

Towards English Education Sustainability: A Narrative Inquiry of an Islamic Eco-ELT School in Dompu

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Abstract

This study aims to accomplish three primary objectives: (1) to identify the key elements that constitute Eco-ELT as a sustainability-oriented pedagogical practice, (2) to describe how school leaders and English teachers construct and enact these practices through their lived and narrative experiences, and (3) to explain the ecological meanings and values that sustain Eco-ELT within a local Islamic school. Drawing on in-depth interviews with the principal and an English teacher, classroom observations, and institutional documents, this study reveals that Eco-ELT is a lived practice shaped by historical, social, and environmental narratives.

The findings show that Eco-ELT is rooted in a community initiative, an English course where tuition was paid with waste, which later evolved into a holistic sustainability vision. The principal's leadership, grounded in reflective learning and community collaboration, led to programs such as SEKAM, English-area policies, and a school-wide environmental culture. Pedagogically, Eco-ELT is implemented through place-based learning, integrating grammar instruction with direct environmental observations in settings such as the Green Lab, composting areas, and thematic gardens. Students act not only as learners but also as ecological agents through roles like "language police" and daily environmental responsibilities. Despite facing challenges related to time constraints, attendance of non-boarding student, and initial skepticism from parents, the school adapts by enhancing communication and showcasing the visible transformation of students. Theoretically, this study positions Eco-ELT as a situated, narrative-driven ecological practice influenced by leadership and place. Empirically, it demonstrates how sustainability-oriented language education can be enacted in resource-constrained yet environmentally committed school contexts.

Keywords: *Ecological language pedagogy, faith-based education, sustainable school governance, ecological awareness*

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable education has increasingly become a central priority in the development of global education systems (Chien & Knoble, 2024; De La Fuente, 2021; Letouzey-Pasquier et al., 2023). International bodies such as UNESCO continue to emphasize the significance of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as a cornerstone of twenty-first-century learning, aimed at cultivating learners' ecological, social, and moral competencies (UNESCO, 2017). Given the escalating environmental challenges we face (Abbass et al., 2022), such as climate change, land degradation, and the unchecked production of waste, education is no longer understood merely as a channel for transmitting knowledge (Agbedahin, 2019; Breiting, 2009; Saiful, 2023; Stibbe, 2015). Instead, it is seen as a transformative space that reshapes attitudes, behaviors, and values (Faizin et al., 2022; Janes & McCunn, 2022; Maghfiroh et al., 2025). In Indonesia, this urgency is pronounced

due to ongoing deforestation, pollution, and the persistently low levels of environmental literacy nationwide (Bulan et al., 2025; Juanda et al., 2024; Nahdi et al., 2024). These conditions demand educational innovations that integrate environmental issues into everyday learning processes, including English language instruction.

Over the past two decades, research on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has undergone significant expansion across diverse educational contexts. Scholars have emphasized that ESD seeks not only to increase environmental knowledge but also to cultivate learners' capacity for critical thinking, ethical reflection, and responsible action towards sustainability (Amprazis & Papadopoulou, 2025; Huang et al., 2024; Lim et al., 2022; Shutaleva et al., 2020). In practice, ESD promotes interdisciplinary learning, participatory pedagogies, and the integration of real-world environmental issues into classroom activities. Recent studies have also highlighted the importance of embedding sustainability values within everyday school practices, thereby transforming schools into living laboratories for sustainable learning (Ásványi & Gedeon, 2025; Sari et al., 2025; Sihombing et al., 2024).

Within the broader framework of sustainability education, environmental pedagogy has emerged as an important area of inquiry. Environmental pedagogy focuses on how teaching practices can encourage learners to critically engage with environmental issues and develop ecological responsibility (Bellino & Adams, 2017; Maghfiroh et al., 2025). Researchers argue that environmental education should move beyond theoretical instruction and involve experiential learning, outdoor activities, and place-based approaches that connect learners with their local ecological contexts (Ernst, 2007; Kolleck & Yemini, 2020; Yildiz, 2022). Such pedagogical approaches emphasize the importance of contextual learning environments in shaping students' environmental awareness and attitudes.

The integration of environmental perspectives into language education is closely connected to the concept of language

ecology, which views language as embedded within social, cultural, and environmental systems (Bellewes, 2024; Janes & McCunn, 2022; Stibbe, 2015). From this ecological perspective, language learning is not merely the acquisition of linguistic structures but also a process of engaging with the surrounding environment and social interactions. Language classrooms therefore serve as spaces where learners interpret and negotiate meanings related to their ecological realities.

Within the field of language education, the Ecological English Language Teaching (Eco-ELT) approach has emerged as a promising framework. Eco-ELT positions language as a medium through which learners can understand, reflect on, and respond to environmental issues (Saiful, 2020a, 2020b, 2023). This approach is grounded in the idea that language is never neutral (Stibbe, 2015); it shapes and negotiates human relationships with the ecological world through discourse, narrative, and communicative practice (Fan et al., 2016; Stibbe, 2015). Beyond developing linguistic skills, this approach encourages sustainable values and ecological action as part of learning. Yet, despite its potential, Eco-ELT remains underexplored in Indonesian Islamic schools, particularly in relation to how school leadership and classroom teachers interpret, enact, and sustain this pedagogical orientation.

Building upon these ecological perspectives, Eco-ELT has recently gained attention as an approach that integrates environmental themes into English language teaching. Several studies have explored the potential of Eco-ELT in promoting environmental awareness while developing language competence. For instance, research has examined the development of environmentally themed teaching materials (Bulan et al., 2024, 2025), the integration of ecological topics into classroom discussions (Saiful, 2023), and the use of project-based environmental activities in language learning contexts (Ásványi & Gedeon, 2025; Iswandari et al., 2017; Yu et al., 2024). These studies indicate that Eco-ELT can provide meaningful opportunities for learners to connect language learning with real-world environmental issues.

To successfully integrate sustainability into schools, strong educational leadership is very important. Research shows that school principals have a key role in shaping institutional cultures that support environmental initiatives (Amprazis & Papadopoulou, 2025; Huang et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2025; Peng et al., 2024). Leadership practices that encourage collaboration, environmental values, and community engagement can significantly influence how sustainability principles are translated into classroom practices (Desfandi et al., 2016; Nilawati et al., 2025). However, limited studies have explored how school leaders and teachers collaboratively interpret and enact sustainability-oriented language education within specific institutional contexts.

Dompu, a region historically challenged by ecological issues such as deforestation, land fires, and inadequate waste management, provides a compelling social context for understanding the urgency of Eco-ELT. In response to these challenges, a local Islamic boarding school has embraced an educational model entirely focused on sustainability. The school adopts what it calls a “life curriculum,” a learning framework built around concrete environmental practices supported by facilities such as a Green Lab, a waste-bank program, eco-brick initiatives. Additionally, the school operates an organic food cycle where livestock management (chickens and ducks) directly contribute to compost production. As the principal highlighted, the school’s daily rhythm is rooted in sustainability, integrating waste processing and gardening into the curriculum configuring classroom environments to function as open, nature-based learning spaces.

As part of this integration, English plays a key role in nurturing ecological awareness. The principal has created an English-area policy, established student “language police,” and organized language-based competitions as formative assessments for midterms and finals. The school is designed so that all teachers embed environmental issues in their lessons. According to interviews with the principal, these initiatives are not merely administrative directives; they are deeply tied to personal

experiences and the school's longstanding journey, starting with the community's launch of a "waste-paid English course" in 2015.

These policies have given rise to a distinctive pedagogical practice within English instruction. The English teacher observed that most of the teaching and learning activities are designed to integrate environmental themes. For example, when teaching tenses, students are asked to observe plants, gardens, waste areas, or fishponds and then present their findings using the targeted grammatical structures. According to the teacher, these learning experiences not only enhance students' vocabulary and presentation skills but also gradually fostering ecological sensitivity, although this awareness is not the primary focus of the present study. The teacher also acknowledged certain challenges, including limited instructional time and irregular attendance among non-boarding students, yet continues to navigate a balance between language learning and environmental engagement through a project-based approach.

Classroom observations further underscored the depth of ecological values embedded in the learning process. The lessons observed were consistently grounded in environmental themes, encouraged ecological critical thinking, and fostered dialogic interaction between teacher and students within a collaborative classroom atmosphere. The teacher regularly connected language forms to ecological meanings, modeled environmental care, and guided students to reflect on the environmental phenomena surrounding their school. The integration of flexible learning spaces, nature-based materials, and the Green Lab collectively enriched this sustainability-oriented experience. These conditions demonstrate that Eco-ELT in this Islamic school transcends mere curricular policy; It is a lived practice woven into the daily routines of teachers and the broader school community.

Despite a growing body of research on ESD (Breiting, 2009; Olawumi & Akintolu, 2025; Perwitasari et al., 2023), Eco-ELT (Bulan et al., 2024; Saiful, 2023), and environment-based pedagogy (Nur et al., 2022), there remains a notable gap concerning how school leadership and teachers' day-to-day

experiences shape environmental education within English language teaching. Existing studies on Eco-ELT have largely focused on material design, learner perceptions, or instructional models (Bulan et al., 2024; Sumarmi et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2024). Meanwhile, research on sustainability in schools tends to highlight institutional policies or green-school innovations rather than the narrative experiences of the key actors who enact and negotiate ecological values in their teaching (Kravchenko, 2016; Lier, 2010; Wang, 2025).

Against this background, the present study addresses a critical gap in the literature by focusing on three interrelated dimensions. First (ontology), it seeks to examine *what* constitutes Eco-ELT as a lived pedagogical and ecological practice within the specific context of an Islamic boarding school, moving beyond its treatment as a mere instructional model. Second (epistemology), it investigates *how* sustainability-oriented language education is constructed, interpreted, and enacted through the narrative experiences of school leadership and classroom teachers, employing a narrative inquiry approach that remains underutilized in Eco-ELT research. Third (axiology), it considers *why* understanding these processes is essential for advancing context-sensitive and sustainable language education practices, particularly in environmentally vulnerable regions such as Dompu.

Accordingly, this study aims (1) to identify the key elements that constitute Eco-ELT as a sustainability-oriented pedagogical practice, (2) to describe how school leadership and English teachers construct and enact these practices through their lived and narrative experiences, and (3) to explain the ecological meanings and values that sustain Eco-ELT within a local Islamic school context.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Material

This study adopted a qualitative narrative inquiry design to investigate the construction, enactment, and sustainability of Eco-ELT within a specific institutional context. The use of narrative

inquiry allowed for the exploration of participants' lived experiences and facilitated the examination of practices evolved over time (Caine et al., 2022). The analysis was structured around three dimensions: temporality, to explore the historical development of Eco-ELT from its community roots; sociality, to examine the interplay among leadership roles, teacher beliefs, and interactional dynamics; and place, to understand how the school's physical environment shapes pedagogical practices.

The study was conducted in a boarding Islamic school in Dompu, West Nusa Tenggara, where environmental challenges such as deforestation, seasonal fires, and limited waste management have influenced the development of a sustainability-oriented "life curriculum." The school integrates environmental practices through programs such as waste management systems, thematic gardens, and the SEKAM (*sampah, energi, keanekaragaman hayati, air dan makanan*) framework (waste, energy, biodiversity, water, and food systems), which also function as learning spaces for Eco-ELT. English is institutionalized through an English-area policy, supported by student language monitors, enabling the integration of environmental discourse into daily communication.

Two key participants were purposively selected: the school principal, who plays a central role in shaping sustainability leadership and institutional programs, and an English teacher who implements Eco-ELT through classroom practices, particularly in integrating language instruction with environmental observation.

Research Procedure

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews explored participants' narratives related to the historical emergence of Eco-ELT, leadership decision-making, pedagogical practices, and responses to contextual challenges. Classroom observation focused on how Eco-ELT was enacted in practice, particularly the integration of grammar instruction with environmental activities, student participation, and the use of school spaces such as the Green Lab and gardens.

The document analysis included lesson plans, sustainability program records, and institutional documents (e.g., SEKAM), enabling triangulation between reported narratives and actual practices. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation across data sources, comprehensive contextual description, systematic documentation of analytical procedures, and reflexive consideration of researcher bias.

Data were analyzed using narrative thematic analysis based on temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The analysis process involved iterative reading of data, identification of narrative units, and thematic categorization related to (1) historical development of Eco-ELT, (2) leadership and institutional practices, (3) pedagogical enactment, and (4) emerging challenges and adaptations. These themes were then synthesized into a meta-narrative representing Eco-ELT as a lived and contextually embedded practice.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This study identifies four key dimensions shaping the implementation of Eco-ELT in the Islamic school: historical foundation, leadership development, pedagogical practice, and student agency, alongside several operational challenges. A concise synthesis of these findings is summarized in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, Eco-ELT in this context is not an isolated instructional strategy but a system rooted in the school's historical and sociocultural development. The findings indicate that the program originated from a community-based initiative known as the "waste-paid English course," which later evolved into a structured institutional framework. This transformation is reflected in the adoption of the SEKAM program, which cyclically integrates environmental themes into school activities, ensuring that sustainability becomes part of the institutional routine rather than an additional component.

Table 1. Summary of Key Findings on Eco-ELT Implementation

Dimension	Key Findings	Evidence Source	Implication
Historical Foundation	Originates from “waste-paid English course” and institutionalized through SEKAM program	Principal interview	Sustainability is organically embedded
Leadership Development	Leadership evolves through experience, mentoring, and community engagement	Principal interview	Enables adaptive and innovative practices
Pedagogical Practice	Place-based learning integrates English with ecological activities	Teacher interview & observation	Promotes contextual language learning
Student Agency	Students act as ecological and linguistic agents	Observation & interviews	Strengthens eco-literacy internalization
Challenges	Time constraints, attendance issues, and initial parental resistance	Teacher & principal interviews	Requires ongoing adaptation

Leadership emerges as a central enabling factor. The principal’s leadership is characterized by a gradual development through lived experiences, mentorship, and continuous interaction with the school community. This developmental journey has led to several institutional innovations, including the reinforcement of English use in daily communication and the integration of environmental values across the school’s practices. In addition, the principal plays a mediating role in addressing community

concerns, particularly in building parental trust toward the school's environmentally oriented approach.

In terms of pedagogy, Eco-ELT is implemented using a place-based approach that connects language learning with direct environmental engagement. Classroom observations show that learning frequently takes place beyond the classroom, utilizing gardens, composting areas, and the Green Lab as integrated learning spaces. English instruction, particularly grammar, is contextualized through observational experiences, enabling students to relate linguistic forms to real-life ecological phenomena. This approach supports more meaningful and experience-based learning.

Furthermore, students function as active agents within the Eco-ELT framework. They engage not only as participants in classroom activities but also as contributors to the school's environmental practices. Their responsibilities include maintaining gardens, managing waste, and participating in ecobrick projects, all while consistently using English through peer monitoring systems. These practices indicate that both ecological awareness and language use are internalized through habitual and socially supported activities.

However, the findings also reveal several challenges. Time limitations and inconsistent attendance, particularly among non-boarding students, constrain participation in outdoor learning activities. Additionally, initial parental skepticism toward the school's unconventional model posed social challenges, although these concerns gradually diminished as positive student outcomes became evident.

Overall, the results demonstrate that Eco-ELT operates as an integrated and dynamic system shaped by historical continuity, adaptive leadership, contextual pedagogy, and active student participation, while remaining responsive to practical and societal limitations.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Eco-ELT in the observed Islamic school operates not merely as an instructional

innovation but as a deeply embedded sociocultural and ecological system shaped by lived experiences, leadership narratives, and contextual realities. In contrast to prior Eco-ELT research, which has largely focused on instructional design, material development, or student outcomes (Bulan et al., 2024; Saiful, 2023; Yu et al., 2024), this study advances the field by positioning Eco-ELT as a narrative-driven and institutionally situated practice. By applying the narrative inquiry framework of Clandinin & Connelly (2000), the discussion synthesizes the findings through the dimensions of temporality, sociality, and place, while critically engaging with broader theoretical and empirical debates in sustainability education and language pedagogy.

Eco-ELT as a Temporal Process: Between Organic Emergence and Planned Intervention

One of the most significant contributions of this study is its emphasis on temporality as a foundational dimension of Eco-ELT. The findings show that the implementation of Eco-ELT did not originate as a formal curriculum design but emerged organically from a community initiative, the “waste-paid English course”, which gradually evolved into an institutional philosophy. This challenges dominant assumptions in Eco-ELT and ESD literature that sustainability integration is primarily the result of structured curricular planning (Saiful, 2020a; Sumarmi et al., 2021).

From a *pro-thesis* perspective, this finding aligns with experiential and constructivist paradigms, which emphasize that meaningful learning innovations often emerge from lived experiences and local practices rather than via top-down interventions (Paulsen, 2020). Furthermore, it also resonates with ecolinguistic perspectives that view language practices as dynamic processes evolving within ecological and sociocultural systems (Stibbe, 2015). In this sense, Eco-ELT is not “implemented” in a linear sense but grows through iterative interactions between past experiences, present practices, and future aspirations.

However, from a *counter-perspective*, several scholars argue that sustainability education requires systematic planning, policy alignment, and measurable frameworks to ensure consistency and

scalability (Lim et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2017). Without a structured design, programs risk becoming fragmented, context-dependent, and difficult to replicate across institutions. From this standpoint, the organic emergence of Eco-ELT in this study may limit its transferability to other educational contexts that lack similar historical and community foundations.

The synthesis of these perspectives suggests that effective Eco-ELT may require a hybrid model, combining organic, context-driven development with strategic institutional planning. While the historical narrative provides authenticity and meaning, formal structures such as the SEKAM program play a crucial role in sustaining and systematizing these practices. Thus, temporality in Eco-ELT should be understood not as a passive continuity of experience, but as an active process of institutionalization that bridges informal origins with formal educational frameworks.

Leadership and Sociality: Between Relational Trust and Structural Authority

The second major contribution concerns the role of sociality, particularly the centrality of leadership in shaping Eco-ELT practices. The findings indicate that the principal's leadership evolved through experiential learning, mentorship, and community interaction, rather than formal training alone. This supports the view that sustainability leadership is relational, value-driven, and context-sensitive (Huang et al., 2024; Nilawati et al., 2025).

From a *pro-thesis* standpoint, this aligns with contemporary theories of distributed and transformational leadership, which emphasize collaboration, moral purpose, and shared vision (Nguyen et al., 2025). The principal's ability to build trust among teachers, students, and parents reflects what Desfandi et al., (2016) describe as the cultural dimension of sustainability leadership, where institutional change is driven by shared values rather than imposed regulations. Furthermore, the relational dynamics between teachers and students, particularly in integrating ecological experiences into language learning, reinforce the notion that education is inherently social (Pellerone et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, a *critical perspective* highlights potential limitations of relying heavily on individual leadership narratives. Research on educational reform suggests that charismatic or experience-based leadership, while effective in localized contexts, may lack sustainability when leadership changes or when institutional support systems are weak (Peng et al., 2024). Additionally, over-reliance on relational trust may obscure the need for formal accountability mechanisms and professional development structures.

The synthesis here indicates that Eco-ELT leadership should balance relational and structural dimensions. While narrative-driven leadership fosters authenticity and commitment, it must be complemented by institutional policies, capacity-building programs, and systemic support to ensure long-term sustainability. In this study, such balance is partially achieved through the integration of leadership practices into institutional programs like SEKAM and the English-area policy.

Place-Based Pedagogy: Expanding Eco-ELT Beyond Content Integration

A third key finding relates to the dimension of place, which emerges as a central element in Eco-ELT implementation. The study demonstrates that environmental learning is not limited to thematic content but is deeply embedded in physical spaces such as gardens, composting areas, and the Green Lab. This supports place-based education theories, which argue that learning becomes more meaningful when connected to local environments and lived experiences (Ernst, 2007; Yildiz, 2022).

From a *supportive perspective*, this finding reinforces prior research emphasizing experiential and outdoor learning as critical components of environmental education (Kolleck & Yemini, 2020).

It also extends the literature on Eco-ELT by showing that physical space itself functions as a pedagogical agent, not merely a setting.

This aligns with ecolinguistic theory, which views language as inseparable from the environments in which it is used (Lier, 2010).

However, *contrasting evidence* suggests that place-based approaches may encounter practical constraints, particularly in

schools with limited resources, rigid curricula, or urban settings where access to natural environments is restricted (Olawumi & Akintolu, 2025). Additionally, critics argue that without careful pedagogical design, outdoor learning may lack sufficient depth and may not effectively achieve its intended learning outcomes.

The synthesis of these perspectives suggests that place-based Eco-ELT should not be romanticized as universally applicable. Instead, it should be adapted to the specific context, with careful alignment between environmental activities and language learning objectives. In this study, such alignment is evident in the integration of grammar instruction with environmental observation, demonstrating a productive synergy between linguistic and ecological learning.

Student Agency and Eco-Literacy: Between Internalization and Social Conditioning

Another significant contribution of this study is its emphasis on student agency. The findings show that students actively participate in both environmental practices and language use, functioning as “ecological agents” within the school system. This aligns with constructivist and participatory learning theories, which highlight the importance of active engagement in knowledge construction (Ásványi & Gedeon, 2025).

From a *pro-thesis perspective*, this aligns with research indicating that Eco-ELT can enhance both environmental awareness and language competence through experiential learning (Maghfiroh et al., 2025). The use of peer monitoring systems, such as “language police,” further reinforces consistent language practice and ecological behavior, suggesting a strong integration of cognitive and behavioral learning.

However, a *critical lens* raises questions about the extent to which such behaviors reflect genuine internalization versus social conformity. Scholars in environmental education caution that behavioral compliance does not always equate to deep ecological understanding or long-term attitude change (Janes & McCunn, 2022). Similarly, enforced language policies may risk limiting

students' linguistic autonomy or creating performative rather than authentic language use.

The synthesis suggests that while student agency in this context appears robust, future research should further examine the depth of internalization, particularly through longitudinal studies or mixed-method approaches. Nonetheless, the findings provide strong evidence that Eco-ELT can foster environments conducive to the simultaneous development of ecological and linguistic competencies through sustained practice.

Challenges and Adaptation: Eco-ELT as a Negotiated Practice

This study does not characterize Eco-ELT as a seamless innovation. Instead, it identifies challenges such as time constraints, inconsistent student attendance, and initial parental resistance highlighting the complexities of implementing sustainability-oriented education. These findings align with existing literature on ESD, which acknowledges that educational transformation is often constrained by institutional, social, and cultural factors (Perwitasari et al., 2023).

From a *supportive perspective*, the school's capacity to adapt and establish community trust exemplifies resilience and contextual responsiveness, which are fundamental characteristics of sustainable educational practices (Shutaleva et al., 2020). The gradual shift in parental perception further illustrates the importance of visible outcomes in legitimizing educational innovation.

Conversely, *critical perspectives* suggest that such challenges may signify deeper structural issues, including inadequate instructional time, policy misalignment, and unequal student participation. Addressing these systemic factors is paramount to ensuring the long-term sustainability of Eco-ELT.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Eco-ELT in the examined Islamic school is best understood as a contextually embedded and dynamic practice rather than a discrete pedagogical model. It emerges from the interplay of historical continuity, leadership

experience, and place-based pedagogy, in which language learning is meaningfully connected to ecological engagement. The findings highlight that sustainability-oriented language education does not solely rely on instructional design; instead, it is shaped by institutional culture, relational dynamics, and everyday practices that collectively promotes ecological values within the school environment.

This study is subject to several limitations. First, it is conducted within a single institutional context and involves only two key participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the narrative inquiry approach emphasizes lived experiences rather than quantifiable outcomes, thereby failing to evaluate the impact of Eco-ELT on students' language proficiency or environmental literacy quantitatively. Third, the study primarily reflects the perspectives of school actors, with limited inclusion of students' and community voices. Future research is therefore recommended to involve multiple contexts, incorporate a diverse range of stakeholders, and implement mixed-method or longitudinal designs to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the sustainability and scalability of Eco-ELT.

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