

Fostering Transformative Learning through Critical Reflection in Academic English

Tatjana Sinkus^{ID}, Inese Ozola^{ID}

Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies, Latvia.

How to cite: Sinkus, T.; Ozola, I. (2026). Fostering Transformative Learning through Critical Reflection in Academic English. In: 12th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'26). Valencia, 15-18 June 2026. <https://doi.org/10.4995/HEAd26.2026.21563>

Abstract

Sustainable learning is an important goal in higher education. In this study, sustainable learning in Academic English is understood as developing foreign language skills through transformative learning processes supported by critical reflection and interaction in academic communication. Empirical evidence linking reflective pedagogy with sustainable learning outcomes remains limited; therefore, the research is an attempt to examine how guided reflective practices in an Academic English course foster sustainable learning through processes described by Transformative Learning theory. A mixed-method research design was implemented with 117 postgraduate students at Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies. Quantitative data were collected using a Likert-scale survey measuring learner agency, skill transfer, reflection, personal transformation, motivation, academic identity development, and collaboration. Qualitative data were obtained from open-ended responses and reflective journals. The research findings suggest that critical reflection is associated with perspective transformation and perceived sustainable learning in Academic English.

Keywords: *sustainable learning; transformative learning; critical reflection; Academic English; higher education.*

1. Introduction

In recent years, due to rapidly changing academic and professional contexts, higher education has placed greater emphasis on learning approaches that support long-term development, learner autonomy, and adaptability (Desjardins & Huang, 2025; Saad & Abdullah, 2025). This shift aligns with the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) agenda, which prioritizes learning as a key driver of sustainable societies (UNESCO, 2020) and is reflected in Sustainable Development Goal 4, promoting lifelong, inclusive, and high-quality education (United Nations, 2015). In this context, sustainable learning extends beyond disciplinary knowledge to include critical thinking, problem solving, and learner agency.

Research conceptualises sustainable learning as a proactive, transformative process in which learners actively reconstruct knowledge and adapt to changing conditions (Hays & Reinders, 2020). It is closely linked to self-directed learning, involving reflection, goal-setting, and strategic regulation of learning processes (Burkšaitienė et al., 2021). Within higher education, this perspective shifts from isolated skills to broader competences such as adaptability, collaboration, and critical reflection (Bates et al., 2022; Fischer et al., 2024).

Despite this emphasis, Academic English instruction often remains focused on language accuracy and task completion, with limited attention to reflective processes that support long-term learning and transfer. As a result, students may develop short-term performance skills without a deeper transformation in how they approach learning and communication.

Although reflection is recognised as a key component of sustainable and transformative learning, empirical research examining how reflective practices function in Academic English contexts remains limited. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how reflective practices implemented in an Academic English course for postgraduate students are associated with sustainable learning processes as described by Transformative Learning theory.

2. Theoretical Framework

Transformative learning is a theory about how adults learn and make sense of their life experiences; it is 'about change, dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves, and the world in which we live' (Merriam, 2004, 60). As a theoretical framework, Transformative Learning, originally proposed by Mezirow (1978) and further developed in later works (Mezirow, 1991, 2000), conceptualizes adult learning as a process in which individuals critically examine their existing frames of reference, including habitual assumptions, beliefs, and expectations, and revise them in response to new experiences. This process results in perspective transformation, leading to more inclusive, flexible, and reflective meaning structures that guide future learning and action (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Thus, sustainable learning can be understood as a long-lasting outcome of such perspective transformations that enable learners to develop the capacity for autonomous and continuous meaning-making beyond formal educational contexts (Taylor & Cranton, 2012).

Critical reflection is viewed as the central mechanism of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997). It is fundamental to learning because learners engage in reflection to derive meaning from current and prior experiences (Moon, 2004). Adult learners must analyse their experience by reflecting, evaluating, and reassessing it individually or together with others (Sinkus, 2019). Understood as an intentional and cyclical developmental process linking past experiences with future learning needs, critical reflection allows learners to revisit experiences, question underlying assumptions, and evaluate previously held beliefs (Brockbank & McGill, 2006). Mezirow (2003) distinguishes among content reflection (what we think), process reflection

(how we think), and premise reflection (why we think as we do). It is premise reflection that serves as a trigger for perspective transformation by challenging deep-seated assumptions and reconstructing meaning perspectives. As a result, learning becomes transferable, adaptive, and sustained over time.

Perspective transformation is inherently learner-centred, as it is grounded in learners' prior experiences, values, and goals (Cranton, 2006). Through continuous reflection, learners assume responsibility for their own learning processes, thereby developing learner agency. Learner agency refers to the capacity to set goals, reflect, intentionally regulate, and direct learning through strategic decision-making and self-monitoring (OECD, 2019) by taking ownership of knowledge construction rather than passively following teacher instruction. Such agency is essential for sustainable learning as it enables learners to direct, extend, and adapt their development beyond institutional requirements (Mercer, 2012). In relation to Academic English, this transformation means moving beyond surface-level language accuracy toward helping students learn how to think and communicate in their academic disciplines (Wingate, 2015). Academic literacy grows through learners' active involvement in authentic disciplinary practices, where they learn the ways of thinking, communicating, and constructing knowledge in their fields (Li, 2022). As learners reflect on academic conventions, feedback, and communicative challenges, they develop an academic voice and identity within discourse communities of academic and professional communication (Castelló et al., 2017).

Transformative Learning is not only an individual cognitive process but is also shaped through dialogue and interaction. Dialogue provides space for learners to examine, question, and validate meaning through interaction with others (Ekhtur & Yamamoto, 2017). In Academic English contexts, collaborative tasks, peer feedback, and reflective discussions enable learners to negotiate meaning and critically examine academic practices, in this way deepening their understanding of how knowledge is constructed in their disciplines (Bhowmik et al., 2018).

Drawing on these theoretical insights, sustainable learning in Academic English is understood in this study as developing foreign language skills through transformative learning processes supported by critical reflection and interaction in academic communication. In practice, learners reflect on their experiences, reconsider how they learn, and gradually form an academic identity that enables confident and sustained participation in academic and professional communities.

3. Methodology

This study used a mixed-method research approach to examine how guided reflective practices foster sustainable learning in Academic English. The study was conducted within an Academic English course at Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (LBTU). Participants were 117 postgraduate students of diverse disciplinary fields, including Agricultural Engineering, Agrarian and Regional Economics, Environmental Engineering, Civil

Engineering, Forestry, Food Science, Information Technologies, and Veterinary Medicine. All participants attended the Academic English course, designed to develop academic, professional, and research communication skills, including academic argumentation, critical reading and writing, conference-style presentation skills, and collaborative problem-solving.

Students engaged in multiple guided reflection activities throughout the course. These were embedded in regular coursework rather than treated as additional tasks, ensuring that reflection became an integral part of the learning process. The activities were designed to encourage examination of experiences, assumptions, challenges, and personal development, in line with the Transformative Learning perspective. The reflection activities included: reflective journaling, self- and peer assessment, and peer discussion.

At the end of the course, students completed a survey. Their participation was voluntary; students provided informed consent, and responses were anonymous. The survey consisted of 14 Likert-scale statements and one open-ended question. The Likert-scale items were grouped into five dimensions: 1) learner agency and independent learning, 2) application and transfer of skills, 3) reflection and personal transformation, 4) motivation and academic identity development, and 5) collaboration and socially mediated learning. Students rated each statement on a five-point agreement scale (1 = low agreement, 5 = high agreement). The final open-ended question invited students to describe a significant learning experience that changed how they think or learn and that they expect to apply in the future.

The survey was developed specifically for this study to align with the theoretical framework of Transformative Learning and the study's focus on sustainable learning outcomes. Quantitative data from Likert-scale items and qualitative findings from learning logs and reflective journals were triangulated. The qualitative dataset comprised responses to the open-ended survey question together with selected entries from students' learning logs and reflective journals produced during the course. This allowed numerical trends to be compared with narrative evidence of reflective learning experiences.

4. Results and Discussion

Quantitative data from Likert-scale items were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify overall trends in student perceptions of sustainable learning. Descriptive statistics for all Likert-scale items are presented in Table 1. Overall, mean scores ranged from 3.51 to 4.32 on a five-point scale, indicating moderate to high agreement with statements reflecting sustainable and transformative processes. Standard deviations ranged from 0.88 to 1.17, reflecting moderate individual variation in engagement with guided reflective practices. The highest-rated indicator of sustainable learning was the perceived transferability of course outcomes, with students reporting strong confidence in applying skills to future studies and work ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.93$).

These findings suggest that students viewed Academic English not as a self-contained subject but as a resource for continued academic and professional development (see Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of student perceptions of sustainable learning, n = 117.

Dimension	Survey statement	Mean	SD
Learner agency and independent learning	I can plan and organize my own learning tasks in English.	3.88	0.96
	I take responsibility for improving my English without waiting for instructions.	3.64	1.03
	I understand what helps me learn English most effectively.	4.03	0.90
	I can reflect on my progress and identify what I still need to improve.	4.01	0.88
Application and transfer of skills	I can use what I learned in this course in my future studies or work.	4.32	0.93
	I can apply the communication skills from this course in academic or professional situations.	4.09	1.00
Personal transformation	This course changed how I think about communication and learning.	3.51	1.17
	Thinking about my learning helped me see how I learn best.	3.68	0.93
	Writing or talking about my experiences helped me see my strengths and what I should do differently.	3.72	0.99
Motivation and academic identity development	I now see learning English as part of my personal and professional development.	4.17	0.97
	I feel motivated to continue improving my English after this course.	3.98	1.13
	I enjoy learning English and want to keep developing my skills.	4.04	1.00
Collaboration and socially mediated learning	I learned useful things from my classmates during the course.	3.79	1.02
	Working with others helped me understand topics better.	3.80	1.00

To complement these numerical trends, qualitative data from the open-ended survey question and selected excerpts from learning logs and reflective journals provide deeper insight into students' experiences of guided reflection and its influence on their learning perspectives. Thematic analysis revealed not only skill development but also changes in self-concept, learning strategies, and future learning intentions, which are key indicators of perspective transformation. Qualitative data were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis approach, in which recurring patterns were identified and grouped into themes based on their frequency and relevance to the research objectives.

While most responses were positive, some students initially reported discomfort with reflective tasks, particularly when they were not accustomed to evaluating their own learning processes.

A dominant theme in student reflections was increased confidence in academic communication. Students reported feeling less anxious and more able to participate in discussions, presentations, and academic interaction in English. Some also expressed greater confidence in their ability to communicate in future academic and professional contexts. These responses suggest growing confidence and an emerging sense of academic belonging.

Qualitative analysis indicates that students developed more effective learning strategies, particularly through discussion and peer feedback. They re-evaluated previous assumptions about language learning and adopted more interactive, self-regulated approaches. This shift reflects a deeper change in how they understand learning and their role in academic discourse, consistent with premise reflection and transformation of meaning perspectives.

Students also emphasised the relevance of course experiences for future academic and professional contexts, highlighting improved ability to express ideas and collaborate effectively. These responses suggest a shift from task-focused learning toward future-oriented competence development, which is a core feature of sustainable learning.

Another recurring theme was reflection-driven awareness of strengths and areas for improvement. Students reported greater understanding of their learning processes and expressed intentions to continue developing their English independently. These findings indicate growing learner agency and continuity of learning beyond formal instruction.

5. Conclusions

This study examined how guided reflection embedded in an Academic English course fosters sustainable learning through processes described by Transformative Learning theory. By combining quantitative and qualitative evidence, the findings show that structured reflective activities support learner agency, personal transformation, academic identity development, and long-term engagement in learning.

Quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that guided reflective practices supported learner agency, transferability of competences, personal transformation, collaborative meaning-making, emerging academic identity, and sustained motivation for continuous learning. These results suggest that structured reflection may function as a potential mechanism supporting perceived perspective transformation and sustainable learning in Academic English.

The study contributes empirical evidence to the limited research linking reflective pedagogies, transformative learning, and sustainable learning in Academic English contexts. It suggests that integrating reflection into regular coursework may support not only foreign language development but also durable, transferable competences beyond formal instruction. These practices may therefore be considered valuable pedagogical tools for supporting higher education's broader aim of developing adaptable, reflective, and lifelong learners.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the absence of a control group limits the ability to establish causal relationships between reflective practices and learning outcomes. Second, the survey instrument was developed specifically for this study and was not externally validated; therefore, the constructs measured should be interpreted with caution. Third, data were collected at the end of the course using self-reported measures, which may reflect student satisfaction or perceived learning rather than actual transformation. Fourth, the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data relies on interpretive alignment between data types, which may introduce subjectivity in the integration of findings. Finally, the reported transfer of skills reflects anticipated rather than observed long-term application.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into how students experience reflective practices in Academic English and highlights their potential role in supporting perceived sustainable learning processes. Future research could include multiple institutions, classroom observations, and longitudinal studies to examine how reflective practices influence academic communication and learner agency.

References

- Bates, R., Brenner, B., Schmid, E., Steiner, G., & Vogel, S. (2022). Towards meta-competences in higher education for tackling complex real-world problems: A cross-disciplinary review. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 23(8), 290–308.
- Bhowmik, S., Hilman, B., & Roy, S. (2018). Peer collaborative writing in the EAP classroom: Insights from a Canadian postsecondary context. *TESOL Journal*, 10(2).
- Brockbank, A., & McGill, I. (2006). *Facilitating reflective learning through mentoring & coaching*. Kogan Page.
- Burkšaitienė, N., Leščinskij, R., Suchanova, J., & Šliogerienė, J. (2021). Self-directedness for sustainable learning in university studies: Lithuanian students' perspective. *Sustainability*, 13(16), 9467.
- Castelló, M., Iñesta, A., & Monereo, C. (2017). The role of writing in research identity construction in doctoral studies. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 36(4), 825–838.
- Cranon, P. (2006). *Understanding and promoting transformative learning: A guide for educators of adults* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Desjardins, R., & Huang, H. (2025). Lifelong learning and skill formation over the life course. In E. Saar and P. Robert (eds), *Handbook on Education and Labour Market*. Edward Elgar.
- Enkhtur, A., & Yamamoto, B. (2017). Transformative learning theory and its application in higher education settings. *Journal of Osaka University, Human Sciences*, 43, 193–214.
- Fischer, A., Havu-Nuutinen, S., Kontkanen, S., & Suortti, E. (2024). Investigating sustainability education in the science capital teaching approach. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Environmental and Science Education*, 20(4), e2418.

- Hays, J., & Reinders, H. (2020). Sustainable learning and education: A curriculum for the future. *International Review of Education*, 66(4), 531–553.
- Li, D. (2022). A review of academic literacy research development. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 7(5).
- Mercer, S. (2012). The Complexity of Learner Agency. *Apples - Journal of Applied Language Studies*, 6(2), 41–59.
- Merriam, S. B. (2004). The role of cognitive development in Mezirow's transformational learning theory. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 55(1), 60–68.
- Mezirow, J. (1978). Perspective transformation. *Adult Education*, 28, 100–110.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). Transformative dimensions of adult learning. Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 1997(74), 5–12.
- Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress. Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative learning as discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1(1), 58–63.
- Mezirow, J., & Taylor, E. W. (2009). Transformative learning in practice: Insights from community, workplace, and higher education. Jossey-Bass.
- Moon, J. A. (2004). A handbook of reflective and experiential learning: Theory and practice. Routledge.
- OECD. (2019). Student agency for 2030 (OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 concept note). OECD.
- Saad, S., & Abdullah, A. (2025). Exploring learner autonomy: A conceptual perspective on self-directed learning in higher education. *International Journal of Modern Education*, 7(24):1304-1315.
- Sinkus, T. (2019). The implementation of the transformative case study model for the development of professional English language competence in business administration studies. *REEP*, 2019 (12), 165-172.
- Taylor, E. W., & Cranton, P. (2012). The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research, and practice. Jossey-Bass.
- UNESCO. (2020). Education for sustainable development: A roadmap. UNESCO.
- United Nations. (2015). Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development. United Nations.
- Wingate, U. (2015). Academic literacy and student diversity. Bloomsbury.