


“I Think They Are Irresponsible”: Teaching Sustainability with (Counter)Narratives in the EFL Classroom

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“Going Green—Education for Sustainability,” a German-American blended learning project for the EFL and STEM classrooms, asks students to challenge commonly held stereotypes about how both cultures approach sustainable development. Since the pilot project (2014), over 3,000 secondary school students in Germany and the US have enrolled in a shared learning management system (Moodle), worked collaboratively both online and offline, developed green action plans and shared them with the school and wider community as part of a competition.

This article outlines the conceptual perspective of Going Green that includes the aspects of (a) teaching ‘publics,’ (b) countering expectations and misconceptions, (c) raising awareness of counter-narratives, and (d) expanding the knowledge base of the target culture (sustainable policies in the US). These components together facilitate learning objectives beyond interactional and communicative competencies by promoting learner agency and community-based actions. Attitudinal data drawn from the last two project cycles (2016–17, 2017–18) reflect a heterogeneous view of learners’ expectations and understandings regarding sustainable policies in the US and Germany. Finally, we investigate how narratives and counter-narratives of sustainable development on both sides of the Atlantic can be exploited in the technology-enhanced foreign language classroom in order to facilitate the aforementioned goals.

- 1 Narratives and counter-narratives play a critical role in cultural learning and can fundamentally shape how foreign language learners construct and make sense of cultural images. Perhaps one of the most instructive examples is the discourse on sustainable development, commonly understood as economic, social, and environmental development that meets the needs of the present without compromising opportunities of future generations. Climate change communication research has long acknowledged the impact of narrative structure, theoretical and ideological framing, and audience appropriateness to communicate effectively sustainability-related messages and inspire climate issue engagement (Roser-Renouf and Maybach). The approaches to sustainable development in Germany and the United States differ considerably, as do perceptions on both sides of the Atlantic. “Going Green—Education for Sustainability,” an intercultural blended learning project for the English as a foreign language (EFL) and content-and-language-integrated learning (CLIL) classrooms takes these transatlantic

(counter-) narratives on sustainable development as a stepping stone to address intercultural stereotypes and engage students in intercultural project work and community action.^[1] This article presents a survey of German students' perceptions of sustainability in the US, discusses the role of counter-narratives in critical foreign language pedagogy, and provides practical suggestions for classroom implementation.

- 2 While Germany, considered the birthplace of the Green Party, is receiving international attention for its efforts to implement the *Energiewende*, the transition to away from coal and nuclear energy to clean energy, the US is often perceived as a nation more interested in profit making at the expense of an environmental agenda. Thus, while the idea of sustainability has gained traction on both sides of the Atlantic, it has taken vastly different directions:

In the United States, on the one hand, the sustainable development trajectory has been full of ups and downs like a pendulum swinging back and forth with every change in executive power. In Germany, on the other hand, the policies based on the idea of sustainable development evolved accumulatively and the idea was slowly but surely institutionalized. As a result, Germany has a sustainable development policy regime, while the U.S. does not. (Rost 32)

Germans tend to look towards the federal government when it comes to setting an environmental agenda. It was Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's red-green coalition's initiative for the so-called *Energiewende* at the turn of the millennium and its confirmation by Chancellor Angela Merkel that inspired legislation to transform the country's energy supply, although its success has been a matter of debate. But in the United States, change does not usually originate with the federal government; instead, it comes from the local and state levels. Grassroots movements often drive change such as the Civil Rights, the Women's, or the Gun Control Movement. Legislation on the state level allows for change that would be much more difficult to achieve on the federal level, but it impacts legislative action in Washington DC. Once students understand this fundamental difference between the German and the US political system, they are open for a different kind of narrative. And this narrative goes something like this:

- 3 California Governor Jerry Brown signed legislation on September 10, 2018, setting the groundwork for a new, ambitious energy goal: getting 100 percent of the state's electricity from non-carbon sources like solar and wind by 2045. The fifth largest economy in the world, California—through its energy and emission policy—influences other US states, even countries, corporations, and businesses. Several US states mostly in the northwest and northeast have adopted this legislation so far. It's not just 'liberal' states that pursue an environmental agenda—which is surprising to many Germans. In June 2017, the *New York Times* announced under the headline, "In Trump Country, Renewable Energy Is Thriving":

The five states that get the largest percentage of their power from wind turbines—Iowa, Kansas, South Dakota, Oklahoma and North Dakota—all voted for Mr. Trump. So did Texas, which produces the most wind power in absolute terms. In fact, 69 percent of the wind power produced in the country comes from states that Mr. Trump carried in November. (Gillis and Popovich)

Though initiatives for sustainable development in these states are driven more by economic considerations rather than an openly stated belief in climate change, the result remains the same: Energy production and consumption in the United States are changing on a massive scale.

- 4 Many more counter-narratives challenging the strongly held perceptions of German students and the general public could be added here, but the point is: The United States of America is a very complex political and social system. Even the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement does not mean that climate action in the US has stalled—quite the opposite. State Department officials are still participating in climate conference negotiations since officially, “the process of withdrawal can only begin the day after the 2020 U.S. presidential elections” (Roberts).
- 5 To cut a long story short: Despite the US federal government's recent policy changes, environmental stewardship is alive and well on state and local levels. This is the focus of “Going Green – Education for Sustainability,” an intercultural blended-learning project for the EFL and CLIL classrooms located on teachaboutus.org, where a demo course can be accessed. The project goal is by no means simple: Besides teaching EFL as well as digital literacies, the task also involves countering a narrative based on limited knowledge, stereotypes, and misperceptions; raising awareness about the challenges the world faces; and initiating cooperation between American and German students to combat and manage climate change.
- 6 Subsequently, we first introduce the Going Green project along with its pedagogical rationale and a discussion of cultural learning in this setting. In so doing, we focus on the role of mainstream vs. counter-narratives of sustainable development in the US and pedagogical approaches to teaching them in the EFL classroom. In order to contextualize some of the potential challenges of such an approach, we report a questionnaire survey of previous project participants' perceptions and preconceptions of sustainable development in the US. The reported data illustrate that learners are often unaware of non-mainstream publics and the impact of the local and state government-levels to support sustainable development in the US. We close by discussing the role of such counter-narratives in the teaching of culture and how they are implemented in the Going Green curriculum.

Going Green – Education for Sustainability

The Concept Behind Going Green

- 7 An annual school project that was first implemented in 2014, Going Green has since attracted over 3,000 participants mostly in Germany and the US. Participants in both countries enroll in an online course on a Moodle-based learning management system (LMS), “Teach About US” and engage in project work throughout the school year. The annual project cycle ends with a student competition recognizing creative and innovative approaches to sustainable development through local action plans. A concluding student conference amplifies these actions by providing a national audience for the learners’ projects and allowing them to connect with other participants. Since 2014, participants have submitted over 70 action plans, which have been documented on the platform and serve as models to current and future participants.
- 8 In terms of foreign language pedagogy, the project builds on the three pillars of task-based language learning, computer-assisted language learning, and intercultural communicative competence. Content-based task cycles are the organizing unit of the project curriculum. In keeping with the principles of communicative language teaching, they are designed to emulate real-life topics and communicative practices that learners encounter outside their classrooms. They adopt a focus on communicative and non-communicative outcomes, and challenge learners both linguistically and otherwise to stretch their competencies beyond current levels to achieve learning goals (Nunan). Content-based and transdisciplinary language learning tasks and projects have been widely described as suitable for the joint learning about sustainable development and language in the research literature (Bartosch and Köpfer; Bogaert et al.; Bonnet; Hauschild, Poltavtchenko, Stoller).
- 9 The Going Green curriculum is made available digitally via the LMS Moodle, allowing for a flexible blended learning format to complement traditional (i.e., analog) classroom practice. The platform is a hybrid space that connects digital and face-to-face practices and provides opportunities for distributing materials and information. It allows for classroom management, and communication and collaboration within and beyond the traditional classroom boundaries, especially across the Atlantic with other project participants (Kaliampas).

Guiding Learners in a Digital Environment

- 10 While the LMS functions as the basis for exploring the Going Green curriculum, the actual engagement is not effortless and needs to be carefully guided. Educational research has demonstrated over the past fifteen years that the early hype around digital technologies in the classroom and the view on millennial learners as “digital natives” (Prensky) or the “net generation” (Oblinger and Oblinger) are misguided. Applied linguistic research adopting learner tracking in digital spaces (Chun; Fischer) and examining the role of learner training (Hubbard) has shown that many students have little experience in using pedagogic software, often take unstructured and erratic learning paths, and frequently overlook or misinterpret affordances of tools and applications.

Nevertheless, today's learners have mostly been socialized into digital technology use in virtually all parts of their lives and are motivated by technology integration in the classroom. They expect to use it in much the same way as they already apply digital practices to express their identity and routinely engage in multi-tasking and task-switching. They act as 'prosumers' of digital content using technology outside the classroom. Specifically, the various discursive practices on sustainable development are mediated by digital tools. When learners are expected to participate in these foreign language discourses themselves, they must develop the digital literacy skills needed as well as an awareness of concomitant genre structures.

- 12 For instance, social media users around the globe connect through hashtags like #greenliving or #zerowaste on platforms like Instagram to portray sustainable behavior and environmental stewardship, thereby foregrounding the transnational nature of questions, such as the reduction of plastic or the limitation of greenhouse gas emissions. Likewise, NGOs like the [Surfrider Foundation](#) as well as individual youth activists like [Greta Thunberg](#), initiator of the "[Fridays for Future](#)" student protests, or entrepreneur [Boyan Slat](#), who is working on a system to clean up plastic waste in the ocean, have gained worldwide recognition and directed attention to the issues they advocate through their viral online presence.

Tackling Environmental Challenges and Cultural Stereotypes as Global Citizens

- 13 The approach to cultural learning in Going Green can be framed within global citizenship education, which opens new avenues for content-driven language learning by foregrounding themes of global relevance, such as human rights issues or the degradation of the environment. These affect learners directly in their communities, regardless of national borders, political systems, or linguistic and sociocultural context. English is instrumental here as an international *lingua franca*—a communicative tool used by native and non-native speakers alike in technology-mediated communicative and collaborative settings to achieve shared outcomes.
- 14 Global education closes in on the many ways that learners' lives are interwoven with transnational challenges by way of personal lifestyle choices and everyday habits. Because the local and the global are intricately intertwined, global learning can involve a normative impetus and a moral imperative by emphasizing individual and collective agency as well as the shared responsibility for solving global challenges at the community level (Volkmann "Challenging the Paradigm"). This pragmatic orientation, which draws on the development and exercise of learner agency in multiple domains (linguistic, scientific, sociocultural, political, digital, and potentially other types of agency), is characteristic of global education. It fosters development in the areas of knowledge (about world countries and cultures as well as about global problems, their causes and solutions), skills (of critical thinking, cross-cultural communication, cooperative problem solving, conflict resolution, and the ability to see issues from multiple perspectives), attitudes (of global

awareness, cultural appreciation, respect for diversity, and empathy), and action (following the call to ‘think globally, act locally’) (Cates).

- 15 It follows that intercultural communication, understanding, and mediation as well as values of empathy, social equity, and environmental justice can be subsumed under this concept. Current scholarship in foreign language pedagogy emphasizes that modern societies are shaped by tendencies of globalization, digitalization, migration, and mobility. The notion of transculturality is core to this idea and refers to the inner differentiation, polyphony, cultural complexity, hybridity, external interconnectedness with other cultures (Freitag-Hild 167). At the level of the individual, such cultural dynamism, fragmentation, and hybridity is mirrored by multilayered and pluralistic self-concepts which, mediated by mobile and social media, offer multiple options for identification and deliberate identity development.
- 16 While intercultural approaches emphasize comprehension across cultural boundaries and the coordination of different cultural perspectives (Bredella), transcultural pedagogies examine the blurring of such categorical distinctions due to modern societies’ inner differentiation and external interconnectedness. This can be observed particularly well in cases of individuals’ multilayered identity constructions or the structure of modern subcultures and transnational movements that are not typically contained by national borders (Freitag-Hild).
- 17 Central to these pedagogies is the role of learners’ cultural stereotypes and preconceptions, which may be perpetuated and reinforced if left unaddressed. According to Lippmann’s seminal definition, education and stereotypes are closely linked: “We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And those preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception” (90). Stuart Hall has described stereotypes as exaggerated cultural representations that “take hold of the memorable characteristics, reduce them, exaggerate them, and simplify them without change or development to eternity. So stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes, and fixes differences” (qtd. in Rosenthal et al. xi). Foreign language research in Germany, for example, has investigated the role of stereotypes and national images in learner textbooks (Anton; Schulze), children’s and young adult literature (O’Sullivan), and popular culture (Rosenthal et al.). Anton has recently demonstrated that the majority of EFL textbooks published in Germany inadequately, if at all, incorporate a reflective dimension regarding stereotypes and images of self and other. This is problematic, given the consensus within the social sciences and (foreign language) pedagogy that cultural and national stereotypes as well as their cognitive functions are a form of tacit knowledge and should be made explicit, deconstructed, and critically reflected upon to avoid their fossilization and reinforcement (Adloff, Gerund, Kaldewey; O’Sullivan and Rösler 339; Thiele 27–28; Volkmann “Nature and Function of Stereotypes”).
- 18 As a consequence, stereotypes should be expected to play a significant role for intercultural learning within Going Green and must be rendered salient to become susceptible to critical reflection and deconstruction. Such an approach, we argue,

would entail determining what kinds of stereotypes exist among learners, what aspects of the target culture they address in which ways, and what cognitive, social, and political functions they serve. It seems plausible that, if such critical questions remain neglected, the ambitious goal of developing global citizenship skills in the context of environmental issues is jeopardized. This issue was addressed by Svea Burmester's introspective and observation-based study of two Going Green participant courses. From the perspective of political education and deliberation, she argues that the project curriculum must help raise learners' awareness of their cultural stereotypes so that the aforementioned global citizenship skills can be developed:

In the case of *Going Green*, its topic of environmental sustainability clearly represents a common good, thus suggesting a high deliberative potential, but the issue is also controversial due to prejudiced perceptions that Germans and Americans maintain towards each other regarding their respective attitudes to the environment. (Burmester 15)

The subsequent study on learner stereotypes and preconceptions examines these aspects in the context of Going Green. Before doing so, we briefly introduce the project curriculum.

Facts are Crucial, but not Enough

- 19 As the cursory discussion of the project's theoretical rationale shows, the goal of tackling cultural stereotypes and attitudes towards sustainability as well as facilitating learner agency is not merely a matter of knowledge transfer. Simply confronting learners with facts and supporting them in engaging with the topic cognitively, although an important first step, is not likely to bring about attitudinal or behavioral changes. Paralleling existing research on stereotypes and cultural learning (Byram; Cates), Ursula Heise describes three layers of ecocriticism that can be exploited for the teaching of sustainability in an intercultural context. Ecocriticism, she argues, involves the study of nature (which is characteristic of science), the scholarly analysis of its cultural representations (as prevalent in the humanities), and engagement in the political struggle for more sustainable ways of inhabiting the natural world. The latter foregrounds the role of sociopolitical participation, learner agency, and foreign language discourse competence. Focusing on transcultural EFL learning, Siepmann proposes a similar sequence of concept, discourse, and action phases to implement transcultural learning pedagogically. We draw on both models to outline the three project phases of Going Green (see figure 1).
- 20 In the first part, the "concept" phase, learners activate prior knowledge and deepen their theoretical concept knowledge by proposing, revising and extending working definitions of key sustainability concepts. This phase corresponds with the first dimension (i.e., the study of nature) in Heise's model. In Going Green, learners begin by filling out a questionnaire on attitudes and prior knowledge regarding sustainable development in the US and critically compare each other's responses.

Then, they contribute these definitions of foundational concepts (e.g., sustainability, the ecological footprint) to a shared glossary and update and extend these definitions in a peer editing process, supported by an examination of web-based resources, such as infographics, web-definitions, and explainer videos.

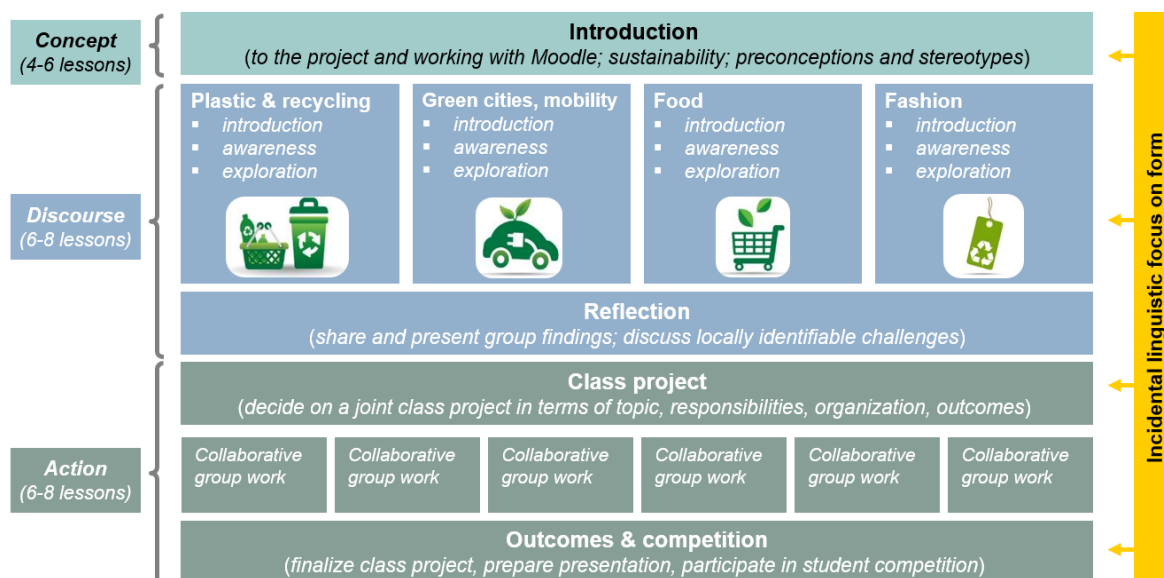


Figure 1: Overview of the Going Green curriculum.

- 21 Having laid this conceptual foundation, the learners then engage in the “discourse” phase, which directs their attention toward the cultural representations of four sustainability areas: recycling of plastic, urban development and mobility, local food, and slow fashion. Learners can select one of these four parallel modules and develop thematically grounded discursive competence by studying public discourse(s) and case studies related to their topic. For example, learners first engage in an awareness-raising activity, such as mapping their food or drawing their vision of a green city, from which they can deduce preliminary questions and hypotheses. They then explore a transnational issue linked to their topic in a research task, for example the Pacific trash vortex in the module “Plastic//Recycle.” The research task is further contextualized with local case studies focusing on one selected US community’s approach to combating the issue, such as the recent ban on single-use plastic bags in several communities in California. In order to transfer this knowledge to a new context—their own communities—and develop approaches for direct socio-political participation, learners finally complete a so-called “eco-challenge.” This is a research- and action-based task asking learners to become detectives of sustainability challenges in their schools or neighborhoods. For example, they may replicate an educational campaign by an NGO in their local context or conduct peer surveys or expert interviews on personal habits related to recycling. Alternatively, they may reach out to local businesses or legislators to inquire about local policies on plastic recycling or statistics on waste production.
- 22 This process introduces learners to authentic and real-life discourses around the selected module topic. Concepts, definitions, and terminology from the first phase function here as semiotic tools that guide learners’ understanding, analysis, and interpretation of these discourses. The case studies themselves model culturally

appropriate ways of discursive participation and citizen action and inspire the learners's green action plans in the final project phase. Although the German participants themselves live in a context where English, the target language, is not spoken as an official language, they nevertheless engage in meaningful learning by using German and potentially other languages to align the project with their own experiential background. English is used as a *lingua franca* to mediate their findings to peers in the project and, potentially, the web community.

- 23 Following this task-cycle, the final project phase asks learners to identify an environmental challenge within their own community. Ideally, this focus will directly emerge from the eco-challenges in the previous phase. Based on the "six steps of future problem solving" (Crabbe), learners identify an everyday issue and the underlying problem, develop and plan an appropriate action to mitigate it, carry out the plan, document the process and findings, and share the outcomes with the project community. In the process, they determine not only the resources needed to enact their plan, such as materials, technology, funding, permissions, and supporters; they also develop a communication strategy to create public momentum. The participants ultimately submit their findings to the annual student competition.

Determining What Students Bring to the Project: Stereotypes and Preconceptions

- 24 In order to assess our learners' pre-existing views about sustainable development on both sides of the Atlantic, we conducted a questionnaire survey investigating these research questions:
1. How do German learners in the Going Green project perceive and evaluate environmental sustainability in the US and Germany?
 2. What attitudes towards the environment and environmentalism do they think prevail in both national contexts?
 3. Which stereotypes do they express regarding their own cultural context?
 4. How do they frame their views argumentatively?

To this end, we analyzed learner responses to a reflective questionnaire task. The data were documented on the LMS as part of a classroom task and not for the primary purpose of scientific inquiry, which has direct implications for the evaluation of the data elicitation procedures and the participant sampling. Questionnaires have been employed in applied linguistic and pedagogic research as viable instruments to elicit attitudinal data about what learners think, their opinions, beliefs, values, and interests (Dörnyei and Taguchi). Open items can be especially insightful as they may provide unexpected and highly individual answers and, by allowing for self-expression, generate motivation among respondents (Mackey and Gass).

- 25 At the project's onset, the students completed the questionnaire task entitled "What are your attitudes towards sustainability?", which includes, for instance, closed and open-ended items on learner attitudes towards sustainability, cognitive

associations regarding sustainable development in both countries, and evaluations of hypothetical decisions (e.g., “Would you agree that it is ok to break the law in the name of the environment?”). They were informed that, upon submission, their answers would be published to all course participants to allow for a critical reflection on the outcomes either orally or in an online forum. For our analysis, we selected the first two open-ended items, which read: “Think of the US [item 1] / Germany [item 2] and its population’s attitudes toward the environment. Do you think there is a typical attitude? What words, ideas, or images come to your mind? Give some examples (at least three).”

- 26 The sampled dataset consists of all questionnaire responses by the 2016/17 and 2017/18 project cohorts in Germany; that is 22 courses overall, or eleven from each cohort (see table 1). While more participants engaged in this activity offline using the PDF-based version of the project curriculum, e.g. by filling out handouts and collecting and discussing results in their classroom. These responses are unavailable to the analysis. Class grades ranged from eight through 13 (2016/17 cohort) and ten through 13 (2017/18 cohort), respectively. 16 courses were taught at various German state-based school levels: the *Gymnasium*, five at vocational schools, and one at a comprehensive school (Kultusministerkonferenz).

	courses	questionnaires
2016-17	11	104
2017-18	11	123
total	22	227

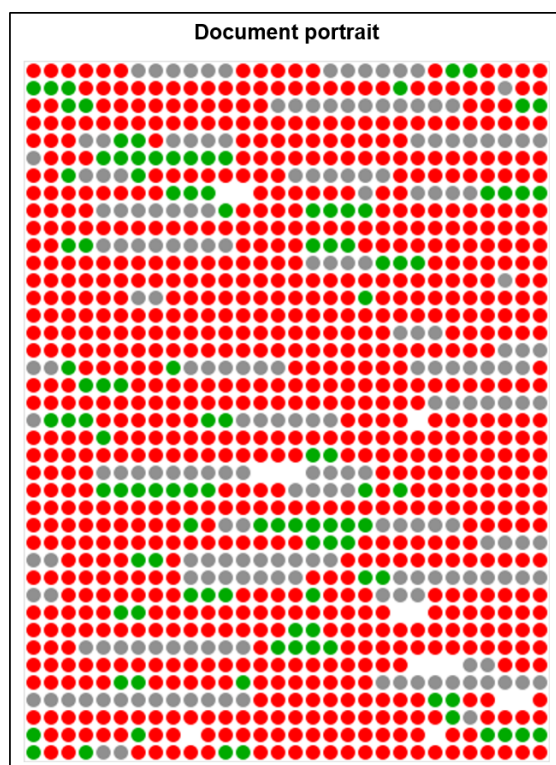
Table 1: Number of datasets included in the survey.

Two starkly different images of sustainability in Germany and the US

- 27 We performed qualitative content analysis (Mayring) using the MAXQDA12 software and categorized the responses as either positive, negative, or non-judgmental. These categories were further differentiated until a complex category system emerged and categorical saturation was reached. The result was a document portrait for each of the two questionnaire items, in which every code in the data was assigned a colored dot. Taken together, they create a map of the distribution of categories across the dataset (see figures 2a and b).
- 28 This quantitative analysis of learner responses reveals largely divergent perceptions of sustainable development in Germany and the US by the surveyed students. Regarding their views on the US (see figure 2a), the negative characterizations far outweigh the positive, with the majority of responses addressing unsustainable everyday practices, disregard for the overall problem of climate change, the negative impact of the economy, lack of political initiative, and the reliance on carbon-based energy sources. A starkly different image emerged

in relation to the students' own cultural context, Germany (see figure 2b). Here, positive characterizations of government effort and regulations for environmental sustainability as well as references to the renewable energy sector shape the learners' responses although, as we analyze below, more differentiated responses were not infrequent in the data.

Category	Frequency in the data
(+) POSITIVE ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES (USA)	68
natural beauty, national parks, wildlife and recreation	21
political activism	19
environmental awareness is increasing in the U.S.	15
technological innovation and renewable energy	8
praise for sustainable everyday practices	4
economy as a driver for sustainable development	1
(-) NEGATIVE ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES (USA)	537
unsustainable everyday practices	
mobility	62
littering and/or no recycling	48
nutrition	22
general	19
wasting energy	16
disregarding the problem	
indifference toward sustainability	84
climate change denial	38
U.S. as a self-centered nation	9
unethical or immoral approach to sustainability	9
U.S. economy affects the environment negatively	57
political inactivity / lack of political action	55
cont. dependence on carbon-based and nuclear energy	48
high population	11
negative consequences as a rationale for sustainability	9
agriculture creates negative environmental impact	7
U.S. sets a negative example for the world	1
(+/-) NON-JUDGMENTAL POSITION (USA)	42
U.S. a pluralist and/or split society	36
everyone should apply sustainable practices	6



Category	Frequency in the data
(+) POSITIVE ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES (GER)	439
laws and government action	
<i>Energiewende</i> / nuclear exit	40
recycling regulations	40
gov't support for sust. development (general)	33
mobility regulations	25
environmental treaties	7
wildlife protection laws	5
renewable energy	89
high(er) level of environmental awareness	78
praise for sustainable everyday practices	57
political activism	29
natural beauty, wildlife, and recreation	12
economy as a driver for sustainable development	12
technological advances and innovation	12
(-) NEGATIVE ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES (GER)	130
unsustainable everyday practices	46
Germans are not doing enough / could do more	25
awareness/practice gap	20
continued reliance on carbon-based energy	17
German economy affects sustainability negatively	14
<i>Energiewende</i> is too ambitious	4
Germany's impact on the world is too small	3
criticism on too much government interference	1
(+/-) NON-JUDGMENTAL POSITION (GER)	41
Ger. as a pluralist society with diverse perspectives	25
other	16

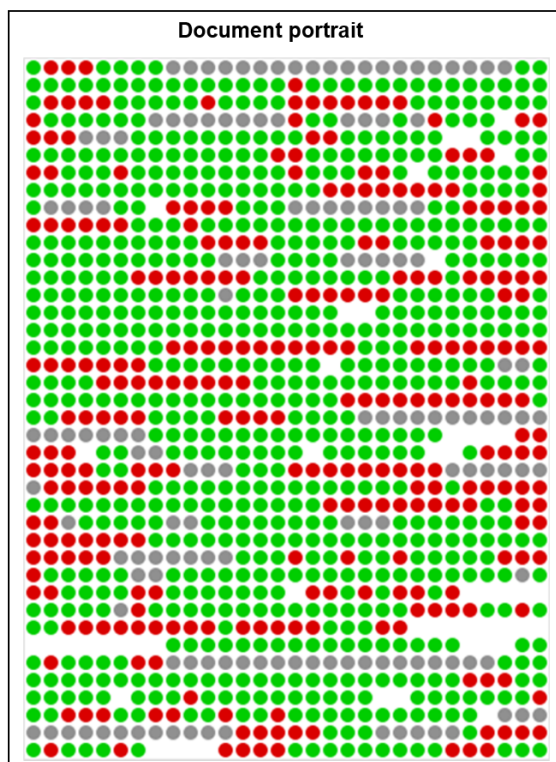


Figure 2a and b: German students' perceptions of sustainable development in (a) the U.S. and (b) Germany. Left are the categories and subcategories with their absolute frequency in the data. In the document portraits (right), created using

MAXQDA12, the colored dots proportionally represent the number and sequence of codes in the two data corpora (green = positive, red = negative, grey = non-judgmental).

Looking Under the Surface: Complex Structures of Cultural Stereotypes

- 29 A qualitative analysis of these overall results demonstrated that our participants's views were more complex and nuanced than both document portraits initially suggested. Corresponding with the four research questions stated above, we thus analyzed (a) how participants further qualify their answers generally, (b) what role they ascribe to the federal government in promoting or hampering sustainable development, (c) how they perceive extreme and fringe positions on sustainability, and (d) whether and to what extent learners express value judgments in their responses.

(a) Germany, the model student, and the US an underachiever? True on the surface, but students's views are more nuanced.

(Sub-) category	Examples
<i>non-judgmental position (US)</i>	(1) “I don’t think there is one single mindset in the US, the country is way to diverse for that. There may be two major mindsets, one being that the environment is being destroyed by our actions and we should try to preserve it, the other is that climate change has nothing to do with human behaviour and our actions thus don’t matter.” [100] (2) “There is, however, a strong divide between the democratic and republican voters (...)” [124]
<i>non-judgmental position (Germany)</i>	(3) “Germany has no typical attitude towards the environment as well. It’s not black, it’s not white ... it’s a nuance of grey. Climate Change is a polarized topic.” [17] (4) “Here in Berlin there’s a lot of trash on the streets and trash bins aren’t always used which shows that people in big cities don’t care much about their environment. It might be different for people in the countryside though where there is nearly no pollution. I think there’s no typical attitude all people in Germany share.” [210]
<i>Germans not doing enough / could do more</i>	(5) “But the scandal of VW or the fact that we buy nuclear power from France shows that these environmental awareness isn’t complete yet.” [104] (6) “It’s a shame we won’t reach our target to reduce our CO2 output since we are a rich industrial country which should be an example for the world.” [154]
<i>Awareness— practice gap (in Germany)</i>	(7) “Many at least pretend to be sustainable and as if they want to save the Environment, but many don’t really DO anything to Support saving the nature.” [2] (8) “We harm the environment but feel bad about it.” [157]

Table 2: Students’s nuanced evaluations of sustainable development in both Germany and the US (uncorrected)

The surveyed learners differentiated their views on sustainability in both countries in various ways (see table 2). Some students made non-judgmental or rather balanced remarks about sustainability in the US, by stressing the plurality of views within the US society (1) or by casting sustainability as a partisan issue (2). Likewise, learners made similar non-judgmental remarks about their own cultural context (3, 4) and that a distinction may rather be drawn between urban contexts and the countryside (4), thereby expressing an auto-stereotype (i.e., stereotypes about one’s own cultural context). They also criticized that Germans, despite the country’s ambitious sustainability policies, are not pursuing climate action more aggressively (5, 6). In the same vein, some answers criticized a perceived awareness-practice gap among Germans, one between political rhetoric and everyday citizens’ actual behavior (7, 8).

(b) Extreme and fringe positions are mentioned disproportionately often.

(Sub-) category	Examples
<i>disregard/indifference toward sustainability (in the US)</i>	(9) “Americans are downplaying the role of the individual in protecting the environment” [15] (10) “I heard in America there are people who polluting the environment on purpose because they want to protest against environmental protection.” [11]
<i>climate change denial (in the US)</i>	(11) “Denying climate change despite overwhelming scientific evidence is something that is dangerous to the environment, because it suggests that we can do what we want, because we don't have any influence.” [100] (12) “A lot of americans just don't believe in climate change” [204]
<i>cont. dependence on nuclear and carbon-based energy (in the US)</i>	(13) “especially in resource gathering, they use fracking to get as much oil as possible to refine and then wasting it on inefficient cars, which leads to extraordinary amounts of air pollution, and many don't seem bothered by this fact” [76] (14) “An extreme example of conservative politics in the US is the building of the Dakota Pipeline through nature and native reservats.” [106]
<i>unsustainable everyday practices/mobility (in the US)</i>	(15) “When I think of US and environment, the first thing that come to my mind is air pollution. It's let me think so because people convert Pickups to so called Coal Rollers. Their aim is to blow a lot of dirt and exhaust fumes in the air. So I think they don't have any responsibility towards environment and sustainability.” [89]

Table 3: Perception of fringe positions on sustainable development in the US by German students (uncorrected).

- 30 In evaluating sustainable development in the US, learners framed their perceptions politically and affectively very differently, using various examples from public discourse to illustrate their views. One frequent theme in the data is the perceived role of fringe positions among the US population and extreme examples of unsustainable development in the US (see table 3). For instance, several learners commented on a perceived indifference of US citizens toward the environment (9, 10). In this regard, learners also foregrounded the denial of climate change in US public discourse (11, 12). As one student noted, this frees individuals of their civic responsibility because they cannot themselves influence the issue (12).
- 31 Drawing comparisons with Germany, where the federal government has committed to phasing out nuclear energy by the year 2022, learners mentioned the United States' continued dependence on nuclear and carbon-based energy sources, again relying on controversial examples like the extraction of mineral oil and gas through “fracking” (13) or the building of the Dakota Access Pipeline (14) in spite of ecological, health, and tribal concerns and against civic protest. In commenting on unsustainable everyday practices, for instance regarding mobility, learners criticized the popularity of big vehicles with low gas mileage. One peculiar trope mentioned multiple times is that of so-called “coal-rollers,” converted pickup trucks that purposefully emit sooty exhaust fumes as a form of conspicuous air pollution (15). What can be inferred from these responses is that, arguably extreme, negative examples of sustainable development in the US context are grossly overrepresented and illustrate how extreme positions can reinforce cross-

cultural hetero-stereotypes (i.e., stereotypes about another cultural context or group than one's own).

(c) Students overemphasize the role of the federal government in the US

(Sub-) category	Examples
<i>political activism (in the US)</i>	(16) "On the other hand, the US has many agencies researching climate change, creating mountains of data supporting their claims." [100] (17) "(...) but also new ideas, progress and engagement of many organisations, companys, citizens etc. towards an sustainable and cleaner society (country of contrasts)" [173]
<i>political inactivity / lack of political action (in the US)</i>	(18) "Trump said that the global change is only a natural phenomena and don't take it seriously." [7] (19) "Politics really influences that, e.g. NASA recently got their budget for researching climate change (among other things) cut." [100] (20) "(...) most people tend to a more a ruthless treatment of the environment, due to the lax laws in the US." [144] (21) "Trump left the Paris Climate Agreement, and there are no concrete goals to reduce the impact on the environment." [187]

Table 4: The role attributed to federal policies and political activism in support of sustainable development (uncorrected).

- 32 Besides such extreme cultural exemplars of unsustainable development, students also referred to the role of the federal government and political activism in furthering the environmental agenda in the respective countries (see table 4). Political action, in this view, is a viable tool to promote environmentalism. Counter to the general trend in our data, political activism at different societal levels occasionally served as a key positive example for environmental protection in the US, including references to the Green Party, NGOs, or the role of Congress. Likewise, students mentioned government agencies like the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), or the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), whose research often forms the basis for environmental legislation (16). Learners also lauded the collaborative efforts by different stakeholders such as NGOs, private businesses, and individual citizens (17). Finally, much attention was given to the current administration's rhetoric and the perceived lack of political action in favor of the environment, personified by the current President (18–21).
- 33 In evaluating the US approach to sustainable development, Germans tend to look through their "Kyoto glasses," posits Crister Garrett, meaning that people make political judgments based on their own socialization and understanding of how government politics (supposedly) work. Research in the social sciences emphasizes that stereotypes and cross-cultural perceptions are contingent on socialization processes in one's own cultural context. Characterizations of the other thus inadvertently imply self-characterizations and can sometimes tell us more about those who express stereotypes than about the stereotyped (Thiele).

Also, socio-psychological research has found that an analysis of political factors carries great explanatory value for the development of national stereotypes in adolescents (Bierhoff and Rohmann 305).

(d) Some learners adopt a moralizing perspective on sustainability

(Sub-) category	Examples
<i>unethical or immoral approach to sustainability (in the US)</i>	(22) “environmental-sinner and climate change critics” [59]
	(23) “I think the attitude of the americans is very wrong, especially in resource gathering, they use fracking to get as much oil as possible to refine and then wasting it on inefficient cars, which leads to extraordinary amounts of air pollution, and many don’t seem bothered by this fact.” [76]
	(24) “I think they are irresponsible. Because if i do think about the U.S i think about much of like every thing with that i mean too much plastik and to much Food [...]” [86]
<i>US as a self-centered nation</i>	(25) “America first, no matter what problems are around” [56]
	(26) “The US has a to large Ecological Footprint per Capita. The US are demanding four times the resources and wastes that our planet can regenerate and absorb in the atmosphere” [226]
<i>awareness – practice gap (in Germany)</i>	(27) “The Germans are very arrogant about their "greenness". In my opinion if you look at how politics have dealt with ecological problems so far then there is only one word I can think of: hipocrisy.” [124]
	(28) “political double moral = anti nuclear power meanwhile supporting questionable projects and countrys in the hope of economical progress and advantages” [173]

Table 5: Expression of moral-ethical judgments on sustainable development in the US

34 Furthermore, the argumentative structure of the learners’ views (see table 5) merits closer examination. As mentioned above, some learners identified an awareness-practice gap in terms of sustainable development in their own country (27, 28), leading them to characterize this discourse in Germany as arrogant or hypocritical. Another subset of learner responses condemned the US approach to sustainability as immoral or unethical, calling the country an “environmental-sinner” (22) and the population’s attitudes “very wrong” (23) due to a lifestyle perceived as overly wasteful and therefore irresponsible (24). A related set of answers foregrounded the perception of the US as a self-centered nation that ignores its global political, economic, and environmental impact (25, 26).

35 These perceptions align surprisingly well with what Stephen Brooks calls the three “I’s” of an isolationist characterization of the United States: ignorance, insularity, and indifference (cf. ch. 1). Factual or not, these motifs have reemerged in recent political rhetoric within the US and continue to influence how people outside the US perceive the country and its population. Stereotype research supports this observation by showing that with no or limited knowledge about the characterized group available, hetero-stereotypes tend to be more negative and less complex,

serving functions of exclusion, marginalization, scapegoating, and self-affirmation (Thiele 25).

Turning Irritation into Learning through Counter-Narratives

- 36 These insightful, yet somewhat sobering findings beg the question how to respond pedagogically—and here we return to the discussion of cultural learning in the EFL classroom.

The classroom as a space for cultural negotiations of otherness

- 37 First, the approaches of inter- and transcultural language learning, as well as global education, make a compelling argument for the language classroom as an ideal location to address the surveyed students' cultural views. Michael Byram (65) argued early that the role of the classroom is not simply to prepare learners for potential experiences in the real world. Engagement in intercultural exchanges with otherness is a simultaneous process both inside and outside the classroom. Similarly, and extending this idea further to emphasize students' agency, Hallet (39) conceptualizes the classroom as a discursive space of cultural encounters where learners, understood as cultural agents in their own right, engage in the discursive reception, production, and negotiation of cultural meaning in response to cultural texts and stimuli.
- 38 Within this space, foreign language learners in general, and participants in the Going Green project in particular, routinely encounter three dimensions of otherness (Bracker 107–11). At the level of topics and contents, they are confronted with mainstream and counter-narratives of sustainable development in a foreign cultural and national context, the US, specifically in the civic and political sectors. At the discursive-linguistic level, these narratives are coded twice—in the target language and in the technical language of politics and science, which both can be markedly different from the learners's everyday language. At the level of classroom interaction, learners exchange and negotiate meanings, divergent understandings, attitudes, opinions, experiences, and knowledge with their peers, as the survey results demonstrate. As we mentioned above, intercultural approaches to language education seek to transcend this dualism of other and self by engaging learners in processes of coordinating and traversing insider and outsider perspectives.
- 39 Regarding the first level, topic and contents, the focus on sustainable development in the US opens a complex interplay of more or less dominant narratives that can result in different images of US culture in the classroom. We can imagine these narratives as different "publics" (Warner), which are open and constituted by virtue of people being addressed and participating in a (public) discourse, however loosely framed this may be. Our learners are only part of a limited number of publics, namely those that they are aware of and that they deliberately pay attention to. Pedagogy must extend this perception by pointing towards less salient, non-mainstream discourses—marginalized publics or those that learners

find difficult to access because they are not attuned to them. Publics can be intersectional and permeate local or national boundaries, a key feature of transculturality. Discourses like those on citizen climate action, leading a zero-waste lifestyle, home gardening, or critical mass cycling activism, among others, all transcend national borders.

Local Case Studies as Intercultural Rich Points

- 40 And yet, the transgression of cultural boundaries seldom happens without friction and irritation. Cultural anthropologist Michael Agar spoke of “intercultural rich points” to frame moments of incomprehension between different cultural agents, “those surprises, those departures from an outsider’s expectations that signal a difference between [cultures] and give direction to subsequent learning” (2). Rich points represent boundaries between cultures where an idea or behavior tacitly taps into opaque cultural meanings in such a way that representatives of another culture are unable to fully understand them. We can exploit this concept in the classroom by countering common learner expectations with narratives that disrupt their cultural expectations by, for example, introducing them to non-mainstream publics and their concomitant discourses.
- 41 Described as “seismograph of comprehension” (Combe and Gebhard 10), irritation can become a springboard for learning by initiating reflective processes and prompting critical comprehension questions of construction and reconstruction, and thus prove learners’ existing vocabulary and explanatory frameworks as insufficient to make sense of new phenomena. Such irritation in EFL directs attention to the process of comprehension rather than its outcomes and has the power to focus intercultural discourse on learners’ own identities and perceptions of what is, and what is not, considered ‘normal’ (Tödter 140). We can deduce from the above learner survey that case studies foregrounding the local government level as well as non-mainstream and marginalized discourses on sustainability offer a promising potential to serve as counter-narratives and engage learners in cross-cultural shifts of perspective, a hallmark of intercultural learning. Going Green addresses these counter-narratives directly in the self-study modules on plastic recycling, green cities, fashion, and food (i.e., the “discourse” phase of the project).
- 42 The study module on plastics, for instance, introduces marine plastic pollution and the [Great Pacific Garbage Patch](#) and connects this issue to an exploration of the initiative by communities like Los Angeles, along with NGOs like [Heal the Bay](#) and the [Surfrider Foundation](#), in promoting a statewide ban on single-use plastic bags. In the module on food, the issue of factory farming and genetically modified foods (GMOs) provides the backdrop to the case of Chipotle Mexican Grill, whose online marketing campaign supposedly marries the business model of a fast food chain with the ambition to offer locally grown, fresh, and non-GMO meals for competitive prices. Likewise, the module on fashion problematizes the trends of ‘fast’ and ‘toxic’ fashion as one factor causing desperate working conditions for garment workers in developing countries, which became tragically evident in the incident of

the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where over 1,000 people, mostly women workers and children, lost their lives. Learners are prompted to analyze varying reactions to the incident in the US, including decisions by some of the largest fashion producers to relocate their production from Bangladesh. Adopting a historic perspective, the module further parallels the current situation of these garment workers to the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in Manhattan, an incident that led to positive developments in terms of workers' rights, workplace safety, fire codes, and immigrant issues in the US. It thus models potentially productive reactions to such disasters going forward. Finally, in the context of "green cities," learners explore two very different but insightful cases: Portland, Oregon, and the German city of Essen—two cities lauded as positive models of sustainable urban development—and their approaches to achieve a more livable and sustainable future for their citizens through policies and incentives addressing mobility, energy, and housing. Adhering to the notion of the classroom as a site of cultural negotiation and the need to scaffold learners in developing and practicing agency (Mercer) by participating in real-life discourses on sustainable development, these case studies become springboards for exploratory and research-based action in the learners' own communities in the subsequent "eco-challenges."

- 43 Lastly, these examples demonstrate that the discussed counter-narratives, more often than not, unfold in digitally mediated discourses, precisely because they are not always covered in traditional mass media but instead emerge from the bottom up. Accordingly, participation in these discourses is most effectively achieved digitally, though this requires learners to develop an awareness of online genre conventions and agency to engage in these, often informal, discourse arenas (Reinhardt; Vandergriff). Social media and Web 2.0 platforms capture the topicality and immediacy of these narratives unlike most traditional pedagogic media, including the student textbook. Since new textbook editions are produced every five to seven years, they do not capture current events and transcultural developments the same way that web-based media can. Likewise, Chappelle warns that, "[m]aterials developers should investigate the cultural narratives that are relevant to the people whose language they are teaching" (225). This is a crucial goal when teaching cultural issues, and one that is increasingly difficult to achieve without a versatile integration of web-based resources and modes of communication and collaboration.
- 44 In sum, *Going Green* attempts to narrow this gap through both its integration of global citizenship education and cultural learning and the use of digital technologies and online discourses. Our questionnaire study of the learners' preconceptions regarding sustainable development in the US has shown that, although their views are not undifferentiated, many participants appear to overemphasize the role of extreme and fringe positions in the US sustainability discourse, overstate the role of the US federal government in setting the environmental agenda, and apply moralizing frameworks in cross-cultural comparisons. These findings, together with scholarship in the social sciences and foreign language pedagogy, highlight the importance of non-mainstream and

counter-narratives for tackling cultural stereotypes. Likewise, they emphasize the pivotal role of teachers as well as teacher education and in-service teacher training in supporting and guiding the classroom implementation of appropriate teaching and learning practices. This affirms the findings of Burmester’s analysis of the development of cultural, social, and political stereotypes in two Going Green courses, which concluded that,

Going Green has begun to correct some misperceptions about American environmentalism and has also fostered the students’ consciousness for this issue and their own responsibility, in doing so addressing a common good and thereby possibly even shaping a ‘new’ narrative of transatlantic meaning. (Burmester 205–06, emphasis in the original)

- 45 The effectiveness of such an approach can be inferred from the learners’ discourses and texts documented in *Going Green* and the various realizations of learner agency and community-based action in the project participants’ action plans. A discussion of these results, however, lies beyond the scope of this article. An analysis of such learner texts with a particular focus on the modification of intercultural perceptions and the development of intercultural attitudes and skills, complemented with introspective participant interviews and reflective writing would further illuminate these aspects. Finally, an investigation of the modes of sociocultural participation in the context of the learners’ action plans with the aim of developing a conceptual and pedagogic model of foreign language learner agency represents a necessary and promising continuation of this research.

Notes

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