the class. While this idiographic study was, as fitting with phenomenological inquiry more generally, limited in terms of participant numbers and scope, its findings offer significant insights into the experiences and opinions of Japanese university students regarding ESD. However, in recognition of the small scale of this study, the low generalizability, and the reality that students across Japan will have different experiences and exposure to ESD, more research is necessary to paint a clearer picture of the state of ESD in Japanese education. Moreover, future research examining the lasting value of sustainability content in Business English following workforce transitions may shed light on the long-term impact of ESD-focused curricula. This call notwithstanding, ESD must not be reserved for Business English but incorporated across *all* class types as part of a holistic effort to prepare learners for a sustainable future. With this goal in view, we call on educators to carry the torch and do their part in embedding ESD within their learning activities and curricula. While governments and institutions burdened by the limiting impact of bureaucracy may remain slow to act, frontline educators hold the capacity for quick and decisive action when implementing classroom-level change and, potentially, helping change the world for the better.

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