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Words that Empower: Developing Communication and Soft Skills through Natural Resources in the English Language Classroom

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ABSTRACT: Concerns about the environment, the reduction in biodiversity, and the increasing levels of stress among students have brought the issue of environmentalism to the forefront of discussions in language education. In this paper, I look at how teaching materials that contain information about natural resources can contribute to the improvement of students' language skills and their mental health. I draw on Attention Restoration Theory (ART), biophilia theory, Eco linguistics, and Eco-ELT approaches to integrate findings from research on exposure to nature, nature journaling, and literature with ecological subjects. The results show that nature-based teaching methods allow for improving students' language skills with the positive effects of decreasing stress and anxiety levels, returning attention, and increasing biophilia. The paper concludes with the presentation of the challenges associated with the implementation of these methods in the classroom and the recommendations for future studies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ecologically and psychologically, the 21st-century classroom is far from insulated from what is happening in the world. As students join the English language class, they carry along a host of burdens such as climate anxiety, screen fatigue, and academic pressure while public discourse increasingly focuses on the problems of biodiversity loss and environmental crisis. Here the English language class continues to represent a unique and dynamic place. The fact is that language is never neutral in transmitting information; it influences perceptions, creates emotions, and establishes the learner's position in relation to the world (Micalay-Hurtado and Poole, 2022). This means that when learners gradually gain knowledge of the vocabulary, texts, and tasks that contain references to natural resources such as water, forests, soil, air, sunlight flora, and fauna, and their impact on human health, the English language class becomes a powerful tool for cognitive development and emotional healing.

In this article, the author explores the relationship among three concepts that are often not discussed together: the language used to describe natural resources, the established positive effects of exposure to nature on health, and the teaching of English as a foreign language. The main question raised in this research is how to implement "the healing words" into the teaching of languages. The author believes that constant attention to the concepts of natural resources and ecological health will help students improve their language skills and, at the same time, improve their emotional state as well as their connection with nature and their sense of belonging to it. The structure of the article is as follows: theoretical background of the study, review of literature that connects natural resources, language and health; the discussion of classroom practices; identification of tensions and limitations; and conclusions of the research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this article, four theories are mentioned, which form the basis for the argument made. These are Attention Restoration Theory (ART), biophilia hypothesis, eco-linguistics and critical eco-awareness language, and ecological understanding of well-being in ELT.

2.1 Attention Restoration Theory

Attention Restoration Theory was created by Stephen and Rachel Kaplan in 1989. This theory states that directed attention is limited resource. Continuous use of it causes mental fatigue, but nature contact helps in restoring it. In a restorative environment, one should be away from usual pressure, there should be enough space for the individual to feel captivated, and the environment should be compatible in terms of natural inclination. The essence of the theory comprises four key parameters that ensure restoration: first, being away from reality; second, being in a restorative environment; and third, environment being in tune with the natural inclination of the person, and soft fascination. The systematic review of artworks confirms the idea that nature contact helps restore the resources of attention. In addition, the systematic nature of the research facilitates the understanding of the mechanisms behind the restoration process of attention (Ohly et al., 2016). Moreover, it has been stated that most of the studies have different research methodology, and the reasons for such differences have not been identified. It is important to say that some of the studies still highlight the significance of ART as one of the major theories explaining restorative role of nature in this sphere (A Review of Attention Restoration Theory, 2024). People engaged in an educational process can make use of the conclusions drawn from ART. It is assumed that a brief interaction with nature may serve as a restorative remedy for maintaining concentration required for the language process, regardless of the particular form it takes.

2.2 The Biophilia Hypothesis

The hypothesis of biophilia, which is associated with E. O. Wilson, who coined the term, has been subsequently developed by Kellert. According to this hypothesis, people are endowed with an instinctive tendency for the natural world owing to the evolutionary process (Wilson, 1984; Kellert & Wilson, 1993). Where ART addresses the cognitive mechanics of restoration, biophilia addresses its affective and motivational dimension: contact with, and language about, the natural world is theorized to satisfy a basic psychological need, strengthen emotional bonds with nonhuman life, and counteract what Wilson termed "biophobia," an alienation from or aversion to nature. Cultivating biophilic attitudes through vocabulary, imagery, and experiential tasks in the language classroom offers one accessible route to this affective connection, particularly for learners with limited direct access to wild or semi-wild landscapes.

2.3 Eco linguistics and Eco-ELT

Eco linguistics examines how language constructs — and can reconstruct — the relationship between humans and the more-than-human world, treating discourse itself as a site where ecologically harmful or ecologically beneficial "stories we live by" are reproduced or contested. Building on this foundation, eco-critical language awareness (eco-CLA) argues that a critical-language-awareness approach to ELT which ignores the urgency of the climate crisis is incomplete, and proposes that ELT practices be scrutinized for the ideologies of nature they normalize while also being mobilized toward ecological, social, and linguistic justice (Micalay-Hurtado & Poole, 2022). A parallel and increasingly well-documented strand of work, generally labelled Eco-ELT, traces its own developmental arc: early, largely theoretical proposals for embedding ecological themes in language teaching gave way, from around 2022 onward, to more transformative and empirically grounded approaches that explicitly incorporate eco-critical language awareness and Eco linguistic analysis into classroom practice (Frontiers in Education systematic review, 2025). According to a wider systematic investigation of sustainability-oriented ELT research from 2013 to 2023, Eco linguistics acts as a fundamental lens through which environmental problems are incorporated into cross-disciplinary

curricula, new classroom exercises, and innovated assessment approaches (Sustainability in ELT: SDG Review, 2024). The "Eco-English" research elaborates this idea in vocation illustrations and subject-based teaching, stating that Eco linguistics and sustainability-focused curricula enhance ecological vocabulary use, confidence in talking about ecological issues, and sense of being accountable for one's environment among learners (Eco-English: Cultivating Language Skills, 2025). All these indicate that literature and creative texts serve as a foundation for empathy, critical thinking, and ecological identity development in language learning.

2.4 Ecological Well-Being in ELT

The concept of well-being in English Language Teaching has recently shifted from an individualized understanding to an ecologically conceptualization. As pointed out by Sarah Mercer, "well-being is a fundamental human right that should inform all education, and it cannot be viewed as limited only to the personal sphere" (Mercer, 2021). It must be understood in a social context, operating in the environment created by the interaction between students, teachers, materials, institutions, and the environment. Nature-based education eliminates the need to improve the cognitive aspect of learning through addressing emotions like stress, fear, and motivation. Scholars have recently developed many studies that analyse how Eco linguistics can help educators design language activities based on ideas of ecology and teach students ecological well-being. The true essence of conversations about ART and biophilia is that they are based on the same conclusion that speaking exercises conducted in nature help people restore their attention, develop love for nature, and increase their linguistic skills and communicative competence.

3. NATURAL RESOURCES, LANGUAGE, AND HEALTH IN THE LITERATURE

Literature derived from practical experience as well as research conducted in Green or Eco ELT indicates that environmental subject matter enhances language learning on several fronts simultaneously. Vocabulary sets related to natural resources-habitat, renewable, and non-renewable resources, water cycle, biodiversity, pollution routes-are largely included in English Student Learning (ESL) and English as Foreign Language (EFL) materials and contribute to learning content and developing vocabulary at the same time. Activities done outdoors and those based on specific locations (variations of tree observance, nature photography combined with descriptive writing, and litter collection related to persuasive writing) enable students to get information outside and make meanings of abstract vocabulary with concrete reference as far as the learning process goes.

Nature journaling and writing about nature bring particularly good results in the mentioned context. In their articles, researchers emphasize that the use of outdoor journals helps students improve their vocabulary, express themselves in descriptive and figurative language, as well as show commitment to place (Edutopia: Benefits of Nature Journaling, 2024). Discipline-specific accounts from English-language-arts classrooms similarly find that nature journaling improves vocabulary and language skills, enhances close reading and comprehension, and helps students develop voice and a tangible sense of place in their writing (Edutopia: Nature Journaling in English Class, 2025). A 2023 discipline review focused on high-school biology and environmental-science classrooms concludes that sustained nature journaling is associated with gains in literacy and critical thinking, stronger connection to local landscapes, and reduced anxiety and depressive symptoms among adolescents (Bollich, 2023, cited in ERIC). For English-language learners specifically, journaling in outdoor settings appears to support vocabulary acquisition through concrete labelling, multimodal (visual, kinaesthetic, semantic) language use, and increased confidence for students who struggle with more decontextualized grammar instruction.

Broader public-health evidence supports the plausibility of these classroom-level findings. A systematic review and meta-analysis of shinrin-yoku (forest bathing) found that salivary cortisol — a standard biomarker of physiological stress — was significantly lower in forest-exposure groups than in urban-control groups both before and after intervention across the pooled studies examined (Antonelli, Barbieri & Donelli, 2019), while a companion systematic review and meta-analysis focused specifically on mental-health outcomes reported that shinrin-yoku produced short-term reductions in symptoms, with particularly consistent effects on anxiety (Effects of Shinrin-Yoku on Mental Health, meta-analysis). At the population level, systematic reviews of green-space exposure and adolescent mental well-being report consistent associations between greater access to green space and reduced stress, improved mood, fewer depressive symptoms, and decreased psychological distress, albeit with heterogeneity in how green space and well-being are measured across the underlying studies (Green Space and Adolescents' Mental Well-Being, systematic review). A parallel review focused on children and adolescents found a consistent beneficial association between green-space exposure and emotional and behavioral difficulties, particularly hyperactivity and inattention, with more limited but still favorable evidence for depressive symptoms in older adolescents (Green Space Exposure

and Children's Mental Health, review), and a 2023 meta-analysis of depression and anxiety outcomes concluded that the magnitude of anxiety relief from natural exposure varies with both duration of exposure and the age of participants (Green Space Exposure on Depression and Anxiety, meta-analysis, 2023). When such restorative experiences are mediated by language tasks — observation, description, reflection, discussion — the dual benefit of linguistic practice and restorative contact becomes available both inside and beyond the classroom walls.

Literature and creative writing add to this effect. Eco-centred poetry, short stories, and speculative fiction have the ability to create empathy regarding the issues surrounding ecology. Through works of literature, both reading and writing skills can be sharpened while also raising awareness of ecological issues and encouraging discussions about ecological interconnectedness. Film and other multimedia resources can be considered similar instruments in fostering ecological awareness in EFL education.

4. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CLASSROOM APPROACHES

A well-organised educational philosophy is one which combines explicit language outcomes with the learning environment, creating a framework where learners will develop their relationship with nature through health-related reflection. Five strands are identified from the research done in the preceding sections of this paper.

4.1 Vocabulary and Discourse Work

The literature shows that there are specific words that are used to talk about natural-resources, such as renewable and non-renewable, the concepts of habitat and ecosystem services, as well as pollution pathways. By giving explicit instruction in these words, learners can analyse how they are represented in the textbook and other forms of media. Learners can then identify collocations and metaphorical frames through which the natural world is viewed as an inert resource, or as an interdependent living system. This critical analysis of language provides a practical example of the Eco linguistic awareness discussed by eco-CLA (Mica lay-Hurtado & Poole, 2022).

4.2 Nature Journaling and Observational Writing

Teachers can use short and regular outdoor or window-based observation intervals, followed by written descriptive, reflective, or creative responses, to direct their focus on the development of specific language features — sensory adjectives, the present continuous tense for processes currently in progress, and comparative structures. At the same time, these structured observations create opportunities for soft fascination and recovery due to focused attention (ART) as previously described (Ohly et al., 2016). One example of a straightforward protocol to enhance engagement and improve classroom focus is to have students spend 20-30-minute intervals (20-30 minutes) at a designated place (sit spot) observing and documenting nature with structured observations before writing about it (Edutopia: Benefits of Nature Journals, 2024).

4.3 Literature and Multimodal Texts

Selecting thoughtfully poetry, short stories, or extracts that show how humans relate to nature and the effects of that relationship on their health — for example, pollution, how landscapes can help you recover from illness (healing), and the use of traditional ecological knowledge — encompasses many themes. All these examples give us ways to create discussions and writing activities with students; they will connect their language skill-building activities with activities relating to the health of our planet and themselves.

4.4 Project-Based and Place-Based Learning

Local inquiry into the natural environment (water quality, green spaces in urban areas, Indigenous perspectives of the land, and health) was conducted and documented via written English, research skills, academic writing, and oral presentations while engaging directly with their environment. Classroom instruction provided structured time for learning through direct contact with outdoors as well as through structured classroom instruction that allowed students to reflect on their experiences and learnings through the written word.

4.5 Well-Being Integration

The explicit connection between activities and both personal and collective health in terms of how spending time outside makes you feel or how protecting the forests and clean water has a positive effect on our overall health creates a way to see how we use language as both a way to communicate and a tool for self-awareness and agency. By creating these connections between

activities and collective health, we can address Mercer's assertion that we should view well-being throughout the entire ELT ecology and not just for the individual learner (Mercer, 2021).

While implementing these ideas, we must remain aware of our context. In urban communities, it may be difficult to make connections to nearby parks, to look out of windows to see trees, or to have indoor plants. In these situations, urban schools may need to use virtual access to nature. For rural communities, however, there are many opportunities to make these connections. The teachers need to model biophilic attitudes by considering the learners' emotional reactions to the materials being presented. The emotional reactions of the students to such topics as climate-related anxiety, however, are not an abstraction for many learners; they are part of their lives and ongoing distress.

5. DISCUSSION

The data examined indicate a synergistic relationship and not simply an additive relationship between nature-related language tasks and their effect on language outcomes (i.e., vocabulary depth, descriptive accuracy), as well as reducing student anxiety through engagement as opposed to simply applying these tasks to enhance learning). Therefore, contact with nature, as evidenced by its restorative properties, will likely have positive effects on the cognitive and emotional factors associated with effective learning. For example, attention restoration theory explains how contact with outdoor settings and nature-related tasks affects students' attentional capacity (A Review of Attention Restoration Theory, 2024). Biophilia supports the development of emotional commitment and encourages continued motivation to engage in the task over extended periods of time. Eco linguistics informs educators on how they can help students turn their enjoyment of nature into critical thinking and action.

There are a number of barriers that impact the ability of teachers to grow in their beliefs and use Eco-ELT in an engaging and effective manner. Teachers' ability to access and utilize high-quality outdoor environments for their pedagogy may depend on their area of residence and their economic circumstances. Additionally, many teachers have not received qualified training in Eco-ELT or outdoor pedagogy. Systematic reviews of the literature regarding the use of Eco-ELT have also determined that many of the ways in which Eco-ELT is currently being studied remain theoretical in nature and have relied on case studies of small-scale operations rather than receiving empirical validation from larger study samples (Frontiers in Education systemic review, 2025). Another sign of friction between classroom practice and school system accountability is seen in testing systems; in most cases, teachers are directed to build units that measure the progress of students' discrete and testable language skills, while the Eco-ELT pedagogy aims to build nature-connectedness, decrease anxiety, and cultivate an ecological identity within their students.

However, even small interventions seem to produce measurable results; short journaling sessions, carefully selected eco-themed texts, or focused critical vocabulary work don't need an entire redesign of the curriculum to promote engagement and affective gains. The incremental nature of this type of intervention is consistent with the overall objectives of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and the increasing recognition that learner and teacher well-being is a key component of effective language teaching within the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) (Mercer, 2021). Future research could include longitudinal studies following students' language abilities in addition to other independent measures of nature connectedness or well-being; more systematic comparisons of different text types and activity formats; and culturally appropriate adaptations tested in a variety of educational settings, including those with minimal opportunities for experiencing natural or semi-natural outdoor environments.

6. CONCLUSION

Natural resources have important pedagogical value if they relate to human health. In English classes, the use of words that pertain to natural resources can build vocabulary and discourse competence, restore depleted attention, decrease anxiety, promote a biophilic connection, and enhance ecological awareness (biophilia theory). These positive effects may be validated by Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan, 1995), the biophilia hypothesis, eco-linguistic research (Micalay-Hurtado & Poole, 2022) and growing research in public health about nature contact (Antonelli, Barbieri & Donelli, 2019). In other words, when educators treat language as a means of providing insight into both a learner's relationship with the living world and the context of words, the educator can create learning experiences that are both intellectually challenging and restorative. Thus, an English classroom provides an opportunity for the development of language and human flourishing to create a positive feedback loop where language helps a learner communicate and also helps them reconnect, recover and care.

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