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Beyond the Classroom: How Extracurricular Activities Empower EFL Learners



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INTRODUCTION

If you ask any language teacher what makes a student truly fluent, most would agree that it's not just what happens during grammar drills or vocabulary quizzes. Language comes alive outside those four classroom walls—when students perform in a play, discuss a book with peers, or reflect on a film they watched in English. These are the moments when learners begin to feel like real users of the language, not just students of it.

In this paper, I reflect on the increasingly important role of extracurricular activities (ECAs) in EFL learning. Drawing from my own experience as a TEFL professor, I explore how ECAs—like drama clubs, reading groups, conversation circles, and film screenings—help students grow in ways that classroom instruction alone cannot. These activities empower learners to use English confidently, connect culturally, and develop skills that extend far beyond language proficiency.



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Why the Classroom Isn't Enough

Let's begin by acknowledging the strengths of the classroom. It provides structure, introduces foundational grammar and vocabulary, and ensures measurable progress. But even the best classrooms face limitations. There's never enough time for real-life communication. Tasks are often scripted, and the pressure to get everything right can make students hesitant to speak up (Richards, 2015; Littlewood, 2011).

Many of us have seen students excel in written exams but freeze in spontaneous conversation. That's where ECAs step in. They offer an open, often informal space where learners can take risks, make mistakes, and learn naturally. As Krashen (1982) suggested decades ago, lowering the affective filter—reducing anxiety and stress—is key to successful language acquisition. ECAs are ideal for doing just that.

What Exactly Are Extracurricular Activities?

In an EFL context, extracurricular activities are voluntary, ungraded experiences that take place outside the formal classroom. They're not "extra" in the sense of being optional add-ons; rather, they're integral to forming well-rounded, communicative, and culturally aware language users. These could range from acting in a student play, joining a reading club, participating in conversation groups, or organizing a film night.

They don't replace classroom teaching; they complement it. In fact, the best EFL programs find ways to link ECAs with what students are learning formally. A student studying persuasive writing, for instance, could apply those skills in a debate club, reinforcing classroom learning in a more dynamic, applied setting.

Language Skills Come to Life

When students take part in ECAs, they get something that textbooks can't quite offer real-world language in action.

Fluency and Spontaneity: In conversation clubs or informal discussion groups, the emphasis shifts from accuracy to communication. Learners speak more freely, listen more attentively, and gradually develop fluency. The low-pressure environment allows them to take risks, which is essential for language growth (Gkonou, Daubney, & Dewaele, 2017).

Vocabulary and Context: ECAs also help students learn vocabulary in meaningful, memorable ways. Watching a film or reading a play exposes learners to idioms, slang, and expressions in context. As Nation (2013) notes, vocabulary retention is stronger when words are embedded in narratives rather than lists.

Pronunciation and Listening: Activities like drama and singing push students to tune into the rhythm and melody of English. Rehearsals and performances sharpen pronunciation and intonation skills, while watching films or listening to guest speakers help train learners' ears to different accents and speaking styles (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010; Field, 2008).

The Power of Emotion, Confidence, and Community: One of the most transformative aspects of ECAs is how they boost students' emotional engagement.

Lowering Anxiety: Many learners are afraid to speak out in front of their peers. In a relaxed extracurricular setting, they often feel safer to experiment and express themselves (Krashen, 1982).

Gaining Confidence: Performing in a play, leading a book discussion, or even just holding a conversation in English can be deeply empowering. These small victories outside the classroom help students see themselves as capable language users, not just learners (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Building a community: Perhaps just as important is the sense of belonging that ECAs create. Learners bond over shared interests, support each other's efforts, and feel more connected—not only to the language but also to each other (Mercer, 2016).

Culture, Empathy, and the Bigger Picture

Language and culture are inseparable: Through ECAs, students engage with English-speaking cultures in ways that are meaningful and relevant.

Cultural Understanding: Reading English literature, watching international films, or participating in cultural exchange events helps learners understand diverse perspectives. These activities expand their worldview and deepen their empathy (Byram, 2021).

Real: Intercultural Experiences. In drama clubs, for instance, students often explore characters from different cultural and historical contexts. This not only enhances language skills but also fosters cultural sensitivity and awareness.

Bringing the Clubs to Life

Let's take a closer look at some specific extracurricular models and how they work in practice.

Language and Conversation Clubs: These are safe spaces where learners can simply talk. Whether it's discussing weekend plans or global issues, the focus is on spontaneous use of English. These clubs are especially helpful for building confidence in learners who hesitate in more formal settings.

Film Screenings and Discussions: Film clubs are an excellent way to expose learners to authentic, unscripted English. Students can watch a movie and then discuss themes, characters, and language.

Theatrical Club: Drama offers a powerful, multi-sensory approach to language learning. Rehearsing lines, interpreting characters, and performing in front of others help students internalize language through action and emotion (Stinson & Winston, 2011).

Reading Club: Reading clubs are havens for reflective and imaginative language use. They allow students to explore different genres, authors, and cultural themes while building vocabulary and comprehension (Day & Bamford, 2002).



Making It Work: Practical Tips

Implementing ECAs doesn't require massive resources, just thoughtful planning.

- 1 Start with Student Interests.** Let learners co-design the activities. Conduct surveys or informal discussions to learn what excites them (Graves, 2000).
- 2 Keep It Low-Pressure.** The focus should be on participation, not perfection. Make room for laughter, mistakes, and experimentation.
- 3 Link to the Curriculum.** When possible, connect ECAs to classroom content to reinforce and extend learning (Tomlinson, 2013).
- 4 Let Students Lead.** Give learners leadership roles within clubs. This builds autonomy, responsibility, and practical life skills (Little, 2007).
- 5 Use Technology.** Even with time or space limitations, online book clubs or virtual film nights can provide meaningful interaction (Godwin-Jones, 2018).



Overcoming Challenges in Implementation

Many teachers may become excited about how drama clubs and reading groups and movie nights can really boost English learning. But let's be real, making these things happen isn't always a walk in the park. Teachers are often already swamped, and schools might not have a ton of extra cash lying around. So, what are some of the real-life bumps in the road, and how can we smooth them out?

The Big One: Time and Resources (Or Lack Thereof!)

Teachers often feel like they're juggling a million things already. Adding another activity to the mix can feel overwhelming. And then there's the issue of where to hold these clubs, what materials to use, and who's going to pay for it all.

Solution: We need to be smart and resourceful. Maybe we don't need a fancy theater with spotlights right away. Could we start a reading club that meets in the library or even online using free video chat? For language exchange partners or online book discussions, there are tons of free platforms out there. Technology can be our friend here, helping us connect and share materials without breaking the bank. Maybe a student with some tech skills could even help set things up! Also, let's not forget the power of asking for help – perhaps there are parent volunteers or community members who'd be passionate about leading a conversation group or helping with a drama rehearsal. Starting small and building momentum is key – a little goes a long way.

The "Why Bother?" Factor: Getting Students on Board

Not every student is going to jump at the chance to join an extra English activity, especially if they're feeling shy or already have a packed schedule. We need to show them why this is fun and helpful, not just more homework in disguise.

Solution: Make it sound appealing! Instead of calling it "extra practice," maybe it's "English Movie Hangout" or "International Friendship Club." Let students have a say in what activities happen – if they're interested in it, they're more likely to show up. For those who are a bit hesitant, maybe they can bring a friend. We can also highlight the social side of things – it's a chance to meet new people who share a common goal. And for the really quiet ones, maybe they can have behind-the-scenes roles in a play or contribute anonymously to an online discussion. Creating a supportive and encouraging vibe where everyone feels comfortable is crucial.

Keeping the Spark Alive: Avoiding the "This is Boring" Syndrome

Even if we get a good group going, how do we make sure they stick around? The last thing we want is for the drama club to have tumbleweeds rolling across the stage or the reading group to dwindle to just one person.

Solution: Keep things fresh and exciting! Maybe have different themes for the reading club each month or try different kinds of plays in the drama club – comedies, mysteries, even student-written scripts. Let students take turns leading activities or choosing what to do. Regular feedback is gold – ask them what they're enjoying and what they'd like to see more of. If they feel like they have some ownership, they're much more likely to stay engaged. Maybe even a pizza night every now and then wouldn't hurt!

Making it Connect: Showing the "Real World" Value

Sometimes, students (and even parents or school administrators) might see these extracurriculars as just "extra fun" and not really connected to serious learning. We need to show them how these activities do help with their English skills and beyond.

Solution: We can make the links to classroom learning clear. If the class is working on persuasive writing, the debate club is the perfect real-world practice. If they're reading a novel in class, the reading club offers a chance for deeper discussion. We can also highlight the "soft skills" they're developing – teamwork in a drama production, critical thinking in a book discussion, confidence in public speaking during a debate. These are skills that will help them in all their subjects and in their future careers. Sharing stories of students who have benefited from these activities can also be powerful.

Essentially, overcoming these challenges is all about being creative, collaborative, and keeping the human element at the heart of it all. It's about making these activities something that students genuinely want to be a part of, where they feel supported, have fun, and see real progress in their English journey.

Final Thoughts

In the end, extracurricular activities are not “extra” at all—they’re essential. They remind us that language learning isn’t just about passing tests or memorizing rules. It’s about using language to connect, to create, and to grow.

As educators, it’s our job to open doors beyond the classroom. When we do, we give learners the opportunity not only to improve their English but also to discover who they can become through it.

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