

EMPOWERING ENGLISH LEARNING BEYOND BORDERS: CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES IN A NON-ANGLOSPHERE CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

English language assumes a pivotal position in the socioeconomic advancement of Vietnam. The adoption of extracurricular mechanisms for English language acquisition is recognized as an innovative and potent overhaul of the pedagogical framework for English learners in Vietnam. This study was executed employing a quantitative methodology to ascertain the perceptions of tertiary level students regarding the advantages and obstacles encountered in their engagement with extracurricular activities directed at English language acquisition. Data was accumulated from 1,032 students pursuing higher education in an institution situated in the Mekong delta, facilitated by a questionnaire. The findings highlighted significant expectations students harbored for these activities. Particularly, they anticipated that engagement in these extracurricular endeavors would yield a positive influence on their linguistic competencies, while also fostering a conducive and collaborative environment for English language acquisition, thereby expanding their social networks with fellow participants. Nevertheless, the participants also acknowledged potential drawbacks. They expressed concern that participation in these activities might be time-consuming and could potentially diminish their motivation to partake, especially if the activities were not in alignment with their individual competencies and areas of interest. The findings of this study propose implications for enhancing the effectiveness of extracurricular activities for English language acquisition. Specifically, adequate financial and human capital investment is crucial, and the activities need to be meticulously planned to avoid an excessive time commitment from the students.

Keywords: English Learning, Extracurricular Activities, Extracurricular Benefits, Extracurricular Challenges, Vietnamese Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Proficiency in the English language has emerged as a critical determinant in Vietnam's progression amid globalization and internationalization. Vietnam's affiliation with international consortiums such as the World Trade Organization and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation has engendered extensive developmental prospects. Nevertheless, these opportunities invariably present challenges. Membership in these organizations

mandates Vietnamese human resources to possess competencies and acumen robust enough to rival counterparts from other regional and global nations.

In response, the Vietnamese Government has initiated multiple policies and projects aiming to enhance the English linguistic proficiency of its citizenry. A key reform receiving substantial attention is the National Foreign Languages Project 2020 (now extended). A major target within this project is to incentivize educational institutions, particularly those at the tertiary level, to incorporate extracurricular activities as a means of augmenting students' English competency.

Numerous studies have attested to the positive ramifications of extracurricular activities in bolstering learners' aptitude for applying English in authentic contexts (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Nguyen, 2019; Zakhir, 2019). These studies also underscore the significance of such activities in amplifying learners' educational outcomes. In a study conducted by Nguyen (2019) in a context analogous to Vietnam, it was unveiled that Vietnamese students harbor considerable expectations from extracurricular activities aimed at English learning. However, the above-mentioned investigations have not expounded on learners' perceptions of the worth of such activities or the potential obstacles they might encounter. These constitute the research objectives of the present study.

The precise definition of extracurricular activities remains elusive due to the varied interpretations by scholars and researchers. For instance, Lariviere (2016) posits that such activities encompass academic contests, stage performances, role-plays, and more. Their diverse nature renders a universal definition challenging. Nevertheless, the most straightforward understanding of extracurricular activities would include those organized to supplement students with essential knowledge that is challenging to glean from classroom learning (Bartkus et al., 2012). The positive influence of such activities on language learning has been corroborated by preceding studies (Holt et al., 2012; Simoncini et al., 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Nguyen, 2019; Zakhir, 2019). Specifically, Simoncini et al. (2012) advocate that participating in extracurricular activities enables students to uncover their strengths and identities.

Concurrently, Holt et al. (2012) discerned that such activities engender growth in learners' maturity, self-assurance, intellect, and morale. Furthermore, extracurricular activities serve as a welcome respite for students after rigorous academic schedules (Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2014). Considering these attributes, extracurricular activities can be defined as endeavors conducted outside classroom hours to impart and augment knowledge and skills that are elusive within traditional classroom settings. These are crucial for students to fulfill the English proficiency requisites in their academic curriculums, especially in Vietnam where the completion of higher education necessitates a B1 proficiency level as per the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Various studies have delved into this domain. Harisiswana (2017) undertook a case study examining the influence of an English Club, a specific extracurricular activity, on academic performance. The study, involving 11 students and utilizing in-depth interviews, concluded that such clubs significantly bolstered students' knowledge and skills. Similarly, Kirkpatrick (2012) gauged the impact of extracurricular activities on Thai students'

academic performance. However, the students expressed concerns regarding the time commitment of these activities, thereby suggesting that their needs and preferences should be taken into consideration when designing extracurricular activities. Despite some negative attitudes, students were still likely to engage more with such activities, recognizing their potential benefits. In a study involving 3,000 Vietnamese university students, Nguyen (2019) investigated the aspects needed to augment the efficacy of extracurricular learning activities. His findings suggest that students were interested in such activities primarily due to their perceived enhancements in communication and English language skills. Furthermore, students displayed a preference for short-term over long-term extracurricular activities.

While the studies by Harisiswana (2017), Kirkpatrick (2012), and Nguyen (2019) have enriched the literature pertaining to extracurricular activities for English learning, more work remains. To further augment the effectiveness of extracurricular activities on learners' English proficiency, it is crucial to clarify students' perceptions of the benefits and challenges associated with participation in such activities.

METHODS

Design

This investigation adopted a case study design and employed a quantitative research approach to gather empirical data. The data collection was conducted through a survey consisting of 22 close-ended questions. The primary objective of this study was to generate generalizable findings on the research topic, thereby providing a comprehensive perspective that could assist stakeholders and other interested parties in formulating more precise strategic recommendations. The findings obtained from this investigation would be particularly valuable for teachers, administrators in higher education institutions, students, and policymakers. They would gain insights into students' perceptions regarding the benefits and challenges associated with extracurricular activities for English language learning. This knowledge would serve as a guide for offering appropriate support to students, enhancing their overall experience with these activities, and ultimately promoting their language proficiency and holistic development.

Participants

The empirical data for this study were acquired from 1,032 students enrolled in a higher education institution situated in the Mekong Delta. Comprehensive demographic details about the students are delineated in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Participants

Variables	Sub-variables	Number of participants	Percentage
Gender	Male	460	44.6
	Female	572	55.4
Majors	Foreign languages-major students	228	22.1
	Non-foreign languages-major students	804	77.9

For the variable “Gender,” there were 460 participants who identified as male, accounting for 44.6% of the total sample. On the other hand, there were 572 participants who identified as female, making up 55.4% of the total sample. Regarding the variable “Majors,” there were 228 participants who were categorized as foreign languages-major students, representing 22.1% of the total sample. The remaining 804 participants were classified as non-foreign languages-major students, constituting 77.9% of the total sample.

Participation was entirely voluntary, with convenience sampling employed as the method of data collection. The research team secured students’ information from the higher education institution serving as the research site and extended survey invitations to the students via Google Forms. All personal information was handled with utmost confidentiality and utilized solely for the purposes of this research.

Data Collection

The quantitative data for this study were collected from a total of 1,032 student participants through the administration of a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 22 items specifically designed to investigate the perceived benefits and challenges of students’ engagement in extracurricular activities for English learning. To assess participants’ perceptions, a five-point Likert scale was utilized, with response options ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”. To ensure comprehensive understanding among the diverse participant pool, the questionnaire was drafted in the participants’ mother tongue, Vietnamese, despite the study’s focus on a foreign language, namely English. This approach aimed to enhance clarity and facilitate accurate responses to the survey questions. Before the official data collection, a pilot study was conducted involving 100 students from the same higher education institution. The purpose of the pilot study was to establish the reliability and validity of the survey questionnaire. The results of the pilot study affirmed the questionnaire’s reliability, indicated by a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.92. This high coefficient value demonstrated the internal consistency and dependability of the questionnaire, providing justification for its use in the main investigation. By incorporating these rigorous measures, the study ensured the appropriate collection of quantitative data from a sizable participant sample. The questionnaire design and pilot study helped to enhance the reliability and validity of the data, contributing to the overall robustness and credibility of the study’s findings.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data analysis for this study was conducted using SPSS software, a specialized tool commonly utilized for research data analysis. Prior to the analysis, a preliminary reliability assessment of the questionnaire was performed using Cronbach’s alpha scale test. The test results demonstrated the reliability of the data collected from the 1,032 student participants, with a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.89. This high coefficient value indicates that the data is internally consistent and reliable, allowing for further analysis. Specific items within the questionnaire were analyzed based on their respective clusters or categories. Descriptive statistics tests were employed to provide an overview of the data, and the results were presented using key summary statistics such as “Minimum”

(Min), “Maximum” (Max), “Mean” (average), and “Standard Deviation” (SD). These statistics offer insights into the range, central tendency, and variability of the data. Furthermore, to facilitate the readers’ comprehension and interpretation of the results, the outcomes were arranged in descending order based on the Mean values. This arrangement allows for a clearer understanding of the significance and relative importance of the different items or variables being analyzed.

RESULTS

Challenges Encountered When Students Participate in Extracurricular Activities for English Learning

The findings detailing the challenges students require assistance with to participate in English learning extracurricular activities are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Challenges

Challenges	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Time consuming	1.00	5.00	3.51	.81
Unsuitable activities for students’ strengths	1.00	5.00	3.51	.80
Lack of support from stakeholders	1.00	5.00	3.48	.83
Uninteresting activities	1.00	5.00	3.48	.80
Uneven guidance of trainers towards completing the product as required by the Organizing Committee of extracurricular activities	1.00	5.00	3.42	.82
Psychological problems	1.00	5.00	3.39	.86
Unfairness related to students’ circumstances	1.00	5.00	3.38	.83
Being distracted from study regular	1.00	5.00	3.34	.86
Unattractive prize	1.00	5.00	3.27	.83

As illustrated in Table 2, the most agreed-upon difficulty was the time-intensive nature of these activities (M=3.51). This was closely followed by the mismatch between activities and students’ strengths (M=3.51), inadequate support from stakeholders (M=3.48), uninspiring activities (M=3.48), uneven guidance provided by trainers in fulfilling the Organizing Committee’s requirements for extracurricular activities (M=3.42), psychological hindrances (M=3.39), inequities related to students’ circumstances (M=3.38), distractions from regular academic pursuits (M=3.34), and less appealing incentives (M=3.27).

The findings indicate the participants’ agreement on the difficulties associated with extracurricular activities for English learning. The most agreed-upon challenge, as reflected by the highest mean score, was the time-intensive nature of these activities. This suggests that the students perceived a significant time commitment required for their participation in extracurricular English learning activities. Following closely, two other challenges were also highly acknowledged by the participants. These included the mismatch between the activities and students’ strengths and inadequate support from stakeholders. These findings indicate that students perceive a lack of alignment between their abilities and the activities they engage in, as well as insufficient support from individuals or groups involved in these

activities. Other notable difficulties identified by the participants include uninspiring activities, uneven guidance provided by trainers in meeting the requirements set by the Organizing Committee for extracurricular activities, psychological hindrances, inequities related to students' circumstances, distractions from regular academic pursuits, and less appealing incentives. These findings suggest that students perceived a range of challenges, including a lack of motivation, unequal opportunities, psychological barriers, and competing priorities that hindered their engagement and enthusiasm in extracurricular English learning activities.

Benefits Expected When Students Participate in Extracurricular Activities for English Learning

Descriptive statistical results concerning students' aspirations or areas they wish to enhance after participating in English learning extracurricular activities are depicted in Table 3.

Table 3. Expected benefits

Expected benefits	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Strengthen basic communication skills	1.00	5.00	4.13	.81
Improve soft skills	1.00	5.00	4.12	.80
Develop self-confidence	1.00	5.00	4.08	.83
Strengthen specialized English for purposes	1.00	5.00	4.03	.85
Expand friendships	1.00	5.00	4.03	.86
Improve teamwork or cooperation skills	1.00	5.00	4.02	.82
Enhance critical thinking	1.00	5.00	4.01	.85
Develop related skills for future career	1.00	5.00	4.01	.84
Improve creativity	1.00	5.00	4.00	.83
Improve learning outcomes	1.00	5.00	3.97	.84
Be well-prepared for foreign language certification exams	1.00	5.00	3.86	.89
Enhance individual talents	1.00	5.00	3.84	.88
Improve artistic talents	1.00	5.00	3.79	.91

Table 3 reveals that students were most keen on refining and bolstering their fundamental communication skills through engagement in English learning extracurricular activities ($M=4.13$). This desire was closely followed by the aspiration to enhance soft skills such as communication ($M=4.12$), to bolster self-confidence ($M=4.08$), to strengthen specialized English for specific purposes ($M=4.03$), to broaden social networks ($M=4.03$), to improve teamwork or cooperation skills ($M=4.02$), to advance critical thinking abilities ($M=4.01$), to cultivate skills relevant to their future career ($M=4.01$), to stimulate creativity ($M=4.00$), to augment academic achievements ($M=3.97$), to prepare for foreign language certification examinations ($M=3.86$), to hone individual talents ($M=3.84$), and finally, to develop artistic talents ($M=3.79$).

The apex mean score discerns that the students exhibited pronounced eagerness towards honing and fortifying their rudimentary communication abilities. This underscores the weightage they accorded to the amplification of their proficiency in conveying cogent

communication in the English language. In close succession, the ambition to augment ancillary skills, such as communication, insinuates that the learners acknowledged the imperative nature of developing not merely linguistic fluency but also an adeptness to articulate effectively across a multitude of contexts. Additionally, the inclination to reinforce self-confidence implies that the students perceived extracurricular activities as an avenue to nurture their conviction in utilizing English and interacting within English-speaking environments. The discovery further accentuates students' ambitions to fortify specialized English for explicit objectives, widen their social networks, elevate collaboration or teamwork competencies, advance their critical thinking capacities, foster abilities germane to their prospective professions, ignite creativity, escalate academic accomplishments, gear up for foreign language certification assessments, sharpen individual aptitudes, and nurture artistic talents. These outcomes substantiate that the students harbored a myriad of objectives and ambitions when partaking in extracurricular engagements for English education. They discerned comprehensive development and an array of capabilities that transcend mere linguistic fluency. These ambitions envelop various facets of personal and professional growth, including specialized skills, social affiliations, teamwork, critical thinking, creativity, and academic accomplishments.

DISCUSSION

Challenges Encountered When Students Participate in Extracurricular Activities for English Learning

Student involvement in extracurricular pursuits, specifically those aimed at English learning, significantly consumes students' time. Prior research consistently attests to the considerable academic workload shouldered by Vietnamese students (Cao, 2018), subsequently yielding substantial time constraints. These findings corroborate the preference among most students for short-term extracurricular engagements over long-term commitments (Nguyen, 2019). Short-term activities afford them participation without the anxiety of excessive time commitment, enabling a maximized experiential outcome.

Identifying students' inherent strengths and interests is pivotal in galvanizing their motivation to partake in extracurricular activities or English learning endeavors (Kaufman, 1979). However, this task is frequently overlooked due to the multidisciplinary, multivocational nature of the institution under investigation, accommodating a vast student populace. Consequently, assessing students' strengths and interests, then orchestrating extracurricular activities accordingly, presents a considerable challenge. Moreover, the task of discerning a standard strength or interest across such a diverse student body, as found at the investigated institution, is virtually untenable. Individual strengths and weaknesses are unique (Kanevsky, 2011), thus many students may struggle to engage in extracurricular activities which are mutually beneficial and appropriate.

Successful organization of an extracurricular activity necessitates ample human resources. Thus, stakeholders like lecturers and academic advisors are typically solicited to support students in English learning extracurricular activities. However, the heavy academic workload of students implies a concurrent burden on teaching staff (Cao, 2018).

Consequently, assisting students with extracurricular activities imposes a considerable strain on these stakeholders, inevitably resulting in support that falls short of student expectations.

Intriguingly, while students identified the difficulty of balancing extracurricular engagement with academic obligations, they did not perceive significant detriment to their formal education. Thus, they strive to ensure extracurricular involvement does not compromise their academic performance. This necessitates robust soft skills, including problem-solving, time management, and task management, all of which are reportedly deficient among Vietnamese students (Tran, 2013; Nghia, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2020). Thus, this study presents novel insights regarding participation in extracurricular activities, particularly those directed toward English learning.

The perceived unattractiveness of rewards was not a significant deterrent to student participation in English-learning extracurricular activities. It may be inferred that students place higher value on practical experience than other rewards. Thus, the allure of rewards is likely of lesser concern to students, as they are possibly more intrigued by the impact of English-learning extracurricular activities on their foreign language competence (Nguyen, 2019).

Benefits Expected When Students Participate in Extracurricular Activities for English Learning

Among the four perceived benefits of English learning extracurricular activities, two pertain to the enhancement of English competencies—specifically English communication skills and its usage for specific purposes. This highlights the students' acute awareness of their participation's purpose in these activities, namely to improve their English proficiency, among other activity-specific goals (Nguyen, 2019).

Moreover, students anticipate the development of their communication skills through their involvement in English-learning extracurricular activities. Previous research suggests that Vietnamese students' communication skills, particularly in foreign languages, are deficient (Vo et al., 2018; Nghia, 2018). Several factors contribute to this, both objective and subjective. Vietnamese students are reportedly somewhat passive, attributed to the education system's influence. Learner-centric pedagogy is a recent development in Vietnamese education, which has historically positioned the teacher as the classroom's focal point (Thanh, 2010). This has deleterious effects on students' learning activities due to limited classroom communication opportunities. Additionally, students' communicative opportunities may be further constrained by the difficulty of finding an English-speaking environment outside of English classes (Vo et al., 2018). Given these factors, it's unsurprising that students anticipate enhancing their communication skills through English-learning extracurricular activities.

Self-confidence development is another major expectation from student participation in English-learning extracurricular activities. The correlation between confidence and language proficiency, particularly in a foreign language, has been extensively demonstrated in prior research (Dev & Qiqieh, 2016; Gurler, 2015). Given the expectation of enhancing foreign language proficiency, students also foresee a subsequent boost in self-confidence.

The majority of Vietnamese students remain apprehensive about utilizing English for communication (Tomlinson & Dat, 2004; Tuyen & Loan, 2019). This is not necessarily indicative of weak English proficiency, but rather the possible impact of confidence, or lack thereof, on their desire to engage in classroom activities utilizing English as the communicative tool. Thus, it is reasonable to infer that students expect to bolster their self-confidence through English-learning extracurricular activities.

Contrarily, students are less inclined to view participation in English-learning extracurricular activities as an opportunity for personal or artistic talent development. The study participants were all university students, hence their partial understanding of their personalities, perspectives, skills, and talents (Mills, 1991). While students will undoubtedly desire to develop these aspects, it is unlikely they will seek to do so within the context of an activity primarily focused on English proficiency development.

CONCLUSIONS

This quantitative investigation sought to gauge students' perceptions regarding the merits and impediments associated with involvement in English learning extracurricular activities. Employing a survey instrument composed of 22 dichotomous questions, data amassed from 1,032 university students yielded significant insights pertaining to the implementation and organization of extracurricular engagements aimed at language acquisition. More specifically, the findings revealed that students anticipated numerous beneficial outcomes from participating in English learning extracurricular activities. Beyond augmenting their proficiency in the English language, the majority of students eagerly anticipated the expansion of their social network and the opportunity to foster new friendships. Consequently, engagement in English learning extracurricular activities presents a favourable environment for students to establish relationships and form collaborative learning groups.

However, the results also underscored the challenges that need to be surmounted for students to derive maximum benefits from participation in English learning extracurricular activities. Firstly, involvement in such activities can significantly encroach upon their time, potentially affecting their formal education. Secondly, exploration of students' unique strengths and interests is imperative in determining the types of activities that will appeal to the majority of students. Subsequent to this, the Organizing Committee could ascertain the preferences of those students with divergent interests and plan future activities that cater to their individual inclinations.

This research has made a modest contribution towards the organization of extracurricular activities for students' English learning. The findings affirm that the frequency of extracurricular activities aimed at English learning should be increased to provide students with additional opportunities to practice English beyond academic hours. However, these extracurricular activities need to be conducted in a systematic and pragmatic manner to yield a positive influence on students' English language acquisition. Investment in financial and human resources is crucial to the professionalization of English learning extracurricular activities. Hence, the administration of higher education institutions and government policymakers need to coordinate their efforts closely. Regular, high-quality

training programs are essential to equip the team responsible for orchestrating extracurricular activities with the requisite skills for their role.

From the perspective of teachers and students, these activities are unlikely to achieve their intended outcomes without their earnest participation. Consequently, efforts to engender a deeper understanding of these activities' significance also warrant attention. It can be inferred that the collection of pertinent insights and suggestions during seminars on organizing extracurricular activities is critical for inviting stakeholders to contribute towards enhancing the quality of these extracurricular activities.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research employed data derived from an extensive student sample, offering valuable insights into the subject matter under investigation. Nonetheless, as is the case with other quantitative studies, the depth of inquiry was somewhat limited, as the data primarily served to provide a generalized understanding of the research findings. Therefore, it is recommended that future investigations utilize diverse data collection methodologies to delve more profoundly into the results, thereby providing a comprehensive depiction rather than merely the superficial view.

Additionally, a number of potential research avenues warrant further exploration. Firstly, it would be beneficial to examine the array of activities implemented at the university level and assess their resultant impact on students' acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes post-participation. Alongside student perspectives, inputs from other significant stakeholders, such as lecturers or coordinators of extracurricular activities, ought to be solicited. More specifically, their perception of the challenges and opportunities encountered during the organization of English learning extracurricular activities needs elucidation.

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