

Impact of Language-Oriented Extracurricular Activities on Academic Achievement in Language Preparation Schools

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Abstract

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) requires learners' exposure to what educators call the language skills: reading, speaking, writing and listening. Language teachers' aim is to make students acquire language skills to ensure achievement both in oral and written communication. Language teachers at Preparatory Schools try to do their best to teach those students who did not reach the level of target language skills that would enable them to study in that language. According to observations, the researcher came to conclusion that those students have difficulty reaching the proficiency level needed for study in the language at their departments for the following year need a special approach, additional to their curriculum studies. The idea was instead of giving abundant homework to students to be completed, it is better to draw their attention to English language-oriented extracurricular activities (ECAs). Via these activities students will use the language beyond the classroom, have sufficient real-life-like practice, but, on the other hand, be devoid of the stress typical for both classroom and first contacts with people not speaking one's native language. This, hopefully, will also let students increase students' level of language skills. The experimental research, in which 34 students of Ishik University (Iraq, Erbil) were involved, the idea was confirmed.

Keywords: Extracurricular activities, academic achievement, drawback, curriculum

Introduction

According to literature resources and researchers' definitions and explanations, it can be claimed that ECAs have great role on students' academic performance. Marsh (1992:533), for instance, says that "extracurricular activities will lead learners to higher educational success and help students to get better grades in the examinations". According to Gerber (1996), learners through these activities can get higher scores in tests (Gerber, 1996). Kuhar and Sabljic (2016) underline the role of ECAs in developing student creativity. Daif-Allah and Alsamani (2014) claim that ECAs effectively fight students' low motivation to learn a foreign language.

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Basic Principles of Extracurricular Activities

To make ECAs effective for language teaching, the following principles have to be followed:

- Taking an action in ECA is more important than expected results which will be probably gained in a very long term.
- There should be only one type of extracurricular activity during one event. On the whole, the activities should be various enough.
- Speaking skill should be emphasized; this can be done via role-play, debate or topic presentation activities which demand group work. Team cooperation is essential.
- School administration, teachers, students should be involved.
- ECA programs should be arranged, based on the students' needs and interests, on the one hand, and their language curriculum, on the other. Surveys should be held to collect the data.
- Lecturers should recognize the individual differences of students and their needs.
- ECAs should prepare students to democratic life by teaching them desirable attitudes and dispositions (Gholson & Buser, 1983).
- Opportunities that are given to students in ECAs should be equal for each student. Students being poor or rich, handsome or ugly, hardworking or lazy should not be a matter of talk to direct them to ECAs (Foster, 2008).
- ECAs can be educating if only they develop students' leadership, intelligent participation, citizenship, and initiative qualities.
- ECAs should be financed by sponsors. Organizing plays needs some expensive clothes to use for the stage. Therefore, it is better to be supported by sponsors.
- Students should be given chances to express themselves in ECAs and they should learn their mistakes by doing and observing their peers. Especially, in writing essay activities students can do that.
- ECAs should match to students' age. Opportunities should be supplied for sensible choice, confirming with deep interest.
- In English language preparatory schools, activities must be mostly language-related and should take into consideration the curriculum.

Extracurricular Activities in Students' Life

Learners who take an action in any extracurricular activities have a fifteen percent more classroom attendance rate compared to non-participants (O'Brien & Rollefson, 1995). Human beings learn many things by doing or experiencing. Students who excel in extracurricular activities may improve themselves for real situations. Students sometimes cannot find opportunity to be open with teachers at schools. And, language teachers know that participation of lessons is the key factor for better learning. Thus, students get disciplined and act well in real situations by joining ECAs.

Time management and discipline issues can be provided by ECAs. To enroll in most academic clubs, a high GPA is normally required, so, if students want to enroll to some club according to their interests, they have to become disciplined and study better.

ECAs as a social component in students' life have a great role by implanting a sense of society, liability and involvement. Students who enroll in extracurricular activities may feel much more certain in their actions than in the classroom, as they care about what they are doing. As it is on the fourth layer on Maslow's (Maslow, 1943) hierarchy of needs, students learn to esteem themselves and others, and this leads to higher self-esteem. Owing to high self-esteem students will entail social, personal and academic achievement.

Some not very academically gifted students learn more and better through ECAs, where they feel more free to pursue their inclinations, where they are not dominated by teachers and not formally assessed. Providing that a student distinguishes him/herself in sports, arts or inventing a formula in a science or math club, one might be entitled to university scholarships and grants.

In ECAs, writing their own projects, students realize the practical need in techniques of persuasive essay writing, holding presentations, etc. These language-oriented ECAs are perceived by many students as preparation for future life more than what they are doing in class. But, on the other hand, they discover some skills that teacher was trying to form with them in the classroom and start being more involved in the class activities, too.

Teachers, coaches and lecturers are more likely to give recommendation letters about their students' performance for study abroad in exchange program, if students demonstrate interest to and success in both classes and ECAs.

Possible Drawbacks for Participation in ECAs

Educators' role is self-sacrificing. Although they follow the curriculum and regulations in educational institutions, they are to do some extras regarding students' intellectual, emotional, social, moral and academic development. Eccles and Barber (1999) indicate that, in consequence with extracurricular activities, some possible drawbacks may happen. If the student is not too successful, teacher or peers may reveal they negative attitude towards his/her participation, thus causing students' demotivation. It is essential that teachers understand it and not only themselves abstain of derogatory comment, but also do not let students make such comments.

Secondly, participants' excessive concern for the extracurricular activity causes tiredness and may take students' concentration away from course subjects and educational success.

Thirdly, ECAs may bring stress to some participants because managing the time effectively in given tasks may be hard for them and their academic performance as well as family ties may be affected negatively. Students' dealing with their course studies and ECA interest should be balanced. Spending too much time on ECAs may put at risk their academic success.

Moreover, implementing ECAs may cost expensive because of the activity equipment. Schools should find sponsors to provide the equipment.

The Importance of Extracurricular Activities in EFL

In EFL teaching, the importance of ECAs is supported by the communicative competence requirements (Hymes, 1966). Students can develop their communicative competence, grammatical competence and sociolinguistic competence by giving speeches in debate club, writing stories or articles to journals in journalism club and individually being a pen-pal on the internet to another student from abroad.

Extracurricular activities are useful in that they help students create positive attitudes to memorize new language and develop language skills. Students become productive when they are involved in extracurricular activities. As long as students are encouraged to learn, they will stand a better chance of achievement. Extracurricular activities can help students to have a good command of English, as during ECAs the target language is used both instrumentally (to fulfil the activity) and integratively (they want to be integrated in the academic society at the university). These activities support the characteristics of approaches language teachers apply in foreign language teaching process. Students who get involved in extracurricular activities will create a platform for promotion of language development.

Education is not only mental and logical issue, but also emotional. Students learn not only by verbal instructions that are usually done in classroom in a formal atmosphere, they might learn by non-verbal instructions in the field of extracurricular activities as well.

Of course, the main goal of a student at a university should be academic achievement. As mentioned above, there is certain risk that ECAs will distract students from academic learning, including learning the target language. However, there are many scholars saying that participation in ECAs has a quite positive impact on the students' retention in educational process, if these activities are closely enough related to the curriculum (Kuh, 2007; Greenbank, 2014). This occurs due to increased motivation and creativity, development of learning strategies, improvement of students' ability to plan, to do time management, to act as leaders, etc. Students learn to communicate better (even if it is in the native language, it eventually promotes their general communicative and social skills and helps them succeed in natural language learning and its authentic application.

Students should participate in language-oriented ECAs regularly because, the more they are involved, the more language is acquired and it causes academic success in EFL. ECAs bring many advantages in term of GPA and discipline (Broh, 2002). Reeves (2008) indicates that students who participate in ECAs, achieve better grades compared to non-participants.

To put it short, language-oriented ECAs not only help students better succeed in language curriculum at prep schools, they create a sort of a bridge between the academic study of the target language and its practical application in further life.

Research Method

This research has been implemented in Ishik University (Iraq, Kurdistan Region) Preparatory Schools in which language learners had a very intensive curriculum, which is quite stressful for the students, so some of them cannot study well. The reason why the programme of prep school is so tough is that students need to develop such a level of English language skills, which will enable them to study in English at the university.

The research was quantitative (experiment, accompanied by testing as a skill level measurement technique).

Research Hypotheses

Based on the findings of the literature review and the researcher's personal experience, an informed guess was made that language-oriented ECAs speed up students' learning pace and statistically, students who participate in language-oriented extracurricular activities have significantly higher achievements in developing their EFL skills.

The following hypotheses will be tested in the research which is part of doctoral dissertation:

- H1: Language-oriented extracurricular activities improve learners' self-esteem, self-confidence and self-reliance.
- H2: Joining in extracurricular activities motivates students to learn EFL better.
- H3: Students' practice in English in language-oriented extracurricular activities gives the learners a lot of opportunities for natural language use.

Research Questions

Based on the hypotheses, the following research questions have been shaped:

- Do language-oriented extracurricular activities have a positive effect on language learners' academic performance?
- Do language-oriented extracurricular activities have effect on language learners' motivation to learn?
- Will the integration of language-oriented extracurricular activities into the formal curriculum lead to an improvement in students' formal assessment?

Procedure

Before the experiment started, students’ agreement to take part in it was obtained as well as the permission to hold the experiment by Ishik University (IU) administration. Students’ language skills in two Prep Schools that are part of that university were assessed. As for experiment two groups with the same level of language skills (to make the groups comparable) had to be selected. Same proficiency tests were administered to the students of both prep schools. Finally, two groups of A1 level at Erbil (15 students) and Sulaimani (19 students) were selected, as their pre-experimental test results were very close to each other.

Table 1: Control (Erbil) and experiment group statistics according to pre-test results

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest Results	Erbil	19	36.8421	11.01142	2.52619
	Sulaimani	15	36.2667	8.52280	2.20058

The average of proficiency test result for Erbil Prep School is 36.8421 points out of 100, versus 36.2667 points for Ishik University Sulaimani Prep School. According to two groups’ independent samples T-test result there is little difference between two groups, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: T-test results of Ishik University Erbil and Sulaimani Prep Schools in pre-test for equality of means

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pretest Results	Equal variance assumed	.105	.747	.167	32	.869	.57544	3.45367	-6.45945	7.60333

Equal variance not assumed			.172	31.995	.865	.57544	3.35025	-6.24884	7.39972
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The significance data obtained was 0.869, which is greater than $P \leq 0.05$. The mean difference between two groups is 0.58. This result shows that this difference is not significant. Standard deviation is a bit higher in Erbil's group than Sulaimani in pre-test, but there is no big difference between them, so we can say that not only the mean levels are the same, but also the students' language levels in the groups are distributed rather homogeneously. Randomly, the Erbil school group was chosen as the control group, while the Sulaimani school group – as experimental group.

During the 16 weeks of experiment both groups were taught English according to the same course books in class, with the same number of ours, according to the same curriculum. The only difference was that the experimental group students were actively involved in language-oriented ECAs, while the control group students were not. To compensate the difference in time spent on language learning (as the language-oriented ECAs meant extra time spent on practicing English), the experimental group was given fewer home assignments. The language-based ECAs included: presentations in debate club, crossword puzzles, fun reading and further discussions, short performances, student-made tests and their application, etc. Overall, one pre-, one while-and one post-test were implemented to both groups (the difficulty level was the same for both groups and each time). To compare their achievements.

Research Findings

Table 3: Control (Erbil) and Experimental (Sulaimani) group statistics according to while-test results

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
While Test	Control	19	71.6842	6.84797	1.57103
	Experimental	15	83.3333	10.32104	2.66488

As shown in Table 3, the average of while test result for the control group is 71.68 points out of 100, versus 83.33 points out of 100 for the experimental. The large enough progress in both groups can be explained by the intensive curriculum applied. However, it shows that, although both groups achieved certain progress, the growth of skills level in the control group was 34.84 points, while the growth of skills level of the experimental group was 47.06 points, which is obviously larger.

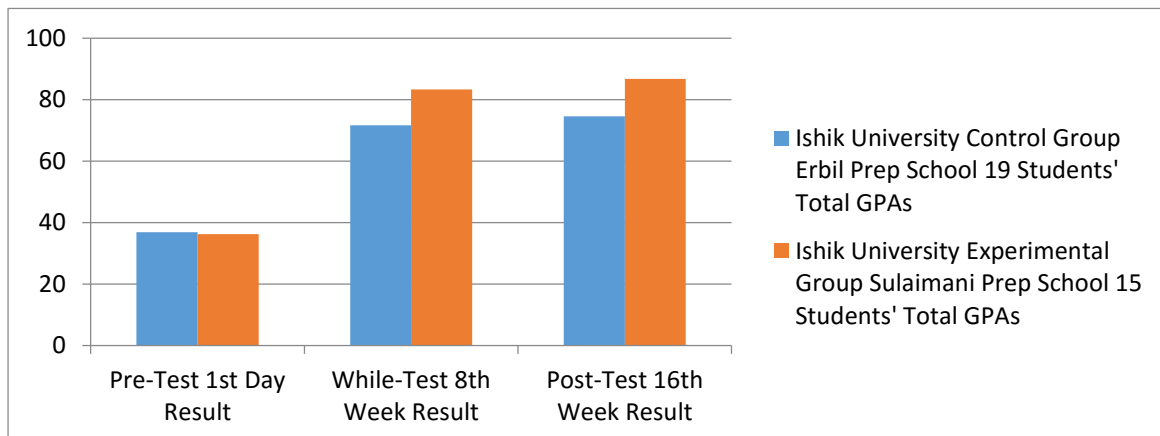
Table 4: Control (Erbil) and Experiment group Statistics according to post-test results

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Post Test	Control	19	74.5263	6.20366	1.42322
	Experimental	15	86.7333	9.96757	2.57361

As shown in Table 4, the average of post-test result for the control group is 74.52 points out of 100, versus 86.73 points out of 100 for the experimental. It shows that, although both groups achieved certain progress, it has slowed down (due to reaching by the time of while-test high enough points), the growth of skill level in the last stage in the control group was 2.85 points (from 71.68 to 74.52), while the growth of skills level in the same period of the experimental group was 3.40 points (from 83.33 to 86.73), which is reasonably larger.

Converting those results into a graph demonstrates visually that the experimental group achieved an impressive success, while the control group’s success is reasonable.

Figure 1: Control and Experiment groups' 16 week general performance result



According to two groups' independent samples independent samples and T-test post test result,

The difference between the two groups in while and post-tests are statistically significant, which is shown on the total average table below.

Table 5: T-test results of the experimental and control groups in while-test for equality of means

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	T-test for Equality of Means
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		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
While Test	Equal variances assumed	5.235	.029	-3.948	32	.000	-11.64912	2.95071	-17.65952	5.63873
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.766	23.239	.001	-11.64912	3.09350	-18.04487	5.25338

It can be said that there is a significant difference, based on the fact that significance 0.001 is smaller than $P \leq 0.05$. It is possible to see that the experimental group students have shown much more success in total average. The mean difference between two groups is 11.64. This result shows that this difference is significant. Standard deviation is a bit higher in the experimental group than in the control group in the while-test, which means it is a bit more heterogeneous than the control group.

Table 6: T-test results of the control and the experimental groups in post-test for equality of means

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper	
Post Test	Equal variances assumed	6.895	.013	-2.586	32	.014	-12.20702	2.78713	-12.8421	-1.52983

Equal variances not assumed			- 2.451	22,253	.023	-12.20702	2.94092	- 13.30210	- 1.11194
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There is a significant difference, based on the fact that significance 0.023 is smaller than $P \leq 0.05$. It is seen that the experimental group students have shown more success in total average. The mean difference between the two groups is -12.20. This result shows that this difference is significant. Standard deviation is a bit higher in the experimental group than in the control in post-test, but the difference is very little.

Conclusions

Implementing language-oriented extracurricular activities are vital in learning/teaching a foreign language. To overcome some students' low motivation and high anxiety, to make the teaching more effective, new approaches should be followed. In Iraq, due to climate and traditions, many students are not sufficiently motivated to learn a foreign language, where education is mostly based on formal curriculum and rote memorization, and where gifted students amazingly manage to learn a language by watching television or playing computer games, the role of language-oriented extracurricular activities in increasing the language learning efficiency is especially important.

The presented in the article research focused on the role of language-oriented extracurricular activities in the academic achievement of EFL learners in Iraq. ECAs were embedded in the experimental group life and closely tied with the curriculum under study. The results confirmed the research hypothesis.

Thus, application of language-oriented extracurricular activities can be recommended to increase the efficiency of foreign language teaching in Iraq.

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