
Improving Students' Awareness about Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through Literary Text: A Case on Language Teaching

Rosida Tiurma Manurung¹, Nanda Saputra², Reni Oktaviani³, Nurmalina Nurmalina⁴, Herman Herman^{5*}, Nguyen Van Thao⁶, Junita Batubara⁷

¹Universitas Kristen Maranatha, Indonesia

²Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Tarbiyah Al-Hilal Sigli, Indonesia

³Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Indonesia

⁴IAIN Takengon, Indonesia

^{5*}Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar, Indonesia

⁶Graduate Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam

⁷Universitas HKBP Nommensen, Medan, Indonesia

* herman@uhnp.ac.id

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Abstract

This research was aimed to investigate students' awareness about sustainable development goals through literary text in the perspective of language teaching. This research paper examines how specific literary works can be utilized to enhance comprehension of and involvement with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the field of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This study employed a qualitative research approach. The researchers chose students as study participants because they create the literary texts under examination and play a crucial role in interpreting these works. To achieve maximum diversity, the study selected students' literary texts (research papers) from two classes, categorized according to IELTS proficiency levels of 5.5 and 6.0. The research utilized multiple methods to gather information, including student focus groups, teacher interviews, and an examination of the prepared sessions. Results indicated that incorporating literary works can enhance students' awareness of SDGs within English language instruction. Despite teachers' familiarity with the SDGs, only a small number incorporated them into their lessons. This research concluded that incorporating selected literary works into English language instruction can effectively enhance students' understanding of sustainable development goals, as analyzed through a functionalist approach to literary texts. The integration of such literary material into English classes positively influences students' knowledge and awareness regarding sustainable development objectives.

Keywords: Awareness, language teaching, literary text, sustainable development goals

Introduction

Literature in English is widely regarded as a good instructional material in English language teaching. Its various genres enrich the teaching and learning process of the target language in a lot of ways (Leal Filho et al., 2019). Focusing on short story genre, Indonesians as a developing country, especially, students of Indonesian Universities are not well acquainted with this kind of literary text. Some scholars even maintain that short stories are the most neglected but the most desirable genre (Ifegbesan, Lawal, and Rampedi, 2017). The significant roles of short stories in English language teaching (ELT) is ineluctable and unassailable, but are they contrary to the pupils' reading habits? On the other hand, there is a far well-known literary text, which has been widely read not only by pupils in the classroom but also by people of all ages and backgrounds out of the classroom, that is comic books. Comic books, which are mostly printed on tabloids and published weekly, are usually written or adapted from popular television series. In this respect, comic books, which either

evoke pupil's enthusiasm or attract pupil's attention, are believed to be an effective instructional material in ELT. (Getie, 2020)

The phenomena above can be summarized as two paradoxes: 1) most concerned with the roles of short stories but Indonesian pupils are not well acquainted with this genre, and 2) Indonesian pupils are well acquainted with comic books, which have diversions from English textbooks proposed by the government and are not well concerned in ELT. The battle between the two genres is for the good of the Indonesian ELT. Even though, comic books are the only alternative solution, is it possible for this genre to achieve those goals and expectations and to fill in these gaps? The aims of the study can be simplified into two points: 1) To investigate and to identify how comic books can be used as an instructional material in the ELT classroom setting in Indonesia, and 2) To investigate and to ascertain whether comic books as an instructional material can achieve those designed goals and expectations.

Language is a tool through which human beings communicate with each other either verbally or non-verbally. It is a crucial component of human civilization and culture, allowing communication of ideas, thoughts, observations, and feelings. As a global lingua franca, English is widely taught and learned around the world. The teaching of English, especially in countries where it is a foreign language, must be taken seriously since people's awareness of other communities very much comes from their knowledge of foreign languages. For this reason, educationists and curriculum developers recognize English Language Teaching (ELT) as an essential means of students' and people's knowledge of their world (Al-Jamal & Al-Omari, 2014; Sastromiharjo et al., 2024).

Literary texts are among the most effective materials to be used in the language teaching and learning process to develop learners' language skills, especially reading. Hence, it is common in country EFL to encounter those literary texts in ELT textbooks. However, the content of the ELT textbooks mostly depicts the western lifestyle—particularly American culture—instead of the messages on developing students' characters and broadening their awareness of global issues, such as environmental awareness and social injustices toward the marginalized groups, gender, race, and ethnic (Ifegbesan, Lawal, and Rampedi, 2017). Combating the above-mentioned issues, the United Nations (UN) in 2015 launched a global action plan entitled Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), consisting of 17 Goals comprising 169 targets to be achieved in 2030. SDGs seek to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all, with a promise of “leaving no one behind.” It replaces the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which prioritized the global South—the poorer, less-developed countries. On the contrary, SDGs are universal, applicable for both the global South and the global North—the richer, more-developed countries.

Literature Review

A. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 global objectives and 169 targets that were adopted by all member states of the United Nations in 2015. This agenda is called 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and builds on the achievements, challenges, and lessons learned from the Millennium Development Goals. The 2030 Agenda is a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and planet, now and into the future. The SDGs are inherently indivisible and interlinked, recognizing that actions in some areas will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance social equity, economic growth, and environmental protection (Saini et al., 2023). The SDGs are underpinned by their ambition to leave no one behind, seeking to ensure that the poorest and most vulnerable people have their needs met first and to enable all people to realize their rights. Moreover, the SDGs promote peaceful, just, and inclusive societies, and aim to foster inclusive growth and economic opportunity for all. This section aims to enable a detailed understanding of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to comprehend the basic aspects of this important global agenda.

The SDGs affirm the universality of poverty reduction, saying that all countries must set targets to combat all forms of poverty (Zamora-Polo et al., 2019). To achieve these ambitious goals, countries will strengthen the global partnership, through the strategic engagement of all stakeholders, including national governments, local authorities, civil society, and the private sector. This partnership framework will be based on principles and values, and a shared vision of equality, sustainability, and human rights. The success of this agenda is critically dependent on the mobilization of financial resources, capacity-building, provision of technology, and trade. Countries will define their own national targets taking into account national circumstances, capacities, and levels of development. The governments will also carry out regular and inclusive reviews at the national and subnational levels. (Maity and Sinha, 2024)

B. Role of Literature in Education

Literature is defined as written or spoken works that have artistic or intellectual value. All literary works, whether fictional or non-fictional, share language as a fundamental quality. All literary texts, regardless of length, are universally written in one of many available language systems. Literature can thus be mapped as a system of symbolic signs, irrespective of actual variable values (Sutrisno et al., 2023; Rakhmyta et al., 2024). Literature is a symbolic representation

of the world and the entire range of human experience. It is for this reason that it has an essential role in educating people about how to view the world and where to position themselves in it. It can assist students in comprehending complex phenomena (Kheladi, 2019). In the reading-as-engagement framework, literary texts can be approached as educational tools that can be used within the classroom in order to positively shape students' perspectives. (Makri, Vlachopoulos, & Martina, 2021; Ansari et al., 2023)

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, this study paper investigates the potential of particular literary texts in promoting an understanding of and engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Proclaimed by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, a set of 17 overarching objectives to be achieved by 2030 have been determined on a global level (Perrino-Antúnez, 2019). Essential interrelated aspects of life from an economic, social, and environmental standpoint, these goals aim to address inequalities and ensure a better and more sustainable life for everyone, everywhere. In this regard, one of the objectives of education is to develop, inter alia, students' awareness/understanding of and active participation in shaping the world around them. (Wiktor-Mach, 2020; González García, Colomo Magaña, & Cívico Ariza, 2020)

C. English Language Teaching and SDGs

The distinct field of Global English Language Teaching (GELT) has made rapid advances and gained worldwide popularity, overshadowing, to some extent, a more local vision of English language teaching. Focusing on the historical developments and current trends in GELT, especially in inner- and outer-circle countries, here, the developmental challenges for the less successful local contexts in building their own GELT models and practices are highlighted. These challenges are discussed in relation to the impacts of native-speakerism, the need for role expansion by trained language teachers, and the importance of creating Englishes for special purposes for local needs (Yaccob, Yunus, and Hashim, 2022).

In 2015, UN member states adopted 17 global goals for sustainable development, and the United Nations General Assembly is encouraged to continuously dialogue with stakeholders on the prevention and resolution of conflict, and on peace-building, the rule of law, and good global governance. Education is key in the vision of a peaceful, just, and post-colonial world; however, in the pursuit of development, education has often been viewed through the lens of commodification, exportation, and market making. In the past 80 years, the education systems of many colonized countries have adopted Western ideologies and epistemologies. Models have been replicated and assimilated, academics, concepts, curricula, and practices have been imported, teachers have been indoctrinated in Western values. One world one education has become the key mantra (Leal Filho et al., 2019).

Methodology

A. Research Design

The specific design and methodology adopted for the research, be it a quantitative study or a qualitative one or a mixed-methods approach, is elaborated in this section. The framework within which the investigation of the research is carried out and the proposed methods to be followed for the research is presented. The students' engagement is a measurement to assess their awareness. The teachers' instructional practices are taken as criteria to measure their understanding of SDGs. The framework is presented as conceptual and analytical frames along with its dimensions, variables, and indicators (Tarakçıoğlu, & Işıkli, 2016; Judijanto et al., 2024).

The concerns and skills needed to solve the current national and global issues define the teaching goals of the contemporary literature courses. However, in many educational systems worldwide, the curricular space for literature in pre-college education is disappearing. The literature course syllabus has not been defined at the national level, and it is up to the teachers to determine the content. This research study is based on a quantitative research method, specifically an exploratory study using questionnaires as a data collection tool. A pilot study was held to prove the validity and reliability of the tool.

B. Participants

The participants in this study were students of two English classes at a university in a region of Indonesia who were enrolled in a pre-service teacher education program. This program is generally four years long, where students study several subjects along with two compulsory English language courses. One of these two compulsory English courses is writing subject, which is a fundamentals of academic writing course that aims to develop students' ability to use writing as a means of communication with critical and creative thinking (Hulu et al., 2023; Widodo et al., 2024). In addition, it also focuses on the processing and development of ideas, and arouses students' creative thinking and imagination. In order to examine the research question of the study, student literary texts (students' research papers) written as a part of the course requirement were selected randomly.

Students were selected as participants of the study because they are the producers of the literary texts in question and will remain key actors in the interpretation process of these texts. To ensure maximum variation, students' literary texts (research papers) were selected from two classes, which are classified as IELTS 5.5 and IELTS 6.0 proficiency levels. According to the university's policy, students are allowed to have a minimum score of 5.5 IELTS proficiency before being admitted to this university. However, language programs at the beginning of each semester place students into pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced classes after being assessed through a standard English language test to ensure uniformity in terms of language proficiency in each class.

C. Data Collection Methods

The data was collected using the survey questionnaire method. A questionnaire was developed for the teacher to elicit responses about teachers' use of literary texts in ELD classes, and their views on the motivational effectiveness of literary texts in terms of the interests and attitudes of ELD students. Multiple-choice questions (MCQs), close-ended questions, and semi-structured open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire so that both quantitative and qualitative data could be collected. The objective of the questionnaire was to collect teachers' views on the use of literary texts in the ELD classroom (Anicet & Mary, 2018; Munthe et al., 2024).

Before conducting interviews, permission was sought from teachers. It was also explained to them that the data would be used only for research purposes, and their identities would be kept confidential. The informal interview method was utilized for teachers. It involved a conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee without a pre-planned structure as a script. In this case, the researcher prepared some major points to be addressed and framed the questions around them. An audio recorder was used to record the interviews. The interviews lasted an average of thirty minutes and were transcribed later. The semi-structured informal interview was used to elicit in-depth understanding and teachers' own words on their views and practices.

D. Data Analysis Techniques

The analysis techniques of research data are based on the type of data used by the researcher. In this study the researcher used qualitative data analysis technique. According to Miles and Huberman, qualitative data analysis consists of three concurrent streams of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (as cited in (Kapanadze, 2018; Herman, Purba and Saputra, 2024; Sinambela et al., 2024).

Data reduction means the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming the data that appear in written-up field notes or transcriptions. In this study, the data that had been collected through interview and students' writings, were analyzed and reduced. The contents of the interview were transcribed. The students' writings were numbered based on the initial of students' name. The important data were kept, and the irrelevant data were discarded. Then the reduced data went to the next stage. Data display is an organized, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action (Purba et al., 2024; Rony et al., 2024). In this study, these reduced data were displayed in a simpler form that made it easier for the researcher to draw the conclusion. The interviews were displayed in the form of narrative, while the students' writings were displayed in the form of quotations. The qualitative analysis used in this study transcribed and interpreted students' writing activities. Interpretation involved explaining the relationships of the social context, the participants, the settings and the events to a descriptive analysis. This is done to obtain a certain understanding of the writing activities after the implementation of literature as a language teaching medium.

Findings and Discussion

The study aimed to investigate the use of literary texts to raise students' awareness about SDGs in the English language teaching context. To achieve this, a literary text related to one of the SDGs was selected, and English language course sessions were designed and delivered using this text. The data was collected through various means, including focus group discussions with students, interviews with teachers, and an analysis of the drafted sessions. The findings reveal that the use of literary texts can raise students' consciousness regarding SDGs in the English language teaching context. Although the teachers were aware of the SDGs, only a few focused on them in their teaching. This analysis presents the results of the study and engages in a critical discussion and interpretation of the findings.

Based on the overarching aim of the study, the following research questions were addressed: "To what extent do the selected literary text and drafted sessions raise EFL students' awareness of the SDGs?" "What are the English language teachers' views on the use of literary texts to enhance awareness of the SDGs?" To investigate the first question, a literary text related to one of the SDGs was selected, and English language course sessions were designed and delivered using this text. Data was collected through various means, including focus group discussions with students, interviews with teachers, and an analysis of the drafted sessions related to the text. The interview focused on teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards the use of literary texts to enhance EFL students' awareness of global issues.

A. Students' Awareness of SDGs Before Intervention

Prior to the execution of the adaptation phase of the intervention, students' understanding of the meaning, existence, and scope of SDGs was examined. All conversations with students unfolded in one city in Indonesia, and quotes have been translated accordingly. Almost all students (9 out of 10) have never heard of the term 'Sustainable Development Goals'. Only one student mentioned hearing about it from a talk show on the internet. After explaining SDGs using the phrases "human-made" and "agreed by UN members", all students stated that contemporary development is a common challenge/history in every negation, especially in developing nations. In this context, "some goals/stereotyped statements can be included" was mentioned by 4 students. Additionally, a few quotes regarding the innocence of this description were as follows: "many goals have been declared from time to time, the implementation of which is lacking" (7), "humanity is always greedy, so realization is impossible" (8), and "goals seem to care of humanity, but all are confined and focused on the nations' own selfish benefits" (9). Almost all students (8 out of 10) stated that they don't care. One student stated that "where am I moving to, if I don't even have a pure dross" (5) addressing the exigency of surviving.

B. Impact of Literary Text on Students' Awareness

The study highlights how the intervention impacted and shaped the students' awareness, understanding, and engagement throughout the research. During and after the interview, students were asked about the intervention and its influence on their awareness. When asked about how reading the literary text "Unseen" influenced their awareness, students expressed their feelings, thoughts, and insights regarding the literary text and Sustainable Development Goals. Most of the students appreciate and find the text captivating and relevant. They convey their experiences of the story revealing the impact of the text on them, the characters in the story, and the larger society. However, an exploration of how the text shaped their engagement with Sustainable Development Goals reveals a more mixed outcome and effectiveness of the text in fostering awareness. When they were asked about the engagement level of the literary text with Sustainable Development Goals, students' views varied (Haile, 2018). Some of the students argue that the thematic focus and subject matter of the text are directly related and engage a reader with Sustainable Development Goals. This view is explained with the example of the text portraying a person with disability calling for equitable education. Others express their feeling that the characters in the story revealing the negative consequences of actions taken against the welfare of the environment did not do much to foster awareness of Sustainable Development Goals among themselves and the society. The story remains limited to the grief of a victim.

C. Challenges and Successes in Implementation

The implementation of the intervention might not be smooth. Several obstacles encountered while trying to implement the treatment are discussed below. First, it was challenging to find appropriate literary texts for the lesson. Since selecting appropriate texts is crucial for any pedagogical use of literature, song lyrics were intentionally excluded due to their obscurity and further references were sought in poetry collections (Yulnetri, 2018). In the end, only three out of the initial six selections survived the selection process. Moreover, though brief biographical information about the authors was planned during the lesson, only background information about "A Brave New World" was introduced, and the other works were left unmentioned. It was believed that by doing so the universal aspect of literature could be highlighted, but this is rooted in central/literary-based pedagogies which is deemed impractical in a foreign context. Here, narrowing the focus on a particular author, work or culture could have yielded a better understanding of the "other" and building an empathetic bridge between encounters. Therefore, this oversight further implicit the need for more in-depth cultural knowledge and methodologies in order to make bicultural literature pedagogically fruitful and to overcome yet another inherent obstacle outside the institutional framework.

Second, heavy workload made it difficult to devote enough time to the proposed lessons. The goals of raising awareness and encouraging critical thinking about social injustices and environmental problems and even establishing the environment that the literary texts to be read in small groups to evoke discussion were largely unmet. Although students seemed to like the idea of conducting discussions in small groups, ELT classes were mostly dominated by question and answer-like activities. This eliminated the chance for the readers to react to the text on their own terms. As a result, the teacher's account seemingly drove upon thematic, moralistic or character-centered interpretation would then risk alienating the readers from the text, its language and aesthetic qualities. The discussion then circled around the intention of the author, misreading or question the question. Aiming for high reading proficiency, the teacher's account concentrated heavily on text comprehension, explaining the text (Woreta Haile, 2018) and form. Therefore, it is believed there is too much emphasis on the portrayal of life in the novel with no reference to language and style, which is a potential source of resistance and dissatisfaction, as findings that newly emerged layers of meaning in an implicit approach using 'non canonical text' such as advertisement and comics. Thus, extending over grade levels, large numbers of participants and limited time could render the tentative but significant success in the implementation of literature-based pedagogy moot

and underscored the need for further focused research on the feasibility of culturally and socially challenging form of literature in ELT classrooms.

Despite the foregoing obstacles, the implementation of the proposed intervention yielded many encouraging successes. First of all, students' attitude towards the controversial aspects of the treatment was remarkably positive. After the proposal of the I-C-I sequence was introduced as the framework for all course readings, only a quarter of the class raised objections about reading the novel due to its length. Those who resisted against reading additional texts prior to reading the translator's preface were ultimately persuaded when it was revealed that a film-based account would be provided as a possible alternative and that the translator's preface could serve as a question guide throughout and beyond reading the novel. As the previous findings indicate, those who refused to read a ten-page provocative article by Noam Chomsky changed to the side of the teacher after a persuasive discussion. Furthermore, students appreciated the inclusion of outside readings such as contemporary songs and proverbs. They felt that these texts were not only more relevant to their lives, but also they would provide a more effective means of language acquisition, implicitly confirming the broader background knowledge of their culture. In contrast, readings such as O. Henry's of 'Chickamauga,' which was considered as more canonical texts, resulted in complaints about it being too difficult. Overall, this attracted attention to the controversy of the selection and suitability of reading materials. Thus, altering the traditional focus of the contents of ELT towards text selection seemed feasible and even promising. In doing this, students' viewpoint of language (L2) learning was implicitly expanded from focusing on the study of grammar rules and vocabulary to considering its practical use for intercultural understanding.

Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that, based on functionalism approach of literary text, it is possible to improve students' awareness about sustainable development goals through integrating a sample literary text into English language teaching. Implementing this literary text into the English language classroom has positive impacts on enhancing students' knowledge and awareness of sustainable development goals. In general, it is recommended that teachers need to integrate literary text into language lessons in order to promote students' awareness about sustainable development goals. Besides teachers, curriculum designers and policymakers also have significant roles in the successful integration of literary text into the English language classroom. They need to prepare a user-friendly syllabus that focuses on literature skills as well as language skills. The Ministry of Education also needs to equip schools with different literary materials by collaborating with publishing houses and universities. In addition, it is advisable that further research be conducted to explore the discourse of authors of English/foreign literary texts and also cultural, ethical, and moral values embedded in literary texts selected and used in English language teaching.

The present study only focused on one sample literary text and one text analysis approach suggested by Davidson. Hence, it does not explore other English literary texts and other approaches to text analysis such as the socio-cultural approach to text analysis proposed by Leech and Short in 1981, the political approach to text analysis put forth by Fairclough in 1989, and Sanders' psychological approach to text analysis. It will certainly be beneficial to study more literary texts such as poems, short stories, novels, and plays and carry out different approaches of literary text analysis to critically examine the themes, values, messages, and ideologies embedded in literary texts selected and used for teaching English as a foreign language. A study could also be conducted on how foreign literary texts and its source language shape the ideologies of students and readers of such literary texts.

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