

The Impact of English Extracurricular Activities on Pre-Service Teachers at the Higher Institute of Social Sciences and Education of Gafsa

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory practice study examined the impact of English extracurricular activities on pre-service teachers at the Higher Institute of Social Sciences and Education of Gafsa (HISSEG). In particular, it explored pre-service teachers' experiences in extracurricular activities that involve the use of English and how these extracurriculars impacted pre-service teachers vis-à-vis their English language. Qualitative and quantitative data from 19 pre-service teachers at the HISSEG were collected via an online questionnaire and self-recorded videos. Results showed that participants' experiences in extracurriculars were positive and beneficial for their motivation towards using the language, as well as for their English language development. Not only did extracurricular activities seem to enhance participants' overall English language proficiency, but they also helped foster specific skills such as pronunciation and vocabulary building.

Keywords: EFL, exploratory practice, extracurricular activities, pre-service teachers, Tunisian education

INTRODUCTION

For pre-service teachers at the Higher Institute of Social Sciences and Education of Gafsa (HISSEG), located in the south of Tunisia, there are few opportunities for using English outside the classroom. Nevertheless, after graduating, these pre-service teachers are expected to teach English to young learners, among other subjects. Therefore, affording pre-service teachers more opportunities for using English is of paramount importance. One avenue for increasing the chances of using English beyond the classroom is through extracurricular activities, such as clubs and associations.

In fact, some of the pre-service teachers have been involved in extracurricular activities provided by the institute, such as sports, music, painting and theatre. However, the

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use of English in these contexts can be non-existent or very limited compared to the use of other languages such as Arabic and French. Moreover, some of the extracurricular activities may not include authentic and engaging settings for interaction and meaningful communication.

THE PUZZLE

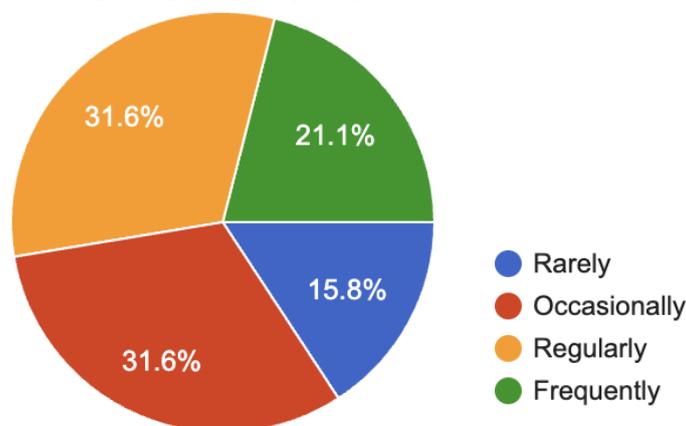
Extracurricular activities may offer pre-service teachers at the HISSEG opportunities to use and learn the English language, which are essential for effectively preparing the pre-service teachers for their careers, yet rare in the Tunisian context where English is a foreign language. Therefore, this exploratory practice study investigates HISSEG pre-service teachers' participation in extracurricular activities, particularly those affording opportunities to use English. The study explores the pre-service teachers' experiences in these extracurricular activities, as well as the impact of these extracurricular activities on the pre-service teachers' English language development.

THE DATA

Participants

To obtain insights into the puzzle, we invited pre-service teachers at the HISSEG to participate in this study. All 19 pre-service teachers who participated were between 20 and 22 years old, and spoke Tunisian Arabic as their first language (L1), French as their second language (L2) and English as their third language (L3). All but one participant started learning English in primary school. When asked to self-rate their English language proficiency, all except one participant indicated that they had an intermediate proficiency or higher. In terms of their use of English outside the classroom, participants indicated that they used English with different frequencies, as shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1
Frequency of Using English Outside the Classroom



Data Collection

Data were collected from two sources: a questionnaire and video recordings. The questionnaire was created via Google Forms, was written in English, and comprised two sections (see Appendix). In the first section, questions were aimed at gathering demographic information about the participants. All questions in this portion of the questionnaire were close-ended. For example, the first question asked, “How old are you?” and participants selected their age from a drop-down menu.

In the second part of the questionnaire, participants were asked about their involvement in extracurricular activities and what impact these extracurriculars had on them. All of these questions were open-ended, such as “How would you describe your experience in this extracurricular activity?” and “In what ways, if any, has the extracurricular activity impacted your English language?”

The second source of data was self-recorded videos of participants describing their involvement in extracurricular activities and the impact the extracurriculars had on their English language. Participants recorded two-to-three-minute videos of themselves speaking in English addressing the questions: What was your experience in the extracurricular activity like and how did it influence your English language, if at all?

Procedure

First, the questionnaire was sent via email to pre-service teachers from various classes at the HISSEG. The questionnaire was accompanied with the following directions: visit the link below and fill out the questionnaire at your earliest convenience; please respond to the questions as accurately as possible. The responses received via Google Forms were opened in a Google Sheets spreadsheet, which was used for analysis.

Second, a follow-up email was sent to the participants involved in extracurriculars. The email contained directions for recording a video: record a two-to-three-minute video of yourself speaking in English about your involvement in extracurricular activities; please include information about your experience in the activities and how the activities impacted your English language. The seven received videos were stored securely in a private folder on Google Drive and used for analysis.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Questionnaire

Participants’ responses to the questionnaire were analysed quantitatively as well as qualitatively. More specifically, at the quantitative level the following percentages were calculated:

1. Participants involved in various extracurricular activities;
2. Participants who joined the extracurricular activity for various reasons; and
3. Participants whose English language was positively impacted by their involvement in extracurricular activities.

At the qualitative level, open-ended responses were selected to represent participants’ experiences in extracurricular activities and to illustrate the impact that these activities had on the participants.

Analysing questionnaire responses revealed that 32% of participants were involved in extracurricular activities. Of these participants, 33% participated in theatre clubs, 50% participated in teacher-training programs, and 17% participated in other activities such as volunteering. The reasons that these participants joined extracurricular activities were as follows: 83% wanted to improve their English and 17% loved using the English language. Moreover, 83% of the participants involved in extracurricular activities indicated that the activities had a positive effect on their English language.

Responses to the open-ended questions revealed the diverse effects that participants' involvement in extracurricular activities had on them. One participant explained that their engagement in an extracurricular activity "helped me improve my proficiency level in English" and another participant stated that their involvement "was so good and beneficial for [my English]." Yet another participant described their involvement in an extracurricular activity as "a very important experience" with regard to their English language development.

Multiple participants indicated that their involvement in extracurricular activities impacted their feelings, emotions and sense of self. For instance, one participant stated that the extracurricular "improved my personality." Similarly, another participant said that the extracurricular impacted their "moral / self esteem [sic]" and another maintained that the extracurricular activity "made me more confident."

In summary, the questionnaire revealed that a minority of pre-service teachers were engaged in extracurricular activities and that the reasons for joining extracurricular activities include wanting to improve English proficiency and for the love of the English language. The questionnaire also divulged how the extracurricular activities impacted the pre-service teachers in relation to the English language, such as positively influencing their confidence in using English. However, the questionnaire was limited in revealing the participants' experiences in the extracurricular activities. The self-recorded videos, on the other hand, provided more in-depth information, to which we now turn.

Self-Recorded Videos

The participants' self-recorded videos were analysed qualitatively. We each independently observed the videos and coded the data for in an iterative, bottom-up manner aimed at solving the puzzle, i.e., unearthing participants' experiences in extracurriculars and the impact the extracurriculars had on participants' English language development. We then compared our codes and compiled a list of unique codes, which were then used to extract overarching themes. In addition to identifying themes, quotes from the videos were selected to paint a picture of the participants' individual perspectives and experiences.

Qualitative coding revealed that the participants had diverse experiences in extracurricular activities. These experiences can be categorised into four themes. First, the extracurricular activities were enjoyable, as they fostered a stress-free environment for using the English language. For example, one participant shared that "doing theatre is fun, especially with the English language. We are having so much fun in our club." Second, the extracurricular activities afforded valuable opportunities to interact with others in English. In one participant's words, "in the [theatre] club, we often practise scripts and interact into each others [sic] in English."

Third, the extracurricular activities afforded a wide range of authentic contexts for using English, including academic, real-world and fictional ones. As one participant explained, engaging in extracurricular activities, "provided me a supportive and dynamic setting to enhance my English language skills, enabling me to communicate more effectively in both academic and real-life scenarios." Another participant noted that by involving yourself in an extracurricular activity, "you will be immersing yourself in an English-

speaking environment, and this immersive experience will naturally enhance your listening and comprehension skills, as well as your ability to communicate effectively in English.”

Fourth, the extracurricular activities provided the space to express oneself creatively in English, such as trying out new vocabulary words and writing short stories. One participant highlighted that her involvement in extracurriculars “exposed [her] to a wide range of vocabulary. [She] learned a lot of new words.” Another participant underscored that participation in extracurricular activities “provides a platform for individuals to explore and express their creativity...and reach their imagination and bring stories to life.” Similarly, another participant claimed that during the extracurricular activity “we can make mistakes, correct them, experiment with language, even learn to improvise.”

The effects of extracurricular activities on the participants’ English were diverse, although the majority of participants concurred that their involvement in extracurricular activities improved their overall English language proficiency. Some participants indicated that the extracurricular positively impacted their English pronunciation and articulation. Some pointed to positive effects on their English vocabulary, like helping to expand their vocabulary in domains not encountered in the English classes at the HISSEG. One participant offered that her involvement in extracurricular activities allowed her to improve her pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar.

Overall, the self-recorded videos revealed that extracurricular activities afforded participants a low-stress environment for using English, opportunities to interact with others, and a range of contexts for authentic language use. In addition, they inspired pre-service teachers to express themselves creatively in English. Lastly, participation in extracurricular activities led to linguistic gains, including vocabulary expansion, pronunciation accuracy, and even overall improvement of English proficiency.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this exploratory practice study can inform the pedagogical practices of instructors of pre-service teachers at the HISSEG. The positive experiences that the participants in the study had during their involvement in extracurricular activities should inspire instructors to foster similar experiences in their classrooms. For instance, instructors can provide space for pre-service teachers to experiment with the English language in a variety of ways, such as through theatrical performances, which other researchers have found to enhance the proficiency of English language learners (e.g., Gill, 2013; Nanda, 2016). Furthermore, instructors can create low-stakes environments for students to use English, which may lower their affective filters and therefore lead to greater intake of the input present in their English classroom environment (Krashen, 1982).

Another implication that can be drawn from the findings of this study is that instructors can offer pre-service teachers more opportunities to interact with one another in English. One approach for achieving this is designing and implementing tasks (Seedhouse, 1999). For example, two-way information gap tasks and collaborative problem-solving tasks require students to interact with one another to accomplish a common goal (Cosgun & Atay, 2021; Tian & Jiang, 2021). Similarly, instructors may implement project-based syllabi to promote interactional communication (Sirisrimangkorn, 2021; Yimwilai, 2020). In these ways, instructors at the ISEAH of Gafsa can provide pre-service teachers with more affordances to use English in authentic ways, thereby increasing their English language proficiency, before they enter the workforce as teachers of English.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire

Extracurricular Activities

Fill out the questionnaire at your earliest convenience; please respond to the questions as accurately as possible.

PART ONE: General questions

1. How old are you?

- 17
- 18
- 19
- 20
- 21
- 22

2. When did you start learning English?

- Primary school
- Secondary school
- Other

3. How do you rate your English language proficiency?

- 1 - Poor

- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 - Excellent

4. How often do you use English outside school?
 - Rarely
 - Occasionally
 - Regularly
 - Frequently
5. Are you involved in any English extracurricular activities?
 - Yes
 - No

PART TWO: English extracurricular activities

1. What English extracurricular activity are you involved in?
2. Why did you get involved in this English extracurricular activity?
3. How would you describe your experience in this extracurricular activity?
4. In what ways, if any, has the extracurricular activity impacted your English language?