

ECO-EXPERIENTIAL ELT: INTEGRATING BALINESE LOCAL WISDOM INTO SUSTAINABILITY-ORIENTED ENGLISH EDUCATION

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Abstract

While sustainability education research has largely developed within environmental science and social education, there has been limited attention to its integration into language learning contexts. Only few studies have explored how experiential environmental learning and indigenous ecological philosophy can be integrated into English Language Teaching (ELT) in international school contexts. This study explores how eco-experiential learning integrates sustainability education and local wisdom within ELT in an international school context. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with curriculum leaders, educators and school communities at Green School Bali, Indonesia. Within the perspectives of Kolb's Experiential Learning (1984) and Sterling's Sustainability Education (2021), the findings of this study reveal that English learning is embedded within experiential environmental activities, such as field-based ecological exploration, community engagement, and sustainability projects rooted in Balinese philosophies including *Tri Hita Karana* and *Sad Kerthi*. These eco-experiential practices foster authentic language use, intercultural understanding, and environmental awareness among students from diverse global backgrounds. Reflective journaling, project-based learning, and outdoor experiential pedagogy function as key mechanisms linking language learning with sustainability practices. The study proposes an eco-experiential ELT framework that integrates place-based education, experiential learning, and culturally responsive pedagogy. The findings contribute to emerging discussions on sustainability-oriented language education and demonstrate how local ecological knowledge can transform English learning into a contextually meaningful and globally relevant practice.

Keywords: *experiential learning, place-based pedagogy, Balinese local wisdom, sustainability education, English Language Teaching*

Introduction

The growing urgency of global environmental challenges has increased the importance of sustainability education across educational disciplines. While sustainability education has gained considerable attention in environmental and social sciences, its integration into English Language Teaching (ELT) remains limited. Traditionally, ELT has focused on linguistic competence, often detached from learners' ecological realities and sociocultural contexts. Recent studies, however, have begun to position language education as a medium for sustainability awareness, critical inquiry, and social transformation (Yu, 2024; Alharbi, 2026). Despite this development, sustainability in ELT is frequently treated as instructional content rather than a transformative pedagogical approach.

Experiential learning and local wisdom offer opportunities to address this gap. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory emphasizes learning through experience, reflection, and action, while sustainability education promotes holistic and transformative learning (Sterling, 2021). In Bali, local philosophies such as *Tri Hita Karana* and *Sad Kerthi* provide ecological and cultural perspectives that emphasize harmonious relationships among humans, nature, and spirituality. Although these philosophies have significant educational potential, research examining their integration into ELT, particularly in international school settings, remains scarce.

This study investigates eco-experiential learning in English language education at Green School Bali, an international school recognized for its sustainability-oriented "living curriculum." The study addresses three questions: (1) How is sustainability-oriented ELT implemented through eco-experiential learning? (2) How are *Tri Hita Karana* and *Sad Kerthi* integrated into English language learning practices? and (3) What are the implications of eco-experiential ELT for students' linguistic development, ecological awareness, and intercultural understanding?

The purpose of this study is to explore how sustainability education and Balinese local wisdom are integrated into ELT through eco-experiential learning practices. The study contributes by proposing an Eco-Experiential ELT framework that integrates experiential learning, sustainability education, and local wisdom into a coherent pedagogical model. It also provides practical insights for educators and curriculum developers seeking to create language learning that is environmentally meaningful, culturally responsive, and globally relevant.

Recent scholarship increasingly positions ELT as a medium for sustainability education and global citizenship development (Yu, 2024; Alharbi, 2026). Studies indicate that integrating sustainability themes into language education enhances critical thinking, ecological awareness, learner engagement, and linguistic competence (Sembilan Pemuda Research Group, 2026; Dhanyamol & Sethunarayanan, 2025). Sustainability-oriented ELT also supports learners' ethical reasoning and understanding of global environmental challenges. However, due to limited teacher preparedness, insufficient curricular integration, and institutional constraints, implementation remains uneven (Sustainable Development in English Language Teaching, 2026).

Experiential learning, rooted in Kolb's (1984) theory, emphasizes learning through direct engagement, reflection, and action. Contemporary research demonstrates that experiential and project-based approaches enhance language proficiency, environmental awareness, and critical thinking (Maghfiroh et al., 2025). Ecological ELT practices encourage active participation in sustainability initiatives and promote authentic language use through engagement with real-world issues. Technology-enhanced experiential approaches further strengthen learner motivation and contextualized communication (Jasmine et al., 2025).

Place-based pedagogy situates learning within local environments and communities, making language learning more relevant and meaningful (Najib, 2025). Such approaches foster intercultural competence, contextual understanding, and stronger connections between language and lived experience. Similarly, ecological literacy has become a key objective of sustainability-oriented ELT, encouraging learners to understand environmental systems and act responsibly toward ecological challenges (Hudaya & Setyowati, 2026).

Despite these advances, research remains fragmented across sustainability education, experiential learning, and place-based pedagogy. Existing studies frequently emphasize environmental content, experiential activities, or local context separately, while giving limited attention to indigenous ecological knowledge systems. Recent work by Candrawati (2025) and Candrawati et al. (2025) highlights the educational significance of Balinese philosophies such as *Tri Hita Karana* and *Sad Kerthi*, yet their integration into ELT remains underexplored.

This study addresses this gap by proposing Eco-Experiential ELT, an integrative framework that synthesizes experiential learning, sustainability education, and Balinese local wisdom. The framework positions language learning as a process of ecological meaning-making, where sustainability is enacted through lived experience and culturally grounded practice. By connecting pedagogy, purpose, and context, Eco-Experiential ELT offers a holistic and culturally responsive model for sustainability-oriented language education.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate how eco-experiential learning integrates sustainability education and Balinese local wisdom within ELT. A case study approach is appropriate for examining complex educational phenomena within their real-world contexts (Yin, 2018). Green School Bali was selected as an instrumental case because of its sustainability-oriented “living curriculum” and emphasis on experiential, place-based learning.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling and included the Curriculum Advisor, Head of Early Years, and educators involved in sustainability-oriented teaching. Although no separate interview was conducted with a Head of High School, upper-school perspectives were represented through the Curriculum Advisor, who oversees curriculum implementation across educational levels.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews focusing on curriculum philosophy, sustainability integration, local wisdom, pedagogical practices, and perceived student outcomes. Interviews were conducted on-site, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2021). The process involved familiarization with the data, coding, theme generation, theme refinement, interpretation, and reporting. Through this process, themes relating to the living curriculum, experiential learning, local wisdom integration, reflective practices, and student development were identified and interpreted through the lenses of experiential learning and sustainability education.

Trustworthiness was established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rich participant narratives, systematic documentation, contextual descriptions, and direct quotations were used to enhance analytical rigor. Ethical approval was obtained through informed consent procedures, and participants’ confidentiality was protected throughout the study.

As a qualitative case study, the findings are context-specific and not intended for statistical generalization. Nevertheless, they provide analytical insights relevant to broader discussions on sustainability-oriented language education. Future studies may incorporate classroom observations and student-generated artifacts to further strengthen data triangulation.

Finding and Discussion

Analysis of the interview data revealed five interconnected themes: (1) the living curriculum as a dynamic educational system, (2) language learning as eco-experiential practice, (3) the integration of Balinese local wisdom, (4) experiential and community-based pedagogy, and (5) transformative student outcomes. Together, these themes illustrate how language learning at Green School Bali is embedded within ecological, cultural, and experiential contexts.

A. Finding

1 Living Curriculum as a Dynamic Educational System

A dominant finding was the characterization of the curriculum as a “living curriculum” that continuously evolves in response to environmental, social, and educational contexts. Rather than following a rigid structure, learning is described as organically developed and adaptable, as shown in the excerpts “What we do here... is very much naturally and organically grown... unique to ourselves.” (DMC, April 24.) At the same time, the curriculum is found to be intentionally flexible, allowing innovation while maintaining coherence as is exemplified in “It’s never stable... one year something new can happen... things can always move and change.” This flexibility is balanced by the need to provide sufficient structure, and this had been acknowledged by the curriculum advisor himself in his further claim that “[The school] wants to create some structures but [it] also wants to provide some freedom... it’s a funny balance.” (DMC, April 24.)

At the Early Years level, the living curriculum is evident in spontaneous learning opportunities emerging from direct engagement with nature. The principal of Early Years mentioned in her interview that “We can suddenly stop and observe... like seeing ants... and that becomes learning directly.” (IK, March 7.) These accounts indicate that learning is not confined to predetermined content but emerges through learners’ interactions with their environment.

2 Language Learning as Eco-Experiential Practice

The findings show that English learning is integrated into interdisciplinary and sustainability-oriented experiences rather than taught as an isolated subject. Language functions as a medium through which students interpret, communicate, and reflect on ecological experiences. The Curriculum Advisor emphasized the school's shift away from traditional disciplinary boundaries in the excerpt “We don’t want you to think that it’s just Math... it’s so much more... a much broader spectrum.” (DMC, April 24.)

Students use English to document observations, communicate with community members, discuss environmental issues, and reflect on sustainability projects. At the Early Years level, language emerges naturally through interaction with the environment, as indicated in “Learning to play in nature... children learn from what they directly see, touch, and experience.” (IK, March 7.) Similarly, engagement with animals and plants creates authentic opportunities for language use, as claimed again by the Head of Early Years in “When children meet animals... like chickens or rabbits... they learn how to care, feed, and talk about them.” (IK, March 7.) These findings suggest that language learning is embedded within lived ecological experiences, making communication purposeful and contextually meaningful.

3 Local Wisdom as Ecological and Cultural Foundation

Balinese philosophies, particularly *Tri Hita Karana* and *Sad Kerthi*, provide the ethical and ecological foundation of learning. Participants consistently described these principles as shaping relationships among people, nature, and spirituality. In this context, the Curriculum Advisor explained that “Connecting students to students... to nature... and to spirituality... helps build you as a whole person.” (DMC, April 24.)

At the Early Years level, these values are translated into everyday practices, like “We say thank you to nature... thank you to the sun, to the earth... before eating.” (IK, March 7.) Children also participate in local cultural and spiritual practices, as remarked further by the Head of Early Years, “Children learn to make *canang* and *kwangen*... and they join ceremonies like *purnama* and *tilem*.” (IK, March 7.)

On the other hand, the ecological dimensions of *Sad Kerthi* are operationalized through regular engagement with forests, rice fields, rivers, and coastal environments as highlighted in that the “Students are in those places all the time... jungles, rice fields, ocean... every week.” (DMC, April 24.) Basically, research participants emphasized interconnectedness as a central principle, in the remark made by the Curriculum Advisor, “One thing doesn’t lie separate from another... everything is interconnected from *ridge* to *reef*.” (DMC, April 24.) These findings indicate that local wisdom functions not as supplementary content but as a guiding framework for ecological learning and cultural understanding.

4 Experiential and Community-Based Pedagogy

Experiential learning is enacted through regular environmental exploration, sustainability projects, and collaboration with local communities. Learning extends beyond the classroom through activities such as farming, ecological restoration, and environmental observation. Community participation is central to this approach. This is proven by the remark mentioning that “We bring in organizations and individuals who are locally based... to teach alongside teachers,” and that students also engage with local knowledge holders and cultural practitioners, as highlighted in “Students go with local guides... learning why places are important and what they mean to people here.” (DMC, April 24.) At the Early Years level, parents contribute cultural knowledge and experiences enthusiastically, as illustrated in “Parents come and share their culture... like Chinese New Year or Diwali.” (IK, March 7.) What serves as a key mechanism linking experience and learning in this school is reflection. Students engage in regular reflective writing and discussion as well as weekly reflective journal as pointed out in the excerpts: “Students’ reflection goes directly on the report card.” and “Weekly reflective journals... and then they synthesize at the end of the term.” (DMC, April 24.) These practices encourage students to connect ecological experiences, language development, and personal growth.

5 Transformative Student Outcomes

Participants reported that eco-experiential learning contributes to linguistic development, ecological awareness, intercultural understanding, and learner agency. Through sustained engagement with environmental and community-based activities, students develop emotional connections to ecological systems, as shown in the excerpt “They care about the ocean... they want to protect it... they enjoy it and want it to last.” (DMC, April 24.) Similarly, younger learners demonstrate environmental responsibility in their everyday actions as mentioned by the head of early years in that “Children already understand not to pick leaves carelessly... they ask permission from plants.” (IK, May 13.)

Exposure to local cultural practices which promotes intercultural understanding is also one of the highlighted findings in Green School, as pointed out in “They understand ceremonies... they know why they happen... and they respect them.” (DMC, April 24.) At the upper-school level, students increasingly demonstrate confidence and agency through sustainability initiatives as shown in “They feel confident to make change locally... and then expand that thinking globally (DMC, April 24.)” Collectively, these outcomes suggest that eco-experiential ELT supports holistic development by integrating language learning with ecological literacy, intercultural competence, and sustainability-oriented action.

Table 1. Developmental Progression of Eco-Experiential ELT Across Educational Levels

Level	Pedagogical Focus	Learning Characteristics	Language Use	Ecological Engagement	Learning Outcome
Early Years	Sensory and experiential exploration	Play-based, observation-driven learning	Emerging vocabulary through interaction with nature	Direct interaction with plants, animals, and surroundings	Ecological awareness and emotional connection to nature
Middle School	Guided experiential and interdisciplinary learning	Structured exploration, reflection, collaboration	Functional language for description and communication	Field-based learning and community interaction	Ecological literacy, systems thinking, and intercultural awareness
High School	Self-directed and project-based learning	Independent inquiry, innovation, problem-solving	Advanced reflective and academic discourse	Sustainability projects and environmental action	Learner agency, global competence, and sustainability-oriented action

As shown in Table 1, eco-experiential learning progresses from sensory engagement in the Early Years to self-directed sustainability action in High School, reflecting increasing levels of ecological awareness, language sophistication, and learner agency.

B. Discussion

1 Eco-Experiential ELT as Ecological Meaning-Making

The findings demonstrate a shift from conventional ELT toward a model in which language functions as a tool for ecological meaning-making rather than merely linguistic competence. While recent studies have emphasized sustainability themes within language education (Yu, 2024; Alharbi, 2026), sustainability often remains content-oriented rather than pedagogically transformative. In contrast, the present study shows that sustainability is enacted through lived experience, where learners engage directly with ecological systems, local communities, and cultural practices.

The concept of a “living curriculum” exemplifies this transformation. Learning emerges through interaction with environmental and social contexts rather than through predetermined content alone. This finding aligns with Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory, which views learning as a cyclical process of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and action. It also reflects Sterling’s (2021) conception of sustainability education as transformative learning that encourages systems thinking and holistic understanding. Consequently, language learning becomes meaningful because it is situated within authentic experiences that require communication, reflection, and interpretation.

The findings further indicate that environmental engagement creates opportunities for authentic language use. Students communicate with community members, document observations, discuss sustainability challenges, and reflect on personal experiences. Language

is therefore not an end in itself but a medium through which learners construct ecological understanding and participate in sustainability-oriented practices. This expands conventional views of ELT by positioning language learning within broader ecological and social contexts.

2 Local Wisdom as an Epistemological Foundation

A major contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that Balinese philosophies, particularly *Tri Hita Karana* and *Sad Kerthi*, function as epistemological foundations. Existing sustainability-oriented ELT research has rarely explored how indigenous knowledge systems shape language learning processes. The present findings suggest that local wisdom provides ethical, ecological, and cultural orientations that influence both what is learned and how learning occurs.

The relational principles embedded within *Tri Hita Karana* encourage learners to develop harmonious relationships with others, the natural environment, and spiritual values. Similarly, *Sad Kerthi* provides a place-based ecological framework that connects learning to forests, rivers, rice fields, mountains, and coastal environments. Through these philosophies, sustainability is experienced not as an abstract concept but as a lived practice embedded in daily activities, community engagement, and environmental stewardship.

At the same time, the findings reveal that the implementation of local wisdom often depends on individual educators. While this flexibility enables contextual adaptation, it may also produce variations in practice across educational levels and classrooms. This suggests the need for more systematic integration of local wisdom within curriculum frameworks while maintaining the responsiveness that characterizes the living curriculum model.

3 Eco-Experiential ELT: An Integrative Framework

Building on these findings, this study proposes the Eco-Experiential ELT Model as a framework that integrates experiential learning, sustainability education, and local wisdom into a unified pedagogical approach. The framework addresses a key gap in the literature, where sustainability education, experiential learning, and place-based pedagogy have often been examined separately.

Table 2. Core Components of the Eco-Experiential ELT Model

Dimension	Theoretical Basis	Core Principles	Pedagogical Function in ELT
Experiential Learning (Pedagogical Dimension)	Kolb (1984)	Direct ecological experience, reflection, and action	Promotes authentic language use through real-world engagement
Sustainability Education (Transformative Dimension)	Sterling (2021)	Systems thinking, ethical awareness, transformative learning	Embeds sustainability within learning processes
Local Wisdom (Contextual-Epistemological Dimension)	<i>Tri Hita Karana</i> and <i>Sad Kerthi</i>	Human–nature–spiritual harmony, ecological knowledge, cultural identity	Provides ethical grounding and contextual relevance

Table 2 summarizes the three interdependent dimensions that constitute the Eco-Experiential ELT Model and illustrates how experiential learning, sustainability education, and local wisdom interact within the proposed framework.

The model consists of three interconnected dimensions. The first is experiential learning, which emphasizes direct ecological engagement, reflection, and application (Kolb, 1984). The second is sustainability education, which promotes systems thinking, ethical awareness, and transformative learning (Sterling, 2021). The third is local wisdom, represented by *Tri Hita Karana* and *Sad Kerthi*, which provide cultural and ecological grounding. Together, these dimensions position language learning as a process of ecological meaning-making that is simultaneously experiential, transformative, and culturally responsive.

The interaction of these dimensions occurs through a cyclical process that consists of five main parts, namely Experience, Reflection, Language Use, Action, and Transformation as illustrated in figure 1.

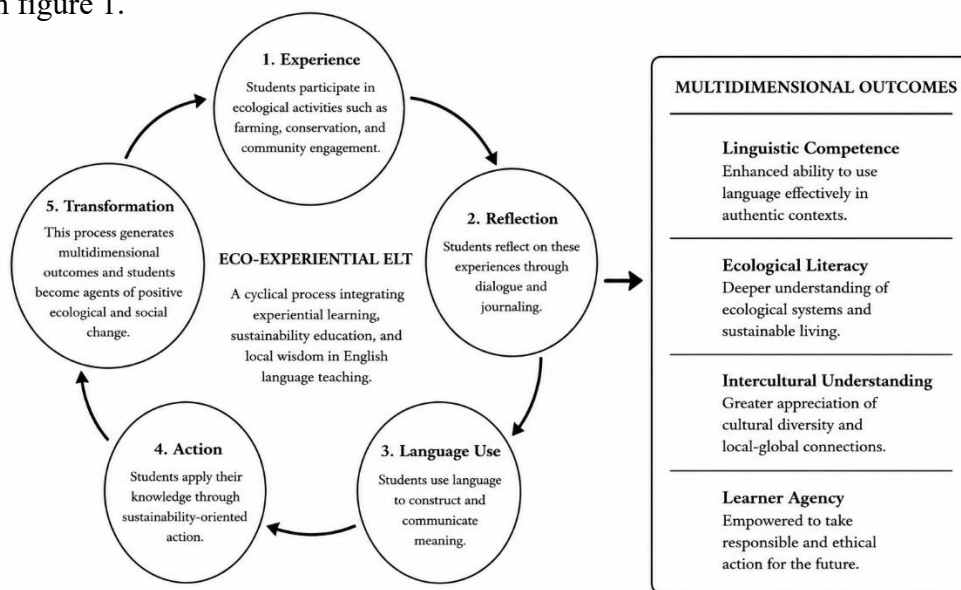


Figure 1. Eco-Experiential ELT Learning Cycle

As illustrated in Figure 1, Eco-Experiential ELT Learning Cycle illustrates the dynamic interaction among experience, reflection, language use, action, and transformation, leading to linguistic competence, ecological literacy, intercultural understanding, and learner agency. Students participating in ecological activities such as farming, conservation, and community engagement, reflect on these experiences through dialogue and journaling, use language to construct and communicate meaning; and apply their knowledge through sustainability-oriented action. This process generates multidimensional outcomes, including linguistic competence, ecological literacy, intercultural understanding, and learner agency.

Therefore, the framework contributes to ELT in three ways. First, it reconceptualizes language learning as ecological meaning-making rather than solely linguistic skill development. Second, it embeds sustainability within pedagogy rather than treating it as an instructional topic. Third, it positions indigenous knowledge as a legitimate epistemological foundation for language education. In doing so, the framework connects local educational practices with broader global sustainability agendas.

4 Implications for ELT Theory, Practice, and Policy

The findings have several implications for theory, practice, and educational policy. Theoretically, the study expands ELT beyond cognitive and communicative dimensions by incorporating ecological, cultural, and ethical perspectives. It also contributes to growing

scholarship that advocates the inclusion of indigenous knowledge systems within language education.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest that language learning can be strengthened through experiential, place-based, and community-oriented approaches. Environmental exploration, reflective practice, and engagement with local communities provide authentic contexts for language use while fostering sustainability awareness and intercultural competence. These findings support the integration of experiential projects, ecological inquiry, and reflective learning within ELT curricula.

From a policy perspective, the study aligns with contemporary educational reforms that emphasize contextualized, learner-centered, and sustainability-oriented education. In Indonesia, the findings support ongoing efforts to integrate local wisdom and environmental education within the Merdeka Curriculum. More broadly, the Eco-Experiential ELT Model offers a framework through which language education can contribute to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), SDG 15 (Life on Land), SDG 11 (Sustainable Communities), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

Conclusions

This study examined how sustainability education and Balinese local wisdom are integrated into English language learning through eco-experiential pedagogy at Green School Bali. The findings demonstrate that language learning becomes more meaningful when embedded within environmental engagement, cultural practice, and reflective inquiry. Through the integration of experiential learning, sustainability education, and local wisdom, students develop not only linguistic competence but also ecological awareness, intercultural understanding, and learner agency.

The proposed Eco-Experiential ELT Model offers a holistic framework that connects pedagogy, sustainability, and local knowledge within a coherent approach to language education. By positioning sustainability as a mode of learning and local wisdom as an epistemological foundation, the framework extends existing approaches to sustainability-oriented ELT and contributes to broader discussions on transformative education. The findings further suggest that experiential, place-based, and culturally responsive pedagogies can enhance the relevance of ELT in addressing contemporary environmental and social challenges.

Future research may examine the implementation of Eco-Experiential ELT across different educational settings and cultural contexts to assess its transferability and adaptability. Classroom observations, student-generated artifacts, and longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how eco-experiential practices influence language development and sustainability competencies over time. Comparative studies involving other indigenous knowledge systems may also contribute to a broader understanding of culturally grounded approaches to sustainability-oriented language education.

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