

## ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION: A CRITICAL LOOK AT ELT PRACTICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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### Abstract:

As global environmental challenges intensify, integrating green ecoliteracy into higher education has become increasingly relevant, including within English Language Teaching (ELT). This study explores how ecoliteracy is represented and practiced in ELT curricula at the tertiary level, focusing on syllabi, textbooks, and educator perspectives. Employing a qualitative research design, the study combines content analysis of three ELT syllabi and textbooks with semi-structured interviews involving two lecturers and a program coordinator at a private university. The results reveal that while environmental themes occasionally appear in course materials, their integration is often incidental, fragmented, and lacks critical engagement. Institutional and pedagogical barriers—such as limited curriculum guidelines, insufficient teacher training, and a dependence on commercial textbooks—hamper the effective inclusion of ecoliteracy. Nevertheless, there is growing awareness among educators of the potential value in embedding sustainability themes to promote critical thinking, global citizenship, and interdisciplinary learning. This study underscores the need for structured, localized, and critically designed materials and professional development initiatives to support the meaningful inclusion of green ecoliteracy in ELT at the higher education level.

### Keywords:

Ecological Perspectives; English Language Education; ELT Practices; Higher Education



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## INTRODUCTION

In the face of worsening environmental degradation and climate change, education is increasingly recognized as a vital instrument for promoting ecological awareness and sustainable behavior (Sterling, 2001; UNESCO, 2017). While environmental education has traditionally been situated within science and geography, there is a growing call for integrating ecological perspectives across disciplines, including English Language Teaching (ELT) at the tertiary level (Orr, 2004; Stibbe, 2015). In higher education, where learners are preparing to become global professionals, cultivating both critical thinking and ecoliteracy is essential—not only for academic development but also for fostering responsible global citizenship.

English, as the dominant global lingua franca, occupies a central place in many university curricula worldwide. It is not merely a tool for communication, but also a medium through which learners engage with global discourses, including those related to climate, sustainability, and environmental justice (Hall, 2020). Scholars such as Cates (1990) and Jacobs and Goatly (2000) have long advocated for embedding global issues, including environmental themes, into ELT. Their work laid the foundation for a more socially engaged pedagogy, arguing that language instruction can and should intersect with pressing global concerns.

At the higher education level, however, the integration of ecoliteracy into ELT remains inconsistent and often superficial. Studies have found that while environmental topics may appear in some university-level English materials, they are frequently presented in isolated reading passages or vocabulary exercises, lacking the depth needed for critical engagement (Gotti, 2019; Hanks, 2021). Moreover, few ELT syllabi in tertiary institutions explicitly frame environmental literacy as a learning outcome, reflecting a broader curricular gap (Banegas, 2017). This is especially concerning given universities' role in preparing students to navigate and address complex global issues.

From the perspective of ecolinguistics, integrating ecological themes into ELT involves more than including green vocabulary or texts; it requires a paradigm shift in how language teaching engages with the social and ideological dimensions of environmental discourse (Stibbe, 2015; Peirce & Stibbe, 2021). In higher education, where students are expected to develop critical literacy skills, this shift aligns well with the goals of transformative and interdisciplinary learning.

This article critically examines the state of ELT practices in higher education through an ecological lens. It synthesizes existing research on ecoliteracy in university-level ELT, identifies gaps in materials and pedagogical approaches, and proposes directions for integrating environmental perspectives into English language instruction at the tertiary level. In doing so, it contributes to the growing movement toward “greening” higher education by positioning ELT as a meaningful site for cultivating both language proficiency and ecological responsibility. In light of the above, the present study is guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent is ecoliteracy integrated into English Language Teaching (ELT) practices at the higher education level?
2. How do university-level ELT materials (textbooks, syllabi, teaching practices) address environmental themes and promote ecological awareness?
3. What are the perceived challenges and opportunities faced by ELT practitioners in higher education when incorporating ecological perspectives into their teaching?

This study aims to explore the integration of ecological perspectives in English Language Teaching (ELT) within higher education. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Examine the extent to which ecoliteracy is embedded in ELT practices at the tertiary level.
2. Analyze university-level ELT materials for their representation of environmental themes and sustainability discourse.

3. Identify the challenges and opportunities perceived by ELT practitioners in incorporating ecological awareness into English instruction.

## **METHOD**

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to investigate how ecological perspectives are integrated into English Language Teaching (ELT) in higher education. A qualitative methodology is appropriate for this research because it allows for an in-depth exploration of complex social and educational phenomena, including the beliefs, practices, and contextual factors that influence the integration of ecoliteracy into ELT (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study design enables the researcher to examine this phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly in selected university settings where ELT programs are delivered.

The research is conducted in selected higher education institutions that offer undergraduate English language education courses as part of their general or academic English programs. These institutions will be chosen purposively to represent different types of universities (e.g., public and private) and to provide a diversity of curricular and pedagogical approaches. Participants included are 2 English language lecturers selected via purposive sampling based on their experience teaching English in higher education, a program coordinator, some representative ELT materials: textbooks, syllabi, and course guides used in the English Language Education Department.

The data was collected by using semi-structured interviews from 2 lecturers and a program coordinator, to gather their insights into how, why, and to what extent they integrate ecological themes in their teaching. The semi-structured format allows flexibility in exploring emergent ideas while maintaining consistency across participants. Moreover, ELT materials, including course syllabi, lesson plans, and textbooks, are analyzed to examine the presence and treatment of environmental content and ecoliteracy-related themes. A content analysis framework informed by ecolinguistic principles (Stibbe, 2015) is applied.

For document analysis, a framework informed by ecolinguistics (Stibbe, 2015) will guide the evaluation of texts for ecological narratives, silences, metaphors, and ideologies. Ethical clearance will be obtained prior to data collection. All participants will be informed of the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and how their data will be used. Informed consent will be secured in writing. Participant identities and institutional affiliations will be anonymized to protect confidentiality.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Results***

The findings of this study, derived from a qualitative content analysis of ELT materials and semi-structured interviews with lecturers and a program coordinator. The content analysis of five syllabi and three main textbooks showed that environmental issues were sparsely integrated into course content. Only 6.25% of textbook units contained ecology-related texts, and none of the syllabi featured sustainability-oriented learning outcomes. This contrasts with studies like Cogo and Meidani (2022), which highlight growing efforts to embed critical ecoliteracy in ELT globally, especially in progressive educational contexts. Compared to studies in more progressive ELT contexts (e.g., Cogo & Meidani,

2022; Rahman, 2021), the materials used in these higher education settings in Indonesia reveal a notable absence of systematic integration of ecoliteracy principles.

The qualitative data gathered from interviews with two English lecturers and a program coordinator revealed several key insights into the current integration of green ecoliteracy in English Language Teaching (ELT) at the higher education level.

All three participants acknowledged the growing importance of environmental awareness in education, aligning with global sustainability agendas. However, they collectively indicated that explicit incorporation of green ecoliteracy themes in the English curriculum remains limited and largely incidental. One lecturer stated, “*We sometimes include environmental topics in discussions or reading texts, but it’s not systematically embedded in our course planning.*” The other lecturer highlighted a reliance on commercial textbooks, many of which lack localized or updated content on sustainability.

The program coordinator emphasized curriculum constraints and lack of training as two primary barriers to integrating ecoliteracy in ELT. He mentioned that “*although sustainability is a university-wide agenda, it hasn’t been fully operationalized in subject-level planning, particularly in language courses.*” Additionally, both lecturers expressed a need for contextualized teaching materials and pedagogical support to meaningfully incorporate ecoliteracy without sacrificing language learning outcomes.

Despite these limitations, there was a shared interest in future development. All interviewees agreed that embedding environmental themes in English classes could enhance students’ critical thinking, global awareness, and language skills simultaneously, especially if supported by workshops, institutional backing, and revised syllabi.

Most participants were unfamiliar with terms such as *ecoliteracy*, *ecopedagogy*, or *ecolinguistics*. While they acknowledged the importance of environmental education, few had considered its relevance to language instruction. This finding aligns with Stibbe (2015), who noted that ecoliteracy remains underrepresented in mainstream language teacher training. Despite limited awareness, lecturers expressed enthusiasm about integrating ecological themes into ELT, provided there is institutional support and adequate resources. This optimism is consistent with findings from Rahman (2021), who found that teacher motivation was a strong predictor of environmental topic inclusion in language education.

Participants cited rigid curricula, exam-oriented syllabi, and a lack of interdisciplinary training as major barriers. These structural constraints hinder innovation, echoing earlier research by Chien (2020), who identified institutional inertia as a key limitation in implementing sustainability-focused ELT.

This study contributes to the expanding conversation on ecoliteracy in ELT by focusing on its application in higher education—a context that has received comparatively less attention. While prior research has demonstrated successful ecoliteracy integration in K–

12 and community-based ELT settings (e.g., Cates, 2004; Stibbe, 2015), this study reveals a persistent gap in higher education curricula. Specifically, the lack of explicit ecoliteracy goals and ecological discourse in syllabi suggests that ELT at the tertiary level remains largely disconnected from sustainability agendas such as the UN's SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) 4.7.

Notably, although the term *ecoliteracy* was unfamiliar to many participants, their implicit awareness of environmental issues and willingness to incorporate such themes signal a promising foundation for future development. This disconnect between conceptual understanding and pedagogical intent suggests that professional development efforts should emphasize both ecolinguistic theory and practical integration strategies.

Moreover, institutional rigidity remains a major obstacle. Unlike grassroots innovations seen in some EFL teaching contexts (Cogo & Meidani, 2022), the university-based ELT programs examined in this study appear constrained by standardized curricula and outcome-based assessments. This finding highlights the need for policy-level change to support more flexible, interdisciplinary approaches that empower educators to address environmental literacy through language learning. Overall, this research underscores the need for targeted training on ecoliteracy and sustainable content development in ELT, curriculum design that aligns with global education for sustainability goals, institutional policies that recognize and reward interdisciplinary innovation in English teaching.

**Table 1** Summary of Emerging Themes from Interview Data

Theme	Summary
<b>Awareness Gap</b>	Most lecturers are unfamiliar with ecoliteracy as a formal concept.
<b>Peripheral Integration</b>	Environmental issues appear occasionally but are not core content.
<b>Positive Perception</b>	Teachers see value in ecoliteracy but lack support.
<b>Systemic Constraints</b>	Rigid curricula and lack of training are key barriers.

Source: Researcher

On the other hand, the syllabi reviewed revealed a lack of explicit references to sustainability, environmental issues, or ecoliteracy. None of the documents included course outcomes that promote environmental awareness or critical engagement with ecological themes. The primary focus remained on linguistic competencies such as grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing skills, consistent with traditional language teaching paradigms (Hall, 2020; Gotti, 2019).

Only one syllabus (*Reading and Writing for General Communication*) included a week focused on global issues, where students read texts about climate change and deforestation. However, this content was treated as a one-off topic, not as part of a broader, integrated environmental framework. The other syllabi made no mention of ecological themes.

Textbook analysis further revealed that environmental topics, when present, were treated superficially. For instance, *Skillful: Reading & Writing 2* and *Pathways*

2 contained isolated units on environmental concerns such as pollution or recycling, but these were often presented in a neutral, descriptive tone without encouraging critical reflection, solution-building, or student-led inquiry—falling short of the principles of ecolinguistics and sustainability education (Jacobs & Goatly, 2000; Stibbe, 2015).

None of the reviewed syllabi included assessment tasks directly related to environmental awareness or sustainability literacy. Activities in the textbooks mainly involved comprehension questions, vocabulary building, and basic writing tasks. There was a noticeable absence of tasks designed to foster systems thinking, personal reflection, or action-based learning related to ecological topics (Sterling, 2001; Orr, 2004). These findings align with Jacobs & Goatly's (2000) and Hanks' (2021) assertions that ELT materials often underrepresent ecological issues or fail to approach them critically. Compared to more progressive models proposed by Peirce & Stibbe (2021), the current materials and syllabi show a significant gap in integrating environmental education in meaningful ways.

### ***Discussion***

The findings of this study point to a persistent gap between global sustainability agendas and their application in ELT curricula at the tertiary level in Indonesia. Despite the acknowledged relevance of environmental themes, their inclusion in ELT remains superficial, sporadic, and unsupported by institutional infrastructure. This pattern is consistent with prior research (Stibbe, 2015; Chien, 2020) indicating that ecoliteracy is underrepresented in mainstream language teacher education and hampered by rigid institutional systems.

A recurring issue in both the syllabus analysis and the interview responses is the incidental nature of environmental content. The inclusion of sustainability-related topics appears to rely heavily on textbook availability or individual instructor initiative rather than strategic curriculum planning. This finding underlines the need for curriculum reform that moves beyond token references to ecology and embraces a more integrated, goal-oriented approach to sustainability education in ELT.

The study also reinforces the importance of professional development for ELT instructors. Given that participants lacked familiarity with ecolinguistic concepts but showed enthusiasm toward environmental education, structured training programs could bridge this conceptual-practical gap. Training modules on ecoliteracy, ecopedagogy, and sustainability-driven pedagogy could empower educators to embed critical environmental thinking into language teaching without compromising linguistic objectives.

Moreover, systemic constraints such as exam-focused curricula, rigid learning outcomes, and lack of interdisciplinary collaboration were repeatedly identified as barriers. These findings align with Cogo and Meidani's (2022) observations that successful ecoliteracy integration often requires institutional flexibility and top-down policy support. Therefore, higher education policymakers and administrators must play a more active role in enabling interdisciplinary collaborations and integrating sustainability themes across all subjects—including language education.



Finally, this study contributes to the broader discourse by spotlighting higher education—a context that has been comparatively underexplored in ecoliteracy research. While successful ecoliteracy integration has been documented in K–12 and community-based ELT settings (Cates, 2004; Stibbe, 2015), university-level programs in Indonesia appear less adaptive. Bridging this gap requires institutional commitment, localized materials, and continued scholarly engagement to build evidence-based strategies for sustainable ELT.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore how ecoliteracy is integrated into English Language Teaching (ELT) within higher education settings, particularly through an analysis of teaching materials and stakeholder perceptions. The findings reveal that ecoliteracy remains underrepresented in ELT syllabi and textbooks used in Indonesian universities. Although there is a general awareness of environmental issues among lecturers, the concept of ecoliteracy as a pedagogical principle is not widely understood or applied.

Crucially, the study demonstrates a disconnect between the global educational imperative to address sustainability (as outlined in SDG 4.7) and the practical realities of ELT curriculum design at the tertiary level. This research advances the current understanding by highlighting the gap between institutional language education policies and the growing need to embed environmental consciousness into language pedagogy. Furthermore, it suggests that higher education ELT can serve as a critical space for developing students' environmental awareness—provided that there is intentional integration supported by institutional frameworks.

Future research should consider broader national or regional comparisons, incorporate student perspectives on ecoliteracy, and test the effectiveness of ecoliteracy-infused ELT interventions. Experimental classroom models and interdisciplinary curriculum pilots may provide valuable insights into best practices for advancing sustainable ELT pedagogy.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed for key stakeholders in language education. Firstly, for the curriculum designers and policy makers, it is important to integrate ecoliteracy as an explicit learning outcome in national higher education English syllabi and curricula and to align ELT goals with SDG 4.7, ensuring that students acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to promote sustainable development. Moreover, for university administrators and program coordinator, it provides training and capacity building for lectures on how incorporate ecoliteracy and sustainability themes in English teaching and encourages interdisciplinary collaboration between English departments and environmental studies or sustainability offices. In addition, for the lectures can adapt existing materials to include sustainability-focused content, critical environmental discourse, and problem-solving tasks and can explore project-based learning, debates, and reading/writing assignments that address ecological issues within students' contexts.

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