

A Decadal Systematic Review of Sustainability Integration into English Language Teaching

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Abstract

As part of its 2030 Agenda implementation, UNESCO has introduced the Education for Sustainable Development roadmap, an initiative that advocates integrating sustainability at institutional levels, educational settings, and professional development aspects. Subsequently, several initiatives have been investigated and reported regarding the extent to which this integration is achieved, the challenges perceived, and the gaps identified. Although English Language Teaching is pivotal in sustainability teaching as the English language is the lingua franca of all sustainability domains and communication, there is a paucity of research regarding how sustainability is integrated in the ELT setting. This study reviews the literature on integrating sustainability in English Language Teaching that has been published since the launch of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals by the United Nations in 2015 and up to the end of 2025, forming a decade of scholarly work on the topic. Using a mixed-methods systematic review design guided by PRISMA procedures, with qualitative and quantitative analysis conducted in MAXQDA across 64 studies, the study yielded findings that point to an uneven body of literature that has increased noticeably in the last three years, with research concentrated mainly in Japan, China, Spain, Iran, Indonesia, and other upper-middle- and high-income contexts. Further, the review demonstrates that sustainability integration into English Language Teaching is mostly operationalized through different approaches, concentrated mostly in higher education settings, and follows three major patterns. Thematic coverage was dominated by sustainability awareness, global citizenship, and gender equality, while human rights, culture of peace, and cultural diversity received comparatively limited attention. With implications and recommendations based on these findings, the review contributes to enhancing the role of English Language Teaching as a transformative tool for achieving quality education.

Keywords: ELT, ESD, SDG 4, Quality Education, Sustainability Education

1. Introduction

A full decade has passed since the launch of the United Nations' (UN) 2030 agenda for sustainable development in September 2015, which adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Martin, 2015). Since then, SDGs have been incorporated into various aspects of life, including social, cultural, and policy dimensions, to ensure a dignified life for responsible and smart citizens who care for the environment and resources, and live in harmony with mutual cultural understanding. SDG 4 focuses particularly on Quality Education, which is operationalized by the UN as the education that fosters sustainability in educational contexts, promoting gender equality, reinforcing the culture of peace and human rights, and preparing graduates who are not only educated but also committed to sustainable development in practice (Wajid, 2025).

The call to apply SDG 4 was reinforced five years later by the UNESCO practice roadmap (UNESCO, 2020) that encourages the implementation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). According to the roadmap, the contemporary education system should equip learners with knowledge, skills, and values that enable them to make informed decisions and take actions pertaining to environmental issues, resource sustainability, social equity, and human dignity. These goals are further supported by mutual cultural understandings and awareness of local culture and community potential that contribute to materializing these concepts.

These principles were accompanied by scholarly inquiries into why curriculum designers and textbook developers had inadequately addressed sustainability and social equity topics, such as gender issues, despite their centrality to the UN SDGs (Ruiz-Cecilia et al., 2020), which entails that the implementation of UNESCO's advocacy for ESD is still in preliminary stages and does not meet the expectations (Astawa et al., 2024). Essa and Harvey (2022) further detailed this unfortunate situation as resulting in the absence of well-defined strategic plans for integrating UN SDGs, particularly SDG 4, into education systems. Institutional statistics on SDG implementation similarly indicate "insufficient global data" on ESD implementation, as evidenced by the UN SDG Report (2025) (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2025, p. 44)

To systematically address this gap, evidence from reliable sources is essential. Accordingly, a systematic literature review on integrating sustainability into educational systems, drawing from trustworthy, relevant scholarship, can offer substantial benefits for advancing this field. Conducting such a review now is considered appropriate, as it covers a decade of SDG implementation and evaluates the extent to

which sustainability is integrated into curricula, syllabi, and tasks during a period considered sufficient for both implementation and evaluation.

The present research focuses primarily on English Language Teaching (ELT) since the English language serves as the main lingua franca across nearly all sustainability-related domains (Rada, 2022) and plays a central role in promoting sustainability-related values and practices within global educational contexts (Rönhild et al., 2023). Sustainability topics help raise students' awareness of important issues, but in EFL settings, lessons centered on these topics often do not motivate students to go beyond learning English. (Jodoin & Singer, 2018). Reflecting scholars' findings about this issue is therefore of particular significance for the ELT education setting. Additionally, selecting SDG 4 aims to encompass all sustainability issues and measure their reflection in curricula. This makes the review grounded on specific standards and boundaries, and provides findings based on dimensions articulated by the UN and supported by UNESCO's ESD roadmap, making them of high institutional validity.

The aim of this systematic review is to examine how sustainability, as operationalized through SDG 4.7, has been integrated into ELT contexts in research published between 2015 and 2025.

To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following objectives:

1. To identify the SDG 4, Target 7 (Hereafter SDG 4.7) themes most frequently addressed in ELT research.
2. To examine co-occurrence among sustainability dimensions across the reviewed studies.
3. To identify the educational contexts and curriculum integration approaches represented in the literature.
4. To synthesize the major patterns through which sustainability integration has been conceptualized and implemented in ELT research.

Based on these objectives, the study addresses the following research question:

RQ1: How has sustainability integration into ELT been addressed by the literature published in 2015 – 2025?

The research findings are expected to provide research-based implications for curriculum designers, teachers, and researchers by showing exemplary practices, potential gaps, and areas for improvement.

2. Material and Method

2.1 Research Design

This study follows a mixed-methods systematic review design to explore how SDG 4.7 themes have been integrated into ELT settings, including specific syllabi, broad curricular focus, and prescribed materials and tasks as reviewed or suggested by the published literature. It investigates the situation at different educational levels and integration patterns. The review combines quantitative and qualitative procedures utilizing Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDA).

2.2 Software

This study utilized MAXQDA (version 26), which has been proven to be a robust, internationally respected tool with an easy-to-use interface and accessible support systems and resources (Star et al., 2025). MAXQDA has recently been used for evaluative text analysis in various research studies (Gizzi & Rädiker, 2021), in which relevant documents are uploaded to the software and text segments are coded using a coding system. It provides a set of statistical and visual tools that enable both quantitative and qualitative analysis. For the current study, the researcher used the code and document systems, code and document variables, and code relations. The quantitative output was also processed by extra statistical and visualization tools, such as Microsoft Excel® and the Datawrapper.de online visualization tool, when it was not possible to perform the required analysis or visualization in MAXQDA.

2.3 Data Sources and Search Strategy

To get a broad, representative, high-quality dataset for the study, the researcher utilized two major international indexing databases: Scopus and the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection. They were also used to ensure comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals in language education, curriculum studies, and interdisciplinary sustainability research. Search was conducted using controlled keywords and Boolean operators related to sustainability, SDG 4.7, and ELT contexts. The search focused on three core constructs, which are (1) Sustainability and SDG 4-related dimensions, (2) English language education contexts, and (3) curriculum, syllabus, or task/material educational design.

Advanced search queries were developed and adapted to each database's syntax requirements. Boolean operators and phrase searching were used to combine sustainability-related terms (e.g., sustainable development, SDG 4, education for sustainable development, global citizenship, gender equality), language education identifiers (e.g., EFL, ESL, TESOL, EAP, ESP), and curriculum-related descriptors (e.g., syllabus, curriculum, course design, material, and tasks). To filter the results, the search was limited to: Peer-reviewed journal articles, Publications in English, and Publication years from 2015 to January 1, 2026. All search results were exported in Excel format with full bibliographic records, including titles, abstracts, keywords, and indexing information, to support systematic screening, deduplication, and qualitative analysis.

2.4 Study Identification, Screening, and Inclusion

The study selection process followed the principles of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Pag et al., 2021) to identify, select, and include the targeted studies. The initial search identified 211 records from Scopus and 71 from WoS, totaling 282 records. Of this initial pool, 49 duplicate records were removed at the database export stage. All remaining 233 records underwent a title-abstract screening process in an Excel environment. During this stage, 168 records were excluded based on predefined eligibility criteria, primarily due to the absence of an explicit sustainability or SDG 4-related focus, lack of relevance to ELT contexts, or a non-curricular orientation. As a result, 65 studies were retained for qualitative analysis. During the subsequent coding phase, an additional study was identified as misaligned with the review focus and was excluded. The final analytical corpus, therefore, consisted of 64 studies (38 studies from Scopus and 26 from WOS), which were subjected to qualitative thematic analysis using MAXQDA software and coding system. The workflow of the processes is reported in Figure 1 below as guided by the PRISMA reporting standards (Haddaway et al., 2022).

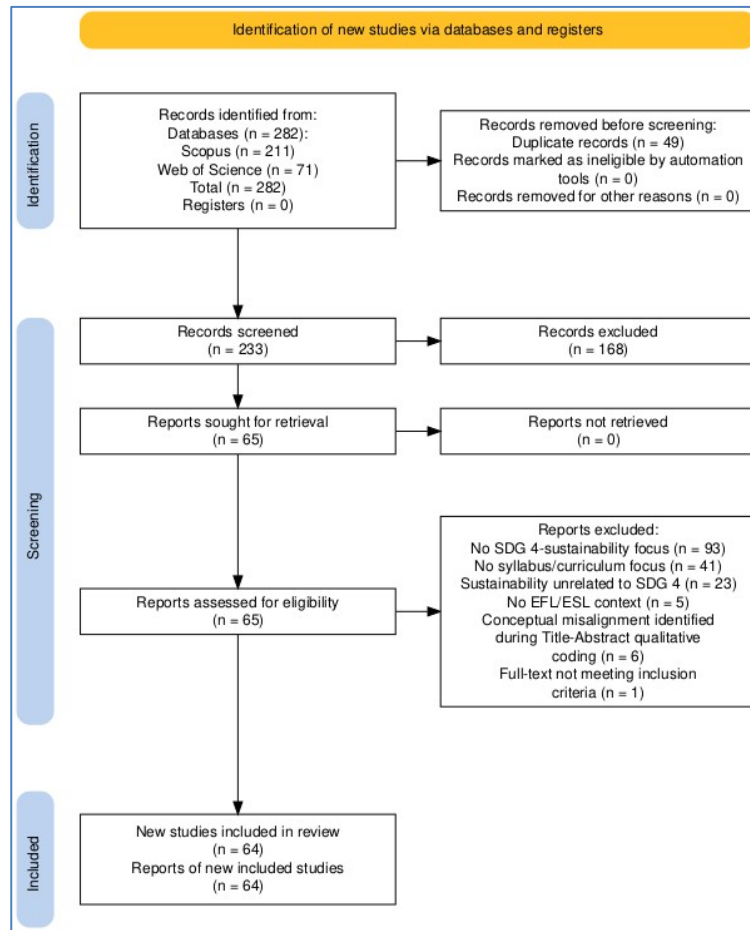


Figure 1. PRISMA Workflow for the Included Studies

2.5 Data Extraction and Organization

For all included studies, bibliographic data was systematically extracted into a structured Excel workbook. Extracted fields included Title, Abstract, Author keywords, Index keywords, Year of publication, Source title, and DOI link. For the final 64 included studies, the researcher used the DOI or web link to get the full article texts. Additional columns were created for SDG 4.7 dimension, Curriculum focus, Educational level, Geographic context, and a column for a short analytic memo to facilitate qualitative analysis. This workbook serves as the main dataset and analysis source for both manual Excel-based screening and MAXQDA-based qualitative analysis.

2.6 Qualitative Coding and Analysis

Qualitative thematic analysis was conducted using MAXQDA (version 26). Each included study was imported as an individual document, with titles and abstracts defined as the unit of analysis and coded separately, but within the same document to preserve contextual integrity and allow accurate thematic identification.

A theory-grounded coding framework was created. The code system is based on the UN's official definition of SDG 4.7. This definition states that by 2030, all member states should ensure that every learner acquires the skills and knowledge needed to foster sustainable development through education tailored for “sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion

of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.” (United Nations, 2015, p. 17). Accordingly, a code system was compiled as shown in Table 1 below to account for the eight specified themes with two codes to assign the segments where each code is present: title or abstract.

Table 1. Code system for MAXQDA qualitative analysis

Theme	Code	Definition – (memo)
Sustainable Development	SusDev	Environmental, economic, or social sustainability goals, including sustainability awareness or long-term societal development, framed as an educational outcome.
Sustainable Lifestyle	SusLif	Responsible consumption, sustainable behaviors, ethical living, or lifestyle choices.
Human Rights	HumRi	Human rights, dignity, equity, justice, or rights-based education.
Gender Equality	GenEqu	Gender equality, gender representation, empowerment, or critique of gender bias.
Culture of Peace	CulPea	Peace education, conflict resolution, tolerance, non-violence, or social harmony.
Global Citizenship	GloCit	Global citizenship, global awareness, international responsibility, or preparation of learners as global citizens.
Culture Diversity	CulDiv	Intercultural understanding, multiculturalism, respect for cultural differences, or diversity awareness in language education.
Culture Contribution to Sustainability	CulCon	Culture as a contributor to sustainability, including preservation of cultural heritage, local knowledge, or cultural values supporting sustainable development

The code system was imported into MAXQDA to mark the unit of the analysis and the SDG 4.7 theme it represents. Accordingly, every instance of the SDG 4.7 theme mentioned was marked. When there is more than one theme addressed by a study, both instances are marked to allow full coverage of the sustainability dimensions and allow mapping their relations. The researcher frequently referred to the article's full text to make informed decisions on the coding process and used the Scopus impact tab to check the mapping of the study to the targeted SDG as coded. However, this process was not possible for the WoS.

These codes mark every instance of the SDG 4 proxies, with memos that clarify their conceptual definition boundaries. Further, the country of study context was coded as a document variable, and a distribution world map was generated by Datawrapper.de, then externally aligned with World Bank income classifications for contextual interpretation. Another document variable for educational level and integration approach to generate visuals regarding their implementation in the corpus. Finally, manual analytic memoing was used to identify patterns related to curriculum orientation, educational level, and geographic focus.

2.7 Analytic Memoing and Synthesis

After the coding process, analytic memos were written for each document to identify patterns, capture interpretive insights, and methodological observations. Coded data and frequency outputs were exported from MAXQDA to an Excel workbook. After that, a column for analytic memoing of each document was added. The memo focuses on the integration pattern in each study. The patterns were aggregated together and used to develop a theory from the raw data into meaningful insights to show the integrative patterns across the included studies. This synthesis aims to show how sustainability is integrated in ELT settings as viewed by the researchers, and how the process is operationalized, conceptualized, and implemented. Based on this synthesis, three integration patterns were identified. Each study was assigned to one category using a categorical document variable. Frequency counts and percentage distributions were generated, and comparative visualization was produced using pie charts to support pattern-level analysis.

3. Results

This study aims to review the literature on how sustainability themes have been integrated into ELT syllabi and curricula, and how they have been presented through various tasks and materials since the launch of the UN SDG initiative in 2015. The study documents were analyzed using CAQDA to generate a quantitative synthesis of publication trends over time and across regions, thematic coverage, education levels, and integration approaches. Moreover, a qualitative synthesis of the integration patterns observed in the corpus, attained through analytic memoing, is presented.

3.1 Quantitative Synthesis of the Included Studies

This subsection reports on the quantitative synthesis of the included studies based on MAXQDA coding and variable-based analyses. It provides an overview of key characteristics of the final corpus, including publication trends, geographic distribution, thematic coverage of SDG 4.7 dimensions, relationships among these dimensions, distribution of education levels, and integration patterns of the included studies.

3.1.1 Publication Trends Over Time

Figure 2 shows the distribution of studies published from 2015 to 2025. The starting year corresponds to the official launch of the 17 SDGs by the UN, and the ending year indicates the approximate decade of publication up to the data collection date.



Figure 2. Distribution of the included studies by publication year (2015–2025)

The earliest publication appeared in 2015, with relatively low and irregular output until 2019. From 2020 onward, the number of studies increased steadily, with a decline in 2022 followed by a notable rise after 2022. The highest number of publications occurred in the most recent years of the review period, indicating growing scholarly attention to integrating SDG 4.7 into English-language education.

3.1.2 Geographical Distribution

Table 2 shows the geographic distribution of the focus of the analyzed studies. It includes countries with more than one study published during the specified period, resulting in 10 countries and 37 studies. An additional 18 studies were published in other countries, with one study per country, while 9 studies did not specify the location context. To further explain the results, the data are mapped using the World by Income classification provided by the World Development Indicator (WDI) database (2024), which the World Bank uses to classify world economies into four income groups for analytical purposes: low, lower-middle, upper-middle, and high income. This classification is used because previous research suggests a relationship between a country's economy and its implementation or targeting of the SDGs.

Table 2. Geographical distribution of the included Studies

Country	Count	Country	Count
Japan	6	Saudi Arabia	3
Spain	5	Turkey	3
China	5	Germany	2
Iran	5	Vietnam	2
Indonesia	4	Poland	2

To enable comparison of the status of income and publishing articles on SDG 4.7 themes, Figure 3 presents the latest WDI world income map.

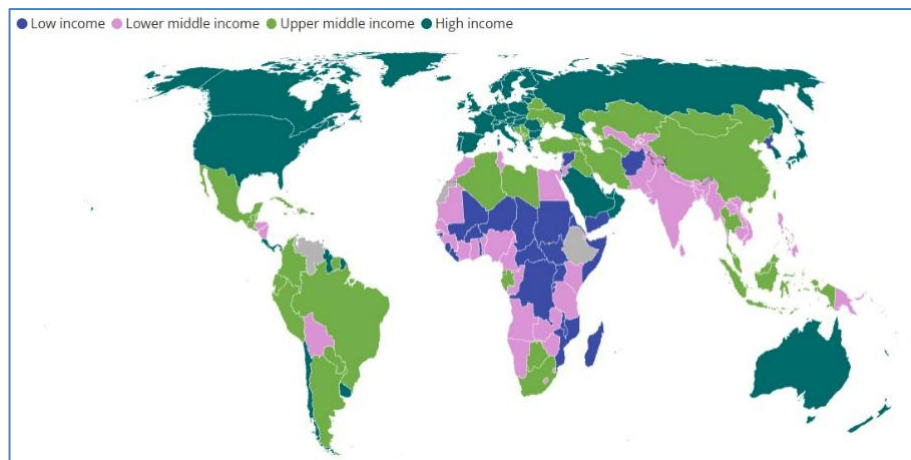


Figure 3. The World-by-Income map 2024. Source: World Bank Group, <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/the-world-by-income-and-region.html>

Table 2 and Figure 3 show that the studies were conducted exclusively in high-income or upper-middle-income countries. The results indicate that Asian countries predominate, with 6 studies in Japan, 5 in China and Iran, 4 in Indonesia, and 3 in Saudi Arabia. Europe came second, with 5 studies in Spain, 3 in Turkey, and 2 in both Poland and Germany. A further 10 studies adopted a global or multi-country perspective, while representation in North and Latin America was limited (n = 1). No studies focused exclusively on African contexts, and nine studies did not specify a geographic focus.

3.1.3 Thematic Coverage

To address the research question, the included studies were coded in MAXQDA using a predefined code system based on SDG 4.7. Code frequency analysis was conducted to identify the relative prominence of SDG 4.7 dimensions across the corpus. Figure 4 below shows the distribution of the themes based on MAXQDA code frequency output.

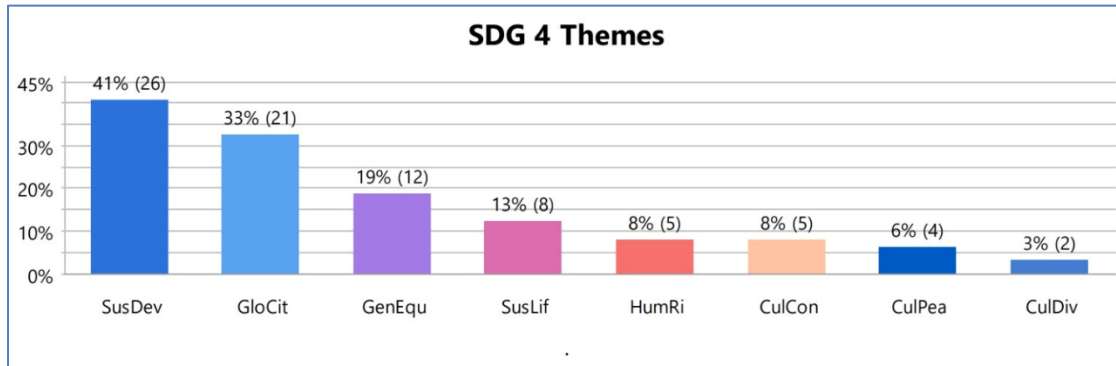


Figure 4. Distribution of SDG 4.7 Themes Across the Included Studies

The analysis, which shows code frequency per document, revealed that Sustainable Development was the most frequently coded dimension as it appeared in 26 documents, which amounts to 41% of the corpus of the studies, followed by Global Citizenship, which appeared in one-third of the corpus, and Gender Equality, which appeared in 12 documents, representing 19% of the studies. Less frequently addressed dimensions included Sustainable Lifestyles (n = 8), Human Rights (n = 5), Culture’s Contribution to Sustainability (n = 5), and Culture of Peace (n = 4). Minimal attention was paid to cultural diversity, with only two studies addressing the theme.

3.1.4 Co-occurrence Patterns among SDG 4.7 Dimensions

To examine how SDG 4.7 dimensions were jointly addressed within the reviewed studies, a code co-occurrence analysis was conducted in MAXQDA. These relationships represent code co-occurrences within individual studies rather than causal or statistical associations between the dimensions.

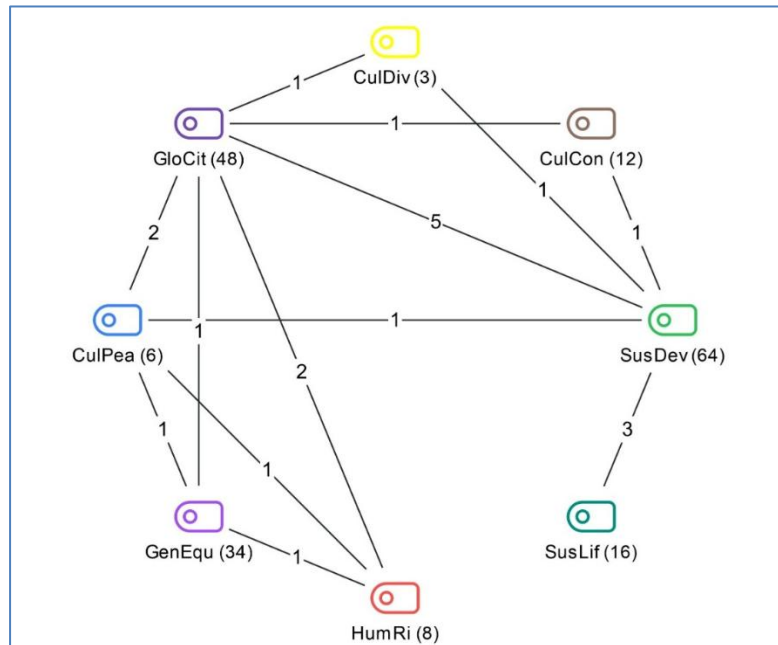


Figure 5. Co-occurrence Patterns Among SDG 4.7 Dimensions Across the Included Studies

As shown in Figure 5, the strongest co-occurrence was observed between Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship, with 5 occurrence cases. Sustainable Development also co-occurred with Sustainable Lifestyles in three studies. Additionally, lower-frequency co-occurrences involving Sustainable Development included Cultural Diversity (n = 1), Culture’s Contribution to Sustainability (n = 1), and Culture of Peace (n = 1).

Global Citizenship co-occurred with several other SDG 4.7 dimensions, including Human Rights (n = 2), Culture of Peace (n = 2), and

Gender Equality (n = 2). Single co-occurrences were identified between Global Citizenship and Cultural Diversity (n = 1) as well as Culture’s Contribution to Sustainability (n = 1).

Lower-frequency co-occurrences were also identified among other SDG 4.7 dimensions. These included Culture of Peace with Human Rights (n = 1), Culture of Peace with Gender Equality (n = 1), and Human Rights with Gender Equality (n = 1).

3.1.5 Education Levels

Regarding educational level, the results show that the study addressed integrating education at various levels, as shown in Figure 6 below.

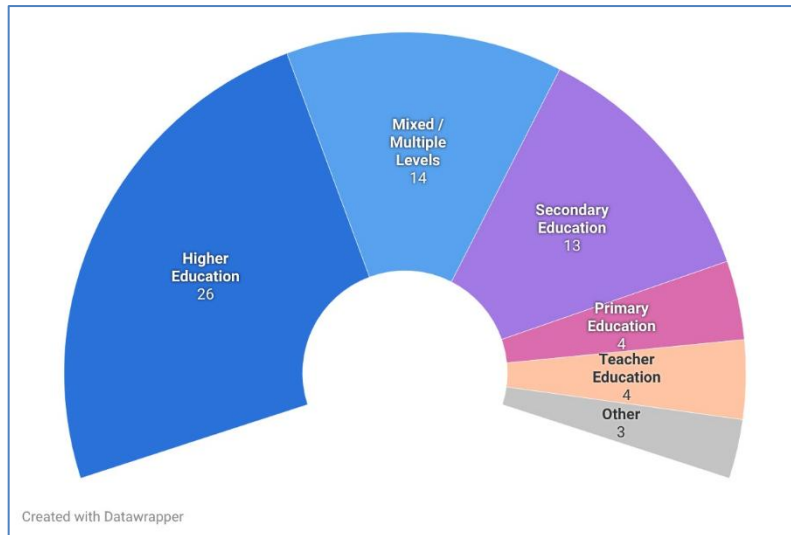


Figure 6. Distribution of Studies by Education Levels

The diagram in Figure 6 shows that most studies focused on higher education contexts (n = 26), followed by secondary education (n = 13). Fewer studies addressed primary education (n = 4) and teacher education settings (n = 4). In addition, 14 studies examined SDG 4 integration across multiple educational levels, while three studies did not specify the educational level.

3.1.6 Integration Approaches

The included studies were further examined according to their curriculum focus to reflect how SDG 4.7 themes were operationalized within English language education. Coding and variable-based analysis in MAXQDA revealed the results displayed in Figure 7.

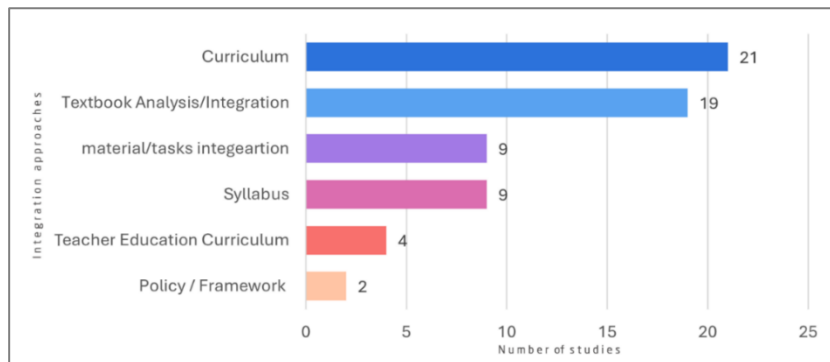


Figure 7. Curriculum Integration Approaches in the Included Studies

The results in Figure 7 revealed that SDG 4.7 integration most frequently occurred at the broader curriculum level (n = 21), followed by textbook analysis or textbook-based integration (n = 19). Other approaches included syllabus-level integration (n = 9) and the incorporation of sustainability-related themes through materials or task-based activities (n = 9). Only a small number of studies engaged with SDG 4.7 in teacher education settings (n = 4) and a policy or framework perspective (n = 2).

3.2 Qualitative Synthesis of the Included Studies

To identify recurring patterns in how SDG 4.7 was addressed across EFL-, ESL-, and ESP-related research, a qualitative synthesis of the included studies, based on analytic memos and coded evidence, was also conducted. The results are reported with a focus on classifying studies according to their dominant mode of SDG 4.7 integration as summarized in Figure 8 below.

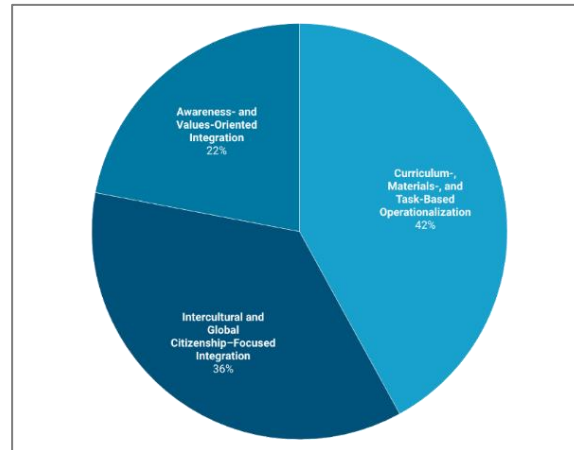


Figure 8. Distribution of Qualitative SDG 4.7 Integration Patterns Across the Included Studies

The results revealed three integration patterns, identified through memo-based comparison and categorization. The most prominent pattern was Curriculum-, Materials-, and Task-Based Operationalization, which accounts for 42% of the included studies, followed by Intercultural and Global Citizenship-Focused Integration, which represents 36% of the corpus. While Awareness- and Values-Oriented Integration appeared as the least frequent pattern. The findings indicate that research on embedding sustainability usually investigates curricular elements, focuses less on the thematic distribution of SDG 4.7 targets, and offers minimal attention to the conceptualization of sustainability among stakeholders in ELT.

4. Discussion

The findings of this systematic review synthesize research on the integration of sustainability into educational systems, with a particular focus on ELT contexts. Overall, the results reveal significant variation in publication trends, thematic emphasis, educational levels, and integration patterns across the reviewed studies. While sustainability-related concepts have long intersected with ELT research, the systematic and explicit alignment with sustainability frameworks, particularly SDG 4.7, has emerged only gradually over the examined period.

4.1 Quantitative Findings

4.1.1 Publication Trends and Temporal Evolution

During the early years of the review period (2015 – 2017), sustainability concerns were addressed in ELT studies only to a limited extent, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Studies from this period, which were rare, often discuss themes related to sustainability, such as global communication, intercultural competence, or ethical awareness; however, no explicit framing within the UN agenda or SDG 4.7 terminology is observed (e.g., Safa et al., 2015). This pattern suggests that sustainability-oriented language education was initially approached implicitly, rather than through a clearly articulated ESD lens. Nevertheless, these studies can be considered the starting point for connecting established themes in ELT, such as intercultural competence, communicative competence, and interculturality, which are deeply rooted in ELT literature prior to the launch of the SDGs initiative.

From approximately 2018 onward, an observable change is observed, several studies in this period explicitly referencing UN calls for global citizenship education (e.g., Jodoin & Singer, 2018) and mark it as an important SDG proxy. This period marks a transition from conceptual alignment to more intentional curricular and pedagogical engagement with SDGs. More systematic engagement is also observed after 2020, as studies operationalize the UNESCO roadmap for ESD and address more sustainability themes (Gayatri et al., 2023; Kaur, 2022). Publication trends further indicate a pronounced acceleration from 2022, ending with a significant increase in output by 2025. This rise suggests that sustainability integration in ELT has moved beyond its founding stage, which reflects both increased institutional understanding and the development of sustainability-oriented curricula.

As sustainability themes become more integrated within ELT, recent research appears increasingly oriented toward evaluating implementation outcomes, pedagogical effectiveness, and broader educational implications. They also show interest in assessing learners' and teachers' understanding, perceptions, and attitudes towards sustainability issues (Akyüz, 2025; Arslan & Curle, 2024; Davari et al., 2025). Accordingly, it can be concluded that the majority of empirically grounded research on sustainability integration in ELT has emerged predominantly in the last third of the review period, a finding that seems logical, as the novelty of the concepts might prevent addressing them in a structured and systematic way in the initial stages.

4.1.2 Geographical Distribution and Research Equity

The synthesis of the geographical distribution findings revealed that the included studies were concentrated in upper-middle- and high-income countries, including Japan, Spain, China, Iran, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and several European countries. This finding suggests that integrating sustainability requires curricular autonomy, teacher training, institutional support, and research funding,

which are likely to be available in high-income economies. Nevertheless, this imbalance should not be interpreted as evidence of the absence of sustainability-related research in low-income countries, but rather as a reflection of structural inequities in research visibility, indexing, and access to publications.

Paradoxically, this uneven representation contrasts with the equity-driven philosophy of SDG 4.7, which explicitly emphasizes global inclusion and shared responsibility. The findings, therefore, highlight a critical gap between the ambitions of sustainability education and the empirical knowledge base that currently informs it. This gap calls for more research that addresses the issue in understudied contexts or reviews existing research indexed in regional databases or broader outlets.

4.1.3 Thematic Coverage and SDG 4.7 Dimensions

Regarding thematic coverage, the dimensions of sustainability awareness and global interconnectedness, as defined by SDG 4.7, are the dominant themes in the included studies. This emphasis reflects that these themes are relatively accessible and pedagogically compatible with ELT contexts. It is observed that such studies widely dealt with environmental awareness, although the environment is a discipline that is normally connected to science (Kazazoglu, 2025), however, these studies emphasized that eco-literacy is central to ELT and should be effectively integrated into language learning, and that contextualizing language instruction within environmental frameworks can develop both language proficiency and environmental communication capabilities (Davari et al., 2025). Thus, the studies do not simply foster sustainability awareness but affirm its fundamental relevance to key language learning constructs.

Beyond environmental sustainability awareness, culture-related competencies have emerged as a prominent focus within the reviewed literature. A substantial body of research addresses Global Citizenship Education (GCE), with numerous studies examining how integrating sustainability in ELT can enhance learners' global citizenship competencies (Omrani et al., 2025), and how textbooks may function as key mediating tools in this process (Davidson & Liu, 2018). Researchers frequently highlight the overlaps between ELT and GCE (Qublan & Bataineh, 2025) and consider them effective for preparing interculturally aware citizens (Xu & Knijnik, 2021). Consequently, several studies explicitly link global citizenship to sustainability education, conceptualizing GCE as both a pathway to and an outcome of sustainability-oriented language teaching (Akyüz, 2025; Omar & Shaalan, 2023).

Given the nature of ELT, it is understandable that most researchers think that integrating sustainability in its contexts is a key bridge for fostering global citizenship and intercultural communication, as the English language is the lingua franca for sustainability-related subjects and global communication. Further, other studies even call for embedding GCE in teachers' education, a domain that is rarely addressed for other sustainability themes (Akyüz, 2025), which highlights the need for extra support for integrating this key theme, as emphasized by the literature.

The social dimensions of SDG 4.7 are also present across the reviewed literature, but with different levels of prominence. Gender equality, for instance, appears relatively early in the reviewed literature (Waqar & Ghani, 2019). This indicates an early research interest in figuring out why curriculum designers and textbook developers had inadequately addressed gender issues despite their centrality to the UN SDGs (Ruiz-Cecilia et al., 2020). This concern becomes more sensible considering the well-documented relationship between language use, discourse practices, and the reproduction of gender stereotypes (Ariyanto, 2018). Within the present corpus, a considerable number of studies critically examine female representation in EFL textbooks (e.g., Ghajarieh et al., 2023; Nur & Farzana, 2024; Yeoh & Cheong, 2023). They situate gender analysis within broader sustainability and global citizenship frameworks, thereby reinforcing the relevance of gender equality as a core pillar of SDG 4.7 rather than as an isolated social concern (Ruiz-Cecilia et al., 2020).

On the other hand, studies addressing the incorporation of human rights themes in ELT are comparatively scarce. Even the few studies that dealt with this principle do not treat it per se, but connect it to related dimensions such as global understanding, intercultural awareness, or culture of peace (Frumuselu & Bellot, 2020). This tendency suggests that human rights education in ELT is frequently integrated within broader ethical or intercultural discourses, rather than being treated as a standalone curricular focus. It is also addressed as a pedagogical tool to enable students to engage with socio-political challenges while developing language skills in more purposeful ways (Perrem & Habte-Gabr, 2025). Although this aligns with the rationale for integrating sustainability in ELT, focusing on the core components of human rights, such as equity and justice, and explaining the universal declarations of them, can enhance the efficacy and depth of the approach.

Taken together, the thematic distribution patterns identified in this review indicate that the dimensions of SDG 4.7 are unevenly and selectively combined across the literature, with certain thematic pairings appearing consistently, while others remain marginal. This situation has consequences, as it implies that environmental and economic concerns are privileged over social justice dimensions, which may weaken the holistic nature of SDG 4.7. Accordingly, this selectivity entails the need to prioritize underrepresented dimensions so that ELT materials can address them more equitably and comprehensively.

4.1.4 Educational Levels

According to educational level, the findings reveal a significant focus of sustainability-oriented ELT initiatives at higher education, with comparatively limited investigation in primary and secondary school contexts. These included targeted initiatives within fields closely aligned with sustainability concerns, such as tourism (Sanosi et al., 2025) and computer science or technology-oriented programs (Wahyuni et al., 2023), as well as institution-wide curricular embedding strategies (Kaur, 2022). Although sustainability-related ELT initiatives were identified across the educational continuum, including primary and secondary education (e.g., Papavasileiou et al., 2025),

their concentration at the tertiary level is prominent.

This imbalance may be attributed, first, to the perception that sustainability education requires advanced cognitive, critical, and disciplinary competencies that are more accessible to higher-education learners, and second, to the disciplinary nature of university curricula, which may facilitate the integration of sustainability-related content. Nevertheless, this concentration contrasts with the relevance of sustainability across subject areas, including languages and social sciences, which are already embedded within public education systems. While sustainability issues are present in school-level ELT research, the findings suggest a need for more systematic, early-stage integration to enable learners to develop sustainability awareness, ethical reasoning, and global responsibility from the initial phases of language education. An example from the literature is a study by Frumuselu & Bellot (2020), which proposed an educational unit for the EFL Bachelor's Degree program based on the lessons learned from Black Lives Matter movement and used it to empower learners to comprehend urban realities around the globe. Although the researchers explicitly specified the unit to be implemented at the university level, they recognized that integrating urban cultural awareness into the EFL classroom could be applied at any educational level. Once again, this should be done to maintain the overarching nature of SDG 4.7, an implication that future research should carefully take into account.

4.1.5 Integration Approaches and Patterns

Several integration approaches are suggested, investigated, and addressed. Of these, the most salient approach was the integration of sustainability within a broader curriculum. The studies of this type are mostly descriptive, showing the limited, inconsistent embedding of SDGs in EFL (Usman et al., 2025), reflecting early-stage development of global citizenship and sustainability-oriented competencies (Kaur, 2022), and urging the need for systemic reforms to align schools with the 2030 Agenda (Papavasileiou et al., 2025).

To be more effective, research in this strand should propose straightforward plans for integrating sustainability into EFL curricula, a pattern more prevalent in the literature, which defines specific syllabi to incorporate sustainability considerations. These latter studies normally identify the targeted domain (ESP, EAP, EFL), justify the needs, and align the sustainability in a clear way (Sanosi et al., 2025; Wahyuni et al., 2023).

Other integration patterns focused on exploring sustainability specifically in textbooks of different ELT contexts (Ariyanto, 2018; Omrani et al., 2025; Ruiz-Cecilia et al., 2020). Mostly, these studies focus on a single dimension of sustainability and show how it is incorporated into, or underrepresented in, the textbook. Studies of this type are methodologically valuable as textbooks are the main proxy for fostering learning sustainability and the primary source that is clear and straightforward to analyze. Less noted and observable may be the integration of material and tasks, which requires attention. The few available studies include innovative ways, such as using online and multimedia tools (Lytovchenko et al., 2021) and use GenAI to promote transferable skills linked to sustainable development and global citizenship (Ata & Kunt, 2025). Nevertheless, such integration remains fragmented in many contexts; therefore, clear, adaptable task-based models are needed to support teachers in translating sustainability principles into classroom practice.

The least frequent approach in the reviewed literature is the analysis of integration approaches in teacher education settings, revealing gaps in knowledge despite the recognized need to equip teachers with sustainability competencies to foster global citizenship, ethical awareness, and the integration of sustainability issues in language education (Tavakkoli & Rashidi, 2020). Similarly, policy frameworks that provide recommendations for whole plans and strategies to incorporate sustainability in the ELT contexts are underexplored (Gayatri et al., 2023). This scarcity limits the efficacy of sustainability integration efforts, since training teachers and policy alignment form the baseline that enables effective integration of sustainability dimensions in ELT. Accordingly, future research should focus on these areas to provide implications for empowering all stakeholders with the relevant competencies, connecting theory to classroom practice, and supporting the comprehensive integration of the SDG 4.7 theme.

4.2 Qualitative Findings

The qualitative synthesis further revealed that the studies addressed sustainability integration in ELT follow one of three patterns, the most prominent of which is curriculum-, materials-, and task-based operationalization. These studies operationalized SDG 4.7 integration through curriculum design (Kaur, 2022; Usman et al., 2025), textbook analysis (Ruiz-Cecilia et al., 2020; Waqar & Ghani, 2019), or task-based instructional materials (Lytovchenko et al., 2021).

Analytic memos iteratively documented efforts to align sustainability-related content with language-learning materials of different types, particularly in EAP, ESP, and tertiary-level contexts. Although embedding sustainability into curricular elements seems straightforward and accessible, most studies recognized challenges related to time or classroom constraints and advocated for extra supporting mechanisms, including teacher training and broader stakeholder engagement (Arslan & Curle, 2024). Such recommendations should be systematically examined by future research to empower curriculum designers and teachers with implementable guidance that can foster practice.

Focusing on a specific SDG 4.7 theme is the second prominent pattern across the reviewed literature. Several studies have addressed integrating a single dimension of quality education into ELT; however, mapping it to related themes is also a common practice. During the analytic memoing stage, it was evident that theme-specific studies revolve mainly around intercultural and global citizenship, whether by manifesting how such a theme is (or should be) integrated in the ELT context alone, or by investigating its relationship with other dimensions and how they complementarily achieve sustainability integration in ELT, along with related themes such as sustainable

development (Omar & Shaalan, 2023), sustainable lifestyle (Davari et al., 2025), promotion of the culture of peace (Akban & Yavuz, 2022), and respect for cultural diversity and cultural contribution to sustainability (Wu & Shafait, 2024).

Together, these studies suggest that key objectives and learning outcomes of ELT should account for interculturality, respect for cultural diversity, and communicative skills. They also conceptualized language education as a space for negotiating identity, culture, and global interconnectedness, with some adopting decolonial, critical, or epistemic justice perspectives (Meighan, 2023). Nevertheless, a considerable proportion of these studies reported some constraints related to implementing these orientations, both at the institutional and individual levels. Since ELT is an essential means of fostering global and intercultural communication, special attention should be paid to research addressing these constraints to promote both ELT and sustainability.

For a considerable subset of the studies, it is essential to foster awareness of the sustainability dimensions and instill ethical values related to sustainability among all stakeholders. Studies of this type form the third observed pattern of integrating sustainability in ELT contexts, labeled: the awareness- and value-oriented integration pattern. Commonly, these studies assess teachers' and students' perceptions, attitudes, and reported practices of sustainability issues, such as sustainable development and environmental issues (Sulaiman et al., 2025), sustainable lifestyle (Lytovchenko et al., 2021), and cultural awareness, and how it contributes to sustainability (Ata & Kunt, 2025). These studies typically reported modest awareness of sustainability and cultural dimensions among teachers and students (Lee & Nguyen, 2024; Omrani et al., 2025). The pattern extends to other stakeholders, such as curriculum designers, as reported by Brown (2024) who found that many normalized behaviors in Japanese ELT material were, in fact, environmentally unsustainable and misaligned with Japan's formal sustainability goals. Further, low parental awareness is also considered a constraint, as Arslan & Curle (2024) reported.

On the other hand, the majority of these studies address gender equality and inclusivity. About half of the 14 studies explicitly focusing on awareness and value integration address the gender equality theme. These studies advocate social justice and ethical awareness in language education (Nur & Farzana, 2024), emphasize the need for more inclusive EFL resources that promote equitable socialization (Dahmardeh et al., 2025), and urge language textbook writers and language teachers to take into account the interplay between gender and language in their practices (Ariyanto, 2018). This suggests that the literature prioritizes raising awareness of specific urgent themes. These themes seem more sophisticated and inaccessible to regular teachers, students, or parents. However, other themes, such as human rights, also require similar awareness-raising efforts, yet they are absent in this subset. Future research should address this gap to promote awareness of all sustainability issues and goals, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of sustainability integration in ELT contexts.

To sum up, this systematic review reveals that the integration of sustainability within ELT has progressively developed from an implicit, uncontextualized focus to a more explicit and aligned treatment. Nevertheless, the research remains uneven when viewed through the lens of SDG 4.7. Although recent trends indicate increased engagement with sustainability frameworks, this engagement remains selective across themes, educational levels, and stakeholder involvement and awareness. Environmental sustainability and intercultural dimensions predominate in the reviewed literature, particularly in higher education, whereas human rights and culture of peace are underdeveloped, with a notable paucity of studies in teacher education.

This situation may undermine the holistic nature of SDG 4.7, which entails a thematically comprehensive, multi-level intervention that accounts for curricula, classroom tasks, policy frameworks, and teacher preparation. These recommendations are based on the mapping of the dominant integration trends, patterns, and gaps identified in this review and can serve as an evidence-based foundation for developing ELT to enhance its role as a transformative tool for achieving quality education.

5. Implications for Research and Practice

Four implications can be inferred from this review for researchers, curriculum designers, teachers, and policymakers based on the synthesized quantitative and qualitative findings.

First, researchers and curriculum designers should avoid selective approaches and target integrative models that map multiple SDG 4.7 dimensions across curricular and instructional levels. The uneven thematic representation of SDG 4.7 identified by this review implies that extra focus is needed on the human rights, culture of peace promotion, and cultural diversity dimensions, with suitable attention to varied integration patterns, including materials and tasks with clear guidelines.

Second, future research should also focus on low- and lower-middle-income contexts to investigate the status of SDG 4.7 integration that is not reflected in the current review, possibly due to indexing constraints. Such research should draw on local pedagogical resources and indexing outlets and apply methods grounded in classroom observations, curriculum analysis, and stakeholders' perceptions.

Third, sustainability integration should be introduced earlier across primary and secondary schools to foster learners' ethical and global awareness at developmentally appropriate ages. This implies the need for coordinated policy decisions to develop age-appropriate pedagogical frameworks that align sustainability with ELT outcomes, thereby balancing the current focus, which is heavily biased toward tertiary education.

Fourth, teacher education and policy frameworks aligned with ESD agendas should be introduced, as the integration of sustainability within ELT cannot rely solely on embedding SDG 4 content in core pedagogical artifacts and individual teacher initiatives. Professional development plans and frameworks aligned with national and international sustainability agendas should be institutionalized to strengthen the impact of integrating SDG 4.7 into ELT.

6. Limitations of the Review

The findings of this systematic review should be generalized with caution, as they might be constrained by potential limitations. First, the included studies were sourced from two indexing databases: Scopus and WoS. Despite their reputation for including relevant, high-quality, peer-reviewed articles, there may be considerable relevant studies indexed in other renowned databases (e.g., ERIC, ProQuest, and Google Scholar) or sources (e.g., university journals and grey literature reports). Accordingly, claiming that these findings reflect the global breadth of sustainability-related ELT research would be a hasty generalization. This limitation may also be reflected in the geographical distribution of the included studies, as Scopus and WoS tend to privilege institutionally funded research and journals requiring substantial financial and infrastructural resources. Consequently, sustainability integration initiatives in low- and lower-middle-income contexts may be underrepresented.

The second limitation concerns the emergent nature of sustainability research in general, as well as its applied aspects, such as implementation in the ELT context. The sharp increase in publications over the last three years suggests a developing field that may continue to evolve in the coming years. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted with the understanding that the selected publication window captures the formative and developmental phases of sustainability integration in ELT. Thus, modest publication in the initial stage of the period should be explained with this limitation in mind.

Finally, the analysis relied mainly on published studies that document established practices, suggest integrating mechanisms and techniques, or analyze curricular documents. Although this methodological focus was intentional, as is typical of systematic reviews, it remains limited to conceptualization and intended implementation rather than reflecting actual practice that is based on classroom observation and long-term interventions.

7. Conclusion

This systematic review examined a decade of research (2015 – 2025) on the integration of sustainability in ELT contexts as operationalized by the UN. The analysis followed a framework based on the 8 dimensions included in SDG 4.7. The findings reveal an uneven body of literature that has increased in the last three years, a concentration of research in middle- and high-income countries, selective thematic coverage that advantages sustainability awareness, global citizenship, and gender equality while neglecting human rights, culture of peace, and cultural diversity.

Further, the review demonstrates that sustainability integration into ELT is mostly operationalized through curriculum design, textbook analysis, and material task utilization with a notable focus on the higher education setting. The review also reveals that the included studies cluster around three patterns: curriculum integration, global citizenship focus, and raising awareness and values. These patterns present the potential of ELT as a vehicle for ESD.

By identifying the thematic coverage trends, mapping them to educational contexts, synthesizing integration approaches and patterns, and identifying gaps in each aspect, this review provides evidence-based implications for researchers and practitioners. However, specific limitations related to data sources, temporal considerations, and methodological choices should be taken into account in future research. Considering these reservations, it is recommended that integrating sustainability into ELT contexts requires a more balanced thematic representation, earlier educational implementation, and stronger alignment with teacher education and policy frameworks to realize the transformative aim of SDG 4: quality education.

Declaration of the Use of AI

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT and Grammarly to assist with content organization and language refinement. After using these tools, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the published article's content.

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Competing interests

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Not applicable.

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Data availability statement

The data generated and analyzed during this study is available in the Figshare data repository at the following link: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31313488>

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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