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INSTITUTIONALIZING ECO-ELT IN AN INDONESIAN BOARDING SCHOOL: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

[1] *Arif Bulan, [2]Titi Pujiarti, [1]Diana Purwati, [1] Rusdin, [1]Nur Wahyuni, [1]Baharudin, [3]Yana Karisma, [4]Ana Joana dos Reis

[1] Department of English Education, STKIP Yapis Dompu, Jln. Syech Muhammad Lingkar Utara Bali I, Dompu Regency, West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia
[2] Department Elementary School Teacher Education, STKIP Yapis Dompu, Jln. Syech Muhammad Lingkar Utara Bali I, Dompu Regency, West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia
[3] Department of Teaching and Learning, College of Education and Human Ecology, Ohio State University, 190 N. Oval Mall, Columbus, OH 43210, United States
[4]Department of English Education, Universidade Dili, Dili, Timor Leste

*Corresponding Author Email: arifbulan1@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study investigates the institutionalization of Ecological English Language Teaching (Eco-ELT) within an Indonesian boarding school context. Moving beyond viewing Eco-ELT as a pedagogical innovation, the study conceptualizes it as an institutional process shaped by leadership, organizational culture, and structural mechanisms. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the principal and English teachers, classroom observations, and document analysis of school policies and sustainability programs. The data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to institutional framing, pedagogical enactment, and sustainability challenges. The findings reveal that Eco-ELT is legitimized through alignment with the school's ideological vision of character formation and sustainability, and embedded within what the institution terms a "life curriculum." Leadership plays a central role in articulating moral direction, while teachers function as mediating agents who translate institutional discourse into classroom practice. Structural supports, including language policies and environmental routines, reinforce the continuity of sustainability integration beyond formal instruction. However, the institutionalization process remains partially reliant on normative leadership and organizational culture, with limited formal codification in written policy frameworks. This study contributes to the emerging discourse on Eco-ELT by reframing sustainability-oriented language education as an institutional project rather than merely a curricular adaptation. The findings highlight the importance of ideological coherence, distributed leadership, and structural alignment in sustaining environmental integration within English language teaching.

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INTRODUCTION

Education for sustainable development (ESD) has become an increasingly urgent agenda in contemporary educational discourse (Breiting, 2009; Letouzey-Pasquier et al., 2023; Munasi & Msezane, 2025). Environmental degradation, deforestation, excessive waste

production, and climate instability have compelled schools to move beyond knowledge transmission toward transformative learning that shapes attitudes and behaviors (Elnakib et al., 2024; Giusti et al., 2025). In many contexts, sustainability education is positioned not merely as an additional subject, but as an integrative framework that reorients curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional culture. This shift demands educational models that embed environmental consciousness into everyday learning processes rather than treating sustainability as a peripheral theme.

Within language education, this transformation presents both challenges and opportunities. English Language Teaching (ELT), traditionally centered on linguistic competence (Bunrosy & Vireak, 2024), is now increasingly expected to address global issues (Saiful, 2023), including environmental sustainability (Ferguson & Bramwell-Lalor, 2023). Ecological English Language Teaching (Eco-ELT) proposes that language learning can function as a medium for developing ecological awareness by integrating environmental content, discourse, and action into classroom practices (Bulan et al., 2025; Saiful, 2020, 2023, 2024). Rather than separating language form from social meaning, Eco-ELT emphasizes that language is a tool for understanding and shaping human relationships with the natural world (Saiful, 2023, 2024).

Despite the growing theoretical discussion surrounding sustainability in ELT, empirical studies often concentrate on material development, learner perception, or short-term instructional interventions. Limited attention has been given to how sustainability-oriented language education becomes institutionalized within a school system, how policies, leadership, teacher practices, and physical environments collectively shape Eco-ELT implementation. The question of how sustainability is translated from institutional vision into daily pedagogical practice remains underexplored, particularly in rural or semi-urban Indonesian contexts.

The urgency of such exploration becomes particularly evident in regions experiencing environmental pressures. Dompu, located in West Nusa Tenggara, has faced ecological challenges including land degradation, illegal logging, and waste management issues. These conditions have influenced educational actors who perceive environmental education not as an optional enrichment but as a necessity. Within this context, one boarding school has adopted a sustainability-oriented model that integrates environmental practices into its institutional identity and daily routines.

The school operates under what it describes as a “life curriculum,” where environmental sustainability structures academic and non-academic activities. Programs such as the SEKAM rotation system, focusing cyclically on waste, energy, biodiversity, water, and zero-waste food systems, are embedded across subjects. Facilities including a Green Lab, thematic gardens, waste-bank management, composting systems, and eco-brick production function not merely as extracurricular features but as pedagogical resources. English is positioned as a strategic subject within this ecosystem, supported by English-area policies, student language monitors, and project-based environmental tasks.

Preliminary evidence from interviews with the principal and English teacher indicates that Eco-ELT in this setting is implemented through integrative and experiential strategies. Grammar instruction, for example, is combined with environmental observation activities in gardens and waste-management areas, where students report findings using targeted language structures. Classroom observations further reveal strong alignment between lesson objectives, ecological themes, student engagement, and collaborative learning processes. These practices suggest that sustainability is not inserted superficially into lessons, but structurally woven into instructional design and school culture.

However, the institutionalization of Eco-ELT also involves negotiation and adaptation. Interviews reveal challenges related to instructional time constraints, attendance variations

among non-boarding students, and initial skepticism from parents regarding the relevance of environmental-based education. Leadership strategies, internal discussions among teachers, and visible behavioral changes among students have played critical roles in sustaining the program. These dynamics indicate that Eco-ELT implementation is not merely pedagogical but organizational and cultural in nature.

In light of the growing emphasis on sustainability integration within English language education, particularly in boarding school contexts, there remains limited empirical understanding of how such initiatives move beyond classroom experimentation and become institutionally embedded practices. While Eco-ELT has been discussed conceptually (see (Bulan et al., 2024, 2025; Kalsum et al., 2025; Saiful, 2020, 2023), little is known about the mechanisms through which it is framed, legitimized, and sustained within school systems. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the institutionalization process of Eco-ELT in an Indonesian boarding school. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: *How is Eco-ELT institutionally framed and legitimized within the boarding school context?; What leadership, pedagogical, and structural mechanisms support the institutionalization of Eco-ELT?; And What challenges and negotiations emerge in sustaining Eco-ELT practices?*

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to investigate the process of institutionalizing Eco-ELT within an Indonesian Islamic boarding school as a complex and context-dependent educational transformation. The case study methodology was considered appropriate because the research focused on understanding how Eco-ELT is conceptualized, justified, implemented, and maintained within the unique social, cultural, and organizational environment of the institution. Rather than evaluating the effectiveness of the program through measurable outcomes, the study aimed to uncover the underlying processes, interactions, and meanings constructed by institutional actors. This approach facilitated a comprehensive exploration of leadership roles, teachers' pedagogical engagement, institutional policies, available resources, and challenges encountered during implementation. By concentrating on one boarding school as a bounded research setting, the study provided an in-depth and contextualized interpretation of institutionalization as an ongoing, adaptive, and negotiated process shaped by multiple stakeholders.

Research Site and Participants

The study was carried out in an Indonesian Islamic boarding school that has formally incorporated sustainability values into its institutional vision, educational programs, and English language teaching practices. The research site was selected because it represented a meaningful context for examining how Eco-ELT principles are embedded within a religious-based educational institution. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, considering their direct involvement, responsibilities, and experiences related to the implementation of Eco-ELT. The participants consisted of the school principal, who holds a strategic position in developing, promoting, and legitimizing sustainability-oriented policies, and English teachers who are responsible for transforming institutional commitments into classroom-level practices. The inclusion of participants from different organizational positions enabled the study to explore Eco-ELT institutionalization across various dimensions, including policy development, leadership support, pedagogical decision-making, and daily instructional implementation. This multi-perspective approach contributed to a deeper understanding of how sustainability practices are negotiated and sustained within the school context.

Data Collection Technique

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Interviews with the principal and English teachers focused on exploring institutional vision, leadership strategies, pedagogical integration, and perceived challenges in sustaining Eco-ELT practices. Classroom observations were conducted using a structured checklist to document how environmental themes were embedded in instructional activities, language use policies, and student engagement. These multiple data sources enabled triangulation and provided both narrative and behavioral evidence of how Eco-ELT operates within the school system.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts and observation notes were first transcribed and coded inductively to identify recurring patterns and meaningful units of data. The initial codes were then grouped into broader themes corresponding to the study's analytical dimensions: (1) institutional framing and legitimization, (2) leadership, pedagogical, and structural mechanisms, and (3) challenges and negotiations in sustaining Eco-ELT practices. Through iterative comparison across data sources, themes were refined to ensure coherence and alignment with the research questions. This analytical process enabled the study to move beyond descriptive reporting toward interpretative insights regarding institutionalization dynamics.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Institutional Framing and Legitimization of Eco-ELT

Within the boarding school context examined in this study, Eco-ELT does not emerge as an individual pedagogical initiative but is institutionally positioned as an extension of the school's overarching vision centered on sustainability and character formation. Interview data with the principal indicate that environmental education is construed as a moral and ideological mandate aligned with the school's Islamic identity. Sustainability, therefore, is not narrowly conceptualized as an ecological concern; rather, it is embedded within a broader project of cultivating disciplined, responsible, and ethically grounded individuals. In this respect, Eco-ELT is framed not merely as an instructional approach but as a discursive articulation of institutional vision and value orientation.

Furthermore, Eco-ELT gains legitimacy through its integration into what the school refers to as the *life curriculum*. Documentary evidence and teacher interviews reveal that English language practices addressing environmental themes are structurally linked to students' daily routines, including dormitory cleanliness, waste management practices, and institutional programs such as SEKAM. This integration situates Eco-ELT within a holistic educational system in which language functions as a mediating tool for internalizing ecological values in everyday life. The findings suggest that environmental discourse in English is not confined to classroom instruction but is embedded within the lived experiences of students in the boarding environment.

From a policy perspective, the legitimization of Eco-ELT is reinforced through both symbolic and structural mechanisms. Institutional programs such as the English Area policy, environmental slogans and campaigns, and discipline-based cleanliness regulations operate as organizational devices that sustain and normalize Eco-ELT practices. Addressing prior concerns regarding the lack of clarity about institutionalization processes, the data demonstrate that Eco-ELT is legitimized not only pedagogically but also administratively and culturally. The principal functions as a central normative authority who articulates and mandates sustainability-oriented direction, while teachers act as key agents translating institutional discourse into classroom enactment.

The boarding school context itself constitutes an ideological and structural foundation that enables relatively consistent institutionalization. Given that students reside within the school environment on a full-time basis, environmental values can be reproduced and reinforced through daily routines, collective regulations, and habitual English language use in authentic contexts. Classroom observations indicate that environmental topics are frequently connected to students' lived practices in the dormitory setting, producing coherence between classroom discourse and everyday conduct. Such alignment strengthens the legitimacy of Eco-ELT as an embedded element of school culture rather than a temporary curricular intervention.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal that the institutional framing of Eco-ELT remains largely normative and culturally driven, with limited formal codification in written curricular documents or specific standard operating procedures. In other words, its legitimacy relies more heavily on leadership influence and organizational culture than on systematically articulated regulatory frameworks. This condition suggests that the institutionalization process is undergoing cultural consolidation, yet has not fully crystallized into formalized policy architecture. Overall, the findings addressing RQ1 indicate that Eco-ELT is institutionalized through an interrelated configuration of ideological vision, integration within the life curriculum, symbolic and structural reinforcement, and the totalizing nature of the boarding school environment. Institutionalization in this context is not technocratic in character; rather, it is grounded in moral legitimation, leadership authority, and a school culture that collectively sustain the integration of environmental values into English language teaching practices.

Leadership, Pedagogical, and Structural Mechanisms Supporting the Institutionalization of Eco-ELT

The institutionalization of Eco-ELT within the boarding school is significantly shaped by leadership direction and strategic positioning at the managerial level. Interview data indicate that the principal plays a pivotal role in articulating sustainability as a strategic priority and embedding it within the broader educational agenda. Rather than functioning solely as an administrative authority, the principal operates as a normative leader who frames environmental commitment as integral to the school's mission. This leadership stance provides ideological coherence and legitimizes teacher engagement with sustainability-oriented English instruction.

At the pedagogical level, teachers function as mediating agents who translate institutional vision into classroom practice. Data from teacher interviews and classroom observations reveal that environmental themes are incorporated into speaking tasks, reading materials, classroom discussions, and project-based activities. Importantly, the integration does not follow a rigid scripted curriculum; instead, teachers demonstrate adaptive agency in aligning environmental content with language competencies. Eco-ELT is thus enacted through pedagogical improvisation within an institutional frame, reflecting a negotiated process between curricular demands and sustainability discourse.

Structural mechanisms further reinforce the operationalization of Eco-ELT. Institutional programs such as the English Area policy create spatial-linguistic zones that normalize English use beyond formal classroom instruction. Environmental routines, including dormitory cleaning schedules, waste sorting practices, and sustainability campaigns, provide authentic contexts for language use, thereby linking structural regulation with pedagogical opportunity. These structures function as material and procedural scaffolds that support the continuity of Eco-ELT practices.

Moreover, the boarding system itself acts as an enabling infrastructure for sustained implementation. Because students inhabit a regulated communal environment, institutional expectations regarding environmental responsibility and English language use can be

monitored and reinforced across time and space. Observational data indicate that teachers frequently reference ongoing environmental routines during classroom instruction, thereby creating continuity between institutional practices and language learning activities. This structural embeddedness minimizes fragmentation between curricular content and lived experience.

Despite these enabling mechanisms, the data also suggest that the sustainability of Eco-ELT depends heavily on leadership consistency and teacher commitment. The absence of highly formalized instructional guidelines means that pedagogical enactment varies according to teacher initiative and interpretive flexibility. Thus, while leadership vision and structural arrangements provide a supportive framework, the operational depth of Eco-ELT ultimately rests on localized pedagogical translation within classrooms.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the institutionalization of Eco-ELT is sustained through an interplay of leadership authority, teacher agency, and structural reinforcement. The process is neither purely top-down nor entirely teacher-driven; rather, it is constituted through dynamic coordination between strategic vision, pedagogical adaptation, and institutional infrastructure.

Challenges and Institutional Negotiations in Sustaining Eco-ELT Practices

Although Eco-ELT has been institutionally framed and structurally supported, its sustained implementation is marked by ongoing challenges and negotiated adjustments. One of the primary tensions identified in the data concerns the balance between curricular demands and sustainability-oriented integration. Teachers reported constraints related to time allocation, examination preparation, and alignment with national curriculum standards. While environmental themes are incorporated into language activities, the pressure to achieve measurable linguistic outcomes sometimes limits the depth of sustainability exploration within classroom instruction.

Another challenge pertains to variability in teacher interpretation and pedagogical readiness. In the absence of detailed written guidelines or standardized Eco-ELT modules, teachers exercise considerable autonomy in integrating environmental content. While this flexibility enables contextual adaptation, it also produces uneven implementation across classrooms. Some teachers demonstrate strong alignment with the institutional sustainability discourse, whereas others integrate environmental themes more superficially. This variation reflects an ongoing process of negotiation between institutional expectations and individual pedagogical capacity.

Student diversity also introduces complexity into the institutionalization process. Although the boarding system allows for extended value internalization, differences in students' prior environmental awareness, linguistic proficiency, and motivation influence the effectiveness of Eco-ELT practices. Interview data suggest that some students initially perceive environmental discourse in English as an additional academic burden rather than as a meaningful extension of daily life. Consequently, teachers must continuously negotiate engagement strategies to ensure that sustainability themes remain pedagogically relevant rather than rhetorically imposed.

At the structural level, sustainability initiatives depend on consistent reinforcement across institutional domains. Observational evidence indicates that when environmental routines are strongly monitored, such as waste management systems or dormitory cleanliness programs, classroom integration becomes more coherent. However, when enforcement fluctuates or competing institutional priorities emerge, the visibility of sustainability discourse may weaken. This demonstrates that Eco-ELT is sustained not solely through classroom commitment but through institutional consistency.

Finally, the data reveal that institutionalization remains partially reliant on charismatic and value-driven leadership. While the principal's normative stance provides ideological direction, long-term sustainability requires broader policy codification and shared ownership among staff. The absence of comprehensive formal documentation suggests that Eco-ELT is still in a phase of cultural consolidation rather than full bureaucratic stabilization. This condition creates both flexibility and vulnerability within the institutionalization process. Overall, the findings addressing RQ3 indicate that sustaining Eco-ELT involves continuous negotiation among curricular pressures, teacher agency, student diversity, structural reinforcement, and leadership consistency. Institutionalization is therefore not a linear or completed process; it is dynamic, contingent, and dependent on the alignment of cultural, pedagogical, and organizational forces within the boarding school environment.

Discussion

The findings regarding the institutional framing and legitimization of Eco-ELT indicate that sustainability discourse in the examined boarding school is embedded within a broader ideological and moral architecture. This aligns with neo-institutional perspectives which argue that educational practices become institutionalized when they are framed as morally legitimate and culturally appropriate rather than merely technically efficient (Bunnell et al., 2017). In this case, Eco-ELT derives legitimacy not primarily from curricular mandates but from its alignment with the school's Islamic identity and character education mission. Such moral embedding strengthens its symbolic authority and normalizes sustainability discourse within English language teaching. This supports the view that institutionalization in educational settings is often driven by value rationality rather than purely procedural formalization (Alvesson & Spicer, 2019).

Furthermore, the integration of Eco-ELT into the *life curriculum* reflects what Saiful, (2023) conceptualizes as the recontextualization of pedagogic discourse, where Krause et al., (2021) said institutional values are translated into pedagogical practice. The boarding school setting allows environmental ideology to be continuously reproduced across formal and informal domains, reinforcing what Finnan (2020) described as the dynamics of a total institution in an educationally productive sense. By embedding environmental language practices within daily routines, the school reduces the fragmentation between discourse and practice. This finding responds to regarding whether Eco-ELT represents an isolated instructional strategy or what Moore et al. (2024) said as a genuinely institutionalized model.

With regard to leadership, pedagogical, and structural mechanisms, the study demonstrates that institutionalization operates through a dynamic interplay between strategic direction and classroom translation. Transformational leadership theory suggests that institutional change in schools is more sustainable when leaders articulate a compelling moral purpose (Effendi & Erb, 2024), and foster shared commitment (Waruwu et al., 2023). The principal's normative framing of sustainability as a collective responsibility appears to create an enabling climate for Eco-ELT implementation. Rather than imposing rigid directives, leadership establishes ideological coherence, allowing teachers to interpret and enact sustainability within their instructional practices.

At the pedagogical level, the findings resonate with scholarship on teacher agency, which emphasizes that teachers function as policy actors who interpret and enact institutional mandates within situated contexts (Brooks & Sinclair, 2024). The adaptive integration of environmental themes into language tasks demonstrates that Eco-ELT is not merely transmitted from leadership but actively reconstructed in classrooms (Bellewes, 2024; Maghfiroh et al., 2025). Structural supports such as the English Area policy and environmental routines further illustrate how institutional infrastructure can scaffold pedagogical innovation. In line with Diavati (2023), sustainable educational reform requires

alignment among vision, capacity building, and organizational structures, conditions that are partially evident in this case.

The challenges identified in sustaining Eco-ELT practices underscore that institutionalization is inherently contingent and negotiated. As noted by Nguyen et al., (2025), institutional work involves continuous effort to create, maintain, and sometimes repair institutional arrangements. Time constraints, curriculum pressures, and variability in teacher interpretation illustrate that Eco-ELT requires ongoing negotiation between environmental commitment and academic accountability. The absence of highly formalized guidelines contributes to interpretive flexibility but also to uneven implementation, reflecting the tension between cultural institutionalization and bureaucratic stabilization.

Finally, the reliance on leadership charisma and cultural reinforcement (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2024) is the normative pillar of institutions, while its regulative pillar remains underdeveloped. For long-term sustainability, institutionalization may require stronger codification through formal policy documentation and systematic professional development. At the same time, the boarding school's immersive environment provides a unique structural advantage for value internalization, supporting arguments that educational change is more durable when embedded within organizational culture rather than confined to formal curriculum design (Cooney & Cohen, 2024). Thus, Eco-ELT in this context represents a culturally consolidated but administratively evolving model of sustainability integration in English language education.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the institutionalization of Eco-ELT in an Indonesian boarding school context operates through a culturally embedded and leadership-mediated process rather than through technocratic curriculum reform alone. Eco-ELT is sustained through the alignment of ideological vision, moral legitimation, pedagogical translation, and structural reinforcement within a total educational environment. The findings suggest that institutionalization in sustainability-oriented language education is not achieved merely by integrating environmental themes into instructional materials, but by embedding sustainability within the normative, cultural, and organizational pillars of the institution. By situating Eco-ELT within institutional theory and leadership dynamics, this study advances the conceptual understanding of how sustainability initiatives in ELT can move from programmatic experimentation to cultural consolidation.

The implications are twofold. Theoretically, the study contributes to the emerging field of Eco-ELT by reframing it as an institutional project rather than solely a pedagogical approach, thereby bridging sustainability education, institutional theory, and language policy enactment. Practically, the findings indicate that schools seeking to institutionalize sustainability within ELT must ensure coherence among leadership commitment, teacher agency, structural scaffolding, and policy codification. While strong organizational culture can facilitate early consolidation, long-term sustainability requires formalized policy articulation, systematic professional development, and distributed leadership ownership to prevent overreliance on charismatic authority. Future research may explore comparative institutional contexts to examine how varying organizational structures influence the depth and durability of Eco-ELT institutionalization.

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INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

This study adhered to established ethical principles in qualitative research. Informed consent was obtained from both the principal and the teacher, whose identities and sensitive information were protected throughout the research process. Narratives were presented honestly and respectfully, without reducing or distorting participants' experiences. Moreover, observational data were used carefully and proportionally to avoid any negative impact on the school community. These measures ensured that the entire research process was conducted ethically, transparently, and with full respect for the integrity of both the participants and the institution in which the study took place.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data utilized in this study cannot be made publicly available due to strict adherence to privacy concerns and ethical obligations that safeguard participant confidentiality. This ensures compliance with ethical research standards and data protection regulations. However, researchers or interested parties who require access to the dataset for validation or further analysis may request it. Such requests will be considered on a case-by-case basis and must be deemed reasonable. Importantly, approval from the appropriate institutional ethics review board is mandatory before any data can be shared, to ensure that the proposed use aligns with ethical guidelines and participant consent terms.

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The authors declare that generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used solely to assist in language refinement, structural organization, and editorial improvement of the manuscript. All conceptual development, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and final content decisions were conducted independently by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the content of this article.

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