



Ecological Silences: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Environmental Representation in Undergraduate ELT Textbooks of University of Calicut, Keralam

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20099461>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 21-04-2026

Published: 10-05-2026

Keywords:

*Critical Discourse
Analysis, Ecological
silences, ELT textbooks,
Environmental
representation, Higher
education in Keralam,
Language pedagogy*

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the notion of “ecological silences” in Undergraduate English Language Teaching (ELT: AEC for Sciences) textbooks prescribed by the University of Calicut. While environmental education has gained prominence across higher education curricula, its integration within ELT materials remains limited and uneven. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis and ecocritical theory, the study examines how environmental issues are represented, marginalized, or entirely omitted in selected college-level English textbooks. The analysis focuses on discursive patterns such as lexical choices, thematic framing, and agency attribution to uncover underlying ideological positions. The findings reveal that ecological concerns are often depoliticized, presented in abstract or global terms, and disconnected from local environmental realities such as floods, biodiversity loss, and coastal erosion in Keralam. These omissions contribute to a form of discursive erasure that restricts the development of ecological awareness and critical engagement among learners. By foregrounding these silences, the paper argues for a reorientation of ELT pedagogy towards integrating local ecological contexts and fostering environmental literacy. The study ultimately highlights the need for more inclusive, context-sensitive, and ecologically responsive language teaching materials in higher education.



Introduction

The growing urgency of environmental crises—ranging from climate change to biodiversity loss—has foregrounded the need for ecological awareness across all domains of education. This imperative is strongly reflected in global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4: Quality Education and SDG 13: Climate Action. These goals emphasize the role of education in fostering environmental awareness, sustainability, and responsible citizenship. However, while environmental concerns are often addressed through specialized courses in higher education, their integration into language education remains uneven and underexplored.

English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly at the undergraduate level, plays a crucial role in shaping students' interpretive frameworks, critical thinking, and engagement with contemporary global issues. Yet, ELT textbooks frequently prioritize linguistic competence and generalized themes over contextually relevant and critically engaged environmental discourse. This gap raises important questions about how language education contributes to—or limits—the broader objectives of sustainable development.

This paper examines the concept of “ecological silences” within ELT textbooks prescribed by the University of Calicut, referring to the absence, marginalization, or depoliticization of environmental issues in language learning materials. While Kerala has experienced significant ecological events—such as recurrent floods in 2018 and increasing environmental vulnerability—these lived realities often remain underrepresented in prescribed texts. Such omissions are not merely accidental but reflect broader ideological patterns that shape what is included, excluded, and normalized within pedagogical discourse.

Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and ecocritical perspectives, this study interrogates how ELT textbooks construct, dilute, or silence ecological narratives. By analyzing discursive strategies such as lexical selection, thematic emphasis, and agency attribution, the paper seeks to uncover the underlying assumptions that inform environmental representation. In doing so, it argues that the absence of localized and critical ecological content limits the development of environmental literacy and critical consciousness among learners—an outcome that runs counter to the transformative vision of the SDGs.

Thus, this study advocates for a reimagining of ELT pedagogy that aligns more closely with global sustainability goals by integrating ecological awareness, contextual relevance, and critical engagement into language teaching. Such an approach is essential not only for achieving educational objectives but also for cultivating environmentally responsible and socially conscious citizens.

Materials and Methods



This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine ecological representation in undergraduate English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks prescribed by the University of Calicut.

Materials

The primary data for the study consist of selected undergraduate ELT textbooks used in Arts and Science colleges affiliated with the University of Calicut under the AEC (Ability Enhancement Course) framework. These include prose essays, short stories, and comprehension passages from prescribed English language textbooks for Science stream, currently in circulation. Texts were purposively selected based on their relevance to themes of nature, environment, or human–nature relationships, as well as instances where such themes are notably absent despite contextual relevance.

Research Design

The study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach, combining Critical Discourse Analysis with ecocritical perspectives. CDA is used to uncover the ideological and discursive structures that shape environmental representation, while ecocriticism provides a framework to evaluate how nature and ecological concerns are constructed within literary and pedagogical texts.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by a three-dimensional CDA model adapted from Norman Fairclough:

1. Textual Analysis – examination of vocabulary, imagery, metaphors, and descriptive patterns related to the environment
2. Discursive Practice – analysis of how texts frame environmental issues (e.g., as neutral, technical, or critical)
3. Social Practice – interpretation of broader ideological implications, including anthropocentrism, sustainability discourse, and environmental ethics

Special attention is given to:

- lexical choices (e.g., presence or absence of ecological vocabulary)
- agency (who is represented as responsible for environmental action or damage)



- thematic emphasis and omission (identifying “ecological silences”)

Procedure

Selected texts were systematically coded and analyzed to identify recurring patterns of representation, marginalization, and absence. Instances of ecological discourse were categorized based on their thematic focus (global vs. local, descriptive vs. critical), and compared against Kerala’s ecological context to identify gaps between lived environmental realities and textbook content.

Results

The Critical Discourse Analysis of Undergraduate ELT textbooks (AEC for Sciences) prescribed by the University of Calicut reveals a consistent pattern of limited, uneven, and ideologically constrained environmental representation. The findings are organized under four key thematic areas:

1. Marginal Presence of Ecological Content

Environmental themes appear only sporadically across the selected texts. When present, they are typically confined to isolated essays or descriptive passages rather than integrated across the curriculum. A majority of the texts prioritize universal, human-centered themes such as personal growth, morality, or cultural identity, with minimal engagement with ecological concerns. This indicates that environmental discourse remains peripheral rather than foundational within ELT materials.

2. Depoliticized and Abstract Framing

Where ecological issues are addressed, they are often framed in neutral, generalized, or decontextualized terms. Topics such as pollution or conservation are presented as global concerns without reference to specific socio-political contexts. There is little acknowledgment of structural causes, such as industrial practices or policy failures. This results in a sanitized discourse that avoids conflict, responsibility, or critique.

3. Absence of Local Ecological Realities

A significant finding is the near-total absence of Kerala-specific environmental contexts, including recurring floods, biodiversity threats in the Western Ghats, and coastal erosion. The lack of locally grounded narratives creates a disconnect between students’ lived experiences and the content they engage with in the classroom. This constitutes a key dimension of what this study terms “ecological silences.”



4. Anthropocentric Orientation and Limited Agency

The analysis shows a dominant anthropocentric perspective, where nature is depicted primarily as a resource or backdrop for human activity. Non-human entities are rarely given agency or voice. Moreover, responsibility for environmental protection is often framed at the level of individual behavior (e.g., “save trees,” “reduce waste”), rather than systemic or collective action. This limits the development of critical ecological thinking.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight a significant disjunction between the environmental imperatives of contemporary education and the discursive practices embedded in Undergraduate ELT: AEC for Sciences textbooks prescribed by the University of Calicut. While global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals call for the integration of sustainability into all forms of education, the analyzed texts reveal a limited alignment with goals such as SDG 4: Quality Education and SDG 13: Climate Action. The presence of ecological silences within ELT materials suggests that language education has not yet fully embraced its role in fostering environmental consciousness and critical ecological literacy.

From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, the marginal and depoliticized representation of environmental issues reflects an underlying ideological tendency to neutralize ecological crises. By framing environmental concerns in abstract and universal terms, the textbooks obscure the socio-political and economic dimensions of environmental degradation. This aligns with broader critiques in ecocritical scholarship, which argue that such representations reinforce anthropocentric and status-quo-oriented narratives, limiting opportunities for critical engagement and transformative learning.

A particularly striking aspect of the findings is the absence of localized ecological realities. In a region like Kerala—marked by recurrent floods, fragile ecosystems, and biodiversity-rich landscapes—the omission of context-specific environmental discourse creates a pedagogical disconnect. Students are positioned as passive recipients of generalized knowledge rather than active interpreters of their immediate ecological surroundings. This gap undermines the potential of ELT to function as a site of place-based learning, which is crucial for developing meaningful environmental awareness.

Furthermore, the emphasis on individual responsibility, rather than systemic or collective accountability, narrows the scope of environmental understanding. By promoting behavioral change without addressing structural causes, the textbooks risk reducing sustainability to a set of personal ethics rather than a



complex socio-political issue. This finding is particularly relevant in light of the SDGs' emphasis on informed, critical, and participatory citizenship.

The concept of “ecological silences,” therefore, extends beyond mere absence; it represents a form of discursive regulation that shapes what learners are encouraged to think, question, and imagine about the environment. These silences limit the transformative potential of ELT by excluding narratives of environmental justice, local knowledge systems, and community-based ecological practices.

In response, this study argues for a reorientation of ELT pedagogy towards a more ecologically responsive and critically engaged framework. Integrating local environmental contexts, encouraging critical discussion of ecological issues, and diversifying textual representations can help bridge the gap between language learning and sustainability education. Such an approach not only aligns ELT with global development goals but also empowers learners to become active participants in addressing environmental challenges.

Ultimately, addressing ecological silences in ELT is not simply a curricular adjustment but a pedagogical necessity in an era defined by environmental uncertainty.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the presence of “ecological silences” in Undergraduate ELT: AEC for Sciences textbooks prescribed by the University of Calicut, using Critical Discourse Analysis and ecocritical perspectives. The findings demonstrate that environmental representation within these materials is not only limited but also shaped by patterns of marginalization, abstraction, and omission. Ecological issues, when included, are often depoliticized and detached from local realities, while significant environmental concerns specific to Kerala remain largely absent. Such discursive gaps restrict the potential of ELT to foster meaningful ecological awareness and critical engagement among learners.

These findings have important implications for both pedagogy and curriculum design. In the context of global educational priorities articulated by the United Nations—particularly SDG 4: Quality Education and SDG 13: Climate Action—language education must move beyond a narrow focus on linguistic competence to embrace its role in promoting sustainability and responsible citizenship. Addressing ecological silences requires a deliberate effort to integrate local environmental contexts, incorporate diverse ecological narratives, and encourage critical inquiry into environmental issues.



The study underscores the need for a shift towards a more inclusive, context-sensitive, and ecologically responsive ELT framework. This involves not only revising textbook content but also rethinking pedagogical practices to enable learners to connect language with lived environmental experiences. Future research may extend this work by incorporating classroom-based studies, learner responses, and comparative analyses across universities.

In an era of escalating environmental crises, ELT cannot remain discursively neutral. Instead, it must actively contribute to the cultivation of environmentally aware, critically engaged, and socially responsible individuals.

Acknowledgements

Sincere gratitude is expressed to the University of Calicut for providing access to the Undergraduate ELT syllabus and prescribed materials that formed the basis of this study. The author also acknowledges the valuable insights gained from interactions with teachers and peers in the field of English Language Teaching, whose discussions helped refine the conceptual and analytical direction of this research.

Special thanks are extended to academic mentors and colleagues for their constructive feedback and encouragement throughout the development of this paper. The intellectual support drawn from ongoing research in ecocriticism, Critical Discourse Analysis, and language pedagogy has been instrumental in shaping the arguments presented here.

The author is also grateful to the broader scholarly community working towards integrating sustainability and education, particularly in alignment with the initiatives of the United Nations, which continue to inspire research at the intersection of language, environment, and social responsibility.

Any limitations or errors in this study remain the sole responsibility of the author.

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