

Language Education for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Nowadays, education for sustainable development starts covering wider and wider spheres of interest and human activity. Out of the three main spheres of interest, such as environmental, economic, and socio-cultural, the first two mentioned here seem to be given more attention than the sphere of socio-cultural activity. In this respect, the aim of the present paper is to redirect the concern of administrators, researchers and educators preoccupied with sustainability to issues such as equal opportunity, tolerance, respect, and especially foreign language education, being component parts of the socio-cultural sphere. Undoubtedly, competence in the socio-linguistic field becomes the decisive element in negotiations and international contacts which require from the language user to be tactful and tolerant. Since sustainability is not a local issue, all sustainability related problems ought to be discussed on the macro scale, which requires an internationally shared means of communication such as language. Although no name of any language appears in the paper, it becomes evident that the attention is directed towards English as an internationally recognized language or, if necessary, any other language which might serve as a means of communication on the macro scale.

In the course of discussion, both the needs and limitations appearing in the process of education for sustainable development are presented and supported by opinions and examples. The paper ends in conclusions directly related to real-life situations, and gives implications to be utilized in the educational process directed at sustainable development.

Keywords: competence, sustainability, socio-cultural model, language, education, communication, translatability, social environment, equal opportunity, tolerance

The International Institute for Sustainable Development in Canada, having its offices in Winnipeg, Ottawa and New York, defines sustainable development in the following way:

sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it, two key concepts:

the concept of needs;

the idea of limitations (Education for..., 2015).

Furthermore, in the given explanation of the notion of sustainability we learn that all definitions of sustainable development require that we see the world as a system – a system that connects space; and a system that connects time.

Analyzing spheres of sustainability, we usually concentrate our attention on environmental, economic and social or rather socio-cultural areas.

However, it appears that much attention is paid to both the environmental and economic area while the socio-cultural area, which includes language and how we communicate, remains somewhat untouched. It is very likely that the main reason for a certain underestimation with regard to the socio-cultural area is related to a conviction that the problems which may appear within this area can be easily solved in a natural way due to human contacts and mutual often friendly relations.

At this point, we usually forget that the final success in human contacts and mutual relations requires a reciprocally agreed and used tool of communication – in this case language. If we only make reference to the above mentioned notion of sustainability and the requirements to see the world as a system, connecting both space and time, we can easily notice that such connections cannot be possible without a proper application of a means of communication and negotiation, i.e. language.

Language is also a system that connects space and time; moreover, language is a system that connects people. Besides, language directs its users onto the pathway of culture and makes them culture consumers. In this way language users become the participants of culture by having their share in its creation (cf. Hopfinger, 1985). Undoubtedly, language behavior and the system of message coding and transmission are culturally determined and deeply rooted in the minds of users of a given language. Therefore, both the way of thinking and expressiveness has much to do with the socio-cultural environment of the language user.

Hardly ever do we realize that language is an environmental element whose destruction or distortion endangers humankind in general, and an ethnic group of language users in particular. Language is alive as long as its users are, and vice versa; the extinction of an ethnic group of language users makes their language die. The need for language care and therefore culture protection was stressed by Edward Sapir and his student – Benjamin Lee Whorf who contributed to the working out of the famous Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (cf. Carroll, 1956).

No matter how controversial the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis might be, it clearly underscores a strong interrelationship between language and thought. One of the two principles of the Hypothesis, namely, Linguistic Determinism explicitly indicates that the user's language determines the way in which he thinks and perceives the outer world. This also means that the language and thought are interwoven and manifested in all people's behavior and expressiveness. And thus, this is just human behavior and the power of mind which make us sensitive to values and dangers we find in our environment, learning, simultaneously, how to protect it.

It was not only the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis which stressed a strong relationship between language and thought and thus – culture. Much earlier, the 19th century German philosopher – Wilhelm von Humboldt who viewed human development as a sustainable process, was also of the opinion that language completely determined thought. Hence, a fully developed thinking process makes human beings sensitive to the outer world and its needs which simultaneously become human needs.

According to Humboldt's point of view, language is a living organism attributed to human nature and a purely abstract construct which suddenly developed when people were in need of using it for communication (cf. Brown, 1968). Thus, quite accidentally we come across one of the two key concepts of sustainable development, which is the concept of needs already stressed at the beginning of the present discussion. Nevertheless, before we come to some detailed discussion over needs, let us briefly review the other principle of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis – Linguistic Relativity.

By analyzing the principle of Linguistic Relativity we can easily see the unique nature of human language. First of all, the language uniqueness is evident in the unlimited use of language structures. This boundlessness is directly related to the speaker's linguistic competence, education, and cultural background – all these factors foster the speaker's expressiveness which, in turn, is based upon his lexicon. Evidently, lexicon is a language user's knowledge of words which are coined by a language community distinguished not only by its language but culture, as well. Moreover, lexicon, being a collection of names given to abstract ideas and physical objects present in reality and constituting the outer world of the language community users, is the evidence of the community users' attitude towards the outer world and its needs as well as dangers. Therefore, viewing Linguistic Relativity through the prism of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis we again find evidence of a strong interrelationship between language and culture, especially when we come across the coining of a different number of names for one and the same object functioning in many cultures and thus – languages. Language education, and especially foreign language training is in fact intercultural education, being of paramount importance to sustainability.

Through the use of language – negotiation and discussion – we level up differences and deficits in knowledge and therefore, different perception of the outer world so characteristic of different cultures. Differences we perceive in the contemporary world are directly related to cultural differences as this is culture which creates the social order of the world in the same way as economy and politics do (Barker, 2003). Since language is an element of culture, linguistic competence as any other kind of knowledge testifies to the quality of a social or ethnic group, characteristic of a given culture and language (cf. Urry, 1995). In consequence, when a clash between two cultures and two languages appears, we witness one more need – the need for translatability.

Translatability makes us sensitive to the problem of intercultural understanding and inter-language communication. The lexicon of one language mirrors objects and ideas created by the minds of a given language users who differ in customs, behavior, and tradition from other language users. It has to be stressed that the basic difference between two language communities can be found in the ways of their thinking and therefore – expressiveness. Hence, interlanguage communication can only be successful when users of one language are able to follow the grammar rules normally practiced by other language speakers and make use of their lexicon which precisely reflects their way of thinking. It means that instead of 'names', thoughts must be translated. (Zygmunt, 2008, pp. 36–37)

If this requirement is not fulfilled, one witness severe limitations in comprehension, which, in turn, limits our ability of negotiation and communication in general. In order

to avoid this one has to organize the language education process in such a way that it could contribute to the sustainable development of human beings functioning at any level of socio-cultural activity. Hence, we must not forget that language education is an everlasting and never ending process no matter whether we consider the mother tongue or a foreign language. Moreover, we must not forget that language is a culturally based dynamic construct which expresses the power of intellect by means of speech, writing, and gesture.

Therefore, taking into consideration both the development of the individual and evolution of culture, the multiple function of language connected with perception, thinking, memory, and expression, it is clear that language plays a constitutive role in human life. Thus, having in focus the sustainable development of the individual, it is a must to concentrate on linguistic education, equipping a global village inhabitant in the linguistic instrument enabling him to function globally and cooperate with partners all over the world (Pullen, 2015). Such an instrument makes it possible for different community members to negotiate a variety of issues, respect each other, tolerate misunderstanding, and finally reach consensus. Mastering any language is simultaneously the mastering of the culture of its users because

language is the central feature of the culture of any community. It is a reflection of the thoughts, the feelings, the values, and the experiences of the community speakers. It is their expression of the way in which they view the total content – physical, spiritual, and moral – of their environment. (Finocchiaro, 1964, p. 24)

This is what we need to know to use language properly and communicate.

To make the present discussion on language education for sustainable development complete, let us concentrate on the two main concepts introduced at the very beginning of the present paper that is needs and the idea of limitations.

The needs

To follow the sustainable development route, it is inevitable to treat equally the three fundamental areas of needs: environmental, economic, and social or more precisely – socio-cultural (Global needs..., 2015). The below presented analysis and discussion over some fields of human activity is to show to what extent the social or socio-cultural needs can be fulfilled, especially that too much concentration on the economic and environmental spheres is not an option.

Situation Conventions

A lot of people, if not most of them, while spending some time in a foreign country and culture have to communicate in a language which is not their mother tongue. Then, they must experience situations in which they can understand every single utterance but not the point of the discourse and therefore, the outcome of the conversation. Hence, such a conversation is fruitless and main issues, for example, environmental problems when discussed – are missed or misunderstood. The main reason of the failure in communication is directly related to the deficit in the socio-linguistic competence of the

speaker, resulting in the limitation of his/her socio-cultural perspective. Both linguistic competence and cultural competence of the language user meet at the level of coding and decoding meaning as meaning is embedded in cultural conceptions of context (cf. Ochs, 1987). Thus, full competence of the speaker can be demonstrated in a situational use of language. So, participating in conventionally based situations, we experience the emergence of the social level of reality (also environmental) conveyed by the language in use. In this way the speaker has to activate both his language and culture related behavior. Otherwise he may succeed in language communication but at the same time he may fail by not being tactful to his interlocutor (Arndt *et al.*, 1989).

Social Environment – Physical, Spiritual, Moral

Taking into account the above mentioned need of participation in conventionally based situations, contributing to the development of full competence of the language user, one must not forget about some other needs, especially the need for creating a friendly social environment. We cannot do it alone; we can only be successful doing it in cooperation, not only on the micro but macro scale as well.

Thus, cooperation can be successful when the cooperating parties understand one another, tolerating beliefs or points of view and showing respect. All these can be achieved in discourse, negotiation, problem solving discussion, and exchange of experience and knowledge. To achieve all these and create an environment, fulfilling our needs, it is a necessity to rely on the mutually used tool of communication, i.e. language. Macro scale cooperation gives a chance to experience social environment physically and penetrate it in an authentic way. Only then can we know each other better, especially the people responsible for the environmental conditions, perceive and understand problems and dangers affecting the environment in question. Mutual understanding of the people involved not only in the social environment but in environmental protection as well, makes possible for a spiritual approach to life, as immaterial culture is equally important as the material one. Therefore, internationally arranged negotiations and discussions over environmental issues should not ignore the spiritual needs of the local people whose environment is to be changed. Mutual understanding, tolerance and respect can give guidance to a successful construction of the social environment and its protection (Pipere, Veisson & Salite, 2015).

Language Education

The need for a successful construction of a social environment and its protection must be clearly understood and globally accepted. *En route* to the goal, one more need emerges; namely, this is the need for language education which would view a language user as a partner in negotiations and discussions over environmental issues and an interlocutor sensitive to environmental dangers. That is why language education, especially foreign language education becomes a corner stone of education for sustainable development viewed in a holistic way (cf. Skye, 2015).

In order to reach mutual understanding and respect towards the interlocutor, it is essential to use the properly developed means of communication in negotiations. Misunderstanding is more dangerous for discourse and its final output than the lack of

understanding. Hence, to foster the speaker and make him function at a variety of socio-cultural levels on both the micro and macro scale, we have to teach him how to communicate and be creative expressing his thoughts. To achieve this goal, we have to design and carry out a language program of studies, which must be universal in the sense that it can offer the widest possible approach to language.

Depending on the learner's age, experience, former education in general, and needs, we can use either the inductive or deductive approach. As the figure below presents, the goal to be obtained is the working knowledge of the studied language demonstrated by the learner's socio-cultural competence as well as functional competence allowing for making use of language functions, depending on the situation.

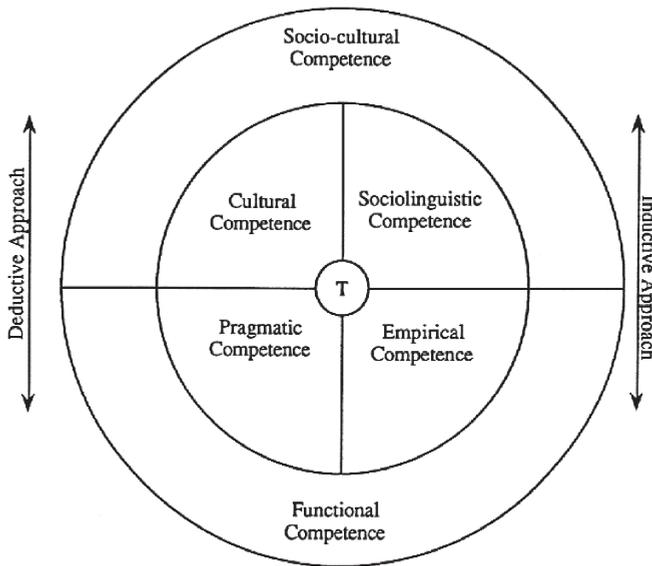
Most importantly, language education designed from the socio-linguistic and pragmatic point of view stresses practical consequences and values as standards by which concepts are to be analyzed and their validity determined. Besides, the key issue of such designed education is to develop in the learner productivity and make him use the power of mind. A productive learner means a creative language user (cf. Chomsky, 2007). As a matter of fact, it is creativity which becomes a decisive factor in negotiations and communication in general.

Human contacts on the macro scale are only possible via language. Not only do human contacts enable the exchange of knowledge and experience; they also develop people intellectually and make them creative as well as tolerant to culturally rooted differences and behaviors. Understanding each other better is a guarantee of sustainable development, which, in turn, contributes to human universality. The very process of achieving the state of sustainable development raises some queries such as, for example, what do we actually need to be fully developed and universal? Moreover, in what way can we achieve the state of equilibrium being the quintessence of human sustainability? At first, one might think about profound knowledge, especially in the social domain. If this is the right answer, it appears that to achieve the target one need to enter a global network of human contacts which, as mentioned above, give us knowledge, experience, and develop those features of character which guide our behavior and manners. But we must remember that entering a global network of human contacts and functioning on the macro scale is impossible without a mutually shared means of communication.

Thus, the only correct answer to the above presented questions is language, as this is language we need for our development, including sustainable, and this is language which contributes to the sharing of our knowledge and experience on the macro scale and thus, contributes to building the world of sustainability (cf. Pullen, 2015).

Bearing in mind the building of the world of sustainability based on human contacts characteristic of understanding, equal opportunity, tolerance and respect, it is quite reasonable to pay more attention to the socio-cultural sphere of sustainability with its focus on education (Badjanova, Iliško, 2015).

Undoubtedly, knowledge, especially linguistic, is the key which opens all the doors of the world of universal experience. Therefore, the model presented below is an option to be taken into consideration by the socio-cultural sphere of sustainability to foster the human being who understands social environment and its needs (cf. Part II, a).



Model of Creative Communicative Competence

T – target linguistic knowledge

Figure 1. Competence – essential for sustainable development

Social Support

Undoubtedly, to obtain the goal of linguistic creativity and, therefore, put this Model of Creative Competence into practice, a substantial social support is needed. It appears that the social support is, in many cases, more important than the financial one. First of all, there must be thorough understanding and social acceptance of the idea of education for sustainable development. Moreover, there must be equilibrium in the treatment of the three spheres of sustainability, that is the environmental sphere, the economic sphere, and the socio-cultural sphere, each of them treated as equally important for sustainable development. It must be taken for granted that a lack of working knowledge of the language which is to be the internationally recognized tool of discourse and communication, does not give any chance for consensus in debates and agreements between two or more negotiating parties. As language and culture are strongly interrelated, social support is also needed for the development of culture studies. Hence, it is strongly recommended to support the idea of founding more institutes or departments responsible for spreading the idea of education for sustainable development, especially in the socio-cultural sphere.

Culture Studies

The notion of culture itself is complex and perceived differently, depending on the school of thought. Sociologists, for example, try to distinguish studies of culture viewed as an “implicit” feature of social life from studies of culture regarded as an “explicit”

social construction. According to this view, culture is presented as a reflection of social relations, and as a kind of symbolic commodity that is explicitly produced. In the abundance of definitions and points of view on culture, the one presented by Elinor Ochs deserves consideration. According to her, culture is

a system of implicit and explicit ideas that underlines and gives meaning to behaviors in society. These ideas are related (in various ways, to varying extents, according to school and paradigm) to political, economic, and kinship relations, events, interactions, and institutions; to values; to conceptions of the world; to theories of knowledge; and to procedures for understanding and interpreting (Ochs, 1987, p. 307).

This seemingly broad outline of culture gives a clear image of what actually culture is and points to the road to be taken to carry on culture studies. Moreover, this definition can be an indicator as to the contents of an educational program combining language and culture studies which, no doubt, are indispensable to sustained development.

Social Status and Position

Individuals, in general, perceive themselves as belonging to social groups. Groups differ as they are composed of individuals' characteristic of their very personal and distinctive features. Among the variables which determine belonging to a given social group, two are of paramount importance, that is language use and behavior. Of course, education, political beliefs as well as economic and socio-historical variables are significant but not as clearly delineating as language and manners. The way in which you speak, your expressiveness and ability of developing interpersonal contacts on a macro scale as well as your body language and attitude of respect and tolerance towards the interlocutor give evidence of what you are. As a matter of fact, your refined personality allows for taking up the top position in the social hierarchy.

Internationally Recognized Status

Education for sustainable development gives an equal opportunity to all involved in the educational process enabling individuals to function on the macro scale. The key point is to make the people participating in any program headed for sustained development perceive and understand problems of different nature, and dangers, limitations or changes affecting the living world. Hence, the major task of education for sustainable development is to raise the level of consciousness of people of different ages, education or social status in order to stir them to cooperative actions bringing beneficial results both on the micro and macro scale. This is not only a social need – this is a demanding task prescribed to institutes or departments carrying out programs of sustainable education and that is why academic units of this kind deserve a high recognition (Ketcham, 2015).

The fulfillment of the above discussed needs is not easy as in many cases while attaining the goals we come across a variety of limitations.

The Limitations

Limitations are inevitable in any area of human activity, including education for sustainable development. If we look at the sustainable development in a holistic way, we can easily notice that the spheres of interest are not equally treated. It seems quite irrational that such problems as, for example, pollution or waste dumping, being key issues of the environmental sphere or cost savings and unemployment which are domains of the economic sphere of sustainability are given the priority of treatment and support in comparison to, for example, the problem of tolerance, equal opportunity or education which are immanent parts of the social or socio-cultural sphere of sustainability.

Without the use of proper language and talking openly about crime, valuable resources, waste dumping or natural beauty preservation, we are not able to save the planet (c.f. Ketcham, 2015). Therefore, to save the planet we have to make people understand the threats, not only local but global. For this reason, we need an internationally approved tool of communication and information exchange to talk to people and to ensure them and governments that education for sustainable development is based on understanding environmental issues. Hence, education for sustainable development, promoting language education should be given reasonable support.

General Attitude towards the Socio-Cultural Sphere

The market economy and a generally accepted policy of economizing appeared to be very painful for academic and research institutions, especially in the new member states of the European Union. It is very regretful that the environmental sphere with its focus on pollution and the economic sphere concentrated on cost savings are given financial priority in comparison to the socio-cultural sphere which seems to be treated as an area of secondary importance. Therefore, it has to be stressed that without proper knowledge enabling local and international human contacts resulting in exchange of information and experience in any domain, none of the below graphically presented spheres can be developed. First of all, human knowledge gained by individuals due to their participation in educational programs of a socio-cultural character guarantees communication, understanding of peculiarities related to ethnicity, and therefore, tolerance and respect for the partner in discourse.

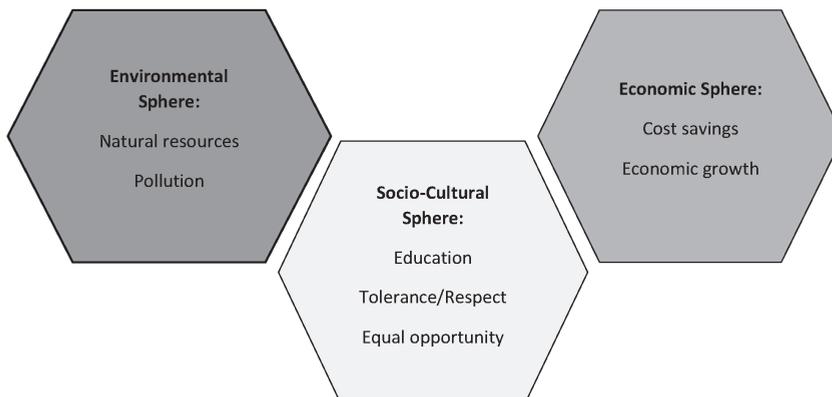


Figure 2. Pillars of sustainability

Limited Support

The scope of human needs is unlimited and unpredictable. Naturally, not all of these needs can be satisfied immediately or at one time. There is no doubt that the needs cumulated in the three spheres: economic, environmental, and socio-cultural are the priority of today. Satisfying them is very challenging but fruitful for present and future generations. This is the task to be carried out not only locally but internationally as well, and must be given the strongest support. Unfortunately, some recent changes in European Union policy with regard to sustainable development are not very promising. The problem is much better understood and perceived in the new member states than in the founder states of the EU. In particular, an alarm call comes from Romania, where Claudia Ionescu pinpoints the problem by saying:

The role of the European Union is to help in building a sustainable world, and in particular, to outline some of the challenges that need to be overcome before the EU can fulfill its potential in this most urgent of tasks. Meanwhile, we have to take into consideration that the EU is facing a crisis in its policy-making on sustainable development, that the gains which the EU has made in the past could well be lost in the future, and that the role of the EU as a progressive force on sustainable development issues is by no means guaranteed in the future. (Ionescu, 2007, p. 25)

When developing her point of view, she admits that

the word 'crisis' is a strong one, but this rather grim assessment is based on three things in particular: (1) an enlargement process which has lost its way; (2) a review of the EU's own sustainable development strategy which reveals that progress towards the quite modest goals it has set itself has been – in most, but not all areas – particularly slow; and (3) a draft EU constitution which has failed either to reinvigorate the EU with a new sense of purpose, or to grasp this unprecedented opportunity to put sustainable development at the heart of the Union. (Ionescu, 2007, pp. 25–26)

Stumbling Network

The number of academic institutions preoccupied with education and research in terms of sustainable development is substantially high, creating a world-wide network. A striking element of the network is the loose connection between educational and research units which compose the net. Hardly ever is there any coordination of activities and tasks as most of the educational and research institutes work solely for the purpose of fulfilling their own plans and needs. Moreover, it appears that some areas of interest, for example pollution or unemployment, are privileged in research, and thus considered as the favorites. This, in turn, ruins the state of equilibrium and causes the network to stumble.

Limited Cooperation between Institutions Involved in Education for Sustainable Development

As it appears from the earlier presented opinions, the lack of coordination in education and research processes together with some limitations of EU support is a stumbling block en route to sustainability. One more stumbling block is limited cooperation and exchange of information between academic units concerned with sustainability. Therefore, the point of view presented here calls for reconsideration of the existing sustainable education programs and verification of tasks to be undertaken in cooperation. Without doubt, working together, sharing experience and creating international teams of research experts speak for a new model of cooperation between institutions involved in research and education for sustainable development. The Romanian voice (Ionescu, 2007), together with the present one, support the idea of founding and developing academic units which can easily strengthen their academic potential, working together in the sense of a real, functioning network – a network which turns into a system that connects space, and a system that connects time.

Conclusions

Cooperation in any domain, especially international cooperation, requires communication, negotiation, and discussion over the obtained results of any nature. All these can be achieved via language as a mutually accepted means of communication. Linguistic knowledge combined with cultural competence enables not only full communication but proper behavior. Besides, these two types of knowledge combined and used in discourse prevent the speaker from being unintentionally offensive and untactful.

Viewing the Model of Creative Communicative Competence as an optional program of education for sustainable development to be utilized within the socio-cultural sphere of sustainability, it becomes evident that the key element required for successful discussion over any issue, including environmental, is the speaker's quality of being well qualified intellectually as well as being able to approach the discussed problem in a pragmatic way. To reach the target, that is to succeed in negotiations and discussions, to present clearly the point of dispute, it is necessary to demonstrate a profound and complex socio-linguistic and cultural competence which permits the speaker to be creative and comprehensive.

Moreover, the employed language of communication must be realistic, meaningful and well balanced through the use of appropriate language functions. Creative communicative competence is not the need of philologists only – philologists play only an instrumental role in spreading knowledge to those people who may contribute to effective changes in their natural vicinity. Hence, the development of linguistic competence, both in the sphere of the mother tongue and a foreign language, parallels the intellectual development of language users and therefore, contributes to their sustainable development. This sort of knowledge is needed by those who would undertake a variety of local and international debates over serious issues endangering the world.

Representatives of local authorities, professionally active managers and businessmen, college students as well as high school students, – all of them can help to change the environment. All of them can be effectively involved in debates over issues directly related to, for example, unemployment, economic growth, pollution and environmental protection or ethnicity, tolerance and respect as well as equal opportunities. Such discus-

sions are possible and fruitful provided the speakers possess creative communicative competence. It is instrumental that people communicate and are conscious of their role as discourse participants. Hence, to develop communicative competence in speakers, it is a must to launch educational programs focused on language and culture in order to make people understand each other better. Due to the raising of people's consciousness and their understanding of both locally and internationally vital problems openly discussed such as, for example, aiding refugees, Polish-Ukrainian trans-border trafficking, or border-river water pollution, a lot can be done to prevent dangers from spreading and the general degradation of nature.

Bearing in mind all the discussed issues presented above, it is apparent that human knowledge obtained and deepened in the socio-cultural sphere is of paramount importance to sustainable development. This is so because people develop through interpersonal contacts and exchange of experience and information. All this is transmitted via language and passed on from generation to generation and from one ethnic community to another. Therefore, language education, combining linguistic and cultural areas, appears to be the main route towards human sustainability and understanding of its nature and needs.

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