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Research Article

Cultivating Ecoliteracy: Using Local Translations To Teach English Vocabulary And Environmental Values

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ABSTRACT

In a globalized world where English has emerged as the dominant language of international communication, there is a growing recognition of the need to incorporate local cultural values and linguistic norms into English language teaching. This research paper explores the pedagogical potential of integrating ecoconscious materials and local translations for teaching English vocabulary and values. Focusing on the Tamil context, the study examines how locally translated poems, such as "Barren Dam", can introduce students to English vocabulary related to local flora, fauna, and landscapes (e.g., "koels", "coucals", "neem", "millets") while simultaneously fostering an understanding of traditional ecological knowledge and cultural values associated with different landscapes (*kurinji*, *mullai*, *marutam*, *neytal*, *palai*). By grounding language learning in tangible, local ecological issues, this approach aims to cultivate ecoliteracy and environmental stewardship among students. The paper argues that connecting English language acquisition to local ecological knowledge creates a more engaging and culturally relevant learning experience, ultimately empowering students to become responsible members of their communities and the global environment. The study also touches upon the broader implications of integrating local cultural elements and linguistic resources into English language education, emphasizing the potential for fostering a sense of community, promoting critical thinking, and acquiring English vocabulary.

Key-words: English as a Lingua Franca, Eco-Conscious Material, Ecological Values, English Language Teaching

Introduction

In the teaching of English as a foreign language, there has been a growing emphasis on the integration of local cultural elements to create a more relevant and engaging learning experience for students (Paez, 2018)(Idrus et al., 2023). In an increasingly interconnected world, English language education plays a crucial role in fostering communication and understanding across cultures. However, traditional approaches to English language teaching often prioritize standardized curricula and materials, neglecting the rich tapestry of local knowledge and ecological perspectives that can enhance learning. This research paper advocates for a more culturally responsive and environmentally conscious approach to English language education, exploring the pedagogical potential of integrating locally translated eco-conscious materials into the curriculum. By connecting language learning to tangible, local ecological issues and cultural values, we aim to cultivate both linguistic skills and environmental stewardship among students. Focusing on the Tamil context, this study examines how locally translated poems, such as "Barren Dam", can introduce students to English vocabulary related to local flora, fauna, and landscapes while simultaneously fostering an understanding of traditional ecological knowledge and cultural values associated with different landscapes. This approach not only enhances language acquisition but also empowers students to become responsible members of their communities and advocates for a sustainable future. The prototype of this paper was presented at the Asia TEFL conference (2009) held in Bangkok, Thailand.

Literature Review

This research draws upon a diverse body of literature exploring the intersection of language, culture, and environment in English language education. A growing number of scholars advocate for incorporating local cultural elements and linguistic norms into English language curricula, recognizing the importance of connecting the target language with students' lived experiences and ecological contexts (Li, 1998)(Paez, 2018)(Idrus et al., 2023). This approach challenges traditional, standardized models of English language teaching and promotes a more culturally responsive pedagogy.

Research highlights the potential benefits of leveraging local resources in the language classroom. Paez (Paez, 2018), for example, demonstrates how incorporating Filipino language and cultural practices into English language instruction can create a more relevant and empowering learning environment, fostering not only language acquisition but also the development of cultural values such as respect, accountability, and solidarity. Similarly, studies on translanguaging (Nursanti, 2021) demonstrate the positive impact of strategically incorporating students' native languages into the classroom, facilitating comprehension and promoting deeper engagement with the target language.

Furthermore, this research draws upon studies examining the integration of eco-conscious materials into language education. These studies emphasize the importance of connecting language learning to tangible, local ecological issues, fostering environmental awareness and promoting responsible stewardship among students. By grounding language learning in local ecological knowledge and cultural values, educators can create more engaging and meaningful learning experiences that empower students to become active participants in their communities and advocates for a sustainable future.

Curriculum Design and Pedagogical Implications

Translating the theoretical concepts of sustainability and cultural relevance into practical classroom practices remains a challenge. The intricate nature of curriculum design cannot be effectively captured through a simplistic formula. The design must consider the parameters within which the curriculum will be implemented to ensure its utility for the students. This paper proposes a curriculum design aimed at achieving two primary objectives in undergraduate education: first, to foster a comprehensive understanding of ecology and its significance; and second, to assist students in acquiring a new vocabulary.

This research suggests a pedagogical approach that integrates local translations of eco-conscious literature into English language instruction. The curriculum design is not prescriptive but rather offers a framework for educators to adapt and implement based on their specific context and student needs. The primary goal is to connect language learning to tangible, local ecological issues, fostering both linguistic development and the cultivation of environmental values.

The proposed approach centers around engaging with locally translated poems, such as “Barren Dam”, which introduces students to English vocabulary related to local flora, fauna, and landscapes (e.g., “koels”, “coucals”, “neem”, “millets”) while simultaneously exploring traditional ecological knowledge and cultural values associated with different landscapes (*kurinji*, *mullai*, *marutam*, *neytal*, *palai*). This integration of language and local ecological knowledge creates a culturally relevant and engaging learning experience.

The pedagogical implications extend beyond vocabulary acquisition. By grounding language learning in local ecological contexts, students develop a deeper understanding of sustainability and environmental stewardship. The curriculum encourages critical thinking about human-nature relationships and promotes values related to environmental conservation. This approach also recognizes the importance of acknowledging and respecting students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, creating a more inclusive and empowering learning environment. The aim is not to produce a generalized model, but rather to offer a flexible framework and practical strategies that fellow educators can adapt and implement in their own classrooms.

The Role of Ecoconscious Material

Integrating ecoconscious material into English language education offers a powerful avenue for fostering environmental awareness and promoting sustainable practices among students. This approach moves beyond simply teaching vocabulary or grammar in isolation and instead connects language learning to tangible, local ecological issues. (Frederick, 2024). By grounding language learning in relevant environmental contexts, educators can create more engaging and meaningful learning experiences that empower students to become responsible stewards of their surroundings.

This research explores the use of locally translated eco-conscious literature, specifically poetry, as a means of achieving these goals. The selected poem, “Barren Dam”, not only introduces students to English vocabulary related to local flora, fauna, and landscapes but also delves into traditional ecological knowledge and cultural values associated with different landscapes. This integration of language, culture, and environment creates a rich learning experience that resonates with students' lived realities. Furthermore, the use of translated materials allows students to connect with their linguistic and cultural heritage while simultaneously developing their English language skills.

This approach aligns with broader pedagogical movements such as Content and Language Integrated Learning, which emphasizes the combined learning of language and content. While CLIL often focuses on

subject matter like science or history, this research demonstrates its potential for integrating environmental education into language instruction. By carefully selecting or adapting texts that resonate with local contexts, educators can create language learning materials that simultaneously build linguistic skills and ecological awareness, fostering a sense of place and responsibility towards the environment.

The Importance of Local Translations

The use of local translations in the language classroom is a crucial component of this research. Incorporating material that are grounded in students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds not only enhances engagement and relevance but also promotes a sense of empowerment and inclusivity. When students see their own languages and cultural references represented in the learning materials, it signals that their identities and lived experiences are valued and respected. (Paez, 2018)

As highlighted in the literature, the use of the students' mother tongue or local languages in English language teaching can create a more welcoming and empowering classroom environment (Paez, 2018). By incorporating local translations, educators can acknowledge and validate the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their students, fostering a sense of belonging and pride.

Moreover, the use of local translations can serve as a bridge between the target language and the students' native or community languages. This can facilitate a deeper understanding of the content, as students can draw upon their existing linguistic and cultural knowledge to make connections and derive meaning. Beyond the language learning aspects, the incorporation of local translations also reflects a commitment to preserving and celebrating linguistic diversity.

Poem for Discussion

Dr. Nirmal Selvamony has translated a poem entitled "Barren Dam" by Palamalay (Selvamony 8). This poem, "Barren Dam" is chosen for study.

With the dry lands becoming wet there is no shade anymore. Is it just that there is no shade? No millet, no maize;
no gourd that climbs and blooms in the evening;
no partridges that stir out suddenly from under the groundnut plants at the slightest sound; no pigeons in the shade of the neem among the cactus hedge; no coucals, no koels; no cassia, the croton of the dry lands to inspire the koel to sing. The bare dam built on the small stream laid waste our village. The dams on kaviri had destroyed forests far and wide. We lost our forests for rice, and then, no rain; now, no forest, and no rice.
(trans.: Nirmal Selvamony)

Local Literature in Translation

This paper tries to explain the use of local literature in translation in teaching English vocabulary. This also attempts to lay stress on local literature in translation, which is more ecologically and culturally relevant to the audience for the development of critical thinking and for cultural awareness of students. For this "Neo-tinai Poetics" is used.

Different Types of Landscapes or Ecozones

In the beginning there were five types of landscapes: "Kurinci", "Mullai", "Marutam", "Neytal" and "Palai". The "Kurinci" tinai refers to mountain region. "Mullai" tinai refers to the forest region. "Marutam" refers to the region of sweet water or agricultural plains. "Neytal" refers to the seashore. "Palai" refers to deserts. These lands come under the first type of relationship called "integrative" but the humans did not appreciate this structure. Then they moved on to "hierarchic relationship" then to "anarchic relationship.

Lands: Wetland and Dry land

"If in the integrative oikos different types of lands (such as the mountains, scrub land, arid tracts, riverine plains and sea coast) were all regarded as equally important and unique, in the hierarchic oikos they were all reduced to two basic types – wetland and dry land – which stood in a hierarchic relationship. Wetland was considered more auspicious, productive and useful than dry land" (Selvamony 4). Usually "nanjai", the wet lands are placed higher than "punjai", the dry lands. "... Palamalai speaks of the consequences of converting dry land into wet" (Indra 66 99). Thus in the hierarchy, wetlands are placed above the dry land. Wetlands are usually equated with fertile lands and dry lands are considered barren and useless. But here the dry lands are also capable of producing grains and vegetables. The dry lands are not barren lands. The dry lands which are looked down upon by human beings have a story to tell. The government has built a dam to convert dry lands into wet lands. Because of this, trees like neem, are cut to make way for paddy fields. Grains which are unique to dry lands, like millet and maize, are also eliminated by wet land plants. Koels, coucals, pigeons, and partridges have lost their habitats.

Birds : Koels, Coucals, Pigeons and Partridges

Birds like Koels, Coucals, Pigeons and Partridges inhabit the dry land. To know more about these birds will enhance the knowledge of the students.

The Asian Koel is a member of the cuckoo birds, the *Cuculiformes*. It is found in South Asia, China, and Southeast Asia. It forms a superspecies with the closely related Black-billed and Pacific Koels which are sometimes treated as subspecies. The Asian Koel is a brood parasite that lays its eggs in the nests of crows and other hosts, where the young are raised by the foster parents. This bird is a widely used symbol in Indian poetry. It has been compared with the "nightingale" due to its melodious call. The word "Koel" is derived from the Hindi word which is onomatopoeic in origin. (**Onomatopoeia** is from Greek. It is one or more words that imitate or suggest the source of the sound they are describing. Common occurrences include animal noises, such as "meow" or "roar".)

A Coucal is one of about 30 species of birds in the cuckoo family. All of them belong to the family Centropodinae. Many coucals have a long claw on their hind toe (hallux). Coucals generally make nests inside dense vegetation.

Wild Rock Pigeons are pale grey with two black bars on each wing. The domestic and feral pigeons are very variable in colour and pattern. There are a few visible differences between males and females. Habitats include various open and semi-open environments, including agricultural and urban areas. Cliffs and rock ledges are used for roosting and breeding in the wild. The Rock Pigeon has a restricted natural resident range in western and southern Europe, North Africa, and South Asia.

Partridges are birds in the pheasant family, Phasianidae. They are a non-migratory Old World group. These are medium-sized birds, intermediate between the larger pheasants and the smaller quails. Partridges are native to Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Partridges are ground-nesting seed-eaters. They are a favourite game bird for many hunters.

Grains: millet and maize (dry land) and rice (wetland)

Next comes the grains which grow in dry land. These grains are pitted against rice, which is the mainstay of the wetland.

The millets are a group of small-seeded species of cereal crops or grains, widely grown around the world for food and fodder. Their essential similarities are that they are small-seeded grasses grown in difficult production environments such as those at risk of drought. They have been in cultivation in East Asia for the last 10,000 years.

The cultivation of common millet as the earliest dry crop in East Asia has been attributed to its resistance to drought.

Maize (also known in some countries as corn), is a cereal grain domesticated in Mesoamerica and subsequently spread to the rest of the world. The term maize derives from the Spanish form of the indigenous Taino word for the plant, maize. In the United States and Canada the usual term is "corn". This was originally the English term for any grain, but now usually refers to maize, having been shortened from the term "Indian corn

Rice is a cereal grain. It is the most important staple food for a large part of the world's human population, especially in tropical Latin America, the West Indies, East, South and Southeast Asia. It is the grain with the second highest worldwide production, after maize (corn). Since a large portion of maize crops are grown for purposes other than human consumption, rice is probably the most important grain with regard to human nutrition and caloric intake. Rice cultivation is well-suited to countries and regions with low labour costs and high rainfall, as it is very labour-intensive to cultivate and requires plenty of water for cultivation.

Plants and trees: Cactus, Gourd, Cassia and Neem

Certain plants like cactus, and gourd and trees like neem and cassia are said to grow in dry lands.

A cactus (plural: cacti or cactuses) is any member of the plant family Cactaceae. They are often used as ornamental plants, but some are also crop plants. Cacti are distinctive and unusual plants, which are adapted to extremely arid and hot environments, showing a wide range of anatomical and physiological features which conserve water. Their stems have adapted to become photosynthetic and succulent, while the leaves have become the spines for which cacti are well known. Some environments, such as deserts, semi-deserts, and dry steppes, receive little water in the form of precipitation.

A gourd is in the same family as the pumpkin. Gourds were the earliest plant species domesticated by humans and were originally used by people as containers or vessels before clay or stone pottery, and is sometimes referred to as "nature's pottery". Only a few varieties are harvested for consumption, mostly in Asia. The shell of the gourd, when dried, has a wooden appearance.

Cassia is a tree related to cinnamon, used as a spice. It has an aromatic bark, similar to cinnamon, but differing in strength and quality. Cassia bark is darker, thicker and coarser, and the corky outer bark is often left on. The outer surface is rough and greyish-brown, and the inside bark is smoother and reddish-brown. Cassia is less costly than cinnamon.

Neem is a tree in the mahogany family Meliaceae. It is native to India, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan growing in tropical and semi-tropical regions.The neem tree is noted for its drought resistance. Normally it thrives in areas with sub-arid to sub-humid conditions, with an annual rainfall between 400 and 1200 mm. It can grow in regions with an annual rainfall below 400 mm, but in such cases it depends largely on ground water levels. Neem can grow in many different types of soil, but it thrives best on well drained deep and sandy soils.

Dams on the river Kaviri had destroyed a large chunk of forests. In this poem, the small dam which is built on a small stream in the dry land is now a barren dam. No one uses the dam now. The wetlands depend on rain water. Now there is no rain. The dam has effectively destroyed the forest as well as food grains. Dr. Nirmal Selvamony in "Post-coloniality and the Discourse of Development" says, "We have ended up in a vicious cycle: rice cultivation leading to deforestation which in turn leading to decline in rainfall or has left us finally with neither rice nor forest" (Indra 99). Thus the attempt made by the human beings to convert dry land into wetland has ended in a fiasco. So, people who live on the dry lands as well as wetlands suffer.

The Study

This approach recognizes the interconnectedness of language and the environment. By connecting language learning to tangible, local ecological issues, the teacher can empower students to become responsible stewards of their surroundings. The paper will examine the pedagogical benefits of using local translations of ecoconscious materials, focusing on how this strategy can promote both linguistic development and the cultivation of values related to environmental sustainability. This research paper explores the use of ecoconscious materials, specifically focusing on local translations for teaching values and English vocabulary.
The paper then explores the use of millets, maize, and rice as grains that are well-suited to drylands. These grains could also be incorporated into educational materials to teach about food security, traditional farming practices, and related values.
The ability of certain plants and grains to adapt to arid environments (Guha et al., 2018) (Guo, 2019) highlights the importance of using locally-appropriate and sustainable materials in educational contexts. By drawing on these ecoconscious resources, educators can not only teach practical knowledge, but also instill values around environmental stewardship and community resilience. (Guo, 2019). This research suggests that using locally relevant, drought-resistant plants and grains in educational materials can be an effective strategy for teaching values and vocabulary related to the environment and sustainability.

Participants

The study involved undergraduate students, with a total of 50 individuals in the Control Group and 50 in the Experimental Group, all from Bishop Heber College in Tiruchirappalli, India. The study involved participants who believed that expanding vocabulary requires the acquisition of words in isolation. They didn't know that vocabulary could be acquired incidentally through reading and listening to language. Additionally, they lacked awareness of the Comprehension Hypothesis. Their study of English as a second language spanned a period of fifteen to sixteen years.

Procedure

The present study utilizes a qualitative approach to investigate the pedagogical potential of integrating locally translated eco-conscious materials into the English language curriculum. The research was conducted in a Tamil-speaking region of India, where the researchers collaborated with local teachers and community members to identify and analyse relevant materials. The study began with an extensive review of locally translated works, focusing on poems that engage with local ecological themes and cultural values. One such poem, "Barren Dam", was selected for in-depth analysis due to its rich exploration of the region's landscapes, flora and fauna, and associated cultural significance.
The poem, "Barren Dam". was used for the study, for the experimental group. Ten target words from the poem were identified with the help of students.

1. Koels, 2. Coucals, 3. Pigeons, 4. Partridges 5. Millet 6.Maize, 7. Rice, 8. Cactus, 9. Gourd, 10. Neem

Ten of the fifty words in the pre-test were taken straight from the poem, while the other forty were chosen at random by the experimenter. The poem was then explained to the experimental group. This procedure took almost an hour to finish. The following day, the same group was allowed to silently recite the same poem out loud. This treatment lasted for around sixty minutes. For an additional sixty minutes, a repeated exposure was administered. The post-test made use of the selected 10 words. Six months later, a delayed post-test was given.
Next, consideration was given to the comparison group. The experimenter provided a pre-test of the 50-word set. The experimenter explained the meaning of these fifty terms to the comparison group. A post-test comprising the same set of fifteen words that had been presented to the experimental group was given to them following the session. Six months later, a delayed post-test was given.

Results

The table shows the mean scores of the participants in the test

	Total Words-10			
	Control Group			
	Pre-test	Post-test	Delayed Post-test	
Mean	1.44	9.68	6.58	
SD	0.535	0.786	2.49	
	Experimental Group			
Mean	1.46	9.68	8.96	
SD	0.573	0.705	1.765	

Number of students: Experimental subjects 50; Comparisons 50
Standard deviations for raw scores.
Maximum score was 10

Discussion

This approach recognizes the interconnectedness of language and the environment. By connecting language learning to tangible, local ecological issues, the teacher can empower students to become responsible stewards of their surroundings. The paper will examine the pedagogical benefits of using local translations of ecoconscious materials, focusing on how this strategy can promote both linguistic development and the cultivation of values related to environmental sustainability. This research paper explores the use of ecoconscious materials, specifically focusing on local translations for teaching values and English vocabulary.
The ability of certain plants and grains to adapt to arid environments (Guha et al., 2018) (Guo, 2019) highlights the importance of using locally-appropriate and sustainable materials in educational contexts. By drawing on these ecoconscious resources, educators can not only teach vocabulary, but also instil values around environmental stewardship and community resilience. (Guo, 2019).
This research suggests that using locally relevant, drought-resistant plants and grains in educational materials can be an effective strategy for teaching values and vocabulary related to the environment and sustainability.
Upon presenting the word to the comparison group for explanation, they are unable to fully understand its meaning. However, the experimental group's subjects absorbed new language after being exposed to it through a brief reading of a poem. These findings align with investigations utilizing the comprehension hypothesis conducted by (Ismaiel & Asmari, 2017).
The results of the delayed post-test confirm that vocabulary acquired via the restricted reading technique is more likely to be maintained than vocabulary acquired through direct instruction. The result is consistent with the study that "One, or a very few experiences with a new word can suffice for the child to enter it into his mental lexicon and to represent some of its syntactic and semantic features"... and the full mapping of the word occurs "as the child encounters the word again" (Carey, 1978).
According to the research, using the restricted reading technique improves vocabulary learning in a second language. While receiving comprehensible input from literature and teacher explanations, the participants unconsciously internalised the meaning. Direct training on vocabulary development was not given to the participants.

Conclusion

Through this poem, "Barren Dam," the students are made to understand the five different types of landscapes that existed in the ancient Tamil tradition. They are "Kurinci," "Mullai," "Marutam," "Neytal," and "Palai." They also come to know of the two types of land, namely, wetland and dry land. The poem brings out the names of birds, namely Koels, Coucals, Pigeons, and Partridges, Grains namely millet and maize (dry land) and rice (wetland); and plants, such as cactus, cassia, gourd, and trees, such as neem. Thus, a student comes to know of a translated poem that is ecologically and culturally relevant. He also learns the English names of some of the birds, grains, plants, and trees. This approach recognizes the interconnectedness of language and the environment. By connecting language learning to tangible, local ecological issues, the teacher can empower students to become responsible stewards of their surroundings. The use of ecoconscious material, specifically local translations, can be an effective strategy for teaching both English vocabulary and values related to environmental sustainability. This paper has explored how such an approach can cultivate ecological literacy, place attachment, and a holistic understanding of human-nature relationships. By drawing on culturally and environmentally relevant resources, educators can foster a sense of connection to the local

landscape and community, ultimately empowering students to become active participants in creating a more sustainable future. These findings have considerable implications for the design of vocabulary education programs in adult ESL situations, especially in this area, where specialized terminology presents a substantial difficulty for learners.

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Biography

Dr. Suresh Frederick has a Ph.D in English from Bharathidasan University, Trichy. He is currently working as an Associate Professor of English at Bishop Heber College, Tiruchirappalli, India. He has thirty four years of working experience as an ESL teacher at Bishop Heber College, Trichy in India. He has presented many papers at many International Conferences held at Kula Lumpur, Penang, Bangkok and Limerick. E-mail: sfheber@gmail.com