



## **English as the Cornerstone of Sustainable Technology and Research (ECOSTAR)**

### **Project rationale**

This project will modernize the curriculum of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Israel by addressing the following specific problems: no standardization of EFL programs at tertiary level, and lack of specific guidelines regarding what to teach at each level. In addition, our proposed curriculum reform will align tertiary level EFL programs with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), of which there is no formal awareness since developments in Europe from the Bologna Process have not yet filtered through to Israeli EFL programs. Consequently, lack of sufficient proficiency in English currently limits mobility and prevents many Israeli students from participating in international exchange programs.

The central purpose of the ECOSTAR project is to modernize and internationalize the HEI EFL curriculum in order to prepare Israeli students to function effectively in the global economy and collaborate with international partners. ECOSTAR is based on findings from the TEMPUS-EFA project, which indicate that graduates of Israeli HEIs are insufficiently prepared for the global workplace in terms of overall exposure to English and lack of focus on productive language skills. Approximately 65% of graduates polled within EFA said their professional English language needs were not provided for by the majority of EFL courses taken during their studies. Both students and graduates say EFL courses over-emphasized preparation for reading comprehension exams at the expense of other language skills.

The nature of HEI EFL programs and their narrow focus on reading comprehension was decided upon in the 1970s when primary sources were not available in Hebrew and before the advent of globalization. Unfortunately the focus of these EFL programs has not changed in the last 30 years. Consequently, in order to achieve the necessary level of communicative competence and to address the demands of the 21st century, the whole framework for EFL in HEIs in Israel must be reformed starting with the lowest entrance levels and continuing through to exit level: simply adding on applied English language skills to the existing EFL programs will not suffice to modernize EFL instruction at tertiary level. Based findings from the EFA project, the proposed ECOSTAR project will for the first time in Israeli history create a standardized national framework for tertiary EFL programs, based on the CEFR with equal focus on all communication skills. This will finally create uniformity and enable inter-institutional recognition both internationally as well as between HEIs in Israel.

The need for change has been recognized by the Israeli Council of Higher Education (CHE) and formulated in a document setting minimum acceptance standards in English for entry to higher education. The next essential step is to address content, skills and assessment procedures. ECOSTAR will accomplish this challenging task with its well-balanced partnership of university and academic college EFL experts who will collaborate on a new comprehensive framework for EFL studies at tertiary level which will upon completion be presented to the CHE for approval. New Israeli partners who have not previously participated in TEMPUS projects include Nazareth Academic College who will ensure the Arab sector's needs are considered; the Israeli Inter-University Center for e-Learning who will provide a national platform to disseminate the new curriculum and support materials developed in the project; Tel Aviv University's highly respected EFL department; the Open University of Israel whose open educational resources (OER) for EFL are currently being used free of charge in over 120 countries; the National Institute for Testing and Evaluation (NITE) who will address standardization of CEFR-based EFL assessment procedures. Maastricht University's language centre's expertise in English Medium Instruction (EMI) will facilitate the creation of a national framework for EMI in Israel, thereby ensuring the most efficient implementation of this approach to increasing students' exposure to the language to improve their proficiency. The development of a model EMI course will highlight best practice and be used for training purposes.

The wider objectives are to reform and modernize EFL programs; reduce growing gaps between socioeconomic groups with a more relevant EFL program to better prepare students from all sectors of society to compete equally in labor markets; promote collaboration between universities and academic colleges to harmonize EFL programs; integrate all communication skills; professionalize the EFL field in Israel.

Wider objectives to be shared with our European partners include "mapping" the CEFR to identify and field-test technological and methodological innovations that will be developed within ECOSTAR, thereby enhancing academic ties between Israel and Europe. These innovations will include standalone OERs for independent study and other online and mobile solutions to extend learning beyond limited class time and promote lifelong learning; encourage student autonomy with self-access in resource centers; internet-based instructional support for new blended learning formats.

The specific objectives are to: implement bottom-up change to teaching and assessment of EFL at HEIs in Israel; achieve internationalization of EFL programs; develop multimedia online EFL learning programs; provide training and support to EFL teachers; develop a model for English-Medium Instruction (EMI) with generic support materials for teachers and students to serve as a best-practice template for future EMI courses.