

# From ego- to eco-centric worldviews: rethinking learner identity through ecomedia literacy

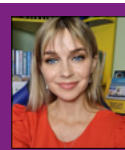
## Armanda Stroia outlines ELT classroom practices for developing systems thinking and critical media awareness

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### Introduction

Traditional media education has overshadowed or still eludes the environmental impact of media and ICTs (López, 2020). A profound understanding goes beyond just decoding media but also requires developing awareness of the interconnectedness between media, society, economy and environmental consequences. In fact, most people are not aware of the soaring environmental costs of technology in their daily lives, particularly the burden posed by the latest digital disrupting trends in terms of staggering electricity demands of data centres and water consumption. The explosive deployment of GenAI has been fuelled by a feverish hype around increased productivity and accelerated scientific advancements in all areas of life ‘comparable to the Klondike gold rush at the dawn of the twentieth century’ (Bashir et al., 2024, p. 2). Consequently, due to the speedy and uncritical adoption of such global-scale innovative tools, the environmental challenges are difficult to mitigate and fully understand.

This is where ecomedia literacy intervenes to reframe digital media education, exploring the link between media, communication technology and environmental sustainability. Thus, it considers both the ecological impacts of media systems and technology (*ecological footprint*) and the role played by media in shaping narratives, public perception, beliefs (*the mindprint*) (López, 2023b). For example, ecomedia literacy prompts learners to critically interrogate why most media corporations and technology companies, as dominant storytellers and storytellers (Share et al., 2023), normalise or promote consumerist



Armanda Stroia holds a PhD in Philology and has almost two decades of teaching experience. Passionate about empowering voices through critical media literacy, her activity bridges research, teacher training and materials design. Her current work explores the intersection of language learning, media and global agency, with a focus on stereotype literacy, atomic language habits, ecomedia pedagogy multimodality and task-based language teaching. She regularly delivers talks and workshops at various international conferences and has authored publications on these topics. She also contributes to the global ELT community as a member of the IATEFL Materials Writing SIG committee.

trends while sustainable practices and lifestyles are marginalised.

Learners can be guided to decode such media messages through the lenses of environmental ideologies such as anthropocentrism, a worldview placing humans at the centre of the ecosystem as opposed to ecocentrism (which highlights the value of all life forms, promoting a holistic, interconnected view of the ecosystem). Once learners critically read media texts and become aware of these dominant ideologies embedded in media messages, they may be better positioned to shift from an ‘ego-logical human-centric worldview, steeped in patriarchy, white supremacy, and classism in which men are above women, white people are above people of colour, humans are above animals, which are above plants’, to a more ‘eco-logical worldview, where we recognise that we are all interrelated and interdependent’ (López et al., 2022, p. 466). In fact, research has shown that integrating ecomedia literacy is beneficial in terms of developing analytical skills and the critical awareness learners need to navigate the challenges of digital environments/ecosystems and be active and responsible participants in a media-saturated world (Afrilyasanti et al., 2024).

### SDGs and ecomedia literacy

Ecomedia literacy supports many of the UN’s 17 interrelated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are targeted towards pressing challenges such as poverty, inequality, climate change and environmental degradation. For example, a deeper analysis, grounded in system thinking and the iceberg

model (López, 2023b) can reveal that ecomedia literacy addresses an apparently unrelated goal – the SDG1 goal of no poverty – by exposing the environmental and social impacts of media production such as exploitation of labour in low-income countries, ‘raising awareness about the intersection of poverty and environmental degradation’ and promoting economic sustainable practices aimed at ‘poverty alleviation and environmental sustainability’ (López, 2024, p. 17).

### Ecomedia literacy in action

Learners using AI tools and social media to debunk greenwashing strategies, designing media to gamify environmentally responsible choices, digital green escape rooms or infomercials to promote local sustainable initiatives can be a reality. Drawing on environmental ideologies and critical media pedagogy, this section explores classroom-tested tasks that develop learners’ ecological identity, showing that employing ecomedia principles can be a pathway to shifting learners’ perspectives from ego-centric to eco-centric worldviews.

### Collaborative eco-analysis of personal gadgets: video essays, digital posters and memes

An eco-analysis of personal gadgets enables students to perform a holistic/integrative critical analysis of the environmental impacts of their digital devices using four zones of inquiry, as proposed by one of ecomedia’s pioneers, Antonio López (2023a): *ecoculture* (the way media narrative, representations and cultural beliefs about technology shape learners’ use and disposal of gadgets), *political ecology* (what social and economic powers drive the production and consumption of digital gadgets), *eco-materiality* (an area which examines the materials used for gadgets along with their environmental impact) and *lifeworld* (an analysis of how use of gadgets affect their daily lives and their connection with the environment). Through this activity, learners work in groups, each team exploring an

assigned area of inquiry. Teachers can employ this analytical tool to help learners get a deeper understanding of the connection between their personal gadgets and environmental impact, thus gaining an enhanced awareness of the ecological footprint of their digital life. This can lead to a more eco-conscious behaviour, such as responsible use and disposal of technology.

To take this activity to the next level and leverage technology for sustainability, learners can be encouraged to share the results of their investigation through digital posters, video essays or memes. Furthermore, for a deeper and more meaningful exploration of the power dynamics and interconnectedness of systems – key areas of ecomedia pedagogy, learners can examine their personal gadget from divergent points of view, roleplaying or creating digital stories when they are in the shoes of a ‘Congolesse child labourer extracting rare minerals, Chinese FoxConn assembler, “playbour” gamer, Amazon warehouse worker or big box store sales associate’, or a media activist (Lopez, 2023b, p. 103). Thus, learners will gain an enhanced awareness of the interconnectedness of every life cycle stage of their gadget, from resource extraction to digital consumption, and get the critical insight that even gaming can be embedded in complex systems of labour exploitation and environmental impact.

This activity addresses several SDG goals. For example, by promoting critical thinking skills, informed decisions, responsible behaviour regarding the use of personal technology along with the skills learners need to adopt sustainable development, lifestyles and global citizenship, it addresses SDG 4, quality of education. When conducting their research for their eco-analysis, which will be presented as a video essay or digital poster, learners become aware of the labour conditions behind gadget production. Thus, this task can target SDG 8, aimed at promoting decent work for all as well as inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Furthermore, by enabling learners to analyse the life cycle of their gadgets, they become aware of the production process and the need for sustainable consumption. Consequently, this activity can target the UN’s SDG 12 aimed at promoting sustainable production and consumption, which might lead to ‘decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation’ and an increase in resource efficiency (SDG 12). Ultimately, by evaluating the environmental impact of their personal gadgets, learners contribute to SDG 13, specifically addressing climate change, through their enhanced awareness, which can lead to the development of an

ecological identity and potential eco-oriented behaviour (López, 2024).

### Turning learners into media detectives

To support teachers interested in organically integrating sustainability in their classrooms, I propose a three-stage approach, one aligned with the principles of ecomedia pedagogy (López, 2023b) and based on my classroom-tested activities informed by critical media literacy framework CML (Block & Stroia, 2026; Stroia & Xerri, in press): understanding greenwashing, a deconstructive phase using CML toolkit and finally, the constructive phase which transforms learners into active creators by prompting them to design counter media.

In the first stage, it is vital that learners understand the core elements of greenwashing as a deceptive marketing strategy and learn how to identify greenwashing techniques. In this foundational phase, teachers should provide rich opportunities for learners to be exposed to a wide range of ads and media messages so they can become aware of the mechanics of greenwashing strategies: impactful catchy slogans, special designs with green or celebrities, limited editions, etc., attention-getting techniques, emotional appeal, exaggeration, green imagery and symbols to create the illusion of eco-friendly vision, rebranding to look more natural, vague language, misleading or inaccurate claims.

During the second phase – the deconstruction stage, a core phase of any task that aligns with critical media pedagogy – learners are encouraged to identify greenwashing techniques in a variety of ads and campaigns. By doing so, they will develop their research and fact-checking skills. A famous example of greenwashing is a 2019 campaign in which McDonald’s introduced paper straws that were actually non-recyclable. Another recent case is Fiji’s bottled water, with its aggressive marketing as green through powerful slogans such as ‘Every drop is green’ and compelling visual imagery.

### Turning learners into agents of environmental change: counter media multimodal composing

Once learners attain a level of awareness and understanding of syntax of ads/ memes or other media genre they choose to work with, and have practised spotting the signs and strategies of greenwashing, the next step is to create alternative media responses by flipping the dominant media

message (see Figures 1, 2 and 3). This action-oriented stage prompts learners to critically and ethically use AI tools such as Open AI’s Sora or Ideogram AI to finalise their multimodal compositions in order to expose greenwashing. During collaborative multimodal projects, it is essential to strengthen the team vision and culture by using a roles allocation system, from project manager to media expert, eco researcher, as well as social roles such as communication coach, noise monitor, etc. (Stroia & Xerri, 2024).



Figure 1: Example of a counter-ad to expose greenwashing made by students using Open AI’s Sora



Figure 2: Example of a meme-style counter ad to expose greenwashing created by a group of learners using Canva and Open AI’s Sora



Figure 3: Example of a counter ad to expose Fiji greenwashing using Ideogram AI and Canva

## Conclusion

This article explored a few classroom-tested creative ways to integrate UN SDGs into ELT practices through the framework of ecomedia literacy. Employing the proposed three-staged approach – developing an awareness of pervasive greenwashing, critically deconstructing media messages and producing alternative narratives – educators can have a clear roadmap for embedding ecomedia literacy in their classrooms. Most importantly, by encouraging learners to adopt a systems thinking mindset paired with the iceberg approach to ecomedia (see López, 2023b), will lead to enhanced critical media literacy, as learners will become better equipped to see beyond the surface of media texts, able to spot the deeper interconnected social and power structures that shape how media reflect environmental issues (Stroia & Xerri, in press).

To conclude, my work in critical media literacy so far has made me reflect on a simple, yet powerful fact: if we do not guide students how to critically read the media-saturated world they live in, someone else will most probably teach them what to believe: algorithms, influencers, political

actors, advertising industries, all powered by the increasing force of AI systems. So, at the end of a class, the question we can ask ourselves is: What kind of future citizens do we want to shape? Students who are able to accurately translate and repeat information? Who can only use English to pass an exam? Or students who can interrogate information from multiple perspectives, detect bias and misinformation and use English to share their voice? The choice is ours, every single time we start a new class. Every single time we decide to empower learners, through simple strategies, to question dominant narratives and become agents of (environmental) change, rather than passive consumers of biased digital content.

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armandaramona@gmail.com

# Building a common culture in the teachers' room where diversity becomes unity

## Farnaz Memari returns to IATEFL Voices with some advice for the teachers' room

### Introduction

As teaching abroad has become one of the major motives for English teachers to immigrate, regardless of nationality, teachers' rooms are no longer monocultural places, no matter which part of the world they are in.

You might be teaching in a European country with colleagues from the Far East, the Middle East or South America, alongside British and American native speakers. Perhaps the academy – or even the university – you are going to work at sends you a precautionary email from the HR department outlining the 'dos and don'ts' of the country you are immigrating to, which sounds thoughtful and practical. In addition to that, you might be given an induction session providing information about workplace policies, your classes, and perhaps some ethical or cultural considerations regarding the country, students or educational system. All of this sounds considerate and well-intended.

However, there is one important aspect that is far more crucial than these points: *how teachers from multiple nationalities and cultures are accommodated together in the teachers' room*. Which culture becomes dominant? What common ethics should teachers follow and be informed about?

In this article, I would like to share some possible challenges that may arise in teachers' rooms with multinational staff, along with suggestions and ideas that might be of interest to teachers. I also hope this will encourage administrators, HR departments and CEOs to consider establishing a *common and unique set of basic cultural ethics*, not belonging to any single country or region, but rather to the academy itself to facilitate communication among teachers, coordinators, directors and managers.



Farnaz Memari is an adventurous English teacher and trainer with 27 years of experience. She has taught English worldwide, from general and business English to exam preparation. She blends her passion for art with teaching, seeing it as an art.

### Risks of poor communication

In our profession, we are constantly taught that rapport between teachers and learners is essential. This is not only considered a soft skill but, in teaching terminology, also a hard skill often referred to as *scaffolding*. If this is so important between teachers and students, then it should certainly apply *among teachers themselves*.

Normally, in such situations, there is a form of nationality dominance; British, American or Asian, to name a few. Naturally, being part of the majority brings comfort as an employee, regardless of the profession. One particular benefit is that you do not need to adjust significantly to other cultures when you are in the majority.

About three months ago, I was speaking to a colleague and shared my surprise that I had said 'Hi' to another colleague from a different country and received no response, even though we made eye contact. Her response was, 'People in that country do not respond to greetings when they are already talking to someone else'. It was then that I realised the colleague had no personal issue with me, it was simply a norm from his own country, rather than the common culture of the country we were both living in.

### Avoiding misunderstanding

I do understand that people should not be forced to change who they are. However, teaching is fundamentally a profession of communication. Cultural ethics, and even personal traits, must be taken into consideration when communication forms a major part of our job description. We cannot simply dismiss challenges by saying, 'This is my character.' We all need to adjust our personal and professional behaviour to achieve effective performance and

communication, especially when we are in positions that require frequent verbal or written interaction with colleagues and employees (Brent & Dent, 2010).

Knowing the host country we are working in is one thing, but being able to communicate effectively with colleagues of multiple nationalities in that host country is another. What I refer to as a 'common language' is a unified, nationality-free concept and tool of communication. This can easily be introduced on the first day of induction or attached to the 'dos and don'ts' email to provide basic information about the professional culture of the workplace.

I have had the opportunity to work in different parts of the world where academies were either British-owned or had British shareholders. As a result, I was often first exposed to a professional working culture and then adapted to the local country culture. In some cases, I managed to adapt easily because I had prior knowledge and could create a personal logic to find my comfort zone in communication. However, this is not always the case, and misunderstandings often arise simply due to a lack of awareness.

Therefore, it is, in my understanding, the responsibility of the HR department to provide very basic information about common courtesies related to employees' nationalities or perhaps to organise regular informal sessions such as 'Find out about me' or 'Where I come from'. Such initiatives not only enhance teachers' cultural awareness, which can also be shared with students, but also improve communication among colleagues and foster closer professional relationships, positively influencing other aspects of the job as well.

I once had a student who was a retired reporter apologise to me for not knowing anything about my cultural background, while simultaneously thanking me for exposing her to my country's customs and traditions. While personal initiatives do help people understand us better and strengthen relationships, they remain individual efforts and do not necessarily address professional communication challenges.

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