



Promoting Environmental Awareness through ELT for Young Learners

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the integration of green education into English language teaching (ELT) for young learners through the perspective of an EFL teacher. Using semi-structured interviews and document analysis, the research investigates the teacher's strategies, challenges, and the broader implications of promoting environmental awareness in early language education. The findings reveal several key strategies employed by the teacher, including incorporating environmental themes into learning materials, linking ecological responsibility to Quranic teachings, and guiding students to think critically about environmental issues, their effects, and potential solutions. These approaches not only enhance language skills but also foster a sense of environmental stewardship among young learners. However, the study also identifies significant challenges, such as the scarcity of age-appropriate learning materials focused on environmental issues and the lack of specialized training for teachers in sustainability education. The implications of this study highlight the potential of ELT to instill environmental values from an early age, emphasizing the role of teachers in shaping eco-conscious behaviors. However, the lack of institutional support and tailored materials underscores the necessity for curriculum developers and policymakers to prioritize green education in language teaching. By addressing these gaps, educators can more effectively combine language acquisition with sustainability education, preparing young learners to become proactive participants in environmental conservation.

Keywords: Green Education, EFL, Young Learners, Environmental Awareness, Qualitative Research.



Introduction

Green education, also referred to as environmental education or education for sustainable development (ESD), is an interdisciplinary approach that fosters ecological awareness, sustainable practices, and responsible decision-making (UNESCO, 2020). It goes beyond traditional environmental science by integrating ethical, social, and economic dimensions of sustainability into learning. The goal is to empower individuals to critically assess environmental issues and take informed actions toward a more sustainable future (Sterling, 2010).

In recent years, green education has gained prominence due to escalating environmental crises, including climate change, deforestation, and pollution. Schools and educational institutions play a pivotal role in embedding sustainability into curricula, ensuring that learners develop a deep understanding of their role in environmental conservation (McKeown & Hopkins, 2010). By incorporating green education into early learning, educators can lay the foundation for lifelong eco-conscious behaviors, aligning with global sustainability frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Early childhood is a critical period for shaping attitudes and behaviors, making it an ideal stage to introduce green education (Davis, 2009). Research indicates that children who engage with environmental concepts early are more likely to develop pro-environmental values and carry them into adulthood (Chawla, 2020). Schools serve as key environments where young learners can explore sustainability through hands-on activities, such as recycling projects, nature-based learning, and eco-friendly school initiatives.

Moreover, promoting green education to young learners fosters a sense of global citizenship, encouraging them to recognize their impact on the planet (UNESCO, 2019). Studies suggest that experiential learning enhances children's connection to nature and motivates eco-friendly actions (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). Given the urgency of environmental challenges, integrating sustainability into early education is no longer optional but a necessity to cultivate a generation capable of addressing ecological crises.

English Language Teaching (ELT) offers a dynamic platform for integrating green education, as English is a global medium for communication and knowledge exchange (Cates, 2004). By embedding environmental themes into language lessons, teachers can simultaneously develop linguistic skills and ecological awareness. For example, using eco-themed reading materials, debates on sustainability, or project-based tasks on conservation can make language learning more meaningful and relevant (Jacobs & Goatly, 2000).

Additionally, ELT can facilitate cross-cultural discussions on environmental issues, allowing students to explore global perspectives on sustainability (Goulah, 2017). Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approaches are particularly effective, as they combine language acquisition with subject matter such as environmental science (Dalton-Puffer, 2011). This dual focus not only enhances vocabulary and communication skills but also encourages critical thinking about real-world ecological challenges.



Despite the recognized potential of ELT in fostering environmental awareness, there remains a scarcity of research on how best to implement green education for young learners within language classrooms (Gunay et al., 2020). Most existing studies focus on older students or general environmental education, neglecting age-appropriate methodologies for early language learners (Bland, 2022). There is also limited empirical evidence on the long-term effectiveness of eco-themed language instruction in shaping children's environmental behaviors.

Another gap lies in teacher preparedness; many language educators may lack training in sustainability education, making it challenging to integrate green themes effectively (Gürsoy & Sağlam, 2011). Addressing these gaps is essential to maximize the role of ELT in advancing global sustainability education. Therefore, this current study focusing on how an EFL teacher can manage her class to promote green education to young learners under two research questions:

- 1) How does the EFL teacher promote green education to young learners?
- 2) What are the challenges in promoting green education to young learners to ELT?

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how an EFL teacher integrates green education into ELT. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth examination of the teacher's perspectives, experiences, and instructional practices, capturing rich, detailed insights that quantitative methods might overlook (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research focused on a single EFL teacher who teaches English for lower class (grade 1 and 2) at an Islamic international elementary school in Solo. The participant was selected through purposive sampling, as the study required an EFL teacher who actively incorporated environmental themes into English lessons. The selected teacher had several years of experience in ELT and demonstrated a strong interest in sustainability education. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed. The participant provided informed consent before data collection, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. This context was relevant because it provided insights into how environmental awareness can be implemented in early language learning environments.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis to ensure comprehensive and triangulated findings. The interviews were conducted in two sessions, each lasting approximately 30–40 minutes. The interviews explored the teacher's approaches to integrating green education and perceived challenges. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for accuracy. In addition to interviews, relevant document, namely student's book, were analyzed to corroborate interview findings and provide concrete examples of pedagogical practices (Bowen, 2009).



Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to systematically analyze the data. The process began with repeated readings of interview transcripts and documents to ensure familiarity with the content. Initial codes were then generated based on recurring patterns and these codes were grouped into broader themes. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data. Manual coding was used, as the dataset was manageable without software assistance. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, multiple strategies were employed. Data triangulation was achieved by comparing interview responses with teaching materials. Member checking was also conducted by sharing preliminary findings with the participant to confirm accuracy and interpretation.

Results and Discussion

The Strategies to Promote Environmental Awareness Into ELT For Young Learners

The thematic analysis revealed several strategies to promote environmental awareness into EFL class by introducing and building the awareness of environmental issues. The first strategy was by telling the students about environmental issues, such as pollution. Further, the teacher let the students know the importance of preserving the environment for sustainability as expressed in the following statement.

“For example, in the material "Vehicles" about various types of transportation modes, in addition to knowing the English vocabulary of transportation and how to mention the vehicles they use to school, I also invite students to think together about the effects of smoke from the number of private vehicles used. The smoke makes the air dirty, and if the amount of use of private vehicles is not regulated properly, then the air can be very dirty and even dangerous to health.” (1st interview)

“Another example, in the topic "In the Park" which contains many trees, flowers and various types of plants, in addition to learning about the vocabulary of objects there, I invite students to be aware of the function of urban parks which can be used as a place to play, exercise and as a source of urban greening. I invite all students to be orderly and maintain the city park so that they can still play and they also keep breathing clean air.” (1st interview)

Those statements show the efforts of Teacher EA in introducing and building the students' awareness about environment and its importance to conserve it. Hence, people can continuously get the benefits and can be hindered from harms. Even though the main material is to know



English vocabulary regarding the topic, Teacher EA could expand it to promote environmental awareness. By incorporating environmental topics such as pollution and urban parks into vocabulary lessons, Teacher EA not only enhances students' linguistic skills but also fosters ecological awareness. This approach resonates with studies by Jacobs and Goatly (2000), who argue that language teaching should extend beyond linguistic competence to include critical global issues, such as sustainability. The teacher's strategy of engaging students in discussions about the environmental impact of vehicles and the benefits of urban green spaces reflects the transformative potential of EFL instruction, where language learning becomes a medium for raising socio-environmental consciousness.

By encouraging students to reflect on the consequences of pollution and the importance of conservation, the teacher cultivates a sense of responsibility toward the environment. Previous research by Goulah (2017) highlights that integrating ecological themes into language education can enhance students' critical thinking and motivate them to take action. Teacher EA's approach exemplifies how EFL classrooms can serve as platforms for both language development and environmental advocacy, reinforcing the idea that language education should address real-world challenges (Stibbe, 2015). This dual focus not only enriches students' vocabulary but also prepares them to become informed and proactive global citizens.

The second strategy was by explaining the Islamic teaching about keeping the environment. It was taken as one of the strategies since it is appropriate with the school value of Islam as mentioned in the interview.

"When I teach the topic 'In the Park', I introduce one quran verse from Surah Al An'am verse number 99. It mentions: 'And it is He Who sends down rainwater from the sky, and We grow with it all kinds of plants, and We bring out of them green plants. We remove from the green plant a large amount of grain; and from the palm trees unravel the stalks that blossom, and the vineyards, and (We also brought out) olives and pomegranates that are similar and unsimilar'." (1st interview)

The incorporation of Islamic teachings into environmental education within EFL classrooms, as demonstrated by Teacher EA, reflects a culturally responsive pedagogy that bridges religious values with ecological awareness. By referencing Quranic verses such as Surah Al-An'am (6:99), which emphasizes the divine origin of natural resources and the importance of plants, the teacher aligns language learning with Islamic environmental ethics. This approach resonates with the concept of *tawhid* in Islamic ecology, which positions humans as stewards (*khalifah*) of the Earth (Nasr, 1996). Teacher EA's strategy not only enriches vocabulary acquisition but also reinforces



the Islamic worldview that environmental preservation is a spiritual duty, fostering a sense of responsibility among students.

Moreover, this strategy exemplifies the broader pedagogical framework of *values-based education*, where moral and ethical principles are embedded in subject matter (Lovat & Toomey, 2007). By connecting the EFL topic "In the Park" with Quranic teachings, Teacher EA ensures that environmental education is not merely theoretical but rooted in the students' religious identity. This method also aligns with the concept of *eco-theology*, which explores the intersection of faith and environmentalism (Gottlieb, 2006). Thus, Teacher EA's approach not only enhances linguistic competence but also cultivates an ecocentric mindset grounded in Islamic values, demonstrating how language education can serve as a vehicle for both spiritual and ecological literacy.

The third strategy was by encouraging the students to think critically about the environmental issue and what they can do to address the case. Teacher EA mentioned it in the interview.

"I invite them to think of solutions that can be done, for example inviting them to rethink about the function of public transportation. It turns out that it can reduce the amount of smoke and prevent pollution."

Teacher EA's strategy of encouraging students to critically analyze environmental issues and propose solutions reflects contemporary approaches in critical environmental education (Stevenson et al., 2013). By guiding students to evaluate the role of public transportation in reducing pollution, the teacher employs *critical thinking pedagogy*, which is central to modern sustainability education (Wals & Benavot, 2017). Recent studies emphasize that integrating problem-solving tasks into language learning fosters both linguistic competence and ecological literacy (Kopnina & Cherniak, 2020).

Moreover, this strategy resonates with transformative sustainability learning (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015), which emphasizes learner participation in systemic change. By prompting students to brainstorm actionable solutions, Teacher EA fosters environmental citizenship, a key goal of Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2019). Recent work by Ardoin et al. (2020) highlights that participatory and experiential learning methods, such as problem-based scenarios, enhance students' motivation and long-term engagement with sustainability topics. Additionally, this approach aligns with place-based pedagogy (Gruenewald, 2014), where local environmental issues serve as a foundation for critical inquiry. Teacher EA's method thus not only advances English language proficiency but also cultivates the skills and mindsets necessary for addressing 21st-century ecological challenges.

The Challenges in Incorporating Green Education Into ELT For Young Learners

The first challenge reported by Teacher EA was about the limited resources, especially for young learners, which addressed environmental issues. Language teaching to young learners is more focusing on vocabulary learning and the use of expression in the target language as expressed in the following excerpt.

"There is no specific material (about environmental issues), because I teach in the lower grades, grades 1 and 2, which focus more on simple vocabulary and expression. But in higher-grade (grades 3-6), the reading passages are more varied and there are contents about environmental issues. I usually use videos to present the material to make it more interesting and easier for students. It's also easier to give illustrations related to the environment, than to just use books."

As an EFL teacher who has concerns on environmental issues, Teacher EA could modify the learning materials and/or expand the discussions to help the students care more about environment. For example, the learning material provided in the book with the topic "On the Farm" below, there are no specific materials about environment or how we can protect it. However, the teacher could expand it while teaching the materials. In this topic, Teacher EA helped the students know the role of trees, grass, and what will happen if trees and grass disappeared due to environmental crisis. It helped the students think critically and eventually able to recognize the importance of preserving the environment in its ideal condition.

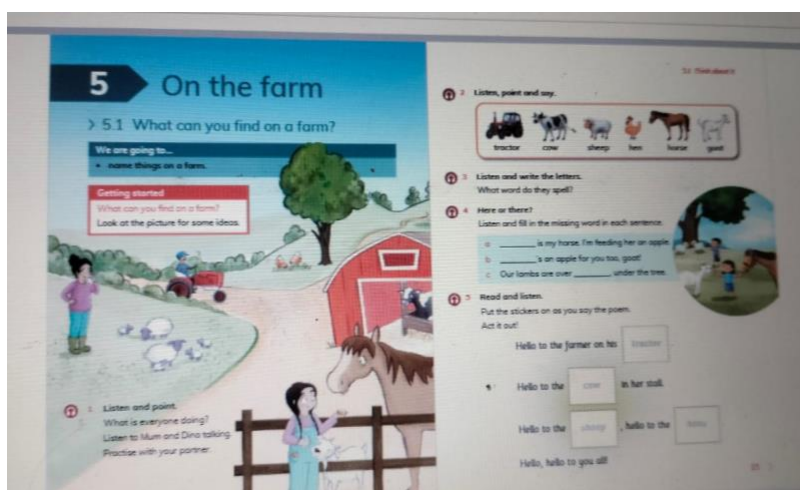


Figure 1. The learning materials do not explicitly address environmental issue

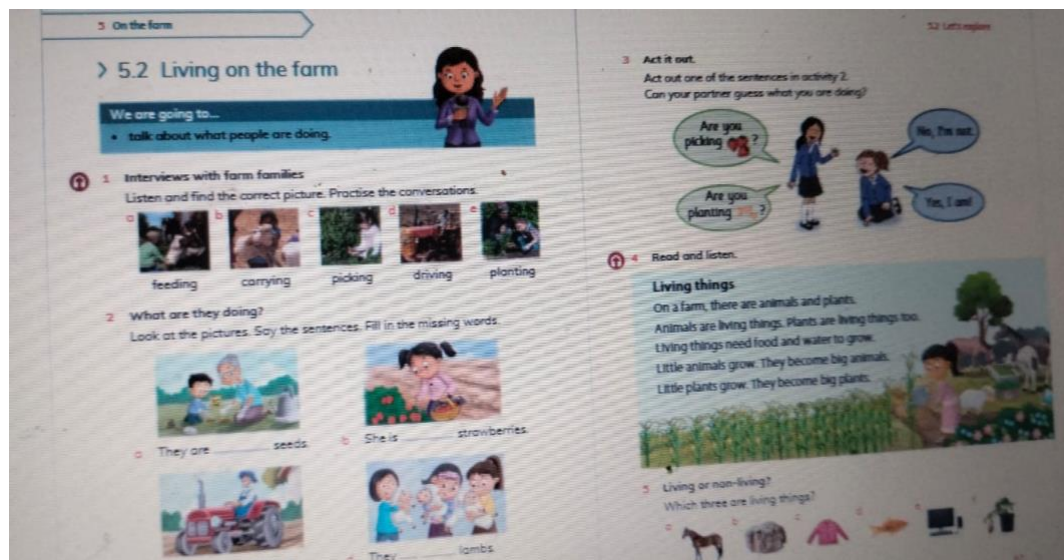


Figure 2. The learning materials focus on vocabulary and expressions

Even though the learning materials do not directly address environmental issue, teachers could still present this concern by modifying and expanding the discussion or during the material delivery.

The second challenge was due to lack of support and specific training from the stakeholder, especially for EFL teachers to present or concern more about environmental issue as reported in the following statement.

"Promoting environmental awareness for classroom learning, I think there is no specific instruction or movements so far, so it depends on the initiative of each teacher. Meanwhile, at the school level, there are some activities toward saving the environment such as water and electricity saving, sorting waste, recycling waste which can be integrated into learning, but not English. Especially, I'm talking for the lower level."

The findings reveal two main challenges in integrating environmental issues into EFL teaching for young learners: limited age-appropriate resources and lack of institutional support. Teacher EA noted that lower-grade materials focus mostly on vocabulary, leaving little room for environmental topics. However, she creatively supplemented textbooks with videos and expanded discussions (e.g., linking farm lessons to deforestation), showing that even simple modifications can foster environmental awareness. This aligns with research suggesting that multimedia make complex topics accessible to young learners (Coyle et al., 2010).



The second challenge, minimal support from stakeholders, highlights a systemic gap. While Teacher EA's school promotes eco-friendly practices (e.g., waste sorting), these efforts are not integrated into English lessons. This disconnect reflects a broader issue where environmental education remains siloed rather than embedded across subjects. Studies emphasize the need for policy-level changes and teacher training to bridge this gap (Borg, 2018). Without structured support, teachers must rely on personal initiative, limiting the scalability of green education in EFL contexts.

Conclusion

This study highlights the innovative strategies employed by the teacher to integrate environmental education into English language teaching, such as embedding ecological themes in lessons, connecting environmental responsibility to Islamic values, and encouraging critical thinking about sustainability. These methods not only improve language proficiency but also cultivate environmental awareness among young learners. However, challenges remain, including a shortage of suitable teaching materials and insufficient teacher training in sustainability education. The findings underscore the potential of ELT to nurture eco-consciousness from an early age, with teachers playing a pivotal role in fostering responsible environmental behaviors. Nevertheless, the lack of institutional support and specialized resources calls for action from curriculum designers and policymakers to integrate green education more effectively into language instruction.

Disclosure Statement

The author utilized DeepSeek during the preparation of this manuscript to assist with initial literature review scaffolding, providing resources, and improving the language. The AI-generated content was carefully reviewed, verified, and modified by the author to ensure accuracy and alignment with scholarly standards. Final responsibility for the content, interpretations, and conclusions rests entirely with the human authors.

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