

Discourse and Communication for Sustainable Education,
vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 92–104, 2016

A Corpus of Young Learners' English in the Baltic Region – Texts for Studies on Sustainable Development

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Abstract

In order to reach far in the work for sustainable development, communication in foreign languages prior to strategic decisions is required from international partners. In this communication English has become the lingua franca. Even though the use of EFL (English as a foreign language) is widely spread, it is clear that in some geographical regions English has quite recently taken the role as the language of international communication. It is therefore relevant carry out studies in order to identify possible causes for misunderstandings when communicating in EFL. With the aim of providing material for research on EFL by 12-year-olds, the creation of a language corpus on the use of English in the Baltic region is in process. The first part of the data collection was completed in August 2016 and the data comprises some 2,200 texts written in 2015–2016 by Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Russian and Swedish learners. The aim of the present study is to investigate young learners' written communication on issues related to sustainable development.

A qualitative method was used on a limited sample of to identify key words in the production by young learners of five different nationalities. Abstract nouns related to topics which can be regarded to refer to sustainable development were collected and analyzed.

The results show that 12-year-olds are able to communicate in English for discussions on issues related to sustainable development. This indicates that successful international communication in English on these matters is within reach with a continued process of English language learning at schools in the Baltic region.

Key words: young learners, English, Baltic Region, corpus, written production, discussions of sustainable development

The English Language and International Communication

The English language has become the means of communication to bring people together internationally. In order to cooperate and find solutions for mutual benefit and understanding it is essential that communication works. Misunderstandings and communication breakdowns can lead to unwanted conflicts and thereby be obstacles

for finding solutions that need collaboration from several regions and countries. In the discussions of education for sustainable development, environmental, educational and socio-cultural aspects are considered. Within the last one, certain fields of interest seem to be given more and more attention and the focus is thereby on issues such as tolerance, respect and foreign language education (Zygmunt, 2016).

It is thus essential that people in different countries and with different mother tongues in a region both are willing to and have the capacity to use a foreign language in communication with each other to be aware of the complexities of sustainable development at a global level such as climate change and consumption patterns. On an everyday life level, decisions should be taken that are to be based on ideas of sustainable development on the future road to responsible life styles with questions which concern what we do, how we do it and what we use to do it. This can be seen in the light of striving for worldview education for global citizenship (Miedema & Bertraam-Troost, 2015). It is therefore of significance for the future if we want to find solutions to common environmental, social and economic challenges that we can work and thus communicate internationally to find strategies and methods together. Effective communication in a common foreign language is thus a crucial factor for spreading ideas about a sustainable life style. In this way new meanings of central concepts are negotiated in order to make the individual think about preferred futures. In this way education not only in a foreign language but in general becomes a future-facing activity (Iliško, Skrinda, & Mičule, 2014).

We sometimes take it for granted that decision-makers and policymakers have the ability to communicate efficiently in international contexts in English at international summits to discuss how to tackle major strategic issues at a global level. Probably the demands will increase in this respect when rapid communication in international settings becomes an even more common and natural part of working life. Efficient communication is the way to enable a paradigm shift to affect consumer behavior, political structures and global production networks.

The present study is about a project that involves five countries in the Baltic Region: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia and Sweden. For historical and political reasons, communication between some of these countries could be very limited just 30 years ago. At that time the Russian language played an important role as a means of communication between some of them and can still be used today. However, in order both to spread your own ideas and to show good examples, and in addition be informed about current findings, ideas and trends from distant cultures and economies, there is a need for a lingua franca working worldwide – and the English language has more and more taken that role in contacts in business, trade, and academic life (Jenkins, 2007).

As a consequence of this development we can see that foreign language learning starts at primary schools and not later than at the age of nine in almost all European countries. In Europe, English is the first foreign language at elementary levels and it is the case that young learners in most European countries approach the A1-level in their oral and aural skills during the first four years of instruction (British Council, 2011).

Working with Values and Beliefs in Foreign Language Learning

Content plays a major role in foreign language teaching and learning, particularly with the English language which is widely spread in society and media (Snow, 2001). As a consequence, it is natural to include language learning as a part of education for

sustainable development and in this way work for fostering critical and independent citizens who question current behavior and patterns of life style. The work with these matters, such as intercultural learning to learn about the benefits of a culturally heterogeneous society, can be carried out at an early age such as with 5 to 7 year-olds (Zake, 2010). Including a relevant content in language learning often becomes evident when authentic material and interactive and international communication are used as ingredients in the planned teaching and learning. This approach is in line with the action-oriented view on language learning found in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) which describes the language learner as “in the process of becoming a language user”. So even though form-focused instruction also is present, it is clear that content-based language instruction with relevant and engaging topics is here to stay (Council of Europe 2001, 43). The foreign language is the tool to discuss international matters of the future at all levels, since the fact is that if global problems are to be solved, international cooperation needs to be involved at an early stage. The learning of relevant vocabulary in the foreign language could for instance be the first step in order to be able to communicate and thereby reach these goals of democratic, environmental and sustainable values and ideas. According to Switala (2015), value is a central notion across the curriculum, a key for sustainable development and depends on the teachers’ understanding of it.

Learning about values and cultures as well as becoming intercultural aware are prerequisites for successful international communication. In the process of learning a foreign language, the learner comes to realize cultural differences which become evident. A foreign language and its culture hang together in the learning process and the fact that the learner becomes aware of the differences between his/her own country and culture and the foreign one is a must for successful communication and collaboration with international partners.

Communication about strategies and long-lasting changes in society, with in some cases controversial issues for change and development, demands a rich and advanced vocabulary and an awareness of challenges on the global scene. Participating in negotiations in a foreign language with partners from different language and cultural backgrounds requires certain skills that need to be learnt and practiced in order for the interlocutor to reach his/her goals. It is thus essential to work with the integration of values and intercultural learning in the foreign language classroom.

School practices more and more tend to leave the traditional classroom procedures thanks to ICT and do not only rely on traditional schoolbook material when learning English. The use of authentic or authentic-like communication in learning processes motivates and engages learners for communication on sustainable development and phenomena such as social media, entertainment and computer games play a significant role both in and outside school in foreign language learning (Salīte, Gedžūne, Gedžūne, 2009). The influence of English from activities in children’s spare time on their knowledge and learning of English is nowadays a recognized phenomenon (see for instance Sundqvist, 2009). By coming across new ideas and views, learners can hopefully reconceptualize concepts and reframe their mindsets (Tillmanns, Holland, Lorenzi & McDonagh, 2014, Skrinda, 2010). In a project when 12-year-olds in Russia and Sweden communicated in English at common blogs the results clearly showed that the children in the study became aware of cultural differences and similarities and could gradually start to question and reflect on central issues, such as recycling and gender roles, which are part

of sustainable development (Andersson & Sundh, 2014). Values and ideas for change, such as consumption patterns and gender roles in families spread rapidly in their international encounters in these children's communication in their spare time. Since change requires contacts with new ideas and people, knowing the foreign language becomes the necessity for this change to occur. To learn a foreign language is thus to learn for a sustainable future.

The Procedures in the Collection of the Data in the Baltic Young Learners of English Corpus (BYLEC)

Since future discussions in international contexts on changes in society for sustainable living conditions will be in English it is of importance to find out more about the characteristics of the linguistic varieties of English used in this communication. Scandinavian and Russian speakers generally have their own specific difficulties when speaking and writing in English that can be identified (Swan & Smith, 1987). By learning more about these interlanguages and language development among young learners in their progress when learning English, and not only structural difficulties but also choices of vocabulary and the use of collocations, it is possible to identify linguistic features that are different due to language background and which can lead to misunderstandings in complex issues such as sustainable development. These findings evidently lead to pedagogical implications for the classrooms. Collecting learner English in a corpus as a resource for research is a recognized approach to the understanding of learner language (see for instance Granger, 2003).

The data in the BYLEC project is collected in two parts. The first part (Part 1) was completed in the academic year 2015/2016 and the second part (Part 2) is for the academic year 2016/2017. Six universities in the Baltic Region cooperate on the one hand by recruiting school teachers who teach English to 12-year-olds and on the other hand by being in charge of analyses on the data.

The first step in Part 1 was the organization of workshops for the school teachers in Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Russia. The purpose of these workshops was to inform the teachers about the research project and to discuss the construction of the six tasks for the writing of the texts as well as the instructions for the pupils. These five workshops were organized at the university in each country and together with the participation of the Swedish project leader and lecturers from the home university. In Estonia an additional Swedish lecturer participated at the workshop with a special interest in how to encourage children with learning difficulties and in Lithuania a Skype-conference was organized with the lecturer at Stockholm University. At these five workshops the teachers' experiences and reflections were taken into account in the final revision of the instructions and tasks in order to secure that the tasks would be appropriate for all 12-year-olds no matter their mother tongue or cultural background.

The second step in Part 1 was the collection of the extra-linguistic variables of the 12-year-olds. A questionnaire on the learners' profiles was constructed and distributed to the school teachers. This questionnaire covered the following variables: gender, age, mother tongue, other languages used outside school, years of English studied at school, time spent abroad, extra lessons of English taken in their spare time, experiences and habits of using English in computer games and on the Internet, and the use of English

outside and after school. The profiles were sent to the project team and all learners were given a code to guarantee them being anonymous in the whole project. The school teachers were asked to inform the children and their parents about the following conditions: In the collection of the profiles and texts the children were anonymous, the texts were collected for research purposes and the participants' identities would not be disclosed in any way (Vetenskapsrådet, 2016). The learners were then organized in the data with their codes as in the following example: SE-A-1 (country, school, student), and then using this system when the six texts written by the learners were organized (SE-A-1-1; SE-A-1-2, SE-A-1-3 and so forth).

In the third step of Part 1 of the project, the instructions for writing the six texts were distributed to the school teachers with the deadlines for three first texts in October, November and December in 2015 and the three last texts in February, March and April 2016. The topics of the six texts were (1) *My best friend*, (2) *My pet*, (3) *A place I like*, (4) *An adventure/a journey of my dreams*, (5) *My favorite website/ computer game/ app*, and (6) *Me in the world in the future*. The topics are descriptive in character but the last one (Text 6) provides the opportunity to discuss issues of the future and a sustainable life style.

A research workshop was organized in November 2015 when the following issues were clarified: the program used for the linguistic analyses, principles in the transcribing of the learners' production, and the storing of the data in a secure way. In August 2016, researchers and school teachers who participated in the project were invited to a workshop at Uppsala University to evaluate the first part of the project.

In the fourth step of Part 1, all texts were transcribed and organized in the corpus data file and were made ready for analyses.

Part 2 of the project (2016/2017) is now in progress with some 500 learners who are to produce six texts which are regularly submitted to the project team for organization and transcription. Schools in Poland joined Part 2 in the BYLEC project which will add one country to the investigation.

The Purpose of the Investigation

The study is carried out on 12-year-olds in five countries in the Baltic Region with highly different historical, cultural, environmental and economic conditions: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia and Sweden. The children's mother tongues are of different origins and structures and when these 12-year-olds communicate in the future in conversations or negotiations, they will do so in English. It is thus essential in order to achieve successful communication that they are prepared in the best way in their learning of English.

The purpose of collecting the written production is to gain insights into Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Russian and Swedish 12-year-olds' uses of English. The data results can lead to useful considerations when discussing pedagogical implications and the organization of and priorities in teaching English in the different countries. A special interest is on questions about integrating content such as sustainable development in English language learning at an early stage in order to facilitate for international communication in the future.

Research Questions

At this stage when the collection of the data in Part 1 is completed the following three research questions are formulated:

1. What are the characteristics of the data collected in Part 1?
2. What are the expressed ideas in the young learners' writing about the future and issues of sustainability in Text 6?
3. Can differences be observed in the young learners' expressed ideas when the productions in Text 6 in the five countries are compared?

Methodological Considerations

As a background to the results presented, a quantitative approach is used for the purpose of providing a picture of the learners and the texts analyzed. In this part the learners' gender and mother tongues are presented followed by the texts in terms of numbers of submitted texts and the lengths of them in words.

In order to investigate the content in the texts regarding issues related to sustainable development, a qualitative approach was relevant. The texts in the corpus are limited both in length and content and therefore approaches such as content or thematic analyses were not considered to be useful; the sentences that contain ideas expressed about the future and sustainability were brief and limited (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). For that reason, a keyword analysis was selected as described by Bernard and Ryan (2010). The method of collecting key words involved finding words that have some sort of meaning in a context of sustainable development. There are several ways in doing this, such as finding frequently used words, unusual use of certain words and identifying key words and the words surrounding them. In the present study, the last alternative was selected.

The key words selected in the present study are nouns used in a context with an abstract meaning related to topics of the economic, environmental or sociocultural aspects of sustainable development. The occurrence of abstract nouns in production is an indication of a higher level of language proficiency and abstract thinking (Sundh, 2003).

The following three criteria were used in the selection of the nouns:

- (1) The nouns occurred more than once in the data.
- (2) The nouns were used by more than one learner in the data.
- (3) The nouns were used in an abstract sense and in a context that can be associated with issues of a sustainable life style.

The Data: Learner Profiles

Learners in five countries participated in the project and wrote at least one out of the six texts. These texts are linked to their extra-linguistic background data. In Table 1 below, the numbers of participating learners in the five countries are provided.

Table 1

Participating Learners in the BYLEC-project 2015/2016

Country	Learners
Estonia	100
Latvia	123
Lithuania	125
Russia	81
Sweden	62
Total	491

As can be seen in Table 1, the learners spread across the five countries with between 62 and 125 learners per country.

Table 2

The Gender of the Participating Learners in the BYLEC-Project 2015/2016 in the Five Countries

Country	Boys	Girls	Unknown	Total
Estonia	43	56	1	100
Latvia	62	58	3	123
Lithuania	63	60	2	125
Russia	32	38	1	81
Sweden	24	38	–	62
Total	224 (46%)	250 (51%)	7	491

As for the proportion of girls and boys, Table 2 shows that there are no major differences and that in the whole material there are slightly more girls than boys but no number that can be expected to influence the overall analyses.

The answers in the learner profile questionnaire reveal that most learners were born in 2003. Some 20% of the Estonians were born in 2002, and some 20% of both the Russians and Latvians were slightly younger since they were born in 2004. A difference between the groups is that in some countries learners take extra lessons in their spare time. 70% of the Russian learners claim that they do so, whereas some 20% of the Latvians and Lithuanians and 10% of the Estonians also have this arrangement in their spare time, whereas hardly any Swedes have this extra tuition. It is evident that all learners are used to being in contact with the English language in activities related to the Internet and computer games since 90% of them across all nationalities confirmed it. It is also clear that the English language is a natural part of these young people's everyday life as between 60 and 80% of them in each of the five countries reply in the questionnaire that they either spoke or wrote in English in their free time when they looked back at the last week.

Table 3 shows that the Russian language is the most common language spoken at home. 196 learners answered that they spoke Russian at home which is 40% of the total number. Russian is thus the most common mother tongue in the study and these learners are found in Estonia, Latvia and Russia. The Lithuanian language is the second most common language.

Table 3

The Learners' First Language Across the Five Countries in the BYLEC-Project 2015/2016

Country	Estonian	Latvian	Bilingual Latvian and Russian	Lithuanian	Russian	Swedish	Other	Unknown	Total
Estonia	66				34				100
Latvia		30	9		82			2	123
Lithuania				124				1	125
Russia					80		1		81
Sweden						62			62
Total	66	30	9	124 (25%)	196 (40%)	62	1	3	491

The Results of the Collection of the Data: the Texts

Table 4

Numbers of Submitted Text1 – 6 From Each Country in the BYLEC-project 2015/2016

Country	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3	Text 4	Text 5	Text 6	Total
Estonia	83	95	58	61	62	61	420
Latvia	109	117	113	110	119	110	678
Lithuania	105	107	108	72	97	106	595
Russia	50	61	26	55	56	66	314
Sweden	58	54	55	47	25	51	290
Total	405	434	360	345	359	394	2297

Table 4 shows that the data consists altogether of 2,297 texts. Since there are more Latvian and Lithuanian learners in the project than learners of the other three nationalities it is natural that there are also more texts from these two countries. Two Estonian schools only participated in the collection of the Texts 1 and 2 which explains the lower figures from Text 3 to Text 6 in the Estonian data.

The Learners' Expressed Ideas in Text 6

In the instructions to Text 6 the learners were asked to write about their future with the following questions:

Imagine that you are around 35 years old. What will you work with? Where will you live? Will you go by bus to work, or will you perhaps fly there in your own little airplane? Perhaps you will have a robot at home, which will do all the housework (cleaning, washing, and so on). Computers are very common today, but what will they be used for in the future? If you have children, will they go to school just like you do? Will you have a little chip in your arm where all the important information is stored?

Table 5 shows that the 394 texts of Task 6 have differences in length ranging from 2 words up to 519 words and that the average lengths of the texts for four of the countries are between 126 and 149. The texts from the Russian learners are shorter than the texts from the other countries.

Table 5

The Number of and Average Lengths of Text 6 Produced by the Learners in Each Country in the BYLEC-Project 2015/2016

Country	Total numbers of Text 6	Average lengths of Text 6 in words used	Range in number of words used
Estonia	61	149	22–519
Latvia	110	139	21–395
Lithuania	106	126	2–299
Russia	66	76	8–172
Sweden	51	143	30–240
Total	394		

The texts were analyzed in terms of the learners' uses of certain abstract nouns to see whether any topics were discussed which are part of the economic, environmental or sociocultural aspects of sustainable development. The results presented in Table 6 show that the learners wrote about issues related to sharing resources and communicating across cultures with nouns such as *charity*, *communication* and *culture*, issues related to technology with nouns such as *technology*, *invention* and *energy*, and finally issues related to international conflicts in terms of concepts such as *war* and *peace*.

Table 6

The Occurrence and Frequencies of Key Words Used in Learners' Texts 6 Across the Five Countries in the BYLEC-Project 2015/2016

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania	Russia	Sweden	Total
charity		1	8		1	10
communication		2		2		4
culture			1	1		2
energy		4			1	5
invention		3		1		4
peace			1	6	1	8
technology	3	12	8	2	1	26
war	12			14	2	28

In order to describe the young learners' discussion of these issues related to sustainable development, five examples are provided below to illustrate the context of the nouns presented in Table 6.

- (1) "In summer 2040 comes the war. Every country sends their bravest and strongest warriors to the war." (EE-B-7-6)
- (2) "Give money for charity in amont 100000 give to charity. That's my life in 1040" (LT-B-7-6)
- (3) "The car energy is eco green batrive." (LV-A-23-6)
- (4) "I would like to help push the world of information technology" (RU-A-6-6)
- (5) "I don't want to live in an apartment want to live in a hose with sun energy and it's going to be a smart hose hope u guys like my thoughts bye!" (SE-B-2-6)

The results show that when the learners discuss abstract matters related to sustainable development the matters can be summarized to three areas: (1) sharing resources and communicating in different cultures, (2) finding new inventions for energy and

technology, and (3) finding ways to cope with and possibly solve international conflicts. Even though the material is limited and many extra-linguistic and classroom factors influence the learners' choices of topics we can nevertheless identify that the Lithuanian learners wrote about topics related to charity, that the Latvian learners focused on technology and energy and that the Estonian and Russian children used abstract nouns related to conflicts.

In order to provide a more comprehensive picture of the learners' uses of these abstract nouns, analyses were carried out on content words immediately surrounding the three most common nouns used in abstract sense in the data: *charity*, *technology*, and *war*. Table 7 shows these content words that emerged in the data. The words presented occurred more than once.

Table 7

Words/phrases Occurring More than Once in the Data Together With the Three Key Words 'charity', 'technology' and 'war'

Charity	donate, give, money
Technology	future, information, more, much, new
War	future, there will be/there will not be, world

Table 7 provides a summarized picture of the 12-year-olds' most common issues discussed with reference to future perspectives and sustainable development. The view in the texts is that charity will be a means of sharing financial resources in terms of giving money to people in need. We will benefit from new technology in many places, such as at home and at workplaces, which in this way will make our life style more sustainable. Finally, a war is described as a threat to a safe future and a secure development in the world.

The Potential of the Data for Further Analyses

The presentation of the BYLEC-data in the present text is the first step in a process of analyzing the written production by young learners in the Baltic Region. The material will be available for university students and researchers at the partner universities and can be useful when looking at matters such as the use of the English language as a foreign language when the learners have Russian as the mother tongue but are in different cultural and educational contexts such as Estonia, Latvia and Russia.

The list below provides examples of research questions to illustrate the potential of the data and possible directions in the future research:

- What are the specific productive patterns of young learners' second language production in these five countries?
- What intercultural aspects, societal factors and native language interference could explain the identified variation in learner language?
- What features of spoken English and digital communication emerge in their written production such as discourse markers, emoticons, traits from texting messages, multiple causal coordination and informal vocabulary?
- What are the ideas and values in the minds of these 12-year-olds across the six different countries and expressed in the texts?

- What are the pedagogical implications for classroom work with writing in English of these identified differences?
- Can the written production by 12-year-olds in the countries of the Baltic Region in the project be described as being at the A2-level according to the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR)?

It is already obvious that the material will be used for different purposes by the various partners. At the international workshop in August 2016 at Uppsala University, ideas were launched to study the content in the texts and thereby identify the mindset of the children in the different cultures in the Baltic Region and to find common tools with the help of the texts for the assessment of the skill of writing in English. These two ideas are only examples what is to come. The material has already been used for term papers at bachelor level at the English Department, Uppsala University and then with a focus on accuracy and the occurrence of a selected number of language structures (Barås & Mohlin 2016; Eriksson 2016).

Concluding Remarks

The present study described the procedures in the collection of the data in the BYLEC-project, the learner profiles in the material and some first results in terms of text lengths and issues being discussed in one of the six texts. The results show a data with a large group of 12-year-olds who have the Russian language as their mother tongue and with an even distribution of girls and boys. In one of the six texts written by the learners, some key words which can be related to issues of sustainable development were identified. There are definitely great differences in levels of language proficiency among the learners in the five countries which is seen in the lengths of the texts. Nevertheless, it is clear that many young learners are able to touch upon questions and topics which are part of the discussion of sustainable development. The forthcoming results will in the context of the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) lead to pedagogical implications and in that way work for future efficient communication in international contexts between European citizens on issues which are to be solved on an international level for sustainable development on a global level.

Acknowledgements

This study would not have been possible without the participation of colleagues at Tartu University, Estonia; Daugavpils University, Latvia; Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania; Immanuel Kant Federal University of Russia in Kaliningrad, Russia and Stockholm University, Sweden.

Teachers and pupils contributed with the compilation of the data at the following schools:

Norrbackaskolan, Visby, Sweden
 St Hansskolan, Visby, Sweden
 Kräklingbo skola, Katthammarvik, Sweden
 Tartu Karlova School, Tartu, Estonia
 Tartu Tamme School, Tartu, Estonia
 Narva Pähklikimäe Gymnasium, Narva, Estonia
 Narva Keeltelütseum, Narva, Estonia

Daugavpils Saskaņas pamatskola, Daugavpils, Latvia
 Daugavpils Basic school Nr 11, Daugavpils, Latvia
 Daugavpils Vienības Pamatskola, Daugavpils, Latvia
 Daugavpils Krievu vidusskola-licejs, Daugavpils, Latvia
 Rigas Sergeja Zoltoka Vidusskola, Riga, Latvia
 Kaunas Senamiestis Middle School, Kaunas, Lithuania
 Kaunas Jonas and Petras Vileisiai Middle School, Kaunas, Lithuania
 Kaliningrad school number 1, Kaliningrad, Russia
 Kaliningrad school number 8, Kaliningrad, Russia
 Kaliningrad school number 21, Kaliningrad, Russia
 Russian Orthodox Gymnasium, Kaliningrad, Russia

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