

The Impact of Activities on Language Learning: Fun in Summer Trip

English Camp Case Study

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Abstract: Nowadays, more and more teachers use activities as part of their teaching to let students participate rigorously and bring about efficient learning experiences. It is believed that activities can provide varied experiences to students to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge, experience, skills and values. Activities can also build student's self-confidence and develop understanding through work in his/her group.

The present study aimed to explore the effect of activities on students' language learning. In February 2016, sixty questionnaires were distributed to the target students in a local middle school to find out their learning preferences and the topics they were mostly interested in before the camp. The lessons in the camp then were designed based on the result of the questionnaires which focused on using activities to guide students to learn Indonesian culture and food.

On the first day of the camp, students were given a pre-test to test how much they know about the topics throughout the lesson and were tested again on the last day of the camp to see how much they have learned. There were 24 questions on the test, in average students answered 12.5 questions correctly before the camp started and 16.5 questions correctly after the camp. The result showed that students have learned content through activities during the camp. In addition, interviews were conducted to all the camp participants at the end of summer to find out whether the content taught was useful for their summer trip in Indonesia and which part of the lessons they enjoyed the most. All the participants claimed that the lessons were very helpful to their trip and through activities they could learn more quickly and were more motivated during the lesson.

Key words: motivation, game based learning, activity based learning, learning community, learning preference

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

What is language? Why do we need to learn a language? Whatever we do when we come together, we talk. We live in a world of language. We talk face-to-face; hardly a moment of our waking lives is free from words.

According to Taiwan's Ministry of Education (2006), the purpose of the English curriculum in elementary and middle school is to develop English communication skills. Interestingly, in the past ten years of my teaching

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career, I have noticed that students who learn a second language, particularly English, in Taiwan still hesitate to speak the language. What went wrong?

It is a common perception that for most students in Taiwan the main goal of learning English is to get good grades and to pass school exams, therefore, if speaking is not part of the test, teachers and students would not spend much time and effort on it.

While Education system continues to reform, many teachers also strive to raise students' communicative skills in the language classroom through sharing teaching ideas and activities on social networks, such as Facebook, LINE or YouTube. These teachers believed that students should be able to apply the language in their daily life instead of memorizing the grammar rules and vocabulary. The present study aims to find out the answers to the following research questions:

- 1) How much time do middle school students spend on learning English per week?
- 2) When learning English, what would middle school students want to focus on the most?
- 3) What kind of activities they have experienced in their English class?
- 4) What are middle students' reactions toward using activities during the class?

2. Literature Review

The idea of blending activities in teaching is not new. Back in the late 17th century, Locke had pointed out that instruction is most effective when children enjoy it. Locke mentioned that children learn for the sake of learning, therefore we could teach them how to read letters and words through games (Crain, 2011, p. 11).

Activity method is a technique adopted by a teacher to emphasize his or her method of teaching through activity in which the students participate rigorously and bring about efficient learning experiences. According to Oja and Pine (1989), in an activity based teaching, learners willingly with enthusiasm internalize and implement concepts relevant to their needs.

The information processing theory in psychology views learners as active investigators of their environment. This theory is grounded in the premise that people innately strive to make sense of the world around them. In the process of learning, they experience, memorize and understand. Students need to be provided with data and materials necessary to focus their thinking and interaction in the lesson for the process of analyzing the information. Teachers need to be actively involved in directing and guiding the students' analysis of the information (Nunan, 1989, p. 11).

According to Nunan (1989), we need to distinguish between knowing various grammatical rules and being able to use the rules effectively and appropriately when communicating. As Breen (1984) suggested, with communication at the center of the curriculum, classroom activities which develop learners' capability to communicate with others begin to emerge (pp. 52–53).

3. Methodology

The study was conducted at a middle school in southern Taiwan. The participants were 60 bilingual club students, curriculum leader and two English teachers. The study was divided into three phases. The first phase was conducted in March 2016, which questionnaire was distributed to the students asking English learning background, experiences and views on learning through activities. The second phase was conducted in April 2016, interviewing curriculum leader and the two English teachers from the school about English class setting and their views on

using activities as part of their teaching. After analyzing teachers' and students' view, with curriculum leader's permission, a five-day camp was organized based on activities. The camp lasted from August 1st to August 5th. Lessons included food, interpersonal relationship, and culture in Indonesia. On the first day of the camp, a pre-test based on the content of the five-day lessons was administered and was administered again on the last day of the camp to see the differences. Throughout the five-day camp, various activities have been used in the lessons during teaching, such as the use of worksheets with questions for students to find the answers from the reading on their own to train their reading skills, field games, group discussions, drama and five-minute group presentation to let students introduce Taiwanese food and culture. The last phase was conducted at the end of August by interviewing all students who participated in the five-day camp after their visit from Indonesia.

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used during the data collecting process. Quantitative data include questionnaires and pre -post tests. Qualitative data include interviews with teachers and students, field notes from the lesson, videotaping the lessons and students' presentation performance.

4. Quantitative and Qualitative Results

4.1 Demographic Information

The demographic information for the present study was summarized from the questionnaire distributed to two bilingual club classes at a middle school in southern Taiwan. A total of 60 questionnaires were completed by student participants and collected during their classes. There were 25 males and 35 females who participated in the study. Among the 25 males who participated in the study, 14 were 7th grade and 11 were 8th grade. Of the 35 females in the study, 18 were 7th grade and 17 were 8th grade. Table 1 summarizes general information provided by participants in response to questions regarding their gender and grades.

Table 1 Participants' General Information

Gender	Grade		Total
	7th Grade	8th Grade	
Male	14	11	25
Female	18	17	35
Total	32	28	60

4.2 Learning Experience

In general, majority of the participants in the study have learned English for more than five years (See Table 2). As Table 3 shown, 90% of the students spent more than 3 hours on study English per week. Among them 17 of the 7th grader spent more than 5 hours on study English and there were only 6 of the 8th grader spent more than 5 hours on study English each week. This result implied that as students' grade get higher, they have more pressures from tests of other subjects, hence they might spent less time on study English.

Table 2 Participants' English Learning Experience

Grade	Experience				Total
	Less than 3 Years	3-5 Years	5-7 Years	More than 7 years	
7th	1	1	12	18	32
8th	0	1	9	18	28
Total	1	2	21	36	60

Table 3 Participants' English Study Time Per Week

Grade	Study time			Total
	2 hours	3-5 hours	More than 5 hours	
7th	4	11	17	32
8th	2	20	6	28
Total	6	31	23	60

As Table 4 shown, 65% of participants chose to go to cram school as part of their self-learning and the reasons they go to cram school varies, 10 out of 60 participants who go to cram school for the purpose of preparing for English Proficiency Test. 18 out of 60 students go to cram school either because their parents ask them to or they are interested in learning more English (see Table 5).

Table 4 Self-Learning in English

Grade	Self-learning						Total
	English TV Program	English Movie	English Song	English camp	Cram School	Others	
7th	1	3	1	1	21	5	32
8th	0	1	1	6	18	2	28
Total	1	4	2	7	39	7	60

Table 5 Reasons for Going to Cram School

Cram School	Reason					Total
	N/A	Enhance Oral Skills	English Proficiency Test	Grammar Practice	Others	
Yes	3	6	10	5	18	42
No	18	0	0	0	0	18
Total	21	6	10	5	18	60

4.3 Interview Results

According to curriculum leader, Mr. Lee, seventh and eighth grade students have three English classes in a week and an additional flexible hour called International Education, which is taught by a foreign teacher to enhance their listening and speaking skill. Both Mr. Lee and Ms. Ni claimed that students lack of speaking skills, when it comes to speak English, they can only answer teacher's questions without further elaboration. However, Ms. Sang, who is the home room teacher for the 8th grade bilingual club students, stated that students have difficulty in writing more than in listening and speaking. In order to enhance the area that the students lack of, all three of them have different approaches, but they all tried their best to provide students more opportunities to practice English.

As for whether they would integrate activities in their teaching, both Mr. Lee and Ms. Sang stated that they would use 10-15 minutes of the class time to do activity because students enjoyed it. Due to time limitation and academic pressure, they can only use activities in the class when time is allowed and they have to be careful with class management, because students often get too competitive and would go out of control. On the other hand, Ms. Ni never uses activities in her class, she claimed activities are meaningless, because she doesn't think students would learn anything through activities, they just want to have fun.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Research Question One

How much time do middle school students spend on learning English per week?

As the curriculum leader, Mr. Lee has mentioned that middle school students generally have 3–4 class hours of English each week at school. As Table 3 shown, 31 out of 60 students spent 3–5 hours study English after school and 23 out of 60 students spent more than 5 hours per week study English after school. This indicated that the participants in this study spent 9 hours in average on learning English per week.

5.2 Research Question Two

When learning English, what would middle school students want to focus on the most?

As Table 6 shown, 17 out of 60 (28%) students claimed that they need to focus more on their writing skills and 28 out of 60 (47%) students stated that they need to focus on grammar more so they could enhance their speaking and writing skills. More importantly, they could do better on the test.

Table 6 Areas of Focus

Grade	Improvement					Total
	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Grammar	Others	
7th	2	1	7	14	8	32
8th	0	2	10	14	2	28
Total	2	3	17	28	10	60

5.3 Research Question Three

What kind of activities they have experienced in their English class?

As we can see from Table 7, participants in the present study have experienced various activities during English class in the past. 39 out of 60 participants have played games (65%) during their English class, this is probably because games are usually easy to administer and would not take much time.

Table 7 Activities Experienced during English Class

Grade	Activity						Total
	Drama	Conversation	Group Discussion	Movie	Games	Others	
7th	1	0	4	0	25	2	32
8th	0	2	4	5	14	3	28
Total	1	2	8	5	39	5	60

5.4 Research Question Four

What are middle students' reactions toward using activities during the class?

As Ms. Sang and Mr. Lee have mentioned during the interview, students enjoy learning without pressure, they like to learn through activities. However, with the academic pressure, teachers and school administrators also have to consider students' achievement and performances, so the time spend on activities during class have to be limited.

Table 8 showed that 41 out of 60 students (68%) enjoyed playing games during the class. During the interview with the students, 59 students claimed that using activities such as playing games, watching movies, and

have group discussion helped them learn better, because they could have chance to learn from each other and corporate with each other. As Auston has stated, “through activities I could see the immediate achievement through teamwork, I could have more confidence and motivation to learn.” The only student who didn’t think that activity help her learn because she prefer to learn on her own and she believed that test score on the paper is more real than the rewards earned through team work.

Table 8 Activities Interested in during English Class

Grade	Interest							Total
	Drama	Singing	Conversation	Group Discussion	Movie	Games	Others	
7th	1	0	3	3	0	25	0	32
8th	0	1	1	3	5	16	2	28
Total	1	1	4	6	5	41	2	60

6. Conclusion

The participants in this study generally expressed positive attitude toward learning English through activities. They expressed how learning through activities could provide them more opportunities to use the language and more fun. As the pre and post test result show in Table 9, students’ performance have improved over the five-day camp learning through activities. Before the camp started, participants answered 13 questions correctly in average. On the last day of the camp, participants could answer 17 questions correctly in average. The result indicated that teaching through activities could also be effective on students’ learning.

Therefore, to become a global citizen and to comply with the English teaching objective set by the Ministry of Education, teachers should make efforts to structure the English class to meet students’ needs-that is to be able to use the language in their daily life rather than prepare them for the test. The results from the study have showed with careful planning, integrating four skills in language class can be beneficial for both teachers and students.

Table 9 Pre and Post Test Result

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean
Pretest	23	8	17	13.00
Posttest	23	11	22	17.04

7. Limitation of the Study

This study has its limitations. First, it is possible that some information was not covered in the interview. Second, the role of the interviewer may have affected the results and how the students expressed their attitudes and feelings during the interviews. Although this study concerned only one middle school in southern Taiwan, the results may shed lights on the effect of integrating language skills through activities in students’ learning.

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