

# Green Your Teaching

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## Abstract

This paper explores options for educators who would like to incorporate environmentally friendly practices into their teaching, lesson preparation, and other educational activities. While most educators recognize the need for educating young people to take better care of the environment, most curricula in public and private schools do not focus on this topic. If the topic is addressed, such instruction is usually limited to explicitly teaching students *about* environmental issues and discussing them in class, rather than actually modeling eco-friendly behavior in and outside of the classroom. This paper provides guidelines for: using the environment as a catalyst in educators' own class preparation; incorporating environmental issues in teaching any subject matter; and encouraging students to be responsible stewards of the Earth. Furthermore, for educators who find the opportunity to teach lessons — or whole courses — specifically focused on environmental issues, this paper also provides resources for planning and implementing those lessons.

## INTRODUCTION

### Environmental Education in English Language Teaching

This study began when the author was planning an extracurricular course at Toyo Gakuen University in Nagareyama, Chiba, Japan. This 10-week, non-credit course was entitled “Being Environmentally Active” and commenced in May, 2008. The purpose was to provide theme-based activities for students who wanted extra English practice beyond their regular university English curriculum and the optional lunchtime “chats” in the university’s English Lounge. The author chose “the environment” as the theme for the course because she felt it was an important issue that needed to be emphasized in the university curriculum. Some of the thirteen students who signed up for the course attended the class every week for the full 90 minutes. However, most only came once or twice, and one not at all. The lack of interest in the topic “the environment” led the author to spend many hours researching relevant activities that might interest the students enough to attend and participate, and hopefully to become more environmentally active in their own lives.

This experience made the author more aware of the need for further research about using “the environment” as content for English language instruction and for communication about environmentally friendly practices in teaching in general. The following are the author’s suggestions to other educators on how to educate students, in a way that they both comprehend and find engaging, about how people can and why they should be more environmentally active. While this discussion is not limited to English education in Japan, the author’s experiences are primarily with Japanese students of English, and therefore, this paper will naturally provide more resources and examples for the EFL classroom in Japan. However, the country or subject matter in which one is teaching is not significant. With a little creativity, educators should be able to make use of most of the resources referred to in this paper.

### **Educators Should Educate Themselves First**

First and foremost, educators should believe in what they are doing and have a solid reason for why they choose to educate youth about the environment. Without this, and without practicing what they preach, it will be very hard to encourage pupils and coworkers to join the cause (Johnston & Carter, 2008b). Therefore, educators should take the time to read the countless resources available on the environment and communicate with colleagues about their findings. Educators could get involved in environmental organizations themselves, even simply to the extent of signing online petitions. Every little bit counts, and if all educators made even a small effort to promote environmentally friendly practices, the outcome could have a significant impact.

For those new to environmental activism, the three Rs stand for “reduce”, “reuse” and “recycle”, in order of most to least eco-friendly. Nevertheless, all are considered “green” behavior — and are much preferred to “consuming” and “disposing”. Students should be encouraged to practice all three “Rs” and would greatly benefit from also witnessing their educators practice them.

Reducing the amount of water, energy and materials — such as plastic and paper — that we use as an individual consumer or business, is not a new tactic in being environmentally responsible, but it is important for people to remind themselves of its importance. Such resources are still being taken for granted across the planet. For example, in Japan and many other countries, plastic packaging and bags are overused and not regularly recycled. Knowledge of this trend and the harmful environmental effects of plastic bags has lead some countries to ban free distribution of plastic bags, while some others have outlawed business’ distribution of plastic bags altogether (Poconos Green Living, 2008).

Reusing materials is also a very environmentally friendly practice, either in the conventional

sense of reusing an item for its original intended purpose or in the sense of reusing something for a new purpose. A wide range of recommendations for reusing everyday materials is available at the website of “A Recycling Revolution” (Bates, 2008). A popular method of reuse is the “refilling” of glass bottles, which requires less energy and is more cost-effective than recycling (Jeantheau, 2005). This technique has become commonplace in Europe, but still takes a back seat to recycling, or mere disposal, in most other countries (Washington, D.C. Institute for Local Self-Reliance, 2002).

While recycling is certainly better than practicing none of the three Rs, it is still important to recognize that 100% recycling of materials seldom occurs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.), and that the process of recycling requires a lot of energy (Jeantheau, 2005). On the other hand, the city of Yokohama has demonstrated a very progressive recycling program by Japanese standards (City of Yokohama, 2008), and if the opportunity to discuss recycling in the lesson or outside of class arises, there is much to be learned from Yokohama’s example. Another progressive and creative recycling effort in Japan is the Shotoku Glass Company’s recycling of light bulbs (2006).

The three Rs allow understanding of some basics in environmental activism, but there is a vast wealth of other information available on current environmental issues and the kinds of positive changes people can make at a grassroots level.

## TEACHING BY EXAMPLE

A good way to teach students how to be environmentally active is to demonstrate! Educators should not be shy to sport reusable drinking bottles and cloth shopping bags around campus. Students will definitely ask “What’s that?” or “What’s that for?” if the educator makes a habit of it, and maybe the habit will rub off on them if they find the gear fashionable.

### **Less is More: Cut Back on Paper Usage**

Completely eliminating the use of paper in lesson preparation and execution is environmentally ideal, but still impractical in this day and age. However, having students do online learning activities and submit assignments via email is usually a viable option. Although it could not completely replace the use of handouts, textbooks and paper-based assignment submission, if educators spent more time finding or making online/computer-accessed materials instead of paper-based materials, it would certainly cut back on the use of paper. This would require educational institutions to provide computers and internet access in the classroom, or at least in the campus library or media center, where students could use online study materials and submit homework via email. If such media is not provided in the educational institutions, but all the

students have internet access at home, it is still possible for the educator to create a website with links, instructions and assignments for the students to complete outside of class.

If educators feel uncomfortable or have difficulty implementing computer-based instruction, there are still ways to cut back on paper usage. The most obvious is to make double-sided handouts. If this is too time consuming, educators can be just as environmentally friendly by making copies on used paper. A way to encourage other educators to reuse paper is to create and place a used paper bin near the copy machines and/or printer with an environmental message like, "Let's save more trees!" In whatever way educators choose to cut back on their paper usage in class, the more who consistently do so, the greater effect this will have on students' perception of how little paper is necessary; how effective just a sheet or two can be.

### **Change the Environment of Your Classroom**

Does the classroom always have to look the same? Most educators have a lot of creativity; if they did not, how could they continuously come up with fresh lesson ideas? Educators should use their creativity to express themselves in the form of posters, pictures, mantras, mottos, and poetry hanging on the walls of their classrooms, or decorative recycling boxes upon the floor, and then use what they have made to encourage students to join in and help decorate. Whatever an educator expresses passionately, be it about puppies and kittens, how to treat friends, global warming or Confucianism, will encourage students to also express their individuality, and give them a chance to consider viewpoints to which they have never been exposed.

### **Expose Your Classes to Nature**

Beautiful day? Why must educators and students stay inside the classroom every week? At many schools there is the option to take students outside for an activity or entire class period, if everyone is able to act appropriately and remain on task. Too often educators forget how many options they have and varying the mundane, such as the physical environment, is one of them. "Research has shown that people who care about the Earth as adults spent time in the natural world as children, sometimes alone or with friends, and oftentimes with a special grown up. We owe it to our students to give them unmediated time in nature..." (Johnston & Carter, 2008a).

For more content-based instruction on the environment while enjoying the outdoors with a class, "Take a Cloud Walk" (Kirkland, 2008) is an excellent activity. In addition, the author of this paper did a follow-up activity with her class entitled "What plants do you see?" (Appendix 1), using whatever plant life was available for observation in the school grounds or nearby areas.

### **Get Involved and Share Your Experiences with Your Students**

The author occasionally finds time in lessons centering around travel, foreign cultures, public service, basic introductions and so on, to share with students her Peace Corps experience in the Republic of Kiribati. Unlike any lifestyle or environment the majority of students have seen before, the author shares her pictures, usually displaying them on computers and large screens, and gives a description of life in these islands. Not only are most of the students mesmerized by a country and lifestyle so different from their own, but the question “Why did you go there?” is inevitably asked. “To help make a positive difference in other peoples’ lives and to experience a life I would have never had the opportunity to experience had I not gone...an invaluable learning experience” or something along those lines is typically the author’s response. Educators cannot force students to think or act a certain way, nor should they try, but they can help students consider different perspectives and paths they could take in their own lives, especially as those new ideas are from someone they know, their educator, who has firsthand experience.

### ***THE ENVIRONMENT AS THE CONTENT OF INSTRUCTION***

Regarding teaching “the environment” as the focus content of a lesson or course, there are numerous pages of resources in one Google search alone to aid any educator. The following are excellent online resources with multitudes of lesson and activity ideas concerning the environment:

- ❖ *National Environmental Education Week* (National Environmental Education Foundation, 2008)
- ❖ *Wilderness* “Environmental Education Activities and Games” (Neill, 2007)
- ❖ *EELink* (North American Association for Environmental Education, n.d.)
- ❖ “Environment” (Académie de Nancy-Metz, 2008)
- ❖ *ESLflow* “Environment: Natural World” (Snashall, n.d.)

The website of *An Inconvenient Truth* also has a variety of resources. However, they are geared toward native English speaking students. It is recommended to first show the movie *An Inconvenient Truth* in class with subtitles in the students’ native language, unless they are extremely advanced second language learners. This film provides an excellent starting point for class discussion on environmental issues. Furthermore, the *Climate Crisis* website provides useful application exercises, such as calculating one’s own carbon footprint, or individual energy usage, compared with others on the planet. (Gore, 2006)

Water diaries (Stout, 2008) are also useful exercises that get students thinking about how much water they use and the personal impact they are having on the environment.

For lessons on English comics, English humor and/or culture, and the environment

specifically, educators should visit the Grinning Planet website (Jeantheau, 2008). This site also contains news articles concerning environmental issues.

When teaching about news stories, the media, global issues or the environment specifically, the “Japan Environment News” blog contains many news stories and information about environmental movements and issues in Japan (Walsh, 2008). The contents are written using a high level of English, so this site is more appropriate as an educator resource or for more advanced English courses. *The Breaking News English* website (Banville, 2008) is more geared toward English language learners, though still not beginners. For environmental video news, educators and students can explore YAHOO! Videos (2008) news section and click on “Environment” in the left side panel.

If educators are encouraging student debate of various global issues in class, environmental issues will probably be considered. StopWhaling.net (International Fund for Animal Welfare, 2008) is a good resource for students, especially in Japan where whaling is a hot topic to which most students could personally relate. For more general global issues, students can benefit from sites such as Breathing Earth (Bleja, 2008) and Time Magazine’s photo essay based on the book Hungry Planet: What the World Eats (Menzel & D’Aluisio, 2005).

### **Make it Fashionable, Fun and Cool**

Being eco-friendly because it is “the right thing to do” might not be sufficient to encourage students; what might be more effective is making “environmentally friendly” seem fashionable or cool and eco-activities fun. An example of this would be an activity involving writing a letter to the students’ favorite celebrities. The educator’s example letter could be to a famous celebrity encouraging that celebrity to be a spokesperson for an environmental cause, and in turn encouraging them to be a more positive role model for young people who already admire them. Of course, students would be able to write to a celebrity about any topic they choose, but they would see the content of the educator’s letter, as would the celebrity, as the letters would actually be sent to the intended recipients. Such an activity could be part of a lesson on letter writing structures, formats and styles, and would at the same time encourage students to use their voice for positive change in society.

Another good example of how reusing materials can be fun and interesting is The Junkman, who plays music with 100% reused materials such as buckets and garden tools, and anything else that can be found around the house (Knaack, n.d.). He has become internationally known and students may have already heard of him.

Finally, a popular clothing store worldwide, especially in Japan, Uniqlo has started a clothing recycling campaign where customers can return their old clothes to the store to be donated to

“such organizations as the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, while the rest will be reprocessed to be used as insulation or fuel” (The Associated Press, 2007). Students who shop at Uniqlo will learn that being fashionable and being environmentally responsible can go hand in hand, and educators could use such news stories as highly influential and relevant course reading material.

## **BEYOND THE CLASSROOM AND LEARNER AUTONOMY**

### **Teaching Environmental Activism**

Many of the websites mentioned in this paper are ones students can access on their own, at home. They can keep up with environmental news and current issues and, if motivated enough, be an active participant in environmental causes. The World Wide Web promotes such opportunities and if educators can help students to see how easy it is to be environmentally active online, more students may get involved and at the same time further develop their autonomy as learners and citizens of the Earth.

Other outside-of-class activities that educators and students can organize are campus clean-up and recycling programs — if the school does not already have an adequate recycling system in place. Another option is starting an eco club on campus where students can organize and execute various eco-friendly projects and have an opportunity to discuss environmental issues outside of their regular school curriculum.

To encourage students to be more environmentally active in their lives beyond the classroom, educators should recommend the *Natural Resource Defense Council (n.d.)*, *Sierra Club* (2008) and *Care 2 Make a Difference* (2008) websites.

### **Show the Students How Easy it Can Be**

Without the constant encouragement of an adult role model, becoming a responsible, environmentally active citizen may seem like a daunting task for students. Educators can assist students by giving them many different options and resources to explore and by helping them find the most appropriate means to become environmentally active. Even if students gave a minimal effort to regularly engage in some kind of eco-friendly behavior, there would be positive change. For example, the Rainforest Site states people can “Click to protect endangered habitat!” on its top page. “On average, over 35,500 individuals from around the world visit the site each day to click the green ‘Click Here to Give - it’s FREE’ button. To date, more than 150 million visitors have preserved more than 40,500 acres of land” (CharityUSA.com, LLC., 2008). This is because each time viewers click on the tab, the advertisers on the site purchase a percentage of rainforest for preservation. The key is reminding students that every little bit counts and that they must not feel overwhelmed by becoming environmentally active. No one has to take an *all or nothing*

approach in order to be a responsible citizen of the Earth.

## **DISCUSSION OF LIMITATIONS**

### **Students' Inexperience and Disinterest**

A possible cause for the lack of interest in and understanding of the class activities exhibited by students of the author's "Being Environmentally Active" class is that some participants may have been uninterested in the entire theme of the course, even though they signed up knowing the course title and description. Perhaps students did not have enough experience with discussing the environment or maybe they did not even know what "environmentally active" or "eco" really meant or how this topic would be actualized in the class. In preparing for similar lessons and courses, it is essential to find activities that are interesting, fun and level-appropriate for students — while not straying from the intended course topic(s). However, this can be difficult to achieve.

### **Access to Level-Appropriate Materials**

Most of the materials available online in English are geared toward native-speaking learners in either primary schools or university level and higher. The language used for the first group would be appropriate for most college students in Japan, however the kinds of activities and information are often too childish and uninteresting for this age group. They know some things about the environment; they simply do not have the vocabulary to discuss the topic in English to the same extent that they would be capable in their native tongue. Therefore, a lot of the content and lesson ideas found online needed to be adapted for the "Being Environmentally Active" class, in terms of consideration of both students' language ability and maturity level.

### **Time and Money**

Being environmentally friendly is not always the most cost-effective or time-effective way to live, otherwise most people would choose such a lifestyle. Conversely they may find that the more they save and reuse materials and reduce consumption of unnecessary items, the less money they are spending. How much time, resources and money an individual spends while being environmentally active is a personal choice, but it does not have to become a huge financial and time-consuming burden.

### **Team Effort and Support of Fellow Educators**

Most importantly, when embarking on a mission to be more environmentally responsible and to attempt to model such behavior for students, the support and team effort on the part of one's fellow educators is crucial. Johnston & Carter (2008b) provide many different rationales in their



website *GreenHeart Education* for convincing other professionals to join in the “greening your teaching” effort, and educators can probably come up with further ways to encourage their colleagues. If one educator on campus is trying to teach environmental activism to students while the others are not, there will obviously be less of an impact; some students may even view that one educator as strange and their teaching without merit. Therefore, it is extremely important for educators to encourage the rest of the faculty to jump on the environmental activism bandwagon and to make a conscious decision as a group to create a greener learning environment.

## CONCLUSION

Many educators are in the unique position of having a weekly audience of a hundred or more young minds. This advantage enables them to educate younger generations on almost any topic, including the environment. Students need to know how each person’s everyday actions matter, that individually they can make a small difference, and collectively a large difference. Looking beyond what is taught in the lesson, and assuming that *actions speak louder than words*, educators should consider what students are learning simply from watching and interacting with them. Educators may not realize how much their own behavior impacts students’ perceptions of the world and should take advantage of this invaluable opportunity they have to be positive role models for so many young people on a daily basis.

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**Appendix 1: What Plants do you See?**

**What Plants do you See?**

**Take Notes:** Use this space to write about the flowers/trees/plants you see.      Date and time:

What is the season?      What is the temperature and weather like today?

Find plants on the school campus and label them here with a picture:

	Plant name in English	Plant name In Japanese	Draw a simple picture of the plant.	Can you use this plant for anything? Food, etc.?	Do you like this plant? Why/why not?
1					
2					
3					

