



LEARNING ENGLISH THROUGH ECOTOURISM: STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES, LINGUISTIC DEVELOPMENT, AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY IN EFL

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ABSTRACT

As sustainability challenges reshape educational priorities worldwide, English Language Teaching (ELT) is increasingly expected to promote not only language development but also environmental responsibility. Although sustainability-oriented ELT and ecotourism-based learning have received growing scholarly attention, previous studies have mainly focused on pedagogical models, curriculum integration, and teacher perspectives, while learners' experiences remain underexplored, particularly in Indonesian higher education. Addressing this gap, this study investigates students' learning experiences in ecotourism-based English learning and examines how engagement with ecotourism topics influences their linguistic development and environmental responsibility. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the study involved six undergraduate students from the English Education Study Program at Universitas Lancang Kuning who had completed the English for Eco Edu Tourism course. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. Four themes emerged: meaningful learning experiences, linguistic development, linguistic challenges, and environmental responsibility. Participants perceived ecotourism as an authentic context for learning English that supported vocabulary development, communication skills, and meaningful language use. They also reported challenges related to unfamiliar terminology, pronunciation, and confidence in expressing ideas. Furthermore, engagement with ecotourism topics strengthened students' awareness of conservation and responsible tourism practices. These findings provide learner-centered evidence supporting ecotourism-based instruction as an effective approach for integrating language development with environmental responsibility in EFL contexts

Keywords: Ecotourism-based Learning, EFL, Environmental Responsibility, Learner Experiences, Linguistic Development, Sustainability-oriented ELT

A. INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has witnessed unprecedented environmental challenges that increasingly influence educational priorities worldwide. Climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, and the growing urgency of sustainable development have transformed expectations regarding the role of education in preparing future generations. In this context, language education is no longer viewed merely as a means of developing linguistic competence; it is increasingly expected to foster critical thinking, social responsibility, and global citizenship. Consequently, English Language Teaching (ELT) has undergone a significant shift from a predominantly language-focused discipline toward a more socially



responsive field that equips learners to engage with complex global issues. Recent studies indicate that integrating social and global concerns into language learning can simultaneously enhance language proficiency and encourage learners to critically engage with real-world challenges (D. M. & D. T., 2025; Alaviyya Nuri, 2025).

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) emphasizes that education should equip learners with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes needed to address environmental, social, and economic challenges while promoting sustainable development (UNESCO, 2017, 2020). Within this framework, language education is expected to extend beyond the development of communicative competence by fostering learners' awareness of sustainability issues and encouraging responsible action. Consequently, sustainability-oriented English Language Teaching (ELT) has emerged as an approach that integrates authentic environmental and social issues into language learning, enabling students to develop language proficiency while simultaneously cultivating critical thinking, environmental awareness, and global citizenship (Kwee, 2021; Dhanyamol & Sethunarayanan, 2025).

Within the context of sustainability-oriented ELT, ecotourism has emerged as a meaningful and authentic context for language learning. The International Ecotourism Society (2015) and Fennell (2020) define ecotourism as responsible travel that conserves the environment, supports local communities, and promotes environmental education. These characteristics make ecotourism particularly relevant to English language education, as it provides learners with authentic opportunities to discuss environmental conservation, cultural diversity, and responsible tourism practices while using English in meaningful contexts. By integrating environmental content with language learning, ecotourism enables students to develop both communicative competence and a deeper understanding of sustainability issues (Gilbert, 2003; Kwee, 2021).

Previous studies have demonstrated the educational potential of ecotourism as an authentic context for English language learning. Environmental and ecotourism-related topics have been found to support vocabulary acquisition, writing skills, communicative competence, and learner engagement by providing meaningful contexts for language use (Iswandari et al., 2017; Chien, 2019; Hariati, 2026). Similarly, studies have reported that ecotourism-based learning enhances learners' environmental vocabulary, communication confidence, and English literacy while encouraging them to discuss sustainability issues in authentic situations (Indrayanti & Romadhon, 2025; Astawa, 2025; Hanifah et al., 2025; Prihanta & Baiduri, 2025). Collectively, these findings suggest that ecotourism offers valuable opportunities to integrate language learning with sustainability education. However, much of the existing research has primarily emphasized instructional practices, teaching materials, and educators' perspectives, leaving learner-centered perspectives on ecotourism-based English learning relatively underexplored.

Beyond providing an authentic learning context, sustainability-oriented ELT has also been recognized for its contribution to learners' linguistic development. Studies consistently report that integrating environmental themes into English language instruction promotes vocabulary acquisition, communicative competence, learner engagement, and critical thinking by encouraging learners to use English in meaningful and contextually relevant situations (Iswandari et al., 2017; Astawa, 2025; Hariati, 2026; Dhanyamol & Sethunarayanan, 2025). Despite these benefits, sustainability-oriented learning also presents linguistic challenges. Learners frequently encounter unfamiliar environmental terminology and experience

difficulties expressing complex sustainability-related ideas in English, particularly when discussing environmental concepts that require specialized vocabulary and critical reflection (Noliza Hasrina et al., 2024; Kazazoğlu, 2025). Although these challenges have been acknowledged, previous studies have paid limited attention to how learners themselves perceive and negotiate these linguistic experiences during ecotourism-based English learning.

In addition to promoting language development, sustainability-oriented ELT seeks to foster learners' environmental responsibility by encouraging them to reflect on conservation, sustainable lifestyles, and responsible citizenship through meaningful engagement with environmental issues (Beibei Yu et al., 2024; Achadiyah, 2025; Ghazali et al., 2025). As a sustainability-oriented learning context, ecotourism provides opportunities for learners to connect language use with environmental conservation, community participation, and responsible tourism practices (Gilbert, 2003; Hanifah et al., 2025; Uma, 2024). However, despite growing evidence of the educational benefits of ecotourism-based learning, relatively little is known about how learners internalize these sustainability values while simultaneously developing their English language skills, particularly within Indonesian higher education contexts.

Despite the growing body of research on sustainability-oriented ELT and ecotourism-based learning, several important gaps remain. Existing studies have predominantly examined pedagogical approaches, curriculum integration, instructional materials, and teachers' perspectives, whereas learners' own experiences have received comparatively limited attention. Although previous research has demonstrated the potential of ecotourism to support language learning and environmental awareness, little is known about how students perceive the learning process, negotiate linguistic challenges, and develop environmental responsibility through engagement with ecotourism topics. Furthermore, empirical evidence from Indonesian higher education remains limited, despite the increasing integration of sustainability-oriented practices into English language education (Achadiyah, 2025; Farahiba et al., 2025). These gaps highlight the need for learner-centered research that provides a deeper understanding of students' experiences within ecotourism-based English learning.

To address these gaps, this study adopts a learner-centered perspective to explore students' experiences in ecotourism-based English learning. Unlike previous studies, which have primarily emphasized instructional models, curriculum integration, teaching materials, and teachers' perspectives (Dhanyamol & Sethunarayanan, 2025; Hanifah et al., 2025; Prihanta & Baiduri, 2025), the present study focuses on how learners experience ecotourism-based learning, perceive its influence on their linguistic development, and develop environmental responsibility through meaningful engagement with sustainability-related topics. By foregrounding learners' voices, this study extends existing sustainability-oriented ELT research and provides practical insights for designing more authentic, engaging, and environmentally meaningful English language learning experiences in higher education. This learner-centered perspective offers empirical evidence that complements existing studies on sustainability-oriented ELT within Indonesian higher education.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore students' learning experiences in ecotourism-based English learning and examine how engagement with ecotourism topics influences their



linguistic development and environmental responsibility in an Indonesian higher education context.

B. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore students' learning experiences, linguistic development, and environmental responsibility in ecotourism-based English learning. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it seeks to understand how individuals interpret and make meaning of their experiences within a particular context, allowing researchers to obtain rich descriptions of participants' perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than measuring learning outcomes quantitatively, this study explored how students perceived the educational value of ecotourism, the linguistic opportunities and challenges they encountered, and the environmental understandings they developed through the learning process.

This approach was particularly appropriate because the purpose of the study was to explore students' firsthand experiences after participating in the *English for Eco Edu Tourism* course rather than to evaluate the effectiveness of the instructional approach. The research focused on understanding how students interpreted the influence of ecotourism-based learning on their linguistic development and environmental responsibility, as well as the challenges they encountered throughout the learning process. A qualitative descriptive design therefore enabled the researchers to capture authentic reflections and identify recurring patterns across participants' experiences. To achieve the research objectives, this study addressed the following research questions:

- (1) What learning experiences do students report from engaging with ecotourism topics in English language learning?
- (2) How does engagement with ecotourism topics shape students' linguistic development and environmental responsibility?

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Lancang Kuning, Indonesia. The participants consisted of six undergraduate students in their sixth semester who had previously completed the *English for Eco Edu Tourism* course during their fourth semester. The course integrates English language learning with topics related to ecotourism, environmental conservation, sustainability, responsible tourism, and community participation.

Purposive sampling Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who had direct experience with ecotourism-based English learning and were therefore able to provide relevant insights into the phenomenon under investigation. The inclusion criteria were:

- (1) being undergraduate students in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Lancang Kuning
- (2) having completed the *English for Eco Edu Tourism* course
- (3) being in the sixth semester at the time of data collection, allowing them to reflect on their previous learning experiences
- (4) being willing to participate voluntarily and provide informed consent

being able to communicate their learning experiences during the semi-structured interviews. Interviewing students who had completed the course enabled them to reflect retrospectively on their learning experiences, linguistic development, and environmental understanding gained through the course.

To ensure confidentiality, participants' real names were replaced with pseudonyms (P1–P6) throughout the analysis and reporting of findings.

Table 1. Participant Profile

Participant	Academic Status	Relevant Course
P1	Sixth-semester student	English for Eco Edu Tourism
P2	Sixth-semester student	English for Eco Edu Tourism
P3	Sixth-semester student	English for Eco Edu Tourism
P4	Sixth-semester student	English for Eco Edu Tourism
P5	Sixth-semester student	English for Eco Edu Tourism
P6	Sixth-semester student	English for Eco Edu Tourism

The sample size was considered appropriate for the qualitative descriptive design because the study aimed to obtain rich, in-depth accounts of participants' experiences rather than achieve statistical generalization.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with six participants. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow researchers to explore participants' experiences in depth while maintaining consistency across interviews through the use of guiding questions.

The interviews focused on four main areas: (1) students' learning experiences with ecotourism-based English learning, (2) perceived linguistic development, including vocabulary acquisition and communication skills, (3) language-related challenges encountered during the learning process, and (4) environmental awareness and responsibility developed through engagement with ecotourism topics. An interview guide consisting of twelve open-ended questions was used to facilitate the discussion and encourage participants to elaborate on their responses.

All interviews were conducted individually and audio-recorded using a mobile phone with participants' consent. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of the data. The interview transcripts served as the primary source of data for analysis.

Table 2. Interview Categories

Category	Focus of Inquiry
Learning Experiences	Students' experiences and engagement with ecotourism-based English learning
Linguistic Development	Vocabulary learning, communication skills, and confidence in using English
Linguistic Challenges	Difficulties related to vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and idea expression
Environmental Responsibility	Conservation, sustainability, responsible tourism, and environmental stewardship

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a systematic and flexible approach for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data.

The first phase involved familiarization with the data through repeated reading of the interview transcripts. During this stage, preliminary notes were made to identify recurring ideas and meaningful statements. The second phase involved generating initial codes by labeling segments of data relevant to the research questions. Examples of preliminary codes included *meaningful learning*, *vocabulary growth*, *communication practice*, *speaking confidence*, *difficulty expressing ideas*, *environmental conservation*, and *responsible tourism*.

The third phase involved searching for themes by grouping related codes into broader categories. In the fourth phase, the preliminary themes were reviewed and refined through continuous comparison with the interview transcripts to ensure coherence and consistency. The fifth phase focused on defining and naming the themes according to their central meanings. Finally, the sixth phase involved producing the analytical narrative and interpreting the findings in relation to the research questions and relevant literature.

The analysis generated four major themes:

- (1) ecotourism as a meaningful learning experience
- (2) linguistic development through ecotourism-based English learning
- (3) linguistic challenges in sustainability-oriented learning
- (4) environmental responsibility developed through engagement with ecotourism topics.

Table 3. Themes Generated Through Thematic Analysis

Theme	Focus
Ecotourism as a Meaningful Learning Experience	Learners' engagement, relevance, and perceptions of ecotourism topics
Linguistic Development	Vocabulary growth, communication skills, and confidence
Linguistic Challenges	Difficulties related to vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and idea expression
Environmental Responsibility	Conservation, sustainability, and responsible tourism practices

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study following the criteria of credibility and dependability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) First, all interview recordings were transcribed carefully to ensure accurate representation of participants' responses. Second, the researcher repeatedly reviewed the transcripts throughout the coding and theme-development process to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data. Third, representative excerpts from participants' interviews were included in the findings section to enhance analytical transparency and support thematic interpretations.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and voluntarily agreed to participate in the interviews. All interview recordings and transcripts were used solely for research purposes. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms (P1–P6) were used in reporting the findings, and all identifying information was removed from the dataset.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed four major themes that address the research questions and reflect students' experiences in ecotourism-based English learning. These themes illustrate how learners perceived the relevance of ecotourism topics, developed their linguistic abilities, encountered language-related challenges, and reflected on issues of environmental responsibility. Table 3 presents an overview of the themes and subthemes generated from the analysis. the findings indicate that ecotourism-based English learning provided students with meaningful learning experiences that supported linguistic development while simultaneously fostering environmental responsibility. Nevertheless, learners also encountered several linguistic challenges related to vocabulary, pronunciation, and confidence in expressing ideas. These findings highlight the potential of ecotourism as a pedagogical context that connects language learning with sustainability-oriented education.

Table 4. Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes
Ecotourism as a Meaningful Learning Experience	Relevance, Authenticity, Engagement
Linguistic Development	Vocabulary Growth, Communication Practice
Linguistic Challenges	Vocabulary Pronunciation, Difficulty, Confidence,
Environmental Responsibility	Conservation, Responsible Tourism, Environmental Stewardship

The following sections discuss each theme in detail, supported by representative excerpts from participants' interviews and interpreted in relation to previous studies on sustainability-oriented English Language Teaching.

Ecotourism as a Meaningful Learning Experience

One of the most prominent findings is that students perceived ecotourism as a meaningful and engaging context for learning English. Rather than viewing English merely as an academic subject, participants associated learning activities with authentic environmental issues, tourism experiences, and real-world communication. This meaningfulness emerged because ecotourism connected language learning with topics that students considered relevant to their interests and everyday lives.

Several participants explicitly described the topic as interesting because it combined language learning with environmental knowledge. For example, one participant explained:

"I think learning English through ecotourism topics is interesting and effective because it helps students improve their language skills while learning about environmental conservation and real-world issues." (p4)

Similarly, another student stated:

"I can learn English while learning about nature and the environment." (P2)

Interestingly, students did not perceive ecotourism merely as a tourism topic. They increasingly associated tourism with environmental responsibility. As P1 explained:

"We should know how to protect the place." (P1)

This statement suggests that students began to view tourism not only as recreational activity but also as a responsibility toward environmental preservation.

The findings indicate that meaningful learning emerged from the integration of language education and sustainability content. Students appeared more engaged when language learning was connected to authentic issues rather than isolated linguistic exercises. This supports previous findings suggesting that sustainability-oriented ELT can enhance learner engagement

through meaningful and socially relevant learning experiences (Nurul Latifatul Azizah et al., 2025; Dhanyamol C. T. & Sethunarayanan N., 2025). However, unlike previous studies that primarily focus on curriculum design and pedagogy, the present study highlights how learners themselves experience ecotourism-based learning as personally relevant and intellectually engaging.

Ecotourism as a Context for Linguistic Development

The second major theme concerns students' perceived linguistic development. Participants consistently reported that ecotourism-based learning supported vocabulary acquisition and created opportunities for practicing communication skills.

Vocabulary development emerged as the most frequently reported benefit. Students repeatedly referred to learning new environmental terminology, particularly concepts associated with sustainability and conservation. One participant explained:

"The ecotourism topic helped me learn new English words and improve my reading, speaking, and writing skills." (P5)

Likewise, P4 stated:

"The ecotourism topic helped me improve my English skills by learning new vocabulary, practicing reading and speaking, and discussing real-life environmental and tourism issues in English." (P4)

Participants specifically identified unfamiliar terms such as *conservation*, *sustainability*, *biodiversity*, and *carrying capacity* as important additions to their vocabulary repertoire.

Beyond vocabulary learning, students perceived ecotourism as a meaningful context for communication. P6 reflected:

"I can improve my conversation to tourism with foreign tourists or local tourists." (P6)

This response suggests that students viewed English not merely as classroom knowledge but as a practical tool for communicating within tourism-related contexts.

An interesting finding is that linguistic development appeared closely connected to learner interest. P1 noted:

"Because I like the topic, everything is gonna be okay." (P1)

This indicates that topic engagement may facilitate language learning by increasing motivation and reducing anxiety.

These findings are consistent with previous studies reporting that environmental and ecotourism-related content supports vocabulary acquisition and communicative competence (Dyah Christina Iswandari et al., 2017; Puji Hariati, 2026; I. G. Astawa, 2025). They also reinforce findings from Chi-ying Chien (2019) and Hanifah et al. (2025), who found that ecotourism-based instruction contributes positively to language engagement and literacy development.

Negotiating Linguistic Challenges in Sustainability-Oriented Learning

Despite the perceived benefits, students also reported various linguistic challenges. These challenges involved unfamiliar vocabulary, limited speaking confidence, pronunciation difficulties, grammatical concerns, and difficulties expressing ideas effectively.

Vocabulary difficulty emerged as the most commonly reported challenge. Students frequently encountered unfamiliar environmental terminology. P5 explained:

“There were some new vocabulary words, such as sustainability, conservation, and biodiversity.” (P5)

Similarly, P3 identified a more specialized challenge:

“Carrying capacity is difficult because it is often misunderstood.” (P3)

These responses suggest that sustainability-oriented learning introduces disciplinary terminology that may require additional instructional support.

Speaking confidence also emerged as a significant issue. Although students generally possessed relevant ideas, they often struggled to express them in English. P 3 stated:

“I have many things I want to say, but it is difficult to express them.” (P3)

Likewise, P5 reported:

“I did not feel very confident expressing my ideas in English because my speaking skills are still not very good.” (P5)

Concerns about grammatical accuracy further contributed to communication anxiety. P2 admitted:

“I was sometimes afraid of making grammar mistakes.” (P2)

Pronunciation difficulties also appeared. P1 explained:

“When I say biodiversity, my tongue and my mouth is like dumb and dumber.” (P1)

Another notable challenge involved limited direct experience with ecotourism destinations. Students felt that discussing ecotourism conceptually was helpful but insufficient for fully understanding the topic. P1 reflected:

“We know what and how, but we do not know the real place.” (P1)

These findings support previous studies identifying unfamiliar vocabulary and insufficient instructional support as challenges in sustainability-oriented ELT (Noliza Hasrina et al., 2024; S. Kazazoğlu, 2025). Nevertheless, the present study extends existing literature by demonstrating how confidence, pronunciation, and communicative expression constitute important but often overlooked dimensions of learners' experiences.

From Environmental Awareness to Environmental Responsibility

Perhaps the most significant finding concerns students' progression from environmental awareness toward environmental responsibility. Participants did not simply acquire knowledge about environmental issues; they increasingly reflected on their own roles in protecting and preserving natural environments.

Many students emphasized the importance of conservation and responsible tourism. P2 stated:

“Protecting nature is important and everyone can help by reducing waste and respecting the environment.” (P2)

Similarly, P4 explained:

“Responsible tourism is important for preserving nature for future generations.” (P4)

Students also demonstrated awareness of personal responsibility. P1 reflected:

“Now I have to take care of all the places I visit.” (P1)

This statement suggests a shift from passive environmental awareness toward active environmental stewardship.

Perhaps the deepest reflection emerged from P3, who connected individual behavior with broader environmental consequences:

“Even if we only burn a small amount of waste, if thousands of people do the same thing, it can become pollution.” (P3)

This response demonstrates systems thinking and an understanding of cumulative environmental impacts.

Students also highlighted the importance of environmental education. P3 argued:

“It cannot rely only on prohibition signs. Tourists need education.” (P3)

This finding suggests that students increasingly perceived communication and education as essential components of environmental conservation.

The progression from awareness to responsibility represents a significant contribution of this study. Previous studies have demonstrated that sustainability-oriented ELT can foster environmental consciousness and global citizenship (Beibei Yu et al., 2024; Rachmawati Achadiyah, 2025; Hanifah et al., 2025). However, the present findings reveal how learners themselves internalize sustainability values and begin to view environmental protection as a personal and collective responsibility. This learner-centered perspective remains relatively underrepresented in existing research.

Pedagogical Implications and Future Directions

Students consistently expressed preferences for interactive and experiential learning activities. Group discussions emerged as the most frequently mentioned activity because they allowed learners to exchange ideas, practice speaking, and learn collaboratively.

Participants also recommended incorporating videos, games, presentations, local tourism examples, role-play activities, and field-based learning experiences. Particularly noteworthy was the suggestion to move beyond classroom-based instruction. One participant proposed:

“We can talk about our local tourism, and then we can go there and see it live.” (P1)

Similarly, another suggested:

“A mini field trip to a mangrove forest or a role-play eco-audit.” (P3)



These suggestions indicate that students desire more experiential forms of sustainability-oriented language learning.

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of learning experiences, linguistic development, linguistic challenges, and environmental responsibility within a single learner-centered framework. While previous studies have predominantly examined instructional models, curriculum integration, and teacher perspectives, the present study foregrounds learners' own voices and experiences in ecotourism-based English learning. This perspective provides valuable insights into how sustainability-oriented language education is experienced by learners in Indonesian higher education settings.

Future research should involve larger participant groups, longitudinal designs, and multiple data sources such as interviews, classroom observations, speaking assessments, and project-based learning interventions. Such approaches would provide a deeper understanding of how ecotourism-based instruction contributes to both language development and sustainability-oriented citizenship over time.

Discussions

The present study explored students' learning experiences in ecotourism-based English learning and examined how engagement with ecotourism topics influenced their linguistic development and environmental responsibility. Four major findings emerged from the study. First, students perceived ecotourism as a meaningful and authentic context that increased their engagement with English language learning. Second, participants reported improvements in vocabulary acquisition and communicative competence through learning activities centered on sustainability and tourism-related issues. Third, despite these benefits, students encountered several linguistic challenges, particularly related to unfamiliar environmental terminology, pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, and confidence in expressing complex ideas in English. Finally, the findings revealed that ecotourism-based learning encouraged students to move beyond environmental awareness toward a stronger sense of environmental responsibility. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that ecotourism-based English learning functions not only as an approach for language development but also as a pedagogical means of promoting sustainability-oriented education.

The findings highlight the educational value of integrating authentic environmental issues into English language learning. Authentic learning environments enable learners to connect classroom knowledge with real-world situations, thereby enhancing engagement and meaningful learning (Herrington et al., 2014). Rather than perceiving English as an isolated academic subject, participants experienced language learning as a meaningful process connected to environmental conservation, responsible tourism, and real-world communication. This finding supports the principles of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which emphasize that education should equip learners with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary to address environmental, social, and economic challenges while promoting sustainable development (UNESCO, 2020). Within this perspective, sustainability-oriented English Language Teaching extends beyond developing communicative competence by enabling learners to engage critically with authentic global issues (Kwee, 2021; Dhanyamol & Sethunarayanan, 2025). The present findings therefore suggest that ecotourism provides an authentic learning environment where language learning becomes socially relevant and personally meaningful.



The study further demonstrates that meaningful learning experiences contribute to students' linguistic development. Participants consistently associated ecotourism-based learning with vocabulary expansion, improved communication skills, and greater opportunities to practice English in authentic contexts. This finding reflects experiential learning theory, which proposes that meaningful knowledge is constructed through learners' direct engagement with authentic experiences (Kolb, 2015). Previous research has similarly shown that environmental and ecotourism-related learning enhances vocabulary acquisition, communicative competence, learner engagement, and literacy development (Iswandari et al., 2017; Chien, 2019; Hariati, 2026; Indrayanti & Romadhon, 2025; Astawa, 2025; Hanifah et al., 2025; Prihanta & Baiduri, 2025). However, the present findings extend existing knowledge by demonstrating that students' linguistic development was closely associated with their interest in sustainability-related topics. Participants perceived ecotourism not merely as instructional content but as a meaningful context that motivated them to use English for authentic communication. This finding suggests that learner engagement functions as an important mediating factor between authentic learning contexts and language development.

Despite these positive outcomes, the findings also reveal that sustainability-oriented English learning introduces distinctive linguistic challenges. Students frequently encountered unfamiliar environmental terminology, experienced pronunciation difficulties, expressed concerns about grammatical accuracy, and reported limited confidence when communicating complex sustainability-related ideas. These challenges are consistent with previous studies identifying environmental vocabulary and insufficient instructional support as common obstacles in sustainability-oriented ELT (Noliza Hasrina et al., 2024; S. Kazazoglu, 2025). Nevertheless, this study provides a broader understanding of these challenges by showing that they are interconnected rather than isolated. Difficulties with specialized vocabulary often influenced learners' confidence, pronunciation, and willingness to communicate. Consequently, these findings indicate that sustainability-oriented language learning requires systematic instructional scaffolding, including explicit vocabulary instruction, opportunities for repeated communicative practice, pronunciation support, and collaborative learning activities that gradually build learners' confidence in discussing environmental issues.

Perhaps the most significant finding concerns students' progression from environmental awareness toward environmental responsibility. This progression reflects the development of sustainability competencies, particularly systems thinking, normative competence, and responsibility toward sustainable action (Wiek et al., 2011). Rather than simply acquiring conceptual knowledge about conservation and responsible tourism, participants increasingly reflected on their personal responsibility to protect natural environments and recognized the importance of environmentally responsible behavior. Such reflection illustrates a process of transformative learning in which learners reconsider their assumptions and develop new perspectives through meaningful educational experiences (Mezirow, 2000). This progression reflects one of the central objectives of sustainability-oriented education, namely fostering responsible citizenship through meaningful engagement with real-world issues (UNESCO, 2020). The findings are consistent with previous studies demonstrating that sustainability-oriented ELT contributes to environmental awareness, sustainability consciousness, and global citizenship (Beibei Yu et al., 2024; Rachmawati Achadiyah, 2025; Hanifah et al., 2025). However, unlike earlier studies that primarily examined curriculum implementation or pedagogical strategies, the present study provides learner-centered evidence illustrating how sustainability values are internalized through students' own reflections and lived learning experiences. This perspective contributes a deeper understanding of the transformative role of



ecotourism-based language learning in shaping both communicative competence and environmental responsibility.

An important contribution of this study lies in addressing an underexplored area within sustainability-oriented English Language Teaching. Existing studies have predominantly focused on curriculum integration, instructional models, teaching materials, and teachers' perspectives, whereas comparatively little attention has been given to learners' own experiences of ecotourism-based English learning (Dhanyamol & Sethunarayanan, 2025; Hanifah et al., 2025; Prihanta & Baiduri, 2025). By foregrounding students' voices, this study demonstrates that meaningful learning experiences, linguistic development, linguistic challenges, and environmental responsibility are closely interconnected dimensions of sustainability-oriented language education. This learner-centered perspective therefore extends current understanding of how ecotourism functions not only as instructional content but also as a transformative educational context that integrates language learning with environmental values in Indonesian higher education.

The findings also have important pedagogical implications. English language educators may consider incorporating authentic sustainability-related topics, particularly ecotourism, into classroom instruction to provide meaningful opportunities for language use while simultaneously promoting environmental awareness. Environmental education has long emphasized that meaningful environmental learning should integrate knowledge, attitudes, and responsible action (Palmer, 1998). The linguistic challenges reported by participants further indicate the importance of designing learning activities that include explicit vocabulary instruction, pronunciation practice, collaborative discussion, project-based learning, and experiential learning opportunities such as local ecotourism exploration or field-based activities. Such instructional approaches may strengthen learners' communicative competence while encouraging deeper engagement with sustainability issues and responsible citizenship.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The findings were generated from a relatively small number of participants within a single higher education institution and were based primarily on semi-structured interviews. Consequently, the results should be interpreted within the specific educational context rather than generalized to all EFL settings. Future research may build upon these findings by involving participants from multiple universities, employing longitudinal or mixed-methods research designs, and incorporating additional sources of evidence such as classroom observations, reflective journals, language performance assessments, or project-based learning outcomes. Comparative investigations across different educational contexts and studies examining the long-term influence of ecotourism-based English learning on learners' language proficiency, environmental responsibility, and sustainability-related behaviors would further strengthen the evidence base for sustainability-oriented English Language Teaching.

D. CONCLUSION

This study explored students' learning experiences in ecotourism-based English learning and examined how engagement with ecotourism topics shaped their linguistic development and environmental responsibility. The findings demonstrate that ecotourism provides a meaningful and authentic context for English language learning, enabling students to connect language use with real-world environmental and tourism issues. Participants reported improvements in



vocabulary knowledge, communication skills, and confidence in using English, while also identifying linguistic challenges related to unfamiliar environmental terminology, pronunciation, and expressing complex ideas. More importantly, the learning experience encouraged students to progress beyond environmental awareness toward a stronger sense of environmental responsibility, particularly in relation to conservation, sustainable tourism, and environmental stewardship.

By foregrounding learners' voices, this study contributes a learner-centered perspective to sustainability-oriented English Language Teaching, an area that has largely been dominated by research on pedagogical models, curriculum integration, and instructional practices. The findings suggest that ecotourism-based instruction can serve as an effective pedagogical bridge between language development and sustainability education by simultaneously fostering communicative competence and environmentally responsible citizenship. These findings also provide practical implications for English language educators seeking to design more authentic, contextually meaningful, and sustainability-oriented learning experiences in higher education.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. The findings were derived from a relatively small number of participants from a single higher education institution and relied exclusively on semi-structured interview data without incorporating classroom observations, language performance assessments, or other complementary sources of qualitative evidence. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific rather than broadly generalizable.

Future research is therefore encouraged to involve larger and more diverse participant groups across different educational settings, adopt longitudinal or mixed-methods research designs, and incorporate multiple sources of evidence, such as classroom observations, reflective journals, speaking assessments, and project-based learning outcomes. Such studies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term impact of ecotourism-based English learning on learners' linguistic development, environmental responsibility, and sustainability-related attitudes and practices.

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