

Teacher perspectives on addressing environmental issues in ELT

Abstract

In this article, we report on a mixed-method study which investigated teachers' attitudes towards and experiences with teaching environmental issues within their ELT classes. Given the rising importance of ecoliteracy and its inclusion as a transversal learning objective for all subjects in many national state curricula, it is critically important to understand how ELT educators can be best supported in addressing simultaneously both linguistic and environmental-related teaching goals. Data were collected via an online international survey (n=91) and a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews (n=5). Analysis of the data reveals the specific strategies ELT teachers employ when integrating environmental issues alongside linguistic issues, what their motivations for doing so are, what resources and materials they use, and what challenges they face. The article offers valuable insights into the factors which facilitate the sustainable and effective teaching of both language and environmental issues in diverse ELT contexts across the globe.

Introduction

Environmental issues are increasingly present in curricula across the globe. Yet, there has been relatively little research exploring how they are actually being addressed in practice. Within ELT specifically, although there have been a number of practical developments, there is as yet no research to understand the challenges teachers face and support they would need in order to be able to address environmental issues alongside language skills in a sustainable way. Our aim in this study is to learn from the experiences of teachers already committed to teaching this dual-focused approach, and enable us to create an agenda for practice and future research.

Addressing environmental issues in ELT

Addressing global issues in education is not new. As Cates points out, 'the education profession has always recognized its unique responsibility in promoting peace, justice, and an active concern for the world's problems' (Cates 1990: 3) Right now, one of the biggest problems facing the world is that of the climate crisis. Some educators suggest that there is a moral obligation to teach environmental issues. Kuttner (2019: 47) argued, 'as sustainability-related issues will be among the most pressing issues future generations will have to deal with, teachers of individual subjects are, to some extent, morally obligated to cope with the matter accordingly and incorporate the topic of sustainability into their teaching.' In terms of educational policy, many curricula across the globe already include an expectation that environmental issues will be addressed in all school subjects (Hanisch, Rank & Seeber 2014: 662). However, there tends to be an inconsistent and unsystematic approach in how this is actively and explicitly supported in teacher education programmes, teaching materials, and measured teaching outcomes. Instead, whether it is implemented at all tends to depend strongly on the innovation and commitment of individual educators, despite the

expectation in many education systems that ALL educators will address environmental issues (Taylor et al. 2019). A review of published research suggests that if teachers are addressing these issues, it is typically through bottom-up initiatives or individual projects in a range of contexts (Goulah & Katunich 2020; Putri 2018). Often most of these projects implement a place-based pedagogy where one of the main aims is to foster empathy with, and knowledge of, the immediate environmental context in order to generate an awareness of the interconnected nature of complex ecosystems; both core competencies in developing environmental or eco-literacy (Hollweg et al. 2011).

In respect to ELT, due to its status as a lingua franca, English plays an important role in providing students with language and ideas to actively participate in global discussions. In ELT, educators typically enjoy a relatively high degree of autonomy, even within the bounds of mandated curricula, to address a wide range of topics and themes in order to develop learners' linguistic competences. This often leaves scope for educators to integrate a range of topics including environmental issues and global citizenship themes within their regular teaching. Indeed, integrating dual educational objectives such as global skills alongside language competences (e.g. Mercer et al. 2019) is gaining traction inspired by experiences in CLIL.

In this study, we seek to understand more fully what English teachers are doing in practice, what support they feel they have to teach environmental issues in ELT, what challenges they face, and what advice they have for other educators.

Research methodology

This mixed-method study drew on international survey data (n = 91) as well as five in-depth qualitative interviews with volunteers. The study took a purposeful sampling approach and deliberately targeted members of the online community 'ELT Footprint'. This is an award-winning (ELTons), not-for-profit community of EFL educators interested in teaching environmental issues. There is no formal membership of this community, but people join the group on Facebook or follow its website and Twitter feeds. It has around 4,000 people who are engaged passively or actively with this community. It can be assumed that as 'members' of the ELT Footprint, they have an inherent interest in this topic and may/may not have teaching experience in this area. In this study, our aim was to understand the profile of teachers who are interested in this field, what kinds of support they might need to integrate environmental issues into their English classes as well as possible obstacles to doing so. Calls for participation were circulated via all ELT Footprint online outlets.

The first data collection tool was an online survey using LimeSurvey which was published online from 4 June to 1 July 2021 with ethics permissions obtained from the University of Graz. The questionnaire is divided into four sections and included questions about the participants' biodata and current professional experiences; their awareness of terminology and frameworks; the support they obtain from curriculum, syllabus, and teaching materials; their reported practices and experiences in the classroom; as well as their attitudes towards

environmental issues in ELT. They were also asked their rationale for joining the ELT Footprint Community. No identifying data were collected, and participation was on a voluntary opt-in basis. Below is an overview of the profile of participants (n=91). The survey data was analysed to provide descriptive statistics using Excel.

Table 1: Survey participants.

Descriptor	Number of participants
Location	Europe: 73 Asia: 23 South America: 19 Africa: 7 Australia: 1 North America: 1
Age	18-25: 2 26-35: 14 36-45: 44 46-55: 42 56-65: 17 65+: 3 No answer: 2
Gender	Male: 31 Female: 89 Non-binary: 0 Rather not say: 3 Other: 0 No answer: 1
Years of teaching experience	0-3: 5 4-7: 7 8-15: 34 16-23: 33 24-31: 31 31+: 14 No answer: 0
Pre-service or in-service training on environmental issues	Yes: 18 No: 106 No answer: 0
Teaching level	Early years: 18 Primary: 46 Secondary: 68 Tertiary: 46 Adult education: 63

	No answer: 0
Educational context(s)	State education system: 37 Private education system: 33 Language institute, language school, or similar: 51 Teacher education contexts: 31 State university: 20 Private university: 13 Business, finance, medical, military, or similar: 5 Other: 5 No answer: 0
Qualification for teaching English	A teaching qualification to teach English in a national Education system: 49 TESOL qualification (e.g., CELTA, DELTA, Trinity Cert, etc.): 52 Both: 14 None: 4

In the survey as well as via an open call, we requested volunteers to take part in a semi-structured interview to explore themes emerging from the survey data in more depth. Interviews were audio-recorded and anonymised at the point of transcription. Participants were asked about their attitudes and experiences in practice as well as their advice for others. The interview protocol can be found in the Appendix. The biodata of the five interviewee volunteers can be found below.

Table 2: Interviewees' biodata (All names are pseudonyms).

Participant	Biodata
Alan	Gender: Male Location: Japan
Boris	Gender: Male Location: Czech Republic
Cala	Gender: Female Location: Morocco
Deliah	Gender: Female Location: Spain
Edward	Gender: Male Location: Spain

The interviews created a corpus of approximately 30,992 words which were analysed inductively using the data management software Atlas.ti. The data were analysed for the core

themes raised by the protocol, but the analysis remained close to the data to allow other possible topics to emerge and the uniqueness of individual experiences to remain salient.

Findings

The survey findings

The survey data revealed the teachers' personal and professional interest in including an environmental focus, yet they also highlight the perceived dearth of resources, frameworks, and training available to support such an approach in the ELT context.

Motivation for integrating environmental issues in ELT

Teachers' motivation for integrating lessons on the environment into ELT was primarily to raise awareness and encourage action in the community. Responses to the question, *What do you hope to achieve by addressing environmental issues in your ELT classroom?* (Figure 1) can be categorised into five main themes: raising awareness or consciousness of environmental issues, discussing and thinking critically about the topic, and developing deeper insights (n=59); this was often associated with the need for taking action (n=21); to educate future citizens and future-proof the survival of the species and / or planet (n=9); and bringing about a change in attitudes (n=9); supported by increased knowledge, language, skills and know-how for transformative engagement in the community (n=8). In the open-ended responses after each set of questions, one respondent expressed the need to mainstream environmental issues in the classroom, 'normalise it - make it part of the daily conversation rather than that throwaway unit on polar bears', and one teacher made reference to the SDG goal of climate action.

What do you hope to achieve by addressing environmental issues in your ELT classroom?

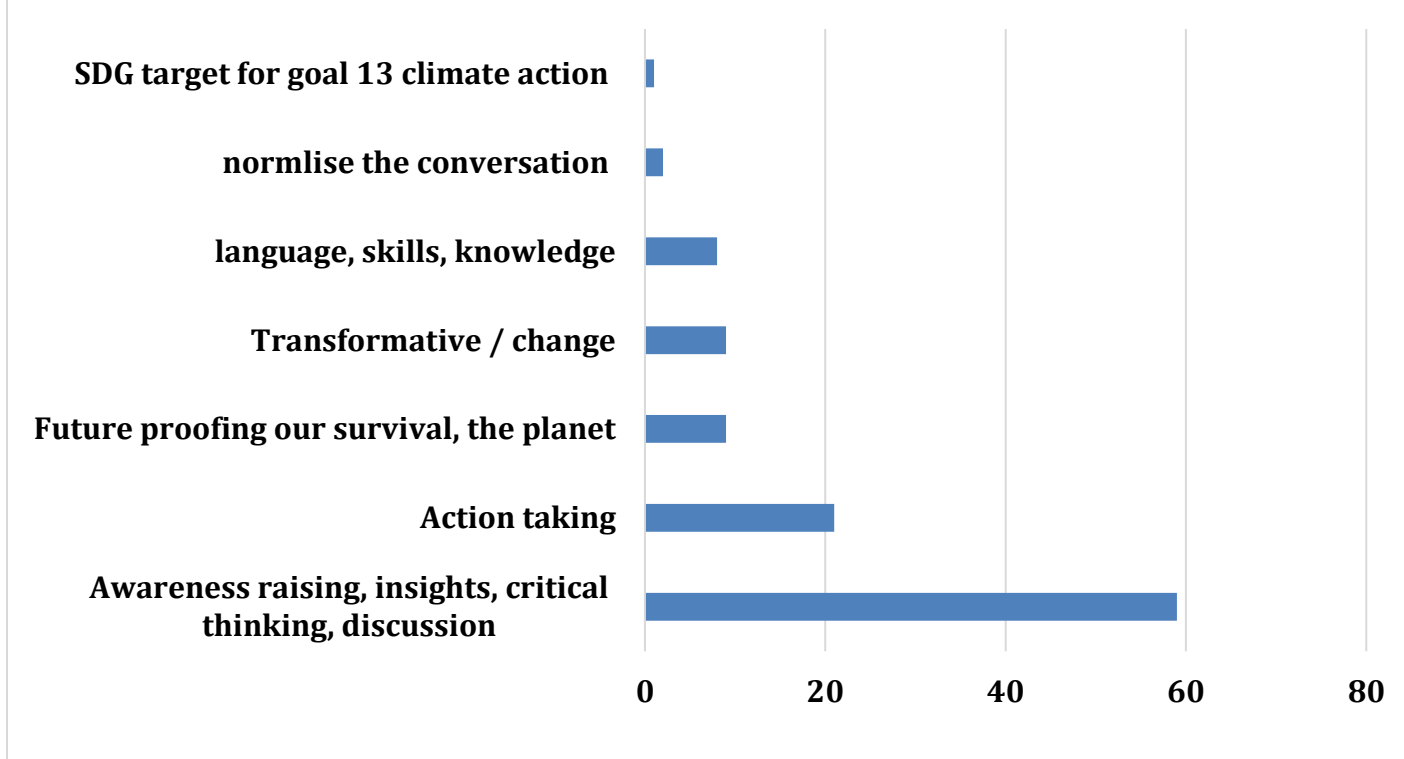


Figure 1: Teacher motives for addressing environmental issues in ELT.

References to the SDGs also arose in teachers' responses to the following question: *Do you use any environmental competence frameworks in your teaching?* 93% of teachers reported not using any framework at all to guide their teaching. However, out of the 7% who claimed to use a framework, the SDGs was the only specific example of an environmental framework named by two teachers.

Lack of support, adequate materials, and training

Questions related to support, training, and resources highlighted the structural gaps in respect to teaching this topic within ELT. In response to *What kinds of support for teaching environmental issues in ELT do you have in your context?* 70,6% of teachers do not feel they have enough support to develop this area in ELT (Figure 2). Only four teachers claim to have received any formal training. However, teachers find support by taking part in online courses and training, membership of environmental groups, such as ELT Footprint, and seeking support from colleagues.

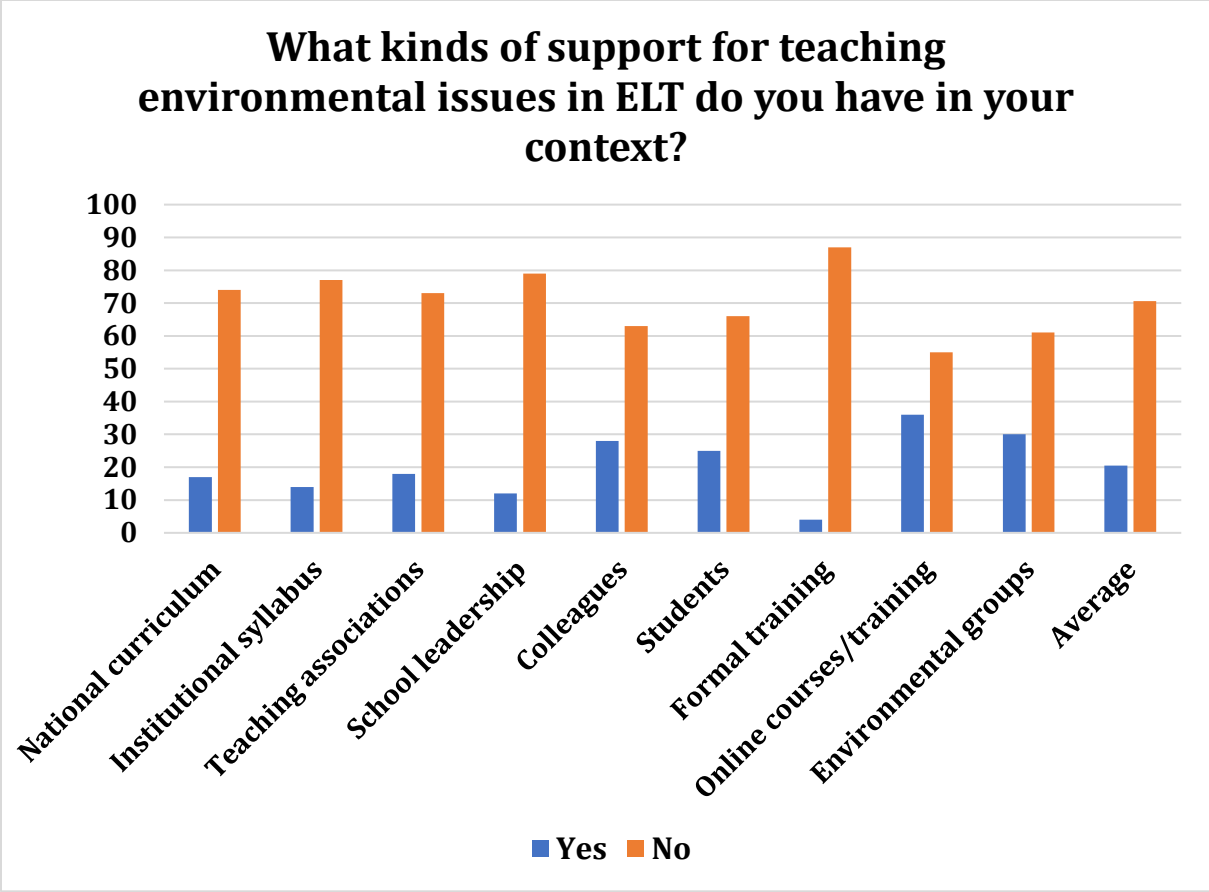


Figure 2: Support for teaching environmental issues in ELT in teachers' contexts.

In terms of course books, 74,7% of the teachers report not using a course book at all when addressing environmental issues. When course books are used (n=23), they are prescribed by the curriculum or institution (n=19), and mostly not chosen specifically for their focus on environmental issues (n=21). The survey data suggest the teachers feel these offer limited support and opportunities for working on environmental issues. Figure 3 describes the ways in which environmental issues are addressed in course books. Teachers reported that their coursebook includes the topic in one or more units (yes = 17; no = 6), but there is little scope of inclusion beyond that: only one person reported having a whole book on environmental issues available and another one a book with environmental issues in each unit.

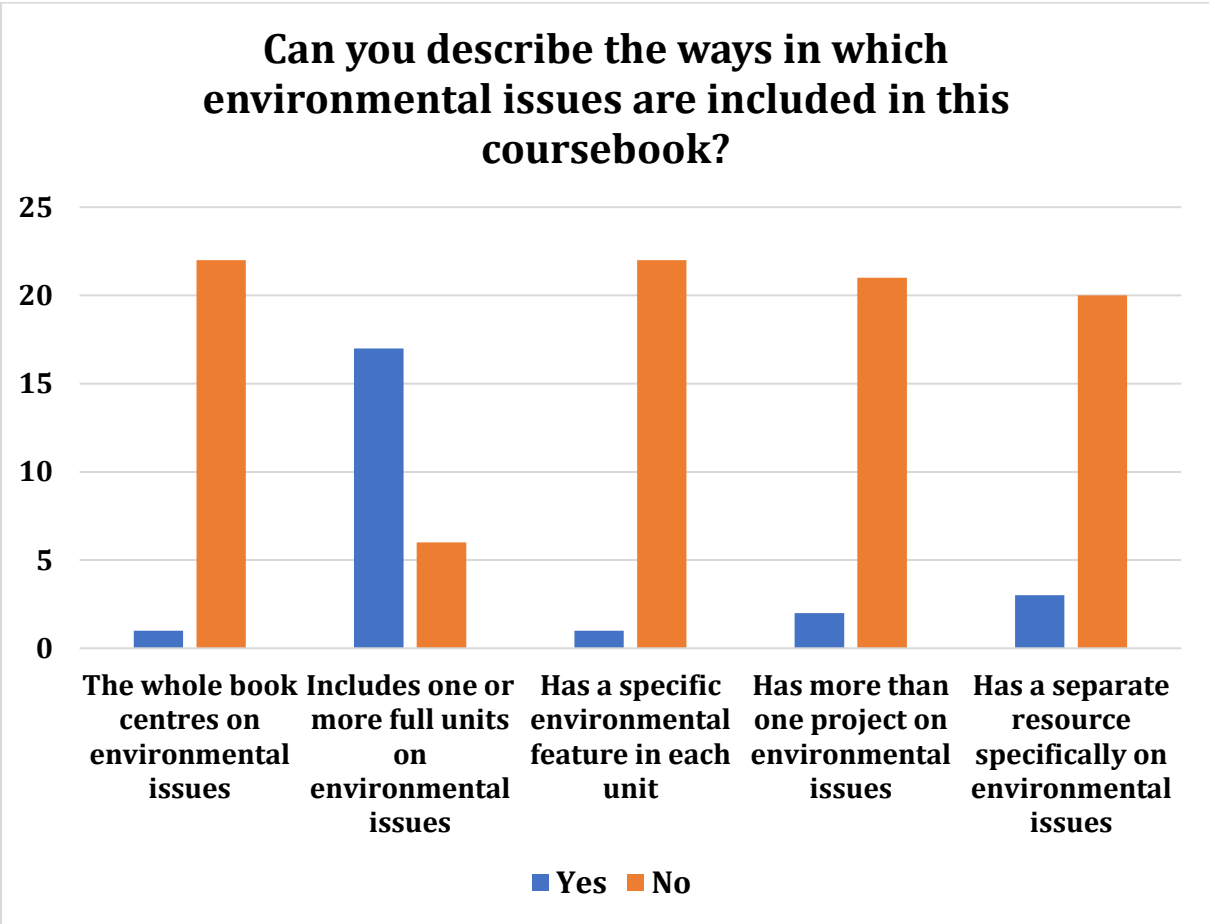


Figure 3: The ways in which environmental issues are included in the coursebooks.

There was great diversity in how teachers reported sourcing materials for addressing environmental issues (Figure 4). The majority of teachers report utilising online materials (n=75) or creating their own materials (n=57). However, a sizeable number (n=41) also used materials created by international or national non-profit organisations, cross-curricular materials (n=36) as well as drawing on students as inspiration (n = 14) and employing literature (n = 19) among others.

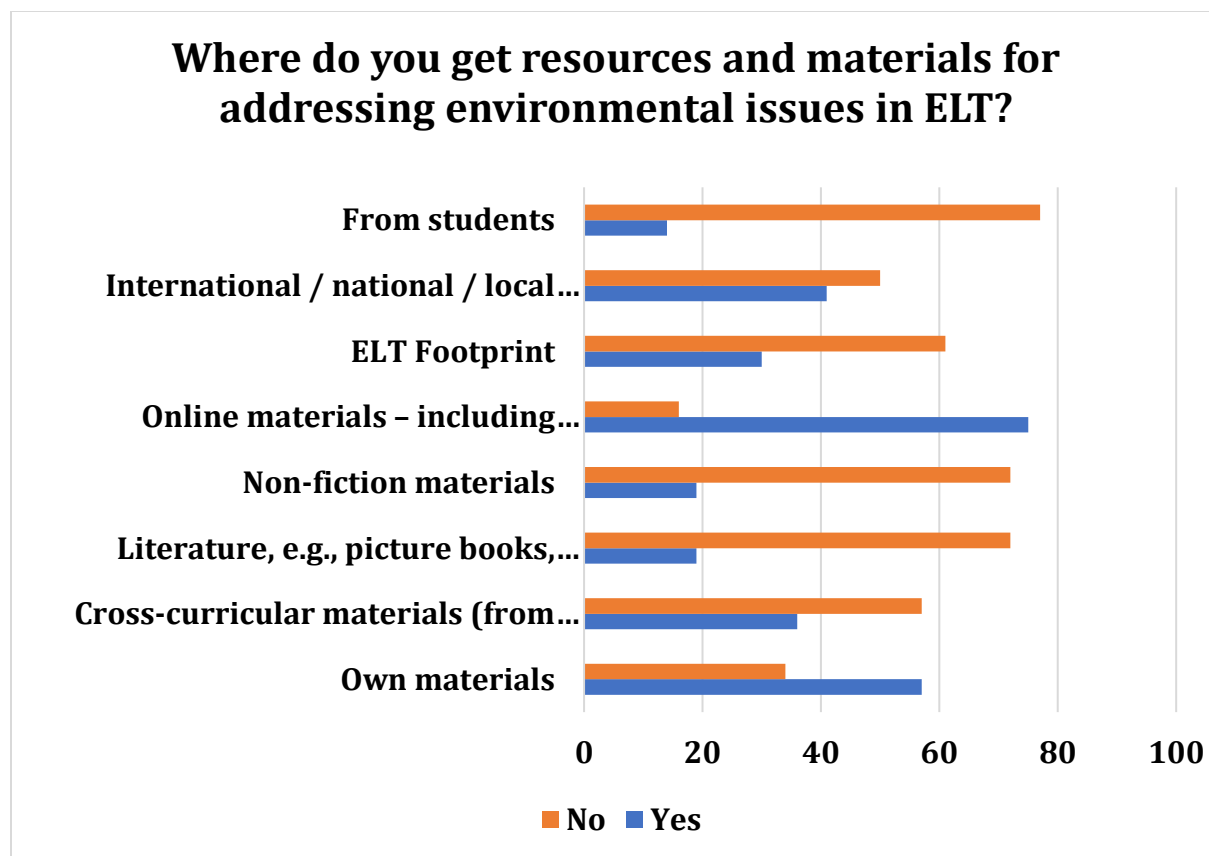


Figure 4: Where teachers find resources and materials for addressing environmental issues.

Teachers' responses to the question, *What factors do you feel support and / or inhibit teachers from addressing environmental issues in ELT?* (Figure 5) generated the following overall themes:

- Attitudes
- Materials and resources
- Time constraints
- Training and knowledge
- Syllabus/curriculum
- Complexity of subject & language level / needs
- Media
- Clear roadmap / framework
- School management / institutional support.

As Figure 5 indicates, teachers focused more on factors that inhibit than support the inclusion of environmental issues in ELT. Teachers identify *Time constraints* (n=19) as well as *Attitudes* (n=19) as the main issues. Attitudes includes both teachers and students' attitudes, and involved topics such as ideologies, disinterest, topic 'fatigue', sense of helplessness, inertia, resistance to change, apathy, confusion. This is followed by a lack of *Training and knowledge* (n=17). *Materials and resources* was evenly distributed between Inhibiting (n=9) and Supporting (n=10) factors, and the *Media*, with only 5 mentions, is

mostly considered a supporting factor in raising awareness of environmental issues in society.

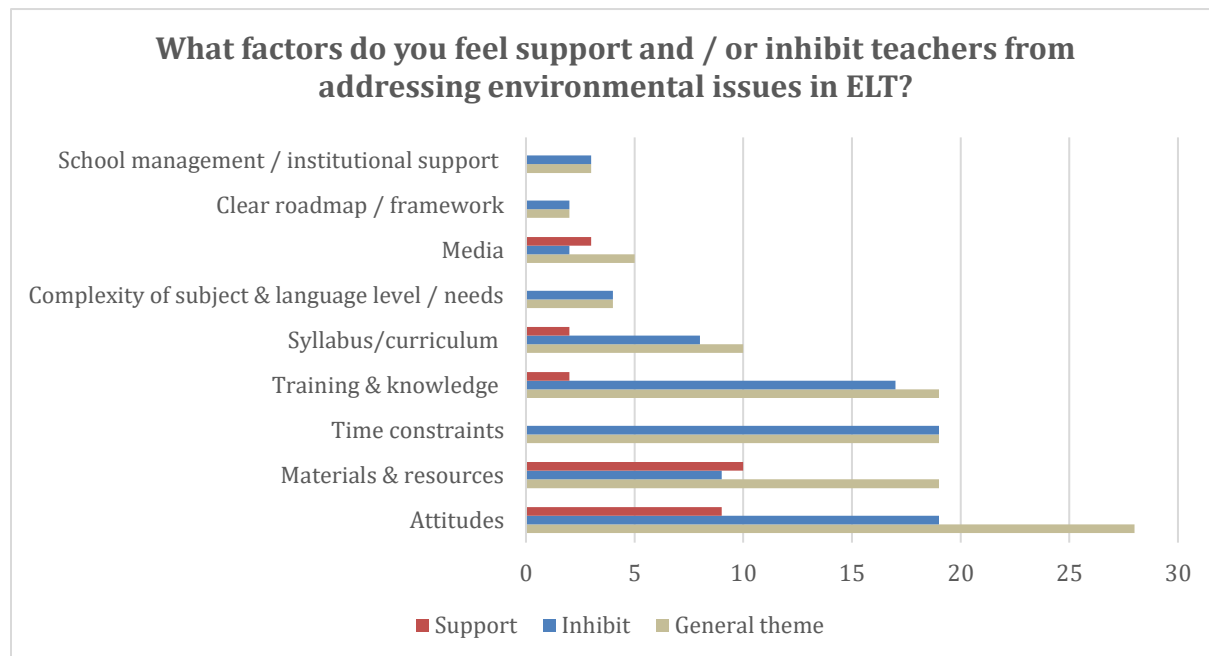


Figure 5: Factors that support and / or inhibit teachers from addressing environmental issues in ELT.

Considering the advice teachers would offer to other educators wishing to integrate environmental issues, teachers reiterated the need to change attitudes by raising awareness and lamented the lack of support in terms of materials and training. Nevertheless, the teachers were generally positive and encouraging in their open-ended advice at the end of the survey: Start small (n = 8), Learn (n = 10), Just do it! (n = 18), Collaborate (n = 5), Join the ELT Footprint community (n = 3), and No need to be an expert (n = 3).

Interview data findings

In the interviews, the data generally supported and added further detail to the insights from the survey. Teachers described their own motivations for including environmental issues in their teaching, as well as suggestions of how they do this in practice and perceived obstacles.

Motivations for teaching environmental issues in ELT

All five teachers had different pathways to teaching environmental issues. For two teachers (Alan and Deliah), it was a love of and connection to nature that triggered an interest in the topic. For the other three teachers, they came to the topic through a mixture of personal interest in environmental issues and connection to other work that they were involved with. Edward explains how he was already a committed environmentalist in his personal life but then he began to think about the potential impact through education: “I thought, ‘Woha, it’s just not enough, is it?’ But what we need to do is educate people and we need to help people

find their voice, help people activate activism and you know, collective action is far better than the, individual action is important.”

A notable connection for four of the teachers (all except Cala) was the explicit link to the UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which was the only framework cited in the survey. Focusing on the SDGs for these interviewees also meant addressing other topics and not only environmental issues, and they highlighted the interconnectedness of all the issues. For example, Boris explains, “Well, I think, yeah, I mean, climate changes, kind of there's an element of social justice, and climate, climate justice, itself is a field and all of these issues are quite interrelated and symbiotic”.

Cala had a very strong personal interest in environmental issues, which she had been able to foster through various online CPD opportunities. In particular, she made explicit her reasoning that ELT was especially well suited to teaching environmental issues. Firstly, she felt that there are many resources readily available online in English so easily accessible for educators to use in practice. Secondly, she felt she had freedoms in the content of what she taught in her English classes compared to teachers of other subjects, who she believed were more constrained: “Teachers of English, more, they are flexible. There are some projects that you can work. But for other teachers, they most of the time, I see that they are focused on the syllabus that they should cover that.” Indeed, all of the teachers discussed how teaching English opened up the potential to teach more than just the language and how rather than choosing ‘banal’ topics (Boris), the teacher has the potential and a responsibility to incorporate important issues relevant to learners’ lives. Deliah explains, “we’re teaching the language but we, as teachers have a lot of discretion in how we shape the content in in how we teach that language. So I mean, that's, that's a position of great responsibility on the issues and that we give our students to, to work with and think about and that there isn't anything that's more urgent.”

Environment as a topic or fundamental way of being as an educator

In classroom practices, there appeared to be two general trends, with the potential for a teacher to blend both. Either environmental issue was addressed as a distinct and separate topic such as through project work in after-school clubs (Cala) or in class topics or teaching units (Alan). Alternatively, it reflected a whole way of being as an educator and infused all actions as a teacher. Alan describes how he feels it can be integrated into every topic and set of tasks: “So, if you're using a text book, look at the, the topic. And think about how you could tilt it towards the environment.”

An issue raised by all the educators concerned what publishers offered in terms of materials and the potential that they have to shape the field and teachers’ opportunities to work on environmental issues. Boris felt that some teachers rely heavily on existent teaching materials and if environmental issues are not woven throughout course books, then they will subsequently not be addressed.

Perhaps the most notable aspect of the interviewees’ descriptions of practice was the diversity of individual approaches and specific activities with each educator having their

own ideas and experiences. All tended to agree that you begin with awareness-raising and local issues moving towards greater criticality and activism depending on the experiences of your learners and context of your teaching. As Deliah explained: "I would say in kind of knowledge of your local area is on the, on the issues is probably a starting point. And then just and then a broader awareness of what those issues are in other regions of your own country, in other countries, so I would start with the, the personal in the media. And then move outwards."

Perceived challenges and support

All of the teachers recognised that there is an inherent duality in the competences needed for teaching both content and language when addressing environmental issues in the ELT classroom. Two teachers (Boris and Edward) commented explicitly on the potential challenge that teachers face who do not have sufficient language skills to cope with discussing environmental issues themselves. As Boris elucidated, "I think, I think the other issue is that a lot of teachers who teach English, their language level isn't necessarily very high. So they might cling to the book and they would sometimes struggle to, to discuss more complex issues, I think kind of language level of the teachers. And confidence of the teachers to address these issues, as is, I think, is something to overcome."

In respect to the content knowledge required, Cala was keen to make clear that ELT educators do not need to become science experts in order to address environmental issues: "when you start, as you said, when you change your attitude and start working on that, you know that you don't understand everything. And you shouldn't. You don't have to understand everything about that, because it's not your, I teach English, I'm not a science teacher. I try to understand. Now with the internet, everything is available. Knowledge is accessible. If you have the ability and the will, you can find out everything." She went on to make the point that you can learn alongside learners together in an atmosphere of joint discovery; a point reiterated explicitly by Boris.

A final challenge identified by Boris was developing positive teacher attitudes before paying attention to specific teaching skills. In this regard, Boris explained that in general education, there is a wider acceptance that topics such as environmental issues are a responsibility of all educators in school; however, he felt that, "a lot of times language teachers don't see themselves as mainstream teachers... and I would hope mainstream teachers have a moral ethical duty in their work to raise awareness to their students about the climate crisis, about, you know, whatever subject they teach, to include things like that. And I think language teachers need to be persuaded that they're part of the community of teachers and educators who aren't just there to, you know, to help students communicate better, but, you know, communicate about what, you know, what, what are the topics that students need to speak in English about?"

A major support for all of the teachers in these interviews was the opportunities they had had in order to explore these topics either informally through social connections and critical experiences (Edward) or through more formalised training such as doing a PhD (Boris) or doing online courses (Alan, Cala and Deliah). Deliah explains how an individual's own

curiosity and interest can drive them to seek out CPD opportunities and sources of input, and how this can then snowball further when shared with other members of their teaching team: “So I’ve sought out my own sort of educational opportunities, I would say, I did a short course offered by X, who’s at the British Council, which was a three-week course on how to introduce green issues in the classroom, that was really useful, but it’s always been my own curiosity... And then, you know, these sort of small initiatives we, in our team, we all sort of just shared together, somebody finds something useful. And then it kind of cascades down, I think.”

Discussion

In this paper, we have sought to understand what teachers interested in teaching environmental issues in ELT are able to achieve and what limitations and challenges they face. The primary drive still seems to stem from an individual’s personal conviction and passion. The implication of this is that the topic is not yet seen by all ELT teachers as being a ‘moral, ethical duty’ (Boris) or even a curricular responsibility, but it remains rather an optional topic to cover depending on personal attitudes. This situation is somewhat at odds with many international state curricula which explicitly incorporate the teaching of environmental issues as a global educational objective for educators of all subjects. Some possible reasons for a lack of broader take up could include the isolation and relegation of the topic to individual chapters in course books and the absence of formalized training opportunities as well as an absence of guidelines from national educational policy on how to sustainably include global skills such as environmental competences alongside language skills into regular teaching without it being perceived as an optional add-on or isolated course book topic.

Another need identified in this study is for a coherent framework of competences to guide teachers on what to teach in terms of skills and how to integrate this coherently alongside the relevant language skills. At present, only the SDG framework provides a limited number of educators with some orientation, structure, and coherence. However, beyond ELT, an example of a useful framework is one produced by a school in Iowa (Lammer-Heindel & Darr 2013) which outlines specific sustainability literacy competences for a range of age groups or the assessment tool for adult ecoliteracy developed in Australia (Pitman & Daniels 2016). Recently, Bilsborough and Jones (2021) have adapted these and similar environmental literacy competences to the ELT context explicitly combining ecoliteracy goals and linguistic outcomes with an emphasis on both receptive and productive communication. More work is needed to extend such frameworks and empirically validate their applicability across contexts.

Finally, the need for CPD opportunities is acute. However, several teachers reported positively in both the survey and the interviews on new resources that have recently been developed and shared by the British Council on their Climate Action in Language Education site. These resources are useful for teachers wishing to engage with the topic, gain a better understanding of the key issues, and develop practical teaching skills. Yet, the challenge remains of how to reach those educators who do not have a particular interest in

environmental issues but may be working in contexts where ecoliteracy is expected as part of transversal teaching objectives.

Conclusion and implications

Overall, this study highlights a growing interest in and awareness of the importance of addressing environmental issues in ELT. It brings to the fore a burgeoning activism at a grassroots level, led by teachers in their local contexts, which reveals the gap between national policy (e.g. state curricula), institutional discourse, teacher education, and classroom practice. Despite a perceived lack of support in terms of training, coherent frameworks, and appropriate resources and materials, the teachers in this study bring an environmentally-conscious attitude and a passionate belief in the importance of teaching others about the topic. If environmental issues are to be addressed more widely within ELT, there is much work still to be done to provide all educators with the support they need to do this in a manageable and sustainable way alongside their language learning objectives. Yet, we end the paper with a note of optimism that the opportunities and resources are increasingly available for those willing to search them out.

References

- Bilsborough, K.** and **C. Jones.** 2021. '#ELTCanDoEco'. ELT Footprint. Available at <https://eltfootprint.org/eltcandoeco> (accessed 16 December 2021).
- Cates, K. A.** 1990. 'Teaching for a better world: global issues and Language Education'. *Human Rights Education in Asian Schools* 5: 41-52. Available to download as a pdf. (accessed 16 December 2021).
- Goulah, J.** and **J. Katunich** (eds.). 2020. *TESOL and Sustainability: English Language Teaching in the Anthropocene Era*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Hanisch, A., A. Rank** and **G. Seeber.** 2014. 'How green are European curricula? A comparative analysis of primary school syllabi in five European countries'. *European Educational Research Journal* 13/6: 661-82. Available at <https://doi.org/10.2304/eeerj.2014.13.6.661> (accessed 16 December 2021).
- Hollweg, K. S., J. Taylor, R. W. Bybee, T. J. Marcinkowski** and **W. C. McBeth.** 2011. *Developing a Framework for Assessing Environmental Literacy*. Washington, DC: North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE). Available from <https://cdn.naaee.org/sites/default/files/devframewkassessenvltonlineed.pdf> (accessed 16 December 2021).
- Kuttner, E.** 2019. 'Using Young Adult Literature in order to promote values of sustainability in EFL learners'. Unpublished MA thesis, University of Graz, Austria.
- Lammer-Heindel, C.** and **B. Darr.** 2013. 'Assessing sustainability literacy'. Paper presented at Upper Midwest Association for Campus Sustainability, 5th Annual Regional Conference, Luther College, Decorah, Iowa. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269106508_Assessing_Sustainability_Literacy (accessed 16 December 2021).

- Mercer, S., N. Hockly, G. Stobart and N. L. Galés.** 2019. 'Global skills: Creating empowered 21st century learners'. Oxford University Press ELT. Available to download as a pdf. (accessed 16 December 2021).
- Pitman, S. D. and C. B. Daniels.** 2016. 'Quantifying ecological literacy in an adult western community: The development and application of a new assessment tool and community standard'. *PLoS ONE* 11/3: 1-18. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0150648>
- Putri, I. G. A. P. E.** 2018. 'Critical environmental education in tertiary English Language Teaching (ELT): A collaborative digital storytelling project'. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics* 8/2: 336-44. Available at <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v8i2.13280> (accessed 16 December 2021).
- Taylor, N., F. Quinn, K. Jenkins et al.** 2019. 'Education for sustainability in the secondary sector: A review'. *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development* 13/1: 102-22. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973408219846675> (accessed 16 December 2021).