

Alternatives to SDGs-based Global Issues Pedagogy in ELT

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are frequently used as a frame of reference for the teaching and learning of Global Issues content in English Language Teaching (ELT). This paper argues that the prevalence of SDGs-based Global Issues pedagogy in ELT is partially the result of a well-intended but uncritical acceptance of the validity of the SDGs as a framework for thinking about social, economic, and ecological well-being. This paper surveys a number of critiques of the SDGs and highlights the necessity of complementing the use of the SDGs in Global Issues study with alternative conceptions and movements that promote social, economic, and ecological well-being, including: Buen Vivir from Latin America, Ecological Swaraj from India, Ubuntu from South Africa, and the de-growth/post-growth movement. In the course of comparing and contrasting these approaches to social, economic, and ecological well-being, this paper offers alternative approaches as to how teachers might introduce and discuss Global Issues with their. The goal is to raise awareness of the need for more critical reflection on the use of the SDGs as a frame of reference when teaching and learning about Global Issues in ELT.

Keywords: Buen Vivir, Swaraj, Ubuntu, Degrowth, Global Issues, ELT

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Introduction

Global Issues (GI) pedagogy in English Language Teaching (ELT) is the incorporation of GI topics into English language education curricula with goals of developing both ability in the language and knowledge of GI which “refer[s] to world problems such as war, hunger, poverty, oppression, racism, sexism, environmental destruction and to concepts such as peace, justice, human rights, sustainable development, social responsibility, and international understanding” (GILE SIG, n.d.). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have become a common framework for raising and teaching GI topics in ELT and they provide a ready-to-use format for thinking about the direction of development and what kinds of actions might improve the lives of many people throughout the world. However, the SDGs are not the only model for considering the development and well-being of individuals and communities, nor are they without criticism. The ready-to-use format of the SDGs means that they are convenient and relatively simple to integrate in ELT, but uncritically using the SDGs is problematic. The purpose of this paper, then, is to highlight critiques of the SDGs and introduce alternative models that could be used in GI pedagogy in ELT.

Critiques of the SDGs

The SDGs are wide-ranging and there are many details that could be criticized. However, the details of individual SDGs are not the focus here. The focus is on the foundations of the SDGs as a framework for development which teachers frequently use in GI pedagogy in ELT. There are two main themes in criticisms of the SDGs’ foundations: A) They portray development in linear, monologic terms; and B) They are internally incoherent. The first charge is based on how the SDGs assume that societies develop toward uniform goal(s) and that development is the same as progression toward social and economic outcomes that characterize Global North, wealthy, industrialized societies today (Briant Carant, 2017; Kothari, Demaria, & Acosta, 2014; Spangenberg, 2017; Yap & Watene, 2019); the second charge is that the SDGs contradict one another, especially in terms of trying to promote both limitless economic growth and ecological sustainability (Hickel, 2019; Spaiser et al., 2017). Too often the SDGs are used as a framework or basis in GI pedagogy in ELT that ignores these critiques. Moreover, alternative models are also ignored.

Alternatives to the SDGs

There are many alternative models to use to think about development. Four alternatives will be briefly discussed below: Buen Vivir from Central and South America, Ecological Swaraj from India, Ubuntu from southern Africa, and Postgrowth/Degrowth economics.

Buen Vivir is a perspective rooted in Indigenous worldviews from Central and South America that pertain to individual, social, and ecological well-being. It breaks with conventional notions of linear development. Rather, it maintains that different communities will have different preferred goals and outcomes. It is highly concerned with biocentric principles and reciprocity both between people and between humans and the more-than-human world. More information about Buen Vivir can be found in Acosta (2016), Hicks (2016), and Salazar (2015).

Ecological Swaraj, which is also referred to as Radical Ecological Democracy, advocates for ecologically-sensitive and localized autonomy. Thus, like Buen Vivir, it recognizes a plurality of paths toward individual and community well-being. Although it emphasizes bottom-up social change, it also maintains that development is dialogic and that both small communities and large political collectives might learn from one another. More information about Ecological Swaraj can be found in Kothari (2016; 2018).

Ubuntu is a relational and communitarian philosophy whose worldview is partially conveyed in the expression ‘I am because we are’. It places high value on social personhood and solidarity, meaning it is an inclusive approach to well-being. Because it recognizes the collective responsibility of well-being, it counterbalances aspects of neoliberal economic development. More information about Ubuntu can be found in Shumba (2011), Tutu (n.d.), and Van Norren (2014).

Postgrowth and degrowth economics are concerned with reducing aggregate growth and using growth as a proxy for well-being; that is, there are other, perhaps better, ways to think about well-being than, say, gross domestic product. While acknowledging that growth should continue in some parts of the world, the wealthiest parts of the world need to shift to less productionist and consumptive practices. Advocates of postgrowth and degrowth economics emphasize that unlimited economic growth is incompatible with planetary limits and ecological boundaries, and policymakers should focus the well-being of communities rather than growth for growth’s sake. More information about postgrowth and degrowth economics can be found in Kothari, Demaria, & Acosta (2014), Burkhart et al. (2016), and PGI (n.d.).

Using the Alternatives

All of the alternative ways of thinking about development introduced above can be integrated into GI pedagogy in ELT. Any, or all, of them, for example, could complement SDGs-related units/activities in a compare and/or contrast format. They could also be used to refocus thematically from ‘development’ to ‘well-being’. They could be used in studying the history of development. They could even be used to scaffold the study of case studies of particular communities and movements.

Specific examples of such topics for the above might include: A) reading about and discussing Buen Vivir and rights of nature legislation in Bolivia or Ecuador; B) running thought experiments about whether money is necessary (Is a community that doesn’t use or have modern concepts of money ‘poor?’); C) studying how racialized colonialism turned self-sufficient societies into impoverished ones; D) highlight Indigenous perspectives on development issues such as the attitudes of Native Hawaiians to tourism; and E) compare different metrics of well-being that are not based on economic criteria such as GDP.

Conclusion

The SDGs are a common framework for GI pedagogy in ELT. However, there are important critiques of the SDGs and uncritically teaching using the SDGs is problematic. There are alternative ways to think about ‘development’ and ‘well-being’, including: Buen Vivir, Ecological Swaraj, Ubuntu, and postgrowth/degrowth

economics. These alternatives can be incorporated into GI pedagogy in ELT alongside, in addition to, or in place of the SDGs.

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