

A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF EU ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION POLICIES

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Abstract: In January 2022, the European Commission released a Proposal for a Council Recommendation on learning for environmental sustainability, in which it recognised that “[w]e are at a critical point in time: human action has brought us close to causing irreparable damage to our planet” and that “collective and individual actions are urgently needed to place our society and economy on a sustainable path” (European Commission, 2022, p. 1). The proposal was then adopted by the Council of the European Union in June 2022 with the “Council Recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development” (Council of the EU, 2022), which focused on the key role of education in addressing the climate crisis and on the importance of preparing learners for the future. This chapter aims to critically analyse the aforementioned Commission Proposal and the ensuing Council Recommendation, as well as the Commission Staff Working Document accompanying the proposal (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022a), in order to discuss the main linguistic, pedagogical and political issues emerging from an ecocritically-informed analysis.

Keywords: Ecocritical Discourse Analysis; ecolinguistics; environmental sustainability; environmental education; sustainable development; green growth discourse

1. Introduction

The results of the 2019 Eurobarometer survey “How do we build a stronger, more united Europe? The views of young people” showed that more than two thirds of young people (67%) believed that protecting the environment and fighting climate change should be the main priority for the EU in the following ten years (Eurobarometer, 2019; see Figure 1). However, the aftermath of Covid-19 and Russia’s war against Ukraine seem to have affected young people’s priorities: while protecting the environment is still deemed important by young Europeans, according to a more recent Flash Eurobarometer survey on Youth and Democracy, conducted between 22 February and 4 March 2022, the percentage of young people who think that promoting environmentally friendly policies should be the first goal of the EU has decreased to 31%, while 37% think that priority number one should be preserving peace, reinforcing international security and promoting international cooperation, 33% expect the EU to focus on increasing job opportunities for young people, and 32% on fighting poverty and economic and social inequalities (Eurobarometer, 2022; see Figure 2). This shift of perspective demonstrates that environmental education needs to be further supported by the EU to ensure that future generations are willing and prepared to respond to the climate crisis.

PRIORITIES FOR THE EU

For young people, the main priorities for EU action in the 10 years to come are:



Figure 1

How do we build a stronger, more united Europe? The views of young people – Infographics 2019. Public domain. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2224>

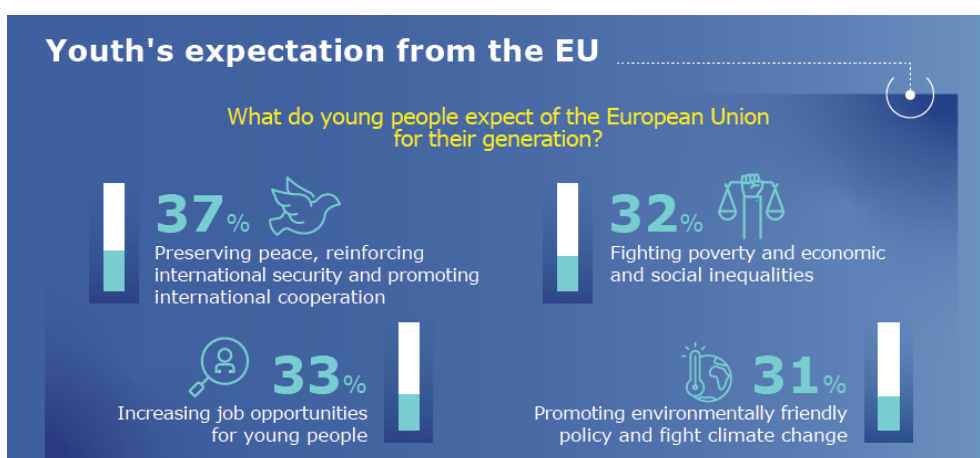


Figure 2

Youth and Democracy in the European Year of Youth – Infographics. 2022. Public domain. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2282>

In January 2022, the European Commission released a Proposal for a Council Recommendation on learning for environmental sustainability, in which it recognised that “[w]e are at a critical point in time: human action has brought us close to causing irreparable damage to our planet” and that “collective and individual actions are urgently needed to place our society and economy on a sustainable path” (European Commission, 2022, p. 1). The Proposal was accompanied by a Commission Staff Working Document providing research evidence in support of the Recommendation, as well as examples of good practice from across Europe (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022a). The Draft Recommendation included in the Commission Proposal was then adopted, in a slightly revised form, by the Council of the EU in June 2022 with the Council Recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development (Council of the EU, 2022), a policy statement that calls for the integration of sustainability into all aspects of education and training in all Member States. Highlighting the key role of education in preparing learners to address the climate crisis, the Council observes that although several initiatives are taking place all over Europe to support it, “sustainability is not yet a systemic feature of policy and practice in the EU” (Council of the EU, 2022, p. 3). The Recommendation thus invites Member States to, among other things, “support education and training systems in taking action for the green transition and sustainable development,” “[e]stablish learning for the green transition and sustainable development as one of the

priority areas in education and training policies and programmes,” “[p]rovide a range of learning opportunities [...], so that individuals of all ages can prepare for and actively contribute to the green transition,” and “[s]upport integration of the green transition and sustainable development into initial teacher and trainer education programmes [...]” (Council of the EU, 2022, pp. 4-6). Both the Commission and the Council also highlight the importance of starting environmental education from early childhood “adopting pedagogies that enhance teaching and learning for the green transition and sustainable development in interdisciplinary ways and develop the socio-emotional aspects of learning” (Council of the EU, 2022, p. 5) through a lifelong-learning and learner-centred approach that involves young people in meaningful ways, fostering “hands-on, engaging and action-based ways of learning” (European Commission, 2022, p. 1).

In addition to the actions promoted by the aforementioned Commission Proposal and Council Recommendation, and within the European Green Deal framework (European Commission, 2019), the EU is undertaking other initiatives such as GreenComp, the 2021-2027 Erasmus+ programme, and various participatory communities, to support Member states to:

- equip learners and educators with the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for a greener and more sustainable economy and society
- help education and training institutions to integrate sustainability into teaching and learning and across all aspects of their operations
- create a shared understanding on the deep and transformative changes needed in education and training for sustainability and the green transition. (European Commission webpage on *Learning for the green transition and sustainable development*. <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/green-education/learning-for-the-green-transition>)

GreenComp, the European competence framework on sustainability, was published in January 2022 (Bianchi *et al.* 2022). It defines the four competences that should be acquired by learners of all ages: embodying sustainability values (which includes valuing sustainability, supporting fairness and promoting nature), embracing complexity in sustainability (systems thinking, critical thinking and problem framing), acting for sustainability (political agency, collective action and individual initiative), and envisioning sustainable futures (futures literacy, adaptability and exploratory thinking). This competence framework can be used in education and training programmes by schools, researchers, educators and public authorities, and contribute to connecting different institutions into a Community of Practice.

The 2021-2027 Erasmus+ programme factsheet explicitly mentions the green transition as one of its main pillars (“Inclusion and diversity”, “Digital Erasmus+” and “Green Erasmus+”), stating that “the programme will lead by example, by encouraging participants to use lower-carbon transport as an alternative to flying” and that “Erasmus funding will also be channelled into building up knowledge and understanding of sustainability and climate action, so that Europeans acquire the world-leading competences needed to create sustainable societies, lifestyles and economies” (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2021). The 2023 Erasmus+ annual work programme follows up on this intention “both by the prioritisation of the green transition in the cooperation activities, and by the promotion of green practices at the level of the projects throughout the Programme” (European Commission, Directorate-General Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022b). In particular, it pledges to give priority to projects that contribute to

[p]romoting learning for environmental sustainability, for example by (i) raising awareness and prompting positive action at both personal and societal levels to address sustainability and the climate crisis and to tackle eco-anxiety; (ii) developing the key competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) related to sustainability as set out in the European sustainability competence framework; (iii) strengthening the professional competences of pre and in-service teachers, and school leadership teams related to sustainability and the environmental crisis; (iv) testing of innovative practices to prepare learners from early school ages and educational staff to become "agents for change" (e.g. behavioural changes towards recycling, reduced consumption, and sustainable lifestyles, engaging at an individual and collective level with sustainability and environmental issues); and (v) supporting whole-school approaches to sustainability including green and sustainable buildings and grounds, as well as creativity and innovation in line with the New European Bauhaus. (European Commission, Directorate-General Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022b, pp. 24-25)

Finally, the EU supports participatory communities such as the Education for Climate Coalition and the European Climate Pact. The Education for Climate Coalition is one of the EU's key actions for environmental sustainability education, and it was launched at the end of 2020 to mobilise all education actors by raising awareness and inviting participation in order to "support the changes needed for a climate-neutral society by deciding collectively, acting collaboratively [and] adapting sustainably." More specifically, its priorities are to "train teachers, bridge education with science, develop green skills and competences, raise awareness, [and] change behaviours" through a holistic and inclusive long-term learning approach (see the *#EducationForClimate Community Manifesto* on the [Education for Climate Coalition website](#)). The European Climate Pact was also launched in 2020 as part of the European Green Deal, and it invites communities to participate in climate action and build a greener Europe by connecting and sharing knowledge (European Commission, 2019).

Within the context of all these initiatives, this paper aims to address three main questions regarding the EU approach to environmental education: does the language used tend to delete or diffuse human responsibility, or does it highlight the role of humans in causing (but also solving) the environmental crisis (Schleppegrell 1997)? Do the analysed texts use vocabulary that suggests a green growth perspective or a degrowth one, or do they offer a "third alternative" (Ossewaarde, Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 2020)? Do they promote beneficial or destructive discourses (Stibbe 2015)? Through these research questions, the main linguistic, pedagogical and political issues emerging from the EU approach to environmental education will be explored by critically analysing the English version of three related policy documents, all published in 2022:

1. The [European Commission Proposal for a Council Recommendation on learning for environmental sustainability](#) (European Commission, 2022) – 5,927 words.
2. The ensuing [Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on learning for the green transition and sustainable development](#) (Council of the EU, 2022) – 4,601 words.
3. The Commission Staff Working Document accompanying the proposal for a Council recommendation on learning for environmental sustainability. [Learning for the green transition and sustainable development](#) (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022a) – 53,034 words.

2. Theoretical framework and methodology

Language inevitably shapes, and is in turn shaped by, our relationship with the environment. To reveal the ideologies at the basis of the EU approach to environmental education, the aforementioned policy documents will be analysed from an ecocritical point of view, taking into account the political and cultural aspects that emerge from the linguistic choices of EU

policy makers. Ecocritical Discourse Analysis (EDA) offers a framework to better understand the causes and consequences of certain environmental conceptions that influence language use, as well as political and legal action, by providing the tools to reveal the power structures embedded within the lexicogrammar of English. The basic tenets of Ecocritical Discourse Analysis were first formulated by Michael Halliday in a paper he presented at the 1990 AILA conference in Thessaloniki (Greece), where he argued that the challenge ahead for applied linguistics was to explore how language construes the world and thereby endangers human and non-human life on earth. In particular, Halliday argued that “the things [...] which we ourselves have brought about – classism, growthism, destruction of species, pollution and the like – are not just problems for the biologists and physicists. They are problems for the applied linguistic community as well” (Fill 1997; Halliday 2001, p. 179).

Halliday’s approach is based on the weakly Whorfian belief that there is a relationship between language, thought and reality, and that linguistic processes influence the way humans interpret the world. Following this line, an ecocritical analysis of discourse can reveal the ideologies (such as anthropocentrism and growthism) that lie beneath certain linguistic choices, which are the practical expression of such ideologies (Adami 2013, 2015). On the linguistic level, the analysis will thus focus on the vocabulary and structures used by the EU to establish its environmental education policies; on the pedagogical and political level, it will consider the possible implications of these linguistic choices by discussing the underlying ideologies and how they influence the “stories we live by” (Stibbe 2015), that is, the cognitive structures that influence our worldviews and how we treat each other, as well as other animals, plants, and the physical environment.

Stibbe (2015) identified three types of discourses on the environment, which convey different ideologies based on the stories they tell: beneficial discourses are consistent with ecological values such as care for the planet and the wellbeing of all human and non-human beings; on the contrary, destructive discourses are based on unecological ecosophies and contribute to ecological exploitation; finally, ambivalent discourses are apparently beneficial but actually fail to promote change, contributing to the maintenance of the status quo. The main question to be explored in this paper is whether the EU policy documents on environmental education are actually beneficial discourses that contribute to the search for new stories to live by, or whether they are still influenced by the so-called “green growth discourse,” that is, the destructive stories of unlimited economic growth and technological progress initiated by international organizations such as the United Nations and OECD, and endorsed by the EU in the last decades (Ossewaarde, Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 2020). The linguistic aspects that will be analysed in order to answer this question are: 1. the erasure of human agency through the use of nominalizations, of passive or ergative constructions, or of generic or indeterminate actors (Van Leeuwen 2008; Schleppegrell 1997; Stibbe 2015); 2. the use of unecological or ambiguous terms inspired by a “green growth” ideology (Ossewaarde, Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 2020).

Nominalizations consist in replacing the explanation of an action with a noun: this highlights the process rather than the actor and thereby erases responsibility. As Goatly explained, “nominalisations often exclude reference to agents or external causes, suggesting [...] a self-generated process” (Goatly 2017, p. 53). For example, words such as “deforestation,” “degradation,” or “pollution” describe processes associated with a human agent without identifying who has caused them. Similarly, the use of generic subjects such as “young people”, “we” or “humans” – as in “human action has brought us close to causing irreparable damage to our planet” – diffuses responsibility to all humans indistinctly, even though not all humans are equally responsible for environmental degradation. Finally, passive or ergative constructions can erase responsibility by omitting the agent, thereby hiding the causes of environmental problems, as in the sentences “Forests are being cut down” or

“Climate is changing.” Such representations of ecological issues seem to refer to self-caused processes for which no one is responsible, as if the action took place without any human intervention (Alexander 2009; Schleppegrell 1997), which is indeed detrimental to ecological interests. On the other hand, Goatly (1996) argued that ergative constructions and nominalizations may also be used “ecologically” to “construe a reality in which energy is not simply imposed on an inert nature from the outside to produce change, as in the transitive Newtonian model, but in which nature provides its own energy” (p. 553), that is, to “construct a more consonant grammar, reflecting an epistemology more in keeping with current scientific and ecological ontology” (p. 556). My qualitative analysis will consider both perspectives and evaluate, through close reading, whether a certain linguistic choice erases human agency or empowers nature.

For what concerns vocabulary, the analysis is based on the data collected through Voyant Tools (<https://voyant-tools.org/>) in order to detect patterns such as word frequency and collocations in each document. With the support of these data, the actual “greenness” of EU policies for environmental education will be evaluated by grouping words and expressions into two categories, “green growth” and “ecological” discourse, drawing attention to the importance of making careful linguistic choices if we really want to change the stories we live by. In fact, the use of vocabulary that belongs to the discourse of economics and highlights the importance of progress and development rather than the centrality of nature – what Jickling (2001) calls “non-terminology” – is a way of devaluing ecological issues and subsuming environmental values into socio-economic ones, in line with the so-called “Mickey Mouse” sustainability model (Peet 2009; see Figure 3). An example of such “non-terminology” is the apparently environmentally friendly expression “sustainable development”, famously defined in the “Brundtland Report” as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland 1987): clearly, the focus here is on economic development rather than on the environment, as confirmed by the linguistic form of the phrase, whereby the adjective “sustainable” is added as a modifier to the noun “development”, which is the core of the phrase. This seems to imply that economic development is more important than environmental protection, thereby indicating a “green growth” approach. On the other hand, using the noun “sustainability” in expressions such as “environmental sustainability” may indicate a more ecological approach. Therefore, “the sustainability paradigm is a major change from the previous paradigm of economic development with its damaging social and environmental consequences” (UNESCO, 2012). However, the overarching paradigm of most policies, not only at EU-level but also at UN-level, seems to be sustainable development. UNESCO’s official formulation is, in fact, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) rather than Education for Sustainability (Efs).

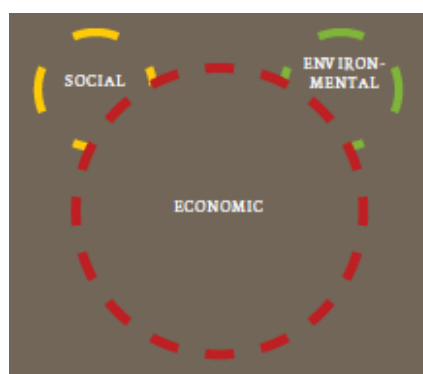


Figure 3
Mickey Mouse sustainability model (Peet 2009).

3. Text analysis and discussion

The European Commission Proposal for a Council Recommendation on learning for environmental sustainability (European Commission, 2022) opens with an “Explanatory Memorandum” which states that “human action has brought us close to causing irreparable damage to our planet, the very source of our existence and well-being” (p. 1). Despite the diffusion of responsibility to all humans (which, as we have seen, may be detrimental because it does not allow us to identify who exactly is responsible for this damage), the choice of an active construction, which highlights the role of humans in the environmental crisis, is indeed a step forward towards an eco-friendly perspective and a beneficial kind of story. The focus seems to shift to green growth discourse in the following sentence, which claims that “[t]o ensure a future where we can thrive, collective and individual actions are urgently needed to place our society and economy on a sustainable path.” So, the goal is clearly for human society to develop and grow, albeit sustainably. Accordingly, the following paragraph refers to “sustainable development,” “energy, environment, mobility and agriculture,” and the “green transition” (p. 1). The call upon the education sector to “take [...] action to respond to the climate emergency and planetary crisis” underlines the importance of preparing learners for the future by teaching them how to “live more sustainably, change patterns of consumption and production, embrace healthier lifestyles and contribute – both individually and collectively – to the transformation of our societies” (p. 1). Although vocabulary seems to point towards green growth discourse and to suggest a destructive story based on the Mickey Mouse sustainability model – with words such as “consumption,” “production,” “lifestyle,” “societies” – I think that the message is actually ecological in its substance, because it does not suppress nor diffuse responsibility, and it includes an invitation to act, emphasizing the role of teachers and educators in driving a change towards more sustainable societies, not only by transmitting knowledge and skills but also by fostering “empathy, solidarity and caring for nature,” helping learners “understand the inter-connectedness of economic, social and natural systems” (p. 1). The key phrase in the Commission Proposal is in fact “learning for environmental sustainability,” an eco-friendly expression which, unfortunately, in the Council Recommendation (Council of the EU, 2022) becomes “learning for the green transition and sustainable development” – a much less ecological formulation, which indicates a lack of attention to the implications of vocabulary choices in official documents, or even, as we will see, a conscious will to reinstate the notion of sustainable development, which had been at least partly avoided by the Commission Proposal.

The data collected through Voyant Tools confirm this difference: both texts feature “education” as the most frequent word, but in the Commission Proposal it is followed by “sustainability,” while in the Council Recommendation the second most frequent word is “development” (see Tables 1 and 2).¹ Similarly, the collocation table indicates that the most frequent collocations are “environmental sustainability” (57 occurrences) in the Commission Proposal and “sustainable development” (59 occurrences) in the Council Recommendation. From an ecocritical perspective, these phrases are not equivalent: in the first, “sustainability” is the centre of the noun phrase, with the adjective “environmental” used as a modifier. This strengthens the ecological message, unlike the already-examined phrase “sustainable development,” which has in fact been widely criticised by ecolinguistics as an example of green growth discourse. Interestingly, the collocate “green growth,” coined at the Fifth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development (MCED) in 2005 in Seoul, and

¹ In the tables, I have included the 10 most frequent words and collocations, eliminating irrelevant results such as “EN” (which refers to the document language, English) and non-content words such as “council” and “including.”

since then widely adopted by international organizations, including the United Nations, OECD, the World Bank, as well as the EU (Ossewaarde, Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 2020), never appears in any of the two documents.

Another notable difference between the two texts emerges from the collocates table: while the Commission Proposal features several collocations with “sustainability” as a noun (environmental sustainability, sustainability learning, sustainability education), the Council Recommendation uses the adjective “sustainable” in collocations such as “sustainable development,” “sustainable green” and “sustainable transition.” The noun “development” also appears much more frequently, not only in terms of word count, but also in collocations: in the Commission Proposal, the word appears 32 times (as opposed to 88 “sustainability” occurrences) and it is not among the top ten collocates; in the Council Recommendation, it appears 75 times (as opposed to 27 “sustainability” occurrences) in the word count list, and four times in the collocates list, one of which in top position, with 59 occurrences of “sustainable development.” For example, the Commission Proposal’s observation that “educators lack support [...] *to incorporate environmental sustainability* in their teaching practices” becomes “[...] *to incorporate the principles of the green transition and sustainable development* in their teaching and training practices.” This indicates a conscious will to go back to traditional green growth discourse, which is also quite evident in the following changes of wording from the Draft Recommendation in the Commission Proposal to the final version of the Council Recommendation:

Draft Recommendation in the Commission Proposal (European Commission, 2022)	Council Recommendation (Council of the EU, 2022)
<i>Urgently</i> step up efforts to support education and training systems to take action for <i>the green transition</i> so that learners [...] can access [...] education and training on climate change, biodiversity and sustainability.	<i>Step up and strengthen</i> efforts to support education and training systems in taking action for <i>the green transition and sustainable development</i> so that learners [...] can access [...] education and training on sustainability, climate change, environmental protection and biodiversity, <i>with due concern for environmental, social and economic considerations.</i>
Establish <i>learning for environmental sustainability</i> as a <i>priority area</i> in education and training policies and programmes in order to support and enable the sector <i>to contribute to the green transition.</i>	Establish <i>learning for the green transition and sustainable development</i> as <i>one of the priority areas</i> in education and training policies and programmes in order to support and enable the sector <i>to contribute to a sustainable future</i> , embedded in a holistic understanding of education.
Raise awareness of the benefits and opportunities of <i>learning for environmental sustainability</i> [...]	Raise awareness of the benefits and opportunities of <i>learning for the green transition and sustainable development</i> [...]
Strengthen [...] high-quality lifelong <i>learning for environmental sustainability</i> [...].	Strengthen [...] high-quality lifelong <i>learning for the green transition and sustainable development</i> [...].
Recognise that all educators, whatever their discipline or sector of education, are sustainability educators who need to support their learners in preparing for the green transition.	Recognise that all educators, whatever their discipline or sector of education, are sustainability educators who need to support their learners in preparing for the green transition. <i>Enable them to raise their learners’ awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals.</i>
Embed environmental sustainability in all initial teacher education programmes	Support integration of the green transition and sustainable development into initial teacher and trainer education programmes.
Support education and training institutions to effectively integrate environmental sustainability across all their activities and operations	Continue to support formal and non-formal education and training institutions in effectively integrating, where appropriate, the green transition and sustainable development across all their activities and operations

The changes, which often involve a substitution of the expression “learning for environmental sustainability” with “learning for the green transition and sustainable development,” are most likely the result of a compromise between the Commission’s will to break away from an ambivalent discourse revolving around the idea of sustainable development (which is nonetheless present, albeit much less frequently, with only 17 occurrences of this collocation, as opposed to the 59 occurrences in the Council Recommendation), and the Council’s need to appease different interests and sensibilities, and to ensure widespread agreement, following the wording chosen by UNESCO and thereby suggesting a direct link with its Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). The “Cirrus” visualisation (word cloud) from Voyant tools, reproduced below, together with the word count and collocates tables, further illustrates the shift from a slightly more eco-friendly perspective in the Commission Proposal, based on the notion of “environmental sustainability,” to a “sustainable development” approach in the Council Recommendation. As anticipated, this is also in line with UNESCO’s wording, which has established “Education for Sustainable Development” (EDS) as its official formulation, stating that sustainability is “a long-term goal (i.e. a more sustainable world), while sustainable development refers to the many processes and pathways to achieve it” (UNESCO, 2012). As observed by Evans (2019), this linguistic choice by UNESCO “problematically places the focus on continuous development and economic growth” (p. 9).

Term	Count	Trend
Education	116	0.019571453
Sustainability	88	0.014847309
Learning	62	0.010460604
Environmental	62	0.010460604
Training	54	0.009110848
Support	47	0.007929813
Green	34	0.0057364604
Development	32	0.0053990213
Sustainable	29	0.0048928633
Climate	28	0.0047241435

Term	Collocate	Count
environmental	sustainability	57
education	training	55
training	education	53
sustainability	learning	33
learning	sustainability	32
European	education	31
learning	environmental	29
environmental	learning	29
sustainability	education	27
education	sustainability	25



Table 1

European Commission, 2022. Sinclair, S. and G. Rockwell. (2023). *Voyant Tools*. Retrieved April 27, 2023.

Term	Count	Trend
education	91	0.01977831
development	75	0.016300805
sustainable	73	0.015866116
green	60	0.013040643
support	48	0.010432514
learning	48	0.010432514
transition	45	0.009780482
training	45	0.009780482
sustainability	27	0.0058682896
climate	24	0.005216257

Term	Collocate	Count
sustainable	development	59
education	training	48
training	education	46
green	transition	45
sustainable	green	40
development	green	39
green	sustainable	39
green	development	39
development	transition	36
sustainable	transition	36



Table 2.

Council of the EU, 2022. Sinclair, S. and G. Rockwell. (2023). *Voyant Tools*. Retrieved April 27, 2023.

The last text to be analysed, directly related to the Commission Proposal and the Council Recommendation, is the Staff Working Document accompanying the proposal for a Council recommendation on learning for environmental sustainability, whose title – “Learning for the green transition and sustainable development” – has been taken up in the final version of the Council Recommendation. This research-based text is much longer than the previous two (53,034 words) and seems to represent a compromise between green growth and ecological approaches, similar to the “third alternative” theorised by Ossewaarde and Ossewaarde-Lowtoo (2020) in their analysis of the EU’s Green Deal. According to this perspective, “the ecology versus economy language is not very appropriate since acting now out of concern for the environment is also acting for the sake of future generations, yet to be born, and hence for the sake of future economic welfare” (Ossewaarde, Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 2020, p. 2). In fact, any official document will inevitably reproduce some aspects of green growth discourse, which “was born among the powerful and perpetuated by them,” since “it does not threaten present power structures and the ideology that they undergird, namely, the Western enlightenment ideology of ‘progress’” (Ossewaarde, Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 2020, p. 4). However, as the Commission Staff Working Document shows, an alternative discourse that avoids contraposing ecology and economy is indeed possible, and it is precisely the focus on education that makes this in-between approach possible: if, as suggested by Ossewaarde and Ossewaarde-Lowtoo (2020), “degrowth is about cultural transformation” (p. 2), supporting the development of educational practices that promote environmental sustainability allows the EU to partly break away from traditional green growth discourse and create a beneficial story, without the need to explicitly embrace the degrowth paradigm, which would probably be rejected by many Member States and stakeholders.

The Commission Staff Working Document is divided into five chapters and it outlines the reasons, scope and policy context for the Recommendation (chapter 1); gives an overview of key findings from public surveys and previous research, and presents EU Member States' approaches to learning for environmental sustainability (chapter 2); gives evidence-based suggestions on how to achieve lasting change towards sustainability through learning and teaching (chapter 3); presents GreenComp (Bianchi *et al.* 2022), the European Sustainability Competence Framework (chapter 4); and provides details on how the Recommendation will be implemented, monitored and supported through various EU instruments, programmes, and platforms (chapter 5). For what concerns the erasure of human agency through nominalisations, passive or ergative constructions, and generic subjects, a close reading of the text reveals some uses of nominalisations such as “pollution” or “environmental degradation,” indeterminate actors such as “young people” and “the education sector,” as well as some passive constructions such as “urgent action is needed.” However, none of these can be categorised as unecological linguistic choices that generate destructive discourses: on the contrary, the authors' effort to find a balance between the requirements of an official document seeking widespread agreement and the will to promote a new paradigm to make the green transition “just and inclusive” (p. 8) is evident in the linguistic struggle between “environmental sustainability” and “sustainable development.”

The discourse constantly shifts from green growth to ecological and, occasionally, even degrowth approaches, but it never fails to advocate for change. For example, the first chapter opens with a reference to “the transformational changes needed in our economy and society” to address the climate and ecological crises by “aligning action across a range of policy areas, including energy, environment, mobility and agriculture.” The exact same words also appear in the Commission Proposal (p. 1) and may seem to indicate a green growth perspective, but the story they tell is actually a beneficial one, because it is a story that promotes change. Similarly, the references to “the interconnected nature of environmental, social, and economic issues” (p. 18) and to the need to “move from awareness to individual and collective action and empowerment” (p. 8) represent beneficial discourses that engage people and invite them to act in order to save both the natural environment and the socio-economic one. Another example of green-growth-inspired but beneficial discourse is the invitation to put “environmental sustainability at the heart of education and training” (p. 10) so as to equip learners “with the competences they need to contribute positively to a sustainable society and economy” (p. 6). As in the previous example, the reference to economy makes the statement fit in the green growth paradigm, but the idea of empowering learners and promoting change makes the discourse beneficial.

As mentioned before, the Commission Staff Working Document also presents some data from public surveys and other research studies (chapter 2). The following comment on UNESCO's 2021 global review on environmental education (UNESCO, 2021) is particularly revealing of the authors' awareness of the importance of language choices in policy documents to create a beneficial story, as well as of the need for “socio-emotional and action-oriented learning” to engage learners on an emotional level to make them active players against the environmental crisis:

A global review of national curricula and policy documents by UNESCO in 2021 shows that crucial environmental themes are not yet sufficiently covered (UNESCO, 2021). Globally, ‘the environment’ is largely present in policy documents (83% of documents analysed); however, climate change and biodiversity are much less represented (47% and 19% respectively). This is of concern given the increasing relevance and urgency of those issues [...]. Across the board, cognitive learning, i.e., learning *about* the environment, prevails over socio-emotional and action-oriented learning. The latter are especially important for developing learners' engagement with the environment and climate change and developing their sense of agency. (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022a, p. 15)

The vocabulary analysis through Voyant Tools (Table 3)² confirms the mediating and self-reflexive function of the Commission Staff Working Document, which situates itself between the “environmental sustainability” approach of the Commission Proposal and the “sustainable development” approach of the Council Recommendation: “sustainability” and “education” are the most frequent words (862 and 717 occurrences respectively) and “environmental sustainability” is the most frequent collocation (292 occurrences), as in the Commission Proposal, but the words “sustainable” and “development” are also quite frequent, both as single words (with 225 and 251 occurrences respectively) and as collocates (116 occurrences). An interesting addition is the appearance of the words “people” and “change” in the top ten of the word count list: this is in line with what emerged from close reading, that is, a clear focus on the importance of empowering people to act for change. The prominence of the terms “environmental,” “education” and “sustainability” in the “Cirrus” visualisation also confirms the authors’ attempt to promote beneficial stories to live by.

Term	Count	Trend
Sustainability	862	0.016253725
Education	717	0.013519629
Learning	541	0.010201003
Environmental	413	0.007787457
Development	251	0.0047328128
Sustainable	225	0.0042425613
Training	192	0.003620319
School	156	0.0029415092
people	150	0.0028283743
change	150	0.0028283743

Term	Collocate	Count
environmental	sustainability	292
sustainability	learning	239
Learning	sustainability	227
sustainability	education	170
education	training	154
education	sustainability	152
Training	education	152
Learning	environmental	141
environmental	learning	141
sustainable	development	116

² As in Tables 1 and 2, I have reported the 10 most frequent words and collocations, eliminating irrelevant results such as “https” and non-content words such as “European.”



Table 3

Commission Staff Working Document, 2022. Sinclair, S. & G. Rockwell. (2023). *Voyant Tools*. Retrieved April 27, 2023.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of three EU policy documents on environmental education has shed some light on the EU approach to “learning for environmental sustainability.” The main issues that have been explored concern the actual eco-friendliness of this approach and revolve around the three main questions articulated in the introduction: does it tend to delete or diffuse human responsibility, or does it highlight the role of humans in causing (but also solving) the environmental crisis (Schleppwegrell 1997)? Does it use vocabulary that suggests a green growth perspective or a degrowth one, or does it offer a “third alternative” (Ossewaarde, Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 2020)? Does it promote beneficial or destructive discourses (Stibbe 2015)? These research questions have guided my discussion of the main linguistic, pedagogical and political issues emerging from the EU approach to environmental education.

Through both close reading and the use of Voyant Tools to collect vocabulary data, the ecocritical analysis of the three texts has tried to answer the aforementioned questions by reflecting on linguistic as well as political and pedagogical issues. The methodology was inspired by the broad perspective of ecolinguistics, which includes insights from different areas such as ecology, ecocriticism, critical discourse analysis, anthropology, and pedagogy to explore the role of language in shaping the “stories we live by” (Stibbe 2015). Since the negative effects of destructive and ambivalent discourses can be limited by raising awareness and revealing the unecological ideologies that underlie them, education plays a key role in challenging them. In fact, as stated in the Commission Staff Working Document, which also quotes several studies on the topic:

Early years are formative years. They profoundly shape individuals’ intellectual, psychological, emotional, social and physical interactions and relationships throughout their life. According to research, early years are also a crucial time window to develop a sustainability mindset and the concept of being an active citizen (Davis 2015) [...]. Learning for environmental sustainability and acknowledging the right of children to participate in issues related to the environment and sustainable development (Fenton-Glynn 2019) must therefore occur well before children start primary school (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2010). (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022a, p. 39).

The EU policy documents analysed in this chapter demonstrate that the EU is indeed taking action to support environmental education through an approach that aims at “prioritizing ecology without welfare loss” (Ossewaarde, Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 2020, p. 2). The

environmental crisis is thus seen as part of a bigger economic, social and cultural crisis, to which education is called upon to respond. Even though the use of language in these documents, particularly in the Council Recommendation, is clearly the result of compromises between different views of the ecological transition and occasionally reveals a tendency towards green growth discourse, for example in the frequent use of “sustainable development” instead of other, more eco-friendly options such as “environmental sustainability,” EU discourse about the role of environmental education can all in all be considered beneficial, because it tells a story of change, empowerment, and care. Once again, it is the Commission Staff Working Documents that most clearly expresses this perspective, highlighting the importance of developing a sense of connectedness with nature in order to change behaviours:

Learning *in* nature and not only *about* nature can help learners develop a connection and a caring attitude towards nature and support sustainable behaviour. Research indicates that environmental knowledge alone has little impact on pro-environmental behaviour (Otto and Pensini, 2017). In fact, between knowledge and connectedness to nature, the latter has the strongest relation to ecological behaviour. Research with primary children showed that while connectedness with nature explained 69% of the variance in ecological behaviour, environmental knowledge only accounted for 2%. (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022a, p. 60)

Education thus plays a key role in challenging traditional patterns of green-growth discourse and promoting behavioural change through an all-encompassing approach that addresses the ecological crisis at its root. The fact that the EU is acting on the education sector to promote new, community-based power structures is a positive sign that gives us hope for a future in which people “live more sustainably, promote sustainable consumption and production patterns, adopt healthier and more environmentally-conscious lifestyles and contribute individually and collectively to the transformation of our societies,” as called for by the Council Recommendation (Council of the EU, 2022, p. 5).

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