

# Out-of-Class English Language Learning Activities: Beyond the Four-Wall Classroom to the Real-World Usage

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## Abstract

*With a focus on the improvement of English language skills, some degree of extra exposure to authentic practice beyond the formal classroom setting is considered supportive to the realization of such a goal. Out-of-class English language learning activities lend themselves as a means by which we can exploit the benefits of engaging in motivating activities and improving the English language skills. This article aims to promote the use of out-of-class English language learning to yield language learners more opportunities to practice authentic language usage in natural situations. The emphasis is on identifying the advantages of out-of-class English language learning activities, the development of learning autonomy, and the interrelationship between motivation in learning the English language and the engagement in the out-of-class English language learning activities. Recommendations for how academic institutions can adopt this strategy in their environment have also been made in order to maximize language learning achievements.*

**Keywords :** out-of-class English language learning activities, motivation, learning autonomy

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# กิจกรรมการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษนอกชั้น: จากชั้นเรียนไปสู่การใช้งานในสถานการณ์จริง

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## บทคัดย่อ

ในการพัฒนาทักษะภาษาอังกฤษนั้น การมีโอกาสได้ฝึกปฏิบัติจริงในสถานการณ์จริงนอกเหนือจากการเรียนในชั้นเรียนปกติถือเป็นการส่งเสริมให้บรรลุเป้าหมายดังกล่าวในการเรียนรู้ภาษา กิจกรรมการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษนอกชั้นเรียนถือเป็นหนึ่งช่องทางที่สามารถใช้ประโยชน์จากการเข้าร่วมกิจกรรมที่น่าสนใจและยังสามารถพัฒนาทักษะภาษาอังกฤษได้ในเวลาเดียวกัน บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์ที่จะส่งเสริมการใช้กิจกรรมการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษนอกชั้นเรียนเพื่อเป็นการเปิดโอกาสให้ผู้เรียนภาษาได้มีโอกาสในการฝึกฝนและเรียนรู้การใช้ภาษาในสถานการณ์จริง โดยมุ่งเน้นในการซึ่งให้เห็นถึงประโยชน์ของกิจกรรมการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษนอกชั้นเรียน การสร้างทักษะการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเอง ความล้มพ้นหรือห่วง遑จูใจในการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษและการมีส่วนร่วมในกิจกรรมการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษนอกชั้นเรียนตลอดจนการให้คำแนะนำแก่สถาบันการศึกษาในการปรับใช้กลวิธีนี้ ในสถาบันของตนเองเพื่อให้มีผลลัพธ์ที่ดีในการเรียนรู้ภาษาอย่างสูงสุด

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## Introduction

In the era of the ‘seamless global community’, the international medium of English becomes one of the basic needs, serving as a tool which supports interaction among people from across the globe. English clearly represents an essential role as a linguistic medium which allows meaningful communication among global citizens. It is not only recognized in the educational setting but also in the business world, in non-profit organizations, and other areas where international collaboration is necessary. The enthusiastic growth of the tourist industry paints a very clear picture of how English is important, especially in accommodating visitors from various regions and, certainly, with different languages. In Thailand, settling into the ASEAN community is an issue where people enthusiastically respond to the changes that they are expecting to encounter over the next few years. English language proficiency becomes a primary concern since it is taken as a working language among the member states of ASEAN. Educational institutions are tackling this issue actively in order to prepare their students for life as ASEAN citizens. To equip students with English language ability is one of the preparations to survive in competitive ASEAN countries. According to the Ministry of Education (2008), students are required to study English as a compulsory course as of Pratomsuksa1, when studying under the Thai Educational Curriculum. This condition signifies the awareness of the Thai government of the need for English language skills development for Thai students in and throughout the nation.

English in Thailand can be considered a foreign language where learning and practice is predominantly undertaken in a formal classroom setting. Language is a skill which, in other words, requires a considerable length of time to develop. Practice and exposure to the relevant resources are indeed primary factors in the successful mastery of the target language. However, in the English as a Foreign Language context, as in Thailand, where English is not a principal medium in general, seeking English language learning resources seems to be strictly limited to the school or other formal classroom contexts. At present, due to the previously mentioned Thai Educational Curriculum, the compulsory course of foreign language consists of only 20, 40, 120, and 240 hours per semester for lower primary level, upper primary level, lower secondary, and upper secondary level respectively. It was claimed by Dulay et al. (1982) that lessons limited to formal, in-class, practice of the target language (i.e. classroom drills and dialogue) may not be sufficient for the mastery of the language since students may be able to engage only in the particular kinds of activity they have practiced but are incapable of communicating in the other authentic interactive situations. Kagan (1995) also highlights the relationship of input, output, and context in the traditional classroom and its relation to language development. Since comprehensible input comes only from teacher and the course book, there may not be enough opportunity for students to build on their language skills successfully. Consequently, students may be unsuccessful during authentic interaction in which the domains of communication are dissimilar to what they have learned from their formal classroom instruction. Hence, if the linguistic competence which students have acquired from formal

classroom instruction is not sufficient to develop the target language skill successfully, learning from real-life resources beyond the classroom boundary may yield a higher degree of language fluency.

‘Learning with fun experience’ seems to be an ideal motto for promoting successful learning outcome. Students normally prefer entertainment to pure academic activity. Language educators may have to lend themselves as language edutainers who incorporate educational content into entertaining lessons. In addition, it has been evident that the combination of in-class instruction with exposure to authentic language usage, via out-of-class language learning activities, helps to maximize language learning outcome (Bialystok, 1981; Ellis, 1994; Shu et al., 1999; Terenzini et al., 1993). If exposure to various authentic language usage situations helps language learning considerably, then out-of-class English language learning activities maybe a viable option for the implementation of this strategy.

### What are Out-of-Class Language Learning Activities?

Out-of-class English language learning activities have been identified and studied by a number of academia (Khu, 1994; Pickard, 1996; Yap, 1998; Hyland, 2004; Sumonviriya, 2004; Chusanachoti, 2009). The terms which refer to this kind of activity are varied even though they define the same types of situation and interaction.

As broadly defined by Yap (1998) and Khu (1994), out-of-class activities refer to any kind of activities that take place outside the formal classroom setting. However, aside from the domain in which the activities are conducted, Khu (1994) and Hyland (2004) have both commented on the characteristics of the engagement in the

activities. This engagement can be either direct involvement (activities that students participate in with the primary goal of learning English) or indirect involvement (activities that students engage in for pleasure but in which learning English is a by-product of the participation). This is also related to Sumonviriya's (2004) definition of out-of-class English language learning activities as activities in which students decide independently to participate in; in other words, the participation is not assigned by the teachers. Activities may include both direct and indirect activities.

Moreover, Benson (2001) coined the term “out-of-class language learning activities” referring to activities that are held outside the classroom environment, and they can be further classified according to the learning situation:

- a. **Self-instruction** refers to a situation where students seek opportunities to learn the language and plan for the learning activities by themselves without the intervention of, and contact with, others (i.e. searching for English grammar exercises on the Internet to develop their English skills)
- b. **Naturalistic** is where the learning activities are not specifically intended to assist with language acquisition but the language learning process occurs unintentionally through interaction with the target authentic language resources (i.e. reading target language signs, talking to English speaking people, etc). Furthermore, this sort of learning usually occurs when learners integrate themselves into the target language community. To put it another way, the difference between self-instruction and naturalistic is at the level of intention to learn the target language. While the first category involves

intentionally created learning situations, the second group regards language learning outcome as the by-product of interacting with target language resources.

c. **Self-directed naturalistic learning** is a combination of the two aforementioned learning conditions. Learners acquire language using situations by themselves but are not mainly focused on practicing the language. The emphasis, to a certain extent, is placed on the substance beyond language use. For example, reading English news with the primary purpose of perceiving the information given in the news and the underlying purpose of learning new vocabulary. However, no conscious learning activity occurs while they are in these situations.

Based on Benson's three categories of out-of-class English language learning activities, even though the categorization is differentiated on the basis of the occurrence of the situation and intention to learn the language content, they all encompass a significant characteristic of language learning outcome gained directly and indirectly.

Another classification of out-of-class language learning activities has been made according to the skills used in performing the activities: receptive skill activities (reading and listening), and productive skill activities (writing and speaking) (Yap, 1998; Lee, 2005; Picard, 1996; Hyland, 2004). This classification method is normally found in the discussion of findings which shows that students normally engage in receptive skill activities over productive skill activities, especially in the EFL context.

All things considered, there were some aspects such as decision making and level of intention in participating in the

activities, language skill, and characteristic of the engagement which are slightly different in each definition of the term “out-of-class language learning activities” from various scholars. However, all concepts seem to denote the general characteristics of the activities in that they should be held outside of the formal classroom environment, and consist of either the direct or indirect process of language learning.

## Pedagogical Advantages of Out-of-Class English Language Learning

Since language is considered a skill that needs a level of practice for its mastery, regular exposure to authentic resources for language learning is expected to provide maximum opportunity for development. For well over a decade, there have been a number of studies investigating the contribution of out-of-class language learning activities to language skills development (Pickard, 1996; Shu et al, 1999; Pearson, 2004; Hyland 2004; Sumonviriya, 2004; Chusanachoti, 2009).

Ellis (1994) sheds light on the integration of the opportunity to use the target language in a natural setting and formal classroom instruction that would yield greater benefit in language acquisition. This is due to the variation of language usage domains in the real world which go far beyond the content the students have learned from the classroom lesson. Therefore, this may be a signal that assembling out-of-class language learning activities as part of the syllabus could somehow better support the language learning process. In addition, Pearson (2004) also highlights the contribution of the out-of-class language learning to the improvement of the

students' language proficiency. The study was conducted with mainland Chinese students who were studying in New Zealand. The finding also discusses the benefit of using self-access language learning to improve language competence of low-proficient students including those who lack of the opportunity of access to authentic practice.

However, Suh et al. (1999) investigated the perception of ESL students towards the impact of out-of-class learning experiences on their conversation skill. Their findings suggested the advantages of some leisure activities which could be supportive to the improvement of English conversational skills, especially listening comprehension activities. However, some cautions on activity selection and concern about guidance from more knowledgeable people have been made. Not all activities are beneficial to all learners. Appropriate guidance from the instructors might be needed in order to help students not only seek activities that suit their characters and needs but also to prevent the fossilization of the incorrect acquisition of language use. Besides, they also strongly felt that in- and out-of-class language learning activities could not be mutually replaceable but rather, must act as support to each other.

As for participation in out-of-class English language learning activities, students tend to engage in the receptive skill activities over the productive skill set. Further explanation has been given for the availability of learning resources and students' personal preferences. In EFL countries such as Thailand and Germany, the resources of productive skill activities are rarely available; it is therefore more convenient for students to engage in receptive skill activities which have a greater number of available authentic

resources (Pickard, 1996; Yap, 1998; Hyland, 2004; Sumonviriya, 2007). Surfing the Internet, watching TV programs, listening to music and radio programs, as well as reading newspapers and magazines are frequently reported as the most popular out-of-class English language learning activities utilized by students. The study conducted by Hyland (2004) in Hong Kong also revealed that students feel more comfortable in engaging in receptive skill activities due to fear of negative judgment received when speaking English in public places. To put this finding into practice in pedagogical procedure in the classroom, the instructors may have to employ a variety of out-of-class language learning activities which could serve to introduce the students to diverse activities, some of which they feel comfortable with and fulfill their needs for language skills development. But since authentic sources of productive skill activities are limited, especially in EFL countries, educational institutions may have to take this matter into account and provide more authentic resources in terms of, for example, recruiting more native English speaker teachers, setting up self-access language learning centers, and organizing English-speaking activities (i.e. Christmas parties, New Year's celebrations, etc.).

In summary, a number of studies have highlighted the benefits of engagement in out-of-class English language learning activities in better enhancing language skills. However, some particular concerns have also been considered in order to prevent improper language acquisition. To put it another way, the appropriate guidance from more knowledgeable people is needed to ensure the correctness and accuracy of the learning content and the appropriateness of activity selection. In addition, pedagogical recommendations have

also been given on how the language educators or educational institutes can support their students' language learning, especially those in EFL countries where authentic language learning resources are rarely found outside the classroom.

## **Relevant Factors in Supporting the Successful Utilization of Out-of-Class English Language Learning Activities**

In addition to out-of-class English language learning activities themselves, learning autonomy and motivation lend themselves as important mechanisms that help support the language learners to learn consistently and achieve the goal of mastering the target language successfully (Benson, 2001; Dornyei, 2006; Mori, 2002; Lamb, 2002; Saville and Troike, 2009; Chusanachoti, 2009). Language instructors who are seeking a new path to encourage their students to participate in language learning activities more engagingly might need to take the effect of these qualities towards the successful learning outcome into their consideration.

### **1) Learning autonomy**

Focusing on the characteristic of desirable language learners, Rubin (1975) proposes one of the seven characteristics of a good language learner as "seek opportunity to practice". This qualification by some means might reflex the utilization of out-of-class language learning in constructing the trait of a good language learner. This sounds interesting for language instructors who look for a strategy that helps their students instill learning and improving language traits autonomously.

Benson (2001) noted the significance of being an autonomous learner which has been in the research stream for decades. He refers to the term “learner autonomy” to learners who are capable of conducting their learning activities with less support of and intervention from others such as teachers and peers. Pearson (2004) adopted the classification of out-of-class language learning activities of Benson (2001) in defining the expression of autonomous learning. He mentions that autonomous learning could include any learning activities which are undertaken beyond the classroom boundary with the involvement in self-instruction, naturalistic learning, or self-directed naturalistic learning. Correspondingly, to maintain the consistency of learning process, Dornyei (2001) also highlighted the importance of creating learning autonomy to keep students eager to learn regularly. In other words, this quality would help protect the students from losing their goal of improving language skills which requires regular involvement over an extended period of time.

With reference to out-of-class language learning activities literature, we could claim that learning autonomy and out-of-class English language learning activities are partially interrelated to the extent that they both promote independent learning which takes place outside the formal classroom setting. Students should be encouraged to look for an opportunity of accessing the out-of-class language learning activities that support the construction of the autonomous learning habit among the language learners.

## 2) Motivation

Motivation is a major factor that drives a learner to success (Dornyei, 2001). In the second language learning context, Douglas

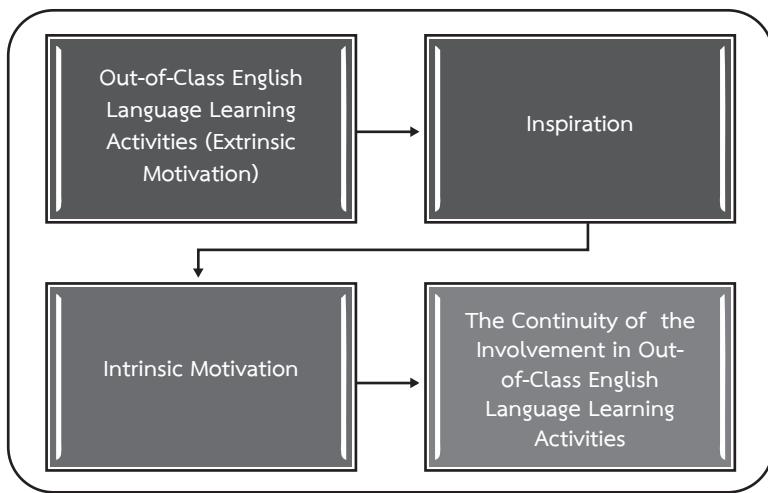
Brown (2001) explains that learners will be successful with proper motivation. Thus, it is simply assumed that the success or failure in any learning activity depends on whether learners are motivated or not. Brown (2001) also mentioned that the term 'motivation' can be used to explain why people succeed or fail in performing some complex tasks as he points out that it is a 'catch-all-term' that is viewed as the internal drive which can push people toward particular actions. More technically, as defined by Keller (1983 as cited in Brown, 1994), motivation affects people in selecting choices of experience or goals they will go through or achieve as well as how much effort they will spend in moving through those choices.

Gardner and his associates refer motivation to the context or purpose of learning. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation represent a continuum of possibilities of intensity of feeling, or drive which rank from deeply internal, self-generated rewards to strong externally administered rewards from beyond oneself (Gardner & Lambert 1972; Gardner, 1985; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Gardner & Tremblay 1994, cited in Brown, 2001). It can be simply put that extrinsic motivation deals with external rewards such as passing exams, avoiding punishment, or fulfilling job requirements that drive people to engage in the activities. However, the intrinsic motivation derives from the activities themselves and is related to the satisfaction of the individual rather than the external rewards. Thus, the inner inspiration of individuals is intrinsically powerful as a means to encourage them to learn.

A number of previous studies revealed the relationship between the participation in out-of-class English language learning activities student motivation (Mori, 2002; Lamb, 2002; Saville and

Troike, 2009; Chusanachoti; 2009). Pearson (2004) mentioned that students with a level of intrinsic motivation tend to be more proactive in engagement of out-of-class English language learning activities. This is also concurred with what Dornyei (2006) claimed about learning experiences, that, to some extent, lend themselves as a source of intrinsic motivation as most children are thirsty for world knowledge. Thus, students who are intrinsically motivated seem to make more attempt at searching for opportunities to join in out-of-class language learning activities.

As referred to in the aforementioned issues, language learning activities seem to be practical but only with the support rendered from those issues. The learning activities could be considered as a source of extrinsic motivation while the satisfaction of learning experience through engaging in those activities could affect the language learners' interest to participate in the activities more enthusiastically. This phenomenon would help generate the intrinsic drive which is powerful enough to encourage or inspire the language learners to involve themselves in conducting the activities autonomously. This would therefore lead to the continuity of the involvement in out-of-class English language learning activities which, as mentioned previously, can better enhance the language-learning outcome. Figure 1 demonstrates the interrelationship of the out-of-class English language learning activities, motivation, and learning autonomy.



**Figure 1:** The Interrelationship of the out-of-class English language learning activities, motivation, and learning autonomy

## Conclusion

The term “out-of-class language learning activities” has been investigated by many scholars in order to gain knowledge of the most effective learning activities which can be used to help develop language skills through participation in and exploitation of authentic resources outside the four-wall boundary of the formal classroom setting. Though the term usage was slightly different in terms of the decision making and level of intention in participating in the activities, language skill, and characteristics of the engagement; out-of-class language learning activities seem to include a generalization as the activities are supposed to be held outside the formal classroom and related to the English language learning either directly or indirectly. The utilization of the activities is empirically beneficial in supporting language skill development. However, the

availability of the authentic resources of English language learning in general places is limited in some contexts especially in the EFL countries. Educational institutions and language instructors therefore should need increase the English language learning resources which allow exposure to the real practice of language usage. In spite of the benefits in English language learning, appropriate guidance from more knowledgeable people is crucially needed in order to prevent the fossilization of the acquisition of incorrect language usage as well as to suggest the selection of proper activities which suits the individual's needs. To encourage more engagement in out-of-class English language learning activities, the activities themselves play a crucial role in motivating the language learners extrinsically. It is noteworthy that if this process is successful, it will then become the inspiration to repeat the activities and intrinsic motivation will therefore be developed. Once the language learners are intrinsically motivated, continuity in the activities' engagement will arise and it should result in instilling the trait of autonomous learning. This signifies that out-of-class English language learning activities seem to be able to better enhance English language learning outcome. However, they are unable to replace formal classroom instruction, but rather act as support for each other by granting students opportunities to use the content learned from in-class lesson in natural situations.

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