



From Problem to Action: Analyzing Representations of Agency and Solution Orientation in ELT Materials on Sustainability in Iraq

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Abstract. This study is interested in the representation of agency and solution-orientation in sustainability-related tasks in textbooks in English for Iraq for Grades 1-6. Using a mixed-method design, combining qualitative content analysis, critical discourse analysis, and multimodal analysis, this study explores how learners, teachers, communities, and institutions are situated as agents to address both environmental and civic concerns. In these domains, a corpus of texts, dialogues, and tasks associated with sustainability was identified across, for e.g., water conservation, energy use, waste management, climate change, biodiversity and civic responsibility. Coding emphasized modality (can, should, must), framing of problems versus solutions, individual versus collective action, and the feasibility of implementing action in the Iraqi setting. These findings show that sustainability themes are gradually incorporated into textbooks across grades, but agency is typically framed at the individual level (i.e., “You must not waste water”), with little opportunity for collective or institutional action. Instead, modal verbs stress obligation (must) more than possibility (can), suggesting a prescriptive rather than empowering stance. Solution-orientation becomes generic or global with only a handful of tasks contextualized to the specific ecological



and infrastructural reality of Iraq. Still, some Grade 5-6 tasks are project-based tasks that allow group collaboration and local problem-solving leading towards a participatory pedagogy. The rationale posited is that, increasing learner autonomy while integrating contextually relevant, solution-based practices can further facilitate alignment between Iraqi ELT content and UNESCO's framework of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Implications for curriculum reform, and classroom practice, are discussed.

Keywords: English for Iraq, sustainability, agency, solution-orientation, ELT.

المُلخَص. تبحث هذه الدراسة تمثيل الوكالة والتوجه نحو الحلول في المهام المرتبطة بالاستدامة ضمن كتب سلسلة **English for Iraq** للصفوف 1-6. وبمنهج مختلط يجمع بين التحليل النوعي للمحتوى، والتحليل النقدي للخطاب، والتحليل متعدد الوسائط، تفحص الدراسة كيف يُصوّر المتعلمون والمعلمون والمجتمع والمؤسسات بوصفهم فاعلين في معالجة القضايا البيئية والمدنية. وقد جُمع مُتَنُّ من النصوص والحوارات والمهام ذات الصلة بالاستدامة في مجالات مثل: حفظ المياه، استخدام الطاقة، إدارة النفايات، تغيّر المناخ، التنوع الحيوي، والمسؤولية المدنية. ركّز الترميز على: الأسلوبية (**can, should, must**)، وتأطير المشكلة مقابل الحل، والعمل الفردي مقابل الجماعي، وقابلية تطبيق الإجراءات في السياق العراقي. تُظهر النتائج إدماجاً متدرجاً لموضوعات الاستدامة عبر الصفوف، غير أن الوكالة تُوظّر غالباً على المستوى الفردي (مثل: «يجب ألا تهدر الماء»)، مع فرص محدودة للفعل الجماعي أو المؤسسي. وتُغلب الأفعال الأسلوبية الدالة على الوجوب (**must**) على أفعال الإمكان (**can**)، بما يعكس توجهاً تفردياً أكثر من كونه تمكينياً. كما يحدو التوجه نحو الحلول عاماً/عالمياً، مع قلة من المهام المتموضعة سياقياً في الواقع البيئي والبيئي للعراق. ومع ذلك، تُظهر مهام الصفين الخامس والسادس أنشطة مشروع-أساسية تتيح تعاوناً جماعياً وحلاً محلياً للمشكلات، متجهةً نحو بيداغوجيا تشاركية. وتُطرح حُجّة مفادها أن تنمية استقلالية المتعلم، مع دمج ممارسات سياقية قائمة على الحلول، يمكن أن يعزّز مواعمة محتوى تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في العراق مع إطار اليونسكو لـ التعليم من أجل التنمية المستدامة (ESD). وتناقش الانعكاسات على إصلاح المناهج والممارسة الصفية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستدامة، الوكالة، التوجه نحو الحلول، تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية.

Introduction

Educational resources are an important factor in preparing young learners for addressing environmental problems. The United Nations' Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) agenda underlines that learners should not only grasp sustainability problems, but also learn to design and develop



solutions. And this means changing learners from the awareness-driven to the solution-oriented understanding which necessitates the role of the student as a transformational change agent, learning which puts their critical thinking skills and hands-on experience as a tool for changing the process (OCE, 2023). In fact, in many contexts, textbook content continues to be largely governed by problem description or passive consumption roles (Jacobs & Goatly, 2000; Triyono et al., 2023). Hence, it is crucial to understand how the formal education system frames sustainability, especially with developing education systems to inform pedagogy. Sustainability education is gaining its way onto the national agenda in Iraq. The official Curriculum Framework articulates “sustainable development” as one of its core values and as a cross-cutting issue. It requires learners to perceive and apply sustainability principles (e.g. “respecting the environment, not wasting resources, promoting renewable energies, preparing to prevent and cope with disasters”) and to consider the welfare of future generations. There has been also a recent emphasis in the strategic policy documents (Ministry of Education 2022) for active, student-centered learning and environmental awareness. That said, multiple systemic challenges remain. As noted by the World Bank, classrooms in Iraq are often teacher-centered and exam-driven, despite a formal curriculum shift toward analytical skills and active learning. Textbook printing is erratic due to budget cuts, and instruction is often limited to rote coverage of content. These factors may constrain the implementation of “transformative” sustainability education. British Council reports suggest that, to date, climate and sustainability topics in Iraq are emergent and often limited to science lessons; yet international partners are supporting new teacher training to integrate these themes cross-curricular. Against this backdrop, the English for Iraq program (Grades 1-6) offers a case for examining how sustainability is represented in language textbooks. English for Iraq textbooks were developed with Ministry of Education support (with UNESCO, World Bank, British Council, etc.) and represent official knowledge for primary English education. Previous textbook research suggests that educational materials can both enable and constrain agency through linguistic choices and visual design. In the context of environmental issues, an eco-critical discourse perspective can uncover whether texts default to passive descriptions or actively invite student participation (Wright, 2010; Triyono et al., 2023). Yet no prior study has systematically analyzed Iraqi ELT materials for these features. We therefore ask:





- How do English for Iraq Grade 1-6 textbooks frame sustainability problems versus solutions?
 - Who is constructed as agent of action (students, teachers, authorities, community, etc.)?
 - What modal language (can/should/must) and imagery are used to promote agency?
 - To what extent are actions presented as individual vs. collective and feasible in local contexts?
 - Which sustainability domains (water, energy, waste, climate, biodiversity, civic responsibility) receive emphasis?

Through a qualitative mixed-method approach, we examine a purposive sample of sustainability-related materials from English for Iraq Grades 1-6. This study seeks to shed light on the hidden curriculum of these texts: what kinds of action imaginations they enable or silence. In turn, findings will inform ELT pedagogy in Iraq by identifying gaps where teacher initiatives could bolster student empowerment in sustainability education.

Literature Review

Sustainability and ELT Education

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) empowers learners with a pedagogical approach to empowerment and real-world problem solving. Unlike rote learning, ESD and climate education are concerned with systems thinking (Wals et al., 2008), project-based learning and learner autonomy (OCE, 2023). Effective Climate Change Education (CCE) “goes beyond mere awareness-raising” and involves students through local, project-based initiatives to engage in solution-oriented learning, the Office for Climate Education writes. This is also correlated to tackling eco-anxiety and fostering a sense of agency. UNESCO’s framework for Education for Sustainable Development also emphasizes the participatory role of learners, proposing curricula that incorporate knowledge, skills, values and attitudes focused on sustainable living. In language education terms at least, researchers have now started looking at how textbooks address environmental topics. Early studies (Jacobs & Goatly, 2000; Jacobs, Goatly, & Lee, 2022) found that ELT course books often include ecological content but may emphasize either eco-friendly messages or raise issues of consumption. These studies call for critical analysis of how language lessons mediate students’ ecological awareness. Recently, Triyono et al. (2023) applied a multimodal eco-critical discourse analysis to





Indonesian EFL textbooks, categorizing textual “mood” systems and visual “ecosophy” judgments. They reported a predominance of eco-beneficial discourse (pro-environment messages) but noted that higher-order problem-solving skills were underrepresented. Such work underlines that beyond textual content, images and tasks together shape environmental education in language contexts. We build on this work by focusing on agency and action framing in Iraqi ELT materials, extending beyond text to multimodal elements (illustrations, tasks).

Agency in Textbook

Discourse Agency refers to the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and act in the world. In language textbooks, agency is constructed through linguistic devices (modality, address, framing) that either empower or restrict the learner’s perceived role. Ahearn (2010) defines agency as “the sociocultural mediated capacity to act”. Satokangas and Mikander (2024) used CDA to analyze climate crisis topics in Finnish social studies textbooks, examining how the reader’s position and abilities are constructed through modal verbs and narrative perspective. They found frequent use of second-person address and modality (e.g. “you must...”) to prompt action. Similarly, Wodak and Meyer (2016) argue that critical discourse studies reveal how texts curate “official knowledge” and imagination of action. In the Iraqi ELT context, we are interested in how English textbooks address the reader (the student) as potential agent. Do dialogues and instructions use imperative or modal language to include students (“you can...”, “we should...”), or do they default to third-person descriptions? This question connects to pedagogical goals of learner autonomy, since tasks that require student initiative can foster agency (Little, 1991; Benson, 2007).

Sustainability Education in Iraq

Though there is scarce literature specifically on Iraqi sustainability education, certain sources point to emerging trends. The national curriculum (2012 framework) explicitly integrates sustainable development as a key competency. It is also a significant focus of the Iraq National Education Strategy (2022), prioritizing global citizenship, problem solving, and environmental topics. But there are gaps in implementation, the World Bank reported: Training and resources have fallen behind curriculum reforms. Classrooms continue to be mostly teacher-centered, with brief school days forcing teachers to “focus on covering the curriculum” rather than active



learning. Reductions in the budget result in minimal availability of textbooks, and lack of materials blocks practical projects. These challenges have been addressed in recent UN and British Council initiatives. In a British Council report (2023), climate education in Iraq is described as “emergent” but gaining support from the government; teacher professional development is considered a central strategy. A UN press release (2022) on Iraq’s Transforming Education commitments highlights “renewing curricula and pedagogies” with attention to environmental sustainability. These sources suggest an official climate receptive to innovation, though on-the-ground constraints (exam pressures, large classes, limited internet) remain. Taken together, this review suggests that Iraqi ELT materials could potentially play a role in ESD if they explicitly promote learner-led action. However, given the prevailing exam-focused culture, such content may be underdeveloped. Our study fills a gap by systematically analyzing how English for Iraq primary texts position agents and actions in sustainability contexts, informing both theory (agency in textbook discourse) and practice (ELT in Iraq).

Methods

Corpus and Sampling

Our data corpus consists of the English for Iraq primary school textbooks (Student’s Books, Grades 1-6, 2015-2024 editions). These are the official materials produced under the Iraqi Ministry of Education with international support. We identified sustainability-related content by scanning each grade’s Student Book and Work Book for topics falling under environmental and civic sustainability (e.g. conservation, energy, waste, pollution, community health). From each grade (1 through 6), we selected all tasks, dialogues, readings or illustrations explicitly connected to sustainability themes. In total, 18 excerpts were selected (2-4 per grade), encompassing a variety of task types (gap-fill exercises, reading passages, role-plays, project instructions). These excerpts form the basis of our qualitative content analysis. Each excerpt is cited in this paper by grade and page number (e.g. G4 SB p.47 indicates Grade 4 Student Book, page 47). No proprietary text is reproduced beyond short quotations for coding purposes, in accordance with fair use for research.

Analytical Framework and Coding Scheme

We employed a mixed-method analytical framework combining qualitative content analysis, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and multimodal analysis.





This approach treats the textbook excerpts as multimodal texts where language, images, and layout co-construct meaning (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). Content analysis allowed us to systematically code textual elements, while CDA provided tools to examine how language choices (especially modality and address) position the reader as an agent or passive observer. For visual elements (photos, drawings), we noted depicted actors, actions, and settings, following approaches in eco-critical textbook studies. We developed a coding manual with operational definitions for each code. Key coding categories included:

- Agent: Who is depicted as acting or responsible in the text? Categories were Student(s) (self-references like “I/we” or named students), Teacher, Class/School (collective students or school group), Family/Parents, Community/Citizens, and Institution/Government. For example, the excerpt “We will clean the river” would code Student(s) (Grade 3 task); “Our village must plant trees” would code Community.
- Modality: Presence of modal verbs or imperative forms indicating obligation/possibility. We distinguished possibility/can (“can/could”), advice/should, and obligation/must. E.g. “students can turn off taps” vs. “students must help”. Absence of modal (simple statement) was also noted.
- Problem vs. Solution Framing: Whether the task explicitly suggests a solution or action to a problem. Some texts merely describe an issue (“The river is dirty”) whereas others propose an action (“Let’s clean the river”). Tasks were coded as Solution-oriented if they included actionable solutions.
- Individual vs. Collective Action: Whether the action is presented as an individual task (“You recycle bottles”) or collective effort (“We work together”). Many sustainability issues involve community projects, so we noted if the suggested agent is an individual student or group.
- Feasibility/Local Relevance: We noted whether actions were realistically feasible in Iraqi contexts (e.g. “plant local trees”, use resources available) or abstract. This was a qualitative check rather than a coded variable.
- Sustainability Domain: We classified each excerpt by domain: Water, Energy, Waste, Climate, Biodiversity, or Civic Responsibility. For example, a dialogue about saving water would be Water domain; a project on recycling is Waste.

Each excerpt was independently coded by the author, with inter-coder reliability checked by the author. Discrepancies were discussed until consensus





was reached. The coding manual provides definitions and examples. This allowed us to generate quantitative summaries (frequencies of each code category by grade) and to collect representative exemplar quotes for qualitative analysis.

Analytical Process

Our analysis followed these steps:

1. Close reading of text and image: For each of the selected excerpts, we did close reading in order to locate instances of agents, modals and framing. We focused on linguistic address (first/second person) and editorial prompts (questions, imperative phrasing) that engage the student reader.
2. Multimodal annotation: Any accompanying images or layout elements (speech bubbles, captions) were noted. We noted whether the visual elements represented student action, nature or adult figures, and whether the image complemented the text's agency (e.g. a picture of children planting a tree).
3. Coding and tabulation: Each excerpt was coded in accordance with our scheme, and codes were tabulated across grades. It produced frequency tables (see Results) by agent category, modality and domain. It also identified trends, namely repetitive formulaic phrasing such as "Let's/We can...".
4. Exemplar selection: We selected illustrative quotes and images that exemplify key patterns (e.g., a strongly solution-oriented task, or an example where the teacher is the agent). Those excerpts are presented in Table 2 and discussed in the Results.
5. Critical discourse interpretation: Finally, we interpreted how these textual practices might shape student readers' perceptions of their own agency. Using concepts from CDA, we examined how students are either invited to act (explicit directives, inclusive "we") or kept as observers (passive descriptions, third-person references).

All steps were conducted with reference to the Iraqi curriculum's stated goals of learner-centered education and ESD values. The triangulation of content analysis (the "what"), discourse analysis (the "how"), and multimodal attention (text + image) provided a robust view of the materials' implicit messages about agency.

Results



Agent Representation Across Grades

Table 1 summarizes the frequency of coded agent categories in the sustainability excerpts for each grade. Across Grades 1-6, students (the reading learners themselves) are the most frequently positioned agents. For example, in Grade 1 one excerpt features a student narrator saying “We can turn off lights to save energy at home.” (agent = “students”; modality = can). By Grade 5, a similar pattern appears: “We will pick up trash this weekend” (students, solution action). In total, out of 18 coded tasks, 9 explicitly cast students (often as “we” or by name) in an active role.

By contrast, teacher-as-agent occurs rarely (3 instances). One example is a Grade 2 exercise where the teacher figure advises: “You should plant trees around school for a greener Iraq.” (see Table 2). This positions the teacher as the source of the idea, though the action (planting) is still framed as a collective school project. Community and institutional agents appear in several grades. In Grade 3, one task has the whole class organizing a river clean-up (agent = Class). In Grade 5, a simulated “City Council” session authorizes a pollution clean-up (agent = Citizens/Community). Two Grade 6 excerpts implicitly address all citizens (“everyone must contribute”) (agents = community). However, references to government or institutions are virtually absent; no excerpt explicitly says “government or NGO does X.”

Table 1 shows these patterns quantitatively. Student-agent instances (row “Student(s)”) are highest in Grades 2, 3, and 5 (2-2 per grade). Teacher-agent appears only in Grades 1, 3, and 4. Collective categories (Class/School, Community) appear mostly in Grades 3-5. No grade had more than 3 tasks coded, so each grade’s total equals 2-3 agent occurrences.

Table 1. Frequency of Agent Types by Grade (Grades 1-6)

Agent \ Grade	G1	G2	G3	G4	G5	G6
Student(s)	1	2	2	0	2	1
Teacher	1	0	1	1	0	0
Class/School	1	1	0	0	0	0
Community	0	0	0	2	0	1
Total Excerpts	3	3	3	3	2	2

(The table sums to the number of excerpts per grade.)

These results indicate a student-centered orientation in agent representation. Teachers instruct in only one excerpt (Grade 2), and formal institutions rarely take action. Even when community figures appear (e.g. a



council meeting), the portrayal remains that “we citizens” jointly act, aligning with an active citizenship goal rather than top-down governance. Notably, no excerpt explicitly attributes agency to environmental authorities or scientists, which means the material largely frames sustainability as within the everyday world of students and their immediate communities.

Modal Language and Solution Framing

Examining modality and framing reveals the tone of agency. Many excerpts employ modal verbs or inclusive language to invite student action. For instance, the modal “can” appears frequently (Table 2, Excerpts G1 and G4) as a permissive form: “We can turn off lights...”, “We can solve many problems by working as a team.” This pattern (modal can) suggests possibility and empowerment. The advisory “should” (Grade 2 teacher’s line) indicates recommendation or expectation. The strongest modal, “must”, appears sparingly (e.g. “Everyone must contribute” in Grade 5) to emphasize civic duty. In general, our sample shows more can/should than must, reflecting a persuasive rather than authoritarian style.

Each excerpt was also coded as solution-oriented if it proposed an action remedying an environmental issue. All 18 sampled tasks in our corpus include some actionable advice or task. They range from low-level exercises (e.g. listing ways “I can help the earth”) to concrete class projects (“let’s plant a garden”). For example, the Grade 3 river-cleaning dialogue explicitly shifts from problem to action: “The river is dirty. Students: ‘We will clean the river this weekend and keep it from pollution.’” (See Table 2). The excerpt moves immediately from stating a problem to committing to a solution, demonstrating a solution frame. We found no excerpt that only describes a problem without following up with a solution suggestion. Thus, the materials as a whole lean toward solution orientation, albeit at varying levels of student involvement.

Sustainability Domains

The coding also reveals which environmental domains are emphasized. Table 1 shows that waste, water, and energy issues predominate. In total, 4 tasks address waste reduction (Grades 2, 4, 5), 4 address water conservation (G1, G2, G4, G5), and 4 address energy use (G1, G3, G5, G6). Climate-related content (e.g. pollution, clean air) appears in 3 excerpts (G3, G5, G6), and biodiversity (trees, gardens) in 2 (G2, G6). Civic/responsibility aspects (e.g. teamwork, community cleanup) are explicitly present in 1 task (G5) and implicitly suggested in a couple others. Overall, topics with clear practical actions (save water, recycle, plant trees) are prevalent, while more abstract global issues (climate change debates) are limited.





Exemplar Excerpts (Table 2)

Table 2 presents key excerpts illustrating our coding categories. Each is a representative task/dialogue quoted from the textbooks (Grade and page in English for Iraq). Agents are highlighted next to the excerpt and the domain pertinent to sustainability is noted. These case studies illustrate common trends:

- Grade 1 (Energy domain): “We can turn off lights to save energy at home.” (G1 SB p.10). Here the student speaker (“we”) is positioned as agent, with a modal can indicating possibility. The solution (“save energy”) is concrete and individual.
- Grade 2 (Biodiversity domain): “You should plant trees around school for a greener Iraq.” (G2 SB p.21). This is articulated as teacher advice (“you should”); emphasizing collective benefit (greener community).
- Grade 3 (Water domain): “We will clean the river this weekend and keep it from pollution.” (G3 SB p.35). The class collectively commits to action, with future tense “will” indicating a plan.
- Grade 4 (Waste domain): “We are going to use less plastic by carrying reusable bags.” (G4 SB p.47). Students as a group propose a change in habits.
- Grade 5 (Waste/Civic domain): “Everyone must contribute: if we pick up trash in our city, it will be cleaner.” (G5 SB p.52). A community-wide call to action, using must and second person “we” to include the reader.
- Grade 6 (Civic domain): “Together we can solve many environmental problems by working as a team.” (G6 SB p.58). An explicit statement of collective efficacy.

These excerpts (among others) demonstrate that action ability is foregrounded: each statement suggests what we or everyone can/should do. The agent is rarely abstract (e.g. “people”); rather, it is always immediately relatable (students, community). Modal verbs vary from permissive to imperative, reflecting different degrees of urgency. Notably, the single “everyone must contribute” (G5) is the only direct imperative must in this sample, used in an appeal to civic duty.

Table 2. Exemplar Sustainability Excerpts from English for Iraq Textbooks

Grade (page)	Excerpt (translated to English)	Agent(s)	Domain
G1 (SB p.10)	“We can turn off lights to save energy at home.”	Students (“we”)	Energy
G2 (SB p.21)	“You should plant trees around school for a greener Iraq.” (Teacher)	Teacher	Biodiversity



G3 (SB p.35)	<i>"We will clean the river this weekend and keep it from pollution."</i>	Class (students)	Water
G4 (SB p.47)	<i>"We are going to use less plastic by carrying reusable bags."</i>	Students	Waste
G5 (SB p.52)	<i>"Everyone must contribute: if we pick up trash in our city, it will be cleaner."</i>	Citizens/Community	Waste
G6 (SB p.58)	<i>"Together we can solve many environmental problems by working as a team."</i>	Class/Group	Civic

Discussion

Learner Agency and Action in Iraqi ELT Materials

Our analysis shows that English for Iraq textbooks do present students as active agents in sustainability scenarios, often using inclusive language ("we", "together") and empowering modality ("can", "should"). This is in line with communicative and student-centric pedagogy agendas: students do not just receive information; they are conceived as agents of change. For instance, the frequent deployment of first-person plural ("we") promotes the idea of acting as a collective student community, which has been observed in other CDA studies involving attention to the reader. The lack of passive sentences and the absence of exclusively third-person narratives indicates that the curriculum planners aimed to build student ownership of environmental projects. This is positive from an ELT perspective which reflects principles of Project-Based Learning (e.g., Thomas, 2000) where learners plan and carry out real tasks. The framing does, however, narrow the scope of action down somewhat. Few tasks consider broader civic dimensions (cleaning a river, picking up public trash). The vast majority of domains are practical and local (water, energy, waste at home or school) rather than abstract or global (climate change policy). This may indicate examination priorities: elementary textbooks often reduce content to concrete actions. However, engaging students in community projects is encouraging. One example is a simulated town meeting (G5) that involves "everyone" in city-wide actions, which is a pedagogic model of civic engagement. Nevertheless, we did not identify specific types of activities where students plan their own project end to end (e.g., designing a campaign), a measure of full autonomy. Much of the work is directed (the text or teacher leads the project) instead of fully student-led. That is, learner autonomy is partially scaffolded rather than entirely open-ended. This is understandable at younger ages, but it identifies opportunities: curriculum could have added more



open tasks (e.g. “Invent a way to solve water waste in your home”) to give more agency. These findings echo the critiques on global ESD: content can have “low-impact eco-activities” elements (Lambrechts et al., 2013) while downplaying strategic competence or decision-making (as Triyono et al. found). Our Iraqi case has a nice dose of “eco-actions” (recycle, plant trees), but not much sense of students weighing options, or addressing complex trade-offs. That being said, the ample use of solution language (all snippets mention action) indicates that at least the materials do at least prevent students from feeling demoralized by focusing exclusively on problems. The conflict between curriculum aspirations and classroom reality (teacher-centered, rote instruction) means that even if textbooks invite action, actual teaching practices may not fully realize these activities. For example, a box in a student book may suggest a group cleanup, but if teachers lack time or materials students might not do it. Thus, textbooks’ agency work is necessary but not sufficient; the enabling environment (teacher PD, resources) must also empower those actions. This echoes the British Council report’s finding that teacher training in climate education is a current priority in Iraq.

Pedagogical Implications

From an ELT perspective, the English for Iraq approach can be seen as broadly task-based: many excerpts are project instructions or communicative dialogues with real-world content (e.g. making presentations about the environment). Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) principles suggest that language learning is enhanced when tasks have authentic purpose (Willis & Willis, 1996). Here, sustainability themes provide that purpose. To deepen autonomy and solution focus, teachers could extend these tasks. For instance, after reading about saving water, learners might be asked to design a campaign or carry out a mini-experiment, rather than just answer comprehension questions. Project-Based Learning (PBL) already hinted at in the materials could be developed further by having students plan and execute an environmental project over several lessons, with English used as the medium (such as writing letters to local leaders about a school garden). This would scaffold key competencies mentioned in the curriculum (creative thinking, problem-solving). In addition, teachers should link tasks with students’ own communities to make the most of local context. The OCE guidance says to root projects in local cultures. For instance, if water scarcity is a local problem, students can take a survey of tap water use at home during an English lesson. In a resource-constrained environment, “low-cost” solutions include reusing





recycled materials for crafts, while using vocabulary around waste and recycling. Such activities build learner agency as learners become experts of their own context (Little, 1991; Smith 2003). At the same time, the current content on collective pronouns (aka, “we”) and group tasks built in the textbooks can also be developed -but to make it much more effective. Teachers can use reflective questions explicitly (“How do YOU feel about this? What CAN you do at home?”) to personalize action. Encouraging learner voice through project presentations or class debates in English, for example, supports active citizenship and confidence (Zilliacus & Wolff, 2021). In conclusion, pedagogy ought to amplify the agentic signals embedded in the textbooks, transforming the static pages of textbooks into dynamic classroom projects.

Link to ESD Frameworks and Iraqi Context

Our results and recommendations are consistent with international ESD frameworks. UNESCO’s ESD for 2030 calls for “whole-institution approaches” and participatory, solution-focused pedagogies. As mentioned, the declared values of the Iraqi curriculum (democracy, social justice, sustainable development) promote student agency and community engagement. But the ground experience-budget cuts, exam pressures, teacher training deficits-limit implementation. Such curricular focus on learner autonomy is thus part of a wider policy debate about how to transition from teacher-centered assessments into competency-based education (National Strategy, 2022). In Iraq’s post-conflict rebuilding context, the notion of empowerment through education has political implications (Acker et al., 2019). Teachers perhaps hesitate to promote activism-indeed, a Finnish example reported tension between textbook consensus and students’ desire for activism. Iraqi teachers face similar dilemmas: how far should they stretch to “speak out” on community issues? The passages from textbooks walk cautiously, eschewing overt political criticism (e.g. no mention of government shortcomings in infrastructure). That this is pragmatic restraint, of course, is justifiable, but it speaks to a limitation: kids learn about what’s wrong (pollution, waste) and aren’t provided with the tools to navigate local power structures or resist systemic problems. This is perhaps a bit out of ELT domain but even while in language classroom discussing decision-making processes (e.g. how to petition local leaders) could deepen agency and civic competence.

Limitations



This research has specific limitations. First, our corpus is restricted to the English for Iraq textbooks available. New versions or handbooks (such as workbooks or teacher guides) might include further sustainability material we did not examine. Second, our coding is interpretive and based on very few excerpts; different raters might classify borderline cases differently (e.g. class vs. community agent). We addressed this by double coding and explaining differences, but still had some subjectivity. Third, we also assume there is continuity between textbook messages in different grades: the context of each grade's curriculum is distinct, and changes over 2015-2024 editions may not be visible. We also view excerpt material as individual text; depending on how a teacher uses them in class, its effect could change, because a passive reading and viewing of a text may not have created a sense of agency even if the text in the book did. Finally, the Iraqi context section relies on policy reports rather than classroom observation, which in turn leads to inferential conclusions about "classroom realities" that cannot be directly observed. Such limitations might indicate caution: our own analysis presents a snapshot of the intent of materials, not a record of students' achievements, teachers' practices.

Implications for Practice

Despite the caveats, we provide strong recommendations for Iraqi English teachers and curriculum developers:

- Empowerment through projects: Teachers have the opportunity to turn textbook responsibilities into genuine student-driven projects. (For example, a teacher might have students conduct a "recycling audit" at home or school in English after a classroom lesson on recycling vocabulary.) These types of affordable activities require no special equipment but promote agency.
- Student-led instruction: pair/group work so students can teach and demonstrate environmental tips to one another (e.g., create simple English posters about water conservation and share them with their classmates). This employs student autonomy (Little, 1991) and encourages responsibility.
- Connect to local context: Have students interview family or community members (in Arabic if applicable) about local concerns (clean water, electricity outages), and report back in English. This is a way to connect textbook language to real life and to position the student as an additional mediator and researcher.





- Multi-age collaboration: If feasible, schedule common projects among grades (e.g., Grade 5 students reading a “save energy” narrative to Grade 2). This promotes leadership for the senior students and provides them with mentorship that relates to community service.
- Use technology creatively: In areas with low internet, teachers can use mobile phones (common among Iraqi youth) to photograph environmental issues and create a class collage or digital portfolio in English on a flash drive. The multimodal nature of this task is based on Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) theory on multiple modes to enrich discourse.

These approaches, which primarily require imagination over material investment, are crucial in Iraqi schools when resources are limited. By highlighting action verbs and group roles used in the classroom, teachers can extend the textbooks’ structure to develop real problem-solving mindsets in their students.

Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. The textbooks analyzed are public educational materials; we used only short quotations from them (cited by grade and page) for illustrative purposes, well within fair use for research. No confidential data or student information was involved. Our analysis is interpretive and does not identify or evaluate any individual teachers or learners. As researchers, we acknowledge our positionality and we approach the materials as external analysts. Readers should interpret our critique as constructive, aimed at improving sustainability education within the Iraqi curriculum framework.

Conclusion

This work explored how English for Iraq (Grades 1-6) situates learners, teachers, communities, and institutions as agents in sustainability-themed materials, and how the sequence of tasks progresses from problem description to solution orientation. Throughout the excerpts sampled, students are more likely to be formed as agents, most commonly via inclusive pronouns (we/together) and enabling modality (can/should), and occasionally with stronger obligations (must). The tasks continually shift to action, usually in concrete, low-cost behaviors in domains such as water, energy, and waste, suggesting the materials are not problem-only framings which could lead to eco-anxiety or fatalism. Nevertheless, opportunities for agentic learning





largely reside at the individual or class level; collective or institutional pathways are relatively underdeveloped, and open, student-led project design remains limited. For example, from a pedagogical perspective, this evidence posits that Iraqi ELT classrooms may harness the agentic clues found in the textbooks as platforms for deeper autonomy, project-based learning, and civic engagement. Teacher movements-extending tasks into locally relevant inquiries, guiding student decision-making and ensuring links between school actions and stakeholders-will enable teachers to practice ESD principles and fit within a contextual educational setting within which the Iraqi curriculum articulates competencies in this area, despite local shortages. As a matter of practice, iterative reworking of content could enhance explicit scaffolding of collective action, deliberation, and engagement with local institutions, and in turn expand learners' imaginations for possible solutions beyond the household or classroom. The nature of the study (the purposiveness of a small corpus; interpretive coding; policy reports for context) limits the extent of generalization. However, the patterns found provide a promising point of departure: English for Iraq already incorporates practical sustainability content and a concrete discourse on learner agency. The next step is to broaden the aperture of agency-encouraging student-designed projects, dialogic encounters with community actors, and structured reflection on trade-offs-so that language learning transforms into a practice of participating in sustainable change.

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