

Business Language in Focus Column

It's So Easy Being Green: Addressing Environmental Sustainability in the Business Language Curriculum

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2015 marks the 45th anniversary of [Earth Day](#), an occasion to reflect on the importance of good stewardship of our planet for ourselves and generations to come. It's also an opportunity to consider how we can integrate environmental awareness and activism into every aspect of our lives, including our teaching. This issue's article revolves around ways to address green issues in business language courses.

Green in the context of business

The first thing that comes to mind when associating green with business is more likely to be the color of money (i.e., dollars) rather than the notion of environmental consciousness. Since the industrial revolution, companies of any size had their eyes on profit, often at the expense of a healthy, livable eco-system, including clean, potable water, breathable air, and untouched old growth forests. But after more than a century of abuse of natural resources, it became clear that business and money-making under such conditions could not be sustained in the long run.

In the mid 1990s, increased attention was given to non-monetary measures to gauge the costs of operating businesses. In 1994, John Elkington coined the [triple bottom line](#) (profit, people, and planet) which forced firms to take account of the true cost of doing business, including environmental and social aspects.

Today, it is common for companies to publish an annual sustainability report, outlining their strides in the corporate social responsibility arena. Some countries are further ahead than others, due to cultural differences in the perceptions of green consumer behavior. In other words, some countries are committed to the environment, and its consumers are willing to make sacrifices in order to protect it. Companies from cultures that are highly environmentally conscious often emanate those same values in their corporate policies. One prime example is H&M from Sweden, a country that consistently ranks as one of the most advanced when it comes to sustainability (see [Sweden](#)). In their [2014 H&M Conscious Actions: Sustainability Report](#), the company highlights that it's the world's number one user of organic cotton. It also recycled the equivalent of 38 million t-shirts in 2014 and is aiming for 100% renewable energy sourcing by 2015. In its 2014 "Conscious actions highlights" video, a number of actions and policies are presented, along with calls to action to the public to wash their laundry at lower temperatures. The fact that companies attempt to engage their stakeholders in this way is promising since it opens up dialog around critical environmental issues.

Teaching green in the business language classroom - the natural next step

As the business world now recognizes that success must come with environmental responsibility, it is essential, as well as easier than ever before, to address the topic in the business language curriculum. Materials and tools are readily available to teachers and learners online (several of which are profiled below).

There is a variety of approaches to the teaching green business and sustainability in the business language classroom. When selecting an angle or a content focus it is crucial to consider the relevance it has to students. Anchoring the content in something familiar and interesting to students will enhance their motivational level and entice them to engage more deeply with the content.

One example is the [GW-CIBER German Green Business Module](#), which zeros in on *eco-fashion*. Targeted discussions can be initiated that revolve around students' usual preferences and buyer behavior: What criteria do they deploy when purchasing clothing? How important is the price? Do environmental considerations play a role in their purchasing decision making process?, etc. The Green Business German features an array of resources such as a business case, multiple videos, a suggested lesson plan, and specific tasks that promote acquisition of language skills, business content knowledge, and environmental issue awareness. After completing the unit, students are better informed—if not yet fully reformed—fashion consumers.



Because environmental consciousness is closely related to culture, focusing on green issues is relevant for any language course. Language faculty like Professor Amanda Sheffer of Catholic University of America recognize the value of teaching green across levels: She organized the K-12 immersion event “German means Green” in November 2014, which introduced teachers and students to green issues and technology while using the language in an immersion setting, hearing from global companies and networking with students and teachers from other schools. To Sheffer, green was the ideal theme for the event: “I wanted to do that topic because it connects so well to many areas that promote German in a modern light. Germany serves as a model in terms of its forward-looking approach to the environment.”

The day-long gathering featured speakers from German companies in the US, including Volkswagen, who spoke about ecologically sound approaches in business. To Sheffer, “This program allowed us to reach out to the local business community to meet two native German speakers working in our area. Students could not only hear the presentation in German and learn language skills, but they also made connections that German can be important in their future careers.”



K-16 Students collaborated on activities ranging from a recycling relay to assembling solar robots using German-only instructions. During the planning for the event there was doubt that students from the lower levels would be able to cope with the language needed for the green theme and the related activities. “Some in our local AATG chapter expressed concern that this was too advanced, but as the day demonstrated, students really jumped right in. You could see the excitement in their faces when the robot worked! Students will face challenges and setbacks while working on a project, but we need to show them this is part of the process and how to handle that situation while working in a team and communicating in German.”

Useful tools for teaching green business

For teachers interested in “going green” in their teaching but uncertain where to start, we offer several recommendations for resources and activities:

Since 2012, the National Geographic and GlobeScan have measured green consumer behavior in almost 20 countries. Their [Greendex](#) gauges the extent to which consumers opt for green products and engage in behaviors that are environmentally sustainable. It also explores attitudes towards the environment and sustainability. Through the Greendex all of this is measured using a quantitative methodology and tracked over time. For the latest iteration, 18,000 individuals in 18 countries participated in the survey, whose overall results reveal that environmental concerns have increased, but that adoption of green consumer behavior has not kept pace with these increased concerns.

Because of its extensive international coverage, the Greendex is suitable for incorporation into the business language classroom. On an individual basis, students can use the [Greendex Calculator](#) to get their own, personalized score, which, subsequently, they can compare to the aggregate score of their target culture/s. Right by the Greendex Calculator are the country reports with abundant detail from countries such as Argentina, China, France, Japan, Mexico, Russia, and South Korea.

Another option is to click on the country of interest on the [interactive map](#) that then displays the Greendex scores and some essential information about that country. The full report is also available through the map tool. The detailed report about [France](#) highlights the following: “In the 18 countries surveyed, consumers in France are among the most likely to feel that the extra cost of environmentally friendly products is not worth it to them” and “French consumers are among the least likely consumers, in the 18 countries surveyed, to say they have an air conditioner in their homes.” Such statements provide business language instructors opportunity to analyze environmental perspectives and practices prevalent in the target culture, and compare them to their own.

The [Eco-Innovation Observatory](#) collects and analyzes information on eco-innovation taking place in European Union member countries. The site provides “country reports” with descriptions of a country, its economic profile and environmental “scorecard,” highlighting positive environmental aspects. One example is [Portugal](#) as the world’s largest producer of cork, which is an effective replacement for plastic in building, fashion, aviation, etc. Supporting documents are available in a variety of languages.

As a warm-up to the focus on environmental consciousness, videos showing environmental activism especially in day-to-day life offer cultural insights and inspiration for students. One example is our German video [Was machst du für die Umwelt?](#) (What are you doing for the environment?) that shows several short scenes of Germans describing their daily environmentally conscious action. Teachers can find or make their own film in the target language based on this model (either while visiting the target culture or even at home). Students then create their own video response, such as the example below, which can be shown in an in-class film festival or posted online.



The [Earth Day Network](#) site links to [Earth Day Events](#) across the globe. Students can see their personal impact on the environment with the [Earth Day Network Footprint Calculator](#), which, by having you design your own avatar to accompany you through the quick survey, manages to make an otherwise dull exercise fun. The survey can be completed in any of the official languages of the countries listed.