

In Love and English: A Case of An Extracurricular Activity Conducted in Thailand's Tertiary Level

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Article information	Abstract
Article history: Received: 7 Feb 2023 Accepted: 23 Apr 2023 Available online: 29 Apr 2023	<i>In Thailand, in-class teaching and learning are regarded as the principal form of obtaining English proficiency in all skills including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, Thai students are still deficient of the ability to effectively wield the skills in real life. This reflects the inadequacy of the classroom teaching of the language and its lack of practical advantage. Therefore, extracurricular activities have been implemented alongside classroom teaching to enhance learners' ability to use the language in an authentic context as well as their confidence and self-esteem. Chulalongkorn University in Thailand offers students with a variety of out-of-class activities by making it a requirement that first-year students participate in any of them as they are embedded as part of the score collection. One of them is entitled "Love Guru" which allows students from all faculties and majors to participate in. It is organized three times per semester and has mostly received positive feedbacks so far from students as a novel alternative to learn English which additionally serves to bond them together, boost their self-esteem, and encourage them to use English as a means of discussion about the issues that they can identify with. This article elaborates on the characteristics, implementations and results of the activity based on the teacher's experiences.</i>
Keywords: Extracurricular activities Out-of-class activities Learner confidence English speaking	

INTRODUCTION

English has been a principal portion in Thailand's school curriculum and embedded as a compulsory course in every level of formal education and its significance has been accentuated from the years of early education to postgraduation due to its potent title as a lingua franca that comes with undeniable practical benefits in job opportunities and cultural bonding (Morris, 2011). Also, youths especially need to master English to be able to stay up to date with the ever-changing global trends in the modern days since English is regarded as a key to countless new opportunities (Bacon & Kim, 2018). Unfortunately, merely a handful of the population in the country is able to accomplish the competency level sufficient to communicate in English despite over a decade of learning English at school. Also, a sizable portion of Thai people are still struggling with comprehending simple exchanges conveyed in English, impeding them from achieving success in the international stage which is considered a loss in the contemporary world. In my experience as a teacher in Chulalongkorn University, nationally renowned as one

of the most prestigious universities in Thailand, cases are students lack motivation and confidence in using English on a daily basis, and recognition of the proper ways of making use of the language in different contexts, rendering an unsatisfactory proficiency level and a limited opportunity to use English. The incidence reflects the inadequacy of classroom teaching and a need to incorporate out-of-class English-related activities like English clubs in English learning for young people to increase the authentic use of English and further enhance their confidence, motivation, and familiarity with the language. The notion has been supported by studies from various countries which are elaborated in the following section.

In Chulalongkorn University, there are a number of English Club activities offered particularly to first-year students as part of the mandatory English courses requiring them to participate in any out-of-class English activities such as creative writing, movie interpretation, drama, and more. An activity I have organized for years is entitled “Love Guru”, a rather puzzling and equivocal name that may put a grimace on the faces of people who first hear of it but is, instead, proved to offer values to participants’ English language enhancement, especially in the motivation to speak English and their attitudes, in such a way that classroom teaching fails to achieve. The current article reports a case of “Love Guru”, an extracurricular activity developed within the scope of Chulalongkorn University.

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE ENGLISH LEARNING IN EFL STUDENTS IN DIVERSE CONTEXTS

The term “extracurricular activities” first made its appearance in the 19th century in educational institutes in Europe and North America (Macarova & Reva, 2017) and is used in the modern era to refer to any programs that are organized outside the school regular schedule that are intended to elevate students’ communicative competence and social skills under teachers’ supervision who serves as a facilitator to help students achieve a specific skill (Simoncini & Caltabiano, 2012). It is a type of informal learning occurring in their daily activities that render them to learn in an undeliberate manner (Gardner & Lambert, 1972), possibly resulting in the acquisition of a language through the use of any activities beyond regular teaching (Van Marsenille, 2015). In other words, extracurricular activities contain two basic features including exclusion from the mainstream program, and serving a specific purpose (Holland & Andre, 1987). To improve students’ English proficiency, English clubs are invented in schools and universities to provide a relaxing atmosphere for students to practice English in a pleasurable and flexible condition in which they are liberated from nervousness and pressure in making mistakes and quantitative evaluation by the teacher, as well as obtain chances to exchange information comfortably with those possessing a variety of experiences and characteristics, which resembles real-world experiences. In such conditions adjacent to their real life, students feel comfortable to practice their spoken English and usage of vocabulary and phrases, and above all, their confidence level to speak English is boosted.

Extracurricular activities have been practiced by quite a number of universities across all disciplines and contexts to enhance EFL students’ English proficiency level, one of which is those conducted for Engineering students in a university in Ukraine to develop their communicative

competence because there are insufficient hours of English classroom hours and the results showed students' substantial interests during extracurricular activities (Sandal et al., 2019). This supports the idea held forth by Fredricks and Eccles (2006) asserting that students who take part in extracurricular activities depict a higher level of communicative competence and distinctly better learning outcomes. This goes in line with the research result conducted to nursing students in Indonesia by Juliana and Afrianti (2020) claiming that extracurricular activities can influence the learning outcomes of English. Also, in a school in Indonesia, Neno and Siahaan (2021) conducted a study by comparing students who participated in English club programs and those who did not, using a pre-test and a post-test as research tools. It is apparent that those who did not join the programs did more poorly and showed no improvement in their speaking scores, compared to those who did. Furthermore, a study by Nguyen (2019) revealed the result among Vietnamese students positing that in addition to the high involvement and interest developed by students, extracurricular activities should go beyond ESP and communicative skills to reach the extent of language test-taking strategies as well as provide real-life experiences for those from different English-speaking countries by making it entertaining. Similar studies were conducted in the Moroccan context (Zakhir, 1970), the Palestinian context (Fattash, 2008), and the Turkish context (Albayrak & Sener, 2021), whose results show a positive trend towards extracurricular activities and go in accordance with the previously mentioned studies.

ABOUT THE "LOVE GURU" ACTIVITY: RATIONALE, CHARACTERISTICS, AND IMPLEMENTATION RATIONALE

The "Love Guru" activity is one of the many English Club activities hosted by teachers in Chulalongkorn University Language Institute as part of the first-year compulsory English courses in both semesters. Students are required to take part in one of the activities offered such as Drama and Creativity, Into the News, Creative Writing, Meet the Pro, and more, each of which is intended to enrich a different skillset not only in basic English skills like writing, reading, listening and speaking, but also creative thinking, critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Regardless of the nature of each activity, all of them contribute to students' self-improvement in one way or another by widening their perspectives about the methods to acquire English skills. Textbooks alone are considered an obsolete means of mastering a language as there is a deficit in authenticity and the scant statistics of EFL learners achieving language proficiency through textbooks alone speak for themselves. Moreover, according to Brown (2000), language competency can be manifested and made concrete by performing and really doing by using the target language. An extracurricular activity could be an ideal setting for students to learn a language. Similarly, according to Thornbury (2006), real-world language users should not merely know the language but perform it out and present not only competence but the pragmatic use of the language.

The "Love Guru" activity is conducted under the notion that the learning process comprises of appropriate learning techniques and within the scope of students' interests so that the motivation to learn a foreign language is ignited (Laili & Nashir, 2018). Love and relationships are part and parcel with human beings as we all are social beings and relationships are an

inevitably crucial component of our survival. The same goes with a romantic love which is an instinct irrevocably and inherently attached to the soul of every human. Unfortunately, it is often a case that students feel embarrassed to discuss such a topic and issues pertinent to their relationships with others, let alone teachers and parents who have the most relevant experiences, as if love were a taboo. The incidence happens because children are framed by the social norms and ideologies that ironically treat love in the equivalent level as profanity or nudity, prohibiting students from expressing affection towards the opposite sex and brainwashed by a make-believe system that love is only appropriate as long as adults practice it, whereas in reality, it is only natural and common to develop a romantic feeling and relationship with boys or girls of the same age; it is indeed uncanny otherwise. In brief, there is absolutely nothing unnatural or immoral about it; thus, they should never have to throw it into the darkness. This activity provides participants who are 18-20-year-old novices with the opportunity to open up and learn more profoundly about such a thing from a teacher who might be years apart but is truly willing to hear what they have to share or confide in even, as well as an opportunity to hone English speaking through discussion sessions with people of the same age. We have often heard of famous quotes like “Love is a universal language” or “All you need is love.” There are a thousand more quotes of the same sort, reflecting that the issue is of interest for people from all walks of life. In my view as the sole facilitator, the topic particularly attracts teens, who still generally experiment numerous aspects of life experiences, love and relationship included. To back up my hypothesis, many claim that the title of the activity itself is what draws them to participate in the activity. I genuinely believe that students can more involuntarily acquire English skill once the language is smoothly intertwined with their interests and a topic they can easily identify with. It is definitely a novel idea, especially in an Asian society which is relatively conservative, to combine the concept of love and relationships with learning English. However, my belief goes vice versa. Love and relationships are, instead, a perfect tool to assist students to diminish fears to speak English and practice the language in the most natural way.

CHARACTERISTICS AND IMPLEMENTATION

The activity is a teacher-led activity, hosted in English, three times per semester free of charge and each session lasts two hours, in which the teacher performs the role of the facilitator who makes sure the activity runs smoothly and as planned. Most of the time, students are the main contributors. Twenty to twenty-five students from various faculties and majors all over the university are accepted to participate in each session by means of online registration on the website prior to the session; this means participants are total strangers to each other. There is a controlled number of participants in each session to ensure active engagement and contribution. The activity begins by introducing the rationale and nature of the activity to participants to develop an accurate picture of what is expected of them in the activities to follow by showing the slides prepared by the teacher, on the screen. After the introduction, in order to break the ice among participants since it is their first time to recognize each other's existence, each of the participants is required to orally introduce themselves by giving a brief talk about who they are and their majors. Surprisingly, in spite of their unfamiliarity among the crowd, some of them chose to open up right from the start about their previous relationships

by sharing experiences and some detailed recounts of what they had been through in relationships. Presumably, this resulted from the way the teacher built up a positive and relaxing atmosphere by befriending students and making them feel at ease. Also, students play a Kahoot game to let them assess their own English vocabulary, phrases, idioms, and general knowledge about the concept of love to stimulate a friendly competition and provoke their curiosity. The activity that follows the break-the-ice activities is dividing them into groups using a random method by which each participant says number one to four and get into groups with people who shout out the same numbers, in order that they are separated from their friends who accompany them and forcibly intermingle with unfamiliar faces who could soon become their friends. Teachers then let participants discuss questions concerning love and relationships such as those about their ideal partners' characteristics and deal-breakers. After the discussion, they are required to present to other groups the opinions and insights generated by their group members. They are allowed to freely agree, disagree, or comment on each other's answer. From then, a small group discussion is elevated into a class discussion, making it even more thrilling. It is noteworthy that all the discussions and exchanges among students are necessarily in English alone. Afterwards, participants are exposed to intriguing and thought-provoking English relationship quotes to incite further interests, ignite critical thinking and reflect on their own situations, different types of relationships, namely, friendzone, rebound relationships, and unrequited love. By so doing, there is an opening of a video clip and teacher's explanation and clarification. Examples are raised and more discussions among students are encouraged. The final sub-activity is poem interpretation. After the participants have learnt about types of relationships, in the same group, they read three poems shown on the screen and brainstorm with one another whether each quote fits into which relationship category. This way, they obtain new vocabulary along with some reading and interpretation skill as a byproduct. After some time, they are, once again, allowed to discuss as the entire class about the reasons for their answers while the teacher observes and offers comments and explanations as necessary. Ultimately, they are asked to evaluate the activity via a QR code, which marks the adjournment of the session.

OUTCOMES AND STUDENTS' FEEDBACKS

The activity evaluation is divided into four major aspects including the participants' demographic data, reasons for participation, satisfaction levels, and additional comments. The final portion is optional while the remainder of the evaluation is required.

In terms of the participants' demographic data, all of them are 18-20-year-old students in Chulalongkorn University studying in their freshman year. There are a significantly higher number of female participants than their male counterpart in most of the sessions, except just one unfathomably receiving more males than females. It is discovered that participants are from all faculties and majors across the university, namely, the Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, the Faculty of Commerce and Accountancy, the Faculty of Education, the Faculty of Engineering, the Faculty of Law, the Faculty of Medicine, the Faculty of Political Science, the Faculty of Science, the Faculty of Veterinary Science, the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, and the Faculty of Psychology. Surprisingly, the majority of students occupying seats in most sessions are from the Faculty of Medicine.

In part two in which participants are required to choose one of the reasons why they participated in the activity, they are provided with a list of four reasons to choose from as follows:

- 1) The name of the activity interests you.
- 2) Your friends are in the same activity.
- 3) You hope to meet new friends from the activity.
- 4) You want to use English to express ideas.

The most popular reason marked by over half of the participants is that the name of the activity interests them, followed by the reason that their friends are in the same activity, whereas the remaining reasons make up a negligible percentage. The results are similar in all sessions. From the result, we could observe that their initial intention was neither to be more able to communicate in English nor to seek camaraderie, but they chose the activity out of inquisitiveness about the name, from which we could infer that, as mentioned, they found the issue of love an intriguing and worth exploring.

The third part of the evaluation form deals with participants' satisfaction levels in the form of a Likert scale, ranging from 1 representing the lowest contentedness to 5 as the highest. The majority of the participants give 5 meaning they are extremely satisfied with the activity. Even though there are a certain number of the participants rating 4, the satisfaction level has never gone lower than 4.

The final part is concerned with participants' direct feedbacks and comments. They are allowed to offer any comments or suggest any improvement for future implementation, which is totally optional, meaning they could have ignored this part and ended the evaluation process. Instead, the evaluation outcomes demonstrate students' contentedness to the program, which are mostly compliments and can be categorized into five major aspects including the nature of the activity, gaining new friendships, the opportunity to use English as a means of discussion, developing insights on the topic of love and relationships, and teachers. Some randomly selected examples directly quoted from the evaluation forms are presented below:

Examples of students' comments on the nature of the activity:

"The activity is fun and not boring."

"I like sharing in the class."

"The class activity is so comforting. There are some deep conversations like an ideal boyfriend."

"I wish the activity time was longer."

"I love listening to friends share about themselves."

"I love it when I can express my preferences with a small number of people at the same age."

Examples of students' comments on gaining new friendships:

"The activity allows me to make new friends."

"I get to know people from different faculties."

"I gain so many new friends."

Examples of students' comments on the opportunity to use English as a means of discussion:

"The teacher let us get into groups to share our thoughts in English."

"I like the way we learn and share our opinions in English about love together."

Examples of students' comments on developing insights on the topic of love and relationships:

"I get to know more kinds of relationships in the world."

"I get to read poems about love and I like it."

Examples of students' comments on developing insights on teachers:

"The teacher has a lot of energy and is funny."

"The teacher has a good sense of humor, and her teaching style is fun."

"The teacher is very considerate and patient."

"The teacher was funny and shared lots of useful advice and experiences."

Apart from satisfaction, the participants' expressions reflect something more substantial – their positive attitudes towards forming a new relationship with people of the same age, their ability to overcome stranger anxiety and open up to them on such a personal issue in a matter of minutes, and the importance of the teacher, who performs the role of the facilitator instead of a dictator or a sole knowledge provider. The teacher who leads any extracurricular activity should not only spoon-feed students with what they know or regurgitate their experiences without taking other factors into consideration, as that could be excessive and unsolicited. Rather, in order to conduct a successful session, the teacher needs to be flexible and able to manipulate students into willingly participating in any activity designed for them in order to accomplish an optimal learning outcome. The techniques adopted to do so largely relies on students' nature and educational levels; however, I discovered that humor is universal and serves quite effectively in any situation as long as it is exercised appropriately. The methods and techniques employed by a language teacher should not be set in stone; the class atmosphere is fluid rather than rigid and it is the teacher's responsibility to observe and adapt their methods of relaying knowledge accordingly to suit students' learning styles.

STEPPING OUT OF THE COMFORT ZONE AND BREAKING THE MONOTONY

As mentioned earlier, one takeaway from the participants' comments is that students are better and more quickly adapt to new circumstances and people than teachers might give them credit for. It is of utmost importance that individuals be given a chance to familiarize themselves with others beyond their small circle of friends to be able to properly socialize and blend in with others in the actual society to avoid awkwardness once they have to step out of schools and eventually become acceptable members of society. Extracurricular activities that engage students in such activities as brainstorming and discussions are believed to be a promising way to promote the socialization skills. In the "Love Guru" activity, participants are total strangers to one another but they are required to make friends with people from diverse

backgrounds and fields of study in a short period of time because they are thrown into small groups of discussion which requires each and every of them to speak and communicate with others in order to come up with answers to share with others at the end of each discussion. They go through the self-introduction stage where they reveal their names and basic information at their own will. Some even break from their shells and share deep thoughts and personal experiences right off, which, to be honest, makes me slightly surprised. There is not only one discussion but quite a few and there are also discussions as a whole class as well, since this activity is meant to be speaking oriented. This allows them to be even more familiar with their new friends. Some of them even exchanged their contact information in the session to continue their friendships. This is an impressive achievement to me because in the 21st Century, where people are so disconnected from each other due to the disruptive technologies that have infiltrated every fabric of human lives and have come to be so influential that they are prone to neglecting each other in the flesh-and-blood world, it has been more and more problematic to make new friends, say a simple hello to each other or even make direct eye contact. Looking people in the eye has become an insult so they tend to pay attention to the alternative distractor in their palm which tenaciously sticks to them like glue – their smartphones. Nevertheless, each session of the activity which only lasts two hours is, as can be observed, sufficient for participants to fly out of their comfort zones and open up to new acquaintances. According to Knifesend and Graham (2012), students yearn for the sense of belonging during the stage of self-exploration. Even if the friendships are ephemeral or they may bid everlasting farewell after the session adjourns, it is a springboard for them to feel more comfortable when making new acquaintances elsewhere, enlarging their future connections and becoming less isolated in the world where people have become increasingly alienated to one another.

In addition to stepping out of the comfort zone, the concept of the activity is quite brand-new in the context of Thai universities. We generally realize such activities as a debate club, a writing session, or a movie analysis prevail but never have I known other extracurricular activities that employ such a light-hearted issue as love and relationships as a medium of knowledge communication and language skill reinforcement. It definitely breaks the monotony of how English skills are cultivated in class and out of class alike. Many out-of-class activities still deal with teaching reading, writing, speaking, and listening in a serious manner using serious topics which makes it almost similar to in-class teaching. I genuinely believe that that is not what students look for in an extracurricular activity. Aside from the resilient nature of the activity, the issue of love and relationships is what most students can easily identify with, making them earnestly engage in any task assigned by the teacher. Wilson (2009) regards extracurricular activities as an option for students to overcome their high levels of boredom and break the routine. It is evident in the “Love Guru” activity that students desire to escape from the realm of the conventional English teaching and be exposed to an innovative way of acquiring English skills. In short, the activity proves as a combination between English learning and useful knowledge they can adopt in such an authentic dimension of life, allowing them to break the monotony of English learning and enhance their interests in the activity.

CONFIDENCE AND MOTIVATION IN SPEAKING ENGLISH OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT

When students are intrigued in the activity content and nature and agree to enthusiastically collaborate in each group discussion, the ultimate result is the improvement in their spoken English, confidence, and motivation to speak English. According to Kuimova and Polyushko (2015), students usually lack the necessary confidence of using the target language both inside and outside the classroom context making them hardly develop foreign language abilities. The same problem has been a chronic issue in non-English-speaking countries like Thailand. The majority of Thai students are observably ashamed to even make correct or nativelike pronunciations, while speaking English in a Thai accent, which is sometimes incomprehensible by speakers from other nations, never bothers them at the slightest. This is because they lack the confidence to speak English making them blindly remain in their comfort zone of their national accent and adhere to it to blend in with others until it becomes a nationwide trend. The ineptitude of using the target language accurately also stems from the lack of motivation to advance in English. One of the most renowned motivation theories in teaching a foreign language is Gardner's Socio-Educational Motivation Theory (1985) asserting that learning a second language is directly influenced by motivation, which encourages learners to practice the language in their own cultural context, internalize the way of thinking of people of that target language and start thinking in that language. The same notion is held forth by Ellis (2004) claiming that motivation leads to perseverance and a sustainable learning process of a foreign language, further leading to foreign language attainment. In an English Club activity like "Love Guru", students are not judged by their accent, grammatical mistakes, or vocabulary usage. Rather, they are reassured and motivated by other participants who also use English in the discussions, regardless of the number of errors made. In such informal environments where mistakes are not sins and can go unnoticed and unpunished as an English Club activity, students feel more comfortable to contribute and share by speaking and using the language. This also uplifts their self-esteem and confidence to speak English in other more authentic contexts. Considering the positive comments given by students concerning the opportunity to discuss and share ideas in English as illustrated in the previous section, "Love Guru" could be an impeccable example of an activity that promotes motivation and confidence to speak English among students whose English-speaking opportunities are extremely limited on a daily basis.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE IMPLEMENTATION

It is irrefutable that the effectiveness of the activity partially depends on participants' characteristics and personal traits whether they are willing to co-operate with the teacher and friends or not. There were situations in which introvert students refused to utter a single word in a discussion and remained silent throughout the session. Due to the limited amount of time, it is impractical to force every participant to engage by answering every question. However, those are a rare occurrence and most of the participants showed active participation and even though the few silent students kept their mouths sealed, they appeared attentive and were able to follow instructions. Therefore, it is possible that their listening skill was enhanced to a certain extent. Moreover, during the first wave of the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic, the activity had to be conducted online via Zoom sessions due to the quarantine policy. Students

were impeded from face-to-face interaction and relied on Zoom break-out sessions during the group discussions. Nonetheless, all of them turned on their cameras and revealed their faces which enormously facilitated the activity to run almost as smoothly as a face-to-face session. Fortunately, there was no technical problem happening during any of the online sessions. In terms of the future implementation, there could be a fewer number of tasks and activities so that all participants including introverts who might prefer to remain silent in a large pool of people, can practice English speaking. Furthermore, some games that promote more interactions and mobility in the classroom could be invented to enhance chances to practice English and be entertained by the content on love and relationships.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

The “Love Guru” activity could set an example of an extracurricular activity for teachers who seek a way to inspire EFL students to break away from their comfort zone and actively participate in English-oriented activities so that they acquire essential English skills in more natural and authentic methods than regular classroom learning as well as find pleasure in an informal setting and issues covered in the activity. It is recommended that the teacher selects a topic that adolescents can easily relate in order to trigger their interests and motivation to collaborate with the teacher and peers, accelerating the language learning process. Hopefully, more activities like this will be promoted in a Thai context, across all educational levels, not only in universities but also in primary and secondary schools. Young learners should be inspired to advance in English at an early age so as to give rise to long-term effects of language acquisition which could further benefit them professionally and personally.

CONCLUSION

It is apparent that the merits of extracurricular activities like English clubs are unanimous and should be included in universities for the sake of English learning. The “Love Guru” activity which is one of the English club activities organized for Chulalongkorn University first-year students proves to be a novel and relatable activity for university students who are adolescents still experimenting on love and relationships as the activity’s objectives are multifaceted. It provides not only the opportunity to discuss and practice English speaking and poem interpretation, it offers useful insights on the issue through quotes, videos, explanations, and exchanges between teachers and students, promote the sense of solidarity among them and bond them together within a short amount of time. This further motivates them to use English as a means of communication and elevates their confidence to use English to communicate with individuals of the same age. It is the author’s intention to encourage schools in Thailand to adopt techniques and characteristics of the activity to make a difference in Thai EFL students’ English proficiency and attitudes towards the language.

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