



An Experiential Learning Project at Tertiary Level EFL Context

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Abstract

This study aims to find out whether English focused extracurricular activities carried out within Experiential Learning Center (XL Center) at an English-medium private university in Turkey have a significant effect on student motivation. Extracurricular activities organized by volunteering students and instructors working for XL Center include various workshops in a wide range of areas from painting to gender studies, a number of social responsibility projects, reading clubs, movie sessions and also concerts, plays, board and field games, charity sales, and student presentation of these activities at the English language festival at the end of the semester. This study was designed as a qualitative study in which participants who were selected with convenience sampling were interviewed and the data collected were analyzed with comments and conclusions to contribute to the EFL literature mostly dealing with curriculum.

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1. Introduction

Extracurricular activities (ECAs) are all kinds of activities done by students out of class and in alignment with mainstream curriculum. Although its origin dates back to the ancient Athens and Sparta, the term appeared in the late 19th century (Reva, 2012). As in ancient times, ECAs today may include sports, music, arts, clubs and many other activities, and they are more common at higher levels of education.

ECAs have been regarded as an indispensable part of school curriculum since the recognition of the vital effects they have on, including but not limited to, academic performance, motivation, social skills, and dropout rates. Findings also suggest that extra-curricular activities are as necessary as regular classes for academic and social skills (Marsh and Kleitman, 2002; Eccles, 2003; Tenhouse, 2003).

As in all subjects, ECAs are crucial in language teaching and learning processes, as well. The use of ECAs was common in various methods of language teaching including Direct Method, the Oral Approach, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). In the 1980s, CLT was used to create a new approach called task-based instruction whose basis is experiential learning (XL) (Reva, 2012). In XL, the focus is on the process rather than the product, and it teaches students to learn

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how to learn, to participate in discussions, and to direct themselves (Reva, 2012). Thanks to the elements in it, XL, which includes ECAs at its core, doesn't only affect academic performance, but also motivation.

ECAs organized and carried out by Experiential Learning Center (XL Center) and studied in this paper include various workshops in a wide range of areas from painting to gender studies, a number of social responsibility projects, reading clubs, movie sessions and also concerts, plays, board and field games, charity sales, and the English language festival (Festiv'ELS) at the end of the semester. The festival included concerts and one-act plays as well as student presentation of the activities they did throughout the semester.

The activities were organized and announced by the instructors and students together, and students were highly encouraged to join these activities. There was interaction between students, instructors, and the administration of the English Language School. Students used the language they were learning, before and during the preparation of these activities (as volunteer students participated in the organization process), during the activities and/or after the activities were carried out. If the activity in itself rendered it impossible to use English, such as the social responsibility projects which required communication with people who did not know English at all, the preparation processes and/or the end-products were in English. It was obvious from the rate of participation in and the attitude of students towards these activities that ECAs done at a tertiary level context increased student motivation.

2. Literature Review

Language learning has been a popular area of research for at least a century and there have been thousands of theories on language teaching and learning expanding from methods like Communicative Teaching to theories on linguistics. When a deeper look is taken inside this area and studies that have been conducted, it would not be wrong to state that language learning is a social and interactive process and when the topic is interaction and acquisition of social behavior, motivation would be the key concept. The role of motivation in teaching environments where English is taught as a foreign language was in the scope of researchers. *"There was also some research concerned with the relation of attitudes toward the language course and its relation to success in the course."* (Jordan, 1941) Gardner and Lambert (1959) named motivation as a crucial element in L2 learning environment by saying *"There is considerable evidence that integrative motivation is implicated in the learning of a second language regardless of the nature of the cultural context."* (Gardner and Lambert, 1959) In their further studies they divided language learning motivation into two; integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. However, in modern world of teaching it holds high importance to boost both when it comes to teaching a foreign language to adult learners. When it comes to 1990's, researchers like Dörnyei and his colleagues (1990) did not take the focus away from motivation but put the emphasis on learners' background and the motivation type to deal with for different types of learners by saying *"Comprehensive Motivational Construct comprises three broad levels, language level, learner level and the learning situation level."* (Dörnyei, 1994) In the same decade, Deci and Ryan (1985) worked on motivation by dividing it into two parts again

according to the source of motivation. They called them intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. *"Intrinsic motivation is an evidence whenever students' natural curiosity and interest energise their learning. When the educational environment provides optimal challenges, rich sources of stimulation and a context of autonomy, this motivational wellspring in learning is likely to flourish."* (Deci and Ryan 1985) However, it was not until the beginning of 2000s when Hayamizu, Williams and Burden (1997) started to analyze the concept and came up with different sources and factors that play important roles in language learning motivation. While different studies on language learning motivation were being carried out, there were credible discussions on applying not only in class teaching but also extracurricular activities to promote learner motivation. Schumann (1978), Fortini&Fitzpatrick (2000) and Csizer and Dörnyei (2005) put considerable effort on their studies focusing on the high need to change the way we design and practice curriculum to boost motivation in a traditional way and suggested radical changes in teaching to integrate learner motivation. In this study, the researchers aim to create an alternative point of view for student motivation via extracurricular activities practiced outside the class and with full autonomy of students.

3. Methodology

3.1. Method

This study is a qualitative study in which participants are interviewed and asked open-ended questions to get an idea of their experiences in the Experiential Learning Center and the effects of activities carried out in the center on their language learning motivation. As student motivation and the effect of activities on their language learning experience are abstract concepts, the study took student reflections into consideration.

3.2. Participants and Data Collection Procedure

This study aimed to examine the effects of ECAs on student motivation at tertiary level in a context in which English is taught as a foreign language. Therefore, participants were chosen via convenience sampling from a population of students pursuing a Bachelor's degree or studying at the English preparatory school at a private university who attended the center activities. These participants were asked to have an interview regarding the center activities. The interview questions were presented to and approved by expert opinion. The participants chosen via convenience sampling were asked to participate in the study and it was stated that their personal information would not be used for any other purpose but the academic concept of the study. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researchers. The data collected was analyzed in detail by the researchers and the conclusions led to the results of the study.

Figure 1. Interview Questions Asked to the Participants

1. Describe what you did in XL.
2. What did you like about XL?
3. What have you learned through your participation in XL?
4. What are your favorite memories of XL?
5. How did the activities you did in XL affect your knowledge of English language?
6. Would you like to attend more activities organized by XL?
7. Has XL changed your attitude towards English? If yes, how?
8. Has XL activities contributed to your motivation? How?

4. Discussion

Five participants who actively took part in English festival, mini plays, workshops and social responsibility projects have been interviewed to be able to collect data on their reflections on the experience in the center activities and the effect of the activities on their motivation and attitude towards English and to find out whether the activities had considerable contribution to their English skills. Answers for each question were transcribed and the data collected was analyzed in a narrative thematic context. Each participant's answers were examined to be able to comment on the impact of the activities on the population.

The results showed that participants report considerable improvement in their language skills. Participants stated that they could perform better in their examinations and in a social context where the medium of interaction is English. A participant (P1) remarked that *"... I said that I attended movie sessions. Before that, I have never seen movies with English subtitles. But it showed me, it is not difficult. It improved my English. Now, I can see English movies with English subtitles."* Another participant (P3) supported the researchers' claim by saying *"...I learned some new various vocabularies which are related with daily life..."* This data clearly indicates that the activities carried out by XL Center had a significant impact on the language proficiency of the participants.

The general attitude towards English in the population is a key part of the study and the activities in the center were designed to improve students' attitude towards English and language learning in general. That's why; the general flow of the interview was aimed to investigate the impact of the activities on participants' attitudes. The answers showed that all of the participants had a more positive attitude towards English thanks to the events they took part in. A participant (P4) pronounced the effect by saying *"...Actually, I have good attitude towards English, XL center contributed to my English love."* Another participant highlighted that she overcame her prejudice towards English which made her think it was hard to learn by stating *"I realized that I can speak English at any moment without long thinking because basic grammar and vocabulary provide us big easiness to speak English. Therefore, speaking English is not difficult."* P1 supported this idea by saying *"I*

understand that learning English never hard and also English is everywhere for so we can speak always without being afraid."

Another area the study has focused on was the student motivation which was a struggle for English language learners and teacher for a long time. The designed activities were aimed to boost motivation to learn and practice the target language. Participants who attended different kinds of activities were in mutual agreement on that their participation has had a noteworthy effect on their motivation to learn and practice English in authentic contexts. In one of the interviews, one response was "*...these activities are motivating for me because I thought different kinds of topics to my students. I want to learn new information about English now.*" (P3). The impact of the activities on motivation was stated by one other participant with the words "*I could improve myself thanks to these projects and I have more self-confidence.*" (P2).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study indicated that the inclusion of extracurricular activities in this language learning context had positive impacts in many aspects. Participants stated that their proficiency in English improved, their attitude towards English was directed to a more positive path, and the motivation towards English and language learning increased significantly thanks to the workshops, social responsibility projects, reading clubs, movie sessions and also concerts, plays, board and field games, charity sales, and the English language festival at the end of the semester.

There have been various studies conducted in different eras to find out the relationship between extracurricular activities and student motivation and English proficiency. Considerable evidence indicated that extracurricular activities indeed have positive impacts on these aspects. In accordance with the studies conducted before, this study also showed that extracurricular activities have crucial effects on the motivation of students who are learning English as a foreign language at tertiary level.

The extracurricular activities organized by Experiential Learning Center attracted the attention of students and encouraged them to learn and practice the target language in authentic contexts. It can be suggested in a humble way that extracurricular activities be employed in EFL environments in order to boost motivation and create a fun learning atmosphere for university level students.

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