

An Empirical Research on Enhancing English Language Skills through Excursion

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Abstract

This research attempts to illuminate how such an extra-curricular activity as excursion can be linked to classrooms in enhancing English language skills of the students. It first discusses the significance of extra-curricular activities at universities, and then it describes the experience that the writer, as a language teacher, gained in enhancing the four language skills of the students attending Diploma in English Language Teaching course at Yangon University. The writer and his students went on an excursion to the *Thit Poke* tree on the Yangon University campus, insisting that the groups of the students discussed the history of the *Thit Poke* tree and that of the university and chatted to each other, using only the target language. Their discussions in English were recorded on tapes. When they got back to the classroom, the recorded tapes were played with pauses at certain intervals. The writer encouraged them to have peer group discussions and correct the mistakes in their conversation among themselves and finally made them write the reports on their experience, attempting to develop their English language skills. This research proves that by giving the students a chance to use English freely and spontaneously, the extra-curricular activities can help them gain pleasure as well as enhance their four language skills. Therefore, this study contributes to the development of English language teaching (ELT) in Myanmar.

Introduction

Since English is a universal language, it has become popular in Myanmar for decades. Language teachers have been trying to find effective approaches to developing English language skills of their students. Nowadays, some adults from all over the world are also eager to seek the opportunities to develop their four language skills in order that they can pursue their studies at the universities in English speaking countries or improve their career prospects. The courses of most public academic institutions advertised on internet websites focus on learner-centred approach in developing communicative skills and offer a comprehensive array of such extra-curricular activities as sports, clubs, volunteer jobs, excursions, historical walks, museum visits and theatre visits so that the students can have pleasure as well as interactive and collaborative studies. Whether a student plays a sport, joins a club, or has a part-time volunteer job, he should select activities based on personal interests. Choosing something that interests him makes the experience more enjoyable and beneficial.

There are some feasible ways to enhance the language skills of the students at the tertiary level by linking classrooms to the extra-curricular activities. One of the activities that is popular among teachers and students is excursion to museums but an activity that has wide applicability to English language teaching at the tertiary level of Yangon University is excursion to the *Thit-Poke* tree. This paper illuminates how English language skills of the English specialization students can be enhanced through excursion.

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Aims and Objectives

This research aims to study how such an extra-curricular activity as excursion can be linked to classrooms in enhancing English language skills of the students.

Hence, the objectives of the study are:

- to examine which extra-curricular activity has wide applicability to English language teaching at the tertiary level
- to develop English language skills of the English specialization students through excursion
- to observe what problems arise and find the solutions to these problems
- to highlight the benefits of going on an excursion in enhancing English language skills of the students.

Literature Review

Curriculum is defined as the courses offered by an educational institution. (Encyclopedia Britannica: 2005) Extra-curricular activities are activities performed by students that fall outside the realm of the normal curriculum of school or university education. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extracurricular_activity)

Therefore, extracurricular activities are activities pertinent to student life, but not part of the usual course of studies of an educational institution, and they include excursion, sports, bands, unions, clubs, associations, societies, publication, competitions, etc.

Excursion is defined as a short journey made for pleasure, especially one that has been organized for a group of people. (Hornby, 2010) Hence, educational excursion is actually a short trip organized by teachers and students simultaneously for educational purposes and for pleasure.

Language teachers are making an attempt to get some new ideas and techniques for developing language skills of the learners. In doing so, they attempt to make learning more *learner-centred* by enhancing student participation and creating student interaction with other speakers of the language. Kokkas (2002) asserts, "It is important to let pupils learn through their own observations rather than force them reproduce our own theories." Language teachers should give his students exposure to their own observations and findings. Harmer (2001) also emphasizes the need to give students exposure to language when he claims, "...a major part of the teacher's job is to expose students to language so that they can use it later." Of course, if students have exposure to language, they can use it later. Regarding the communicative skills, Myo Myint (2005) provides the following fruitful implications:

"The final issue is the inordinate emphasis being placed on accuracy in using English at all levels, so much so that excessive correction has become an impediment to students' language production. Students need to be given the chance to use English freely and spontaneously, i.e. without being corrected too often."

He claims that a language teacher should not make excessive corrections to the mistakes of the students. He goes on to suggest that although what is said or written may not be error-free, there should be a balance between ensuring accuracy and encouraging fluency.

Research Methodology

This study applies *learner-centred* approach proposed by Kokkas (2002) and Harmer (2001) as a theoretical basis.

As Myo Myint (2005) suggests, a teacher should encourage fluency of his students and ensure their accuracy but avoid excessive correction. In order to give his students a chance to use English freely and spontaneously, a language teacher can draw them out of the classroom and let them take part in the extra-curricular activities which will help them have confidence.

Applying *learner-centred* approach as a theoretical basis and taking the implications of Myo Myint (2005) as a useful guideline, the research was conducted on the educational excursion to the *Thit-Poke* tree on the Yangon University campus.

Excursion to the *Thit-Poke* Tree

Materials

The materials needed were as follows:

- cassette recorders
- new cassette tapes
- cassette batteries
- camera
- notebook

Procedure

The steps in this activity were as follows:

1. Choosing an educational excursion site
2. Announcing the programme of the excursion to the class
3. Dividing the class into groups
4. Giving students some do's and don'ts for the excursion
5. Telling students what to bring
6. Strictly forbidding students from using the mother tongue but encourage to interact in English
7. Providing students with some discussion topics, but warning them not to prepare the questions in advance
8. The teacher commencing the discussion at the excursion site
9. Making each group discuss the topics in separate places
10. Asking students to record their discussion on audio tapes
11. Making sure that students interact only in English
12. Tactfully changing the discussion topic if the teacher suspects that the conversation is a prepared one
13. Asking students to make peer-group correction of the mistakes in their recordings, and the teacher acting as arbitrator
14. Asking students to give group presentations from the gist rather than from the script, and the teacher giving feedback
15. Asking students in groups to write an assignment on their own experience of the excursion.

Activity

As a language teacher, the writer led a group of 27 students from ELT in Diploma Course (2002-2003 Academic Year) of Yangon University on a one-hour excursion to the *Thit-*

Poke tree on the campus of Yangon University with the aim of enhancing their four language skills of English. There are three main landmarks in Yangon University: Convocation Hall, Judson Hall and the *Thit-Poke* tree. Since the tree is about two hundred years old, it is older than Yangon University founded in 1920. It is a ten-minute walk from the language classrooms in Taungoo Hall. The botanical term for the *Thit-Poke* tree is *Tetrameles nudiflora* R. Br., *Tetrameles* being a genus and *nudiflora* a species. It belongs to the Datisceae family.

All the students cheered when the writer announced the programme of the excursion a week ahead since they had never gone on such an educational excursion. Some of them said that they would take group photographs and some said that they would bring and eat snacks in the shade of the tree. The writer gave them some do's and don'ts for the excursion. They were strictly forbidden from using the mother tongue but encouraged to interact in English and not to worry about the mistakes they might make. He provided them with such topics as history, age, height, leaves and significant features of the tree to discuss during the excursion and warned them not to prepare the questions in English in advance and let them know that they would be allowed to bring only new notebooks.



Fig. 1. *Thit Poke* Tree on Yangon University Campus



Fig. 2. Instructor and his candidates at *Thit Poke* Tree



Fig. 3. A small group in discussion

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warned them not to prepare the questions in English in advance and let them know that they would be allowed to bring only new notebooks.

On the day of the excursion, the students gathered at the *Thit-Poke* tree. It was a pleasant sunny day in December. The writer, as the instructor, and his students first took a group photograph with the tree in the background. Then he explained the botanical name of the tree to the students. Afterwards, they were divided into three groups of nine each. The groups immediately dispersed and he found two groups standing and one group sitting in the shade of the tree. The groups had a cassette recorder each. They were having a conversation and taping it by passing the recorder from one person to another as each spoke. The writer was outside the groups but was walking around them, listening to what they were talking about and sometimes conversing with them. They spent about an hour chatting, taping, wandering about and taking photographs. He made them interact in English on the way back to the classroom. The interaction through excursion provided exposure to speaking and listening skills for the students.

When they got back to the classroom, the instructor played the recorded cassette tapes back to the students, making a pause at each part of the conversation in which a mistake occurred and letting them reflect on that part, pass comments on it and correct each other's mistakes while he acted as arbitrator. They actively participated in the peer-group discussion and correction, which developed their listening skills and oral accuracy.

As group work, each group was assigned to the task of writing a gist or a short note on the description of the *Thit-Poke* tree and giving a presentation from it rather than from the script. The instructor gave them feedback on their presentation. This helped the students enhance their writing skills and oral skills.

Each group was finally given the task of writing an assignment on their experience of the excursion to the *Thit-Poke* tree. Then the groups were asked to exchange their assignments and give suggestions on them. Finally, the teacher checked their assignments. This helped the students enhance their reading and writing skills.

Findings

Although empirical in nature, the research included useful observations and conclusions. The educational excursion to the *Thit-Poke* tree not only gave the students pleasure but also enhanced their English language skills. It was also found that at the end of the project, students were quite motivated to participate in some more projects. It can be asserted that going on an educational excursion can be successfully used as a tool for enhancing English language skills of the students.

Problems and Solutions

Enhancing language skills through excursion presents some problems that will need to be addressed. The teacher should expect that some students might prepare questions for discussion in advance. To meet the objectives of the excursion, the teacher should converse with each group and attempt to make their discussion alive and natural and if he suspects the conversation to be a prepared one, he can tactfully change the discussion topic.

The presentation the students will give is actually a prepared talk. Hence, the students should be encouraged to speak from gist rather than from script. The teacher should also make sure that all the members of each group participate in writing their assignment and giving a presentation at the final stage.

Conclusion

Extra-curricular activities have become so popular that today's courses of some universities offer a comprehensive array of extra-curricular activities to complement their curriculum. Employers of some companies seeking job applicants look at the applicant's university extra-curricular activities to determine if he or she is the best suited for the job. Since extra-curricular activities are part of a student's life, a language teacher can take full advantage of them in developing the language skills of his students. He has to just link classrooms to such an activity as going on an educational excursion which can not only give the students pleasure but also enhance their language skills. It can be found that at the end of a project, the students are quite motivated to participate in some more projects.

The nature of extra-curricular activities itself has the sense of learner-centredness. By giving the students a chance to use English freely and spontaneously, avoiding excessive correction and managing a well-planned project very skilfully, a language teacher can successfully enhance the English language skills of his students through excursion. What is important is to ensure that the students really interact with each other in English and, if possible, to expose students to English speakers.

This study may need further observations and investigations. Further researches on other extra-curricular activities with entry behaviour tests before the projects and terminal behaviour tests after the projects are recommended. It is hoped that the effort made in this study will lead to further researches on enhancing English language skills of the tertiary level students.

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Online Material

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Extracurricular activity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extracurricular_activity)