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Developing Discourse Competence and Environmental Agency through Authentic Non-Literary Texts in EFL: A CLIL and Task-Based Learning Intervention

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Abstract: This study examines the influence of authentic non-literary texts on the enhancement of discourse competence and environmental agency among intermediate-level university students within an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) framework. Grounded in Ecopedagogy, *Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)*, and *Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)*, the research implemented a six-week “Discourse-to-Agency” instructional cycle integrating authentic environmental journalism, policy texts, and multimodal materials. The research used an exploratory pre-post feasibility approach and included 40 students enrolled in non-philological programs. Learners engaged in the critical analysis and production of environmental discourse, followed by simulation-based tasks promoting active communication and problem-solving. Quantitative results from pre-test and post-test comparisons demonstrated a consistent improvement in all aspects of discourse competence, especially in lexical awareness and the interpretation of evaluative language. Additionally, there were notable advancements in environmental agency, particularly regarding willingness to act and perceived self-efficacy. Effect size estimations indicate significant enhancements across assessed factors; however, these should be regarded with caution owing to the lack of comprehensive statistical dispersion data. Participants demonstrated a shift from awareness to active involvement, reflecting increased environmental engagement. The study shows that authentic non-literary texts function as both linguistic and transformative pedagogical tools, enhancing EFL learners’ environmental awareness and productive language skills. The investigation is carried out within the research project *Integrating and promoting green education in the initial training of English language teachers*, strategic priorities: societal challenges, strategic direction: Innovative Educational Technologies and Products, with the code 25.80012.0807.56SE, which studies integrated approaches to green education in English language learning contexts.

Keywords: pedagogy; discourse competence; environmental agency

1. Introduction

The prevailing global climate challenges have rendered the incorporation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) within university curricula of paramount significance. As articulated by UNESCO (2020), Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) transcends the designation of a mere subject; it constitutes a transformative process that redefines the manner in which students acquire knowledge,

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thereby empowering them to make judicious choices and collaborate effectively to safeguard the environment.

In this changing world of education, the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom has become a unique place for “Ecopedagogy”, a pedagogical approach that integrates language learning with environmental education (Misiaszek, 2020). EFL instruction can connect local environmental issues with global sustainability discussions by using English as a common language for scientific and social debate.

Parallel to the development of ESD, language teaching has increasingly adopted Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). At the heart of these models is *discourse competence*, which goes beyond grammatical accuracy to encompass the ability to organize, interpret, and negotiate meanings within specific social contexts (Celce-Murcia, 2007).

Despite its importance, discourse competence in higher education is frequently stifled by “English textbooks” - standardized, decontextualized materials that lack the complexity of real-world communication. This disconnect is particularly evident in intermediate university settings, where learners are often cognitively ready for complex social debates but are linguistically restricted by oversimplified instructional tools.

Furthermore, while environmental themes are increasingly present in EFL textbooks, they are often relegated to “soft” environmentalism - isolated vocabulary lists or superficial reading passages that prioritize awareness over action. This approach fails to cultivate *environmental agency*, defined as the capacity of an individual to perceive themselves as a reflective and capable actor within ecological systems (Bowers, 2017). For university students, *agency* requires more than knowing terms like “global warming”; it requires the critical literacy to navigate conflicting discourses, identify greenwashing, and participate in professional or civic environmental communication.

Authentic non-literary texts - including reports, environmental journalism, policy briefs, and digital documentaries - offer a robust pedagogical solution to these challenges. Unlike literary narratives, these texts provide direct exposure to the pragmatic and rhetorical structures of professional and scientific discourse (Hyland, 2018). They serve as a “linguistic bridge,” allowing intermediate learners to engage with the actual language used in the green economy and international climate policy. However, despite the theoretical benefits, there remains a significant empirical gap regarding the systematic integration of such texts in higher education to simultaneously achieve linguistic and ecological objectives.

Consequently, this study investigates the intersection of *discourse competence* and *environmental agency* through the lens of authentic non-literary texts. By focusing on intermediate university EFL learners, this research seeks to demonstrate that language education can transcend traditional boundaries, serving as both a vehicle for communicative mastery and a catalyst for sustainable citizenship.

2. Literature Review

Discourse competence is widely recognized as the rhetorical and organizational aspect of communicative competence, extending beyond grammatical accuracy to the creation of cohesive and contextually appropriate texts. (Canale & Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia, 2007). In university EFL settings, achieving discourse competence requires a solid understanding of genre conventions, which are socially accepted ways of using language to meet specific goals (Bhatia, 2014). However, traditional teaching methods often rely on simplified texts, which remove the natural complexity of language. This leads to

what Widdowson (1998) describes as “discourse poverty.” Students struggle to understand the subtle, often contradictory language found in real-world communication. In addition to linguistic development, *environmental agency* has emerged as an important outcome of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). This reflects our shift from “learning about” the environment to “learning for” the environment. Agency is not just about gaining ecological knowledge; it involves a transformative ability that combines critical environmental literacy with the readiness to take action (Sterling, 2011). In Ecopedagogy, agency develops when learners move from being passive observers to “transformative intellectuals” who can question unsustainable social structures (Giroux, 2020). Still, a significant “value-action gap” exists in higher education. Students gain theoretical knowledge but often lack the language skills and critical thinking needed to apply this knowledge in professional or civic situations.

The integration of authentic non-literary texts, *such as technical reports, environmental journalism, and policy briefs*, connects discourse mastery and agency. Unlike literary texts, which often use metaphorical or artistic language, non-literary environmental discourse is primarily functional and goal-oriented. Stibbe (2021) notes in *Ecolinguistics* that the stories we present in reports and news shape our connection with the natural world. Authentic materials expose learners to real-world vocabulary and the practical strategies used by scientists, activists, and policymakers (Hyland, 2018). Research shows that using these authentic materials improves metalinguistic awareness, as students navigate the expert language of professional environmental discourse (Guo, 2020). However, the regular use of these texts in EFL is still inconsistent. The literature suggests that while authenticity boosts learner motivation, it can also cause linguistic anxiety if not properly supported (Mishan, 2005).

Recent changes in teaching focus on a “dual-goal” approach. This means that learning a language and becoming a global citizen happen at the same time. When a student reads something like a United Nations Sustainability Report, they need to use both bottom-up decoding (vocabulary and syntax) and top-down critical analysis (judging views and biases). This dual engagement blends discourse competence with environmental awareness. The student gains knowledge of linguistic structure while critically evaluating the ecological reality presented in the text. Even though there is strong interest in critical literacy, there are no long-term studies on how using non-literary texts in a systematic way impacts the development of both skills simultaneously in intermediate university settings.

3. Methodology

This study used a quasi-experimental mixed-methods research methodology, chosen for its ability to connect measurable linguistic improvements with the subtle qualitative shifts in student viewpoints. Data were collected using two primary instruments. The first instrument was a *Discourse Competence Test* that aimed at four things: *cohesion and coherence, text organization, lexical knowledge (academic and environmental terminology)*, and how well someone could understand evaluative language. The test had both analytical and productive tasks, such as putting together a text, finding discourse markers, and writing brief answers based on real-world texts. Before it was put into use, the *Discourse Competence Test* was piloted to ensure clarity and authenticity.

The second instrument was an *Environmental Agency Questionnaire* with Likert-scale items (1–5) that measured four things: *environmental awareness, sense of responsibility, readiness to act, and perceived self-efficacy*. We used Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.82$) to check the internal consistency of the questionnaire, which showed that it was reliable. The questionnaire items were based on existing frameworks in Education for Sustainable Development and were changed to fit the EFL setting.

Some of the questions on the *Environmental Agency Questionnaire* were: “I feel confident talking about environmental issues in English,” “I am willing to do something to help the environment,” and “I can critically evaluate environmental messages in the media.” People said how much they agreed on a five-point Likert scale, with “strongly disagree” being the lowest and “strongly agree” being the most.

Descriptive statistics (means and mean differences) were used to check the results of the pre-test and post-test. To enhance the study, paired-sample comparisons were performed to analyze the discrepancies between pre-test and post-test outcomes. But because there aren't any comprehensive dispersion measures, the data are more like trends than statistically significant conclusions.

Through the incorporation of a pre-test/post-test framework, the study suggests an association between the intervention and the enhancement of the specified competences. The research was carried out at Ion Creanga State Pedagogical University of Chişinău, comprising a sample of 40 undergraduate students engaged in non-philological disciplines. These participants, aged 18 to 22, were chosen using convenience sampling from intact classroom groups to preserve the ecological validity of the teaching environment. All participants were classified as possessing intermediate English competence, aligned with B1-B2 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Even though they were doing well in university, these students said that most of their teaching was traditional and focused on form, with little exposure to the specialized, non-literary language used in global environmental advocacy. The intervention was structured as a “Discourse-to-Agency” cycle, moving from breaking down real-world language to using it in sustainable situations (see Figure 1).

This six-week programme departed from conventional reading comprehension exercises, using *Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)* and *Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)* to facilitate the use of English to talk about real environmental problems.

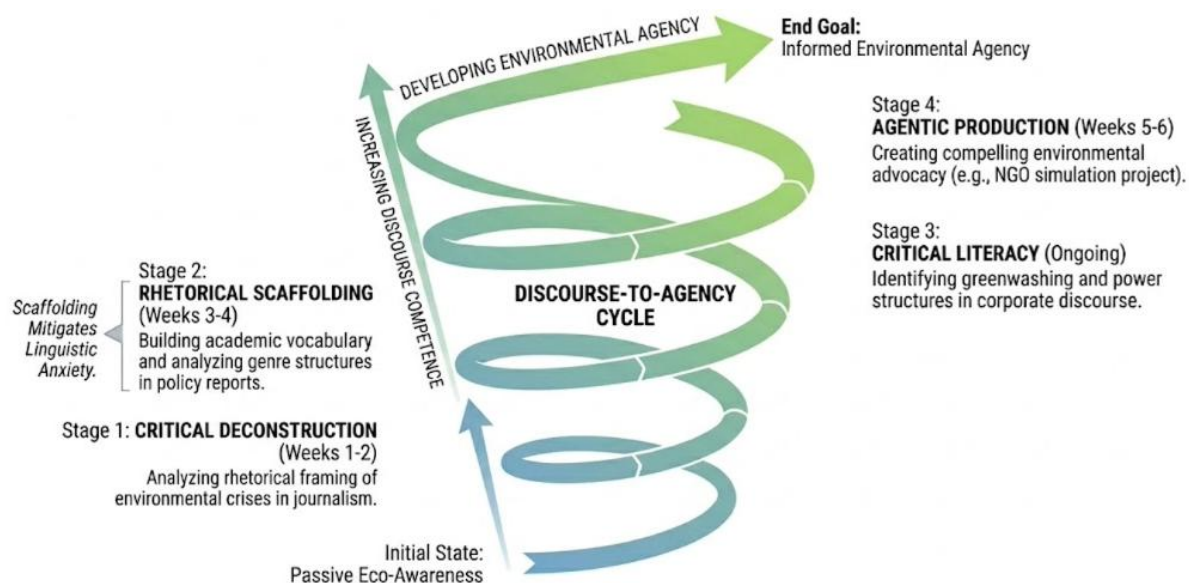


Figure 1. The Discourse-to-Agency Instructional Model

As illustrated in Figure 1, the Instructional Model is not a straight line, but an upward spiral. This design reflects the iterative process of language acquisition and identity development. The critical deconstruction of journalism in Weeks 1-2 lays the groundwork for the more technical analysis of policy papers in Weeks 3-4. Each step builds on the one before it. This path makes sure that by the time students get to the last stage of production (Weeks 5-6), they have the language skills and critical thinking skills they need to show environmental agency:

Weeks 1 and 2: Critical Media Literacy and Environmental Journalism

The first step used real news stories from places like National Geographic and The Guardian's Environment section. For instance, students examined a report about the “Plastic Soup” in the Pacific Ocean. *Critical Discourse Analysis* was used as a teaching method, but we made it easier for students at the intermediate level. Students were required to discover facts; they were told to look for “evaluative language,” which is language that has moral or emotional weight (such “catastrophic” vs. “challenging”). By mapping these terms, students established a foundation for discourse competence, understanding how journalists construct narratives around environmental problems to elicit public reaction.

Weeks 3 and 4: Technical Reports and Rhetorical Scaffolding

The focus then changed to more organized, non-literary material, such as executive summaries from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and business sustainability reports. We employed a “rhetorical scaffolding” strategy to make things easy for B1-B2 learners to understand. This included “genre analysis,” in which students examined different parts of a technical report, like how it goes from identifying a problem to making a policy suggestion. One of the concrete assignments was “lexical mapping,” in which students found common academic collocations such “mitigation strategies,” “carbon footprint,” and “renewable transition.” This phase aimed to enhance students' discourse skills by teaching them how to use the formal, data-driven language that is used in professional and academic environmental circles.

To reduce the “linguistic anxiety” that comes with the technical depth of authentic teaching materials like executive summaries, the intervention used a multi-layered scaffolding method. The teacher knew that B1-B2 level students could get too much information when they were given specialized jargon, thus, they were given bilingual glossaries that were specific to the context and focused on how to use the terms in real life (for example, how to tell the difference between *mitigation* and *adaptation*). Additionally, the deconstruction process was enhanced via peer-to-peer reciprocal education, wherein students collaborated in small groups to convert intricate policy ideas into colloquial English. This teaching change moved the responsibility of understanding from the person to the group, creating a low-stakes setting. Students were able to keep a feeling of global knowledge by using graphic organizers to sketch out the logical flow of the reports before focusing on individual sentences. This kept them from getting frustrated by the bottom-up language difficulties that often happen.

Weeks 5 and 6: Multimodal Texts and the Growth of Agency

The last step used a variety of non-literary, multimodal materials, like infographics from the *World Wildlife Fund* and *Green Marketing Campaigns*. Students used parts of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar framework to look at these multimodal parts of environmental advocacy. They examined how compositional and interactive meanings, like where images are placed and how color is used, worked to persuade or inform the viewer. To turn this into environmental action, the intervention ended with a *simulation project*. Students had to pretend to be an environmental NGO and “re-author” a message about sustainability that wasn't working into a strong digital campaign for their local university community. This change in teaching style was important for fostering agency since it changed students from being passive decoders of English to active creators of environmental advocacy.

During the intervention, a formative “Feedback loop” was kept going through conversations where peers reflected on each other's work. After each exercise, students had organized discussions in which they had to explain why they chose certain words (for example, *Why did you use the word “urgent” instead of “important” in your memo?*). This metacognitive method made sure that the growth of discourse

competence was intentionally connected to the power of language in environmental advocacy. At the end of the intervention, the students had put together a “Green portfolio” that included their analyses and creative works. This demonstrated their speaking and acting abilities. Despite the absence of a control group, the study tried to keep ecological validity by doing the intervention in a real classroom.

4. Results and Discussion

The examination of pre-test and post-test outcomes demonstrates a uniform and significant enhancement in all aspects of discourse competence subsequent to the realization of the Discourse-to-Agency instructional cycle. The intervention, using authentic non-literary texts and task-based production activities, yielded quantifiable improvements in learners' capacity to organize, understand, and develop discourse within environmental contexts. Table 1 shows the scores for the four parts of discourse competence and the overall score side by side.

Table 1. Development of Discourse Competence

Measure	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Mean Gain
Cohesion and Coherence	5.8	8.2	+2.4
Text Organization	6.1	8.5	+2.4
Lexical Awareness (Academic/Environmental)	5.5	8.7	+3.2
Interpretation of Evaluative Language	5.3	8.4	+3.1
Overall Discourse Competence	5.7	8.5	+2.8

The most significant gains were observed in lexical awareness and the interpretation of evaluative language, suggesting that exposure to authentic environmental journalism, policy texts, and multimodal discourse enhanced students' ability to decode specialized meaning beyond the sentence level. Improvements in cohesion and text organization further indicate increased awareness of genre-specific rhetorical structures, particularly in environmental reporting and institutional discourse.

As reflected in Figure 2, these results in a visual way. It shows how the scores changed from pre-test to post-test for the *four sub-components of discourse competence*. The figure clearly illustrates that the numbers after the test are much higher than the values before the test in all categories.

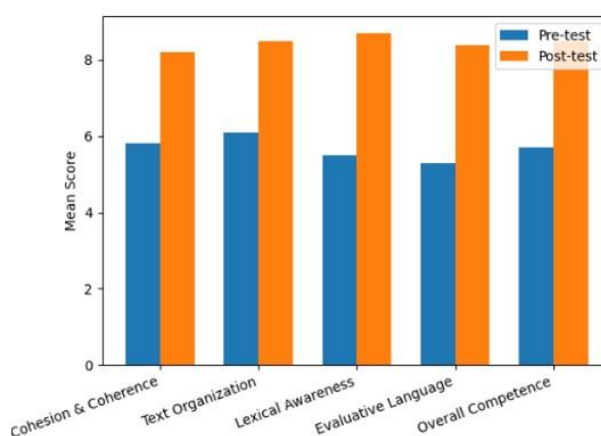


Figure 2. Development of Discourse Competence

Along with helping students acquire new words, the intervention also attempted to help them feel like they could make a difference in the world. The results of the *Environmental Agency Questionnaire*

before and after the test are reflected in Table 2. The questionnaire asked students about their awareness, responsibility, readiness to act, and perceived self-efficacy.

Table 2. Environmental Agency Development (Likert Scale 1–5, N = 40)

Dimension	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Gain
Environmental Awareness	3.1	4.3	+1.2
Sense of Responsibility	2.9	4.4	+1.5
Willingness to Act	2.8	4.5	+1.7
Perceived Self-Efficacy	2.7	4.2	+1.5
Overall Environmental Agency	2.9	4.35	+1.45

The greatest significant increase was shown in the readiness to act, which shows a change from simply being aware of environmental issues to being more actively and involved. This implies that, in addition to fostering cognitive comprehension of environmental issues, students improved their personal and communicative preparedness to engage in sustainability-related initiatives. Because there are no measurements of variability, the results are seen as trends rather than statistically accurate effects.

The results indicate significant enhancement in all aspects of environmental agency, notably in *readiness to act*, *sense of responsibility*, and *perceived self-efficacy*. These results should be interpreted cautiously because the lack of variability measurements makes it hard to trust the effect size estimates. Overall, the results indicate that the incorporation of authentic non-literary texts and simulation-based exercises not only facilitated linguistic advancement but also enhanced learners' environmental agency and their ability to participate in significant ecological communication.

Taken together, the results indicate that the use of authentic materials and simulation-based tasks may play a meaningful role in fostering both linguistic competence and environmentally responsible communicative engagement.

These findings are illustrated in Figure 3 below where the dynamics of changes is reflected.

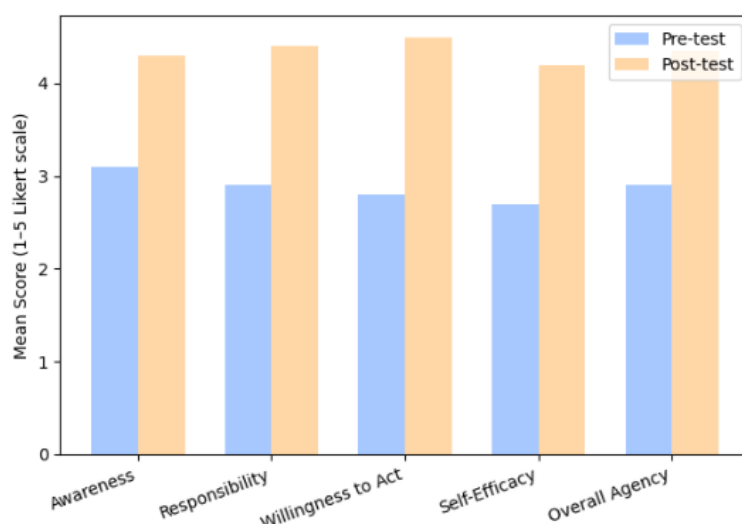


Figure 3. Development of Environmental Agency

The results show that there is a strong link between developing discourse competence and environmental agency. This alignment backs up the study's main idea: *that learning a language can be both a linguistic, cognitive, and transformative educational process at the same time.*

From a discourse point of view, reading authentic non-literary texts helped students connect with genres like environmental journalism, policy reports, and multimodal advocacy materials. This exposure helped students become more aware of different genres, improve their vocabulary, and become better at interpreting texts. It also helped them move beyond learning English from textbooks to using it in real-life situations.

From an ecological and educational point of view, the results show that environmental agency is not just a way of thinking; it is a skill that can be learned and improved through structured teaching. In this case, *the simulation-based “NGO project”* worked especially well because it made students active participants in environmental discourse instead of just passive receivers of information.

One important lesson from this study is that discourse competence should be seen as a socially situated skill that is connected to forming an identity and getting involved in civic life. In this way, learning a language goes beyond just getting the grammar right; it also means being able to take part in global sustainability discussions in a meaningful way.

The results also back up the ideas behind Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). They show that engaging with meaningful content helps both language learning and student motivation. Authentic materials served as both input sources and mediational instruments for *critical thinking, reflection, and action-oriented learning*.

A significant sign of the growth of environmental agency was that students were beginning to be able to spot greenwashing and language manipulation in corporate speech. Several students wrote in their reflective journals that they were now more skeptical of ambiguous environmental terms. For example, one student (Participant 14) thought about a social media promotion by a well-known fast-fashion brand:

'Before this class, I thought that when I saw the word “sustainable” and a green leaf sign, the company was doing something good for the earth. But when we examined the technical records, I saw that they used “passive voice” to mask who was really accountable for the trash. They said “emissions were generated” instead of “we made emissions.” “I now feel empowered to contest these narratives as I understand how the language is employed to divert our attention”. This understanding fits with Stibbe's claim that *Ecolinguistics* should show us the “stories we live by” that could harm the environment.

The transition from passive consumption to critical deconstruction represents the convergence of discourse competence and agency; by acquiring proficiency in the linguistic tools of the green economy, pupils progressed from superficial awareness to a level of informed, critical citizenship. The *simulation-based NGO initiative* had a positive effect on students, as shown by their reflections on their position as advocates. In the beginning of the cycle, the focus was on deconstruction. In the end, it was time to switch to agentic production. In their last journal entry, one student (Participant 22) talked about this change:

“At the start of the course, I felt like a student just learning difficult words from reports, but the NGO project changed my perspective. Creating a digital campaign for our university forced me to stop being a *decoder* and start being a *sender* of a message. I had to think about how to use the evaluative language we studied to actually move people to act. For the first time, I didn't feel like I was just practicing English for an exam; I was using it as a tool to protect my community's environment.”

This reflection confirms that the simulation task effectively closed the *value-action* gap by providing a professional context where linguistic mastery and ecological responsibility could converge. It demonstrates that perceived self-efficacy - which saw a gain of +1.5 - is deeply rooted in the transition from passive analysis to active, multimodal production.

Overall, the results confirm that discourse competence and environmental agency are mutually reinforcing constructs. As learners develop the linguistic tools to interpret and produce specialized discourse, they simultaneously strengthen their capacity to position themselves as active participants in global environmental communication.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the pedagogical influence of authentic non-literary texts on the enhancement of discourse competence and environmental agency among intermediate-level EFL university students. The results indicate that the incorporation of environmental journalism, policy discourse, and multimodal texts into a structured Discourse-to-Agency instructional cycle can markedly improve learners' capacity to interpret and generate specialized discourse, while concurrently cultivating a heightened sense of environmental responsibility and engagement.

The findings indicate that discourse competence has steadily improved, especially in areas like lexical awareness, understanding evaluative language, and genre awareness. There have also been significant improvements in environmental agency dimensions, such as willingness to act and perceived self-efficacy. These advancements indicate that authentic texts, when integrated into task-based and simulation-focused learning environments, can serve as effective mediational instruments for both linguistic and critical ecological development.

The study substantiates the perspective that discourse competence and environmental agency are interdependent constructs that can be cultivated through the intentional incorporation of authentic texts in EFL instruction. The results show that language learning can be more than just a formal process; it can also be a transformative educational space where students talk about global sustainability issues in a meaningful way.

The study is constrained by the absence of a control group and the reliance on estimated effect sizes due to missing variability data. Future research may implement longitudinal designs and incorporate controlled experimental conditions to further validate and expand these findings across various proficiency levels and educational contexts. The interpretation of effect sizes remains indicative due to the absence of variability measures, and therefore the findings should be considered exploratory rather than conclusive.

From an educational standpoint, the research indicates that incorporating authentic non-literary texts into CLIL and TBLT frameworks can be an effective approach to concurrently enhancing discourse competence and promoting environmentally responsible citizenship in EFL settings.

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