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The Discourse of Sustainability in English Language Teaching (ELT) at the University of Oxford: Analyzing Discursive Representations

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Abstract

The article presents and discusses a study that focuses upon discursive representations of sustainability in English Language Teaching (ELT) that are found on the official website of the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom. The study involved a corpus of texts related to sustainability in ELT that were collected on the website of the University of Oxford. The corpus was analyzed qualitatively to identify and classify the types of discursive representations of sustainability in ELT. After that, it was investigated quantitatively to calculate the most frequent types of discursive representations of sustainability. The results of the corpus analysis revealed that the most frequent types of discursive representation of sustainability in ELT at the University of Oxford involved “lifelong learning” and “digital sustainability”, respectively. It was found that the aforementioned discursive representations did not reflect the main sustainability goals that were set by the University of Oxford, inter alia, zero carbon emissions and biodiversity. It is suggested in the article that the discursive representations of sustainability “lifelong learning” and “digital sustainability” are indicative of an ELT-specific aspect of the discourse of sustainability that is communicated online by the University of Oxford.

Keywords: discourse of sustainability, discursive representations, English Language Teaching (ELT), sustainability, the University of Oxford, webpage

Introduction

Sustainability, which is often regarded as environmental quality and well-being (Ott et al., 2016, p. 671), has found its rightful place in university settings, where it plays an important role both in the teaching and learning processes (Meihami & Salite, 2019; Salite, 2015). The literature indicates that top-ranking universities (for example, the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom) appear to support education for sustainable development (ESD), sustainability in relation to teacher education, and sustainable practices in teaching in general (Filho et al., 2020; Heffernan & Heffernan, 2018). In conjunction with that, it should be specified that sustainability facilitates the development

of the necessary knowledge, awareness, skills and capabilities to respond to the complex socio-ecological issues and challenges (Stevenson et al., 2017).

Typically, the teaching and learning policies associated with sustainability are provided on the universities' websites in the form of guidelines, mission statements, and strategic visions (Siano et al., 2015). For instance, the University of Oxford maintains the webpage *Sustainability* (available at <https://sustainability.admin.ox.ac.uk/home>) that is dedicated to the university's sustainability policies and practices (the University of Oxford, 2022a). However, while sustainability policies are communicated explicitly via the designated webpages (e.g., *Sustainability* at <https://sustainability.admin.ox.ac.uk/home>), they are not always present on the discipline-specific webpages of the arts and humanities, in particular, linguistics, literature, and English Language Teaching (ELT). In concord with Hall (2017), ELT is defined as teaching English to individuals whose first language (L1) is not English.

Given that the social, cultural, and political dimensions of ELT involve global trends that are embedded in the local contexts (Hall, 2017), the current literature is indicative of multiple connections between ELT and sustainability (Bekteshi & Xhaferi, 2020; Bowden, 2010; Lavrysh et al., 2020). Contextualized in the ELT settings, this article describes a study that identifies and analyzes how sustainability is represented discursively on the University of Oxford webpages related to its ELT programs. It should be observed that the University of Oxford enjoys one of the best international rankings for its ELT programs on the undergraduate and post-graduate levels (Heffernan & Heffernan, 2018). However, there is a paucity of research literature that focuses on the discourse of the University of Oxford associated with sustainability in the ELT contexts (McKinley & Galloway, 2022). Furthermore, there seems to be no current research that elucidates the issue of how sustainability is represented discursively on the ELT webpages of the University of Oxford.

The study that is further presented in the article seeks to address this under-researched issue by means of problematizing discourses of sustainability in relation to ELT that are communicated online by the University of Oxford. The rationale behind the study involves the following consideration: Given that the University of Oxford provides detailed and explicit communication concerning sustainability on its university-wide page *Sustainability* at <https://sustainability.admin.ox.ac.uk/home>, it would be reasonable to assume that some forms of sustainability discourse would be present on the ELT-specific webpages. However, it remains to be investigated how sustainability discourse is instantiated via discursive representations that are associated with the ELT programs at the University of Oxford. Hence, the present study aims to provide answers to the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What types of discursive representations are employed in conjunction with sustainability in ELT programs at the University of Oxford?

RQ2: What is the most frequent type of discursive representations of sustainability in ELT programs at the University of Oxford?

From the vantage point of its significance and potential contribution to scholarship, the present study is associated with the integral role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in raising awareness of sustainability and climate change mitigation (Boon, 2016, p. 40). Provided that "a sustainability perspective is becoming more and more acceptable"

(Salite et al., 2021, p. 2), it appears natural for HEIs, inclusive of the University of Oxford, to communicate their sustainability and climate change-related policies online (Goulah, 2017; Mohammadi & Moradi, 2017) in order to reach out to the students and faculty, as well as to the public at large. Taking into consideration a prominent position that the University of Oxford occupies on the global education market (Lancho-Barrantes & Cantu-Ortiz, 2021), it seems relevant and, hopefully, significant to pay attention to the discursive practices, in particular, discursive representations of sustainability that the university employs in its online communication. In addition, research on the discourse of sustainability by the University of Oxford merits attention due to the fact that multiple stakeholders in the United Kingdom (for instance, universities and HEIs) addressed the issue of sustainability and climate change earlier than their counterparts in other developed countries (Kapranov, 2018, p. 52). Arguably, they offer an example of the best practices in sustainability and climate change communication (ibid.).

Further, the article is structured as follows. Firstly, the theoretical background of the study is provided. It involves the construal of discursive representations that are analyzed through the lens of the approach postulated by Wodak (2009, 2015). Secondly, there is a brief outline of the relevant literature on discourses on sustainability on university websites. Following the literature review, the present study is discussed in conjunction with the RQs. Finally, the article concludes with the summary of the major findings and their implications.

Theoretical Background: Discursive Representations

The construal of discursive representations is central in the present investigation, which is guided by Wodak's (2009) discourse-historical approach to discourse. In accordance with Wodak (2015, p. 275), discourse is defined as a communicative contextualized act of verbal and semiotic interaction/interactions between the speaker/writer and the recipient, who are embedded in the relationship of reciprocity, i.e., they exert a mutual influence upon each other. In the wake of Wodak (2015), Oostendorp (2018) posits that discursive representations are regarded as the situated, time-bound cultural and social practices that are reflected in the text. Arguably, discursive representations on the textual level involve such forms, as description, explanation, narration, argumentation, and dialogue (Matus, 2018, p. 13).

From the vantage point of the discourse-historical approach, discursive representations are operationalized as

[...] the material or textual expression of the references or meanings elaborated by the speaker's consciousness about himself, about reality and his world of sense. From this standpoint, discursive representations always exist in a text, even when referring to imaginary objects. Such objects may be, as already noted, elements of the empirical world (e.g., a table or a cat) as well as abstract concepts (e.g., yesterday) and even relationships at the macro-level of culture or the speaker's world of sense and even that of the listener (e.g., ideology). (Matus, 2018, p. 13)

Following Matus (2018) and Wodak (2015), discursive representations are reflective of objects and/or abstract concepts in the textual form and discourse-specific genre.

Additionally, they appear to establish the connection with previous discourse and/or discourses (Matus, 2018, p. 14). In other words, discursive representations are indicative of a particular angle of understanding the discursive situation (Miladi, 2021, p. 122), inclusive of the actors and issues involved in the situation (Sénit, 2020, p. 412).

The construal of discursive representations has been elaborated in researching such complex issues as didactics (Kapranov, 2022) and education policy (Kapranov, 2021), feminism (Olson et al., 2008), national identity and immigration (Wodak, 2012; Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999; Wodak & Reisigl, 1999), political discourse (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008; Sénit, 2020), and religion (Miladi, 2021). Typically, the construal of discursive representations is employed in the research literature in order to analyze a particular type of discourse through the lenses of situatedness in the given culture, time-frame, socio-cultural context, as well as “specific assumptions, judgments, contentions, dispositions, and capabilities” (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008, p. 481). As previously mentioned, the construal of discursive representations is applied in the present study to elucidate how the University of Oxford describes sustainability on its webpage dedicated to the ELT programs. However, before proceeding with the study, it seems relevant to provide a brief outline of the prior literature associated with sustainability discourse on university websites.

Literature Review: Discourse of Sustainability on University Websites

There is a line of fairly recent studies that investigate how discourse of sustainability is represented on university websites (Amey et al., 2020; Fernández-Vázquez, 2021; Filippo et al., 2020; Hart et al., 2015; Joseph, Engkamat, & Tawie, 2013; Salvioni et al., 2017). Two major research foci are distinguished in the prior studies. The first one seems to involve the focus on discourse of sustainability on the university websites in general, i.e., without paying attention to the specific university programs (Amey et al., 2020; Fernández-Vázquez, 2021; Filippo et al., 2020; Joseph et al., 2013; Salvioni et al., 2017). Another research focus, however, seeks to provide insights into how sustainability is represented on the program-specific university websites (Hart et al., 2015).

In terms of how sustainability is communicated via websites by universities in general, Amey et al. (2020) have established that 67 % of the Canadian universities involved (total number = 95) provide communication concerning the issue of sustainability on their websites by means of different interactive features. However, it does not follow from their study that the interactive features have a facilitative effect on the teaching staff's and the students' awareness of sustainability in the teaching and learning processes. It is inferred from their research that the online presence of sustainability discourse does not automatically entail the students' and teachers' active involvement in the issue of sustainability.

Similarly, the study conducted by Fernández-Vázquez (2021) involves a substantial sample (total number = 80) of high-ranking universities in Latin America, whose environmental websites have been investigated in terms of information quality, multimodal design and stakeholder engagement. Fernández-Vázquez (2021) posits that whereas 59 % of the universities maintained environmental websites associated with sustainability, the majority of them were characterized by insufficient content and the lack of interactivity. Likewise, Joseph et al. (2013) point to inadequate communication of

sustainability by universities in Maylasia, which “do not fully utilize the websites to provide awareness about sustainably development” (ibid., p. 2).

While the literature indicates that online discourse on sustainability is underutilized by the universities in Canada (Amey et al., 2020), Latin America (Fernández-Vázquez, 2021), and Malaysia (Joseph et al., 2013), Salvioni et al. (2017) have found that the highest-ranked universities in the world provide a superior level of integration and inclusion of the sustainability theme in their research and teaching activities. Along the lines outlined in the aforementioned study, Filippo et al. (2020) have examined discourse of sustainability on the websites of Spanish private and state-run universities (total number = 50). These authors indicate that Spanish universities have adopted sustainable practices in terms of both policy and research (Filippo et al., 2020, p. 14). Reportedly, the practices are reflected in online discourse of the Spanish universities, which is characterized by such discursive themes as renewable energy, innovation and governance, quality education, health and well-being, sustainable consumption, zero hunger, and climate action (Filippo et al., 2020, p. 14).

Unlike the other studies, Hart et al. (2015) analyze discourse of sustainability on the university websites associated with the Master programs in Business Administration (MBA) in the USA. Hart et al. (2015) suggest that high-ranking MBA programs pay considerable attention to communicating sustainability on their respective websites. Concurrently, however, the authors have found that very few full-time MBA programs promote sustainability on their MBA webpages. It has been discovered that the faculty, who teach MBA, have insufficient training in sustainability (Hart et al., 2015).

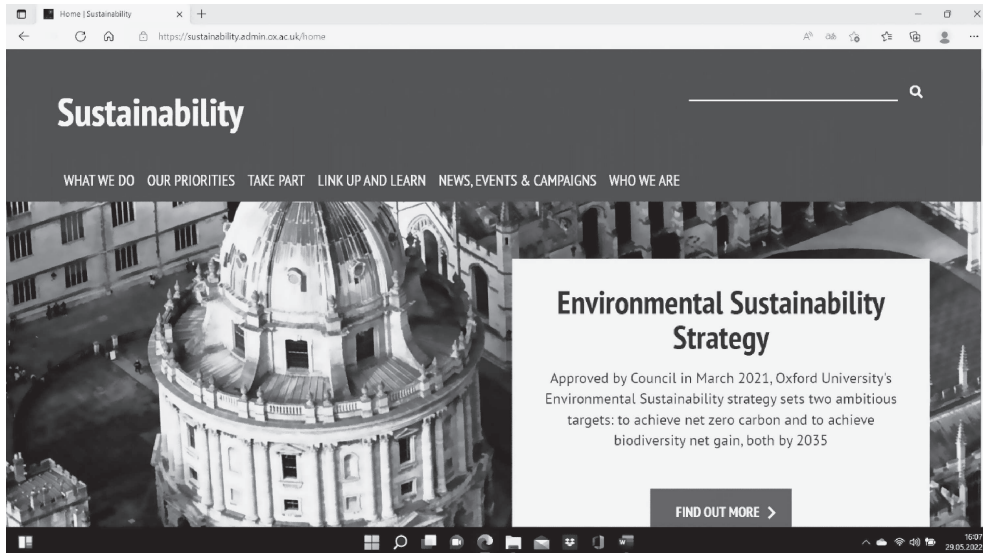
It follows from the literature that whereas there is an ample body of research on the discourse of sustainability on university websites, little attention is paid to the way sustainability is represented discursively on the ELT websites by the leading universities, such as the University of Oxford. Further, the study is introduced and discussed that seeks to contribute to generating new knowledge about this issue.

The Present Study

The present study is contextualized in the online environment of the University of Oxford. On its official website, the University of Oxford pledges to achieve the following sustainability goals, namely i) zero carbon emissions (i.e., the reduction of carbon emissions related to the University’s energy consumption to a minimal level) and ii) biodiversity, which is understood as the enhancement of biodiversity on the University’s grounds and premises (The University of Oxford, 2022a). Also, the University of Oxford aims at “embedding environmental sustainability in the University’s governance and decision making” (ibid.) and providing annual reports in conjunction with carbon emissions and biodiversity. These measures are amply elucidated on the University’s webpage *Sustainability* (ibid.), as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Sustainability Webpage on the Official Website of the University of Oxford



While *Sustainability* (The University of Oxford, 2022a) is a university-wide webpage, the present study aims to identify and discuss how sustainability is represented discursively on the webpages of the University of Oxford that are associated specifically with its ELT programs. Hence, the research aims of the study are i) to establish whether or not there are explicit references to sustainability on the ELT webpages, ii) to analyze and discuss how sustainability is represented discursively on the ELT webpages, and iii) to compare discursive representations of sustainability referred to on the ELT webpages with the sustainability-specific webpage *Sustainability* (The University of Oxford, 2022a). Informed by the research aims and the RQs (see the introductory part of the article), the University of Oxford website has been searched to collect the corpus of online texts associated with sustainability in ELT programs.

The Corpus

The corpus is comprised of the online texts associated with sustainability in ELT settings. The corpus has been collected on the official website of the University of Oxford by means of searching for such keywords and phrases, as “biodiversity”, “carbon emissions”, “ecology”, “ELT”, “environment”, “nature”, “sustainability”, “social responsibility”, “sustainable education”, and “sustainable development”. It should be noted that the set of keywords is adapted from the study by Sundh (2016). The descriptive statistics of the corpus are given in Table 1 below.

Table 1

The Descriptive Statistics of the Corpus

N	Descriptive measures	Statistical values
1	Total number of texts	20
2	Total number of words	17204
3	Mean words	860.2
4	Standard deviation	872.4
5	Minimum	221
6	Maximum	2841
7	Range	2620

Methods

The study follows the research methodology described in Soler et al. (2018). It is a summative content analysis that consists in the identification of discursive representations in the textual content. In concord with Soler et al. (2018), the corpus of online texts associated with sustainability is analyzed in the computer program AntConc (Anthony, 2014) in order to calculate the frequency of the following keywords and key phrases: “biodiversity”, “carbon emissions”, “ecology”, “ELT”, “environment”, “nature”, “sustainability”, “social responsibility”, “sustainable education”, and “sustainable development”. It is done to identify a range of possible patterns associated with discursive representations of sustainability. Following the computer-assisted identification of the frequent keywords and phrases, they are examined manually in the surrounding pieces of discourse. The frequent keywords and phrases are analyzed against the background of the discursive clusters surrounding them (Soler et al., 2018). Thereafter, the discursive clusters are manually investigated for their textual and discursive connections to ELT and sustainability (Kapranov, 2021). In line with Soler et al. (2018), there could be several representations per discursive cluster and per text, respectively. Finally, the discursive representations are given labels by the author of the article. Labeling the discursive representations is not fortuitous, since it is based upon the objective criteria of word frequencies obtained in AntConc (Anthony, 2014).

Results and Discussion

The corpus analysis indicates that discursive representations of sustainability are explicitly present on the University of Oxford’s webpages associated with the ELT programs. The presence of discursive representations of sustainability in the corpus is in line with the previous studies (Amey et al., 2020; Fernández-Vázquez 2021; Filippa et al., 2020; Hart et al., 2015; Joseph, Engkamat, & Tawie, 2013; Salvioni et al., 2017) which indicate that high-ranking universities tend to provide sustainability-related disclosures, statements, and other types of sustainability discourse on their websites. In this study, a range of discursive representations of sustainability has been identified on the Department for Continuing Education webpages at <https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/> (the University of Oxford, 2022b) and the Department of Education at <http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/> (the University of Oxford, 2022c). The analysis of the corpus has yielded the following types of discursive representations of sustainability, namely “climate change”, “digital

sustainability”, “lifelong learning”, “social justice”, “sustained education”, and “well-being”. It is observed that the distribution of the types of discursive representations differs in the corpus. For instance, the discursive representation “lifelong learning” is the most frequent type, while “climate change” occurs only once in the corpus. These findings are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Discursive Representations of Sustainability in ELT in the Present Corpus

No.	Discursive representations	Total number of the occurrence per type
1	Lifelong learning	N = 8
2	Digital sustainability	N = 7
3	Social justice	N = 3
4	Sustained education	N = 1
5	Climate change	N = 1
6	Well-being	N = 1

It appears relevant to discuss the findings presented in Table 2 from the vantage point of the RQs in the study. As mentioned in the introduction, RQ1 seeks to establish the types of discursive representations of sustainability in the ELT programs that are offered at the University of Oxford, whereas RQ2 aims to determine the most frequent types of discursive representations of sustainability.

Discussing RQ1

It follows from Table 2 that there are several types of discursive representations of sustainability associated with the ELT programs that are taught at the University of Oxford. However, if we compare them to the sustainability goals set by the university (see Figure 1), we can notice that the sustainability goal of biodiversity is not represented discursively on the ELT webpages, whereas the goal of zero carbon emission is implied in the discursive representation “climate change” in relation to the ELT program. Furthermore, the analysis of the corpus reveals no explicit discursive reference to the following university-wide sustainability goals: i) sustainable food, ii) sustainable international travel, and iii) carbon offsetting (see The University of Oxford, 2022a). The discrepancy between the discursive representations of sustainability that are found on the ELT-related webpages and the sustainability goals that are described on the *Sustainability* webpage (The University of Oxford, 2022a) is evocative of the prior literature (Filippo et al., 2020; Hart et al., 2015), which indicates that while high-ranking universities promote sustainability on their official websites, it is not equally reflected on the discipline-specific webpages. Moreover, the identified discrepancy between the present findings and the sustainability goals postulated by the University of Oxford on the university-wide level is exacerbated by the differences in discursive representations in the study and the prior research (Filippo et al., 2020, p. 14) that reports such discursive representations of sustainability as renewable energy, innovation and governance, quality education, health and well-being, sustainable consumption, zero hunger, and climate action. Notably, only two out of the aforementioned discursive representations have been disco-

vered in the corpus, namely “climate change”, which corresponds to “climate action” in Filippo et al. (2020), and “well-being”.

Whereas not the entire range of the University of Oxford’s sustainability goals is represented on the ELT-related webpages, it is, nevertheless, observed that the discursive representations summarized in Table 2 exhibit an explicit orientation to sustainability, corporate responsibility, and climate change activism. This finding lends support to the prior literature (Salvioni et al., 2017), which indicates that a sustainability-friendly governance culture characterizes the international top-ranking universities. Presumably, the particular range of discursive representations of sustainability in the ELT contexts at the University of Oxford is reflective of the discipline-specific realization of the principle of sustainability. In this regard, the author of the present study concurs with Salvioni et al. (2017), who suggest that sustainability in a university teaching program is indicative of the institutional practices and behavior, which, in turn, facilitate the formation of the discipline-specific view of sustainability. In the ELT settings at the University of Oxford, the discipline-specific view of sustainability appears to be associated with such discursive representations as “lifelong learning”, “digital sustainability”, and “social justice”, given that they are not mentioned on the university-wide webpage *Sustainability* (The University of Oxford, 2022a). It should be reiterated that the discursive representations of sustainability “lifelong learning” and “digital sustainability” are the most frequent ones in the corpus. Further, they are discussed in detail in conjunction with the RQ2.

Discussing RQ2

The most frequent discursive representation of sustainability in the corpus is epitomized by “lifelong learning”. The corpus analysis reveals that it is typically associated with the webpages of the Department for Continuing Education (2022b). Presumably, the discursive representation “lifelong learning” seems to be embedded in the online discursive space of the Department. In other words, “lifelong learning” is reflective of “the inclusion of sustainability as part of the core focus of teacher education policies and practices” (Stevenson et al., 2017, p. 408). This finding is illustrated by excerpt (1):

- (1) *Study skills programmes for educators and lifelong learners: perhaps you’re a teacher looking to progress your career, and improve your classroom and online teaching techniques; or you might be a prospective student looking to enter or re-enter education after a period away. Whatever your situation, we offer a range of short courses to suit your needs* (The University of Oxford, 2022d).

It is, perhaps, expected that “lifelong learning” is amply employed on the webpage of the ELT programs at the Department for Continuing Education (2022b), given that both sustainability and continuing education share such common facets as personal development and progress (see excerpt 1), gender equality, and well-being (English & Carlsen, 2019), to name just a few. In this regard, continuing education, which is reflected in the discursive representation “lifelong learning” is concomitant with sustainability,

[...] because it can empower people and communities to continuously learn, solve problems and adapt to their social and physical environments. [...] For teacher education programs, it involves candidates learning to teach students

to be committed lifelong learners and to learn on their own (Sunthonkanokpong & Murphy, 2019, p. 96).

In addition to “lifelong learning”, the discursive representation “digital sustainability” is also frequently employed on the ELT-related webpages of the University of Oxford. This finding is in line with the literature that posits that digital literacy and digital tools are indispensable in the ELT settings (Kapranov, 2020, p. 47). “Digital sustainability” is illustrated by excerpt (2) below:

- (2) *Digital literacies encompass essential skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration and social engagement, all normally embedded in contemporary syllabi. With this in mind, this workshop explores the area of digital literacies and considers ways of teaching and exploiting them in your classroom* (The University of Oxford, 2022e).

Notably, it is observed in excerpt (2) that digitalization contributes to fostering one’s critical thinking and social engagement, which are pivotal to sustainability. Assuming that one’s cognizance of digital tools and applications is facilitative of sustainability (Gossen et al., 2021, p. 1), it appears reasonable to suggest that digitalization in the ELT settings provides an opportunity to select and develop the optimal and sustainable teaching activities (Bowden, 2010).

Conclusions

The article introduced the study whose aim was to provide an analysis of the discursive representations of sustainability in ELT on the official website of the University of Oxford. The results of the analysis revealed several types of discursive representations of sustainability, such as “climate change”, “digital sustainability”, “lifelong learning”, “social justice”, “sustained education”, and “well-being”. It was established that the aforementioned discursive representations only partially coincided with the sustainability themes that were provided on the university-wide webpage *Sustainability* (The University of Oxford, 2022a). The discrepancies between discursive representations identified on the ELT-related webpages on the one hand and those found on the webpage *Sustainability* (The University of Oxford, 2022a) on the other hand could be reflective of the ELT-specific curricula, didactic needs and other potential variables.

Another finding in the study consisted in the two types of the most frequent discursive representations of sustainability, namely “lifelong learning” and “digital sustainability” that did not appear to align with the University’s central sustainability goals. In addition, they were found to be absent in the prior research that investigated discourse of sustainability on university websites (Amey et al., 2020; Fernández-Vázquez, 2021; Filippo et al., 2020; Hart et al., 2015; Joseph et al., 2013; Salvioni et al., 2017). It could be concluded that the discursive representations of sustainability “lifelong learning” and “digital sustainability” formed an ELT-specific aspect of online discursive space associated with sustainability at the University of Oxford.

Presumably, the importance of the findings rested with the need to elucidate discursive practices related to sustainability in the ELT settings at the University of Oxford, one of the top-ranking universities in the world. The University of Oxford’s discursive representations of sustainability might serve as an index of the best practices to be emulated by ELT programs at other universities. Their online use by the HEIs would be

especially relevant in terms of sustainability communication, given that sustainability became a broad and complex term that involved a series of educational, social, and environmental dimensions (Fløttum et al., 2022). An effective online communication of sustainability within the ELT settings at HEIs could involve the sustainability strategies that were developed and employed by the University of Oxford.

Arguably, the present findings might pave the way to future research studies that would illuminate discursive representations of sustainability in ELT from the vantage point of comparing them between British and North American discursive traditions (Berglez & Al-Saqaf, 2021). In addition, a potential avenue to explore in the future research would involve a comparison of discursive representations of sustainability between the so-called Anglo-Saxon discourse and that of a non-Anglophone country. Furthermore, the present findings would serve as a starting point to discuss how discursive representations of sustainability that were communicated online would be received by the students and faculty (see Fløttum et al., 2016) and, in particular, by the future teachers of English.

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