



## ECOLINGUISTICS-BASED PEDAGOGY FOR YOUNG LEARNERS: Eco-Teaching Practices in Nunleu, Kupang City-Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the implementation of the *eco-teaching* approach in English language education within the Kali Sembunyi learning community, located in Nunleu subdistrict, Kota Raja, Kupang City. The target group consists of children aged 6–10 years living near a local river basin. Eco-teaching integrates *ecolinguistic* principles (Halliday & Muhlhäusler) and *meaningful learning theory* by utilizing environmental objects as direct teaching media. The learning process emphasizes interactive and joyful activities grounded in the children's ecological context.

Using a descriptive qualitative method, data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The results indicate that children acquired English vocabulary more effectively when learning was contextual and grounded in their surroundings, compared to traditional methods involving translation and rote memorization. Engaging with real-world materials such as stones, leaves, and water fostered deeper cognitive and emotional involvement, making language acquisition more meaningful. These findings support the view that language should be taught in connection with ecological contexts to cultivate both linguistic competence and environmental awareness.

This study recommends implementing eco-teaching across all age levels in foreign language education, particularly in community-based learning settings. Integrating language instruction with local ecosystems not only enhances retention and understanding but also nurtures ecological sensitivity among learners.

**Keywords:** *eco-teaching, ecolinguistics, meaningful learning, young learners, community-based education*

### I INTRODUCTION

In the current context of globalization, mastering a foreign language - especially English - is a fundamental skill that needs to be instilled from an early age to the younger generation. English does not only serve as a means of communication across countries, but also as an entry point to understanding science, expanding professional relationships, and active involvement in the dynamics of the international community. Thus, efforts to provide quality English language learning that can reach all children become an inevitable educational

urgency, especially in areas that are still struggling with limited formal education facilities and resources.

However, limited learning time in formal schools is often an obstacle in providing sufficient space for children to develop foreign language skills optimally. Limited class hours, rigid learning methods, and low access to relevant learning resources are factors that hinder children's English development in various regions. In the midst of these limitations, learning communities that grow in the home environment or the surrounding community open up new opportunities for alternative learning processes that are more flexible, contextual, and rooted in the local needs of learners.

Language learning is not only about mastering grammatical structures and vocabulary, but is also closely related to the social and ecological context in which learners live and learn. In recent years, pedagogical approaches have emerged that integrate sustainability and environmental awareness into language teaching practices. One approach that has begun to receive attention is eco-teaching, which is a learning method that places the natural environment as a source and medium of learning, so that language is learned contextually, interactively and meaningfully.

Initial observations and field studies conducted in the Kali Sembunyi learning community, Nunleu Village, Kupang City, showed that the English language skills of children aged 6-10 years are still relatively low. Difficulty in understanding basic vocabulary, lack of engagement in language activities, and low motivation to learn are the main indicators of this problem. This phenomenon emphasizes the importance of a more enjoyable, contextualized and experiential learning approach as a solution that addresses pedagogical challenges at the community level.

In response to these problems, learning approaches and methods that emphasize meaningfulness and active involvement of children are being tested in the form of environment-based learning programs. One approach that shows great potential is eco-teaching, which is English language learning that integrates local ecological elements as learning resources and learning contexts. Through play, nature exploration and the utilization of local cultural narratives, children are invited to learn English through real interaction with their own environment - a process that is not only fun, but also strengthens personal attachment to the learning material.

The eco-teaching program implemented in the Kali Sembunyi community brings a new approach to children's pedagogy, namely an ecolinguistics-based pedagogy that combines aspects of language, environment and local culture as the foundation of learning. This practice not only aims to improve children's English language skills, but also to foster ecological awareness and cultural values from an early age. This study aims to explore how the practice of eco-teaching is implemented, what impact it has on children's language development, and how this approach can be a model of sustainable pedagogy that is relevant in areas with unique ecological characteristics such as Nunleu.

This paper is more concerned with describing the English language learning outcomes of children in the Kali Sembunyi learning community, by comparing the effectiveness of the eco-teaching method and the traditional teaching approach that has been used so far. The research focuses on how children process and master foreign language vocabulary through active engagement in a fun and meaningful learning environment. Deep learning theory becomes an important foundation in understanding the process of language knowledge internalization that occurs in the field, where students not only memorize words but also understand their meaning and context of use through concrete experiences. The ecolinguistic approach acts as a theoretical umbrella that brings together elements of language, ecological identity, and local culture, and becomes an interpretive framework in analyzing the interrelationships between learning methods, learning environments, and children's foreign language learning outcomes in this community.

## **II LITERATURE REVIEW**

The theoretical foundation of eco-teaching can be found in the discipline of ecolinguistics, which is a field of study that explores the relationship between language, ideology, and ecological sustainability. Halliday (1990) in 'New Ways of Meaning' emphasises that language plays an important role in shaping the way people perceive the world, including nature. Mühlhäusler (1996) reinforces this idea by pointing out the correlation between the preservation of local languages and the conservation of cultural and ecological diversity. In the context of language learning, this approach encourages the formation of alternative discourses that are not only communicative, but also support sustainability values.

A concrete application of the eco-teaching approach can be found in the practice of teaching English in the Kali Sembunyi and Kali Bambu communities, Nunleu Village, Kupang

City. Children aged 6-10 who live around the river are encouraged to learn through direct interaction with their environment, such as recognising vocabulary through rocks, leaves, water and other natural objects. This approach differs significantly from traditional rote and translation-based teaching methods, and is proven to increase children's understanding and retention of vocabulary more deeply.

The effectiveness of the approach is in line with Ausubel's (1968) theory of meaningful learning, which states that new information will be assimilated more easily if it is linked to students' prior knowledge. The child's living environment functions as an advance organiser, strengthening the cognitive structure and enabling the subsumption process. When children learn through real experiences, they do not simply absorb words, but build connections between language and their daily lives - a process that supports the formation of a reflective and conscious ecological way of thinking.

A number of studies support this approach. Stibbe (2021) and Cheng (2022) show how ecological discourse can be integrated in language learning to increase students' critical awareness of environmental issues. In Indonesia, a study by Perwitasari et al. (2025) showed that the use of natural media and community-based approaches can improve vocabulary comprehension and ecological awareness of primary school students. Institutional support through the Whole School Approach (Nordén, 2024), as well as constructivist practices promoted by the OECD (2025), strengthen the position of eco-teaching as part of a sustainable transformation of education.

With a strong theoretical foundation and supporting empirical findings, this study aims to further examine the effectiveness of the eco-teaching approach in early childhood English language learning and highlight its contribution to the development of ecological awareness and sustainability values. The study is expected to enrich the practice of sustainable pedagogy, particularly in areas with cultural and geographical proximity to nature.

### **III METHODOLOGY**

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach that aims to describe in depth the practice of eco-teaching in environment-based English language learning. This approach allows researchers to understand the process, students' responses, and the effectiveness of teaching strategies implemented in two non-formal learning communities, Kali Sembunyi and Kali Bambu, located in the watershed of Nunleu Village, Kota Raja Sub-district, Kupang City.

The research subjects consisted of 54 children aged 6-10 years who actively participated in learning activities in both communities. The sampling technique was purposive, taking into account age, neighbourhood background, and activity in English learning activities. In addition, five tutors were involved as sources of information through in-depth interviews to obtain data on teaching practices and the utilisation of the environment as a learning medium.

The research data was collected through three main techniques: observation of learning activities, semi-structured interviews, and documentation of students' work. Observations were conducted to record children's interactions with natural objects in the language learning process, while interviews were used to explore tutors' experiences and views on the effectiveness of the eco-teaching method. Documentation in the form of photographs, tutor notes, and students' language products were used to strengthen the descriptive analysis. All data were analysed thematically by identifying patterns of success in vocabulary acquisition and learners' ecological engagement.

#### **IV RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

##### ***Children's Interaction with the Environment as Learning Media***

During the three months of learning activities, children in Kali Sembunyi and Kali Bambu communities were invited to interact directly with their environment as part of the English learning process. Stones, leaves, water, small insects, and other objects commonly found around where they live are used as concrete teaching media. Learning activities are carried out outdoors, by the river, in the courtyard, and in a small community garden.

Through these interactions, children begin to recognise new vocabulary directly related to the natural objects and phenomena they see and touch. For example, the word "stone" is introduced by pointing to and holding a stone, rather than simply stating its translation. This way of learning forms a powerful sensory experience, making children fully engaged physically, emotionally and mentally in language learning.

This condition strengthens the eco-teaching approach, which is learning based on the connection between language and the environment. By making nature the source and context of learning, the process of mastering language becomes more natural and meaningful. Observations show that children do not just memorise words, but really understand their function and context.

### ***Children's Enthusiasm in the Learning Process***

During the learning activities, the tutors noted that the children showed high enthusiasm. They seemed eager to join the learning session, even some children voluntarily came early to the learning location. Not a few wanted to continue learning outside the schedule because they felt learning was fun. This is in contrast to children's responses to traditional learning in formal schools, which tend to be passive and easily bored.

This enthusiasm is reinforced in learning sessions that are open and dynamic. There is no pressure or rigid atmosphere, so children are free to ask questions, experiment and share their experiences with their peers. Tutors also treat children as unique individuals, valuing each child's participation and adjusting teaching styles based on their responses.

This phenomenon is in line with the environmental constructivism approach, where learners form meaning through direct exploration and personal experience. When learning is designed to be relevant to children's lives and environments, their engagement increases significantly. Learning becomes a part of life, not an activity separate from their world.

### ***Tutors' Perception of Eco-Teaching Effectiveness***

Interviews with five tutors revealed that the eco-teaching approach provided a refreshing and transformative teaching experience. They felt more connected to the students and could observe language development in a more tangible way. Tutors stated that children absorb vocabulary more quickly and are able to use it in context, without the need for verbal memorization.

One tutor noted that this approach "makes language come alive." Children not only learn new words, but also relate them to direct experiences, such as saying "water" while playing with river water. Such a learning process creates a reflective space between meaning, objects and language.

The tutors' positive impressions also reflect a paradigm shift in language teaching, from an authoritative and static model to a participatory and contextual approach. Tutors no longer just deliver material, but facilitate the exploration of meaning, which is cognitively and emotionally deep. This is in line with the principle in meaningful learning (Ausubel, 1968), which emphasizes connections between new information and prior knowledge.

***Traditional teaching methods are compared here.***

In general, tutors and children expressed significant differences between traditional and eco-teaching approaches. Traditional methods that emphasize translation and memorization are considered boring and less effective in building understanding. Children often have difficulty remembering vocabulary that is taught in the abstract.

In the context of language education, a comparison between traditional teaching methods and eco-teaching approaches shows significant differences, both in terms of effectiveness and learner engagement. Traditional methods centered on literal translation and memorization tend to create a monotonous and rigid learning atmosphere. This not only reduces children's motivation to learn, but also hinders the process of internalizing the meaning of the vocabulary learned. When children are faced with abstract and context-less learning, they often struggle to remember and apply the words in real-life situations.

In contrast, the eco-teaching approach offers a more lively and well-rounded learning experience by utilizing the surrounding environment as a learning resource. Direct interaction with natural objects, situations and phenomena helps children build concrete associations to the vocabulary they are learning. Tutors who implement this approach report significant improvements in children's language comprehension and retention. Not only that, eco-teaching encourages exploration, curiosity and active participation, all of which contribute to the formation of a meaningful and enjoyable learning experience.

Thus, it can be concluded that eco-teaching is a more relevant and responsive alternative to children's developmental needs in language learning. This approach not only emphasizes on linguistic content, but also on context and real experiences, which are key in building overall communicative competence. Shifting the focus from rote to experiential and interaction-based learning is a progressive step in enriching pedagogical practices in the modern learning era.

## **V CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

### ***Conclusion***

Based on the results of the implementation of learning activities in Kali Sembunyi and Kali Bambu communities, the eco-teaching approach proved to be a more effective and meaningful method in children's English learning. The use of the environment as a teaching medium presents a concrete, sensory, and contextual learning experience, which supports the

development of natural and deep language understanding. Children do not just memorize vocabulary, but are able to relate words to functions and phenomena that they experience directly.

The high enthusiasm shown by children during the learning process is evidence that this approach is able to build a positive relationship between learners and their learning experience. The open, flexible and fun learning environment encourages exploration and strengthens children's intrinsic motivation to learn. This approach places children as active subjects in the learning process and reflects the principles of constructivism that prioritize real experiences and interactions.

From the tutor's perspective, eco-teaching opens up new possibilities in language pedagogy that are more reflective and participatory. Tutors do not just deliver materials, but become facilitators in shaping relevant and contextualized meanings for children. Compared to traditional methods that tend to be rigid and abstract, eco-teaching presents an adaptive learning model that suits the developmental needs of children in an evolving learning era.

### ***Implication***

Based on the findings and discussion, the eco-teaching approach shows significant effectiveness in early childhood language learning by making the environment a contextual and meaningful teaching medium. Educators are advised to adopt the role of exploration facilitator, supported by experiential pedagogical training to make learning more adaptive to learners' social and environmental contexts. The implications of these findings also point to the need for educational policy development and further studies examining the linkages between sensory experiences, direct interaction with the environment, and children's ongoing language acquisition.

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