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BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Zapojení témat environmentální výchovy do výuky anglického jazyka za
účelem zlepšení komunikačních dovedností žáků
Integrating Environmental Education Topics into the EFL Class to Improve
Students' Communication Skills
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Odevzdáním této bakalářské práce na téma *Zapojení témat environmentální výchovy do výuky anglického jazyka za účelem zlepšení komunikačních dovedností žáků* potvrzuji, že jsem ji vypracovala pod vedením vedoucího práce samostatně za použití v práci uvedených pramenů a literatury. Dále potvrzuji, že tato práce nebyla využita k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

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ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá integrací témat environmentální výchovy do hodin anglického jazyka s cílem zlepšit komunikační dovednosti žáků. Teoretická část práce se věnuje metodám výuky, které umožňují do hodin anglického jazyka přizvat obsah z neязыkového předmětu, představit relevantní témata a vytvořit tak autentické prostředí pro rozvíjení jazykových dovedností. Kromě analýzy obsahu a hlavních cílů environmentální výchovy jako jednoho z průřezových témat se tato část zaměřuje i na definici komunikačních dovedností, které jsou považovány za klíčovou součástí tzv. měkkých dovedností. Následně práce zkoumá jejich možný rozvoj skrz podněcování diskuze o environmentálních tématech. Praktická část spočívá v plánování jednotlivých hodin, jejichž obsah se odvíjí od témat environmentální výchovy a klade důraz především na komunikační aktivity. Lekce byly následně aplikovány na ZŠ Drtinova a reflektovány pomocí Korthagenova modelu ALACT. Tato část také obsahuje doporučení pro obdobné vyučovací hodiny, které vychází z osobních zkušeností získaných v rámci implementace navržených učebních plánů. Výsledně práce konstatuje, že učitelé anglického jazyka mají jedinečnou příležitost poukazovat na environmentální problematiku a současně rozvíjet komunikační schopnosti svých studentů.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

výuka anglického jazyka, vyučovací metody, komunikační dovednosti, průřezová témata, environmentální výchova

ABSTRACT

This bachelor thesis aims to explore ways in which environmental topics might be integrated into the ESL classroom to improve students' communication skills. The theoretical part is concerned with teaching methods that combine content and language instruction, introduce relevant topics and create an authentic environment for language learning. It further analyses the content and main objectives of Environmental Education as a cross-curricular subject and identifies communication skills as an essential element of soft skills. The thesis examines their possible development through engaging students in discussions about environmental issues. The practical part consists of planning individual lessons whose content derives from topics of Environmental Education and emphasis is placed on communication activities. The lessons were thereafter implemented in an Elementary School ZŠ Drtinova and reflected on using Korthagen's ALACT model. Based on the teaching experience, the practical part contains recommendations for similar lessons. The thesis suggests that English language teachers are in a unique position to promote environmental awareness and improve students' language skills simultaneously.

KEYWORDS

English language teaching, teaching methods, communication skills, cross-curricular subjects, environmental education

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Introduction

In the 21st century, it is becoming increasingly important for individuals to be environmentally aware. There is clear-cut evidence that the environmental issues we are facing today have a significant impact on the quality of our lives and the condition of our planet. To raise the awareness and prevent further damage, children should be educated from an early age to gain an inherent sense of respect for nature and protect the Earth. As a part of the school curriculum, Environmental Education has the potential to encourage a change in human lifestyle towards a more sustainable development.

Nowadays, the concept of holistic education is preferred and by gradually interconnecting the curriculum contents of individual subjects, learners will be able to comprehend the world in a broader context. Environmental Education as a multi-disciplinary field penetrates all educational areas of the current school system and its topics might be integrated into a wide range of subjects, including English as a Second Language (ESL). Language teachers can make a difference by raising learners' interest in contemporary global issues and simultaneously promote meaningful language learning. Topics of Environmental Education, which have attracted considerable interest in the last few years, could bring real-world issues into the English classroom and heighten students' motivation to participate in discussions, thereby creating a stimulating context to practise their communication skills.

The aim of this thesis is to examine how environmental topics might be incorporated into English lessons to improve students' communication skills. The theoretical part analyses teaching methods that combine content and language instruction to provide an authentic environment for foreign language use. The thesis proposes that the subject matters of English lessons might derive from topics of Environmental Education as a cross-curricular subject. It further discusses the importance of communication skills as a key aspect of soft skills and the possibility of enhancing their development in the context of the ESL classroom. In the practical part, individual lessons based on environmental topics will be designed and implemented in an Elementary School. In the process of reflection, motivation and performance of students will be considered to evaluate their suitability. On the basis of these findings, recommendations for similar lessons will be outlined.

1 Theoretical part

1.1 Creating an authentic learning environment in the EFL classroom

The constantly evolving modern world has become very demanding, requiring individuals to adapt and live in diverse environments. Language allows us to interact with people from all around the world, become more involved and actively participate in the global society. Learnt and spoken internationally, English is the current lingua franca which enables people from diverse backgrounds and cultures to communicate effectively. In the previous decades, the area of language teaching has been subject to many innovations, as educators are increasingly meeting the challenge of incorporating complex topics and tasks into their classrooms to equip children for the modern world.

One of the main goals of foreign language acquisition is the ability to use the target language outside the classroom context. When students can make connections and applications to their lives, interaction becomes more relevant. Since meaningful communication is central to learning a language, the key focus of language instruction should be to use it for interpreting and expressing real-life messages. The more teachers expose students to authentic and relevant language learning environment, the easier and more natural it will be for them to use English in their daily life. Therefore, it is vital for English teachers to provide an authentic environment for the development of learners' language skills necessary for their successful integration into our globalized world.

Recent education reform efforts advocate a shift from the traditional teacher-centred approach towards a more progressive, student-centred and constructivist classroom. In contrast to students' role of passive recipients in the traditional teaching methods, authentic instruction involves a constructivist approach in which learning becomes an active process. Through engaging in self-directed inquiry, problem solving and critical thinking, pupils construct their own knowledge instead of passively receiving a collection of facts transmitted to them from the teacher. As a result, language learning is not based on rote memorization, but on a personal experience and practical application of information. This way, learners discover new language through active exploration of content matter and interaction with their teachers and peers. Student-based approach is aimed at narrowing the traditional gap

between teacher and student. Learners gain responsibility for the learning path and are treated as individual thinkers capable of performing challenging tasks.

EFL teachers should emphasize the communicative nature of an interactive learning environment and present activities that are pertinent and interesting to the learners. Stimulating learning environment is characterized by divergent questioning techniques, authentic problem solving tasks and learners' sharing of thoughts. By gaining experiences in expressing themselves, students will not only accomplish the communicative function, but also gain confidence in using English as their second language. Authentic conversation is centred around matters of academic or general interest to the learners, providing a purposeful context for practicing and mastering the communicative functions of language. If meaningful content is absent, language can be learned only as an abstraction devoid of conceptual or communicative substance (Genesee 3).

It has been proven that when the content of learning mirrors real-life circumstances and provides students with practical skills applicable to their lives outside of school, they are more motivated to engage in the learning process and better prepared for their career and adulthood. If pupils recognize the value of what they are studying, they are more likely to remember it for the future. Moreover, meaningful learning allows learners to organize information logically and facilitates the retention of knowledge (Hung 98).

It is fundamental to note that language teachers can take an active social role by introducing a range of topical issues as central themes of the ESL lessons. They can also "incorporate themes from students' day-to-day lives to enable them to think about their situation and explore possibilities for change" (Akbari 278).

In the following section, I will introduce several methods that integrate language instruction and content, make use of real-life situations and provide opportunities to actively practice language in relevant contexts.

1.1.1 CLIL

The term Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) was coined in 1994 by David Marsh from the University of Jyväskylä, Finland and refers to a “dual focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language” (Marsh et al. 1). CLIL involves any activity in which both language and subject have a joint role and so the implementation of CLIL provides substantial opportunities to build language competence and strengthen subject learning. This can be done in two ways - either an English language teacher includes cross-curricular content in a language class or subject teachers use English as the language of instruction. There are two kinds of CLIL - hard and soft. The term hard CLIL is used when a subject is taught in a foreign language with content objectives at the front. Soft CLIL, on the contrary, involves teaching content with predominantly linguistic objectives.

There are four specific dimensions that form the Conceptual Framework of CLIL (Coyle 551):

- **content** - providing learning contexts which are relevant to the needs and interests of learners and integrating language into the broader curriculum
- **cognition** - developing thinking skills by exploring new theories and concepts, solving problems and reflecting on learning
- **communication** - opportunity to use the target language to convey students' thoughts, attitudes, opinions and engage in meaningful interaction with others
- **culture** - strengthening intercultural understanding and promoting global citizenship

Thus, the 4Cs Framework holds that the effectiveness of CLIL depends on a combination of multiple factors: progression in knowledge, skills and understanding of the subject matter, engagement in associated cognitive processing, interaction in a communicative context, development of appropriate language skills and acquirement of a deepening intercultural awareness through the positioning of self and ‘otherness’ (Coyle 550). The 4Cs Framework might be used as a tool for designing CLIL activities to maximize their potential.

The main advantages of CLIL are as follows:

- Students are highly motivated during the lessons as the learning process is based on real-life situations.
- Language learning is at the centre of curriculum.
- Linguistic competence and cognitive flexibility develop simultaneously.
- CLIL introduces a wider cultural content and promotes multilingual interests and attitudes.

CLIL allows students to cultivate their competences and soft skills in a natural environment, since the learning process is directly linked to realistic situations. Environment of that kind provides an opportunity to nurture language, communication and cognitive skills. Moreover, it encourages creativity, provides conditions for personal growth, development of social-civic competence and raises cultural awareness. CLIL has become a feature of European education in numerous schools and appears as a substantial innovation aimed at achieving increased language competence, in-depth subject matter knowledge and empowering participants of the learning process with a multitude of learning skills.

1.1.2 Content-based instruction

CLIL resembles another well-known approach in the field of language education - Content-based instruction (CBI). This method also belongs to the group of proficiency-based approaches to language education which combines content and language learning, and is defined as “the teaching of content or information in the language being learned with little or no direct or explicit effort to teach the language itself separately from the content being taught” (Krankhe 65). More specific definitions describe CBI as an approach which “views the target language largely as the vehicle through which subject matter content is learned rather than as the immediate object of study” (Brinton et al. 5). Hence, students are exposed to authentic input in a foreign language on a regular basis, acquiring new meaningful knowledge related to specific subject areas and improving their language skills at the same time. Met suggests that “content in content-based programs represents material that is cognitively engaging and demanding for the learner, and is material that extends beyond the target language or target culture” (150) and Genesee proposes that content “need not be

academic; it can include any topic, theme, or non-language issue of interest or importance to the learners” (3).

Depending on the skills being taught, CBI can be implemented in multiple ways as it implies not only traditional teaching methods such as grammar-based instruction or vocabulary development, but also contemporary approaches, for example communicative language teaching or other humanistic methods. CBI approach places emphasis on the use of essential language skills because students are expected to interpret authentic reading materials, analyse information and react to them either orally or in writing. Stoller lists eight practices that allow for natural and effective content integration into the foreign language classroom:

- extended input, meaningful output, and feedback on language and grasp of content
- information gathering, processing, and reporting
- integrated skills (using reading, writing, speaking and listening in natural classroom activities)
- task-based activities and project work, enhanced by cooperative learning principles
- strategy training (to produce more meta-cognitively aware strategic learners)
- visual support (images, graphic organizers, language ladders etc.)
- contextualized grammar instruction
- culminating synthesis activities (knowledge displayed in writing and orally)

CBI has been proven to be an effective approach to teaching English as a second language because when this approach is applied, students strengthen their language skills as well as gather knowledge about new concepts through meaningful content. Moreover, language acquisition is more successful since the information presented to students are seen as useful and lead to a desired goal. CBI builds on previous experience of the learners and addresses their needs.

Devon argues that CBI and CLIL share identical properties, but there are certain differences in terms of their origin, aims and links to specific educational contexts. Whereas CBI programmes originated in the United States and Canada in a context of education with English as the majority language, CLIL programmes emerged in Europe as a part of the

bilingual education programmes. Moreover, Devon states that “CBI deflects the focus of the lessons away from the language and puts it on the content itself,” whereas CLIL is, in most cases, dual-focused (15-16). Nevertheless, both methods strive for communicative competence in a foreign language through exploration of meaningful content.

1.1.3 Task-based Language Teaching

Task- Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is an approach which requires students to use authentic language while they are actively engaged in the process of achieving a goal or completing a task. To plan and deliver instruction, communicative and interactive tasks are used to facilitate learning and teaching activities.

Although the definitions of the term ‘task’ might vary to a certain degree, Ellis states that it stands for an activity which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language. The intention is mainly to convey meaning rather than manipulating form to achieve a communicative or non-linguistic outcome (243). Moreover, Ellis states that the TBLT framework consists of three main stages:

- 1. Pre-task** - teacher helps learners define the topic area, recall and activate vocabulary connected to the topic, provides a model for the completion of the task and gives instructions.
- 2. During task** - learners perform a task while the teacher observes and encourages them from a slight distance
- 3. Post-task** - learners report how the task was completed, present the outcomes focus on the forms of activities and might repeat the task

Such tasks are thought to provide an effective basis for language learning since they involve meaningful communication, negotiation and enable learners to acquire language competencies as a result of engaging in authentic language use. TBLT gives the learner freedom and autonomy and modifies the teacher’s role to that of a helper.

TBLT seeks to develop students’ language proficiency by challenging them to use language to solve and complete a task. Students prepare for the task, report back after it is completed and then study the language that arises naturally out of the task cycle and its accompanying materials. For example, grammar use emerges from authentic situations when

engaging in interactive task and so the communication is at the core of the process. The focus of TBLT is mainly on fluency, since it concentrates first on performing a task and only afterwards on the linguistic elements present throughout the performance. The TBLT approach to syllabus design is based on a holistic view of language - instead of dividing up the language by grammar structure or lexical topic, it involves a holistic use of language performed during communicative functions (Long 346).

1.1.4 Project-based learning

Project-based learning (PBL) entails a dynamic, student-centred classroom approach in which students obtain a deeper knowledge through active exploration of real-world challenges and problems. As opposed to rote learning or traditional teacher-led instruction, PBL puts emphasis on active, inquiry-based learning by investigating diverse problems and scenarios, working with and using their own ideas. For an extended period of time, students have to examine and respond to a complex problem and apply problem-solving, decision making or investigative activities that culminate in the completion of a project, realistic products or presentations. One of the key concepts of PBL is learning by doing and so this approach exposes students' ability to apply skills from multiple academic domains in a new context.

According to Larsson, students are known to develop greater communicative, thinking and problem-solving skills when engaged in PBL (2). Haines claims that PBL can be used with a variety of groups of different ages, abilities or language proficiency levels. Furthermore, he points out that this student-centred approach to learning supports cooperative rather than competitive atmosphere, which increases the probability of students' success.

PBL is an overall approach to the design of learning environments which have five key features (Krajcik et al. 318):

1. At the beginning, there is a driving question - a problem to be solved.
2. Students explore the driving question, learn and apply their ideas when participating in an authentic inquiry in which problem solving is essential.

3. Students, teachers and community members participate in collaborative activities to find solutions to the driving question.
4. While engaged in the inquiry process, students are scaffolded with learning technologies that help them participate in activities normally beyond their ability.
5. Students create tangible outcomes that address the driving question. These are shared artefacts and external representations of the learning outcomes.

The aim of PBL method is to engage students in the exchange of information, opinions and ideas in both written and oral form. Moreover, it allows students to explore ideas, collect and analyse data, and reflect on their meaning within an action research framework. Students are encouraged to propose hypotheses, provide an explanation, discuss and challenge ideas of others. Fuelled by natural interests and curiosities, students learn how to apply knowledge to solve real-world challenges.

However, there is generally a united agreement that PBL should not be considered a replacement for other teaching methods, but rather a complementary one. Nevertheless, its advantage over traditional methods is that it significantly improves the communicative skills of students and positively affects the general ability of problem-solving. Rather than being passive receivers of knowledge, students acquire it actively, which serves as a motivation to learn.

1.1.5 Summary of content-focused and interactive teaching methods

Teaching and learning a foreign language via an authentic subject matter is a practice that has a long history. However, it is only in the previous few decades that empirical studies have been carried out and provided sufficient evidence of its effectivity. It is widely believed that foreign language development is most successful when students acquire and apply the language in a meaningful context.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is an educational approach which involves content-based subjects to be taught through the medium of a foreign language. Its benefit for the learners is that they can gain new knowledge about subject content while being in contact with, using and improving their L2 concurrently. **Content-based Instruction (CBI)** provides learners with necessary conditions for foreign language

acquisition by exposing them to meaningful language use and considers their interests and needs. In the process of mastering academic subject matter and discourse patterns, it focuses on accurate usage of language. **Task-based Learning (TBLT)** is another effective teaching strategy that can revive traditional lessons. In a task-based class, a completion of a central task serves as a basis for language learning, as the language studied is determined by what happens in the process of exploring an assignment. As a result, natural context emerges from students' personal needs and relevant experiences with the language. The students are also exposed to a broad range of lexical phrases, collocations and language forms. **Project-based Learning (PBL)** is an interdisciplinary approach which requires students to engage in inquiry, solution building and project making. Students pursue knowledge by asking questions that arouse from their natural curiosity, are guided through research and collaborate with their peers to create a project that reflects their discoveries.

In the previously mentioned methods, there is a move away from the role of a teacher as instructor to that of a facilitator. By prioritizing cooperative learning and natural exploration of both language and content, children become more independent thinkers and learners. In addition, increased motivation raises the potential for enhanced language performance and production as learners gain greater confidence in their L2. Implementing these methods into education enables students to participate more fully in an increasingly complex academic and social environment. Students are challenged to deal with real-world problems and implement a multitude of learning strategies and skills. In the following sections, I will elaborate on how these methods might be put into practice in the English language class, combining language instruction and cross-curricular subject (Environmental Education) to develop students' communication skills.

1.2 Cross-Curricular Subjects

In accordance with the Education Act which came into effect in 2005, all primary and secondary schools have to prepare their own school educational programmes on the basis of *Framework Education Programme for Basic Education* (FEP BE). Thus, besides incorporating the main educational fields, each school is obliged to apply cross-curricular subjects and develop students' key competences. The purpose of cross-curricular subjects is to integrate topics related to contemporary issues into existing subjects across various educational fields of the curriculum. The thematic areas which constitute an inseparable part of basic education are not only linked to the educational content of specific subjects, but also with pupils' activities carried out both inside and outside school.

The FEP BE encompasses the following cross-curricular subjects:

- Personal and Social Education
- Educating a Democratic Citizen
- Education for Thinking in European and Global Contexts
- Multicultural Education
- Environmental Education
- Media Education

Connecting content across disciplinary boundaries, cross-curricular topics enrich the curriculum and facilitate interdisciplinary thinking, cooperation and help develop students' personalities, especially in the area of attitudes and values. Cross-curricular subjects are based on themes and activities beneficial for shaping pupils' attitudes towards themselves and the world around them.

The extent and method of cross-curricular subjects' implementation is determined by the school itself. They can either be integrated into the content of specific educational fields (Czech Language and Literature, Mathematics, History, Natural Sciences, Foreign Language etc.) or realized in the form of individual subjects, projects, seminars and courses. There are no specifically prescribed didactic materials or teaching methods of instructions, and so the

choice depends entirely on the teachers. Interdisciplinary projects, co-planning, co-teaching or extra-curricular activities all contribute to a complex education, providing pupils with an opportunity to form an integrated view of various issues and apply a wide range of skills.

1.2.1 Environmental Education as a cross-curricular subject

Environmental Education as a part of the cross-curricular subjects programme “guides the individual towards understanding the complexity and intricate nature of the relations between Man and the environment, i.e. towards realising the necessity of gradually moving towards sustainable development of society and recognising the importance of taking responsibility for the actions of society as well as of each individual” (FEP BE 100). EE enables learners to observe the dynamically developing relationships between man and nature. To form an integrated perspective, it points out the links between environmental, economic, scientific, political and civic aspects, as well as relatedness between local, regional and global problems. Another key focus is to discuss and propose solutions to critical environmental problems, since effective Environmental Education should influence students’ lifestyle and value orientation, motivating them to actively participate in the protection of the environment.

The definition of Environmental Education as a cross-curricular subject comprises three parts. Firstly, the *characteristic* provides a general definition of environmental education and its link to basic educational areas. Secondly, it states the *expected outcomes* of the programme and its contribution to the development of pupil’s personality. The last part presents the *thematic areas* of the cross-cutting theme.

The benefits of Environmental Education as a cross-curricular subject are demonstrated in two areas: cognitive - knowledge, skills, abilities and affective - attitudes and values (FEP BE 101).

In the area of knowledge, skills and abilities, EE as a cross-curricular subject:

- develops pupil’s understanding of connections within the biosphere, relations between Man and the environment, impact of human activity on the environment
- guides the pupil towards realising the conditions necessary for life and the possibilities of their endangerment

- contributes to the pupil's recognition and understanding of the connections between the evolution of human population and the relations to the environment in different parts of the world
- makes the pupil aware of connections between local and global issues and personal responsibility in relation to the environment
- stresses the importance of cooperation in environmental protection on the local, regional, European and international level
- provides the knowledge and skills necessary to gain a sense of responsibility and adopt environmentally-friendly behaviour
- shows model examples of desirable and undesirable behaviour in terms of sustainable development
- acquaints the pupil with the principles of society's sustainable development
- prepares the pupil to assess the objectivity and gravity of information concerning ecological issues
- **teaches the pupil to communicate on environmental issues, to express his opinions and to defend and justify them rationally**

In the area of attitudes and values, EE as a cross-curricular subject:

- contributes to a perception of life as having the highest value
- guides the pupil towards becoming responsible in his/her relation to the biosphere, nature preservation and conservation of natural resources
- guides the pupil towards understanding the necessity of sustainable development as a positive prospect for further development of society
- stimulates activity, creativity, tolerance, open-mindedness and considerateness in relation to the environment
- contributes to shaping a healthy lifestyle and becoming aware of the aesthetic value of the environment

- promotes personal engagement in solving issues associated with environmental protection
- inspires the pupil to adopt a sensitive approach to nature, natural and cultural heritage

The syllabus of EE is divided into four main thematic areas aimed at promoting a thorough understanding of the relationship between humans and the environment, recognizing fundamental conditions necessary for life and fostering a greater sense of responsibility for the impacts of their activities. These are the main thematic areas:

- **Ecosystems** – forests, fields, seas, water resources and tropical rainforests, artificial ecosystems (human settlements, cities and villages), cultural landscapes. The focus is on the importance and functions of these ecosystems and the effects of human activity on them.
- **Basic conditions for life** – water (importance of water, its protection), air (importance of air, climate change, air pollution, etc.) soil (land as a source of livelihood, land reclamation, agricultural land), protection of biological species, biodiversity of ecosystems (importance of biodiversity and conservation), energy use and conservation, natural resources (exhaustible and renewable resources, management of natural resources)
- **Human activities and environmental problems** – agriculture and the environment, ecological agriculture, transport and the environment, industry and the environment, waste and waste management, nature protection and the preservation of cultural monuments, changes to the landscape, long-term programmes and events focused on increasing the public's environmental awareness
- **Man's relation to the environment** – specific environment, communities in which pupils live and the lifestyle of their families, current (local) ecological problems, participation in its analysis and finding solutions, influence of the environment on human health, different conditions of life in different regions of the Earth and the effect of globalization

Evaluation of Environmental Education as a cross-curricular subject

According to a research carried out by Činčera in 2009, the area of Environmental Education as a cross-curricular subject was not compatible with the international standards, its inner integrity was only partial, it was value-neutral and did not correspond to the theories of responsible Environmental Education (23). Considering a more recent research from 2016, the area has not undergone significant improvements, as Činčera et al. again points out several defects of the programme. In contrast to the international standard which is strongly focused on pupils' individual initiative and involvement in action, the Czech programme is mostly oriented towards the factual knowledge of environmental issues. The majority of schools applies a directive approach, with the result of providing hardly any opportunities for learners' own initiative (Činčera et al. 166-167). The research also stresses the importance of applying student-centred, project-oriented approach in order to develop students' action competences and inspire their involvement in the solution of local issues.

Incorporating environmental topics into English classes and using interactive techniques characteristic of methods such as CLIL, CBI, PBI or TBLT could partially compensate for these defects as students would be given the opportunity to express their opinions and bring about solutions while practising the target language.

1.2.2 Understanding the need for Environmental Education

Environmental issues such as global warming, excessive waste production, air and water pollution or the greenhouse effect significantly impact not only human health and ecosystems but also various social and economic sectors. As individuals, we decide whether our domestic energy use, waste disposal or personal transport will contribute to or harm the environment. Establishing green habits and encouraging green behaviour is decisive, since the accumulation of many individual-level actions could result in a positive environmental impact.

Governments around the world have promoted environmental protection and green consumption. For instance, European Union has initiated the European Climate Change Programme and created EU legislation and policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions,

boost energy efficiency, protect the ozone layer or fight climate change. However, pro-environmental behaviour (PEB) is not only the result of statutory control conditions through social norms but also arises from the intrapersonal values held by citizens. Education is one of the key factors that contributes to the reinforcement of such values. Raising awareness and inspiring young people to incorporate sustainable changes in their daily lives could have a direct impact on the level of green behaviour in society.

Environmental Education teaches individuals to approach issues through critical thinking, applying their problem-solving and decision-making skills. Besides equipping students with a wide range of skills needed to form responsible decisions, it serves as an instrument of social transformation towards a more sustainable development. Every individual should participate in securing a safer and cleaner environment for generations to come. For these reasons, effective Environmental Education programmes should form an inevitable part of every school's syllabus.

Environmental Education as a cross-curricular subjects might be integrated into English lessons with the purpose of raising environmental awareness, inspiring pro-environmental behaviour and enhancing students' language skills concurrently.

1.3 Soft skills

Soft skills is an umbrella term that indicates personal transversal competences such as social aptitude, language and communication capability, ability of working in a team and other personality traits that characterize relationships between people. The process of defining and determining the scope of soft skills is not straightforward. Robles claims that soft skills are “character traits, attitudes and behaviors which are intangible, non-technical, personality-specific and determine one’s strengths as a leader, facilitator, mediator and negotiator” (457). These skills are traditionally considered complementary of hard skills, which are the abilities to perform a certain type of task or activity. Hard skills are also called *specific competences* and soft skills are often indicated as *generic competences*, other common terms are *key competences* or *21st century skills*. According to Haselberger, soft skills are a dynamic combination of cognitive, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills, which allow us to adapt to various situations and deal with the challenges of professional and everyday life effectively (67). Whereas disciplinary knowledge is subject-based, content-specific and formally assessed, soft skills are often independent of the formal curricular and rarely assessed explicitly.

According to Shakir (310-311), the following skills can be defined as soft skills:

- Communication skills: expressing thoughts and arguments with clarity
- Critical thinking and problem solving: ability to analyze, evaluate and apply knowledge
- Ability to cooperate with others: ability to work in a team and cooperate with individuals coming from various backgrounds in terms of society, education and culture, as well as being able to achieve the same goals
- Lifelong learning, information management skills: ability to learn and search and process relevant information
- Ethics and professional moral: ability to apply ethic principles in private and public context
- Leadership skills: ability to lead and understand the leadership roles

1.3.1 Soft skills in education

Despite the fact that the importance of soft skills is widely recognized, they are only seldom included in the course curriculum. However, there is no doubt that non-academic attributes such as the ability to cooperate, communicate, think critically or solve problems are becoming increasingly crucial. The report *Skills for social progress* published by OECD in 2015 stressed the need to develop a “whole child” with a balanced set of cognitive, social and emotional skills needed to successfully deal with the challenges of the 21st century. Soft skills allow individuals to take a more critical approach and contribute to his immediate surroundings by expressing and communicating original ideas. It is known that soft skills are beneficial for a higher employability possibility (Tang 8), but it is not their only advantage. As these skills are essential for everyday life, schools should provide learners with soft skills training not only to succeed professionally, but to flourish as human beings and citizens (Cimatti 103). According to Nussbaum, the key focus of current education system is to teach students how to be economically productive, whereas it should put a premium on encouraging them to think critically and become more empathetic and informed citizens. Focusing primarily on profitable skills will undermine the ability to question authorities and deal with complex global problems. For that reason, soft skills are not only beneficial for better career prospects, but for the development of a complete human being.

There is now a strong body and evidence showing that social and emotional skills are more malleable between early childhood and adolescence. School-based programmes designed for their development significantly influence children’s academic achievement and behaviour (Jones et al. 8). That being so, teaching soft skills should be a fundamental element of educational activity starting in primary or secondary education. Soft skills teaching can be effectively integrated in several disciplines by using didactic tools that enhance their development.

Language teachers can extend the basic language learning activities (listening, speaking, reading and writing) by creating more complex tasks. Focusing on soft skills training by providing students with opportunities to engage in meaningful discussions, find solutions or think critically would provide new perspective to language teaching and

learning). In consideration of the foregoing, ESL classroom provides an ideal environment to nurture soft skills. Although the definitions of these competences vary and do not always contain a homogenous list of individual skills, communication skills are generally considered to be of primary importance.

1.3.2 Environmental Education as a medium for the enhancement of communication skills

One of the key objectives of Environmental Education is that it should “focus on pupil’s ability to communicate on environmental issues, to express their opinions and standpoints, as well as defend and justify them rationally” (FEP EE 101). This directly corresponds to the primary focus of foreign language acquisition, that is, teaching students how to communicate effectively. Blending Environmental Education and English language teaching may provide ample opportunities to enhance students’ communication skills when addressing problematic environmental topics. Although many themes can spark the interests of language learners and teachers, environmental degradation of our planet ranks among the most critical concerns affecting people globally. Stimulating students’ curiosity by meaningful conversation topics will encourage them to express, communicate and discuss their opinions and attitudes in English. By integrating elements of Environmental Education into the language classroom, educators can heighten students’ interest in contemporary issues that might directly influence their futures; teach students how to contribute to a healthier, more sustainable world; and promote language learning and meaningful communication (Hauschild et al. 3).

1.3.3 Embedding soft skills in the ESL context

Some elements of soft skills are already existent in the ESL curriculum, but the goal of the following activities is to emphasize their importance and increase students' environmental awareness at the same time. Their key focus is to improve skills related to self-awareness, emotional intelligence, teamwork, leadership, innovation and communication. Below are a few possible ways of embedding soft skills training in the English classroom:

- **group work involving discussion** – in a group discussion, students have to express their opinions and ideas in a coherent way and respond to arguments, learn how to manage and resolve conflicts (e.g. stirring up a conversation about ethical or moral issues)
- **oral speaking** – impromptu speech (giving a speech with little or no preparation), delivering a persuasive presentation (e.g. to encourage classmates to engage in more earth-friendly habits etc.)
- **problem-solving activities** – a task or problem is presented to students and they need to find a solution by discussing it (engaging creative thinking, contributing with their ideas, accept ideas of others)
- **critical reading** – allows pupils to develop their ability to work independently and actively with text and to analyze it
- **presenting lectures, documentaries or short videos** – visual aids providing basis for critical examinations
- **role plays, simulations, dialogues** – engaging students in imaginative situations that explore provocative topics

2 Practical part

In the practical part of my thesis, I will outline lesson plans based on topics that form the core of Environmental Education and activities designed to develop students' communication skills. These lessons will be applied in an Elementary School and reflected on afterwards using Korthagen's ALACT model. This reflection method provides a structured framework by which I will evaluate not only the suitability of the chosen topics and practices but also the teaching experience itself. The purpose of the action research is to identify the opportunities and obstacles of English lessons oriented towards environmental topics and also to pursue the improvement of my future performance.

Another crucial aspect to be observed is whether students are interested in environmental topics and the English class is a suitable place to promote them. The lessons will be designed for 8th and 9th grade of Elementary Schools or higher levels of six or eight-year academies. However, they might be adjusted and simplified to be implemented in lower grade levels as well. Integrating this type of lessons into Grammar Schools would enable teachers to apply even more complex tasks and practice more advanced language skills.

The main objective of the lessons will be to create an authentic environment for discussing and expressing opinions and ideas of students. By putting emphasis on the content, these lessons should eliminate the typical separation between language and subject matter classes.

2.1 Lesson planning

The key purpose of the lessons is to introduce the chosen topic (content) at the beginning of the class to provide background information for further discussion. The topics correspond to Environmental Education syllabus which can serve as a basis for integrating environmental issues into English lessons. Since it is not an obligatory subject and some schools have not yet implemented Environmental Education in their programmes, students obtain information about environmental issues mostly from media or their families and friends. For that reason, topics that do not require previous experience with the subject but rely on general knowledge of students were chosen to ensure that every student can

participate in the discussion. The activities include pair, group and individual work and students are always asked to present their ideas in front of the whole class. Another key element is incorporating higher-order questions that require students to generalize, compare, contrast or analyse information. The main criteria for choosing the topics and integrating them into the lesson plans are:

- generally known topics that can be easily explained and realized within the English classroom
- possibility to make the topic interactive
- students' interest in the topic
- adequate language – students are able to understand the content and have sufficient language proficiency to discuss the chosen topics
- time needed for realization – 45 minutes
- classroom equipped with a whiteboard and a data projector to show photos and videos

Based on the various teaching techniques discussed in the theoretical part, several principles were selected to be applied in the lesson planning process. They are the following:

- **Meaningful context for language learning - integrating relevant topics:** As the topics dealt with in the lessons are not covered in most of the English language textbooks used in the Elementary Schools, they should be relevant to the pupils to draw their interest. This should result in active participation of the pupils and also improve the teaching experience itself.
- **Pupil orientation:** The pupils' individuality should be considered and integrated into the lesson, as every pupil has different abilities and interests. Some pupils might not be interested in a particular topic, but the teacher should try to motivate them by the exploration of current issues.
- **Choice and variety of methods:** The choice of a suitable method is of major importance for increasing pupils' activity. It is crucial to use a wide range of methods like group work, learning games and different types of interaction to motivate them.

- **Question- or problem-orientation:** The teacher raises questions or presents problems which require students to think critically and try to find possible solutions.
- **Focus on expressing and discussing ideas and opinions:** The most crucial aspect of the lessons is to provide ample opportunities for answering questions, expressing and discussing ideas and opinions.
- **Enhancing students' knowledge and awareness:** By introducing interesting content, students obtain new, important and useful information.
- **Independence of the pupils:** Pupils learn more effectively if they are active themselves and work independently. Therefore, it is inevitable to incorporate phases of independent, action-oriented work.

2.2 ALACT model of reflection

Fred Korthagen developed a concept of teacher education that differs from the traditional approaches in many ways, focusing primarily on establishing connection between practice and theory. In the traditional model, theoretical background leads to its application in practice. In contrast, the realistic model involves practical experience which leads to creating personal conceptual schemes that provide a prerequisite for linking practice with theory (256). The ideal process of experiential learning is described as an alteration between action and reflection.

Korthagen distinguishes the following five phases of the reflection process (Fig. 1)

1. **Action**
2. **Looking back on the action**
3. **Awareness of essential aspects**
4. **Creating alternative methods of actions**
5. **Trial**

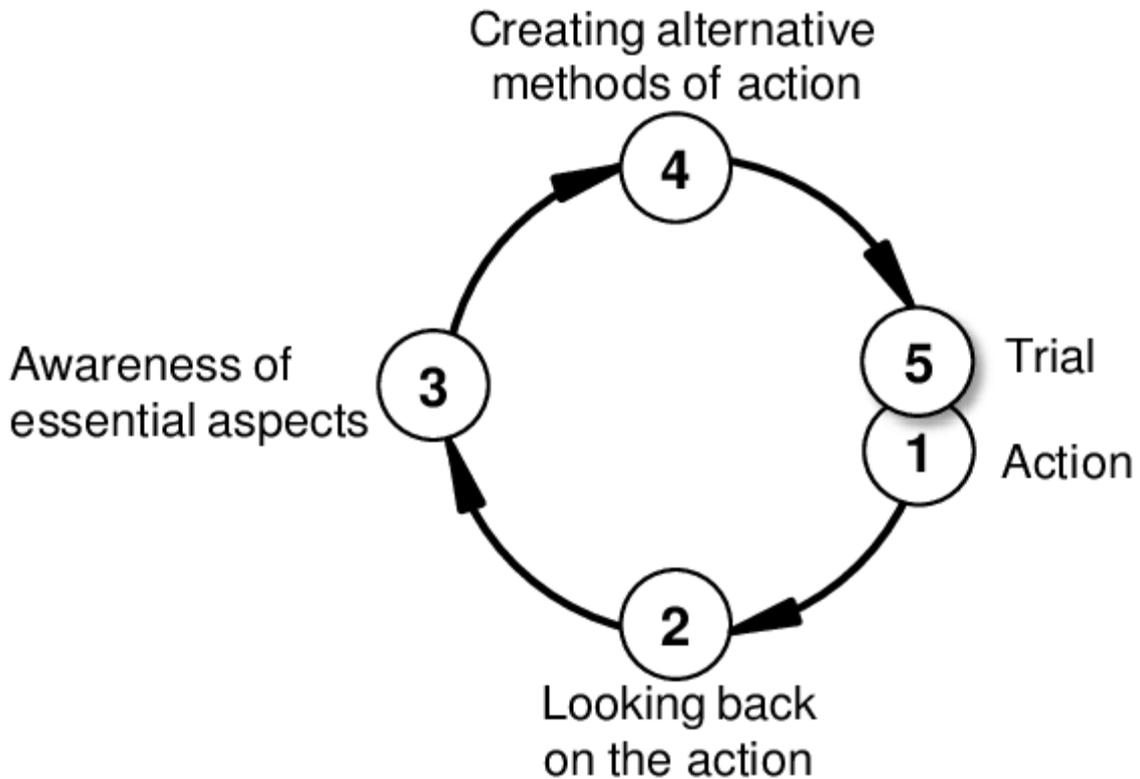


Figure 1. The ALACT model describing a structured process of reflection

The cycle begins with an action which describes what the teacher and students are doing during the class. The second step is based on the use of reflective tools to see and think about the action in retrospect. The awareness of essential aspects includes re-considering one's actions - teaching strategies, students' learning or subject matter and judging their consequences. This third step constitutes an essential part of the model, as at this point the teacher is looking for connections between the aspects. In the penultimate step, the teacher thinks about alternatives that would have been more suitable in that situation and puts them into practice afterwards. Since the trial phase is another action to be reflected upon thereafter, trial and action are considered one phase and mark the beginning of a new cycle.

The following questions should be addressed throughout the reflection process:

Phase 1: Action

- What was the actual situation?
- What was my role in this situation?
- What action did I take?
- What was the outcome of this action?

Phase 2: Looking back

- What exactly happened?
- What did I see?
- What did I do?
- What did I think and feel?

Phase 3: Awareness of essential aspects

- What did the action involve?
- What is the result of the action?
- What were some problems or positive discoveries?

Phase 4: Alternative methods

- What alternative methods could be used in the future?
- What are the solutions or ways of making use of what I have discovered?
- What are their advantages and disadvantages?
- What can I improve next time?

Phase 5: Trial/action

- What do I want to achieve?
- What should I be careful about?
- What do I want to try out in the future?

According to Korthagen and Kessels, one of the major drawbacks of teacher education is that throughout the studies, theory is presented without much connection to practice (4). As a result, there is a growing need for practically oriented programmes, as the current ones often struggle to prepare future teachers sufficiently for practice. If young teachers do not reflect on their performance accordingly, they may adhere to ineffective practices and be unwilling to adopt new insights into teaching and learning. Reflection is crucial in every teaching process and is especially important for novice teachers who want to evolve in their abilities and skills.

The ALACT model of reflection serves as a practical tool for the improvement of teaching efficiency. Reflection is defined as “the mental process of structuring or restructuring an experience, a problem or existing knowledge or insights” (Korthagen 58) and provides an opportunity for interpersonal skills development. Using reflection as a means of evaluating one’s teaching allows teachers to reconsider their decisions and actions, connect them to theories and improve their future performance. From my point of view, student teachers should practice teaching and evaluating their lessons as early as possible in order to be thoroughly prepared for reflection tasks and get the chance to independently improve their competences. This is directly linked to the premise that teaching skills are founded on experiences and cannot be replaced by observation solely.

I believe that it is of major importance for both teaching skills and development of reflection competence to critically examine and evaluate the class given. In the following chapter, I will reflect on the lessons taught following Korthagen’s model.

2.3 Action research

The action research involving the delivery of the lesson plans was conducted in Elementary School with extended foreign language teaching programme - ZŠ Drtinova, Prague. At this school, 1st and 2nd graders have two lessons of English per week, and 3rd to 9th graders attend four lessons of English class per week. This school is committed to developing a curriculum centred on foreign language acquisition as one of the key dimensions of education, culture, citizenship and employment.

After discussing an English teacher, we agreed on implementing the lesson plans in two classes of the 9th grade, in which students' levels of English are A2-B1 (according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). Identical lesson plans were implemented in two different classes to try out the methods with distinct groups of pupils. The teacher claimed that although the first group tends to be a bit less communicative than the other, students in both classes have a sufficient level of English language proficiency needed to successfully cope with the tasks and activities. The plan was to teach three 45-minute classes in both groups over the course of two weeks, therefore teaching six classes altogether. Unfortunately, due to an unexpected turn of events, a national state of emergency was announced, schools were closed down and I only managed to teach four lessons on that account.

2.3.1 Lesson plans implementation and reflection

First lesson (Appendix 1)

The purpose of the first lesson was to introduce the concept of environmental education in general and find out to what extent are the learners interested in some of the most critical environmental issues such as pollution, extinction of species, climate change etc. I also intended to observe how students react to the topic, whether they are able to answer my questions and how comfortable they feel when expressing their ideas and opinions.

At the beginning of the class, students were asked to prepare a card with their name on it and to introduce themselves with the intention of creating an amiable classroom atmosphere, as this was the first time we met. I encouraged them not to be worried about the

correctness of their answers, because there are no wrong answers when it comes to expressing opinions. I prepared a PowerPoint presentation to complement the instruction by projecting images, definitions, key words and discussion questions. To engage the students from the beginning, I chose brainstorming so that they can share their ideas of what the word environment means. Later, I projected several photos depicting environmental issues (endangered species, air/water pollution, waste production), so that the students might get a grip on the key terms. When projecting the photos, students were asked to describe and examine the causes and effects of the particular issue. The main activity called Investigative Journalist involved pair work - both students got a series of questions they should ask their partner as well as a handout with useful phrases (asking for and giving an opinion, agreeing, disagreeing). Students were given 10 minutes to discuss the given issues, engage in authentic conversation and later present their ideas for the rest of the class.

Group 1

- **Class:** 9.A
- **Age:** 14,15
- **Number of students:** 12
- **Level of English:** A2 - B1

Action: After the students introduced themselves, I displayed the presentation and asked them to brainstorm on what the word 'environment' means. I noticed they were hesitant to speak out, so I gave them some clues to encourage their answers. When I showed them photos connected to various environmental issues, several students described them promptly and I later elaborated on their answers by giving additional questions. Some of the students might have felt unable to answer the questions properly as this topic is not easy to grasp for young people. However, as the lesson progressed, students became more relaxed and engaged. The pair work activity was aimed at using certain phrases to express one's opinions. The handout was distributed to provide students with practical phrases necessary to help students maintain a conversation. I walked around the class, listened to the conversations and asked the students whether they need some help with vocabulary or

phrases. After a few minutes of conversation, I asked the pairs to present their ideas and opinions.

Looking back on action: As this was my first experience with teaching a lesson of this kind, I was a little nervous at the beginning and was trying to create a friendly atmosphere in the class. I was not sure how the students will react to the topics and whether they will be willing to participate in the discussion. Although they were a bit shy at first, the atmosphere gradually became more relaxed and pupils were cooperative. I was pleasantly surprised that they did not switch to Czech but spoke English throughout the whole lesson. There were no students disturbing the lesson and everyone was paying attention to the presentation of content.

Awareness of essential aspects: Overall, I understood that even when students might not participate fully at the beginning of the class, they need some time to adjust to the new topic and gain more confidence. Moreover, the topic itself is quite difficult to deal with for younger people, especially when they did not take any environmental course. Even though this was an unusual class for them, students were interested in the content and eager to find out new information. I raised a variety of questions, including probing questions (to require students to go beyond a superficial or incomplete answer) or redirecting questions (to ask for clarification or agreement from others). In some cases, I called on a particular student and asked a more complex question, which might have been distressing for them as they would need more time to think about the answer.

Creating alternative methods of actions: An alternative procedure would be to begin the class by a short presentation of content, rather than asking questions or brainstorm from the very start. Moreover, I would spend more time presenting the issue to give the students some time to adjust to a new topic, especially if this is the first time they encounter this theme. As far as the answer eliciting is concerned, an alternative is to pose the more challenging questions to the whole class, allowing students to formulate an answer they would be prepared to voice and only later call on a particular student if no one is answering.

Group 2

- **Class:** 9.B
- **Age:** 14,15
- **Number of students:** 15
- **Level of English:** A2 - B1
- **Lesson duration:** 45 minutes

Action: We began the class by introducing ourselves and proceeded to the brainstorming activity. In contrast to the first group, the students of 9.B were not shy or afraid to speak and were able to answer all of my questions from the very beginning, suggesting many interesting and insightful ideas themselves. The photo description was easy for them and they responded to my questions willingly, even without being asked individually. During the pair work activity, I noticed they found the handout useful and repeated the phrases throughout their discussions. At the end of the lesson, students summarised their dialogues in a very consistent way.

Looking back on action: Throughout the lesson, I felt very satisfied with its development and the overall atmosphere in the class. The students were cooperative, eager to learn more about the issues we discussed and had a positive approach. I believe my intention to create a friendly atmosphere in the class was achieved and students felt comfortable even though this was their first class with me.

Awareness of essential aspects: It was a very positive discovery to see that students found the topic interesting, were communicative and willing to participate in the class. This might be the result of the appropriate choice of activities and interesting content. I encountered no particular problems throughout the process and the lesson exceeded my expectations.

Creating alternative methods of actions: In the end of the class, I would offer students more space to ask more questions themselves, as they were mostly required to answer my questions or questions of their partners. This would give them the opportunity to share some of their original ideas or concerns.

Trial/action for both groups: I would like to improve the presentation of content, so that it provides sufficient information and facts that students can build their answers on. In the following lesson, I will use a short video as a tool to present the content of the lesson in the beginning, so that the speaking activities could be based mostly on the information and facts it contained. This might prevent feelings of uneasiness or uncertainty caused by a lack of knowledge or vocabulary necessary to communicate effectively.

Second lesson (Appendix 2)

To ensure that students would engage in the following lesson, they were asked to select a specific topic they would like to discuss further at the end of the first lesson, both groups agreeing on the theme Endangered Species. The class began with a short BBC Video in English (with English subtitles) about several animals in danger to provide an interesting and engaging visual aid. The video projection was followed by a series of questions about its content - students were asked to describe the species they have seen in the video, explain the causes of their endangerment and we also discussed possible solutions for this issue. The main part of the lesson was a role play activity focused on expressing opinions, agreement and disagreement and to promptly react in a discussion. There were two different tasks which addressed the issue of endangered species and students had to make use of the information from the video (mainly the causes and effects of animals' exploitation). Each half of the class chose their task first and then they split into two teams - one in favour, the other one against. They were asked to prepare arguments, present them to their opponent and react to the opposing team. In the first task, one group consisted of a team of developers who plan to build a luxurious resort in the middle of a tropical rainforest, causing loss of natural habitats of many species, deforestation and other threats to nature. The opposing team consisted of an environmental activist, local villagers or professors who were strictly against this plan. In the second task, a world-famous fashion brand plans to launch a new collection which involves an extensive production of animal-derived clothing, stirring up criticism among animal rights activists. One group consisted of a fashion brand owner, designer and a blogger promoting the brand, and the other group was formed by animal rights activists and eco-friendly bloggers. The students were given 15 minutes to formulate their arguments and

prepare for possible counterarguments. After the preparation was finished, they were asked to present the role-play for the other group.

Group 1

Action: The lesson began with a 5-minute video screening and while the students were watching it, I wrote some of the key words (endangered species, extinction, natural habitat, poachers etc.) on the board so that the pupils might use them later when discussing the content. After we watched the video, I asked students to name some of the species mentioned in the video. Unfortunately, I did not tell them to pay attention to the specific names of animals or write them down (for example Sumatran tiger, white rhino, polar bear, sloth etc.) and so they were unable to recall most of them. Similarly, when we talked about the causes of extinction, they remembered some general causes, but not more specific ones. Then we moved on to the main activity - role play. Students were asked to form the groups themselves and choose the task. There were 12 pupils present which was an ideal number for creating the team. The first group consisted of 6 boys and they chose the first task - Building a luxurious resort, second group consisted of 6 girls who chose the second task - Promoting a new collection of leather, fur and wool products. When students were preparing their arguments, I walked around the class to offer some help with the vocabulary and arguments formulation. In the end of the class, both groups presented their role-plays.

Looking back on action: Students were less active than during the previous class, probably due to the fact that this was an early morning class and they seemed quite tired. As a result, their motivation and participation was partly impaired. At first I struggled to find the right way to approach them and tried my best to motivate them. When I realized they were not enjoying the first part, I decided to move on to the main activity - role play. I believe the students enjoyed the assignment topic as they were given the option to choose an area which they feel more connected to.

Awareness of essential aspects: When the girls group performed their role play, it was clear that they had well-prepared arguments, but it was more difficult for them to react to the opposing team. However, this was not a result of inability to express their opinions and arguments in English, but rather a lack of information about this topic, which is

understandable. Although the group did not show full participation, they still carried out the task well and did what was required from them. The boys group, on the other hand, was much more engaged and lively, both sides presenting reasonable arguments as well as reacting promptly to counterarguments. When brainstorming, some students switched to Czech. However, their teacher believed that this was natural since the topic was quite difficult to deal with and discussing ideas in their mother tongue gave students more confidence when presenting their arguments in English later.

Creating alternative methods of actions: After the activity, I realized that I did not encourage the students to perform the roleplay in front of the whole class. Instead, they were sitting at their desks, which caused that the observing group was not too attentive to the performing group. An alternative would be to ask the students to organize their chairs in front of the blackboard and perform for the whole class. Another possible adjustment would be to ask the second group to judge the performing team and choose the winner. That way, they would pay more attention to the role play.

Group 2

Action: Unlike in the first group, I asked students to note specific names and causes of extinction during the video screening. This proved to be very helpful as students remembered most of the video content and were able to answer all of my questions. They were very active and I did not even have to ask them for answers individually as they were willing to answer themselves. I encouraged them to use the key terms written on the board and so they were able to incorporate the terms in their answers. Afterwards, we moved forward to the roleplay activity. Before we began, I pointed out that the groups will perform in front of the blackboard and the performance will be judged by the observing group. Students quickly formed the groups, chose their topic and started preparing the arguments. I walked around the class and saw that they were engaged in the preparation and there was no need for me to help them. When the students finished the preparation, we re-organized the classroom so that the teams could sit opposite each other. Both teams performed very well, they had no problems expressing their opinions and reacting to counter-arguments. They became so engaged in the role play that they continued debating even after the class was finished.

Looking back on action: The first part of the lesson was very successful as students enjoyed the video screening, each student expressed their opinions, participated actively and showed excitement from learning new information. However, I encountered a different problem this time with the first group - each member of the team supporting the idea presented all the arguments individually, and then the other group presented the arguments against. As a result, the discussion was not interactive enough, as the students did not offer counter arguments promptly, but I had to encourage them to do so. However, the second group performed a much more active and natural discussion, as the students quickly reacted to the opposing team. Overall, it was clear that the students were entertained by this kind of activity and they became truly engrossed in the situation. It was very pleasing to see them enjoying the activity and expressing themselves naturally in English.

Awareness of essential aspects: I realized that performing in front of the whole class is a more suitable organization than when the students stay at their usual places. As pupils performed the roleplay in front of the class, the other group was paying more attention and was engaged in watching the discussion. In this case, it was visible that the students really enjoyed putting themselves in a certain role and the discussion seemed very natural. Students were relaxed and enriched the conversation with humour elements which created a great atmosphere. It also proved to be beneficial when the other group had to judge their performance, as this was another opportunity to express one's opinion. I also understood that the 15-minute limit for the preparation could be shortened so that students could use the remaining time for a more natural, spontaneous conversation.

Action/trial for both groups: These two lessons reinforced my belief that pupils enjoy action-oriented activities based on improvisation, in which they are likely to be unwittingly exposed to a variety of language skills use. Moreover, interactive and collaborative activity such as role-play provides them with essential tools to draw from when using English outside the classroom.

2.3.2 Evaluation of the teaching experience

All in all, I am very satisfied with the lessons' progress and pupils' performances. Even though there were some students who were afraid or unable to express their opinions at the very beginning, they became considerably more active as the lesson evolved. I believe that as there was no disruptive behaviour among pupils and they were, on the whole, motivated and interested, it might be assumed that meaningful lesson content stimulates their learning environment.

The implementation of lessons was also a very beneficial experience for me as a student teacher, as it was the first opportunity to put my own lesson plans into practice in an Elementary School. It also helped me gain confidence in my ability to create a meaningful environment for language learning, introduce unusual topics into the classroom and design creative tasks that help students learn through interactive lessons and "think outside the box". Moreover, I became convinced that language teachers can not only support students' language skills development, but also acquaint them with contemporary issues and therefore raise awareness of socially important messages. This undoubtedly adds value to the teaching experience itself, since language instruction becomes means of meaningful communication and individual expression rather than just a demonstration of grammar rules and exercises.

2.4 Recommendations for similar lessons

Lessons based on environmental topics might be used as a complementary material providing topicality and introducing relevant issues not covered by most of the English course books used in Elementary Schools. This does not mean that the infusion of global issues is necessary in every lesson, nevertheless, environmental topics could diversify the traditional ESL curriculum.

The advantage of Environmental Education is that it is a very complex subject which can be approached on many levels. To my mind, environmental topics can be successfully integrated into English lessons at all levels of second stage Elementary School. However, more complex tasks (discussions, role-plays) are more suitable for the 8th and 9th grades, as they require a higher level of language proficiency.

Environmental lessons should be aimed at creating a student-oriented class in order to avoid excessive teacher-talk and provide space for speaking practice. Teachers can select from a variety of general themes, but should also specifically ask students to identify topics of interest within the broader areas, in order to **create a more learner-centred classroom and give students control of the content learning.**

To expand thinking skills and enrich the conversations, questions asked should **involve students in higher order cognitive thinking process** related to the topic (critical thinking, evaluative thinking, decision making, brainstorming etc.). Teachers should, for the most part, **make use of open questions** to elicit respondents' knowledge, opinions or ideas.

Moreover, the **use of visual and audio aids** proved to be very convenient as these allow students to connect with the lesson material in a more beneficial way. Photographs, videos or animations serve as facilitators of the intellectual activities, help students grasp the content and make connections to the real world.

Students were considerably more enthusiastic throughout the roleplay in comparison to the pair-work activity that was based on prescribed questions. The role play, on the other hand, contained no predetermined information and students had to come up with all the ideas and arguments themselves, which provided even more room for creativity and natural communication. It is therefore advisable to **use group activities**, rather than individual or pair-work activities. Working in a group allows pupils to a greater spectrum of viewpoints and requires them to react and respond quickly even throughout the process of preparation. This way, teachers can help students develop skills in collaborating, including turn-taking, listening, and respect for others' opinions. With the help of other peers, learners are able to tackle more complex tasks. By stimulating real-life situations, for example in a role-play, students can try out how they would react in specific circumstances. What is more, students generally enjoy taking an unusual role which contributes to their engagement in an interesting debate.

The role play has proven to be an ideal activity to practice a wide range of skills - the pupils have to listen to other classmates, react, engage in discussion, propose arguments and defend their opinions. Activities crafted in a similar manner highlight topics relevant to daily life of students and their communities, give them opportunities to demonstrate their

knowledge of environmental topics and discuss controversial issues in their second language. Such experiences encourage them to make connections to their daily lives, possibly even inspiring them to persuade schoolmates, family members, and their communities to be more environmentally responsible. To strengthen the effect, another alternative would be to involve students in **giving a persuasive presentation** that encourages the audience to engage in more eco-friendly habits.

English lessons based on environmental content allow the incorporation of several methods introduced in the theoretical part. These lessons would fulfil the main dimensions of content-oriented methods (CLIL, CBI) as they promote knowledge, skills and understanding of the environmental subject matter, engage students in associated cognitive processing, encourage interaction in a communicative context and deepen intercultural awareness. Language learning objectives can be achieved by **selecting and adapting authentic materials for use in class** (use of newspaper and magazine articles or any other media materials). The outcome of the lessons might be a **project** created by the pupils throughout the lessons (Project-based Learning). Similarly, students could be given a **task** to solve by the end of the lesson (Task-Based Learning). All of these methods require students to use authentic language throughout the process, develop their speaking skills and reinforce knowledge about environmental issues in tandem.

On the whole, I believe that the English class provides an ideal environment to practice speaking skills and discuss environmental issues. First of all, as the foreign language lessons are usually taught in groups, there is a smaller number of students and therefore more opportunities for everyone to engage in conversation, answer questions and express opinions. Following the observation of the class atmosphere and students' reactions, I am convinced that environmental topics arouse interest among young people and they are willing to ponder challenging questions and look for solutions.

To conclude, teachers should always keep in mind that it is essential to support building a positive approach to Environment Education. They should be careful not to distress students by addressing only appalling issues, but to develop their attitudes and values, encourage them to undertake positive environmental action, come up with solutions

and ideas for improvement. It is imperative not to overwhelm student by solely negative information which might, in consequence, demotivate them and hinder communication.

2.4.1 Collaboration with teachers of other subjects

Addressing environmental topics throughout English lessons might be challenging when lack of information or knowledge about given topics would hinder students' ability to communicate or discuss the content. An ideal solution would be to cooperate with teachers of other subjects, who could provide the indispensable background information. Students would develop expertise on various environmental topics and the acquired knowledge would serve as a basis for the implementation of environmental topics into English lessons. The complexity of Environmental Education as a cross-curricular subject calls for integration into various other subjects, since innumerable environmental issues are not caused by physical and biological factors, but also by social, economic, political, historical and cultural elements. Subjects such as Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Citizenship education or even Art class all provide an excellent backdrop for interdisciplinary learning. If students were provided with necessary background understanding of environmental issues, they could discuss them in the English classroom with greater confidence. Given insight into environmental issues from different perspectives, students will comprehend the interconnectedness of social, ecological, economic, cultural and political issues and able to understand the world in a broader context. Further study of these areas within English lessons will not only reinforce the content knowledge, but also students' capacity to exchange views on it in a global foreign language.

English teachers might feel hesitant about incorporating Environmental Education into their curricula due to lack of expertise in this area or demanding preparation of activities. However, there is no need to reconstruct the entire curricula, but simply begin by including activities that build upon established language-learning objectives and incorporate information about environmental issues. When they observe that students find the themes interesting, they can develop additional materials that support project work or an entire theme-based unit that promotes environmental education.

When applying methods such as CLIL or CBI, non-language experts are invited to teach content in a foreign language and so language teachers might provide support for them. Likewise, content teachers can function in a supportive manner for English teachers in the process of implementing specific environmental topics into the English classroom. This way, language and subject teachers would cooperate to create a balanced approach between the two areas and reinforce acquisition of both content and language.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore how environmental topics might be integrated into English lessons to improve students' speaking skills. The theoretical part was concerned with content-focused and interactive teaching methods which contribute to the creation of an authentic language learning environment. It also contained an analysis of Environmental Education as a cross-curricular subject and pointed out its role within the Framework Educational Programme. It was suggested that addressing topics of Environmental Education in English lessons could diversify the ESL curriculum and provide a meaningful context for the improvement of learners' communicative competence. The practical part consisted of designing lessons focused on environmental content and speaking activities. These lesson plans were subsequently implemented in two different 9th grade classes and reflected upon afterwards.

The process of reflection led to the conclusion that content-oriented English lessons aimed at exploring environmental issues pique students' interest and natural curiosity. During the lessons, students were motivated to speak and active participation was observed even among individuals with a lower level of language proficiency. As a majority of the pupils were eager to express their individual opinions and ideas, it could be concluded that incorporating Environmental Education into English lessons brings forth plentiful opportunities for the development of students' communication skills.

Another strong point of English lessons based on environmental topics is that they also fulfil the main objectives of Environmental Education as a cross-curricular subject. Even without extensive expertise in environmental studies, English teachers can guide pupils towards realising the importance of protecting the Earth while remaining committed to improving students' language skills. By addressing a wide spectrum of topics, they will teach pupils to discuss, express and defend their viewpoints effectively.

Integrating environmental topics into the ESL class does not only create an authentic and meaningful environment to practice speaking skills, but develops additional personal and social competences. When discussing the environmental issues, students have to think critically, define problems, analyse root causes, propose creative solutions, draw conclusions and make personal real-world connections. In addition to the previously mentioned

advantages of blending English language learning and Environmental Education, the opportunity arises to reinforce the process and cultivate other beneficial competences, the so called 21st century skills. In our fast-changing world, there is a growing need to develop and practice skills which will prepare learners for the world of tomorrow. These skills could be taught and nurtured within core content areas, including ESL, by engaging students in learning experience that involves complex and creative thinking, communication and cooperation.

In a world marked by diversity and cross-cultural interactions, English as a global language equips students with skills necessary to participate in debates about contemporary concerns. Foreign language learning encourages global citizenship and provides a powerful tool for social, emotional and cultural transformation. Learning English via natural exploration of content increases motivation and inspires students to use language as a means of gathering knowledge and exchanging ideas about relevant subjects. English teachers are therefore in a unique position to foster development of key communication competences with the addition of promoting environmental awareness.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Lesson no. 1 - Environment and Environmental Issues

Topic	Environment and Environmental Issues
Content	Introduction and identification of the main environmental issues, their causes and exploration of possible solutions.
Language skills	Speaking: expressing ideas/opinions, asking questions Listening: listening to other Ss and reacting to their answers Writing: writing down advice on how can individuals help the environment
Key competencies	communicative competence problem-solving skills civic competence
Time	45 minutes
Level	A2 - B1
Methodology	Using pictures to activate speaking Pair work – dialogue, discussion
Materials	PowerPoint Presentation, projector, handout with useful phrases

Activities:

- 1. ICE BREAKER:** students write their names on a piece of paper, introduce and say something about themselves - for example what is their hobby (5min)
- 2. LEAD-IN:** brainstorming, writing 'environment' on the board and students share what comes to their mind (5min)

3. PICTURE DESCRIPTION (5min)

- a. Waste
- b. Air pollution
- c. Deforestation
- d. Global warming
- e. Endangered species

+ Additional questions - What/who causes this issue? Why does it happen? How can we prevent it?

4. PAIR WORK: INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST (15 min)

Students interview their partner and write down the answers (brief notes).

STUDENT A

1. What are some of the most serious environmental problems?
2. What can governments do to help the environment?
3. What is your opinion on climate change?
4. Which countries cause the most pollution?
5. What can individuals do to help the environment?

STUDENT B

1. What are some local environmental problems you have noticed?
2. What will happen if we keep polluting the environment?
3. Do you think that it is necessary to recycle things?
4. Do you think houses will be more environmentally friendly in the future?

5. What kinds of technologies do you know of that might help prevent environmental problems?
 - Presenting answers (10 minutes) + additional questions

6. **FINAL ACTIVITY:** Pupils write down three ideas about how can an individual help the environment. (5min)

Handout with useful phrases

<p>Giving opinion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In my opinion/view... • From my point of view... • I believe/think... • As far as I'm concerned... • It's a fact that... 	<p>Asking for an opinion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think about...? • How do you feel about...? • What is your opinion on...? • Do you agree with... ? • What are your views on...?
<p>Agreeing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I (completely) agree. • That's true/right. • That's exactly what I think. • You're right. • Exactly/Certainly/ Definitely 	<p>Disagreeing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't agree with you. • I'm afraid I disagree. • I don't think so. • I'm not so sure about that. • Absolutely not/ Not at all.

Appendix 2 - Lesson no. 2 - Endangered Species

Topic	Endangered Species
Content	Introduce the topic of endangered species, explain the causes of their endangerment, gain perspective on human activities that put animals in danger and threaten global environment.
Language skills	Speaking: expressing ideas/opinions, asking questions Listening: listening to other Ss and reacting to their answers
Key competences	communicative competence problem-solving skills team-work civic competence
Time	45 minutes
Level	A2 - B1
Methodology	Using a video to activate speaking Group work – roleplay, discussion
Materials	PowerPoint Presentation, projector

Activities:

1. **VIDEO:** playing a short BBC video about endangered species and causes of this issue (with English subtitles)

2. DISCUSSING THE CONTENT OF THE VIDEO

Example questions: What endangered species were mentioned in the video?

What are the causes for extinction of species?

How can we prevent extinction of animal species?

3. BRAINSTORMING: How can I help?

Example answers:

- support zoos, nature centers, nature reserves, or botanical gardens
- volunteer for animal rights organization
- avoid buying products made from endangered species - ivory, snakeskin belts, bags...
- avoid using herbicides and pesticides
- keep learning about plants and animals; share what you've learned with others

3. ROLEPLAY

Students split into two groups, each one consisting of team for and against a controversial idea. Students choose their roles (they can come up with their own roles) and are given 10 minutes to prepare their arguments. After they are finished, they present their roleplay in front of the class.

Task no. 1: A European company has recently bought a large area of a tropical rainforest in Colombia. Their plan is to build a luxurious resort in the middle of the jungle. They will have to cut hundreds of trees, keep the wild animals away and spray the surroundings with chemicals every day to get rid of all the insects and ensure the comfort of tourists.

For

- Developer (Resort owner)
- Corrupt politician supporting the project
- Marketing manager

Against

- Environmental Group representative
- Botany university professor/Biology expert
- Local resident living in a nearby village
- Developer who planned to build an animal sanctuary in the same place

Task no.2: A famous fashion brand is known for selling expensive leather shoes and bags. Cattle, lambs, crocodiles, horses and other animals are raised and killed to get the necessary material. In 2020, they are planning to present a new collection and sell their products world-wide.

For

- Brand owner
- Fashion designer
- Journalist who will promote the brand in a popular fashion magazine
- Blogger who will be sponsored by the brand
- Supermodel that would do a photoshoot for the brand

Against

- Representative of animal rights movement
- Eco-friendly blogger
- Journalist who will criticize the brand in a popular fashion magazine
- Supermodel that would refuse to do a photoshoot for the brand