

TEACHING FOR CHANGE: INTEGRATING THE SDGS INTO EDUCATION A CASE STUDY AT CAN THO UNIVERSITY, VIETNAM

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Abstract. *This study explores how integrating Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into English language teaching can enhance students' language proficiency and sustainability awareness at Can Tho University (CTU), Vietnam. In response to global educational shifts toward interdisciplinary learning and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), this research addresses the limited application of SDG-aligned content in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction for non-English majors in higher education. The study involved 180 students from 17 faculties enrolled in the General English 3 Course (XH025). Data collection included a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with seven students. Lessons focused on key SDGs relevant to the Mekong Delta region: Quality Education (SDG 4), Gender Equality (SDG 5), Clean Water and Energy (SDGs 6 & 7), Innovation (SDG 9), Climate Action (SDG 13), and Governance (SDG 16). Findings reveal that SDG-integrated lessons improved student motivation, vocabulary, speaking fluency, and sustainability understanding. Despite challenges with technical language and interdisciplinary tasks, students gained critical thinking skills and real-world problem awareness. The study also aligns with the ECOViP project (Fostering Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Ecotourism), which supports graduates in applying language and sustainability knowledge to tourism startup initiatives, enhancing Vietnam's green economic development.*

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Can Tho University (CTU), Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), Interdisciplinary Learning

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale

In the face of global challenges such as climate change, inequality, environmental degradation, and resource scarcity, education must not only provide students with language and communication skills but also equip them with the mindset to actively contribute to sustainable development. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a globally recognized framework that can be integrated into teaching across disciplines, including English language instruction. Embedding SDG-related content into English learning promotes student engagement, critical thinking, and meaningful, real-world language use.

Can Tho University (CTU), situated in the Mekong Delta—Vietnam's most ecologically sensitive and economically vital region—serves as an ideal context for this approach. As a multi-disciplinary institution with a commitment to regional and national development, CTU is well-positioned to lead educational innovation. With its diverse student population and strong focus on applied learning, integrating SDGs into English courses at CTU

offers the potential to build students' language proficiency alongside their sustainability awareness and civic responsibility.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 General Statement

This investigates the imperative of integrating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into English language instruction at Can Tho University (CTU), setting the stage for the research questions: impact on language proficiency and sustainability awareness; and perceived challenges and benefits) and the objectives (identifying effective methods and evaluating outcomes). Can Tho University, located in the Mekong Delta—Vietnam's "rice bowl"—occupies approximately 4 million hectares with over 17 million people, and is the country's primary agricultural hub for rice, fruit, and aquaculture

2.2 The Mekong Delta and the Role of Can Tho University

The Mekong Delta (Đồng bằng Sông Cửu Long – ĐBSCL) plays a crucial role in Vietnam's economy, accounting for more than 50% of national rice production and a significant portion of the country's fruits and aquatic exports (Le et al., 2020). Rich in biodiversity and natural resources, the region is nonetheless highly vulnerable to climate change, salinity intrusion, and environmental degradation (World Bank, 2022). In response to these challenges, regional development increasingly demands education systems capable of producing sustainability-oriented professionals.

Can Tho University (CTU), located at the heart of the Mekong Delta, is the region's flagship higher education institution. Established in 1966, CTU offers a wide array of undergraduate and postgraduate programs and has grown into a hub of scientific research and technological innovation (CTU, 2024). The university's mission prioritizes education, research, and the transfer of scientific knowledge to address regional socio-economic issues. Its quality assurance practices include national and ASEAN University Network–Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) accreditation. As such, CTU is strategically positioned to lead efforts in embedding SDG themes into curricula. Its strong partnerships with local and international institutions, along with its interdisciplinary student base, make it an ideal context for exploring the integration of the SDGs in English language education.

2.3 Rationale for Integrating SDGs into English Education

There is growing recognition that education, particularly language education, plays a central role in addressing global challenges and promoting sustainable development (UNESCO, 2017). English, as a global lingua franca, is not only a tool for communication but also a medium for raising awareness and fostering civic engagement on sustainability issues (Cates, 2013; Byram, 2008). In the context of Can Tho University, students come from 17 different faculties, making English classes a uniquely interdisciplinary and cross-cultural space where SDGs can be explored through diverse lenses.

The SDGs address complex, interconnected global and local problems—from climate change to poverty, gender inequality, and responsible consumption. Embedding these themes into English language instruction helps students improve language skills while critically engaging with real-world topics (Tilbury, 2011). For the Mekong Delta, this is particularly pertinent due to the region's climate vulnerability and the need for local sustainability solutions (Leal Filho et al., 2018). Moreover, such integration supports national educational goals, which increasingly emphasize competency-based, learner-centered approaches aligned with global standards (Nguyen & Hoang, 2021). Integrating

SDGs into English teaching not only prepares students for global citizenship but also enhances their employability and readiness to tackle 21st-century challenges.

2.4 Harmony with Global and National Education Frameworks

The integration of SDGs into English language teaching at CTU aligns strongly with both global and national education strategies. Internationally, UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) framework—especially Target 4.7 of the SDGs—calls for education systems to promote sustainable lifestyles, global citizenship, and intercultural understanding (UNESCO, 2017). ESD encourages learners to think critically, collaborate across disciplines, and apply knowledge in meaningful ways—outcomes well-supported through English education that incorporates SDG themes (Rieckmann, 2012). Nationally, Vietnam has embraced educational reform through curriculum renewal and integration of global competencies, digital transformation, and sustainability (Vietnam MOET, 2021). The Ministry of Education and Training promotes outcome-based, interdisciplinary teaching methods that align well with the goals of SDG-oriented instruction. CTU, in particular, is recognized for its proactive implementation of international accreditation standards such as AUN-QA and its investment in high-quality, innovative learning environments (CTU, 2024).

Thus, incorporating the SDGs into English education at CTU represents a convergence of institutional, national, and global priorities. It provides an opportunity not only to improve students' English language proficiency but also to embed in them the competencies needed to be informed, responsible, and proactive global citizens capable of contributing to sustainable development in Vietnam and beyond.

2.5 Pedagogical Value of SDG Integration in ELT

Integrating SDGs into English language teaching (ELT) brings substantial pedagogical benefits. First, it aligns with communicative and task-based approaches, which prioritize real-world relevance, learner autonomy, and the development of critical thinking (Richards, 2006). By discussing sustainability topics such as climate action (SDG 13), gender equality (SDG 5), or clean water (SDG 6), students not only practice language but engage deeply with issues affecting their communities and the planet (Cates, 2013). At Can Tho University, this integration can take the form of thematic lessons, project-based learning (PBL), and interdisciplinary collaboration. For example, environmental science and engineering students can collaborate on a clean water project in English class—combining content knowledge with communication skills (Beckett & Slater, 2005). This builds not only language proficiency but also teamwork and problem-solving skills.

Furthermore, SDG integration enhances learner motivation. When language activities are tied to meaningful and urgent global concerns, students tend to be more engaged and invested in their learning (Dörnyei, 2001). This approach also reinforces higher-order thinking and values-based education, essential for developing global citizens capable of addressing complex sustainability challenges in the 21st century (Tilbury, 2011; Sterling, 2010).

2.6 Research Gap

While numerous global frameworks advocate for the integration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into education, practical applications in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms—especially in Southeast Asia—remain limited and under-researched. Existing studies have mostly focused on SDG integration in environmental sciences, teacher education, or social studies (Leal Filho et al., 2018; Rieckmann, 2012), but few have explored its pedagogical value in university-level language education,

particularly for non-English majors in developing countries like Vietnam. At Can Tho University (CTU), a leading institution in the Mekong Delta, there is a strong institutional foundation for sustainability and innovation. However, the potential of English language teaching as a platform to raise sustainability awareness and build interdisciplinary competencies remains largely untapped in research. Current scholarship lacks empirical evidence on how embedding SDG themes impacts students' language proficiency, motivation, or critical thinking in a real classroom setting.

This research seeks to fill that gap by evaluating the outcomes of SDG-based English instruction at Can Tho University. It addresses an urgent need to understand not only how students respond to such integration, but also how it integrates with broader educational reforms and sustainability agendas at local, national, and global levels.

2.7 Summary

This part has laid out the contextual, pedagogical, and theoretical foundations for integrating the SDGs into English language teaching at Can Tho University. The Mekong Delta's rich resources and complex challenges underscore the need for sustainability-focused education. Can Tho University, as the region's academic leader, is well-positioned to embed the SDGs into interdisciplinary, skills-based learning. By aligning with UNESCO's ESD goals, Vietnam's educational reforms, and CTU's institutional mission, SDG integration in ELT offers a powerful tool to foster global citizenship, critical thinking, and practical language skills. English classrooms serve as inclusive spaces where students from multiple disciplines can engage with urgent issues like climate change, clean energy, and gender equality—all while improving their English proficiency.

These insights frame the research questions guiding this study: how SDG integration affects student learning and what challenges and benefits are encountered. The next chapter will outline the methodology used to investigate these questions, including the design of classroom interventions, participant selection, data collection, and analytical strategies.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Research Questions

This study was guided by two core research questions:

1. How can the integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into English language teaching at Can Tho University enhance students' language proficiency and sustainability awareness?
2. What are the perceived challenges and benefits of implementing SDG-related English education projects among students and faculty at Can Tho University?

3.2 Research Objectives

The study sought to achieve the following objectives:

1. to explore effective instructional methods for integrating SDG themes into English language teaching at Can Tho University.
2. to evaluate the impact of SDG-based learning activities on students' language skills, interdisciplinary collaboration, and sustainability understanding.

3.3 Research Tools and Participants

3.3.1 Participants

The study involved 180 non-English major students enrolled in the General English 3 Course (XH025) course at Can Tho University during the summer semester (May–July 2025). Participants were drawn from 17 diverse faculties, schools, and institutes, representing CTU's interdisciplinary academic environment. This diversity facilitated rich cross-disciplinary interactions and perspectives throughout the SDG-related learning activities.

Participating Faculties/Schools/Institutes:	
No.	Faculty / School / Institute
1	College of Agriculture
2	College of Aquaculture and Fisheries
3	College of Engineering Technology
4	College of Environment and Natural Resources
5	College of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)
6	College of Natural Sciences
7	College of Rural Development
8	School of Economics
9	School of Education
10	School of Foreign Languages
11	School of Law
12	School of Pre-University
13	School of Political Science
14	School of Social Sciences and Humanities
15	College of Physical Education
16	Institute of Food and Biotechnology
17	Mekong Delta Development Research Institute

3.3.2 Research Tools

Two primary data collection instruments were employed:

1. **Questionnaire:** A structured questionnaire was administered to all 180 students to collect quantitative data on their perceptions, self-assessed language progress, and awareness of SDG-related concepts following the intervention. The questionnaire included Likert-scale items and open-ended questions for richer responses.
2. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** In-depth interviews were conducted with seven purposefully selected students from various faculties to gather qualitative insights into their learning experiences, interdisciplinary collaboration, challenges, and perceived benefits of SDG-integrated English instruction. These interviews allowed for a deeper exploration of nuances not captured in the questionnaire.

3.4 Learning Materials and Teaching Design

The instructional design centered on embedding selected SDGs into English lessons tailored to Vietnam's socio-economic priorities and the Mekong Delta context. Content development emphasized sustainability themes directly relevant to students' disciplines and local realities.

SDG	Topic	Sample Activity
SDG 4	Quality Education & Digital Literacy	Reading and debating equitable access to online learning
SDG 5	Gender Equality & Inclusive Entrepreneurship	Role-play interviews with female entrepreneurs

SDG	Topic	Sample Activity
SDG 6 & 7	Clean Water & Clean Energy	Group presentations on local water purification and solar startups
SDG 9	Innovation & Infrastructure	Writing assignments on smart infrastructure development
SDG 13	Climate Action	Poster creation and oral presentations on climate resilience
SDG 16	Legal-Tech & Governance	Case study analysis and vocabulary tasks on justice and technology

3.5 Material Types and Pedagogical Features

The materials incorporated:

- *Authentic texts*: Including news articles, sustainability reports, and NGO publications, providing real-world language exposure.
- *Visual media*: Infographics, charts, and short documentaries to enhance comprehension and engagement.
- *Interactive tasks*: Project-based assignments, collaborative discussions, and debates fostered communication and critical thinking.
- *Skills integration*: Activities were designed to develop reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills simultaneously within the SDG context.

All tasks were harmonized with communicative and task-based learning principles (Richards, 2006), promoting learner autonomy, critical reflection, and interdisciplinary dialogue. The curriculum followed Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) frameworks (Tilbury, 2011; UNESCO, 2017), encouraging students to become active problem solvers and responsible global citizens.

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics to identify trends in students' perceptions, language proficiency improvements, and sustainability awareness. Statistical software such as SPSS was used to calculate frequencies, means, and correlations where appropriate. Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis. This involved coding interview transcripts to identify recurring themes related to instructional effectiveness, interdisciplinary collaboration, challenges faced, and perceived benefits of SDG integration. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings provided a comprehensive understanding of the impact of SDG-infused English language teaching at Can Tho University.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Can Tho University Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. All participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained; participants' identities were anonymized in all reports and publications. Data were securely stored and accessible only to the research team. Additionally, care was taken to ensure that the inclusion of sustainability themes in the curriculum was culturally sensitive and respectful of diverse student backgrounds.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Key Findings

This part poses the key findings derived from the mixed-method data collection: a questionnaire completed by 180 non-English major students and semi-structured interviews with seven students from diverse faculties at Can Tho University (CTU). The

analysis centers on students' perceptions of how integrating selected Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into English language learning influenced their language proficiency, sustainability awareness, and motivation. The chosen SDGs—4 (Quality Education and digital literacy), 5 (Gender Equality and inclusive entrepreneurship), 6 & 7 (Clean Water and Clean Energy startups), 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), 13 (Climate Action), and 16 (Legal-Tech for Governance and Justice)—reflect priorities pertinent to the Mekong Delta region and Vietnam's sustainable development agenda.

4.2 Questionnaire Findings: Student Perceptions Across SDG Themes

4.2.1 Overall Impact on Language Proficiency and Engagement

Among the 180 respondents, 82% agreed or strongly agreed that learning English through SDG-related topics heightened their interest and engagement. Students highlighted that addressing meaningful, real-world issues enhanced their motivation to improve language skills, especially vocabulary acquisition and speaking fluency, corroborating findings by Coyle et al. (2010) and Ghosn (2013).

4.2.2 SDG-Specific Findings

SDG Theme	Sample Activity	% Students Reporting Improvement	Key Skills Enhanced
SDG 4: Quality Education & Digital Literacy	Reading & debating online learning equity	75%	Reading comprehension, critical thinking
SDG 5: Gender Equality & Inclusive Entrepreneurship	Role-play interviews with female entrepreneurs	70%	Speaking fluency, intercultural communication
SDGs 6 & 7: Clean Water & Clean Energy Startups	Group presentations on local startups	78%	Vocabulary expansion, presentation skills
SDG 9: Industry, Innovation & Infrastructure	Writing tasks on smart city solutions	68%	Writing skills, technical vocabulary
SDG 13: Climate Action Initiatives	Poster creation and speaking tasks	80%	Speaking fluency, environmental awareness
SDG 16: Legal-Tech for Governance & Justice	Case studies and vocabulary tasks	65%	Analytical skills, legal vocabulary

The integration of SDG content enriched language development and sustainability understanding across various disciplines. For instance, activities under SDG 4 helped 75% of students enhance critical reading skills while deepening awareness of global education issues. Similarly, SDG 5 role-play interviews improved speaking fluency and intercultural communication for 70%, fostering gender equality consciousness. Group presentations on environmental startups, linked to SDGs 6 and 7, enabled 78% to expand their vocabulary and hone presentation skills. Writing assignments on SDG 9 supported 68% in mastering technical vocabulary and problem-solving approaches. Climate action-related tasks (SDG 13) achieved an 80% improvement rate in speaking and environmental literacy. Lastly, SDG 16 case studies enhanced analytical abilities and legal lexicon for 65%, demonstrating the interdisciplinary benefits of this approach.

4.3 Interview Insights: Qualitative Perspectives on SDG Integration

4.3.1 Student Interview Responses

Interviews provided nuanced understanding of students' experiences with SDG-integrated English learning. Student 1 (College of Environment & Natural Resources) reflected,

"Learning about clean water issues made English feel useful beyond textbooks. I improved my speaking when explaining problems that affect my community."

Student 2 (College of Engineering Technology) added,

"Writing about smart city innovations helped me use technical vocabulary and think critically in English."

Student 3 (School of Foreign Languages) stated,

"Role-playing interviews on gender equality improved my speaking and taught me how to express social issues clearly."

Meanwhile, Student 4 (School of Economics) shared, *"Creating posters on climate action helped me become more confident in presenting and understanding environmental problems."*

Challenges were also acknowledged. Student 5 (School of Law) commented,

"Legal and governance terms were hard at first, but group discussions and teacher support helped me grasp difficult vocabulary."

Student 6 (College of Agriculture) noted,

"Working with students from other faculties was challenging due to different knowledge bases, but it also expanded my perspective and helped me explain ideas better."

Student 7 (School of Social Sciences and Humanities) observed,

"These topics motivated me more than usual English lessons because they connect to real social issues that I care about."

4.3.2 Common Themes from Interviews

The interviews revealed several consistent themes. Students highly valued the real-world relevance of SDG-integrated English learning, noting that connecting language study with pressing sustainability issues significantly enhanced their motivation and engagement. Interdisciplinary collaboration was another important aspect, as working with peers from different faculties fostered empathy, improved communication skills, and deepened their understanding of complex, interconnected challenges. Although technical vocabulary presented initial difficulties, these language barriers were effectively overcome through instructor scaffolding and peer support. Finally, students reported noticeable improvements in their speaking and presentation skills, with gains also seen in writing and critical thinking abilities, demonstrating the multifaceted benefits of embedding SDGs within the English curriculum.

4.4 Discussion

The findings corroborate that integrating SDG themes into English language teaching at CTU significantly boosts students' language proficiency and sustainability awareness. The use of real-life, interdisciplinary, and project-based pedagogies aligns with recognized best practices in Education for Sustainable Development (Tilbury, 2011; UNESCO, 2017). This content-based instructional model, rooted in local and global sustainability concerns, motivates learners and enriches language acquisition.

While challenges such as technical language complexity and coordinating interdisciplinary group work were noted, these were effectively addressed through collaborative learning strategies and teacher facilitation, consistent with earlier studies (Thomas, 2000; Sterling, 2011). Importantly, students perceive SDG-based English education as a valuable foundation for their future careers and active community engagement, underscoring the necessity of aligning language curricula with sustainable development priorities.

CONCLUSION

5.1 Conclusion

This study explored the integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into English language teaching at Can Tho University (CTU) to assess its impact on students' language proficiency and sustainability awareness. Drawing on data from 180 student questionnaires and interviews with seven participants across various faculties, the findings confirmed that embedding SDG-related content—such as clean energy, gender equality, and digital justice—made English learning more meaningful and relevant. Students reported gains in speaking fluency, technical vocabulary, critical thinking, and engagement. SDG-based activities like role-plays, debates, poster presentations, and writing tasks enhanced both language skills and interdisciplinary understanding. The integration of real-world sustainability themes provided a platform for students to develop as global citizens, prepared for the challenges of their local and international communities. Overall, the research supports the idea that teaching English through SDG frameworks fosters not only linguistic competence but also the values and skills needed for sustainable development.

5.2 Implications

The results of this study have several practical implications for English language education in Vietnam and similar contexts. First, incorporating SDG-related themes into English lessons can serve dual purposes: improving communication skills and enhancing students' awareness of sustainability. Educators are encouraged to use real-world topics and interdisciplinary tasks to promote student engagement and critical thinking. Universities should consider training faculty to implement Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) approaches and foster collaboration across departments. Curriculum designers might integrate English course objectives with global development goals, especially those relevant to the local region such as the Mekong Delta. Furthermore, this model can inspire policy-makers to support integrative approaches in higher education that go beyond linguistic outcomes, contributing to national development goals. For institutions like CTU, such integration can strengthen their role in equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and values to become agents of sustainable change in both their professional and community lives.

In addition, this study paves the way for incorporating the *ECOVIP* project (Fostering Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Ecotourism to Support Sustainable Development in Vietnam and the Philippines) into the curriculum. The *ECOVIP* initiative offers a unique opportunity to extend SDG-based English education by directly linking language learning with entrepreneurial skills and sustainable tourism development. Embedding *ECOVIP* activities within English courses can provide hands-on experience in ecotourism startups, helping students apply their language competencies to real-world business and environmental challenges. This approach not only enhances employability after graduation but also supports regional economic growth and environmental stewardship, aligning closely with CTU's mission and the broader SDG agenda.

5.3 Limitations

This study was limited to one summer term and focused on non-English majors in a single course at CTU, which may restrict generalizability. Data relied mainly on self-reports, which can be influenced by bias, and participants' varying language skills might have affected the depth of responses. The short timeframe also prevented assessment of long-term impacts. Future research should include larger, more diverse samples, mixed methods, and direct language assessments over extended periods.

5.4 Further Research

Future studies could explore long-term effects of SDG integration on language skills and civic engagement, compare different institutions or regions, and gather instructor perspectives on interdisciplinary teaching. Experimental research on specific pedagogical approaches and the use of technology would be valuable. Moreover, implementing and evaluating the *ECOVIP* project within English courses offers a

promising direction to link language learning with sustainable entrepreneurship and ecotourism development.

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