

Beyond Classroom English Activities to Generate Interest in English Among Tertiary Students

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Abstract: In this article, we present a study aimed to explore the attitude, interest and perception of students learning English language beyond the classroom using a list of activities such as Readers Theatre, Storyboard, Academic Explorace, Spell it right and Melodies of Pilah. A survey was conducted involving 466 students from different faculties who were taking English proficiency courses at diploma and degree levels at a local university. The findings indicate that both male and female students had a positive degree of interest and attitude toward the English activities carried out beyond the classroom. The popular activities were Readers Theatre and Melodies of Pilah (group singing). The study also indicated that students preferred group activities compared to individual activities. Based on the findings, it is recommended that students should be allowed to explore English materials independently beyond classrooms where language learning takes place implicitly. The study found that the success of English learning activities carried out beyond the confines of the classroom can generate interest among students to learn the language. The success of English activities carried out beyond classrooms can be assessed by students' ability to complete the task assigned (the end-product) rather than the processes involved in completing the task.

Keywords: language learning, beyond-the-classroom, out-of-class

1. Introduction

Some students struggle to learn English taught in a formal classroom setting where the teaching and learning focuses on the teacher who ensures students develop their linguistic skills. Participation and enthusiasm for learning activities in classroom confined spaces have long been an issue in education around the world (Chu, Angello, Saenz & Quek, 2017). For many students such a structural approach to teaching and learning English can be boring. Also, studies have shown students learn a language in different ways (Abdulkadir & Guven, 2020. Bakar, 2018; Chen, 2016), therefore there is no one universal correct way to teach students to acquire a language; the success of language learning depends on student's preference and interest. According to Orhon

(2018) the impact of a teacher's teaching within the confines of a classroom, is somewhat limited, however, when learners are put in an environment that encourages real language use in authentic situations, such as in the language learning activities beyond the classroom, it has proven to help students learn. At this point, the concept of beyond-the-classroom learning, which is defined as "any kind of learning that takes place outside the classroom and involves self-instruction, naturalistic learning or self-directed naturalistic learning" (Orhon,2018).

Beyond-the-classroom learning approach appears to be aligned to the functional approach whereby the emphasis lies on the ability of students to express themselves orally and in written form in creative ways (Shanthi, Zainon & Thayalan, 2018). Thus, the beyond-the-classroom approach is one of the ways to address the challenge of making students interested and wanting to learn English in fun ways. Beyond the classroom activities carried out encourages students to learn English by focusing on task-orientated activities that engages students in creative language use. A task-based activity which has less teacher control and more students control has unique benefits in that language learning tasks become more meaningful, linked closely with real-life events and "stimulate spontaneous language use" (Chen, 2016). According to Orhon (2018), among others the one to consider for language education to be successful, is to consider the autonomy of learners, described as "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action" (Little, 1991, p.3). Orhan (2018), further adds that learners must be independent to develop their proficiency in a second or foreign language skills because they are responsible for the success for learning the language. Especially in a country like Malaysia, students do not have the opportunity to practice English outside the classroom because the use of mother tongue and the Malay language is most commonly used as lingua franca. Therefore, students do not have enough room to use English outside the classroom, and their learning is often limited to the walls of a classroom. Hence, it is the responsibility of teachers to create opportunities for learners to continue their learning independently beyond the classroom by undertaking language activities to attain better language proficiency.

For the purpose of this study, the lecturers from the Academy of Language Studies at a local university carried out "Language Fest" where task-based language activities were carried out outside the classroom for a period of one month. A post study was conducted after the activities to gauge students' attitude, interest and perception on the effectiveness of the activities to generate interest to learn English. Based on the different preferences that students may have of learning English and to check on the students' preference to learn English outside the classroom, the researchers designed a month-long English Language Festival that consisted of 5 different language activities carried out at different levels; the classroom, the faculty and the university levels. The aim of Language Fest was to help students experience the fun and usefulness of English through a functional-based learning approach. Students were assigned with five language activities namely: Readers Theatre, Storyboard, Melodies of Pilah, Academic Explorace and Spell-it-right. The rules and regulations were briefed to all participants and they were free to select and practice for any of the activities. The program was carried out over a period of one month. At the end of the month-long program students were asked to complete a questionnaire describing their experience in taking part in the different competitions organised. Most of the activities carried out were group activities because studies have shown that students learn language better when they work in groups (Shanthi, Thayalan, Zainon, & De Mello, 2019). Group work also promotes student collaboration whereby each member taps and optimises each other's abilities and capabilities in language learning.

This paper aims to report students' attitude, interest and perceptions on learning English after participating in language activities beyond the classroom. Thus, there are two objectives being focused on the research:

1. identify a student's attitude and interest in participating in language-based learning activities beyond the classroom.
2. identify the perceptions of learners towards language-based learning activities beyond the classroom as a platform to learn English.

1.1 Beyond-the-classroom English Activities

Beyond-the-classroom learning are language activities that encourage language learning outside the classroom (Maros & Mat Saad, 2016). It is said that language activities beyond the classroom promote independent learning (Shanthi et al., 2019) and students can learn a language independently when it becomes crucial for them to use the language to accomplish a set task (Ismail & Shafie, 2019), where learners set goals based on the target to achieve which is the end-product. In the case of this study the end-product is the ability of students to complete the five activities in English for an audience. Thus, students not only set goals, but also took charge of their own learning progress to achieve the set goals; thus, motivating them to take control of their own learning. In the process of completing the task at hand, students got to explore language learning according to their interest and ability which were at the very heart of learning (Shanthi et al., 2018). Thus, the activities made learning more functional, because students could visualise and put to practise what they had learnt in class; putting language to practice. When organised well, these activities could attract student's interest, and change their attitude and perception to be more positive and "the feeling they derive from self-direction is both a beautifully satisfying resource for learners and could become an amazing resource for life (Chen, 2016).

According to Thomas (2017), through the beyond-the-classroom learning students improve their communication skills, teamwork skills and acquire the ability to tackle or face real-life situations. He further states that among others the significant benefits of beyond-the-classroom learning are, i) developing interpersonal skills and acting independently, ii) improving creativity, iii) minimizing behavioural problems, iv) staying motivated, and v) better ability in tackling uncertainties.

It is believed that when cooperation and interaction are combined with engaging and fun activities, successful learning becomes more possible (Le, Janseen & Wubbles, 2018; Shanthi, et al, 2018, 2019). Hence, activities which can be fun and engaging like Readers Theatre, the more likely it is to encourage teamwork and motivate learners to learn English. Based on the advantages discussed, the researchers designed Language Fest to help students experience the fun and usefulness of English. The activities used in this study are described as below:

i. Readers theatre (RT)

Readers Theatre is an engaging oral presentation of any prose in a dramatic way by a group of students focused on the audience. Each group should consist of 6 to 8 students. Group members make use of small hand props and costume accessories (such as an umbrella, shawl, gloves, hat, glasses, etc.). RT is a group activity that integrates all the four skills of language: listening, speaking, reading and writing in an authentic context. Students develop fluency and comprehension when they become familiar with the text and the plot structure. They also improve their pronunciation and presentation skills by much practice reading and listening to the stories (Shanthi et al., 2019).

ii. Melodies of Pilah

This is a group singing competition. Each group consists of not more than 6 students. Participants can choose any English song to sing. Singing is accompanied by a musician playing any musical instrument or a minus one audio. Songs are useful authentic material and they are easy to access and help develop speaking, listening, vocabulary and grammar aspects of language learning. They help students to pick-up useful phrases and expressions that students can use in daily communication.

iii. Spell-it- right

This is an individual competition that requires students to say and spell correctly words coming from the competition judge. As the round of competition progresses, the difficulty level of the words to spell increases as well. In each round the speller who misspelled is eliminated. The benefits of spell-it-right goes beyond language learning, as students often improve self-confidence, communication skills and the ability to deliver under pressure.

iv. Academic Explore Race

This competition involves completing five tasks. Each task station is hidden in different locations. Participants will only obtain directions to the next station after completing the present task. The

tasks are related to English proficiency such as completing a word puzzle, singing a song with the correct rhythm and rhyme after listening to a clip of a song, producing idioms and other language tasks. The tasks not only offered students a chance to use their map-reading and problem-solving skills, but it also builds leadership skills. The team that finished all the five tasks in the shortest time was the champion.

v. Storyboard

This competition involves groups of students presenting a storybook that they have read. Each group should consist of 4 – 5 students. Group members may use props and costume accessories. The competition consists of 2 parts: Part 1 – Students present an overview of the story; Part 2 students highlight an event or a scene in the story by acting it out. Storyboard activity needs a great deal of careful thought, which increases ability to think critically as the students have to come up with creative ways to create a storyboard for the audience. This involves good teamwork, ability to think critically and overcoming fears and insecurities while presenting to an audience. By the time students reach the presentation stage of each activity, students would have explored many areas of English such as vocabulary and grammar, and language skills such as speaking, reading, writing and listening. Students would have also built confidence in public speaking; a skill that students need for their future workplace.

1.2 Existing Problems in English Learning at Tertiary Level

In Malaysia students learn English as a second language from primary schools up to high schools. However, even with 11 years of English learning, many students enter tertiary institutions with low English language proficiency. In the public university where this study was conducted, students attended compulsory English proficiency classes for the first three semesters of their tenure of 3 to 4 years of campus life. The ultimate objective of English language courses in this university was to help students achieve communicative competence for job purposes. In the current teaching style of English, most class time was spent with the lecturer teaching and the students watching and listening to instructions. At times there was some infusion of information technology (IT) making it a blended method of learning English. Hence, whether its face-to-face teaching or blended mode, the teacher was in control of the teaching and learning.

However, studies have shown that teachers must recognize that students can learn from each other and that the deepest learning happens when students have the opportunity to practice and obtain feedback from the teachers (Sawant & Rizwi, 2015; Wen & Piao, 2020). Therefore, when students are given the opportunity to take control of their own learning as in the beyond-the-classroom English activities, it provides opportunities for students to be actively involved in discussions, design their own language projects, explore topics that interest them and finally present their work to an audience.

2. Method

The present study investigates the beyond-the-classroom language activities carried out by lecturers from a local university for tertiary-level learners. Quantitative data was collected using a questionnaire and structured interview after “Language Fest”. The first part of the questionnaire seeks to obtain the demographic information with respect to their level of study at the university (diploma or degree), and gender. The second part of the questionnaire contains 12 items to measure students’ attitude and interest, the third part contains six questions on students’ perception on beyond-the-classroom activities held to help improve their English proficiency. The questionnaire had a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” or “very boring” to “very interesting” requiring participants to respond to each of the 20 statements considering their own experience in learning English. A total number of 466 students took part in the study. The questionnaire was administered at the end of the one-month program of Language Fest; after all the activities had been carried out.

3. Results and Findings

Table 1 shows that of the 466 students who participated in the study, 311 (66.7%) were diploma students, and 155 were degree students. The number of female participants was 304 (65.2%), while 162 (34.8%) were male participants.

Table 1: Participants for the study

Population	Male	Female	Total (%)
Diploma	106	205	311(66.7%)
Degree	56	99	155 (33.3%)
N	162 (34.8%)	304 (65.2%)	466 (100%)

Students' attitude and interest towards the activities were explored using 12 items in the questionnaire. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the male and female students' attitude and interest towards out-of-class English activities.

Based on the mean score interpretation shown in Table 2. A descriptive analysis of the student's attitude and interest in beyond-the-classroom activities is provided.

Table 2: Mean Score Interpretation

Mean score	Interpretation
1.00-1.80	Very Low
1.81-2.60	Low
2.61-3.20	Medium
3.21-4.20	High
4.21-5.00	Very High

Source: Moidunny (2009)

The results in Table 3 indicates no significant difference between male students (M=3.38) and female students (M=3.47). This result was supported by the t-value and p-value. It was found that there was no significant difference in mean test score between the female and male since the p-value is more than 0,05. When the overall attitude of all participants was analysed, it was seen that the students had a positive attitude towards out-of-class activities to learn English (M=3.44, SD=0.49). This shows that students' attitude for beyond-the-classroom was at moderate level.

Table 3: Attitude according to gender on out-of-classroom English activities

Participants	Mean	Mean difference	t-values	p-values	Decision
Female	3.47	0.09	883	0.378	Not Significant
Male	3.38				
Female & Male	3.44				

The participants were also asked to rate at a scale of 1(very boring) to 5 (very interesting) the five main language activities (Storyboard, Readers Theatre, Melodies of Pilah, Spell-it-Right and Academic Explore race) that were carried out at different levels throughout the month-long Language Fest. A descriptive analysis revealed that more than 75% participants either rated the activities as interesting (49.4%) or very interesting (26.2%). The mean score M=4.01 (SD=0.754) denotes that the students highly enjoyed the five activities.

4. What is your opinion on the English activities carried out during Festival Bahasa, 2019?
466 responses

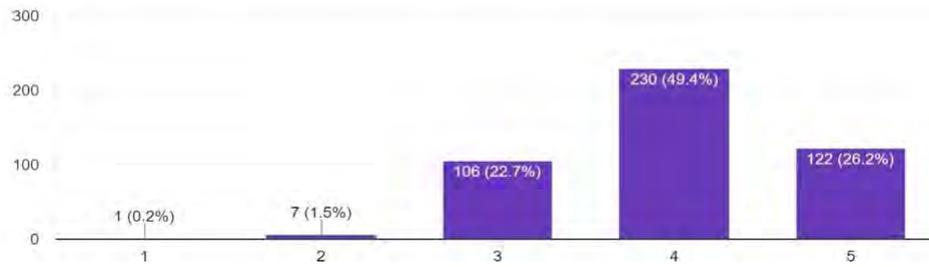


Fig.1: Students' Opinion on Language Fest Activities

1=strongly
disagree
5= strongly

The study also examined which among the five activities among the five was perceived as more helpful to improve their English learning outside the classroom. Descriptive statistics revealed that students highly perceived all the five activities had helped them learn English outside the classroom. Nevertheless, the most preferred activities are Academic Explore race and Readers Theatre.

Table 4: Students' Interest on the out-of-class language learning activity

Type of activity	Mean score	Standard Deviation
Readers Theatre	4.00	0.755
Storyboard	3.94	0.716
Melodies of Pilah	3.92	0.842
Spell-it-Right	3.97	0.791
Academic Explore race	4.01	0.645

Participants were also asked whether they preferred group or individual language learning activity to improve their language proficiency. Descriptive statistics revealed that students preferred group activities compared to individual activities. Figure 2 reveals that more than 80% either agree (37.1%) or totally agree (44.0%) that they prefer group activities compared to individual activities to help them learn English outside the classroom (M=4.21, SD=0.75).

10. I prefer group activities than individual activities to improve my language proficiency.
466 responses

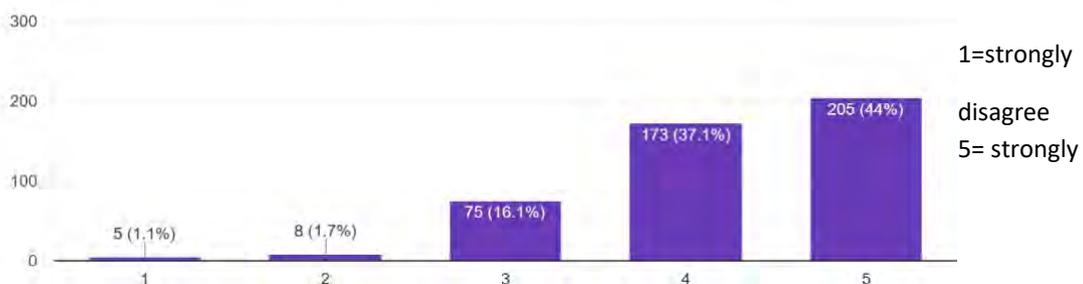


Fig.2: Students Preference on Type of Activity

Finally, to check if the participants enjoyed the experience of learning English independently outside the classroom, two questions were asked in the questionnaire as seen in Table 5. The descriptive analysis reveals that more than 84.1% of the participants would take part in beyond-the- classroom language learning activities in future (M=2.8, SD=3.6). To the question if the beyond-the- classroom activities had helped them improve their English language proficiency, 74.9% students replied “Yes” (M=2.24, SD=0.43).

Table 5: Student’s response to future commitment

Question	Yes (%)	No (%)	Maybe (%)	M	SD
Would you take part in out-class-language learning activities in future?	84.1	1.0	14.9	2.80	0.36
Do you agree that the language learning activities outside the classroom has helped you to improve in your English language proficiency?	74.9	0.6	24.5	2.24	0.43

Outcome of the semi-structured interview with lecturers

Five from the total number of 11 lecturers participated in the semi-structured interview. The question asked was: What is the difference that you see in your student’s English language proficiency before and after the beyond-the-classroom activities? The findings are reported in Table 6.

Table 6: Lecturer’s semi-structured Interview report

L1 Students with higher proficiency level mostly took control of carrying out the activities and guided the less proficient ones. That in the end enabled the groups to produce good final performance.
L2 Since students were allowed to choose the activity that they wanted to participate; students showed more interest to “show-off“their ability to use English especially in the speaking skill. They practiced more so as not to make mistakes in the final stage performance.
L3 Students with lower language proficiency did not show much improvement as they played a small role in the group task. Task was more dominated by students with higher proficient levels. So, I think students with better proficiency level shined and showed greater level of improvement in language skill.
L4 at the very beginning students were not comfortable or relaxed at the idea of performing in front of an audience because they lacked confidence. But later when I saw them during the final presentation, my students really bloomed.
L5 the students needed me indirectly, I was sort of a guide to them; giving ideas and helping them check the language for their script. The students needed prompting and once they had their acts covered, they spent more time working on their own and the final product of their work was excellent. They had put in a lot of effort and were very creative; I find a very positive attitude to learning English in them that I never saw while they were in my class.

It can be summarised that lecturers saw positive changes in the students’ ability to use English as seen during the final performance to the audience. Students with low proficiency level

needed guidance from their more proficient language learners and that in the end good team work prevailed where the students with higher proficiency level were helping the weaker one so that as a team, they could complete the task at hand better.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The two research questions in this study require the answers concerning the attitude and interest, and perception towards beyond-the-classroom English learning activities in one of the institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. One of the key outcomes of out-of-class English learning activities was that both male and female students found out-of-class English activities as helpful to learn English. Thus, it is recommended that teachers use more out-of-class language activities to encourage students to master English since they were proven to instill a positive attitude among language learners. Such activities exposed students to use English more outside the confines of the classrooms. The findings of this study were in resonance with a study conducted by Sargsyan and Kurghinyan (2016) that the use of English words and expressions learned through songs and music lyrics proved to be a prominent source to attain proficiency in English. It is recommended that learning English language needs to be encouraged and developed in and out of the classroom through appropriate language activities such as those used in this study. In fact, studies have shown that exposure to language plays such as Readers Theatre play an essential role in improving students' language proficiency (Shanthi et al. 2019; Orhan, 2018) because they enable students to learn language effortlessly and effectively (Maroz & Noor Saazai, 2016). When students were allowed to choose language learning activities that were suitable to their needs and interests, learners learned independently and they showed passion and dedication to show better progress in their ability to use English.

As found in the study, students prefer group activities compared to individual activities. Group activities encourage social interaction with others (Shanthi, 2017; Le, Janseen & Wubbles, 2018) and enables students to manage their own learning so that group interaction and management can improve their attitude and confidence to use English. This sort of learning experience can provide a pleasurable and positive language learning and language use experience (Chu et al., 2017).

Based on the outcome of the study, it is recommended that students should be allowed to explore English materials independently outside the classroom where the process and level of learning that has taken place can be judged based on the final performance of the students in front of an audience. In short, the success of out- of- class activities to encourage English acquisition cannot be judged from the process but rather based on the end product of it.

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