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The Role of Extracurricular Activities in Chinese Language Learning in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the effect of participation in extracurricular activities (ECAs) on Chinese language learning in Zimbabwe. The study employed survey design as the major research method. The questionnaire constructed by the researcher included 'yes/no', multiple choice and open-ended questions. A total of 45 students from the University of Zimbabwe participated in the study. The results indicate that more than 78% of students had some experience with ECAs and were aware of ECAs available through their university. Language-related ECAs included trips to China, luncheons at Chinese restaurants, games and competitions, movies, and language retreats. The majority of respondents placed a high value on ECAs and thought that ECAs were beneficial for their language skills development. The study revealed that ECAs helped students to improve language motivation and develop more interest in knowing Chinese culture and a stronger desire to visit the country. Over half of the respondents revealed that ECAs helped them to improve language fluency, vocabulary, grammar and other communication skills. The researcher thus recommends more investment in ECAs and that ECAs be integrated into formal language learning curricula at the university level.

Introduction

Extracurricular activities (ECA) are learners' activities which are outside the realm of normal curriculum or syllabi of an educational institution (Makarova & Reva, 2017). ECA programmes supplement the regular course of classroom instruction and often organized sporadically by enthusiastic students without much regulation, they are sometimes organized with the participation of instructors (Campbell, 1973). Researchers have reported a positive impact of ECAs on students' academic performance and critical skills important for everyday life (Campbell, 1973). Mahoney and Cairns (1997) observed that ECAs reduce the chances of dropping out for some categories of students. Such studies provide evidence that ECAs are necessary for building academic and social skills just like regular classes.

The integration of ECAs into foreign/second language curriculum is advocated by theoreticians of Communicative Language Learning as a way to create an informal environment for learning a language (Krashen, 1981). Studies by Druzhinina (2009) show some positive effects of ECAs on students' communicative skills and self-confidence. These results are supported by Reva's (2012) study that shows a positive effect of ECAs on the overall language proficiency as well as on all specific language skills. There is also evidence that ECAs stimulate interest in taking foreign language classes and visiting foreign countries, help to create an immersive and interactive learning environment, and raise student confidence. A study by Brown (1999) shows

that students who do not participate in ECAs had poorer grades, attended school less regularly, and had lower self-confidence. Boehm (1972) shows that there is an appreciation of ECA activities as being more meaningful and educative than classroom activities. However, another study by Makarova and Reva (2017) shows that ECAs have no direct impact on language skills. More research into ECAs is warranted in order to find new ways of teaching and navigating into non-traditional language learning communities (Tarone, 2012).

The present study seeks to investigate the role of extracurricular activities (ECAs) in Chinese language learning at the University of Zimbabwe. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Which specific language-related ECAs do students participate in?
2. How do students evaluate their experience with ECAs?
3. How do students evaluate the effect of ECAs on their language learning?
4. What problems do students identify as associated with ECAs?

Background of the Study

The learning of foreign language in Zimbabwean institutions dates back to the 1990s when high-income schools and universities such as National University of Science and Technology introduced French, Spanish, and Portuguese. In recent years, the popularity of French and Spanish has waned, and Chinese has gained popularity due to improved bilateral trade relationships between China and Zimbabwe (Hamadziripi & Mkize, 2019). Currently, Chinese language lessons are offered at various educational levels, and these including primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. One of the reasons for adult learners is to gain Chinese proficiency so that they are able to carry out entrepreneurial activities in China. In 2006, Zimbabwe is host to a Confucius Institute established at the University of Zimbabwe. Due to the increased number of people applying to study Chinese, a number of Confucius classes have been offered in various cities within the country: Gweru, Bulawayo, and Chinhoyi. Classes at the Confucius Institute are open not only to students currently enrolled at the University of Zimbabwe but also to anyone who has an interest in so-called “social class”. Students enrolled by the University and students in the social class are taught separately, but teachers use the same teaching methods, materials, and guidelines.

Although the learning and teaching of Chinese as a foreign language has developed fast in Zimbabwe, studying Chinese language is still considered very challenging (Mkize & Chisoni, 2015). A considerable number of students ended up quitting, and very few students have successfully mastered Chinese to the extent of being able to use it proficiently. Some students have studied Chinese for more than two years at the University of Zimbabwe’s Confucius Institute and still have not mastered many basic Chinese words. According to Mkize and Chisoni (2015), such poor performance among Chinese language learners may be attributed to a variety of reasons, ranging from lack of student motivation to poor teaching. This study also mentioned teachers neglecting students that are struggling, cultural clash with teachers, and favoritism by teachers.

In Zimbabwe, ECAs are given considerable attention by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, and the Ministry has made them mandatory in schools. However, the Ministry of Higher Education does not specify that ECAs are mandatory in tertiary institutions. Popular

extracurricular activities in primary schools and high schools include trips to important places of heritage such as Victoria Falls, Matopos, and Great Zimbabwe. Other extracurricular activities include drama competitions, poetry competitions, debates, music competitions, sports, and career guidance activities. These extracurricular activities are often used for developing social skills in learners and for conveying important messages to the society, e.g., unity among races, HIV/Aids, history of Zimbabwe, etc.

Literature Review

Extracurricular activities (ECA) have been advocated by earlier researchers (Kilzer, Stephenson, & Nordberg, 1956; Melsness, 1964; Sherritt, 1964; Trump, 1953; Nuttall, 1982). Nuttall (1982) notes that ECAs help students develop important skills, such as leadership, socializing, and character training.

Impact of ECAs on student engagement and achievement

Participation in ECAs is associated with many indicators of short term and long-term success among the learners. According to Reeves (2008), students who take part in extracurricular activities during the academic year have better grades than those who do not participate in extracurricular activities at all. This is supported by Wilson (2009) who indicates that the level of ECA involvement is positively related to future success for those who participate. ECA participation can be linked to positive academic outcomes, including improved grades/test scores, more school engagement, and increased educational aspirations (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006).

Participation in ECAs has a positive impact on the students' retention in the educational process if these activities are closely related to the curriculum (Kuh, 2007; Greenbank, 2014). This occurs due to increased motivation and creativity, development of learning strategies, improvement of students' ability to plan and time management, to act as leaders, etc. The overall trend is that ECAs eventually promote general communicative and social skills and help students to succeed in natural language learning and authentic language application.

Participation in organized ECAs is positively associated with educational, civic, and to some extent, occupational success in young adulthood (Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). ECAs lead to membership in pro-social peer groups as well as stronger emotional and social connections to one's school. In addition, participation in ECAs may contribute to mental health wellness, improve engagement in school and achievement, decrease problem behaviors, and strengthen long-term educational outcomes. For example, Morrissey (2005) found a link between adolescents' extracurricular activities and educational attainment as well as occupational choice and income. Morrissey (2005) also noted a reduction in delinquency and less engagement in risky behaviors.

The role of ECAs in language learning

The role of ECAs in language learning has been propounded by researchers around the globe (e.g., Campbell, 1973; Housen & Beardsmore, 1987; Reva, 2012; Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003; Krashen, 1981; Reva, 2012; Makarova & Reva, 2017). Housen and Beardsmore (1987) argue that ECAs have become an inseparable part of the context of second language teaching and

learning in higher education. They postulate that ECAs such as giving speeches in debate club and writing stories or articles to journals can help students to develop communicative competence, grammatical competence, and sociolinguistic competence.

Other researchers (e.g., Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003; Reva, 2012) focus on how ECAs impact second language learning in both formal and informal environments. The consensus is that ECAs are useful for promoting positive attitudes towards language learning among the learners (Reva, 2012; Makarova & Reva, 2017). With opportunities for both instrumental and interactive uses of a foreign language, ECAs are also considered a platform for promoting foreign language skill development and supporting student-centered teaching approaches.

ECAs contribute to student language motivation. Motivation encourages students to start learning a foreign language, influences continuation of learning, and play a major role when the learning process becomes difficult. Maintaining high levels of motivation for language learning is one of the strongest factors in successful language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2001). According to Gardner (2001), language learning motivation is comprised of three elements: efforts to learn the language, eagerness to achieve a goal, and finally, enjoyment of learning the language. Crookes and Schmidt (1991) state that ECAs can contribute to integrative motivation because positive attitudes towards the country and people of the target language have a positive impact on language learning. ECAs can also play a role in building instrumental motivation, i.e., obtaining something practical and useful for a future career or personal life.

ECAs help students to relate language learning to their personal interests. Extracurricular activities offer opportunities for creating situations where the real language is used with the help of authentic materials that were not originally created for teaching purposes (Nuttall, 1982). ECAs provide language instructors and students with multiple opportunities for creating the target language environment and exploring different cultural issues of the country of the target language. As they get involved in ECAs, language learners develop intercultural competence. For example, learners raise awareness of targeted cultures, develop social skills, tolerance, and patience required for intercultural communication. One of the ways to motivate younger learners is to employ language learning using both classic literature and modern bestsellers for youth (Dörnyei, 2001). Watching films, reading authentic magazine articles, and listening to music are more motivating to students and give them the opportunity to reflect on their interests. Cultural competence is important in second language education (Kramsch, 1993). Yildiz (2016) says that book clubs, movie nights and other types of ECAs provide learners with a chance to select the form of media that interests them.

Research Methodology

The present study used a descriptive, cross-sectional survey design. The accessible population of our study was a group of approximately 100 students studying Chinese at the Confucius Institute of the University of Zimbabwe. Data was collected from a stratified sample of 45 participants, with 15 students randomly drawn from the accessible population at each of the three levels: first year, second year and third year. The sample consisted of 33% male and 63% female. There was a wide range of reported age: 55% in the 18-24 age category, 29% in the 24-34 age category, and

16% in the 34-44 age category. The participants spoke different native languages: 56% of Shona-speaking origins, 29% of Ndebele-speaking origins, and 7% of English-speaking origins.

A self-report questionnaire was then distributed to the selected students. Participation was voluntary. The questionnaire included demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, year in college, native languages), and ECA study questions. The ECA study questions included multiple choice, Yes/No, and open-ended questions. These questions addressed the respondents' experience with language-oriented ECAs, their attitudes toward such ECAs, and perceived impact of these ECAs on their language acquisition. Students completed the questionnaire without discussing their answers with each other.

Data obtained from the questionnaires were entered on SPSS 22® for processing. Responses to the Yes/No and multiple-choice questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while responses to the open ended questions were analyzed using *key word analysis* and *key word frequencies* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Findings

Students' knowledge of ECAs at their university

The majority of the participants (78%) reported that they were aware of ECAs on campus, while 22% said they were not aware. Of the 22% who were not aware, 19% were in first-year students and 3% were in their second year. These results suggest that there was a possibility that orientation was lacking for the first-year students. The students who were aware of ECAs were further asked to list the types of ECAs that were organized on campus. Of the 35 participants that were aware of ECAs on campus, 85% listed Chinese restaurant luncheons, Chinese movies, trips to China, language retreats, Chinese Music Choir, Chinese bridge competitions and Chinese cultural day and festivals as ECAs that they knew were available, while 15% not only identified all the above listed ECAs but also included Chinese games.

Participation in ECAs

Students were asked if they had participated in any language oriented ECAs organized on campus. The question required students to answer by simply mentioning yes or no. The results show that 78% of the respondents had participated in language oriented ECAs and 22% indicated that they had not participated in any language oriented ECAs. Of the 78% of respondents who indicated that they had participated in any language oriented ECA, all indicated that they would like to participate in language-oriented ECAs in the future (outside or inside the university) and would like to keep attending language oriented ECAs at the University.

Activities participated in by respondents

Participants were asked to mention the ECAs they had participated in. The ranking results (see Table 1) indicate that the most frequently mentioned ECA was watching Chinese movies (33%), followed by Chinese restaurant luncheons (29%), trips to China (11%), Chinese music choir (11%), Chinese games and Chinese bridge competitions (9%), and language retreats (7%).

Table 1*ECA Activities at the University of Zimbabwe (N=35)*

ECA Activities	Frequency	Percent
Chinese movies	15	33
Chinese restaurant luncheons	13	29
Chinese music choir	5	11
Trips to China	5	11
Competitions and games	4	9
Language retreats	3	7

Students' evaluation of the effect of ECAs on their language learning

Students were asked if participating in ECAs had any impact on their Chinese language learning. As shown in Table 2, 94% of those who had participated in ECAs said they noticed some impact while 4% said they did not notice any impact.

Table 2*Impact of ECAs (N=35)*

ECA Question	Response	Frequency	Percent
<i>ECAs have impact on my Chinese learning.</i>	Yes	33	94
	No	2	6

Students were also asked to identify whether the ECAs had an impact on different aspects of their Chinese language learning. The list included grammar, fluency, vocabulary, culture knowledge, culture interest, personality and interest in the country of the target language. As shown in Figure 1, the great majority of the participants agreed that there was a positive impact of ECAs on their interest in the country of the targeted language (89%), interest in the country (96%), interest in the culture (98%) and language motivation (89%). What is more, the percentage of participants who noted a positive, moderate impact of ECAs on specific language skills ranged from 55%-65%: grammar knowledge (55%), vocabulary (53%), language fluency (54%), communication abilities ranged (57%), and overall Chinese language skills (65%). Interestingly, over half of the participants noted a change in their personalities (57%).

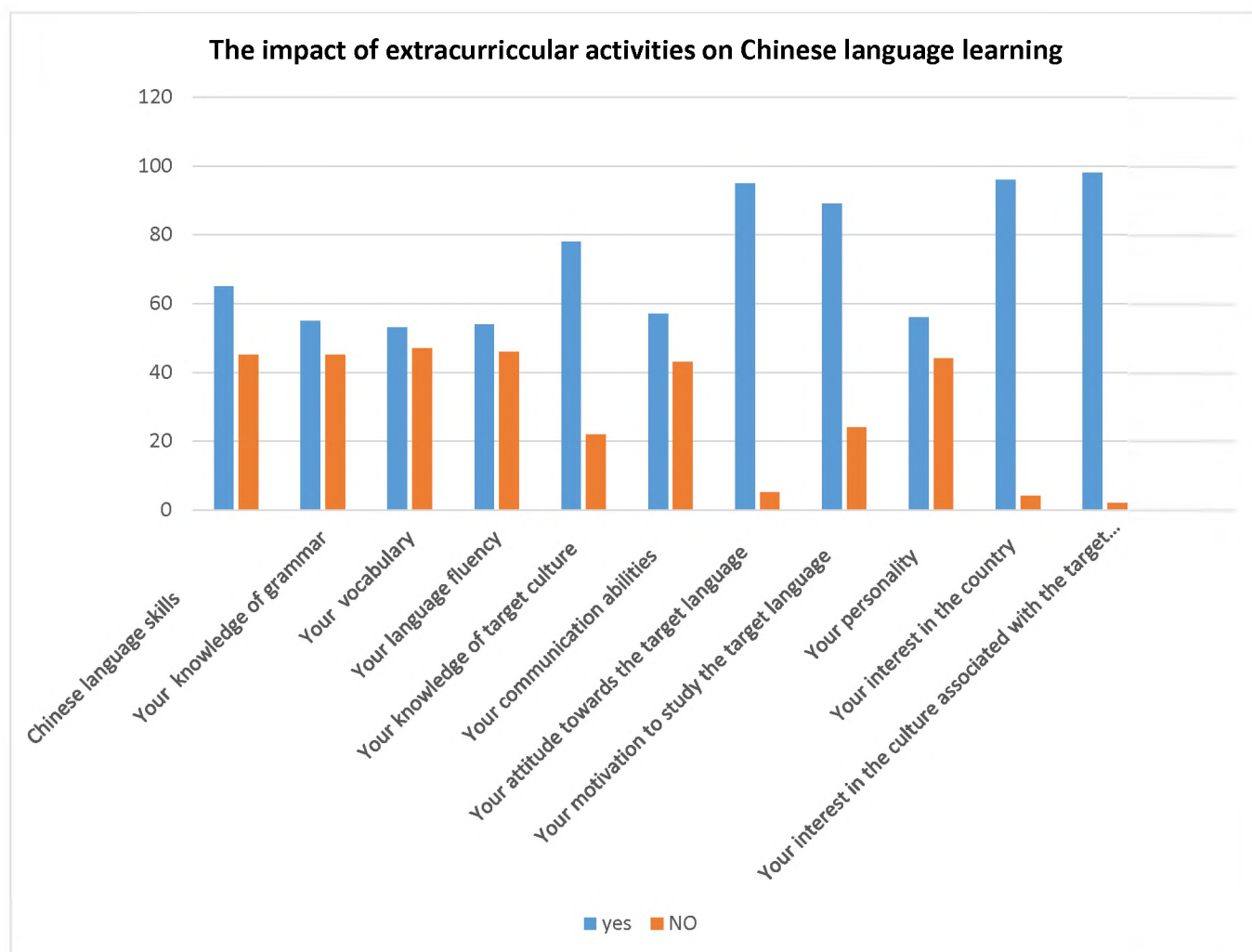


Figure 1. Impact of ECAs on language learning

Student Responses to Open-Ended Questions on Impact of ECAs

In addition to the questions above, the questionnaire also contained open ended questions inviting the participants to elaborate on the effect that ECAs had on their language acquisition, personality development, interest in target country, interest in target culture, motivation for studying Chinese, and problems with ECAs. The results of data analysis of responses to these open-ended questions are represented below.

In terms of impact of ECAs on language acquisition, the highest frequency (15) said the ECAs helped them to practice more, i.e., ECAs provide additional opportunities for practice. Participants also described the effects of ECAs on their language acquisition in the following phrases: 'ECAs helps me learn more words,' 'strengthens my comprehension,' 'broadens my vocabulary,' 'gives me confidence,' 'makes it easy to memorize words,' 'motivates,' 'helps me to gain experience,' 'develops creative skills,' and 'improves public speaking skills.'

In terms of impact of ECAs on personality development, 27 Participants identified effect of ECAs on their personality as being “an improvement in their public speaking skills”. 3 participants indicated that ECAs helped them to “become more interactive and outgoing. 1 participant said ECAs make them more comfortable in group settings, less nervous”, 4 respondents said ECAs “changed them.”

In terms of impact of ECAs on their interest in the target country, 25 participants indicated that ECAs also made them develop interest in China as a country, and “want to visit China.” 10 participants reported that their interest in the target country changed “for the better” because of ECAs.

In terms of impact of ECAs on their interest in the target culture, 25 participants agreed that under the impact of ECAs, they are “more interested” and they also could “see how the target culture differs from others.” They indicated that “more awareness means more acceptance” and that ECAs give them “increased knowledge of the target culture,” and one participant remarked that he/she “was always fascinated by other cultures.”

In terms of impact of ECAs on their language learning motivation, 18 participants noted that their motivation increased. Similarly, 9 participants found themselves “more motivated” by ECAs. Eight participants also indicated that ECAs made them pay more attention and remarked that “*the better you communicate, the more you enjoy the language*”. Two participants found themselves to be “*more determined*,” and one participant noted that he/she “*wanted to learn more*.”

When asked to identify any problems they may have had with ECAs in their institutions, 20 participants indicated that they would like to have “*more ECAs*” organized and have “*more native speakers*” invited. Ten participants complained of poor advertising and high costs of some ECAs. Fifteen participants found that it was “*hard to understand native speakers*” and that “*organization of ECAs was bad*.” These 15 participants also said that ECAs were “*too hard to attend because of the scheduling issues*” and that it was “*hard to communicate using the target language*.”

Discussion

There is a shortage of literature on ECAs in Zimbabwe. Most language education researchers focus on issues such as learner types, cultural aspects, new technologies, and other aspects of the language classroom. ECAs are not integrated into foreign/second language curricular at the university level and are therefore invisible to teachers or curriculum planners. Our study indicates that ECAs still exist in Zimbabwe and are having a positive impact on participating students.

The results show a certain degree of exposure to language-related ECAs among students at the University of Zimbabwe. This finding aligns with previous studies (Reva, 2012; Makarova & Reva, 2017), which showed that students in Russian and Canadian universities had high participation in ECAs. Consistent with findings of Makarova and Reva’s (2017) study of Russian and Canadian universities, the ECAs reported in this study at the University of Zimbabwe were

mostly traditional, and there were no modern, computer-enabled ECAs. A possible explanation is that funding for ECAs has been inadequate.

With over 78% of surveyed students claimed that they would like to participate in language-related ECAs in the future, our study clearly demonstrates a strong interest in ECAs among college students in Zimbabwe. It should be pointed out that their interest, however, may have been steered by the Hawthorne effect, i.e., being selected to join this study may have stimulated their interest in language-related ECAs. However, the results may also indicate that if students were made aware of ECAs, they would participate more.

The results showed ECAs had a major positive effect on students' learning of culture and but a lesser effect on language proficiency. The finding that participating in ECAs may have stimulated a keen interest in taking foreign language classes is consistent with the results of previous studies (e.g., Reva, 2012; Yildiz, 2016; Makarova & Reva, 2017). Furthermore, the study shows that ECAs motivate language learning in many ways, including stimulating a desire to visit foreign countries, creating an immersive and interactive environment, raising confidence, etc. Finally, participants view ECAs as helpful in improving creativity and public speaking skills, encouraging them to be more interactive, and making them less nervous.

Our findings also indicate problematic aspects of current ECAs at the University of Zimbabwe. At least 22% of students who participated in the study did not know of ECAs being done in their environment. This reflects poor advertising or a lack of student orientation for language-related ECA at the university. Participation in ECAs depends on the knowledge of the students about the available activities. A good number of students who had participated in ECAs (30%) did not have enough contact with native speakers of Chinese. This reflects the poor organization of ECAs. Moreover, students had challenges in their communication with available native speakers. This suggests that the native speakers need to be better trained to conduct ECAs and lower their speech rates while communicating with low proficiency Chinese language learners.

Recommendations

Extracurricular activities allow students to “broaden their regular curriculum and pursue activities that help to create a positive atmosphere in school” (Vermaas et al., 2009, p. 26). Undergraduate language programs in universities and colleges are, therefore, recommended to resort to enhancing extracurricular offerings for language proficiency (Reva, 2017; Yidiz, 2017). The results of our study suggest that according to student views, language-related extracurricular activities in the university are an excellent tool to motivate language learners and help them by providing an additional milieu for language practice and need to be integrated into the curriculum. The learners also find that ECA participation helps to overcome shyness and nervousness. The researcher suggests that ECAs be better advertised (on par with study abroad programs) and better structured (by accounting for them in curriculum programming and resource allocation). Our study suggests that ECAs are worth examining and accounting for in some shape and form in university curriculum planning activities. More research needs to be done in ECAs, and the theoretical foundations of ECAs need to be re-established. Doing so can

better inform Chinese language teachers and learners about ways in which the learners can improve their language skills in peer groups and on their own.

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited by the sample size and was restricted to one university in Zimbabwe. There was no equal representation of gender in the sample. Therefore, the results should be treated as preliminary and should be further validated in a larger-scale study. It should also be noted that the positive effects of ECAs were self-reported by the participants. Future empirical studies, especially experimental studies, need to be conducted to confirm such effects by measuring the proficiency of students participating in ECAs in comparison to those in a control group with less or no participation in ECAs. In addition, there would be some merit to conduct a future study of the teachers' opinions on the value of ECAs.

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