

The Impact of Extracurricular Activities on English Language Students' Professional and Leadership Development

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Abstract:

EFL learners' extracurricular experiences have a significant impact on their academic careers, particularly, their personal growth. This paper attempts to examine English students' perceptions and involvement in extracurricular activities and how they contribute to improving their self-development. Questionnaires were handed to 100 EFL students, in addition to a semi-structured interview conducted with 4 teachers of English, and a disguised in-context observation. Results revealed students' determination and motivation to join extracurricular activities. However, the fewer opportunities at a local level, along with the inability to access international opportunities stood as an impediment in front of their thirst for knowledge and development. The incorporation of leadership activities in EFL classrooms may significantly enhance not only students' linguistic competencies but will prepare them for labour-market challenges.

Keywords: EFL learners; Extracurricular activities; Leadership; opportunities; self-developm

1. Introduction

For multiple reasons, Algerian students' academic journey is usually described as either exhausting or boring. On one hand, the educational system in Algeria has in a way or another ignored the incorporation of entertaining but challenging extracurricular activities that aim at making the learning process joyful but most importantly enriching. On the other hand, the absence of creativity along with a sense of autonomy among the majority of students has made them passive recipients of knowledge striving simply to give back what the teacher has already spoon-fed them. Still, being a motivated student is not enough to be an independent learner, and an active agent of change in society, because we usually come across students who are passionate about self-development through extra-academic activities, but unfortunately, they do not know about rewarding techniques or appropriate methodology. Students' access to such activities is harder in Algeria due to a lack of local on-site opportunities which compel them to master the use of computers and the internet to search for international ones. Being autonomous and doing extra activities whether in or outside the academic

institution, is key to developing students' leadership skills. Reeves (2008) has stressed that being involved in such activities has a major impact on students' behaviours, and consequently their academic performance, and that makes the difference between a passive and an active student.

Algerian universities usually do not consider co-curricular activities mandatory. It is up to students interested to volunteer or be involved. Such optional policies concerning motivated students' membership in university clubs, organisations, sports teams, etc. have significantly contributed to deepening the gap between enterprising and reluctant students. Thus, this case study aims to uncover EFL students' obstacles while searching for extracurricular activities. In doing so, a questionnaire has been administered to 100 students, and an interview was conducted with 4 teachers.

2. Local extracurricular activities

Algerian students usually complain that they are overwhelmed by the number of lectures or the amount of information they receive, and this (according to them) is the reason why they are not involved in extracurricular activities. Moreover, most of the students either ignore or pay little attention to international development opportunities that are due to a variety of reasons, such as; internet access, absence of training, motivation...etc. On the other hand, motivated students do only focus on the available local programs. According to Fujita (2005), extracurricular activities are divided up into structured activities like university official clubs, sports teams, student organisations, or any activity happening within the university, versus unstructured activities which are routine practices like watching TV, going out with friends...etc. Students' inclination towards one type of activity reflects several traits about their personality and consequently their academic achievements.

On one hand, timid, introvert, and hesitant students stick to unstructured activities because they prefer staying within their comfort zone which is most of the time; their close friends, surfing the net, or simply doing nothing. On the other hand, active and confident students prefer structured activities because they are certainly found on the frontlines of the official clubs, sports teams...etc. The problem with this voluntary system is that it reveals a direct correlation between students' motivation and membership in extracurricular activities. That is to say, this policy encourages students who are already motivated, while it ignores those who are hesitant. In order for extracurricular activities to have an extensive systemic impact targeting particularly demotivated or hesitant students, there has to be a switch in the regulatory laws organizing them. Students' hesitation does not necessarily reveal their incompetence but it is in most of the time a barrier in the face of latent talents that need to be unleashed. Unfortunately, the Algerian

educational system, particularly at university, does not encourage hidden gems to be exposed, since extracurricular activities are not mandatory and most importantly teaching is in most of the time theoretical. According to Shute (2008), research demonstrated that some educational systems tend to reduce the amount of time dedicated to educational activities, claiming that the focus should be on official academic modules. This policy negatively affected students' motivation and achievements.

The relationship between local extracurricular activities and learning a foreign language might be viewed as incompatible by some students who usually raise questions like: how can a local extracurricular activity improve my language skills? How to implement programs and activities while many do not understand the language? Such inquiries are legitimate and need to be addressed not only by teachers of the language but by those specializing in leadership training and self-development, with substantial expertise in the organization of extracurricular events locally and internationally. In fact, students of English have hundreds of possibilities to be active locally performing activities and improving their language skills as well. For instance, fresh graduates usually complain about the lack of opportunities while they can join private schools voluntarily and teach for a symbolic amount of money if not free. Recently graduated students must understand that they should first experience the teaching context, become acquainted with the students' expectations from them and check what could be improved in their teaching methodology. The approach of joining local organizations, teaching voluntarily, doing charity, etc., may seem to some as futile, yet it is a major step that a successful graduate must take. This idea is conceptualized in terms such as internship, volunteering work, charity, etc., which also applies to graduates of Western countries' graduates as well.

3. International extracurricular activities

The combination of EFL learning and international opportunities entail compatibility and harmony, since the global language is key to access worldwide programs. Yet, the situation in Algeria, particularly in Tiaret University, is quite different due to various reasons. International programs are divided into online and in-person opportunities. Unfortunately, students often fail to attend programs that are purely face-to-face due to their financial situation, and if not, they are required to successfully pass the bureaucratic procedures in order to get an entry visa to their destination. In similar vein, the majority of students seem to be unaware of the effective methodology to search, apply and prepare for such global events. This usually deprives them from participation in hundreds of online events that are massively beneficial and completely free.

The availability of online courses to improve students' language skills, have a direct impact on their studies and is of great help as students can perform further readings, in-depth research and advanced understanding of their lectures. Several platforms offer free access to hundreds of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Most of these courses are in the English language; however, they are not limited to language skills. For instance, anyone can learn about First aid, programming, public speaking, etc., from the comfort of their homes.

Whether a student or a fresh graduate, one is held accountable for his continuous professional development. This challenge might be easy to accomplish for someone who masters English than another person who does not master the language. If we consider Master students' possibilities to keep developing, we may list the following opportunities:

3.1 Language proficiency tests

English Language graduates have become increasingly concerned about losing their language skills due to being disconnected from the university and without an appropriate job that guarantees their continuous professional development. One of the alternative plans to overcome these fears is by inviting students to sit for various English language proficiency tests, these could be online or face-to-face examinations that certify students' English level based on an international framework called CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), which is defined by Cambridge as: "an international standard for describing language ability. It describes language ability on a six-point scale, from A1 for beginners, up to C2 for those who have mastered a language." (Cambridge Assessment, n.d. p1).

Students are usually advised to sit for online language proficiency tests in order to be well prepared for an actual face-to-face examination that is internationally recognized, as it allows its holder to study in reputable universities, find a job, relocate to an English-speaking country...etc. English assessment qualifications vary according to students' purposes and travel destinations, still, the most popular English tests that are accepted worldwide and available in Algeria are the following:

a- Test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL)

Provided by ETS (Educational Testing Service) and available in these provinces: Oran, Algiers, Constantine, and Setif.

b- International English language testing system (IELTS)

IELTS is jointly managed by the British Council, IDP: IELTS Australia, and Cambridge Assessment English, it is provided by the British Council in Algiers city only.

c- Cambridge English qualifications

Provided by Cambridge Assessment and available in Algiers by the British Institute.

3.2 International teaching certificates

Other than language proficiency tests, fresh graduates usually bump into the reality of the Algerian labour market. The vast majority of English Language graduates in Algeria have one option, which is the sector of education that cannot recruit hundreds graduating every academic year. In such situations, many graduates lose hope and think that unemployment is their eventual fate disregarding the possibility to apply either for internationally recognised teaching certificates that allow them to guarantee a job abroad or online thanks to the availability of international organizations providing ESL/EFL positions. To apply for such certificates, graduates need to check their actual language skills as reputable companies hire those with a minimum of C1 English level.

Teaching certificates that are highly demanded by recruiters worldwide are divided up into online and face-to-face certificates. Any fresh graduate or student who proves to have a C1 English level will be able to apply for an online teaching certificate like; TEFL (Teacher of English as a Foreign Language) or TESOL (Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages). The courses' price vary according to companies' reputation and to the period of purchase.

Face-to-face teaching certificates are obviously expensive but more recognised than online ones. In-class certificates are TEFL, TESOL, or CELTA, the latter stands for (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) and is known to be the most prestigious and demanding course that is issued by Cambridge University. Graduates could consider such courses as a form of Continuing Professional Development that will brush up on their English and boost their knowledge about the latest teaching approaches and techniques.

3.3 International exchange programs

International exchange programs have significant impacts on students' psychology, leadership, and competence. Unfortunately, the lack, if not the absence of opportunities provided by Algerian universities, along with the inability to access international programs resulted in students with limited leadership skills. Thus, it is of great importance that English students learn about such programs through study days, seminars, or even modules like; Continuing Professional Development (CPD), Leadership and exchange programs.

Unfortunately, opportunities that are available to Algerian students remain limited compared to students in Europe or the Middle East. However, this does not mean that the hunt for opportunities is impossible. Computer and internet literacy and communicative upper-intermediate English are a must for someone willing to

find not only opportunities but to discover the hidden gems that only a few people know about. The following programs are examples of opportunities that are not invested appropriately.

a- United States embassy exchange programs

The United States embassy in Algeria provides fully-funded scholarships, exchange programs, and events for youth and students. The aim of these programs is to reinforce mutual understanding, educational and cultural exchange.

b- AIESEC volunteering and professional internships

AIESEC is an international NGO that provides students and fresh graduates with international internships aiming at self-development, leadership, and intercultural exchange.

c- Speakers' platforms: TED Talks, WikiStage...etc

TED Talks and WikiStage are non-profit-organizations that organise talks by inviting speakers of different backgrounds to share their expertise and success stories. Such platforms are a unique opportunity for those interested in public speaking and debating.

d- Model United Nations events

Model United Nations, is an event that is organised almost everywhere in the world including Algeria. It is a simulation of the United Nations' events and it aims at training students in diplomacy skills.

e- Platforms for students' opportunities

In addition to the above-mentioned exchange programs, there are hundreds of international conferences and events which could be found on platforms for youth and students. For instance: *marj3.com*, *scholarship-positions.com*, *studyportals.com*, *Heysuccess.com*, *opportunitiesforafricans.com*, *opportunitydesk.org*, *scholars4dev.com*. Students' language skills, motivation, and hard work will make them independent autodidacts who are able to think out of the box and not confined to traditional education. Autonomy means hunting for more unique global opportunities that will absolutely boost their career.

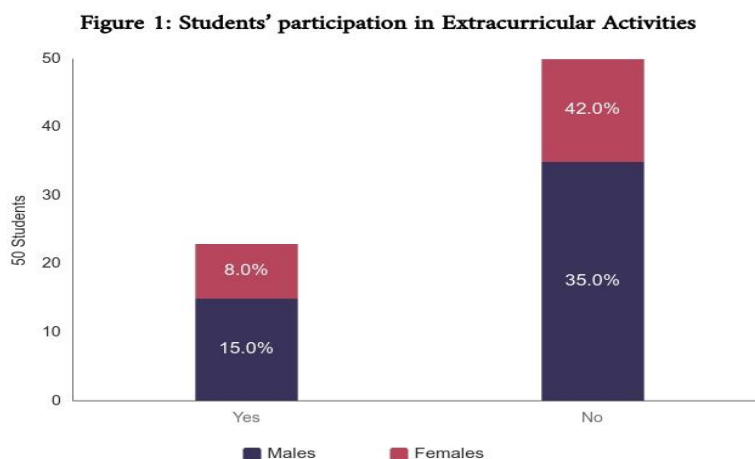
4. Methodology and data collection

This study opted for a triangulation method aiming to examine English students' and their teachers' awareness about extracurricular activities. The data for this quantitative study were collected through an online google form questionnaire dedicated to 100 Master 2 students of English at the department of English at Tiaret University. In addition, four university teachers were chosen for an interview based on the variable of gender and experience to examine their interest in extracurricular activities and if they know enough to enlighten their students.

5. Results and data analysis

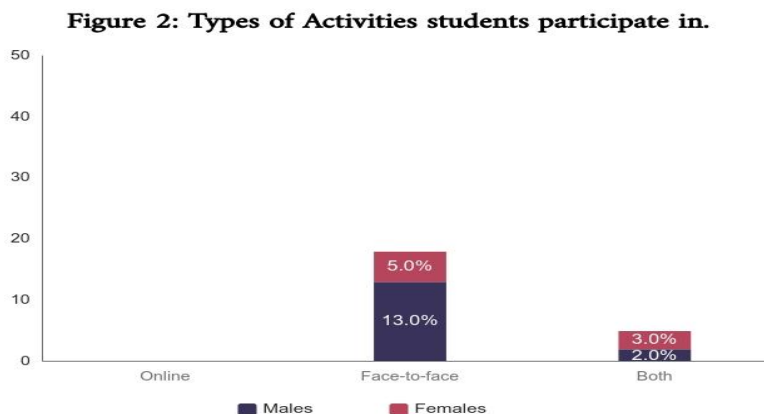
Due to the pandemic, the questionnaire was mainly sent online through Google forms, the link was shared with Master 2 students who answered the questions voluntarily. Overall findings demonstrated students' estrangement from significant extracurricular activities because of interrelated reasons such as; lack of activities, demotivation, English language skills, and most importantly unawareness about CPD (continuing professional development), leadership and exchange programs. Results are represented in the following bar graphs:

5.1 Students' participation in extracurricular activities



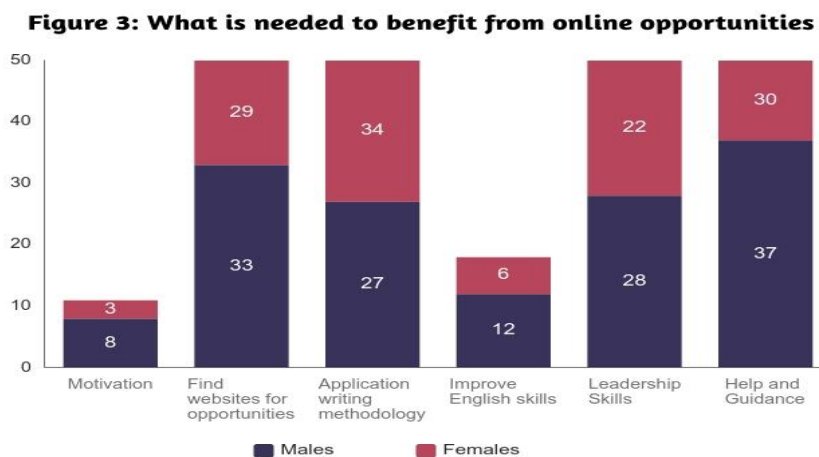
Descriptively, the results demonstrate that 23% of students participated in extracurricular activities, while 77% did not. This indicates a low level of participation. The chart shows that 15% of males and 8% of females participated in extracurricular activities, while 35% of males and 42% of females did not. This demonstrates that a higher percentage of female students do not participate in extracurricular activities compared to male students. This illustrates students' low participation in extracurricular activities, which is the result of intricate reasons that are academic, social, psychological, and financial. 23% of both male and female students said that they participated at least once in an extracurricular activity, the latter was mainly in the context of charity organisations and sports teams.

5.2 Types of activities students participate in.



The answers provided in this bar graph apply only to 23% of the target population. Surprisingly, 5% of the respondents experienced online extracurricular activities, while 18% participated in actual face-to-face programs. Such reactions by senior students clearly reveal how extracurricular activities whether online or face-to-face are of marginal concern for students.

5.3 The reasons behind students' reluctance to make full use of online opportunities.

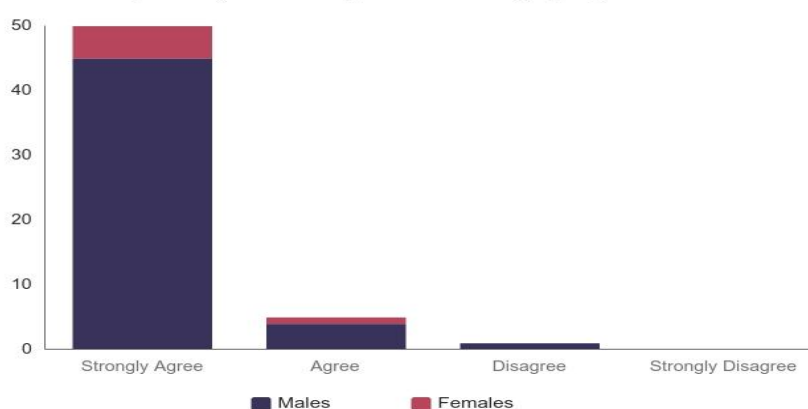


As extracurricular opportunities in Algeria and the province of Tiaret particularly, are limited to sports teams and charity associations. We considered asking students about online opportunities and how to make full use of them. The answers provided show how the causes are multiple and interrelated. The majority of students agreed that they need help and guidance to easily access and apply for these opportunities. Besides the need to develop their leadership skills, students'

demands are legitimate because EFL learners should be well versed not only in the four skills but also in interculturality and leadership which make them active citizens of the world.

5.4 Training students about CPD, leadership, and exchange programs

Figure 4: Training students about continuing professional development, leadership and exchange programs.



The overwhelming majority of students strongly agreed that there should be modules about continuing professional development, leadership, and exchange programs in their English curriculum. These reforms need to be taken into consideration by higher authorities in the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in order to escalate education and make it contextualised for the sake of effective communicative skills, concrete leadership skills, and pragmatic resolution of real-life problems.

5.6 Teachers' interviews about CPD, leadership, and exchange programs.

The semi-structured interviews made with four university teachers of English demonstrated harmonious aligned ideas and views about extracurricular activities.

The deductive analysis of the four interviews reveals how extracurricular activities have never been accessible for them all due to similar causes. The interviewed teachers believe that extracurricular activities are almost inexistent at a local level and difficult to access internationally. In fact, this perspective is widely believed in by Algerian students and teachers because local extracurricular activities remain limited with no pragmatic actual change, while international ones require competent subscribers who are financially independent and are lucky enough to pass the bureaucratic procedures to get a Visa. Moreover, teachers stressed that extracurricular activities have to be provided and organised by universities and that before training students, the Ministry of Higher Education needs to train the trainers, that is teachers, as they have never been exposed to such programs.

6. Conclusion

The complaints voiced by students and teachers about extracurricular activities and CPD programs need to be addressed to higher authorities and academicians responsible for curriculum design and development. Traditional development programs proved to be sterile and ineffective which necessitates the incorporation of what Starkey et al, (2009) call professional development programs that are crucial to both novice and experienced professors. In the context of teaching English as a foreign language, there should be a reorientation from traditional lecturing to modern interactive teaching approaches like (CLT) communicative Language teaching and (PBL) project-based learning which fall under the umbrella of student-centered approaches. These methods maintain students' engagement during and after lectures, as they boost teachers' professional development. In a similar vein, both students and teachers have to be exposed to e-learning which proved to be an imperative during the pandemic. Still, effective web-based learning and teaching require a reliable connection that facilitates the interactive exchange among students and teachers.

The findings of this study revealed both students and teachers' need for formal training about alternative global opportunities that are numerous present but unexploited. The focus of modern English language teaching approaches is the contextualisation of learning objectives to serve as pragmatic resolutions suppress to more than linguistic issues. Thereupon, direct communication and mutual exchange particularly with native speakers should be encouraged not only by authorities but also by students and teachers who aspire to live up to the international standards of teacher and learner competence. Communicative skills, leadership principles, and extracurricular programs are the healing potion that will transform ELT into a rewarding, entertaining, and productive process.

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The Impact of Extracurricular Activities on EFL Students' Professional and Leadership Development

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