

Language Learning for Environmental Justice

INTRODUCTION

Due to the overuse of resources across the world, ecosystems are being destroyed, conflict is common, and inequality and injustice are widespread. The unprecedented high temperatures and low rainfall in the UK this summer are recent reminders that climate change affects all of us. But the environmental crisis doesn't affect everyone equally, because those who are the most economically disadvantaged, experience the most devastating impacts of climate breakdown.

Discussions around climate change and conflict may understandably provoke feelings of fear, concern, upset and anxiety in you when you are thinking about their impacts now and in the future. But have you considered how learning languages can empower you to contribute to a more sustainable and socially-just future for our planet? This resource explores some key aspects of environmental justice and the important role that you play in the campaign for climate justice as a language learner.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Sustainability: avoidance of the depletion of natural resources in order to maintain an ecological balance (Oxford Dictionary).

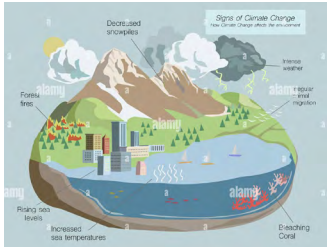
Social justice: justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society (Oxford Dictionary).

Climate change: a change in global or regional climate patterns, in particular a change apparent from the mid to late 20th century onwards and attributed largely to the increased levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide produced by the use of fossil fuels (Oxford Dictionary).



LANGUAGE TASK

Label these images of the environmental challenges identified by Greenpeace with the French/German/Spanish from the table below.



F:
G:
S:



F:
G:
S:



F:
G:
S:



F:
G:
S:



F:
G:
S:



F:
G:
S:



F:
G:
S:



F:
G:
S:



F:
G:
S:



F:
G:
S:



F:
G:
S:



F:
G:
S:



F:
G:
S:



F:
G:
S:



F:
G:
S:



F:
G:
S:

FRENCH	GERMAN	SPANISH
l'Arctique	Kohle	La contaminación del aire
L' Antarctique	Arktis	los bosques
L' énergie nucléaire	Antarktis	El cambio climático
Les forêts	Atomenergie	la carne y los lácteos
La viande et les produits laitiers	Wälder	el aceite de palma
La pêche	Verschmutzung durch Plastik	la pesca
Les oléoducs	Fischerei	las abejas
La pollution atmosphérique	Bienen	la energía renovable
Le charbon	Fleisch und Milchprodukte	viajar en avión
La fracturation hydraulique	Ölbohrung und Pipelines	El carbón
Les abeilles	erneuerbare Energie	La región ártica
L'énergie nucléaire	Luftverschmutzung	La región antártica
La pollution plastique (ou la pollution par le plastique)	Flugreisen	El fracking
Le voyage en avion	Fracking	La energía nuclear
L' huile de palme	Palmöl	la contaminación de plástico
L' énergie renouvelable	Klimawandel	los oleoductos

Reflective/discussion point:

Are there any particular aspects that you know more/less about? Why might that be?

RESEARCH TASK

Find out about any of these aspects in more detail on the [Greenpeace website](#).

LANGUAGE TASK: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

All United Nation Member countries adopted the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)** in 2015 to end poverty, reduce inequality and build more peaceful, prosperous societies by 2030.

Match the English translation from the box below with the Spanish/French/German SDG. The first one has been done for you.

Hint: Begin by looking for cognates or the words you already know!

LIFE BELOW WATER	CLIMATE ACTION	AFFORDABLE & CLEAN ENERGY
RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION & PRODUCTION		QUALITY EDUCATION
DECENT WORK & ECONOMIC GROWTH		LIFE ON LAND
REDUCED INEQUALITIES	CLEAN WATER & SANITATION	GENDER EQUALITY
NO POVERTY	ZERO HUNGER	GOOD HEALTH & WELLBEING
PEACE, JUSTICE & STRONG INSTITUTIONS		SUSTAINABLE CITIES & COMMUNITIES
INNOVATION, INDUSTRY & INFRASTRUCTURE		PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

ENGLISH	FRENCH	GERMAN	SPANISH
No poverty	<u>Pas de pauvreté</u>	<u>Keine Armut</u>	<u>Fin de la pobreza</u>
	<u>Faim « zéro »</u>	<u>Kein hunger</u>	<u>Hambre cero</u>
	<u>Bonne santé et bien-être</u>	<u>Gesundheit und Wohlbefinden</u>	<u>Salud y bienestar</u>
	<u>Éducation de qualité</u>	<u>Hochwertige Bildung</u>	<u>Educación de calidad</u>
	<u>Égalité entre les sexes</u>	<u>Geschlechter-gleichheit</u>	<u>Igualdad de género</u>
	<u>Eau propre et assainissement</u>	<u>Sauberes Wasser und sanitäre Einrichtungen</u>	<u>Agua limpia y saneamiento</u>
	<u>Énergie propre et d'un coût abordable</u>	<u>Bezahlbare und saubere Energie</u>	<u>Energía asequible y no contaminante</u>
	<u>Travail décent et croissance économique</u>	<u>Menschenwürdige Arbeit und Wirtschaftswachstum</u>	<u>Trabajo decente y crecimiento económico</u>
	<u>Industrie, innovation et infrastructure</u>	<u>Industrie, Innovation und Infrastruktur</u>	<u>Industria, innovación e infraestructura</u>
	<u>Inégalités réduites hydraulique</u>	<u>Weniger ungleichheiten</u>	<u>Reducción de las desigualdades</u>
	<u>Villes et communautés durables</u>	<u>Nachhaltige Städte und Gemeinden</u>	<u>Ciudades y comunidades sostenibles</u>
	<u>Consommation et production responsables</u>	<u>Nachhaltige/r Konsum und production</u>	<u>Producción y consumo responsables</u>
	<u>Mesures relatives à la lutte contre les changements climatiques(ou la pollution par le plastique)</u>	<u>Massnahmen zum Klimaschutz</u>	<u>Acción por el clima</u>
	<u>Vie aquatique</u>	<u>Leben unter Wasser</u>	<u>Vida submarina</u>
	<u>Vie terrestre</u>	<u>Leben an Land</u>	<u>Vida de ecosistemas terrestres</u>
	<u>Paix, justice et institutions efficaces</u>	<u>Frieden, Gerechtigkeit und starke Institutionen</u>	<u>Paz, justicia e instituciones sólidas</u>
	<u>Partenariats pour la réalisation des objectifs</u>	<u>Partnerschaften zur Erreichung der Ziele</u>	<u>Fortalecer los medios de ejecución y revitalizar la alianza mundial para el desarrollo sostenible</u>

Reflective/discussion point:

Is there anything surprising/particularly interesting to you about this list of environmental goals? Is there anything that you think is missing from this list?

RESEARCH TASK:

Go to the [UNICEF website](#) to check your answers to the Language Task on page 4 and for explanations of each of the SDGs.

Challenge: Click on the French/German/Spanish hyperlink in the table to read the explanations in the target language!

The table below presents the Member States and/or State Parties to the Convention supporting the global pledge. You can read the full pledge on the [UNICEF website](#).

1. Can you name one or more languages spoken in each of the countries in the table below?
2. In which countries are the language(s) you are learning at school spoken officially?

LANGUAGE TASK:

Can you write the names of some of these countries in the target language you are learning at school?

Afghanistan	Belize	Comoros	Estonia	Guinea	Kenya	Madagascar	New Zealand	Portugal	Slovenia	Trinidad and Tobago
Albania	Benin	Democratic Republic of the Congo	Fiji	Honduras	Kyrgyzstan	Malawi	Niger	Qatar	Solomon Islands	Turkey
Andorra	Bhutan	Cook Islands	Finland	Hungary	Lao People's Democratic Republic	Mali	Nigeria	Republic of Korea	South Africa	Turkmenistan
Argentina	Bosnia & Herzegovina	Costa Rica	France	Iceland	Latvia	Malta	North Macedonia	Romania	Spain	Uganda
Armenia	Bulgaria	Côte d'Ivoire	Gabon	Indonesia	Lebanon	Federated States of Micronesia	Norway	Rwanda	Sri Lanka	Ukraine
Australia	Canada	Czechia	Gambia	Ireland	Lesotho	Mongolia	Palau	Samoa	Suriname	United Kingdom
Austria	Cape Verde	Denmark	Georgia	Italy	Liberia	Montenegro	Panama	São Tomé and Príncipe	Sweden	Uruguay
Azerbaijan	Chad	Dominican Republic	Germany	Jamaica	Liechtenstein	Morocco	Peru	Senegal	Switzerland	Vanuatu
Belarus	Chile	Ecuador	Ghana	Japan	Lithuania	Nauru	The Philippines	Serbia	Thailand	Viet Nam
Belgium	Colombia	Eritrea	Guatemala	Kazakhstan	Luxembourg	The Netherlands	Poland	Slovakia	Togo	Zambia

Reflective/discussion point:

Is there anything surprising about this list of countries? Are there any that you might expect to be listed and that aren't or that you didn't expect to be listed and are?

What is the connection between racism and the environment?



Widespread air pollution over India and Pakistan on 4 January 2020, as seen from space.



Protesters hold signs during a Black Lives Matter protest at Place de la Republique in Paris, France, on June 13th, 2020.

HOW DO PEOPLE EXPERIENCE CLIMATE BREAKDOWN DIFFERENTLY?

The world's richest 10% of people (located in the Global North) cause 50% of global carbon emissions whereas the world's poorest 50% of people (located in the Global South) contribute to approximately 10% of global carbon emissions. Despite causing relatively far lower carbon emissions, People of Colour in the Global South are far more likely to experience the worst impacts of climate breakdown: flooding, heat waves, drought, wildfires and rising sea levels. People's ability to respond to the impacts of climate change depend upon a number of factors such as their location and their economic status. People with access to funds find it easier to access safety, find temporary accommodation, clean water and sanitation etc. Those without funds may not be able to evacuate danger zones or access food, water, housing or energy.

The disproportionate impacts of the environmental crisis affect People of Colour in the Global North too. Research tells us that due to structural racism Black African and Caribbean people in the UK are exposed to higher levels of illegal air pollution than any other ethnic group and this contributes to several health conditions. Moreover, the fact that People of Colour in the UK are more likely to live in poor quality housing means that we are more vulnerable to flooding and less equipped to deal with extreme heat.



Destruction of houses in Puerto Rico seen from National Guard reconnaissance flight, Sept. 23, 2017. Three days earlier, on Sept. 20, Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico, causing catastrophic damage.

Greenpeace activists take part in a protest in Chapultepec Lake Park in Mexico City. December 20, 2009.



Barcelona, Spain. June 7th, 2020. Protesters hold an anti-racism rally outside the Catalan Parliament.

WHAT ARE 'SACRIFICE ZONES'?

Sacrifice zones are areas which are destroyed for power and profit. These areas are most often populated by people who are Black, Indigenous or other People of Colour (BIPOC) and who lack access to funds and political power. According to Darlington: 'Their proximity to BIPOC communities is no accident either: it's dictated by an underlying belief that non-white individuals are somehow inferior – also known as white supremacy'.

You may have already heard about one high-profile sacrifice zone nicknamed 'Cancer Alley' in the US state of Louisiana - home to mainly Black population which has a cancer rate that is much greater than the national average since it has been an area for US toxic waste disposal. There are other examples of sacrifice zones all over the Spanish and French speaking world.

A set of dummies propped up in the Sahara Desert awaiting an atomic bomb explosion during the French nuclear testing, 1960. The French Reggane nuclear test series was a group of 4 nuclear tests conducted in 1960-1961 during the Algerian War.



WHAT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN COLONIALISM AND THE ENVIRONMENT?

The slave trade, slavery and the conquest and exploitation that took place in the colonies placed the extraction of resources founded on the work of slaves at the centre of the development of the capitalist economy and agenda. Indigenous Peoples were subjected to brutal systems of oppression and diseases which were deadly. Colonisers' unsustainable farming practices – like cattle rearing and single-crop plantations (e.g. cotton and sugarcane) devastated forests.

The link between colonialism and the environment has been researched by decolonial theorists (see Hare, Jones, Grosfoguel and Escobar) and a growing number of thinkers argue that the current environmental crisis and climate injustice is a direct consequence of colonial history.



A Costa Rican worker during the application of chemicals used for maintenance on the banana plantation.

WHAT CAN BE LEARNT FROM INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT?

Indigenous Peoples are the earliest known inhabitants of an area and due to the fact that they have lived for generations within particular lands and native wildlife, they often have unparalleled knowledge of how to protect nature, and to use natural resources sustainably. Despite the continued disruption of violent colonialism, Indigenous land protection has been shown to be the most effective form of conservation. Indigenous knowledge about the natural world is essential in the protection of the environment.

Find out more in the [Minority Rights Group International 2019 Report](#).



Tarabuco indigenous people buying and selling goods on the colourful Sunday market of Tarabuco near Sucre, Bolivia.

WHAT IS CLIMATE JUSTICE?

Many progressive campaigners are rejecting a Western worldview which separates nature and culture and turning to indigenous knowledge. The concept of 'buen vivir' (living well) was developed by an American-Colombian anthropologist called Arturo Escobar and was inspired by the Quechuan concept of 'feeling-thinking with the earth'.

Supporting environmental defenders who are Black, Indigenous and other People of Colour is a really powerful way to stop the unequal impacts of climate change.



Cuzco, Peru: Quechua women in traditional indigenous clothing at market selling colourful textiles and making local craft souvenirs.



Quechua girls admire Andean Mountain views on the Ausungate trail. Cusco, Peru.

Urban graffiti and words protesting the building of pipelines on indigenous land painted on a wall, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.



Montreal, Canada. December 15th, 2014. Native Cree walkers against uranium development in their region arrive to the city of Montreal after an 850 km walk in frigid winter temperatures.

HOW ARE BLACK, INDIGENOUS AND OTHER PEOPLE OF COLOUR 'FIGHTING FOR OUR PLANET'?

You will likely know about climate change and autism activist Greta Thunberg and the global youth climate movement she inspired. But there are many Black, Indigenous and other People of Colour around the world who are at the forefront of the fight for environmental justice but remain outside of the media spotlight. At the World Economic Forum in 2020, a youth delegate from Uganda called Vanessa Nakate was cropped out of a photo. This example of anti-Black racism highlighted the fact that *'racism is as true in the climate movement as anywhere else.... Despite deep experience of environmental racism, and expertise fighting for social and environmental justice, people of colour are still left out'* (Kaur Paul 2020).



RESEARCH TASKS

1. Greenpeace's website amplifies the voices of environmental activists who are Black, Indigenous and People of Colour. Read about these inspiring young people - [find out about their work and which languages they speak](#).
2. To find out more about the connection between the climate emergency and racism see Greenpeace's report from July 2022: [Confronting Injustice: Racism and the Environmental Emergency](#).

LANGUAGE TASK

Translate the following environmental slogans into English from the Target Language that you are studying. Solutions are at the bottom of this page.

Spanish



French



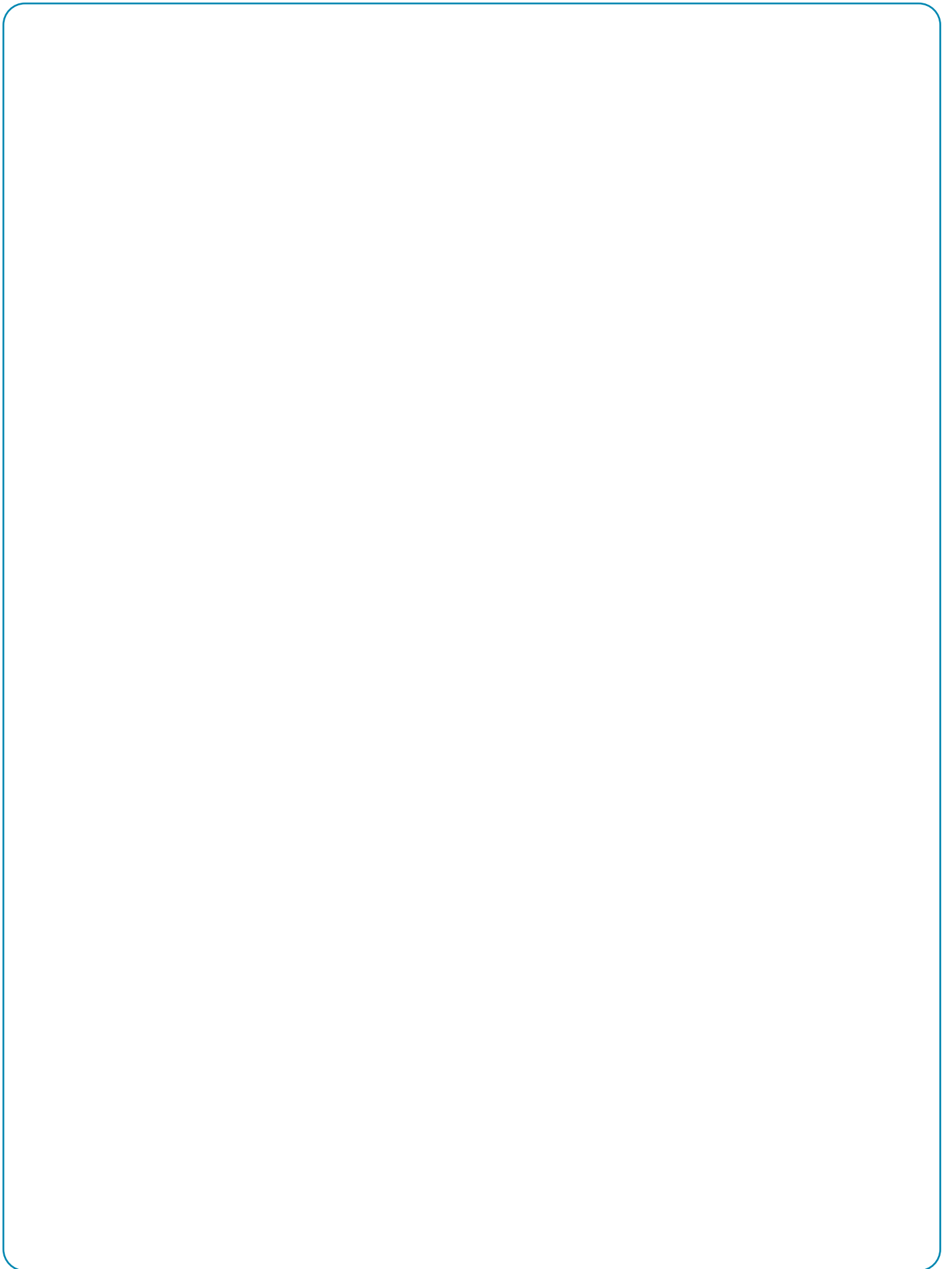
German



SLAGANS:
 Spanish 1. Clean and renewable energy! Action needed now. 2. Our generation, our future!
 French 1. Less consuming, more butterflies. 2. There isn't a planet B!
 German 1. (Green) We demand a Plastic Master Plan from politicians. 2. (Red) We care about the future of future generations; Ban plastics. 3. The trees' breath gives us life

CREATIVE TASK

Design your own environmental poster and write a slogan in the target language that you are studying.



WHAT ROLE DOES LEARNING LANGUAGES PLAY IN CLIMATE JUSTICE?

'Language education has a vital role to play in tackling climate change. It gives people the tools to understand environmental issues, to discuss ideas and to work together on solutions' - British Council.

Learning another language is a powerful tool for fostering tolerance and respect for others. Language learning is about dialogue and dialogue is essential for sharing knowledge and finding peaceful and sustainable solutions.



© 123RF

Reflective/discussion point:

How has your experience of learning languages fostered tolerance and respect for people with other cultures/languages? Have you had experience of a multilingual context (one where more than one language is spoken) that has brought benefits/opportunities/solutions? Perhaps in school/at home/elsewhere. What do you think are the benefits and opportunities of studying/learning/working in a multilingual context?

WHY ARE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN MOTHER-TONGUE LANGUAGES IMPORTANT?

Many people in the world do not have access to an education in a language that they speak or understand. Education systems offering instruction in just one language have often contributed to reducing the use of local languages. In fact, more than 2,500 languages are in danger of disappearing altogether.

In Mexico, alongside a Spanish-speaking literacy programme, there are bilingual literacy programmes for Indigenous communities in Maya, Mazateco Alta, Náhuatl de la Huasteca, Náhuatl Sierra Negra and Zongólica, Tseltal and Tsotsil.

Policies like the ones in Mexico which promote and support people's mother-tongue language are key to ensuring that heritage, knowledge and understanding is transmitted across people with different cultures and preserved over the generations.



Santa Ana Zegache, Oaxaca, Mexico - Artwork on a wall promotes the rights of indigenous people.

© Alamy Stock Photo

Reflective questions:

Which language(s) is/are taught at your school?

Which language(s) are spoken by members of your school community?

Do you think that other languages should be taught and qualifications made available in them?

Outside of home/school, where are there opportunities to develop/progress in mother-tongue language(s)?

WHAT ARE LOST WORDS?

The relationship between nature and language has been explored by an academic called Dr Robert McFarlane who in his book *Landmarks* (2015) looks at more than 2,000 terms to describe nature, landscape, creatures and weather from over 30 languages of Britain and Ireland that have faded from usage. Dr McFarlane is concerned about the words of nature that are being lost over time and is an advocate for 'nature literacy' in children's education and the important role that languages has to inspire children to protect the natural world:

'Just as nature's names are vanishing from the language of children, nature itself is vanishing. Forgetting is an easy way to lose things – as each generation becomes more at ease with less nature, we forget what it is that we've lost....keeping everyday nature alive in the words and stories of children in particular – who are the ones who will grow up and decide what to save and what to lose – seems to me vital.' Dr McFarlane.

Here are some of the words that Dr McFarlane presents in his book *Lost Words*:

Acorn	Adder	Bluebell
Bramble	Conker	Dandelion
Heron	Ivy	Kingfisher
Lark	Magpie	Newt
Otter	Raven	Starling
Weasel	Willow	Wren

Reflective/discussion point:

Do you recognise all of these words? Would you be able to explain them or draw them, even? Why do you think that it is important to know what these are? Search online for any words that you are unsure about.

LANGUAGE TASK

Translate each of these natural objects into the language that you are studying using the support boxes below. Use a dictionary to help you.

FRENCH	GERMAN	SPANISH
jacinthe des bois	Dornenzweig	estornino
pissenlit	Reiher	chochín
martin-pêcheur	Lerche	nutria
lierre	Löwenzahn	comadreja
pie	Eisvogel	víbora
corbeau	Eichel	Alondra
Gland	Molch	castaño de indias
Roncière	Star	sauce
héron	Zaunkönig	hiedra
saule	Otter	campanilla
triton	Wiesel	diente de león
étourneau	Kreuzotter	martín Pescador
troglodyte	Kastanie	bellota
alouette	Rabe	zarza
loutre	Weide	urraca
belette	Hasenglöckchen	cuervo
vipère	Efeu	Garza
marron	Elster	tritón

ACTION RESEARCH TASK

Talk to someone in your family/school who speaks another language. Ask them about words in their language for nature. Are there any words that don't have an easy/direct translation into English? Why might that be?

Being a language learner and using your languages skills to advocate for climate justice means that you can play a powerful part in contributing to the essential dialogue between people for a more peaceful and sustainable future. How will you use your language skills to amplify dialogue? How will you use your voice to champion environmental justice?

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING



Atchoarena, D Multilingualism: The language of sustainable development, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning Blog [Multilingualism: The language of sustainable development | ONLY CONNECT \(unesco.org\)](#)

Begum, H Confronting Injustice: Racism and the Environmental Emergency. Greenpeace July 2022 [Confronting injustice: Racism and the environmental emergency \(greenpeace.org.uk\)](#)

British Council Website [Climate action in language education | British Council](#)

Darlington, M Sacrifice zones: the places being destroyed by our toxic system – and the dangerous ‘climate solutions’ that could make them worse [Sacrifice zones: the places being destroyed by our toxic system – and the dangerous ‘climate solutions’ that could make them worse | Greenpeace UK](#)

Evelyn, K Like I wasn't there Published 29 January 2020 (Guardian website) [‘Like I wasn't there’: climate activist Vanessa Nakate on being erased from a movement | Activism | The Guardian](#)

Glennnon, J Inspire students to take action Published: 5th January 2021 [Taking a Stand: Inspire Students to Take Action | Cambridge English](#)

Institute of Race Relations [BME statistics on poverty and housing and employment - Institute of Race Relations \(irr.org.uk\)](#)

Kaur Paul, H Climate change affects rich and poor unequally. Climate justice redresses the balance Published: 9th March 2020 [Climate change affects rich and poor unequally. Climate justice redresses the balance | Greenpeace UK](#)

Kodjo-Grandvaux, S Colonialism, The Hidden Cause of Our Environmental Crisis [Colonialism, The Hidden Cause Of Our Environmental Crisis - Worldcrunch](#)

Oxfam (2015) [World's richest 10% produce half of carbon emissions while poorest 3.5 billion account for just a tenth | Oxfam International](#)

Vaughn, A [London's black communities disproportionately exposed to air pollution - study | Pollution | The Guardian](#) (2016)

Walsh, L The Lost Words [The Lost Words \(cam.ac.uk\)](#)

World Meteorological Organization [Weather-related disasters increase over past 50 years, causing more damage but fewer deaths | World Meteorological Organization \(wmo.int\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lisa Panford is a Senior Lecturer at St Mary's University in Twickenham, with over 14 years' experience teaching languages in secondary schools in London. She has studied and worked in Spain and Peru. Lisa is passionate about counteracting discriminatory practices in the secondary MFL classroom and is dedicated to the principle that all pupils should be given an opportunity to appreciate the enriching and transformative experience of studying languages. Lisa is the co-founder of the Decolonising Secondary MFL Curriculum (Decolonising the Curriculum - Association for Language Learning (all-languages.org.uk)), elected Member of the Council for the Association for Language Learning and a Member of the Advisory Panels at the Institute of Languages, Cultures and Societies and the British Academy.

With thanks to PGCE Secondary trainees for their input on this piece.

Explore the rest of our resources on [diversity and inclusion](#).

