

1 Introduction

1.1 In Times of Crises

No one talks enough about the climate crisis. Among all those we are currently facing, undoubtedly this is the crisis discussed the least not only at the public level, but also within our own personal spheres. And yet all crises are inextricably linked and emanate from the impact generated by the economic system we all live under. However, as Dipesh Chakrabarty implies, “a critique of capital is not sufficient for addressing questions relating to human history once the crisis of climate change has been acknowledged and the Anthropocene has begun to loom on the horizon of our present” (Chakrabarty, 2009: 212), since there is a disconnection between the climate crisis, its impact on our daily lives, and the measures that are taken by our representatives at the institutional level.

This may seem unrelated to what we do in our Second Language (SL) / Heritage Language (HL) classes. However, a glimpse at social media and new forms of popular culture show us otherwise. Let us take a look, for example, at the Instagram account @earthlyeducation, which recently published a post with a carousel of memes worth checking out. The account defines its profile with the following keywords: climate, nature, justice; and offers links to campaigns on such topics. One of the memes reads as follows:¹

The meme (Figure 1) insists, in a more colloquial register, on the dissonance between politicians’ words and the needs and beliefs of “humanity” (to quote the meme’s vocabulary). We are bringing it up because this is the kind of media that our students read and produce – the generations we are teaching right now are the ones who will suffer the most from the consequences of the climate crisis, and the ones who need to find new forms of living and adapting to this new situation. And also, as Chakrabarty suggests, “the crisis of climate change calls on academics to rise above their disciplinary prejudices, for it is a crisis of many dimensions” (Chakrabarty, 2009: 215). Indeed, we conceive of such a climate emergency as a threefold discursive, humanitarian, and scientific crisis.

The intent of this Element, therefore, is to bring the climate crisis as a multifaceted discourse into the classroom, and to make it part and parcel of our language curriculum. This is not really new, since the US academy has already (although very recently) inaugurated the field of Environmental Humanities, emphasizing humanists’ unique contributions to climate scholarship (see, for example, Philippon, 2012;

¹ This meme has been reproduced with permission of the aforementioned Instagram account.



Figure 1 Politicians versus humanity.

Source: @earthlyeducation

Reynolds, 2010; Viakinnou-Brinson, 2018). Among many voices that have helped shape this transdisciplinary field, we want to bring attention to a couple of theorists who have contributed to our understanding of it. Angela Antunes and Moacir Gadotti are two educators from Brazil working at the Paulo Freire Institute who discuss what they call “eco-pedagogy” as a sustainable praxis, arguing that “the preservation of the environment depends on an ecological conscience and shaping this conscience depends on education” (Antunes and Gadotti, 2005: 135). Thus, they put forward a “democratic and understanding pedagogy, a pedagogy for everyday life” (2005: 135). This vision of an “everyday life pedagogy” relies on a conception of Earth not just as a space for domination, an object of research, but as “a living space, a space giving us ‘solace’ and requiring from us ‘care’” (2005: 135). At the curricular level, content must be meaningful to students, in the sense that it should be “meaningful to the health of the planet and to a context greater than that of the individual student” (2005: 136). Therefore, thinking of sustainability in these terms implies a way of proceeding that goes beyond individual projects because it pays attention to the impact made by human societies on the natural environment, allowing for the development of new models of living that may challenge economic, social, and cultural structures.

Now, we are sure that this is not the first time that you, dear reader, have heard the term ‘sustainability’ applied to education. Actually, Gadotti has discussed such a label as the foundation of a livable life that respects human rights, and has, as well, provided an institutional framework. In his work, Gadotti has referred to UNESCO to emphasize “the need to reorient education at all levels towards a culture of peace and sustainability” (Gadotti, 2010: 204), explaining that sustainability “is a dynamic balance with others and the environment” (2010: 204). Understood as such, maintaining this balance and preserving the environment depends on ecological awareness, which simultaneously depends on education – we teach how to awaken that consciousness and what to do with it. More than that, this conception of sustainability relies on eco-pedagogy as a pedagogy that has overcome “the anthropocentrism of traditional pedagogies” (2010: 205) and therefore requires a specific curricular orientation, as argued before. Taking sustainability not as greenwashing, but as a way of producing new knowledge with the aim of developing a new paradigm, means that our classroom practices need to integrate the local economy, pay attention to human interactions and biodiversity, and put forward “a systematized knowledge” based on “new habits for sustainable living” (2010: 207). Therefore, the focus should be on our local communities, emphasizing what kind of economy is circulating, and what kind of life is allowed within that ecosystem. This refers, in the end, to systematizing a kind of knowledge centered on sustainability and not on growth.

Caroline Levine, from a humanities and cultural studies perspective, has traced a connection between this idea of sustainability and the current global context, emphasizing what faculty and instructors from the humanities can do within an environmentalist framework. In her book *The Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis*, she proposed to understand sustainability as a term that is “genuine” (Levine, 2023: 13), meaning that it should enable just conditions that will allow “a rich variety of lives to continue into the future” (2023: 14) – reading it as part of an intergenerational project. Levine problematizes the use of the term ‘sustainability,’ considering that it “implies the continuation of life as we know it, which for many in business and politics includes expectations of economic growth, competition, and accumulation” (2023: 13). In fact, she adds that it might even work as a neutral term, referring to “the capacity to keep any state of affairs going over time” (2023: 13). In order to resignify the term, she ties the concept of sustainability to that of “collective continuance,” that is to say, “the establishment of political, cultural, environmental, and economic conditions that allow

collective life-worlds to flourish over time” (2023: 13). The idea, therefore, is to enhance a culture of sustainability in order to foment cooperation and to answer questions (essential questions) related to human and democratic rights.

1.2 State of the Art

Among the humanities, we have seen environmental projects in anthropology, history, geography, sociology, political science, and performing and visual arts. In the field of language arts, we have recently witnessed environmental research and education in literary and cultural studies. However, language education is not part of the equation yet. Climate discourses and action are relegated to single unit projects, lesson plans, or sections of the textbook, usually as a connecting thread to cover and practice pre-established grammatical and lexical expressions (Contreras et al., 2020). Some initiatives are taking place in English as a second language (Brasermann et al., 2021; British Council n.d.; Deetjen and Ludwig, 2021; Green Action ELT n.d.), also in Foreign Languages (Eppelsheimer et al., 2014; Melin, 2014, 2021; MLA, 2007; Nuessel, 2010; Revista de la Asociación Internacional de Literatura y Cine Españoles, 2025; Ter Horst and Pearce, 2010; Walther, 2007), but the truth is that we lack a true institutional and curricular conceptualization and restructuring of language education with respect to the climate crisis (Marín Cobos and Aguiló Mora, 2024). An initiative that is worth mentioning is “Greening Modern Languages: Research and Teaching,” defined as a “collaborative project that aims to think about the role that our discipline has to play in times of ecological crises” (“Greening Modern Languages,” 2023). Faculty from modern languages departments from Wales, Ireland and the UK come together in order to ‘green’ their field, that is to say, “rethink our academic practice as educators, scholars and eco-citizens” with the twofold purpose of decentering and decolonizing the curriculum, as well as a collective reconsideration of the role of languages within environmental humanities. Precisely, what we propose here is the incorporation of climate discourse at the foundational level: in the basic language program, the trunk of the departmental tree (Aguiló Mora and Marín Cobos, 2025). We cannot ignore the fact that languages are a core component of the humanities, and considering the great number of students who learn languages through basic course offerings, working at the level of the tree trunk means merging climate and sustainability with the language program.

At the institutional level, there is an interest in addressing the situation, as can be seen in the importance of organizations such as the Association

for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education or the success of journals such as the *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*. In addition, many US universities include among their academic objectives the promotion of sustainability, and undoubtedly the pressure exerted by students foments these kinds of measures. Faculty and staff participation in committees designed to advise the university in complying with their own environmental agreements is also increasingly higher. Luis I. Prádanos suggests in his article “La enseñanza del español en la era del antropoceno: Hacia la integración de la sostenibilidad en las clases de español como lengua extranjera” that at this point it is obvious that sustainability is not an exclusive endeavor on the part of faculty and programs related to environmental studies, but a skill that should be acquired by all faculty and students (Prádanos, 2015a: 334). However, rather than simply teaching sustainability as a skill, we are focused on sustainable ways of teaching, learning, and researching. This approach begins at the roots, so that it can grow in a robust trunk to permeate all the branches and give rise to new leaves. That is why we focus on changing our praxis through course design, not the other way around: It is not about creating new courses for the sake of amplifying and diversifying content – that is actually a very unsustainable practice; instead, it is about changing the way we teach.

Prádanos reviews the role of higher education in today’s society and wonders if today’s education should be at the mercy of the market economy and economic growth or, instead, should be at the service of a civic society that is sustainable, engaged with, and responsible to the world we live in (Prádanos, 2015a). He suggests that a way of introducing sustainable practices in SL programs, specifically Spanish, is by enhancing critical-thinking skills, making students aware of the socioeconomic model, and making them assess its own sustainability in a context of global environmental restrictions. Thus, he exposes how Spanish as a SL (SSL) can contribute to a change in the cultural logic that would take us from consumerism to sustainability by incorporating an ecological intelligence.

His has been one of the few works in the last ten years that has specifically addressed a set of practices to be incorporated both at the elementary and advanced levels (see also Melin, 2019, for a compilation of works that put into practice environmental thinking through language and go beyond the humanities/sciences dualism; and Barbas-Rhoden, 2021, for an environmental humanities content-based Spanish course at the intermediate-advanced level). Nevertheless, these practices work as add-ons, as branches of a tree whose trunk remains intact. We do not

see any curricular or institutional questioning, nor a sustainable way of teaching as defined here. Instead, the work occurs at the level of course content and at the instructional level, exploring pedagogical variations. However, they all lack a holistic perspective, an integrated approach to language climate teaching. Thus, these proposals would require a true reconceptualization that looks beyond the microunits of a language level and allows for a macrointervention in the program itself.

Prádanos uses the textbook (referencing samples of those most commonly used in US Spanish language programs) as a point of departure and proposes a series of criteria to assess whether the textbook contributes to normalizing and legitimizing questionable actions and attitudes from a socioecological point of view. These criteria are that the textbook: (1) promotes and doesn't problematize a culture based on irresponsible consumption, (2) perpetuates and doesn't question unsustainable eating habits, (3) normalizes an inefficient use of energy, (4) doesn't teach about the need to stop generating waste, and (5) takes a superficial approach on topics related to sustainability and the ecological crisis (Prádanos, 2015a: 336). In his article, he goes into depth on examples that can be applied in different units at the elementary level, always using the textbook as a starting point to be amended and to be used as a tool to raise students' concerns about the climate emergency. Yet, for intermediate and more advanced levels, he does detach himself from the textbook and devises an approach based on writing and oral skills, including Hispanic cultural manifestations that focus on environmental issues, as well as some ideas for courses that are taught with specific purposes (such as Spanish for Medical Purposes) and for study abroad programs. In addition, he reflects on the fact that not all language instructors have the ecological knowledge necessary to put these measures into practice. With that in mind, Prádanos refers to institutional resources available to faculty to complement their skills at this level. Overall, he emphasizes the importance and relevance of this approach, which would ultimately help students see the connections among disciplines and help them think in more complex and transdisciplinary terms (see also Prádanos, 2015b).

1.3 The Missing Piece

Even though Prádanos's ideas are valuable and original as barely no one had tried to incorporate climate discourse(s) in the language classroom, his overall approach remains at the textbook level, without looking at the curricular level, at the whole program – the trunk of the tree, to follow

our metaphor. Hence, he still relies on the textbook as the main tool setting the tone and topics, without questioning the very nature of Spanish as a colonial language and the ways in which Spanish is instrumentalized and decontextualized in the SL/HL classroom.

We understand that such an approach is realistic, particularly given that language instructors normally hold precarious teaching positions, with a high student–teacher ratio and heavy teaching loads per semester; and they lack institutional support – funding – to conduct scholarly research to develop new courses and new teaching praxis. With this in mind, a logical first step is to challenge the textbooks we use. These working conditions are parallel to a consideration of the basic language programs as having secondary value (Kern, 2000). However, we believe, and Prádanos’s plan also heads in this direction, that basic language programs are the foundation – again, the trunk of the tree – to begin a sustainable education, to imprint on our students the need for ecological awareness also in a SL, because language is the main sociocultural mediating tool for cognitive development through which we build thought and knowledge of the world, a tool for inter- and intrapersonal construction (see Negueruela-Azarola et al., 2024).

Along with the inherently radical approach of incorporating climate and sustainability at the trunk of university academic programs while revisiting the roots, we strive for sustainable teaching practices in the SL/HL classroom. The following ethical dilemma has driven our thinking since we started to conceive of this curricular innovation: How can we teach and learn Spanish – a colonial language mostly in Latin America, but also in the US, Africa, Asia, and even Oceania – in the context of climate and the environment without somehow perpetuating the colonial imperative (del Valle, 2014; Train, 2010)? How to avoid propagating “colonialism,” in other words, “privileging dominant colonial knowledges, languages, and neoliberal valorizations of diversity” (Meighan, 2022: 146)? If we acknowledge that the climate crisis is the result of intersectional colonial and neocolonial processes at various levels, we need to decolonize our teaching dynamics (Behari-Leak, 2020; Mintz, 2021; Phipps, 2021; Twyman-Ghoshal and Lacorazza, 2021). To tackle these questions, we propose a root-level transformation of the language programs that, scaffolded by the following teaching principles, will allow for a curricular development: (1) decentralization of climate discourse in English toward an integration of climate discourse in other languages, (2) contextualization of an often decontextualized language teaching, and (3) shared expertise and transdisciplinarity toward an integrated approach. These principles will enable the implementation of language courses from

a critical social justice perspective, focused on the living nature of languages and their interconnection with society beyond academia.

This curriculum centers on developing students' critical thinking skills through the analysis of climate-related topics, emphasizing a range of diverse texts, such as literature, film, documentaries, social networking platforms, press articles, and realia. Students engage deeply with these materials, working on their communicative skills and metalinguistic awareness as they critically assess various representations of the climate emergency across different media. This type of teaching and learning contextualizes language by addressing the colonial history and ongoing impact of Spanish and its regional varieties (in our case), ensuring that the voices of marginalized communities – such as women, racialized groups, and Indigenous peoples – are part of the conversation. Students compare climate discourse across the Spanish-speaking world, analyzing rhetorical and aesthetic choices, and explore how metaphors and communicative strategies in both Indigenous and colonial languages shape environmental beliefs. Finally, scientific knowledge in English bridges with alternative epistemologies in other languages, connecting academic and public spheres to address the political and social dimensions of the climate crisis (see Aguiló Mora and Marín Cobos, 2025).

1.3.1 Coloniallingualism, Epistemic Injustice, and Transepistemic Language Education

Building upon the previously mentioned ethical dilemma as SSL/SHL instructors, it is worth delving into what Meighan refers to as “the Western epistemological error” (2022, 2023) – a worldview characterized by linguistic and cognitive imperialism, the belief in human superiority over nature, and white (epistemological) supremacy (2022: 146) – which is all too often embedded in our classroom dynamics. To that regard, although Meighan refers to English language teaching, we agree with the proposal of an epistemic (un)learning of the Western epistemological error in SL/HL language classrooms to enable “equitable validation of all languages and knowledge systems, including those Indigenous and minoritized” (Meighan, 2023: 2). This type of linguistic and cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 2017) is what Meighan calls “coloniallingualism,” which “upholds colonial legacies, imperial mindsets, and inequitable [pedagogical] practices” (Meighan, 2022: 146) and “is subtractive and detrimental to multilingual, multicultural learners’ identities and heritages; endangered, Indigenous languages and knowledges; minoritized communities; and our environment” (2022: 146–147), since Indigenous languages

and knowledges are closely interrelated to culture and land (Chiblow and Meighan, 2021). ‘Coloniallingual’ languages such as English can be disconnected from the land and treated simply as a resource to generate profit within a Global North, neoliberal system that mainly serves powerful corporations and wealthy elites (Meighan, 2023: 4). Spanish, among others, also carries “a colonial, imperialist legacy and a eurocentric, human-centered worldview” (Meighan, 2022: 147).

Thus, SL/HL classrooms need to question this ‘coloniallingual’ view of language(s) that normalizes and legitimizes environmental racism and injustice in times of climate crisis (McGregor et al., 2020; Meighan, 2023: 4). A specific way to do this is by problematizing ecologically destructive metaphors in English vis-à-vis the target language (Spanish in this case) and other Indigenous languages in contact. Some metaphors are deeply embedded in English and European philosophical traditions or have a direct and harmful impact on Indigenous voices. Fine et al. enumerate several of these (2023: 85–86), including (1) the *terra nullius* metaphor, which imagines newly colonized lands as ‘empty’ so they can be renamed and claimed (see also Saïd, 1979); (2) the framing of natural systems as inanimate ‘machines’ in colonial languages, contrasted with more animistic understandings in Indigenous languages (Rout and Reid, 2020); and (3) the metaphor of biodiversity as a ‘library,’ suggesting it exists primarily for human benefit and extraction (Stibbe, 2008). In her proposal for metaphors that foster a mutualistic relationship between scientific and traditional ecological knowledge, Robin Wall Kimmerer argues that “Indigenous ways of framing and communicating concepts, through shared narratives and symbols, effectively engage the power of metaphors to encompass both material and spiritual dimensions of a matter” (2013: 50). Why not give space to these voices in the language classroom, especially since they often coexist with the languages we teach?

By working with a variety of epistemic discourses, we can shape students’ understanding of how knowledge(s) on climate and the environment are constructed and validated. Quoting bell hooks on the English language and what the oppressors do with it (hooks, 1995: 296), Meighan states that “it is what speakers do with language – how language can inform worldviews, thinking, mindsets, behaviours, and relationships with peoples, environments, and lands – that matters” (2023: 3). The scholar highlights that the unrelenting spread of English (episteme) worldwide, also in climate discourse we should add, has caused the disenfranchisement, minoritization, and forceful eradication of Indigenous and HLs in Western mainstream education through top-down, colonial