



EFL TERTIARY TEACHERS' INTEGRATION OF CLIMATE CHANGE TOPICS TO PROMOTE SDG LEARNING IN SPEAKING CLASSES

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Abstract:

This article illustrates a structure related to a written qualitative study to examine how tertiary EFL teachers integrate climate change themes into speaking teaching to promote students' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) capacities. By selecting frameworks that are internationally recognized, such as UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and the framework of transformative learning theory, this research argues that weather-integrated EFL strategies align with both linguistic and educational interventions. This research synthesizes many interviews with Vietnamese teachers in the Mekong Delta, revealing that local tertiary climate problems like salinity intrusion, flooding, pollution, and livelihood disruption in the Mekong Delta play a crucial role in communication, critical thinking, and social awareness. In the final section, data illustrate that EFL tertiary teachers attentively combine authentic materials, task-based tasks, reflective dialogue, and multi-digital tools to encourage learners' linguistic performance and environmental ethical responsibility. Additionally, problems include gaps in the curriculum due to a lack of materials, instructors' limited ESD training, and, finally, challenges with institutional constraints. This research also proposes a model for teaching weather themes in EFL speaking classes that links communicative language teaching with the SDGs to adjust learners' speaking competencies. By reflecting on this article, pedagogical implications for instructors' curriculum design, institutions, and educators are provided to promote systemic adoption of sustainability-embedded English instruction.

Keywords: climate change integration; EFL speaking instruction; Sustainable Development Goals; transformative learning; environmental literacy; Vietnam

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1. Introduction

Climate change is a significant matter which is considered one of the most pressing global challenges. Its role is to promote environmental stability, public awareness, and teaching priorities.

Lately, teaching EFL in some tertiary institutions globally has become a key to Sustainable Development (ESD), contributing to social development such as learners' awareness about society, responsibility, and becoming globally minded citizens. With this type of EFL speaking instruction, teaching English at the stage of global engagement in economic and technological exchange has connected the impact of making English a vital platform to engage learners with sustainability themes, aligning with building students' abilities to process easily with communicative competence. In reality, teaching EFL speaking lessons gives students the competence to understand meaning and acquire personal and social concerns to better boost the critical awareness necessary for dealing with complex weather matters.

In tertiary universities, climate change presents extreme conditions, particularly in the Mekong Delta, where salinity intrusion, rising sea levels, agricultural disruptions, and severe climate conditions influence local living standards. These severe impacts provide authentic and meaningful contexts for EFL teaching improvement. Ultimately, nowadays, climate-topic educational training sounds like it is systematically applied across a wide range. For teachers, there is insufficient training, materials, and curriculum constraints. This research also examines climate embedded in EFL speaking instruction through a newly constructed academic lens. The current article benefits from a fully rewritten theoretical analysis aligned with international ESD frameworks, transformative learning theory, and communicative pedagogy. Its value improves conceptually and practically by exploring the advancement of sustainability-oriented EFL education in the Vietnamese context.

2. Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) forms the conceptual foundation of this study. According to UNESCO (2017, 2020), ESD aims to cultivate knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that enable individuals to contribute to sustainable societies. ESD promotes competencies such as critical thinking, systems reasoning, collaboration, and reflective judgment. Its integration into higher education requires interdisciplinary approaches and pedagogical solutions to real problems. Climate change is considered both a scientific and socio-cultural matter, which supports a natural condition for ESD-integrated instruction.

Some frameworks related to ELT with famous authors like Cates (2013), Crookes (2020) and Goulah (2019) express that international issues can incorporate communicative engagement while encouraging responsibility for dialogic exploration of climate themes.

Practicing good oral communication about environmental problems in local areas is expressed through debates, problem-solving tasks, simulation activities, and various presentation tasks. One of the dominant tasks that has a significant contribution to teaching theories is integrating climate themes into speaking lessons through Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) because this brings meaningful activities that can happen regularly, like in the real world, and ensures its relevance to teachers' instructing careers.

One dominant theory that is very supportive of the research topic related to integrating SDGs with communicative speaking skills is the Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow, 2000) because, from the perspective of this theory, its value of transformation is built through critical reflection on personal assumptions and public realities. Therefore, in the context of climate change topics, it causes such effects to encourage learners to compare lifestyle choices, cultural factors, and community roles. In most speaking classes, inquiry, storytelling, reflection, or dialogue towards climate problems can lead to either linguistic or affective transformation.

Within the strengths of these theoretical frameworks, because of many challenges that come from particular cultural factors in Southeast Asian contexts, Ngo and Le (2025) state that ESD integration in EFL environments is restricted due to the lack of sequentially increased education for sustainable development content in materials, inadequate teachers' professional development, and institutionally imposed curricula that inhibit pedagogical creativity. These meet the demand of highlighting the necessity for situated models of weather themes in EFL speaking pedagogy. This study reflects the gap by synthesizing both international theoretical insights and the lived experiences of Vietnamese tertiary instructors. These limitations emphasize the demand for localized models of weather-adaptive EFL oral communication teaching approaches. This investigation addresses these gaps by consolidating global frameworks together with real-life experiences of Vietnamese tertiary instructors.

3. Methodology

This qualitative study was implemented, which took place at tertiary institutions and consisted of exploring how tertiary EFL teachers integrate climate change topics into speaking instruction. Participants who worked at universities and had at least 10+ years of experience joined this study to illustrate their understanding of semi-structured interviews. In order to ensure the validity of the data, participants were chosen utilizing target-oriented sampling. With this design, the research was conducted in a good manner to guarantee a system of teaching environment, tertiary educational contexts, along with instructors' familiarity with using ESD in their teaching.

Table 3.1: Geographic Information of Participants

Participant code	Teaching context	Years of Teaching Experience	Geographic Region
P1	University	12 years	Northern Vietnam
P2	University	11 years	Central Vietnam
P3	University	15 years	Southern Vietnam

Interview triggers emphasized lesson strategies, document selection, students' reactions, evaluation practices, reflective approaches, and captured challenges. After recording, all interviews were transcribed and coded thematically, aligning with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. Themes were built inductively, focusing on criteria that captured instructors' pedagogical judgment, local knowledge, and adaptive practices. Ethical considerations included informed consent and making the data anonymous.

4. Results

The present section focuses on significant findings collected from the thematic analysis. Through semi-structure interview consisting 6 main themes were identified: (1) the embedding of geographical weather settings; (2) the implementation of real and multi-format material resources; (3) task- based oral tasks fostering SDG-aligned skills; (4) reflective discussion and critical analysis; (5) students' participation and environmental ethical awareness; and (6) curricular and institutional barriers. The subsequent subsections expand on each theme accompanied by representative participant quotations.

4.1. Embedding of Geographical Weather Themes into Speaking Activities

Instructors systematically emphasized answering questions about the environmental obstacles of Southern cities in Vietnam, like salinity intrusion, erosion, drought, and flooding, in order to teach oral speaking lessons. This method helps learners to link with similar experiences. Therefore, it increases learners' willingness to attend and helps them expand the effectiveness of communication, or improve their talks with a more individual narrative orientation. The result depicts that geographically constructed themes are considered a creative entry point for real, meaningful interaction.

4.1.1 Geographic Weather Theme-based Problems Are Implemented in Efl Speaking Classes to Engage Interest

Instructors depicted the ways local environmental topics fostered learners' interest by enabling students to communicate from their lived experiences. When themes reflect students' 'possessive realities, they reacted with a high level of fluency, passionate investment, and decisive competence.

[...] When I create oral activities for speaking lessons, integrating frequent topics like salinity intrusion or erosion that students have actually witnessed, their familiar experiences create rich expression to help speakers with greater confidence. They start

telling detailed stories about how their families struggle with water shortages or how crops failed during the dry season. These lived experiences make the conversation more expansive, far more spontaneous, and much more meaningful than textbook topics. (Participant 1)

"[...] When topics are introduced to be close to my students' real life in the Mekong Delta, they are more active in joining in activities in my lessons. They describe clearly drought seasons in their hometowns and how their family members manage to go through this condition. This is the authentic connection which helps them embrace the link between what they are learning and their real-life experience." (Participant 2)

"[...] Initializing my lessons by talking about local problems will help my students get used to these before moving towards bigger global climate issues. Climate migration or carbon emissions are introduced after ordinary topics, such as salinity or flooding in the Mekong Delta. This will help them recognize the strong bond between their community and the whole picture of global challenges." (Participant 3)

4.1.2 Challenges in Local–Global Climate Integration

Although the speaking assignments are strongly supported by local issues, teachers still face many challenges when trying to relate them to larger global issues. One of the most important reasons is the lack of knowledge among students, and time constraints are also significant obstacles. Furthermore, there are reports of a lack of materials linking teachers' lessons to climate change.

"[...] Sometimes students can describe salinity or flooding in their hometowns very clearly, but when I ask them to relate it to global warming or rising sea levels, they struggle to get the big picture in English. I feel there is a gap between what they experience every day and what they understand academically about climate change as a global system." (Participant 1)

"[...] We often have enough time for students to share local stories, but time for thoroughly guiding them to global concepts is radically limited. Lessons move quickly, and we end up discussing global climate issues at a superficial level. I always feel that the transition from local to global needs more time and more structured support." (Participant 2)

"[...] There are not many resources that clearly show the connection between the Mekong Delta issues and global climate change in a way that is appropriate for students' English level. I often have to create explanations or diagrams myself, and this is a difficult addition to maintain each semester without adequate resources." (Participant 3)

4.2 Use of Authentic and Multimodal Environmental Materials

Teachers made extensive use of authentic and multimedia materials—including videos, NGO reports, articles, photographs, infographics, and digital tools—to support understanding and stimulate meaningful discussion. These materials helped students visualize climate issues, connect them to real-world experiences, and confidently engage in extended presentations.

4.2.1 Benefits of Authentic and Multimodal Input

Authentic materials create emotional resonance and increase engagement. Visual frameworks also help lower-level learners access complex climate content.

"[...] Whenever I use videos or real news about environmental changes in the Mekong Delta, students show immediate interest and emotional reactions. They often say things like "this is our life" or "this is happening near my house", and the whole atmosphere becomes more animated. The authenticity makes climate change real instead of a distant or abstract issue." (Participant 2)

"[...] Long climate reports are shortened with highlights, charts, photos and clips so as to help weak students follow my lessons. They also rely on these to build their preparation for their speaking." (Participant 1)

"[...] Digital tools like Padlet or Canva enable students to be creative and proactive. When creating short videos about climate, students carefully select images, background music, and subtitles to convey their ideas. This creative process helps them internalize important climate concepts long before they present or discuss them in class." (Participant 3)

4.2.2 Limitations in Accessing and Adapting Materials

Teachers also noted limitations related to finding level-appropriate climate materials, the labor-intensive adaptation process, and limited digital infrastructure in some educational institutions. These challenges reduce consistency in the deployment of authentic materials.

4.3 Task-Based Speaking Activities for SDG-Oriented Skills

Teachers use task-based speaking activities including debates, role-playing, problem-solving tasks, and mini-projects to build sustainability-related competencies such as collaboration, critical thinking, and solution-oriented communication.

4.3.1 Task-Based Learning as a Driver of Higher-Order Competencies

These activities require students to negotiate meaning, justify choices, and propose climate-related solutions, promoting open and purposeful communication.

"[...] Problem-solving in groups is fruitful for my students because this is an opportunity for them to share their ideas and find solutions together. Moreover, when problems are related to their life experience, such as water conservation or flood response plans, they will learn how to be responsible citizens." (Participant 3)

"[...] It is likely that learners are motivated to gain in-depth knowledge of how to develop their thinking and oral communicative skills. In their debating tasks in speaking classes, the technique is to ask them to research information, pick up environmental impacts, as well as clarify the reasons why students' appropriate solution is much more sustainable than any others. It means these strategies help students overcome shallow attributions or comments and after that can foster many perspectives in terms of speaking with well-organized structures and well-reasoned responses." (Participant 1)

From participant 1: *"Students' thinking and speaking skills are developed through debates about topics which are linked to climate."*

"[...] The method of teaching in speaking lessons is highly efficient when teachers consider tasks which need to prepare more activities than a lesson must require. Therefore, each lesson construction, with preparation stages and presenting teaching steps, needs to take much more time. In our daily teaching, the syllabus is so tight, so teachers often skip many steps to prepare lessons carefully, so that the depth of each lesson is reduced more than what we expect." (Participant 2)

4.3.2 Practical Constraints in Implementing Complex Tasks

Despite their pedagogical value, complex exercises are difficult to implement due to limited classroom time, rigid curricula, and assessment pressures, which often force teachers to shorten or omit multi-stage activities.

4.4 Reflective Dialogue and Critical Thinking in Climate Discussions

Teachers incorporate critical dialogue to deepen students' emotional, ethical, and analytical understanding of climate issues. These critical activities allow learners to connect global challenges with their personal and community experiences.

4.4.1 Reflection as a Tool for Deepened Understanding

Reflection encouraged students to evaluate climate issues from ethical and practical perspectives, thereby enhancing their ability to articulate complex ideas.

"[...] Reflection completely changes the atmosphere of the classroom. When students talk about how climate change affects their families or villages, the discussion becomes emotional and profound. They connect language to their personal identities and life experiences, which makes reflective speaking much more powerful than typical classroom exercises." (Participant 1)

"[...] I usually require learners to assess the ways to deal with problem-solving by concerning matters belonging to behavior, practice, or the adaptation into geographic communities so that critical thinking happens in terms of questioning in the classroom instead of just repeating what they hear in the news. I'm sometimes amazed by the vast replying in their rezoning..." (Participant 3)

"[...] The reflective dialogue requires time, which is one of the difficulties we meet. In our system, teachers tend to focus on many themes much more than building depth. Some activities in lessons are distributed very quickly, so teachers barely have time for reflection. Additionally, no effort to exist with institutional recognition of critical teaching, it's difficult to sustain this method systematically." (Participant 2)

4.4.2 Structural Barriers to Sustained Reflective Teaching

Teachers say that critical discussion is hampered by time constraints, a heavy curriculum, and school expectations that emphasize content coverage rather than knowledge depth.

4.5 Student Engagement, Motivation, and Eco-Ethical Awareness

Integrated climate speaking exercises increased student engagement and fostered emerging ecological ethical awareness. Students spoke more confidently when topics related to their families and communities, and some began to adopt environmentally responsible behaviors.

4.5.1 Personal and Emotional Connections as Engagement Catalysts

Teachers found that familiar and personally relevant issues motivated students to participate more actively. Digital media supported reluctant talkers by reducing anxiety.

"[...] Water scarcity, heatwaves, or crop failures are factors that help students have the highest motivation in the topic, which directly impacts students' livelihood. Actually, students easily speak out with genuine feeling since these matters are authentic in their life, not like something that is taught, not specifically from a textbook. This means tasks that authentic communication keeps students deeply engaged because it reflects something with an emotional connection." (Participant 2)

"[....] Hi-tech can encourage students in quiet ways to express their feelings. That means using images, memes, or short videos through speaking lessons helps students be more interested, supported, and less worried about speaking skills. Therefore, Visuals and digital media could provide significant support. Especially for timid students." (Participant 1)

"[...] Over time, I noticed that students became more environmentally conscious. They began to reflect on their own behavior – using less plastic, saving water, cycling to school. These small changes show that integrated climate-related speaking lessons not only

influence language development but also moral values and personal responsibility.”
(Participant 3)

4.5.2 Tensions Between Motivation and Institutional Expectations

Teachers report tensions between keeping students motivated and meeting school expectations. School climate issues are often secondary to testing, which reduces the chances of students maintaining long-term engagement.

“[...] Students get excited when we talk about climate issues, but when it comes to exams, they ask me, “Will this topic be on the test?” If the answer is no, some quickly lose interest because they feel pressured to focus only on the skills and topics relevant to the test.”
(Participant 1)

“[...] I feel there is a disconnect between what I believe is meaningful to students and what schools assess in exams. Integrated school environment assignments are time-consuming, and when they are not part of formal assessment, I sometimes feel guilty for devoting so much class time to them.” (Participant 2)

“[...] We can see that students enjoy these activities and even change some of their real-life habits, but at the end of the semester, the grades still come from traditional oral tests. Without assessment links, climate topics become an extra part of the curriculum that we only do when we have free time.” (Participant 3)

4.6 Challenges in Curriculum, Materials, and Institutional Support

Teachers highlighted systemic barriers that limit the implementation of climate-integrated teaching. These challenges include a lack of alignment between climate curriculum and pedagogy, a lack of accessible materials, and a lack of institutional structures that legitimize or support sustainability-focused teaching.

4.6.1 Misalignment Between Curriculum and Climate Pedagogy

Teachers have expressed concerns about the lack of clear curriculum guidelines and the shortage of appropriate teaching materials. Climate integration often relies solely on the individual initiative of teachers.

“[...] The curriculum doesn’t specify which climate topics fit into which content, so each teacher has to create their own approach. This inconsistency across classes makes climate integration dependent on individual effort rather than a school-wide commitment. It will be difficult to sustain this practice long-term without clearer guidance.” (Participant 1)

“[...] We lack truly appropriate climate materials for students’ level. Many assignments are too advanced or too specialized, forcing teachers to rewrite or simplify things

themselves. This is very time-consuming, especially in the absence of shared resources or training programs.” (Participant 3)

“[...] As with traditional methods, university management is just concerned with exam scores. When climate-related themes do not play a crucial part in teaching to obtain exam scores, teachers mostly consider them as optional or extra. This eliminates innovation since instructors usually overload to prioritize exam construction via meaningful discussion.” (Participant 2)

4.6.2 Need for Institutional Support and Structured Climate Integration

Teachers highlighted the need for structured policy support, shared materials, professional development, and institutional recognition to ensure the sustainability of climate-integrated teaching practices.

“[...] What we really need is commitment from organizations, not just individual enthusiasm. Teachers can integrate climate topics on their own, but without guidance at the policy level, shared resources, and proper training, everything will depend on individual motivation, which is not sustainable in the long run.” (Participant 1)

“[...] Sometimes I feel like we’re working individually because there’s no coordinated plan for climate change education. If educational institutions could develop a clear framework or provide approved materials, we could deliver the lessons more confidently. Currently, each teacher is trying their best, but a system is lacking.” (Participant 2)

“[...] In tertiary institutions, it is necessary and crucial for most instructors to apply the tasks in their real teaching. Perhaps, Climate themes are significant, but at the beginning, they are overlooked when curriculum and assessment do not clearly specify them. It is expected that in the next generation, if weather topic activities were built via official guidelines, instructors in teaching EFL would be more encouraged to use and could support more frequently for the integration.” (Participant 3)

5. Discussion

This section interprets these findings based on existing literature, theoretical frameworks, and broader implications for climate-integrated English language pedagogy. Four main interpretive themes emerged: teacher pedagogical competencies, transformative learning outcomes, institutional implications, and regional perspectives.

5.1 Pedagogical Innovation and Teacher Agency

The result shows that the high degree teachers who integrate atmosphere -oriented themes in the absence of clear guidance in the curriculum. Instructors function as curriculum controllers, innovatively embedding sustainability themes into speaking

lessons. Pre-task activities and critical reflection discussions. This approach is consistent with previous global ESD research, which characterizes teachers as transformative actors through sustained effort to stimulate critical awareness of sustainability by adapting pedagogical practices to local contexts (Cates, 2013; Crookes, 2021).

The use of simulations, storytelling workshops, community interviews, and multimodal projects by teachers demonstrates adaptive expertise and reflective practice (Schön, 1983). These activities highlight teachers' ability to overcome structural constraints and adapt English language teaching to broader sustainability goals.

5.2 Student Outcomes and Transformative Learning Indicators

Students exhibit several signs of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 2000), including heightened environmental awareness, ethical reasoning, and emerging behavioral change. Climate-integrated speaking exercises have encouraged learners to articulate personal experiences, evaluate solutions, and discuss climate challenges in increasingly nuanced ways.

Linguistically, students demonstrated improved expressive abilities—such as detail expression, justification, turn-taking, and argumentation—consistent with research on communicative competence development (Ellis, 2003; Richards, 2006). These results are parallel with previous research illustrating that education for sustainable development encourages critical engagement with contextual learning that develops language acquisition in EFL situations (Oraif, 2024).

5.3 Institutional and Policy Implications

The data show the demand for structural assistance to guarantee the sustainable development goals in teaching EFL while integrating climate topics in speaking classes. Similarly, some obstacles include inflexible curricula, limited materials, and exam-based teaching approaches.

The findings show the demand for consistent support in order to guarantee the sustainable development goals in using climate change topics to teach students in oral EFL classes. Similarly, some challenges like constrained curricula, limited resources, and exam-based teaching methods have been reported in EFL contexts, involving Southeast Asia (Ngo & Le, 2025). Such measures would reduce reliance on individual teacher initiative and promote consistent, sustainable learning outcomes.

5.4 Regional Perspectives and Future Research Directions

Vietnam's education context illustrates wider regional movements in ASEAN areas, particularly in Malaysia and Indonesia, where environmental themes are dramatically incorporated into EFL language teaching syllabi through methods like CLIL and project-oriented learning (Hasrina et al., 2024).

The severe climate vulnerabilities of the Mekong Delta further highlight the importance of integrating sustainable development-oriented teaching into local universities.

6. Conclusion

This study examines how English language (EFL) teachers in the Mekong Delta integrate climate change issues into university-level speaking lessons and how these activities contribute to sustainability-oriented learning. Through thematic analysis of teacher interviews, six relevant findings emerged: (1) the central role of local climate realities in promoting relevance and engagement; (2) the pedagogical value of authentic and multimodal materials; (3) the effectiveness of task-based approaches in fostering competencies aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); (4) the role of critical dialogue in deepening critical thinking; (5) stronger student motivation and emerging awareness of eco-ethics; and (6) persistent curricular and institutional constraints.

Generally, the results illustrate that climate change topics in speaking lessons have positive impacts on both the language teaching field and sustainable teaching approaches. Students are able to develop discourse development, behavioral content, and environmental consciousness since teachers conceptualize climate change content in students' lived experiences, and, after that, instructors can combine it with multimodal scaffolding, problem-solving skills, and metacognitive structures.

In conclusion, this study reinforces the argument that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms – particularly in climate change-vulnerable regions such as the Mekong Delta – can serve as powerful venues for promoting Sustainable Development Goal 4.7 and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). To achieve this potential, climate change-integrated pedagogies need to be supported not only by teacher initiatives but also by systemic institutional and curriculum frameworks.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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