

Integrating Ecolinguistics into English Language Teaching: Opportunities and Challenges in Climate-Vulnerable Higher Education Contexts of Bangladesh

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Abstract. Ecolinguistics has generated growing theoretical interest in applied linguistics, yet empirical accounts of how teachers in climate-vulnerable, Global South contexts perceive and enact ecologically informed pedagogy remain scarce, with most existing literature drawn from Western and East Asian settings. This qualitative case study addresses that gap by examining how English language teachers in Khulna, Bangladesh, a coastal city bordering the Sundarbans mangrove forest, perceive the opportunities, constraints, and pedagogical value of integrating ecolinguistic perspectives into tertiary English Language Teaching (ELT). Guided by three research questions concerning perceived opportunities, structural barriers, and educational value, the study drew on semi-structured interviews with 15 teachers, interviews and classroom observations involving 40 students, and document analysis across four institutions, analyzed through Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. Findings revealed four interrelated themes: teachers held largely positive but operationally partial understandings of ecolinguistics; exam-oriented curricula, scarce materials, and limited training constituted the principal barriers to integration; locally grounded ecological issues, particularly the Sundarbans, salinity, and cyclones, generated marked learner engagement; and participants favored incremental, resource-based implementation over curricular overhaul. The study argues that ecolinguistic pedagogy in Khulna is constrained not by teacher resistance but by institutional and curricular unresponsiveness, offering implications for materials design, teacher training, and place-based language curricula in similarly vulnerable Global South contexts.

Keywords: ecolinguistics, English language teaching, teacher perceptions, climate-vulnerable contexts

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Introduction

The connections between language and the natural environment have been of growing concern in applied linguistics and language education in the last three decades. In the context of ecological crises, which are becoming more severe throughout the world, scholars have increasingly demanded that language education should also be in response to the ecological challenges and that language learners be provided with communicative competence, but also critical ecological literacy (Stibbe, 2015; Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001). Ecolinguistics (the study of the relationship between language, ecology and the stories we live by) provides an exciting theoretical and practical approach to reconsidering the potential of English language teaching (ELT) in the 21st century.

Bangladesh is a fascinating place to study this interaction. The country is internationally known as one of the most climate change-vulnerable countries, where the increasing sea level, cyclonic activity, flooding and salinity intrusion are affecting the livelihoods, ecosystems and communities (IPCC, 2022; Shamsuddoha & Chowdhury, 2007). These ecological challenges become an integral part of the living experiences of the learners and educators, turning environmental issues into an everyday discourse. The country offers a compelling space for exploring the symbiosis among ecological vulnerability, English Language Teaching (ELT) and educational transformation. Here, graduates are expected to engage with sustainability and resilience, acquiring linguistic competence to take part in academic and professional development. The city of Khulna is in a vulnerable ecological condition because it lies in the southwest coastal belt bordering the Sundarbans, the largest tidal mangrove forest in the world, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Acknowledging ecological disruption as a reality for teachers and learners in this region, Khulna is a place of special relevance for ecolinguistically informed pedagogical inquiry. It exemplifies an appropriate research setting since it demonstrates a close affinity among environmental realities, community practices and educational perspectives. The city faces many ecological disasters like cyclones, flood, salinity, displacement, etc. As environmental hazards is visible in the living experience of the teachers and learners, it is necessary to investigate how ecological knowledge and awareness can be integrated into the tertiary ELT classroom, how ecolinguistic pedagogy can foster environmental awareness in the academic arena.

Although there is increasing international literature on ecolinguistics and its possible applications in language education, there are limited empirical research studies on the perception and response of English language teachers to the incorporation of ecolinguistics in South Asian, and particularly in Bangladeshi, tertiary education context (Zhou, 2021). The majority of the research currently available comes from either Western or East Asian settings, which are very different in terms of institutional structures, teachers' preparation and flexibility in the curriculum from that found in Bangladesh. Such a geographical imbalance in the literature means that the specific opportunities and constraints faced by teachers in climate-vulnerable, resource-constrained contexts of the Global South are hardly visible in international literature.

This study aims at filling this gap by examining the perception of English language teachers of Khulna on integrating ecolinguistic perspectives in their pedagogical practices. It explores the opportunities teachers see for integrating ELT with ecological issues, the challenges they face at pedagogical, institutional and curricular levels, and how they assess the educational value of using sustainability issues in ELT for learner engagement, critical awareness and local relevance. The study thus addresses the call for research in language education that is grounded in the

empirical, context-sensitive and actionable (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Canagarajah, 2005).

The role of ELT in the Global South is expanding, and questions are raised about what it is mediatizing in terms of knowledge, values and discourses. Ecolinguistically informed ELT might be one way to make sure language learning in climate vulnerable contexts serves as a means to connect them to the ecological realities they live with, instead of disconnecting them. ELT is gradually extending its arena to encompass social, cultural and environmental realities to meet up the increasing diverse demands of the learners. Therefore, concerns arise regarding the knowledge, values, ideologies and theories ELT produces and approaches, methods, and pedagogies ELT practices. Traditional ELT practices are often criticized for decontextualized, globalized and privileged practices and their limited ecological concerns that affect the learners' lives differently in different regions. Therefore, there is a growing need to integrate ecolinguistics into ELT in disaster-prone areas like Khulna, Bangladesh, to position English not as a tool for linguistic competence but as a medium for fostering ecological awareness, language education and a sustainable future.

The present study provides evidence that resonates on this possibility in a particular context, which has been underrepresented, and implications for language teachers, curriculum designers and teacher educators globally.

Literature Review

Ecolinguistics: Theoretical Foundations

The origins of ecolinguistics lie in Haugen's (1972) seminal ecological metaphor for language, which viewed languages as organisms that live in social and natural environment. Later, this biological analogy was refined into a more critical model by Halliday (1990) who stated that the grammar of contemporary English reflects an anthropocentric and consumerist orientation, which leads to ecological decay. This provocation by Halliday, that even the grammar of the dominant world language is ecologically harmful, opened up a productive inquiry into the ways that language choices make or break ecological awareness and human relations to nature.

Ecolinguistics analysis was further comprehensively systematised by the proposal of Stibbe (2015) that the analyst should consider the "stories we live by" – the ideological narratives which implicitly are communicated within the discourse and that influence human relations with nature. Stibbe pinpoints such textual strategies as salience, framing, erasure and identity construction which can be used to either normalise or to oppose ecological devastation in everyday language. The concept has a number of implications for language teachers, as classroom texts are not ecologically neutral and critical analysis of language can be a way of developing environmental awareness among students.

Alexander and Stibbe (2014) continued this work, proposing a pedagogical approach they call an ecological discourse of analysis, which aims to teach a student how language creates a relationship with nature. This work is relevant to ELT because the choice and examination of authentic texts, genres and communicative tasks may either reproduce or question discourses that promote or reproduce eco-damaging practices. The pioneering anthology by Fill and Mühlhäusler (2001) likewise set the agenda for the scope of ecolinguistics by bringing together views from the fields of language ecology, linguistic relativity and environmental discourse analysis.

Ecolinguistics in Language Education

The use of ecolinguistics in the language classroom has resulted in a small but enlarging field of studies. As illustrated by Goatly (2001), the grammar of English reflects ecology (or the lack thereof) in ways that are not readily apparent even to speakers of English. However, referring to systemic functional linguistics, Goatly suggested that language teaching should be used to develop grammatical awareness as a way of raising ecological awareness to help learners see how transitivity patterns and nominalisation can obscure environmental agency and responsibility.

Cates (2002) linked ecolinguistics with the global education in ELT, suggesting that ecolinguistic theme and texts provide authentic meaningful input to the language classes, and at the same time contribute to the development of global citizenship. Curriculum designers who want to incorporate socially responsible material into the language curriculum, but not at the expense of language goals, have been influenced by Cates' "global issues in language education" framework. More recently, Phipps (2019) has explored the potential of environmental storytelling and place-based language learning as means of embedding ecolinguistic perspectives within curricula, in particular the potential to focus on the ecological knowledge of marginalised communities in language learning.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approaches have also been identified as compatible with ecolinguistic pedagogy particularly when environmental science or ecology is the subject content taught by means of language (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). They are ways of communicating that are similar to communicative language teaching, where language learning is part of meaningful and content-rich activities, and have been successfully used in different national contexts. Kramsch and Steffensen (2008) also extended an ecological approach to SLA by claiming that language acquisition is more of an embodied or situated activity that cannot be divorced from the physical and social context in which it takes place.

However, despite such body of work, there is a dearth of empirical research that has explored how ecopedagogy can be applied to the practical realization of ecolinguistics in ELT classrooms, especially in Global South settings. The majority of accounts are theoretical, programmatic, or anecdotal, and few systematic evidence of teacher perceptions, classroom processes, and/or learner outcomes (Hu, 2019). The aim of the current study is to add to this empirical framework.

Teacher Cognition, Beliefs and Pedagogical Innovation

The adoption of any innovation in language pedagogy depends on the teacher perception of that innovation. Borg's (2006) seminal study on teacher cognition identified that teacher beliefs, which are shaped by previous language learning experiences, teacher preparation and teacher practice, play a key role in the relationship between curriculum policy and classroom practice. Innovation is not necessarily passed on from teachers to teachers but interpreted, adapted, negotiated, and sometimes resisted in relation to their tacit domain and institutional context. It is thus one of the first steps in understanding how innovations like ecolinguistic pedagogy can or cannot be realised in practice, to understand teacher perception.

The study found that some of the intrinsic structural barriers that hinder pedagogical innovation in ELT in Bangladesh are examination-oriented curriculum designs, insufficient pre-service and in-service teacher training, large class sizes, and scarcity of resources (Hamid & Honan, 2012; Shohamy, 2006; Ahmed, 2014). These structural constraints have been found to be one of the factors which restrict the uptake of communicative and task-based approaches, although they are widely endorsed in

official curriculum documents. Learner-centred approaches were found to have positive attitudes by the English teachers of the universities in Bangladesh but the implementation was found to have significant barriers as stated by Rahman and Pandian (2018) where they are based on the assessment requirements, class sizes and institutional culture.

The conflict between innovation and the examination-based assessment of students learning has been documented in a significant way. When English is assessed through end-of-course tests that focus on grammar or text-reproduction, teachers are under institutional pressure to focus on the formal aspects of English, the accuracy of the learner's production of those forms, and the content of the texts in the textbooks rather than on the meaning, critical engagement, and authenticity or novelty of language production. Spolsky's (2004) notion of 'language policy' as an ecology of interacting forces, that is, the combination of practices, beliefs and management, offers a helpful way to conceptualize the various ways that assessment regimes limit teachers' pedagogical choices and consequently the potential for innovation, even when teachers are willing and theoretically ready.

Environmental Literacy and ELT in the Global South

The importance of environmental literacy, defined as the ability to grasp ecological phenomena, appreciate human influence on the environment, and communicate on the subject, as a curricular priority has been growing in education around the world (UNESCO, 2017; Orr, 1992). In the case of ELT, this has been expressed as a duty to incorporate environmental material into language learning, especially when the environment has a direct impact on the lives of learners. Education that is unaware of ecological realities is itself ideologically distorted, Bowers (2001) argued, in that it continues to uphold the anthropocentric outlook of industrial modernity at the expense of ecological intelligence.

Bangladesh is one of the most climate change-vulnerable countries in the world; for this, the issue of environmental literacy is a foremost concern of education (Ahmed, 2014; Islam & Shamsuddoha, 2017). Sundbans area, which is the source of ecological and livelihood support for the millions of people in Khulna and nearby areas, is undergoing significant change with the increase in sea level, increase in frequency of cyclone and salinity intrusion. Here, learners' knowledge is of a nature that is immediate, embodied and may be used as a pedagogical resource in an action-oriented, ecolinguistically informed ELT, if purposefully mobilised in the classroom.

Nevertheless, the incorporation of environmental dimension into ELT in Bangladesh is informal and initiative of individual teachers as no formal curriculum has been designed for introducing eco-linguistically oriented pedagogy in the tertiary level (Kabir & Akther, 2021; Islam, 2019). In the context of Bangladeshi tertiary ELT, textbooks have been observed to be centered around western cultural contexts and western communication genres to the extent that it neglects the local ecological or environmental contexts (Jahangir & Ferdous, 2018). This textbook ecology (to use an appropriately ecolinguistic metaphor) is a pedagogical moment that positions ecology structurally on the margins of the classroom, though not of learners' lived environments.

Research Gap and Research Questions

While there is much theoretical development in the field of ecolinguistics across the globe, empirical studies on how this could be adopted in ELT in the context of South Asia and in particular Bangladesh are still limited. The majority of research on

ecolinguistic pedagogy has taken place in European, East Asian or North American contexts, which have different institutional structures, teacher training and curriculum flexibility to those found in Bangladesh (Hu 2019; Alexander and Stibbe 2014). In the international literature on ecolinguistics in education, the voices and perceptions of teachers in climate-vulnerable and resource-poor contexts of the Global South are under-represented.

Besides this, studies in this field tend to focus on theoretical perspectives on ecolinguistic pedagogy in detriment of empirical findings regarding teachers' perceptions and their actual practices in the classroom. Studies are especially needed that examine teachers' perceptions, considerations, and reactions to the possibility of embedding ecological perspectives in their ELT practice in their specific contexts of sociocultural and institutional settings (Borg, 2006). In its absence, suggestions for the integration of ecolinguistic dimensions into language teaching can easily become unrealistic in classrooms and institutional settings where language is learned.

To fill these gaps, this study looks at teacher perceptions in a context that is highly ecologically significant and pedagogically underrepresented: tertiary level ELT in Khulna, Bangladesh. The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What opportunities do English language teachers in Khulna's tertiary institutions perceive for integrating ecolinguistic perspectives into their ELT classrooms?

RQ2: How do pedagogical, institutional, and curricular constraints shape or limit the integration of ecolinguistics in English language teaching in Khulna, Bangladesh?

RQ3: How do teachers perceive the value of ecolinguistically informed ELT in fostering learner engagement, critical awareness, and local environmental relevance?

Method

Research Design

In this study, a qualitative approach (semi-structured interviews, document analysis and classroom observation) was used. This design was selected within a purposive sample of 15 teachers and 40 students and then to explore the depth and nuances of their individual perceptions, classroom practices and ecolinguistic representations in the curriculum. (Creswell, 2014; Dörnyei, 2007). These multiple data sources enabled methodological triangulation and regour and enhanced reliability, credibility and depth of analysis. The data were collected in three phases: document analysis, interview and classroom observation. The qualitative strand of the analysis is given interpretive priority.

Research Context

The study was performed in Khulna which is the third largest city of Bangladesh and also the administrative capital of Khulna Division. The city is located next to the world's largest tidal halophytic mangrove forest, the Sundarbans, and is extremely vulnerable to the effects of climate change such as cyclonic activity, riverbank erosion, salinity intrusion, and seasonal flooding. In this ecological context, Khulna is a particularly relevant context for ecolinguistic inquiry in ELT, as learners and teachers are immersed in a context where ecological changes are apparent and important.

Tertiary education in Khulna includes public university, private university, and affiliated college which provide compulsory English course in all disciplines. An EFL teacher at this level is working in a centrally prescribed syllabus aimed at exam preparation and accuracy in language, where there is little room for innovation of content in the institution. Usually, the classes are around 40 to 80 students and English

is taught using a set of prescribed textbooks, grammar and reading comprehension exercises that are geared towards terminal exams.

Participants

The total number of participants who took part in the study was 15 teachers and 40 students from English departments from four tertiary institutions (two public universities, one private university and one affiliated degree college) of Khulna Division. In case of teachers, purposive sampling was used to achieve variation in institutional type, teaching experience, gender and prior level of knowledge of ecological or environmental themes in the teaching. Teachers had from 2 to 24 years of teaching experience among 09 of the teachers were male and 06 were female. All participants had at least a Masters' degree in English language and literature or applied linguistics and six had doctoral qualifications.

The student participants consisted of 40 undergraduate students (from first year to fourth year purposively sampled) enrolled in the Departments of English at four tertiary-level institutions in the Khulna Division of Bangladesh. Their responses complemented the perspectives of the teachers indicating challenges and opportunities related to ecolinguistically informed ELT practices and offered a scope for data triangulation. This purposive selection was designed to provide coverage of the spectrum of views represented in the sample, instead of having a majority of respondents with a similar institutional or experiential profile.

Data Analysis

The semi-structured interview transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and included recursive reading of the transcript, initial coding, collating initial codes into potential themes and reviewing and refining the themes through discussion between the two researchers. Themes were identified and described to reflect the meaning of the data and the conceptual structure imposed by the research questions of the study. Researcher triangulation, member-checking of themes that emerged from the interviews with three participants, and a reflexive analytic memo throughout the analytic process, supported analytic rigour.

Findings

This section presents the findings from the qualitative data generated through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The analysis identified four interrelated themes: (1) positive but partial understanding of ecolinguistics, (2) structural and institutional barriers to integration, (3) the pedagogical value of local ecological issues for learner engagement, and (4) participants' suggestions for practical forms of implementation. Across the dataset, ecolinguistics was described as pedagogically meaningful and locally relevant, but difficult to implement within an exam-oriented and resource-constrained ELT environment.

Theme 1: Perceptions of ecolinguistics

A dominant pattern in the interview data was that teachers responded positively to the idea of integrating ecological issues into English language teaching. Across the teacher interviews, participants described ecological themes as meaningful, locally relevant, and potentially useful for increasing learner engagement. Several teachers cited references to the Sundarbans, climate change, salinity, and environmental vulnerability to explain why this content would be appropriate in the Khulna context. One teacher explained:

“We can see the importance of bringing environmental issues into English classes, especially in a place like Khulna, where students already know about the Sundarbans and climate-related problems. But most of us have not received any training on how to teach these topics through language activities”. (Participant-05, Lecturer, Khulna University)

Another teacher similarly noted:

“Students respond more when lesson content connects with their own lives. The problem is not that these topics are irrelevant; the problem is that the syllabus and classroom routine do not really show us how to use them in practice.” (Participant-03, Senior Lecturer, Northern University of Business & Technology Khulna)

The interview data, therefore, showed a broadly favorable orientation toward ecolinguistics among teachers, alongside repeated references to uncertainty about implementation. Positive attitudes were present, but they were often accompanied by comments about limited training, lack of methodological guidance, and the pressure of existing course requirements.

Classroom observations reflected a similar pattern. In the observed lessons, teachers occasionally referred to ecological topics while explaining vocabulary, initiating discussion, or eliciting examples from students. In one observed class, the teacher opened a brief discussion on environmental problems in the local area, prompting students to mention the Sundarbans, cyclones, and pollution. Student participation increased during this exchange, but the topic was not extended into a structured reading, writing, or speaking activity, and the lesson then returned to textbook-based work. Across the observed classes, ecological content appeared as a brief point of reference rather than as a sustained lesson focus.

Document analysis also supported this pattern indirectly. The reviewed curriculum and syllabus documents contained established language-learning components such as reading, writing, speaking, listening, and grammar, but they did not articulate ecolinguistics, sustainability, ecological literacy, or place-based environmental engagement as explicit objectives. In this sense, the documents showed space for language instruction, but no formal framing through which teachers might readily connect ecological issues with classroom practice.

Taken together, the interview, observation, and document data showed that teachers generally viewed ecolinguistics content positively, while also describing limited pedagogical preparedness for its systematic use in ELT.

Theme 2: Structural barriers to integrating ecolinguistics into ELT

The second and strongest theme concerned the barriers that participants associated with the integration of ecological content into English language teaching. Across both teacher and student interviews, the exam-oriented curriculum was identified most frequently as the principal obstacle. Participants described classroom practice as heavily shaped by syllabus completion, assessment demands, and examination preparation, with little room for exploratory discussion or locally grounded thematic work.

One teacher stated:

“The curriculum is mostly driven by exams, so teachers must concentrate on the items students are expected to answer in the assessment. In that situation, it becomes difficult

to spend time on environmental topics, even when those topics are relevant to life.” (Participant-14, Professor, Khulna University)

Another teacher emphasized the lack of suitable teaching materials:

“The textbooks do not really provide enough content on environmental issues. Even if a teacher wants to discuss the Sundarbans or climate change, there are very few ready-made materials in the course structure to support that.” (Participant-06, Associate Professor, Jashore University of Science & Technology)

Student participants referred to similar constraints. One student commented:

“Most classes stay focused on what is important for exams. Even when teachers mention social or environmental issues, the discussion is usually noticeably short because they have to finish the lesson, and the curriculum has no relevant content.” (Student Participant-11, 3rd year, Khulna University)

Another student described the limited relevance of textbook content:

“Many of the topics in class feel general and disconnected from our own situation. If there were more passages about our region or environmental problems we know, the classes would feel more meaningful.” (Student Participant-17, 4th year, Khulna University)

The document analysis provided further evidence of this pattern. The reviewed undergraduate curriculum for English defined the program in terms of language and literature studies, linguistics, critical thinking, writing skills, and professional competence in English. However, ecological literacy, sustainability, climate awareness, and place-based environmental engagement did not appear as explicit learning outcomes or curricular strands. Similarly, the first-year syllabi were organized around literary studies, grammar, listening and speaking, fiction, non-fiction, and drama, with no explicit reference to environment, ecology, sustainability, climate, or the Sundarbans. The outcome-based curriculum for Communicative English listed language-learning components such as vocabulary development, sentence structure, reading comprehension, note-taking, and speaking skills, but did not include any ecological or locally grounded thematic orientation.

Classroom observations supported these interviews and documentary patterns. Observed lessons were predominantly syllabus-led and assessment-conscious. Most classroom time was devoted to text explanations, grammar clarification, vocabulary work, and examination-related preparation. Opportunities for extended discussion of local environmental issues were limited. Even when ecological topics were briefly mentioned, they did not become organizing themes for reading, writing, speaking, or critical analysis.

Theme 3: Local ecological issues as relevant and engaging classroom content

A third theme concerned the local relevance of ecological content in Khulna. Interview participants repeatedly referred to the Sundarbans, salinity, climate change, cyclones, and environmental vulnerability as topics already familiar to students through everyday experience. These issues were described as recognizable, meaningful, and easier for students to relate to than more generalized textbook topics.

Teachers reported that students responded more positively when classroom content reflected local realities. One teacher stated:

“Our students engage more when the content is related to their own lives and surroundings. When topics like the Sundarbans or climate change come into discussion, they have something to say because these are familiar issues for them.” (Participant-03, Professor, Khulna University)

Student participants expressed similar views. One student remarked:

“When teachers discuss climate change, salinity, or deforestation, it feels more connected to our future and our area. Then English class feels related to real life, not only grammar or memorization.” (Student Participant-27, 4th year, Khulna University)

Another student similarly noted:

“If the lesson includes examples from Khulna or the Sundarbans, it becomes easier to understand and talk about the topic because we already know something about it.” (Student Participant-08, 2nd year, Northern University of Business & Technology Khulna)

This pattern was also reflected in classroom observations. In one observed lesson, the teacher introduced a short prompt about environmental problems in the local area, and students responded readily with comments about the Sundarbans, salinity, and cyclone-related impacts. Compared with the preceding textbook-based exchange, student responses were quicker and more concrete. In another class, a teacher used a local ecological example to clarify the meaning during the explanation, and several students contributed additional examples from their own context. In both cases, the exchanges remained brief and were not extended into longer language-learning tasks, but local ecological content elicited visible student participation.

Document analysis, however, showed that these locally relevant ecological themes were not explicitly represented in formal curriculum objectives or syllabus content. Although participants repeatedly referred to the Sundarbans and other ecological issues of Khulna as meaningful for teaching and learning, such topics did not appear as designated themes in the reviewed course documents.

Taken together, the interview, observation, and document data showed that ecological issues linked to Khulna were widely perceived as relevant and engaging classroom content, even though they were not formally embedded in the ELT curriculum.

Theme 4: Participants proposed practical forms of implementation

The final theme concerned the ways participants believed ecological content could be incorporated into English language teaching. Across the interview data, teachers did not call for a separate ecolinguistics course or a complete redesign of the ELT curriculum. Instead, they referred to practical forms of support that would allow ecological topics to be integrated within existing teaching structures. These included teacher training, supplementary teaching materials, greater flexibility in lesson planning, and the use of locally relevant passages or classroom tasks.

Participants repeatedly suggested that ecological topics could be incorporated through familiar language activities such as reading comprehension, paragraph writing, speaking tasks, vocabulary exercises, and classroom discussion. One teacher explained:

“We do not need a completely separate course for this. If teachers get some training and a few suitable materials, environmental topics can be included through reading,

writing, and speaking activities quite naturally.” (Participant-04, Assistant Professor, North Western University, Khulna)

Another teacher described the same point in relation to classroom practice:

“These ideas can be brought into the existing lesson structure. For example, a comprehension passage, a paragraph topic, or a discussion task can focus on the Sundarbans or salinity. What teachers need is guidance and usable materials.” (Participant-02, Jashore University of Science Technology, Bangladesh)

Student participants also referred to practical forms of integration rather than curricular replacement. One student noted:

“If there were reading passages or speaking topics about the Sundarbans, climate change, or local environmental problems, it would make the class more interesting and easier to participate in.” (Student Participant-12, 3rd year, North Western University, Khulna)

Another student similarly stated:

“These topics do not have to be taught separately. They can be part of normal English classes through discussion, writing, or comprehension.” (Student Participant-31, 2nd year, Gov’t B.L. (Honours/Degree) College, Khulna)

The document analysis reflected part of this pattern. The reviewed curriculum and syllabus documents already contained established ELT components such as reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, and comprehension-based work. These components indicated that there was general pedagogical space within the existing course structure through which thematic content could be introduced. At the same time, the documents did not include ecological themes, local environmental passages, task models related to the Sundarbans or coastal vulnerability, or guidance for integrating such topics into routine language activities.

Classroom observations showed occasional attempts to localize content through brief examples or topical references. In one observed class, the teacher moved from a general discussion prompt to a short exchange about environmental problems in the local area, and students responded with familiar examples related to the Sundarbans and salinity. In another observed lesson, a local environmental example was used to clarify vocabulary and stimulate response, but the lesson then returned to the prescribed textbook activity. Across the observed classes, such attempts were occasional and brief rather than systematically incorporated into lesson design.

Overall, the interview, document, and observation data showed that participants envisaged implementation primarily through incremental adaptation within existing ELT practices.

Discussion

This study examined the possibilities and constraints of integrating ecolinguistics into English language teaching in Khulna, Bangladesh, with particular attention to teachers’ perceptions, structural barriers, the relevance of local ecological issues, and feasible modes of implementation. Taken together, the findings suggest that ecolinguistics was not rejected by participants as marginal or impractical; rather, it was understood as educationally worthwhile but institutionally under-supported. This is an important distinction. The central issue emerging from the data was less a lack of

pedagogical interest than a lack of curricular space, assessment alignment, materials, and training through which that interest could be enacted in routine classroom practice. In that sense, the study positions ecolinguistics in Khulna not as a concept facing ideological resistance, but as an approach whose uptake is limited by the prevailing organisation of tertiary ELT. This pattern is consistent with recent work showing that sustainability-oriented ELT is increasingly recognised as a meaningful way to combine language development with ecological awareness, while implementation remains strongly dependent on teacher preparation, materials design, and institutional support (Yu et al., 2024; Dhanyamol & Sethunarayanan, 2025).

The first finding, that teachers held broadly positive but partial understandings of ecolinguistics, can be read as evidence of a belief–practice gap. Teachers in this study generally recognised the value of connecting English teaching to environmental realities, especially in a region where the Sundarbans and climate vulnerability are part of public consciousness. Yet their comments also indicated that this recognition had not developed into a stable pedagogical repertoire. The observation data supported this point by showing that ecological issues could generate interest and participation, but usually entered classroom interaction only briefly and without sustained task development. This suggests that ecolinguistic awareness at the teacher level may currently be conceptual rather than operational. Such a pattern aligns with Bangladesh-based work arguing that ecological or “green” language pedagogy requires more than goodwill: it depends on practical frameworks, authentic texts, and methodologically usable models that can translate environmental concerns into teachable language activities (Haque, 2023). The present study extends that insight by showing how, in a tertiary case-study context, teachers may already be disposed toward locally relevant ecological content but remain uncertain about how to embed it in everyday ELT practice.

The second finding, concerning structural and institutional barriers, appears to be the most consequential for understanding why ecolinguistics remains marginal in the observed context. Teachers and students consistently pointed to exam pressure, rigid syllabus structures, limited resources, and weak curricular support as the main constraints on implementation. The document analysis strengthened this interpretation by showing that the reviewed curricula and syllabi did not explicitly encode environmental literacy, sustainability, climate awareness, or locally grounded ecological themes as formal learning goals. This matters because what remains absent from curricular objectives is likely to remain optional in classroom practice. The findings therefore suggest that ecolinguistics in tertiary ELT is currently reliant on individual teacher initiative rather than supported through programme design. This resonates with broader critiques of ELT in Bangladesh, where reform efforts have often been hindered by entrenched assessment cultures, limited teacher support, and gaps between curricular aspiration and classroom reality (Rahman, 2018). It also speaks to recent scholarship on environmental literacy in ELT materials, which has drawn attention to how ecological content may be unevenly represented or insufficiently developed in English-language curricula and textbooks (Lee, 2024; Awal, 2025). In the present study, the issue was not simply scarcity of environmental content, but the lack of institutional mechanisms through which ecological relevance could become pedagogically routine rather than incidental.

The third finding highlights the particular significance of place in ecolinguistic pedagogy. Participants did not speak about ecological content in abstract global terms alone; they repeatedly anchored it in the lived ecological realities of Khulna, especially the Sundarbans, salinity, cyclones, and environmental vulnerability. This is one of the

study's most important contributions. It suggests that the pedagogical value of ecolinguistics in this setting lies not merely in its environmental theme, but in its local recognisability. Students appeared more able and willing to participate when classroom content connected to places, experiences, and concerns already meaningful in their own lives. From this perspective, the findings support a place-based understanding of language education, in which learning becomes more engaged when it is connected to the physical, social, and environmental contexts students inhabit. This interpretation is well aligned with the wider place-based education literature, which emphasises the educational value of linking learning to local environment, community, and context, and with language-education work that frames ecological citizenship as something that can be cultivated through meaningful engagement with real-world environmental issues (Yemini, 2025; Porto, 2025). The Khulna case therefore shows that local ecology can function not only as content for awareness-raising, but as a discursive resource that makes language use more immediate, situated, and participatory.

This place-based dimension also sharpens the study's response to RQ3. The data indicate that weaving the ecological realities of Khulna into ELT is likely to be most effective when those realities are used not as isolated informational topics but as the basis for communicative activity. In other words, the Sundarbans becomes pedagogically productive not simply because it is environmentally important, but because it provides meaningful content for speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary development, and critical discussion. The observation data are especially revealing here: even brief references to local ecological issues prompted more immediate student contribution than decontextualized textbook interaction. Although such moments were not developed into sustained tasks in the observed classes, they showed that local ecological content can open a stronger participation structure in the classroom. In this respect, the findings support an understanding of ecolinguistics as a form of contextualised language pedagogy rather than an additive topical supplement.

The fourth finding, that participants advocated practical rather than abstract forms of implementation, is especially important for the pedagogical implications of the study. Neither teachers nor students called for wholesale curricular replacement. Instead, they pointed to a more incremental form of integration through familiar ELT practices: reading passages, paragraph writing, discussion prompts, vocabulary work, and speaking tasks. This is a significant finding because it suggests that, in this context, feasibility matters as much as principle. Participants were not demanding a fully separate ecolinguistics strand; they were identifying modest but workable entry points inside the existing curriculum. This aligns closely with recent reviews of sustainability in ELT, which show that effective integration often occurs through interdisciplinary lesson design, authentic texts, guided discussion, project work, and teacher development rather than through stand-alone curricular overhaul (Yu et al., 2024; Dhanyamol & Sethunarayanan, 2025). It also echoes Bangladesh-focused work arguing for practical frameworks and authentic ecological materials as the most realistic route for embedding environmental concerns into English teaching (Haque, 2023). The implication is that the route to ecolinguistic ELT in Khulna may be evolutionary rather than revolutionary: not replacing ELT as currently structured, but re-thematising parts of it around locally meaningful ecological content.

At a broader level, the study contributes to current conversations on sustainability, language education, and curricular justice in at least two ways. First, it adds a context-specific case from coastal Bangladesh to a literature that has been growing internationally but remains unevenly developed in South Asian tertiary ELT. Recent reviews suggest that sustainability-focused ELT is expanding globally, with Asia

showing notable activity, yet the forms this takes remain highly context-dependent (Dhanyamol & Sethunarayanan, 2025). The present study shows that in a climate-vulnerable region such as Khulna, ecolinguistics is not simply a fashionable theoretical import. It intersects directly with local environmental experience and with students' sense of what counts as relevant knowledge in the English classroom. Second, the study highlights that ecolinguistic pedagogy in higher education cannot be understood only at the level of teacher belief or classroom technique. It must also be examined as a curricular and institutional question. Where ecological themes are absent from learning outcomes, materials, and assessment logic, their classroom presence is likely to remain fragile and teacher-dependent.

These interpretations should also be read in light of the study's scope. As a qualitative case study focused on Khulna, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable across all tertiary ELT settings in Bangladesh. Their value lies instead in analytical transferability. The case shows how ecolinguistic possibilities emerge most clearly where ecological crisis, local knowledge, and language education intersect, but also how quickly those possibilities can be narrowed by conventional curriculum structures. Further research could therefore build on this study by examining whether similar patterns appear in other public and private universities in Bangladesh, by analysing teacher-developed ecolinguistic materials, or by trialling classroom interventions built around local ecological texts and measuring their effects on both language participation and environmental awareness. Such work would help move the field from conceptual advocacy toward evidence-based pedagogical design.

Overall, the discussion suggests that ecolinguistics in ELT should not be framed simply as an additional thematic concern, but as a way of re-situating English language teaching within the environmental, social, and discursive realities learners inhabit. In Khulna, those realities are inseparable from the Sundarbans, coastal vulnerability, and climate-affected everyday life. The study, therefore, indicates that the strongest rationale for ecolinguistics in this context is not only ecological urgency, but pedagogical relevance: it offers a way of making English more context-sensitive, more participatory, and more closely connected to the lived world of learners.

Conclusion

This study investigated the integration of ecolinguistics into English language teaching in Khulna, Bangladesh, and found that ecological content was widely perceived as pedagogically valuable, locally relevant, and engaging for learners. Topics such as the Sundarbans, salinity, climate change, and environmental vulnerability were seen as especially suitable for contextualizing English learning because they connected classroom content to students' lived realities.

However, the findings also showed that ecolinguistics remained difficult to implement in practice. The main constraints were structural rather than attitudinal: exam-oriented teaching, limited time, insufficient training, lack of materials, and the absence of ecological themes from formal curriculum documents. Teachers and students did not reject ecolinguistics; rather, they described a system in which such integration was difficult to sustain without stronger pedagogical and institutional support.

The study further suggests that local ecological issues can function as valuable resources for contextualized ELT. In Khulna, the ecological realities surrounding the Sundarbans and coastal vulnerability offer meaningful entry points for speaking, reading, writing, and discussion. Participants therefore envisaged implementation not through wholesale curricular reform, but through practical adaptation within existing

lesson formats. On this basis, the study concludes that ecolinguistics has significant potential in Bangladeshi ELT, particularly when it is grounded in local ecological realities and supported through curriculum design, teacher development, and materials innovation.

Implications and Recommendations

This study suggests that ecolinguistics has important implications for ELT in Khulna and similar environmentally vulnerable contexts. The findings indicate that ecological issues such as the Sundarbans, salinity, and climate vulnerability can make English learning more relevant and engaging, but that their classroom use remains constrained by curriculum pressure, lack of materials, limited training, and exam-oriented teaching.

The study therefore recommends that ecological content be incorporated into existing ELT components rather than introduced as a separate curricular strand. Reading passages, writing prompts, speaking tasks, and vocabulary activities based on local environmental realities may provide practical entry points for integration. Teacher education should also include concrete guidance on how to design and use such activities, while materials development should prioritize locally grounded and pedagogically accessible resources.

In addition, curriculum planners and institutions should provide more formal support for contextualized language teaching by recognizing ecological themes within course design and allowing greater flexibility in assessment. Without such support, ecolinguistics is likely to remain dependent on individual teacher initiative. Future research may build on this study by developing classroom materials, piloting ecolinguistically informed lessons, and examining their impact on learner engagement, language development, and ecological awareness.

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