

Alan Maley*

Language teachers as eco-activists: From talking the talk to walking the walk

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jwl-2022-0005>

Received January 28, 2022; accepted May 19, 2022; published online July 11, 2022

Abstract: The climate crisis has received a great deal of attention of late, yet its root causes go back to the last century and beyond. Also going back many years have been efforts to address the roots of the climate crisis. These efforts include the work of language teachers to research, create, trial, and share materials and pedagogical strategies for educating and mobilizing teachers, students, and other stakeholders to address the beliefs and practices that have led our species to the precipice of irredeemable disaster. This article seeks to serve as an annotated repository of works and collective wisdom of the author and colleagues, both near and far, as to how language teaching can accomplish its joint tasks of both facilitating student enjoyment of and expertise in their languages, and at the same time engaging students in fulfilling their responsibility as citizens of their home country and the world, a responsibility that has only grown more urgent due to the climate crisis. This repository is the result of 50 years of research, not with blinded control groups and statistical analysis (valuable though those methods can be), but of naturalistic investigation. The repository divides into three sections: Inspiration, Information, and Implementation. Strategies and ways that teachers have found useful for growing their own and their students' knowledge of the causes of and possible solutions to the climate crisis are considered. The article ends with a poem by the author which addresses the important question of the role of the teacher in the classroom and beyond.

Keywords: climate change; consumerism; neophilia; poetry; songs

The sedge has withered from the lake
And no birds sing.

(Excerpt from “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”¹ by John Keats)

¹ https://www.bbc.co.uk/poetryseason/poems/la_belle_dame_sans_merci.shtml (accessed 12 November 2021).

*Corresponding author: Alan Maley, The C Group: Creativity for Change in Language Education, London, UK, E-mail: yelamoo@yahoo.co.uk

1 Introduction

The current state of the global ecosystem is imperiling the very existence of humankind. This should come as no surprise, given the many high-profile warnings issued over the past decades. The alert was sounded in 1962 by Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring*. Since then, we have seen Meadows et al.'s *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (1972), David Attenborough's *The Blue Planet* (2001), and many other of his books and films (Attenborough 2020, 2021), Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006); James Lovelock's *The Revenge of Gaia: Why the Earth Is Fighting Back* (2006), and innumerable books and reports, not to speak of the 26 COP (Conference of the Parties) meetings and the rise of Extinction Rebellion. Yet for all the many international conference resolutions, there has been little action. And there have been a number of serious attempts to slow down action on climate change by climate change deniers acting in their own narrow self-interest (Stott 2021). Time is running out. And public opinion is reaching a point of disillusionment at the lack of action. And there are already signs of panic-stricken despair, especially among the young. This poem says it all.

An Epitaph for the Environment

Rod Bolitho

Kyoto, 97, COP Three.
Lots of talk – but talk is free.
The Year 2000 in the Hague,
Promises but all quite vague.
In Bali for COP Thirteen,
No new ideas, they've all been seen.
Then Paris for COP Twenty-one,
Hopes were raised but now they've gone.
Trump pulled out and said the US
Was not responsible for this mess.
Resolutions all now binned.
Promises just so much wind.
Now much more talk this time in Glasgow
But wait, there's one thing we all know
From a great big dose of realism,
That profit always trumps idealism,
And so we'll hurtle madly head on
Towards the threatened Armageddon.

In this article, I want to present the case for action by teachers, because teachers, of all subjects, not just languages, wield enormous influence (Maley and Kiss 2018; Prodromou 2002). They are role models for their students, and their actions and

presence continue to influence students for many years after they leave school or university (Chau and Shunmugam 2021; Jacobs et al. 2022). It is time this influence was activated in support of global action on the ecosphere.

There exists a well-established and growing literature calling on teachers and educators generally to engage with students in actions aimed at making the world a better place (e.g. Bowers 2012; Dewey 1916; Katunich 2019; Lowenstein et al. 2010; MacPherson 2010; Nolet 2009; Pantić 2015; Reid et al. 2021). The view espoused in this literature is that rather than students being involved in decontextualized, lower-order thinking and learning of basic knowledge and skills, students learn better and more deeply when their studies call for higher-order thinking and clearly connect with the world that students live in and that they and future generations will inhabit.

Language teachers in particular have the opportunity to make a major contribution to changing mindsets and bringing about practical action. Whereas other subjects have a defined content to teach, a language does not. Teaching a language can recruit any content. In the past, we have seen language taught through literature and through areas of English for Specific Purpose (ESP). Environmental issues are now ripe for incorporation into the language curriculum. And there is no time to be lost in doing this. But to achieve this, a conscious effort must be made to include eco-awareness in teachers' initial and in-service training and development. This article will therefore focus on action by teachers – but many of my proposals will be equally suitable, with adaptation, for direct classroom application. This article shares the work of many fellow language educators (e.g. Cates 2022; Goulah 2017; Goulah and Katunich 2020; Jacobs and Goatly 2000; MacPherson 2010; Pennycook 2017) and encourages colleagues to join, localize, and expand on this work.

I shall suggest that this agenda could be implemented in three ways, through the three "I"s: Inspiration, Information, and Implementation. Each of these will be addressed in detail below. I shall also suggest that we can introduce action by starting with the individual and moving outwards to the family, the school, the community, the wider area, the nation – and internationally. Finally, I believe that we need to go beyond the first step, which is to make sure environmental issues are brought center-stage inside our classrooms. We then need to ensure that this leads to action outside the classroom in the community. If climate issues remain simply a subject for study, they will remain a dead letter. Given the urgency of redemptive action to save our planet, it will not be enough to get these activities into our classrooms, which is largely a question of curriculum and pedagogy. We need also to think of ways of getting them out of classrooms and into the community in the form of personal and group action. This is an issue fraught with ethical and practical problems, but it needs to be confronted if there is to be any practical outcome.

I will now develop these ideas with practical suggestions for implementation. Note that I am not suggesting anything new in terms of pedagogy: Everything here can be activated using the language teacher's toolkit of individual, pair, group, and whole-class working, deploying the whole gamut of activity types ranging from questioning through role-playing to project work. What is different is the content and the purpose. The content focuses on the forces threatening the extinction of human life on this planet. The purpose is to mobilize society to find ways of removing or mitigating these threats.

2 The three “I”s: Inspiration, information, and implementation

Though the three “I”s are presented separately, they are not to be viewed as sequential. Rather they should be considered as inextricably woven together. Inspiration requires information, and information, if it is to be of value, needs to be implemented.

It is necessary to remember that we are also language teachers, so any activities we engage in need to facilitate language acquisition as well as raise awareness of climate change issues. In fact, this will be a natural outcome of deploying rich data in ways that require close attention through reading, listening, speaking, and writing. And the compelling nature of the content gives it an additional motivational pulse. This involves the situated, authentic use of language – the aim of much recent methodological debate.

The overall intention of the suggestions which follow is to create a community of practice of teachers who are critically enthused, well-informed and equipped, and action-oriented, and who are able to relate and adapt the activities suggested to their own classrooms.

2.1 Inspiration

Younger teachers in particular should not need to be inspired, given that the younger you are, the more you have to lose if the global ecosystem goes bust. But, human nature being as it is, many people still contrive to avoid facing the obvious.² Hence the need to generate interest and enthusiasm on the theme of human survival.

² I shall discuss the reasons for inaction in more detail later in this article.

2.1.1 Openings

Make it a regular practice to open every training session by presenting and discussing a short ecologically-related item. These could include any or all of the following:

Popular songs. Some well-known examples would include The Beach Boys – *A Day in the Life of a Tree*, Atlantic – *The Weather Station*, Hawkwind – *We Took the Wrong Step Years Ago*, Joni Mitchell – *Big Yellow Taxi*, and many more.³

Poems. Try John Agard's *Inheritance*, Constance Nwabe's *We Have Everything We Need*, or Carl Dennis' *The Greenhouse Effect*. There are plenty of materials to choose from (see "Poems" in Appendices), including:

- 10 Poems about climate change awareness.⁴
- 9 Poems about climate change.⁵
- Poetry and the Environment.⁶

Quotations. There are many examples for discussion in Resources for Teaching below (see "Quotations" in Appendices). You could start with some of the quotations from Will Rogers or Barack Obama through an Internet search, such as "Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there"⁷ and "We are the first generation to feel the effect of climate change and the last generation who can do something about it".⁸

Short prose extracts. For example, the opening of *Silent Spring* (Carson 1962), or short passages from *The Road* (McCarthy 2009), from Stephen Emmott's *10 Billion* (2013), or David Attenborough's *A Life on Our Planet: My Witness Statement and a Vision for the Future* (2020). The passages could be distributed for silent reading, or performed by the trainer or a trainee.

All the items above can be briefly discussed, though the main point is to make trainees aware of the material available to them and to stimulate interest.

2.1.2 Biographies of eco-activists

There are increasing numbers of reports of the actions by young people in particular which are now taking place in response to the global environmental crisis. These

³ See <https://www.globaldimension.org/en/content/songs-about-climate-change> (accessed 12 November 2021).

⁴ <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=Poems+about+climate+change> (accessed 12 November 2021).

⁵ <https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/events/climate-change-poetry-anthology.pdf> (accessed 12 November 2021).

⁶ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/146462/poetry-and-the-environment> (accessed 12 November 2021).

⁷ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/will Rogers_104938 (accessed 12 November 2021).

⁸ <https://twitter.com/barackobama/status/514461859542351872?lang=en> (accessed 12 November 2021).

include: Craig's *We Have a Dream* (2021), and the winners of the first *Earthshot Prize*⁹ – Laing's stories of young activists and of course, the story of Greta Thunberg.

Discussion of news items. Topical headlines and newspaper articles are constantly appearing. These can be briefly introduced and discussed for trainees to follow up in their own time.

Eco-journals. Trainees would be asked to keep an eco-journal in which they record anything they come across which is relevant to the ecology theme. Entries would be shared with other trainees on a regular basis.

It will be important to encourage trainees to contribute actively to all these categories by bringing items they have found to class. Over time a bank of resources will then be created for use with other groups of trainees, which can be drawn on for activities with students in the classes they teach.

Teachers need to be led by example. These activities aim to inspire them to do this through regular exchange of information and views, thus helping to create a supportive eco-learning community of practice.

2.2 Information

The aim of this section is to suggest ways trainees can be encouraged to locate and access a rich store of information upon which to draw in their own teaching.

Directed reading. Trainees would be directed to read specific texts within a given time and to report back on them to other members of the group. Each trainee would read a different text. In this way, information is shared and ideas can be discussed. It would be advisable to start with fairly short extracts, for example from *Silent Spring* (Carson 1962), or chapters from *The Future We Choose* (Figueras and Rivett-Carnac 2020). From short extracts, you can then move to short complete texts such as any of the excellent short titles in the *Penguin Green Ideas* series.

Book circles. In book circles, everyone in the group reads the same book. Usually, one book would be read per month. At the end of the month, the group meets. One or two trainees are nominated to report back on the book. You can start with short complete books, such as the *Penguin Green Ideas* series mentioned above or *The No-Nonsense Guide to Climate Change* (Godrej 2001). With time, trainees can be asked to read longer, more demanding titles, such as Emmot's *10 Billion* (2013), Graeber and Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything* (2021), Klein's *This Changes Everything* (2014), Maniaque-Benton's *The Whole Earth Field Guide* (2016), and Wallace-Wells' *The Uninhabitable Earth* (2019).

⁹ <https://earthshotprize.org/first-ever-winners-of-prince-williams-earthshot-prize-announced/> (accessed 12 November 2021).

Web searches. Trainees are assigned specific areas to research. This can either be done as a group or whole-class activity. Areas might include finding out more about: Teachers' associations (like IATEFL [International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language], TESOL [Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages] International Association, JALT [Japan Association for Language Teaching], ELTAI [English Language Teachers' Association of India], etc.), The British Council, international organizations, conference proceedings, the United Nations and other reports on climate change (see "Links to organizations" in Appendices for ideas to get started).

Published eco-teaching materials and resources. In groups, trainees search for and evaluate existing teaching resources (See "Classroom teaching materials" in Appendices for some ideas to get started). These can then be discussed in open class sessions and compiled into a database for future use.

Projects to build resource/information banks. Trainees are assigned specific areas to research. These could include: Water supply and use, Power supply and use, Food production, distribution and consumption, Transport, Housing, Waste disposal, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, Sea-level rises, Marine pollution, Re-wilding, Deforestation (and re-forestation), Re-cycling, etc. They then combine their lists into resource banks on each theme.

In all these activities they would be looking for accessible material offering information about each area, and especially items that could form the basis for classroom teaching materials. The aim is to familiarize trainees with what useful information is available to them, and to learn how to look for information they may need.

2.3 Implementation

These would give trainees first-hand experience of activities that would be directly transferable to the classroom.

2.3.1 Building personal agendas for action based on audits

Over a period of time, trainees would be invited to conduct personal audits of a range of daily-life issues such as water use, energy use, food production and consumption, waste creation and disposal, transport, clothing production, consumption and disposal, use of paper and packaging.

It may be helpful to generate a set of questions for each category. For example,

- Water: Measure how much water you use in a week. How much water do you use in a week for: Drinking? Cooking? Washing? Clothes washing? Toilet use? Watering the garden? Washing your car? How could you reduce your personal water use? Make a list.

- Paper: How much paper do you use in a week for: Reading material (newspapers, magazines, books)? Writing material (letters, photocopying, notebooks, diaries, etc.)? Toilet paper? Tissues and kitchen rolls? Packaging paper? How could you reduce your personal paper use? How much paper could you recycle? Make a list.

Trainees would bring their answers to their audits at the end of a week for sharing and discussion. After an agreed time, perhaps a month, they repeat the audit and compare their consumption before and after.

2.3.2 From audits to surveys to campaigns

The same principle as personal audits can then be extended to the school or institution, the community, and the nation. For example, they can conduct a school audit/survey to report on: Energy use, water consumption, use of paper, waste creation and disposal, use of plastic, etc.

The results of such surveys can then lead to designing campaigns to improve matters. For example, a campaign to eliminate the use of plastic, or to reduce the use of paper, or electricity.

2.3.3 Debates

Organizing a debate can involve the whole group in extensive fact-finding and deciding on a presentation of arguments. To prepare for the debate, the group is divided into two. One half prepares to propose the motion, the other to oppose it. Allow a week or more for out-of-class preparation, which will involve marshaling information and deciding who will be the proposer/opposer and who the seconds.

On the due date, appoint a Chairperson to control the debate. The two teams face each other. The proposer is given 10 min to present the case. The opposer then has 10 min to refute the case. The seconder for the motion then has 5 min, followed by the seconder against the motion. Finally, the proposer and the opposer each have 3 min to sum up their case. After this, the whole group votes for or against the motion.

Here are some possible topics for motions:

- It is now too late for humanity to prevent environmental catastrophe. There is nothing we can do.
- No one is too small to make a difference.
- *Homo sapiens* is programmed to destroy itself.

There is plenty of material to get started in the Appendices below. For example, for Topic 1: *There is No Planet B* (Berners-Lee 2020), *Cancel the Apocalypse* (Simms 2013), *The Future We Choose* (Figueres and Rivett-Carnac 2020), *Global Issues and Human Nature: Is it Too Late to Change?* (Maley 2020).

2.3.4 Projects

For those unfamiliar with Project Work, there are plenty of available sources (Casañ-Pitarch and Candel-Mora 2021; Fried-Booth 2002). A project needs to have a concrete outcome. This might be in the form of a report, an information flier or brochure, a poster, a blog post, a video clip, an online interview, a newspaper article, etc. Trainees work in groups of about five to thoroughly research their topic, decide on how they will present findings, and prepare the final presentation (Chau and Jacobs 2021).

Some possible topics for projects:

- Prepare a report on which countries have the most effective environmental policies and implementation (e.g. Finland, Costa Rica) and which have the least effective and most damaging policies (e.g. the United States, India).
- Prepare a class video to show the use and misuse of water in your community.
- Prepare a brochure with personal advice on how to reduce consumption of water, power, transport, clothing, and/or food.
- Prepare a brochure with information about which foodstuffs are most environmentally-damaging and with advice on how to limit consumption of these items.
- Draw up a plan for a family to reduce their environmental footprint. Use the slogan “Reduce, re-use, re-purpose, recycle” as a structure.

2.3.5 Creative writing

This might seem a fanciful suggestion, but writing from a deeply-held perspective can be a powerful way of confronting the issue. It allows trainees (and learners) to express their deeply-felt fears, emotions, and convictions. As Ben Okri (2021) recently reminded us, “Artists must write as if these are our last days on Earth”. He goes on, “If you knew that you were at the last days of the human story, what would you write? How would you write?”.¹⁰

There are already signs of interest in using creative writing as a resource for raising awareness of the issues (Maley 2022). There are ample resources to draw on

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/12/artists-climate-crisis-write-creativity-imagination> (accessed 12 November 2021).

for techniques for introducing creative writing (Maley and Duff 1989; Maley and Moulding 1985; Spiro 2004).

Here are some possible starting points:

- Write a poem to an animal affected by climate change; for example, a bee, a tuna, an orang-utan, or a dead seagull.
- Write a protest poem about an issue that means a lot to you; for example, deforestation, litter in public places, the gap between affluent and poor people, marine pollution, famine, and death of coral reefs.
- Write a “then-now” poem about a place that has been changed by “development”.
- Write a question poem to a common object, using all the interrogatives – what, who, where, when, how (much, many, often [...]), why; for example, a plastic bag, a T-shirt, a mobile phone, a pizza.

2.3.6 Storytelling and drama

Stories are universal and a rich part of every culture. Trainees can be asked to collect stories relating to environmental issues. These may be traditional/wisdom stories or stories based on recent real-world events (Craig 2021) or the Earthshot prizewinners (Butfield and Hughes 2021). They then learn basic storytelling techniques for sharing them (and for later use in their classes) (Heathfield 2017; Walsh 2014; Wright 2009).

2.3.7 Organizing group action

Consider how teachers can take actions that have a real impact *outside* the classroom. It may be that ultimately some form of direct action or rebellion is the only option left in the face of official inaction (Extinction Rebellion 2019; Hallam 2019; Sandford 2020; Thunberg 2019). Clearly, this is a sensitive area. Some countries have a tradition where public protest is acceptable. In others, any kind of protest is seen as a direct challenge to authority and can be suppressed, sometimes quite brutally. It will be for trainers and teachers, to decide just how far they can safely go. These suggestions, therefore, come with a health warning! The suggestions below are on a scale from relatively mild to quite extreme forms of action.

2.3.8 Researching current policy and practice

Does the school or institution have an environmental plan/policy? For an example of such a plan, see IATEFL in the “Classroom teaching materials” of Appendices.

How effective is it? Can it be modified to make it more effective? Or, it does not have a plan, can one be devised and implemented?

Do the local supermarket chains have an environmental plan or policy regarding issues such as geographical origin of products, use of harmful substances, use of plastic bags, packaging, etc.? What is the policy of your village, town, or city towards recycling and environmental protection?

2.3.9 Surveys

In order to provide a fact-based campaign, it may be useful first to conduct a survey among as large or representative a population as possible. Survey Monkey provides a freely downloadable tool for this (see “Links to action” in Appendices).

2.3.10 Campaigns/petitions

Trainees can be encouraged to join existing campaigns by signing petitions, sending e-mails to public figures, and participating in webinars. There are organizations that regularly support petitions. These include Avaaz, World Wildlife Fund, 38 Degrees, Care2 Petitions, Change.org, Greenpeace, etc. (see “Links to organizations” in Appendices). They can also start their own petitions using one of these platforms, such as Change.org.

2.3.11 Boycotts, protest marches, and strikes

Advice on how to organize these actions can be found in “Links to action” in Appendices. We need always to keep in mind that all these activities involve both highly authentic, situated uses of language (for reading, listening, discussion, and writing), are fully contextualized – and are highly relevant because of personal involvement and urgent concerns.

3 What is stopping us?

Any attempt to act against the impending climate catastrophe meets with formidable challenges. These are broadly of two kinds: Those inflicted by society, government and big business and those caused by human nature.

3.1 Social and institutional factors

The Growth Credo. The prevailing ethos holds that growth is necessary and good for us. Governments continue to pursue economic growth at all costs, regardless of the patent environmental damage it is causing.

Consumerism. We have grown accustomed to wanting things we do not need through the power of commercial advertising (Naish 2009; Wallman 2015). This is summed up by Will Rogers: Too many people spend money they have not earned to buy things they don't want to impress people they don't like.¹¹ Consumerism is a necessary partner for the growth model of economics: *Two for the price of one. Buy one, get one free. Mega-burger. Buffet – eat as much as you like. Black Friday.*

The Throw-away Society. The dominant, richer economies have moved from a society of conservation and respect for scarcity to one of massive waste creation. We are in the grip of neophilia, the mistaken belief that only what is new is of real value. Hence, there is a restless pursuit of more novelty. So, rather than repairing goods, we now tend to throw them away and acquire new ones, thus fueling the growth model. But this ready availability of new goods blinds us to the environmental costs.

A Society of Massive Distraction and Info-glut. We are drowning in information. The advent of the World Wide Web (WWW) and the Internet, together with the rise of the iPhone, exploited by the hegemony of a few global providers such as Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. has served to trivialize communication and provides endless fodder to distract almost everyone. We are exposed to “news” 24/7 and to a barrage of mostly superficial “entertainment”. This makes clear and focused thinking difficult. Are we literally *Amusing ourselves to death*? (Postman 1985). Waving while drowning? Have we literally ‘lost our minds’ or rather given them away?

Population growth plus aspirations. Human population growth is now approaching eight billion and is forecast to reach 10 billion or more within a matter of years (Emmott 2013). This places an ever-greater stress on available resources. And this is exacerbated by the quite understandable aspirations of poorer groups to attain the levels of consumption of the better-off populations.

Wealth disparity/Inequality. In a world where 1% of the global population is responsible for 20% of the pollution, where the top 10% of the global population owns or controls 85% of the total wealth, while the bottom 90% hold the remaining 15%, and where half of the world’s net wealth belongs to the top 1%, and the top 30% of adults hold 97% of the total wealth, where the likes of Musk and Bezos can spend billions on a joyride into space while millions die of hunger, the argument

¹¹ <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2016/04/21/impress/> (accessed 21 November 2021).

for a fairer distribution of resources is indisputable. Yet, if anything, the super-rich gets richer by the hour. And they are the ones who are despoiling the planet to the detriment of the majority of humankind.

Vested commercial and political interests. It is not in the interests of big business, nor governments that citizens should be well-informed and critically-inclined. Action to halt or slow climate change is highly uncongenial to the coal, oil, and gas lobbies. Everything is done to obstruct anything which threatens these interests. And in general, governments are complicit with or tolerant of big business.

Institutional power imbalance. The coercive power of governments worldwide makes protest difficult and often dangerous. Top-down wins nearly every time. And governments do not take kindly to the opposition. Such is the power of dominant groups that, however convincing their arguments and ideas, grassroots movements rarely have the effect they deserve. Political and commercial expediency will most times trump rational decision-making based on the current observable effects of global warming.

Speed and acceleration. A number of writers have drawn attention to “the acceleration of just about everything” (Gleick 1999; Honore 2010; McAlary 2017). Speed leaves “no time” for thinking (Doerr 2021). IWIN (I want it now) is the rule. And this compulsion for immediacy goes hand in hand with a 24/7 world, which never stops for breath (Crary 2013).

The Competitive Drive. The market-driven economy requires that there be competition. Unfortunately, it is cooperation that is now desperately needed.

Words and Deeds. Those in political and commercial authority tend to lull the public’s concerns with well-sounding pronouncements and reassurances. Often this is done intentionally to ensure that no action is taken. And even when statements are made with the best of intentions, they are rarely followed through with effective action.

Centralization. Power, influence, and commercial activity has become increasingly centralized, to the detriment of the local.

Mega world. Bigger has come to be accepted as better. And much of the world’s economy is now controlled by a few enormously powerful corporations (Schumacher 1993). Shopping is now dominated by the hypermarket and online providers such as Amazon and Walmart. These corporations now exert political control over democratically-elected governments (Naughton 2021). Agriculture has likewise become dominated by larger and larger units to the detriment of small, environmentally-friendly family farms. Fishing is now the domain of gigantic, factory trawlers which literally hoover up fishes indiscriminately and unsustainably.

Groupthink. Groupthink (Janis 1972) describes the tendency of groups to think they are invulnerable through a process of collective rationalization and unquestioned belief that they are right about everything. This discourages creative thinking and tends to suppress self-awareness and alternative views.

3.2 Individual human factors

These are some of the many traits which characterize individual behaviors:

Fear of change. Change is uncomfortable. Humans are creatures of habit. They will do almost anything to resist change (Gerver 2013). Charles Handy in his book *The Age of Unreason* (2002) suggests that a frog, placed in cold water that is slowly heated will not sense any danger so that it will allow itself to be cooked slowly to death. People's fear may well be justified where it is based on the possible loss of employment, massive disruption of lifestyles, loss of economic privileges, etc., but fear can and often is mobilized by authorities to control and manipulate subordinate groups. But without change, we shall all perish and our human culture with us, just like Handy's frogs.

Greed and egotism. IWAM (I want more) is now the call of the human animal. And the obsession with individual wants to the exclusion of those of others is epitomized by the 'selfie'. IAAM (It's all about ME) is the message purveyed by the selfie culture. And this is inexorably fuelled by consumerism and the media.

The cult of the individual. Society in the West, at least, has extolled the virtues of the talented individual over the value of community. This too stands in the way of the kind of cooperation we now so urgently need.

Insecurity. The ubiquity of social media in particular has been accompanied by feelings of insecurity. FOMO (Fear of missing out), FOS (Fear of Silence), and FOTH (Fear of thinking). These do not favor careful thinking about global issues.

Indifference. WC (Who Cares?). Or as Benjamin Zephaniah's poem has it, "What's it got to do wid me?" (Zephaniah 2013). Indifference equals inaction.

Leaving it to others. Indifference leads us to leave action to others. "The young/the old/the government/the UN [...] will do something, so I don't need to". So no one does anything.

Procrastination. This is the Scarlett O'Hara syndrome – "I'll think about that tomorrow". Human nature is inherently predisposed to inaction. Anything which looks as if it might require effort tends to be postponed.

The immediate trumps the important. There is a natural human tendency to deal with what seems to need urgent attention rather than with longer-term, more significant calls on our attention. This deflects attention from the existential threat

facing humanity. Ironically, the immediate has now become also the immediate, though not everyone has realized it yet.

Compartmentalized thinking. Human nature is very good at keeping things in separate compartments: work/leisure, home/elsewhere, friends/others, behavior/consequences, purchasing/waste, education/life, material wants/spiritual needs, art/science, nature/civilization. This comes in the way of seeing the world as an interconnected whole where actions at any point affect all the other points.

Ostrich panic. The magnitude of what confronts us when we seriously begin to consider the consequences of climate change is so hideous that our minds seize up with panic and we mimic the ostrich by blocking it out. We dare not think about the unthinkable. And yet we must!

4 How can we cope with these challenges?

These are undeniably serious challenges to any attempt to deal with the current global crisis. What possible difference can teachers make in the face of this nexus of challenges? The fact is, we have no alternative. It really is a matter of life or death – possibly for ourselves, certainly for our children and grandchildren, born and not yet born.

It is worth noting too that whereas we have limited control over the social/institutional factors, we have much greater potential control over the individual, and human factors. It may seem well-nigh impossible to change society, but it is quite possible, though even then not easy, to change our individual behaviors. So it is worth keeping the following in mind: “No one is too small to make a difference” (Greta Thunberg)¹² or “I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do” (Edward Everett Hale).¹³

And it is at this personal level that teachers can make the biggest difference – by inspiring their students, by informing them, and by offering activities that serve to implement change, raise awareness and keep hope alive. “To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing” (Raymond Williams).¹⁴ And

¹² <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/623668/no-one-is-too-small-to-make-a-difference-deluxe-edition-by-greta-thunberg/> (accessed 12 November 2021).

¹³ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/edward_everett_hale_393297 (accessed 12 November 2021).

¹⁴ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/raymond_williams_193973 (accessed 12 November 2021).

by offering their students a role model. “The best way to promote a good cause is to provide a good example” (Arne Naess).¹⁵

Further, there have been some attempts to present practical ways of avoiding the worst outcomes (Figueroes and Rivett-Carnac 2020; Gates 2021; Hawken 2018; Juniper 2007; Simms 2013). Moreover, even seemingly permanent, irremovable power structures are susceptible to subversion and change. The collapse of the British Raj was due in large part to the non-violent campaigns of Gandhi, the disintegration of the Soviet empire was successfully brought about by democratic challenges from within, the end of apartheid in South Africa was the result of large-scale protest over many years, as with the Civil Rights movement in the USA. All seemed like hopeless causes. But they show that governments can be successfully challenged. As Gladwell (2000: 11) pointed out, “[...] sometimes big changes follow from small events, and [...] sometimes these changes can happen very quickly”. It is suggested that if 3.5% of the population takes action, the rest will follow.¹⁶ And even media control by mega-corporations can be turned to advantage by using the communications structures they provide to spread counter-information through networked groups of activists.

Numerous stories exist of how language teachers surmount obstacles in the way of social change (e.g. Jacobs and Crookes 2022). One idea lies seeks to utilize “strength in numbers”, that is, working via organizations of language teachers at the international, national, and local levels. Internationally, and mentioned earlier in this article, are IATEFL and TESOL, which both have active subgroups involved in assisting teachers in bringing the environment and other global issues into language classrooms.

Service-learning (Sohn and Kim 2022) combines students participating in service to others at the same time that they are doing learning relevant to their courses. Doing journal writing about ecologically-based service projects offers an easy way to incorporate a language element in service-learning. Another idea would be for students to do service-learning by engaging in ecolinguistic analysis and then publicly sharing their research. For example, Jacobs and Dillon (2019) provided a sample study comparing advertisements for eco-friendly and eco-harming food products. The advertisements could be in the target language or in another one of students’ languages, with translation used to provide a way for students to enhance their target language proficiency. Along similar lines, another potential

¹⁵ <https://vdoc.pub/documents/the-ecology-of-wisdom-writings-by-arne-naess-420kr41dkhp0> (accessed 12 November 2021).

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190513-it-only-takes-35-of-people-to-change-the-world> (accessed 12 November 2021).

service-learning project could utilize the language learning materials used by students as fruitful soil for ecolinguistic analysis. For instance, Jacobs and Goatly's (2000) study of the environmental education content of ESL textbooks could serve as a model for students' analysis of their current textbooks or other learning materials. Going a step beyond analyzing current materials, students could recommend or create enhanced materials, which could be shared with students and teachers in other institutions and even other countries. Teachers could not only guide such service-learning projects; they could also be active participants.

Given the urgency and seriousness of the challenges faced by humanity, it is disappointing that there has been such a muted reaction from the language teaching community. When teacher activism is proposed, there is any number of objections and, as we have seen, human nature itself is resistant to change. We commonly hear objections such as "Our business is to teach English not to get involved in politics", "Nothing we do can make a difference", "Sponsors will complain", "There's no time for this", and "It is not in the curriculum". My answer to these objections is best expressed through a poem.

Teacher

Alan Maley

What do you do?

I'm a teacher.

What do you teach?

People.

What do you teach them?

English.

You mean grammar, verbs, nouns, pronunciation, conjugation, articles and particles, negatives and interrogatives ... ?

That too.

What do you mean, "that too"?

Well, I also try to teach them how to think and feel – show them inspiration, aspiration, cooperation, participation, consolation, innovation

... help them think about globalization, exploitation, confrontation, incarceration, discrimination, degradation, subjugation,

... how inequality brings poverty, how intolerance brings violence,

how need is denied by greed,

how -isms become prisons,

how thinking and feeling can bring about healing.

Well, I don't know about that. Maybe you should stick to language, and forget about anguish. You can't change the world.

But if I did that, I'd be a cheater, not a teacher.

Appendices: Information resources

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