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Senior University Students' Extracurricular Activities and English Performance: A Study on Determining Factors and Perceived Impacts

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Abstract: In the context of globalization and internationalization of higher education, English proficiency has become a core competency for college students. Traditional classroom teaching faces limitations such as a single context, insufficient interaction, and limited practical opportunities. Extracurricular activities related to English have become an important complementary path for enhancing language proficiency. This study takes 120 senior English majors from Fuzhou University of Foreign Trade as the research subjects, adopts an interpretive sequential mixed method, and quantitatively analyzes the types, frequency, personal and family determinants of extracurricular activity participation, as well as their correlation with English scores. It also explores subjective perceptions and practical experiences through semi-structured interviews with 10 students. The results show that the frequency and type of extracurricular activity participation are significantly positively correlated with overall English scores; personal motivation, self-efficacy, family economic and cultural capital, and communication atmosphere are key factors affecting participation behavior; academic, professional, and cross-cultural extracurricular activities have differentiated enhancement effects on academic writing, professional application, and oral fluency, respectively. This study addresses the deficiencies in existing research regarding the lack of attention to senior student groups and the absence of a longitudinal perspective, providing empirical evidence for universities to optimize their English extracurricular systems and enhance the quality of talent cultivation.

Keywords: Senior Students; Extracurricular English Activities; Determinants of Participation; English Performance; Mixed Methods Research.

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, English has shifted from being a competitive advantage to an essential skill for academic development, career advancement, and cross-cultural communication among college students. Both the "College English Teaching Guidelines" and the "China English Proficiency Scale" emphasize that English teaching should focus on practical communication skills and promote the transformation of language knowledge into application abilities [3]. However, traditional classrooms are limited by class hours, formats, and teacher-led models, resulting in passive knowledge reception by students and a lack of real language use scenarios, which can easily lead to communication anxiety and hinder the internalization of skills [1]. Extracurricular activities, as non-curricular and voluntary practical activities, encompass both academic and non-academic types, providing immersive and highly interactive scenarios for language learning. Existing research has confirmed that extracurricular activities can reduce communication apprehension, enhance oral fluency, and strengthen writing and critical thinking abilities[1] [4]. After three years of accumulation, senior college students tend to have more stable participation behaviors and clear goals, making their participation patterns and learning outcomes more representative [5]. However, existing research mostly focuses on ordinary undergraduate students, neglecting the interaction between individual and family factors and lacking tracking of the long-term participation trajectories of senior students [9]. Based on this, this study revolves around three core issues: first, what are the types, frequencies, and characteristics of senior students' participation in extracurricular English activities?

Second, how do individual and family factors influence their participation behaviors? Third, does participation in extracurricular activities have a significant impact on English performance and what is the mechanism of action? This study adopts a mixed method, balancing data objectivity and experiential depth, aiming to reveal the influencing mechanisms and propose a practical framework to provide reference for English education reform in universities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Basis

The student engagement theory suggests that there is a positive correlation between student development and the time, effort, and depth of activity involvement. Sustained and stable participation is more effective in enhancing learning outcomes than sporadic participation[5]. The self-determination theory distinguishes between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation, driven by interest and a sense of achievement, primarily promotes students' initial participation in extracurricular activities. Extrinsic motivation, driven by factors such as employment prospects, certificates, and rewards, is more effective in maintaining sustained participation among older students[2]. Among these, autonomy, sense of competence, and sense of belonging are core mediating psychological needs that connect influencing factors with participation behavior[10] The cultural capital theory indicates that family economic conditions, parental education level, and educational attitudes collectively constitute family cultural capital, which directly affects students' preferences for

extracurricular activities and their ability to access resources. This provides theoretical support for understanding the participation differences among students from different family backgrounds[7].

2.2. Determinants of Participation in Extracurricular Activities

The influencing factors of participation in extracurricular activities can be divided into two levels: personal and family. At the personal level, students' participation motivation undergoes a significant transformation as they progress through the grades. Lower grades are primarily driven by interest, while higher grades shift towards career preparation[2]. Early English learning experiences directly affect self-efficacy, with negative experiences reducing students' willingness to participate in extracurricular activities, while positive experiences can enhance the sustainability of participation[1]. Additionally, extroverted personality, strong social needs, and clear goal orientation can significantly increase students' participation frequency. At the family level, family economic capital determines the accessibility of high-cost English extracurricular activities such as international exchanges and paid training[5]. The higher the parents' educational level, the more students tend to choose academic extracurricular activities[7]. A supportive and open family communication atmosphere can enhance students' diversity of participation and resilience to setbacks, while an authoritarian family atmosphere can limit students' choice of activities[13].

2.3. The Impact of Extracurricular Activities on English Performance

The enhancement effect of extracurricular activities on English performance is reflected in three aspects: academic performance, professional performance, and standardized performance. Academic activities such as academic seminars and essay debates can significantly improve students' course GPA, academic writing proficiency, and thesis defense quality[7]. Professional activities such as business English training and workplace communication simulation can effectively enhance the passing rate of professional qualification exams and workplace English application Scores [3]. Cross-cultural exchanges and international activities can enhance students' vocabulary fluency and oral proficiency, positively impacting standardized language test scores such as IELTS and TOEFL[4].

2.4. Research Gaps

Most existing related studies adopt a cross-sectional design, which makes it difficult to clearly reveal the long-term dynamic relationship between students' participation in extracurricular activities and English learning[5][13]. Moreover, most studies treat senior students as a homogenous group, without fully considering the impact of individual differences such as career goals, family background, and activity types. At the same time, there is a lack of systematic analysis of the interaction between personal and family factors, making it difficult to comprehensively explain the complex mechanism of senior students' participation in extracurricular activities[9]. This study fills the existing research gap from a retrospective perspective, focuses on the specific group of senior college students, constructs an impact model of multi-factor interaction, and further enriches the research results in the field of English extracurricular activities and learning outcomes.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts an interpretive sequential mixed method, following a research logic of quantitative analysis first, qualitative exploration second, and conclusion integration third. Through the quantitative phase, it systematically reveals the participation characteristics, key influencing factors, and correlation with English achievement of senior students in extracurricular English activities. With the help of the qualitative phase, it deeply explores the subjective motivations, practical experiences, and mechanisms behind participation behaviors. Finally, by integrating the results of the two types of research through data triangulation and mutual verification, a scientific and comprehensive practical guidance framework is formed to ensure the comprehensiveness and credibility of the research conclusions [12].

3.2. Research Subjects

This study quantitatively selected a sample of 120 senior students majoring in English from Fuzhou Foreign Trade University, using full-sample sampling to ensure data representativeness. The inclusion criteria were being in their fourth year, majoring in English, participating in at least one extracurricular English activity during their university years, and voluntarily signing an informed consent form. Students who were not in their fourth year, not majoring in English, had no extracurricular activity experience, were suspended or dropped out, or refused to participate were excluded to ensure the relevance and validity of the research subjects.

Qualitative samples were selected using purposive sampling, with 10 students selected strictly based on differences in extracurricular activity participation frequency, English achievement level, and personal and family characteristics, ensuring that the sample covered different levels of participation and learning, until data saturation was reached, thus guaranteeing the depth and comprehensiveness of the qualitative analysis.

3.3. Research Tools

In the quantitative phase of this study, a structured questionnaire was utilized, encompassing five sections: basic student information, types and frequency of participation in English extracurricular activities, personal and family influencing factors, perception of English skill improvement, and objective English achievement indicators. The tool design drew upon mature scales from both domestic and international sources, and was locally adapted in alignment with the research objectives. It underwent review by three experts in the field of English education and pre-experimental testing with 30 students to ensure its reliability and validity met the research requirements. In the qualitative phase, a semi-structured interview outline was employed, with open-ended questions designed around core issues such as participation experiences, motivation evolution, factor influences, effect perception, and improvement suggestions. After expert validation, these questions were used for interview research. Objective academic data, including students' core English course GPA, scores in individual skill courses, and professional English exam scores, were also collected as the basis for measuring English achievement.

3.4. Research Procedure

This study strictly adheres to academic ethical norms. It first obtained permission from the Ethics Review Committee and Fuzhou Foreign Languages and Foreign Trade College, clearly informing all participants of the research purpose, the principle of voluntary participation, the rules of anonymity and confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time, ensuring the ethical compliance of the study. In the quantitative phase, questionnaires were distributed to 120 research subjects, and official academic performance data were collected simultaneously. After data cleaning, descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis were conducted. In the qualitative phase, based on the quantitative analysis, one-on-one confidential interviews were conducted with 10 stratified students. The entire interview was audio-recorded and transcribed word-for- word, and the six-step thematic analysis method was used to complete coding and refinement. Finally, the quantitative statistical results and qualitative narrative content were integrated, and the final conclusion was formed through triangular corroboration. A practical framework for extracurricular English activities in universities was also constructed.

3.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis was conducted using SPSS statistical software, with a systematic approach guided by research objectives. Descriptive statistics were employed to present the distribution characteristics of extracurricular activity participation, influencing factors, and English achievement. Pearson correlation coefficient was used to examine the strength and direction of the association between extracurricular activity participation and English achievement. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to identify the predictive effects of key influencing factors, with a statistical significance level set at $p<0.05$. Qualitative data analysis was conducted following Braun and Clark's six- stage framework, involving data familiarization, initial coding, theme search, theme review, definition and naming, and extraction of typical expressions. This approach comprehensively explored students' subjective experiences and deep cognition. Finally, data triangulation was used to integrate the results of the two types of analysis, corroborating objective statistical data with subjective interview content to clearly elucidate the relationships and underlying mechanisms between variables [6].

4. Research Results

4.1. Participation Characteristics of Extracurricular Activities

The extracurricular English activities participated by senior students are primarily academic and career-oriented, followed by cross-cultural activities, with the lowest participation rate in entertainment activities. The frequency of participation is mostly concentrated between 1 to 4 times per month, and 62.5% of students have been continuously participating for over a year. Overall, the extracurricular activity choices of senior students exhibit a clear goal-oriented characteristic, preferring activities directly related to academic improvement and job preparation. Participation driven by pure interest has significantly decreased, and participation behavior has become more stable and targeted. [2]

4.2. Determinants of Participation

Among personal factors, motivation transformation, self-efficacy, past learning experiences, and extraversion are significant predictors of participation in extracurricular activities. Among these, extrinsic motivation oriented towards career development has a stronger explanatory power for participation behavior than intrinsic motivation driven by interest[13]. In terms of family factors, family economic level, parents' education level, parents' supportive attitude, and family communication atmosphere jointly influence students' participation choices. Students from families with high cultural capital participate significantly more in academic and international activities[7]. At the same time, there is a positive interaction between personal and family factors. Students with high self-efficacy and high family support have higher levels of participation and persistence in extracurricular activities[10].

4.3. The Relationship between Extracurricular Activities and English Performance

The frequency of participation in extracurricular English activities by senior students is significantly positively correlated with their comprehensive GPA in core courses, as well as their scores in oral English, writing, and translation. Different types of activities have differentiated effects on the improvement of English skills. Academic-oriented activities have a significant impact on the improvement of writing and translation scores, while career-oriented activities are more effective in enhancing professional English application abilities and qualification exam scores[4]. Cross-cultural activities have a prominent effect on promoting oral fluency and listening comprehension abilities[4]. Students who consistently and steadily participate in extracurricular activities have an average course GPA 0.37 higher than those who occasionally participate, and a 42% higher pass rate in professional English exams. The quality and continuity of participation have a significant impact on learning outcomes[5].

4.4. Qualitative Topic Discovery

Qualitative interviews have identified four core themes. First, participation motivation evolves gradually with the progression through university, shifting from initial interest and curiosity to the accumulation of career capital and the rigid demand for abilities in higher grades[2]. Second, family provides resources and attitudinal support for participation, while personal motivation and self-efficacy determine the degree of persistence in participation, jointly shaping the participation pattern[9]. Third, extracurricular activities effectively enhance language application abilities and reduce communication anxiety through paths such as authentic language scenarios, peer interaction and communication, and practical feedback reinforcement[1]. Fourth, students' needs for improvement in English extracurricular activities are concentrated in increasing career orientation, cross-cultural practice, and personalized coaching content, hoping that the activities can better align with academic and employment needs [14].

5. Discussion

5.1. Explanation of Core Findings

The core findings of this study reveal that the participation

of senior college students in extracurricular English activities exhibits typical characteristics of goal-oriented, professionalized, and sustained engagement, which closely aligns with the practical needs of students for graduation, further education, and employment. The transformation of personal motivation, self-efficacy, family economic capital, and cultural capital jointly shape students' participation behavior. The research results fully support the core viewpoints of self-determination theory, student participation theory, and cultural capital theory[5][7].Extracurricular activities effectively promote the transformation of English knowledge into practical abilities through four pathways: increasing language practice duration, expanding real application scenarios, strengthening peer interaction feedback, and enhancing self-efficacy. This, in turn, improves academic performance and language proficiency, validating the important supplementary value of extracurricular activities in English education[11].

5.2. Theoretical Contribution

The theoretical contributions of this study are primarily manifested in three aspects. Firstly, it constructs an integrated impact model of "individual - family - participation - achievement" for senior students' extracurricular English activities, systematically clarifying the mechanism of multi-factor interaction. Secondly, it reveals the key role of transformation of participation motivation and sustained participation among senior students, compensating for the lack of longitudinal perspective in existing research[13]. Thirdly, it confirms the applicability and effectiveness of the interpretive sequential mixed method in the study of extracurricular English activities, providing a referential paradigm for similar language education research[12].

5.3. Practical Implications

At the practical level, this study provides clear guidance for universities, teachers, and students. Universities should establish a tiered and categorized extracurricular English activity system, enriching three core modules: academic, professional, and cross-cultural, increase funding and teacher guidance, and establish a credit certification and incentive mechanism for activity participation. Teachers should guide students to rationally shift their participation motivation from interest-driven to goal-oriented, implement early positive intervention for students with low self-efficacy, strengthen home-school communication, and guide families to provide reasonable support. Students should prioritize extracurricular activities that match their goals and allow for long-term deep participation, balance the development of academic and practical abilities, and maximize the learning value of extracurricular activities[8][15][16].

6. Conclusion

This study confirms that the participation behavior of senior college students in extracurricular English activities is significantly influenced by personal motivation, self-efficacy, family economic conditions, parental cultural capital, and family communication atmosphere. The frequency, type selection, and persistence of participation in extracurricular activities are all significantly positively correlated with English performance. Different types of activities have differentiated effects on improving English listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation skills. The research results provide solid empirical support for universities to design and implement high-quality extracurricular English activities and promote the development of students' English application abilities. This study has limitations such as a single sample source, primarily relying on retrospective data, and not incorporating institutional factors such as school systems. Future research could expand the coverage of institutions, adopt a longitudinal tracking design, and incorporate institutional variables such as policy support and teacher guidance to further enhance the universality and comprehensiveness of research conclusions.

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