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Teachers' Attitudes towards the use of Extracurricular Activities in Enhancing Students' Speaking Skills

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Abstract

This study investigated teachers' attitudes towards the use of extracurricular activities (ECAs) in enhancing High School students' speaking skills in Saudi Arabia. Data for the study were collected from questionnaires distributed to 40 high school teachers and semi-structured interviews with three of them. It is found that majority of teachers have positive attitudes towards ECAs. The finding also shows that even though teachers use ECAs, the activities are not appropriately planned. Based on the findings, the study suggests sufficient care for planned and efficient practice of ECAs to help EFL teachers to improve their students' communicative skills in general and speaking ones in specific.

Keywords: Extracurricular Activities (ECAS), Speaking Skills, EFL

Introduction

English Language Learning (ELL) requires learners' frequent exposure to what is called the language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Language teachers' aim is to make students master language skills to ensure achievement and proficient performance both in oral and written communication. In addition, there is an increasing awareness of the importance of communicative skills in teaching and learning English as a second or foreign language. Speaking is one of the most prominent targets set by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Many researches and studies have been carried out to find out ways to improve students' communicative skills, how students can use English efficiently and naturally and how to help students express themselves accurately and fluently. One of these ways proposed by educators is utilizing extracurricular activities inside as well as outside English language classrooms to enhance students' communicative skills informally away from the pressure of grades and exams.

Background of Study

Extracurricular activities are those activities that fall outside the realm of the curricula or syllabi. As stated by Hornby (1995), extracurricular activities are: "outside the regular course of work or studies at a school or college (Hornby, 1995: 409)."

Fujita (2005) traces the history of extracurricular activities stating that their development was slow in the beginning, however:

Eventually people, including educators, began to see the benefits of extracurricular activities, but it took a while to inure themselves to them. In fact, before 1900, educators were skeptical of participation in extracurricular activities, believing that "school should focus solely on narrowly defined academic outcomes. Afterwards, much more care was paid to them (Fujita, 2005:2)

For more background information concerning extracurricular activities, Zhang and Chongying (2013) trace their history. They state that ECAs subverted the curriculum as much as completed it; this is supposed to be due to the inefficient practice of ECAs that make them ends not aids. They write:

The extra-curriculum made its first appearance in American colleges in the nineteenth century. It complemented the curriculum as much as subverted it. The extracurricular English activities involve different kinds of events which cover English Corner, English Drama Show, English Song Contest, English Cultural Week and others (Zhang & Chongying, 2013:79,80)

Communicative Skills

Communication is defined as

"Communication is simply the act of transferring information from one place to another, whether this to be vocally (using voice), written (using printed or digital media such as books, magazines, websites or emails), visually (using logos, maps, charts or graphs) or non-verbally (using body language, gestures and the tone and pitch of voice). (<http://www.skillsyouneed.com>)

Communicative skills are those skills that are supposed to enable learners to express themselves in English using different media (e.g. telephone conversations, chatting over the internet, face to face conversations, etc.). Here, all skills are involved whether they are linguistic or non-linguistic. First, verbal linguistic skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing are integrated together to improve the learners' communicative skills. Second, to communicate naturally in English, students are to acquire or learn non-verbal ways of communication. These skills, in spite of being non-linguistic, are a must for better communication. Some of these are communicative etiquette, body language and facial expressions. Nonetheless, this study focuses on speaking skills as one of the most prominent skills in English Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

Speaking Skills

Hedge's definition (2000: 261) states how important speaking skill is, which entails more attention because it reflects people's traits and personalities; speaking is "a skill by which

interlocutors are judged while first impressions are being formed." However, other simpler definitions may define Speaking as a complex process of sending and receiving messages through the use of verbal expressions, but it also involves non verbal symbols such as gestures and facial expressions. There are various speaking skills. Some are accuracy, fluency and complexity.

The main skills addressed here are accuracy and fluency. Edge and Garten (2009:15) define accuracy as conforming to the language system itself, whereas fluency is operating that system quickly. Gurbuz (2011:54) comments that "fluency" in everyday life often refers to "oral proficiency" in a given language be it native or foreign. In brief, if accuracy is to know what to say, fluency is to know how to say it.

Attitudes

An attitude is a psychological tendency, that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993: 15). Attitudes can be positive, negative or neutral. This study is intended to measure teachers' attitudes towards the use of ECAs as a tool for promoting students' speaking skills.

Statement of the Problem

Majority of high school Saudi students' performance in speaking English is below expectations. This could be attributed to either the demotivating content or the lack of activities and practice necessary for good communication. The use of extracurricular activities as a tool for improving learners' speaking skills is assumed to depend mostly upon the attitudes of teachers toward this kind of activities. Teachers' attitudes toward extracurricular activities are an important factor that can shape the effective utilization of extracurricular activities for improving learners' speaking skills. Neglecting that kind of activities may demotivate learners and drive them away from learning EFL.

For teachers, a lot of their actual practice may be obstacles for their students to improve their communicative skills. Some do not give students the freedom to choose the activities through which they can express themselves freely and naturally. Others may focus only on memorizing grammatical rules and new vocabulary. Many teachers consider learning English just as a tool for getting high marks in tests and exams. A considerable effort is exerted by some, but the problem still exists. Students do not master communicative skills.

The more learners need to master communicative skills in their education or their real life practices, the more activities are in demand. One of these activities is extracurricular activities. Yildiz (2016:164) asserts, "Students become much more productive when they are involved in extracurricular activities." For activities to be carried out effectively and efficiently, teachers' participation and involvement are needed. Without this commitment, activities carried out might not yield the desired outcome. To examine whether teachers have the right attitudes towards ECAs used in enhancing students' speaking skills, this study is carried out.

Literature Review

Most related literature has handled out-of-class activities or ECAs in their general, comprehensive sense. They have discussed extracurricular and co-curricular activities whether they are linguistic, scientific or athletic. Kuhar and Sabljic (2016) underline the role of ECAs in developing students' creativity. Daif-Allah and Alsamani (2014) claim that ECAs effectively fight students' low motivation, challenging them to learn a foreign language.

The field of ECAs is somewhat new; hence there are only a few studies that have discussed that field. Pickard (1996) writes about recent trends to language learning strategies that learners use outside classrooms:

Useful typologies of strategy highlight the importance of the out-of-class strategies employed voluntarily by learners outside the language classroom. These language learning strategies encompass student-initiated activities, such as listening to the radio and reading newspapers. In spite of the interest in this area, there is a paucity of data on the precise nature of the language learning activities undertaken by learners outside the classroom" (Pickard, 1996:150)

Furthermore, it is supposed that ECAs relate to indirect social learning strategies. This can be understood from Oxford (1999):

"Learning strategies are defined as "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques -- such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task -- used by students to enhance their own learning" (Oxford, 1999:110).

Moreover, Edward (2000) says,

" Co- curricular pursuits are integral to the educational program and – whether or not they carry academic credit—have legitimate links to regular courses and to the purposes of middle level and high schools" (Edward, 2000:5)

Approaches Underpinning ECAS

In EFL teaching, the importance of ECAs is supported by the communicative competence in a CLT requirement (Hymes, 1972). Students can develop their communicative competence, grammatical competence and sociolinguistic competence by giving speeches in an English-speaking club, giving talks in a school morning assembly, writing stories or articles in journalism club, designing quizzes, and individually by being an e-pal on the internet to another overseas student.

From the researcher's point of view, some extra-curricular activities are based upon the natural approach, whereas others relate to task-based approach. When an EFL teacher asks students to practise English freely inside a school during breaks, games or in the school library to each other or with workers at school who speak English, or outside school, aiming at improving communicative skills of learners, he is implementing the natural Approach. However, when preparing activities to be done by learners, especially oral or written ones such as quizzes, school morning broadcast, the task-based Approach here is the one in progress. Finally, it is assumed that a learner internally says:

*"Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I'll remember; involve me and I'll learn."
An ancient Chinese Proverb (Hedge, 2000:100).*

Learners prefer to be engaged in their learning [...] not just listening but doing. This is the research backbone; involving learners into activities, especially those away from the bars of class, that result in subconscious acquisition of ESL and conscious learning of EFL which improve communicative skills of learners. Yalden (1987) writes the following:

Tracy Terrell is the best-known contemporary proponent of the natural approach to language teaching, although it is by no means his invention. What is interesting about Terrell's treatment is that it has assumed a great deal of importance through its link with Krashen's theory of the existence of two separate systems—learning and acquisition – for gaining knowledge about language. (Yalden, 1987: 70)

Consequently, engaging students in extracurricular activities does not only enhance their level of language proficiency or academic achievement, but also their personality as well. According to Gardner, et al (2008), participation in organized activities during high school is positively associated with educational, civic, and to some extent, occupational success in young adulthood.

Previous Studies

While discussing ECAs and their role in improving students' speaking skills, it is necessary to review and explore the previous works that have been done dealing with either ECAs. In this section, TWO previous studies are discussed.

Firstly, Gibbons (2006) conducted a study entitled " The Link between extracurricular Activities and Academic Achievement for Youth in Grades 5 and 7", a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Education to Department of Graduate and Undergraduate Studies in Education, Faculty of Education, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON.

Gibbons' study (2006) examined the link between involvement in extracurricular activities and academic success for 504 youth in grades 5 and 7, using the first-year survey data from a longitudinal study conducted by Youth Lifestyle Choices-Community University Research Alliance (YLC-CURA).

The results of Gibbons' study indicated that students in grades 5 and 7 were involved in club and sport activities both inside and outside of school at fairly equal frequencies, with a mean frequency of approximately once a month. The hypothesis that a positive relation between in- and out-of-school extracurricular activities and achievement was supported. Moreover, the findings of this study support the argument that too much or too little involvement in out-of-school activities is related negatively to a student's academic success; however, a moderate amount of involvement appears to be positive. The hypothesis that there would be a relation between involvement in extracurricular activities and stress level for both in-school and out-of

school activities was not supported. Results were discussed in terms of educational implications and community resources for extracurricular activities.

Secondly, Holand and Andre's study (1987), Iowa State University, is entitled: "Participation in extracurricular Activities in Secondary School: What Is Known, What Needs to Be Known?" This study sheds more light on some of ECAs benefits.

The previous paper reviews literature relating to extracurricular participation and adolescent development. Five areas are described: personal-social characteristics, academic achievement, educational aspirations and attainments, participants' roles in activities, and environmental social context. A methodological critique and directions for future research are provided. Participation correlated with higher levels of self-esteem, improved race relations, involvement in political/social activity in young adulthood, academic ability and grades in males, educational aspirations and attainments, feelings of control over one's life, and lower delinquency rates. However, causal relationships between participation and desirable characteristics have not been demonstrated. Students in smaller schools participate in a greater number and variety of extracurricular activities than students in larger schools. Low-ability and lower SES students are more involved in school life in smaller schools. The existing findings justify additional research into the processes by which participation may influence students' lives.

So, the present study bridges a gap in literature as it deals with only ESL or EFL ECAs that are available at school, not all kinds of ECAs. It also focuses on high school students.

Significance of Research

This research highlights the value of linking classroom learning meaningfully to out-of-class activities. From a teacher's perspective, this may include school broadcast during the morning assembly, and quizzes among students from the same class or between classes, etc. As it is mentioned that:

"Co-curricular pursuits are integral to the educational program and—whether or not they carry academic credit—have legitimate links to regular courses and to the purposes of middle level and high schools. They underpin the goal of teaching students to be responsible and fulfilled human beings with opportunities that develop character, critical thinking, social skills, and talents" (NASSP, 1996: 95).

Also, Gibbs (2000) points out that EFL teachers tend to direct their most effort to in-class activities, tests, etc., paying no or little care for ECAs:

It is significant that in most course descriptions what teachers do in class is described while what students do out of class is not - it is simply not planned in the same way or to the same extent. These teachers were only planning half their course and were leaving the other half to chance. (Gibbs,2000:2)

Banks et al (2007) in a research entitled: "Learning in and out of school in diverse environment; Life-Long, Life-Wide, Life-Deep" mention some principles of learning as follows:

1. *Learning is situated in broad socio-economic and historical contexts and is mediated by local cultural practices and perspectives.*
2. *Learning takes place not only in school but also in the multiple contexts and valued practices of everyday lives across the life span.*
3. *All learners need multiple sources of support from a variety of institutions to promote their personal and intellectual development. (Banks et al.,2007: 5)*

They add: "Most of the learning that occurs across the life span takes places in informal environments (Banks et al.,2007: 9)." Furthermore, Edward (2000) says that:

co-curricular activities may not be tested or graded, but they educate and benefit students in ways that classroom activities cannot. He also adds that also provide students with a network of peers and adults who have interests and talents similar to their own. Students who participate have the chance to excel individually, be part of a group, and gain real-life lessons about the importance of teamwork, responsibility, commitment, and hard work (EDWARD, 2000:5).

So, the importance of this study lies in its dealing with ECAs, which are supposed to contribute to a large extent in the development of TESL and TEFL. Therefore, this study is hoped to be of great significance to:

- 1) **Teachers of English** as it makes them aware of the importance of ECAs and draw their attention to their importance for improving high school students' communicative skills.
- 2) **Curriculum designers** as it encourages the syllabus designers to give ECAs much more care and provide room for these activities within the syllabus. Curriculum designers can also suggest, for teachers as well as students, suitable extra activities concerning certain skills.
- 3) **High school students** as ECAs give students the opportunity to practise EFL away from formal learning and improve their communicative skills but under the supervision of their EFL teachers. ECAs encourage them to choose from extra-curricular activities what suit their abilities, attitudes, ambitions and available facilities.

Research Questions

This study tries to investigate the following main question:

What are teachers' attitudes towards the use of extracurricular activities for enhancing high school students' speaking skills?

This main question can be sub-divided into sub-questions as follows:

- 1) What are the general attitudes of EFL teachers towards the use of extra-curricular activities for improving students' speaking skills?
- 2) Does EFL teachers' workload have a negative effect on their actual practice of extra-curricular activities for enhancing speaking skills of high school students?
- 3) What are EFL teachers' expectations of the future use of ECAs?

Research Methodology

The present study is based on the descriptive method. In this study, a combination of the quantitative and qualitative research design is adopted to address the research questions above. To answer the previously mentioned questions, the research is conducted as follows:

A) The data of the research are drawn up from a group of teachers through an attitudinal questionnaire. The intended sample for this questionnaire research is 40 EFL teachers working in high schools in Saudi Arabia.

B) Semi-structured interviews are conducted with three teachers, randomly-selected from the sample, to gain deeper insight into EFL teachers' attitudes towards the use of extra-curricular activities for improving communicative skills, and to highlight their opinions, suggestions, anticipated obstacles and expectations.

Validity & Reliability of The Instruments

The questionnaires and the questions stated to be asked to the interviewees are judged by referees to ensure their validity in measuring what they claim to measure. In other words, "Each question of the questionnaire must be related obviously to the topic under investigation" (Koul, 1993:150). These questions were reviewed by two experts at the high school. After confirming the validity of the tools, the survey is carried out.

Then, the reliability result is scaled. "Reliability is the extent to which the measuring instruments will produce consistent scores when the same groups of individuals are repeatedly measured under the same conditions" (Amin, 2005). Finally, the data collected are processed using (SPSS) programme. The value of Cronbach's Alpha of the questionnaire in this study is 0.81; and this is a very good coefficient of reliability, implying that the tool is suitable for the objectives it is used to achieve.

Ethical Considerations

At the onset of data collection, the researcher has sought permission of the head teachers of the schools that participate in the survey. In addition, each questionnaire contains an opening introductory letter requesting for the consent of the respondents, asking for cooperation in providing the required information for the study. The participants are further assured of confidentiality of the information provided and that the study findings are to be used for academic purposes only. Respondents are assured in advance of their personal data protection and that they have authority to refuse or accept to participate or be interviewed.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia. This study is limited to EFL ECAs, sometimes called EFL out-of-class activities; the study does not deal with other kinds of activities. Finally, the results of this study are applied only to high school students, not to other stages.

Findings of The Study

The results have shown that there is a general positive attitude among the majority of EFL teachers towards ECAs, and a high degree of positive expectations. Also, the results have shown

that workload negatively affects teachers' actual practice of extracurricular activities. On the other hand, some teachers bear more workload and practise some of ECAs, but this practice, in most cases, is not planned appropriately; just random practices.

1. The majority of the participants have experience to varying degrees in using EFL extracurricular activities.
2. Most of the participants (97.5%) have got workload that hinders them from preparing for more EFL extracurricular activities. However, some of them do their best to bridge the gap and try to bear more workload in EFL ECAs practices.
- 3) More than half of the participants practise different kinds of EFL ECAs, realizing the importance of them for improving pupils' communicative skills.
- 4) Three quarters of EFL teachers (75%), from the sample, have the freedom to design out-of-class activities for improving pupils' communicative skills, whereas (25) % of them do not have the freedom to do so.
- 5) The majority of the participants (97.9%) have got positive attitudes towards the use of extra-curricular activities for improving pupils' communicative skills.
- 6) The majority of the participants (97.5%) of EFL teachers think that EFL extracurricular activities can help to improve pupils' communicative skills.
- 7) Due to EFL teachers' workload their actual practices of different kinds of EFL ECAs (84.1%) are not of a high percentage as their positive attitudes (97.9%). This supports the reason why (97.5%) agreed upon lessening and lightening EFL teachers' workload to help them practise more EFL ECAs. Also, this was enhanced through the interviewees' responses.
- 8) The majority of EFL teachers, 99.2% of the participants, have got good hopeful future expectations.

Finally, the following figure sums up the results:

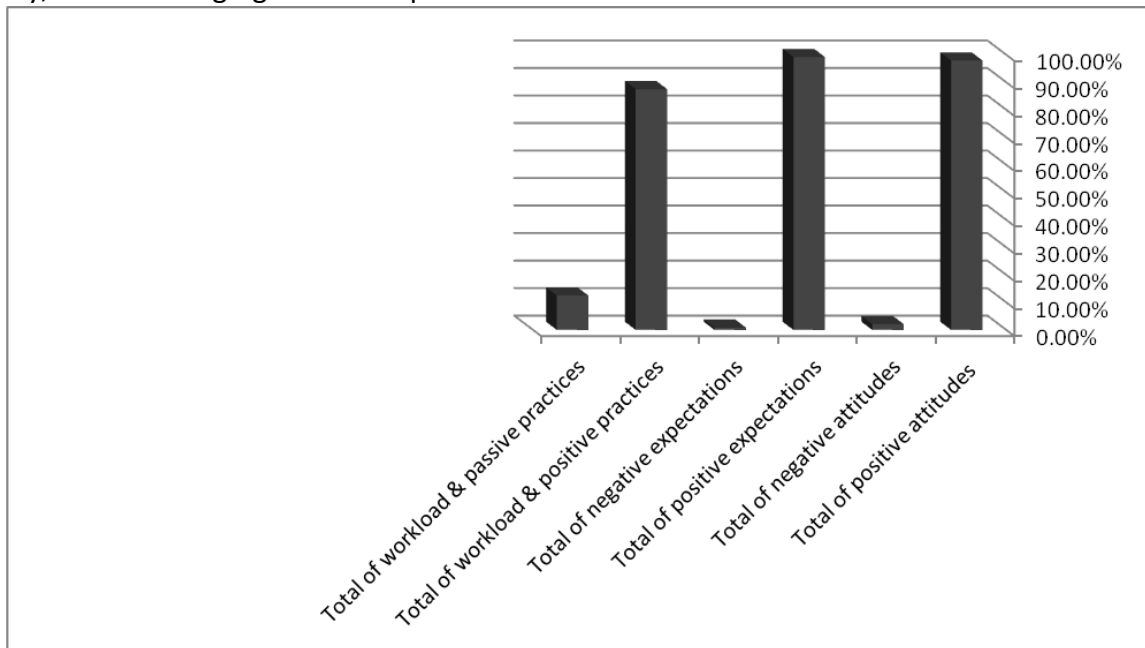


Figure 12.1 A summary of the study findings

Conclusion

Despite all of these high positive attitudes and expectations, the problem still exists. Actual practices and implementations of ECAs reveal weaknesses. Practices are spontaneous, teacher-centered with no advanced planning. Moreover, students speaking skills are still below expectations. Thus, this study recommends planning much more effective ECAs that promote students' speaking skills. The study also recommends conducting further research on the use of ECAs with different groups of students; elementary, intermediate and higher education.

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