The Perception of College Students' English Learning toward Competition Activities

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand college students and teachers' perceptions toward competition activities in order to enhance students' English skills and to examine the effectiveness of these activities as well. In this study, 47 students in one selected Science University were motivated to practice English through competition activities – including speech contest and singing contest. This study was employed through a questionnaire with open-ended questions and informal interviews. From students' questionnaires and interviews, the reported benefits from these activities included: creating English learning environment, motivating students to participate in activities in the future and the expectation for stimulating students to learn more from teachers. This study clarified both teachers' and students' perceptions about these activities and provided suggestions in designing competition activities to motivate students to learn English. The study suggests that teachers could focus on providing more pronunciation and grammar in the curriculum, offering students more opportunities of oral presentation, and using English songs in classrooms. The study also suggests that students could attend more speaking activities as possible as they can and participate more competition activities.

Keywords: English learning; competition activities; English learning environment; learning attitude; English skills

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INTRODUCTION

When English is positively and highly valued and programmed as an instrument to bring Taiwan into the world academically and commercially, teachers in Taiwan try their best to do everything possible to make English learning more effective and even more attractive for students. Given this goal, a number of studies have been conducted on teaching methodology, successful teaching principles, language activities and language assessment to help teachers and students in language teaching and learning (Brown, 2001; Lewis, 1996). However, little attention has been paid to how students respond their English learning toward language competition activities. This study attempted to examine how students recognize the competition activities as their ways in English learning, what interest can students find in these activities; how the activities are specific for English learning; and the perceptions of students and teachers toward the competition activities to language learning. Suggestions in this study were given to make the competition activities more effective and more attractive for students.

Definition of Term

The competition activities in this study refer to singing contest and speech contest held in 2005 in a selected Science University. These activities are designed for students to compete individually.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Activities related to language are considered to be more active to students' language learning. As Carrier et. (1980) stated, the advantages of using ESL- related activities for language learners can: (a) provide a variety of learning situations; (b) stimulate students' learning motivation; (c) renew students' energy before returning to more formal learning; (d) encourage students' participation; (e) remove the inhibition of those who feel intimidated by formal classroom situations; (f) change teachers' role from formal instructors to managers or organizers of activities that students enjoy participating in, and (g) reduce the distance or conflicts between teachers and students. Accordingly, the characteristics of these activities suggested that ESL-related activities not only connected in some way with students' daily lives, but also enable teachers to provide an opportunity for students to use their language skills in a less formal situation. Furthermore, language-related activities featured to create a stimulating learning environment for good language learners and demonstrated high motivation and an inherent interest in languages (Oxford and Crookall, 1990; Oxford, 1993; Hsiao & Oxford, 2002). Also, the importance of the

activities is pointed out as Brown (2001) argued, "authentic language and real-world tasks enable students to see the relevance of classroom activity to their long-term communicative goals." (p. 258). Although ESL-related activities are helpful to students' language learning, there are few empirical studies focused on deeper understanding students' perceptions toward their language learning activities, and the effect of the language related activities on their English learning.

Moreover, according to Carrier et. (1980), when language activities had a competitive or point-scoring element in them, they might have a negative influence on some learners and reduce the enjoyment for the activity and the motivation for learning. However, Carrier et. (1980) also mentioned that the competition in activities could be viewed as a way of shaping or giving external purpose to the activities as well as an important motivating factor. Thus, these researchers advocated that it was important to assess students' interests in language learning in a competitive way.

In this literature review, ESL-related activities in a competitive way played a key role to motivate students' language learning and provided teachers alternatives to their English teaching. However, the problems and difficulties students encountered in language activities from their perspectives were rarely mentioned. Most studies on the language activities not only have limited empirical data, but also typically present the researcher's opinions relevant to the effectiveness of language learning. Hence, there is a need to understand how students perceive ESL-related activities as their English learning from their narrative experiences.

This study intended to investigate the perceptions of students and teachers toward the competition activities in English learning in a selected Science University. Specifically, this study examined the extent to which and the way in which students perceive these competition activities as an effective way to motivate their English learning as well as enhance their English skills, the problems and challenges of the English competition activities. The following research questions are addressed:

- 1. What challenges and/or impacts do students have in the competition activities?
- 2. What benefits do students think of the competition activities?

METHOD

This research was a qualitative case study that explored 47 students' and ten teachers' conceptions of the competition activities. Merriam (1988) stated that a case study examined "a specific phenomenon such as a program, an event, a process, a person or a social group" (p, 9). This qualitative case study tended to analyse the impact of English competition activities on students' English learning experiences,

and discover the perceptions of both students and teachers upon these competition activities. The interviews and survey were conducted after the singing contest and the speech contest.

Research Site and Participants

The site selected for this study was in the Foreign Language Division at one selected Science University. The participants in this study included 47 students participating in the competition activities and ten teachers who advised these students in these activities. These students' previous English learning experience was from six years to ten years.

Data Collection

The data were collected from (a) questionnaires; (b) informal interviews; (c) semi-structured individual interviews; (d) students' documents and records. These multiple methods of data collection allowed the researchers to integrate the data and provided a more reliable analysis.

All participants in the study were volunteers. They (47 students and ten teachers) finished the questionnaires designed by the researchers. Along with these questionnaires, informal interviews and conversations were conducted at the same time. The number of informal interviews in this study was not limited. The interviews were informally held in the office area, classrooms, teachers' lounge and hallways. Some of these students and teachers with an informal interview described how they learned about their ways of learning English, and how they felt about these competition activities.

The other primary source of data were collected from semi-structured individual interviews in this study. The advantage of using individual interviews is to allow participants with different perspectives of attending the activities to explain their attitudes and experiences in detail. In this study, six of the 47 students, the winners of the activities, were individually interviewed at a location most convenient to them. Interviews were tape recorded, and notes were taken during the interviews to stimulate future questions and clarify. Each interview was transcribed soon after the interview. Each interview was conducted approximately 30 minutes and followed a planned interview protocol designed by the researchers. Participants were asked how they felt about the activities, what challenges and impact they had encountered in the activities, how the competition activities affected their English learning, and what changes they would have for their future English learning. The protocol was modified when necessary to expand areas of interest that were discovered during the interviews.

As a part of data collection process, relevant documents and records were also collected. These included the photos taken in these competition activities, students'

notes about their experiences, students' English learning records, and teachers' notes when mentoring these students in the competition activities.

Data Analysis

As individual interviews, informal interviews, and questionnaires were completed and transcribed, the information was saved in a separate file for each individual. All data were read, re-read, and analysed by identifying participants' anonymous name, question number, categories in parenthesis and a sentence or phrase or text to identify the category. All responses from participants were analysed for both groups of questions and each question.

The data analysis process occurred during an on-going series of intensive sessions utilizing a constant-comparative method (Strass and Corbin, 1998). Here, this method would make researchers more understand how often a concept emerged and what it looked like under varying conditions rather than how many individuals expressed the concept (Strass and Corbin, 1998).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part summarized and discussed the findings of this study, and presented recommendations for designing competition activities. In particular, the extent to which the reported benefits of these competition activities represent students' English learning was examined. Secondly, the perceived concerns of effective competition activities were analyzed in relation to the challenges in developing effective competition activities.

Data from individual interviews, informal interviews, questionnaires and student documents and records revealed two categories: the challenges of the competition activities, and the perceived benefits of the activities. The challenges of the competition activities identified by the participants included: English skills and impact of practice. The perceived benefits of the competition activities included (a) the creation of a learning environment, (b) positive motivation, and (c) attitude change.

The Challenges of the Competition Activities

According to the participants in this study, the emerging challenges of the competition activities included English skills and impact of practice. This part revealed the results of the study and discussed relevant issue to students' English learning.

English Skills

When the participants were asked about the most difficult parts of language skills in preparing or training for the contest, 60 percent of the students had difficulties with fluency, and more than 53 percent of the students had difficulty with pronunciations (see Figure 1). 70 percent of the teachers believed that the training of pronunciation was the major difficulty and 40 percent of teachers were also worried about the fluency training for students.

Further, more than half of the students and teachers believed students' fluency and pronunciation were the worst parts and problems in their performance. For example, as student B stated in the interview, "I find many students in the contest have problems in pronunciation and intonation." Student A mentioned, "sometimes we check the pronunciation on the Internet (K. K. System). However, my pronunciation sounds different from that on the Internet.... This is because I never learned the pronunciation well when I started my learning as a kid." Student E said, "there is trouble in pronunciation. Sometimes my pronunciation is different from my teacher's. I don't know why until I find that there are two systems of pronunciation."

As suggested in the findings of the study, pronunciation and fluency are the major difficulties and concerns for students in preparing. This can possibly be explained that inaccurate pronunciation for non-native English learners is unavoidable. However, fluency comes only when there is accurate pronunciation and plentiful practice. The problem of students' fluency may come from the lack of practice. After all, practice makes perfect. This part will be discussed later.

Furthermore, grammar also caught the attention of 32 percent of students and 30 percent of teachers regarding English learning. This is a response to the dissatisfaction of the performance, especially in the two parts which are urgent to improve for them – pronunciation and fluency. When asked about the challenge in preparing for the contest, student D indicated, "I feel my challenge lies in the grammar of the sentence, intonation and accent." Student D also declared, "our grammar is not good, so most of our grammar is wrong." Student E pointed out, "as I am not familiar with grammar, I am afraid what I write is not so good" and "I don't know how to use the word and there is something wrong with it grammatically." Clearly, this study suggested that students want to improve their grammar to make their English skills more fluently.

According to Driscoll (2003), fluency is defined as "having oral proficiency in English that consists of comprehension and production. Production is defined as accurate and efficient oral communication using appropriate pronunciation, intonation, grammar, and vocabulary in an interactive professional context." This corresponds to the evidence in this study that proficiency of English needs accurate pronunciation, intonation, and grammar. Since participants believed their problems and difficulties

come from their pronunciation and grammar, this implied that they hope to meaningfully engage in the use of English. Fluency and accuracy are complementary principles underlying communicative techniques (Brown, 2001).

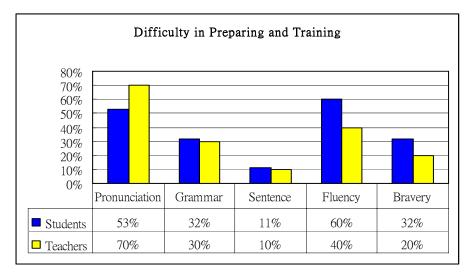


Figure 1. Difficulty in Preparing and Training

Meanwhile, when participants perceived fluency and pronunciation as their challenges in the competition activities, they connected the factors of time, and teachers' instruction to the difficulties. Three-fourths of the students reported that they were not well prepared in the contest. When the reason was investigated further, 14 out of 32 students answered "no time for preparation", 3 students answered "no teachers' instruction", and 15 out of 32 students answered "just get experience" (see Table 1)

Table 1. Not well-prepared for the contest (N = 32)

No time for preparation	No teachers' instruction	Just get experience
44% (N=14)	9%(N=3)	47%(N=15)

In addition, there is a big gap between the perception of teachers and students regarding the time they needed to prepare for the contest (see Figure 2.). 60 percent of students thought the time they needed to prepare for the contest was two weeks at least or more than a month. In fact, the time they really spent preparing for the contest was only a week or less than a week. However, 60 percent of the teachers thought that the time students needed to prepare for the contest should be at least one month or even longer. Generally, the time they spent training students was one or two weeks. The finding seems to explain that teachers think students need more training than students think. When there is a gap between the perception of teachers and students

regarding time needed for English learning, the expectation between teachers and students would be different.

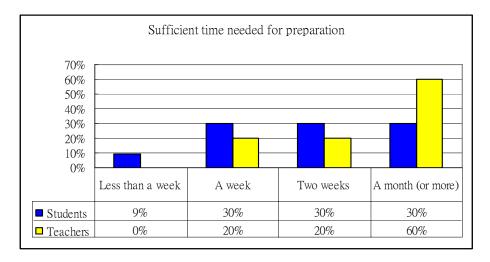


Figure 2. Sufficient time needed for preparation (Students: N=46 Teachers: N=10)

Interestingly, 89 percent of the teachers cantered on "students' English ability" instead of "the lack of time for training" when asked what teacher worry the most in training. Teachers in this study reported that the key point in the training is students' English ability. The instruction goes smoothly and leads to excellent performance for students with good English ability. Conversely, teachers felt frustrated when teaching students with limited English ability.

Impact of Practice

Through the individual, informal interviews and questionnaires, participants reported that they are not satisfied with their performance in the contests. Teachers and students have the same conception of the performance as the data showed that less than 60 percent of participants felt satisfied. Maybe the lack of time to practice and the insufficiency of courage on the stage can explain this result. As investigated above, 70 percent of the students spent a week or less than a week in preparing for the contest which is far less than many teachers (60 percent) think they should have – at least a month (See Table 2). More time should be scheduled for the preparation of the contest.

Table 2. Students' viewpoint on "Time needed for practicing" vs. "Time spent by students" (Total N=47)

	Less than a week	A week	Two weeks	A month (or more)
Time needed	9% (N=4)	30% (N=14)	30% (N=14)	30% (N=14)
Time spent	34% (N=16)	36% (N=17)	26% (N=12)	4% (N=2)

Moreover, 60 percent of the students mentioned that their dissatisfied performance located on nervous and embarrassing experiences such as standing on the stage dumbly because of forgetting what to say or what to sing in the contest. The followings are the comments of students for their performance in the contest:

"I am so nervous and I forget what to say when the bell (reminding of time) rings." (student G)

"I have been preparing for the contest for a long time. However, I am so nervous that I forget what to say even at the very beginning of the contest." (student H)

"I have spent much time practicing. However, when I step onto the stage, nothing is left in my head." (student I)

"I feel nervous in my mind and at the moment I stand on the stage, I am really nervous. I sing the song faster than it should be and feel unsatisfied with my performance." (student A)

"Because of being nervous, instead of lack in practicing, many students forget everything when they step onto the stage." (student C)

It is evident that students attending in the contest felt nervous and ended up their unsatisfied performance. From their responses, practice is also an important factor for their unsatisfied experiences. 64 percent of the students in the study stated that their continuous practice is the most important and necessary for them to do in preparing for the contest. To make it more specific, more than half of the teachers indicated "the continuous practice of students" would be the most important and necessary element in the training. Both students and teachers get agreement in this aspect. As practice makes perfect, the rule is easy to learn while the success depends on the practice. Without continuous practice, the performance never goes smoothly. The answer to this question reveals that students know what they have to do. Given the fact that students stand dumbly on stage due to forgetting what to say and what to sing, practice would be a good way for students to prevent this embarrassing experience. Obviously, what they need most is not the rule, but the continuous practice.

The Perceived Benefits of the Competition Activities

The perceived benefits of the competition activities included (a) the creation of a learning environment; (b) positive motivation; and (c) attitude change.

The Creation of a Learning Environment

33 out of 44 students reported that they felt the competition activities as a moment of happiness and expectation instead of pain, helplessness, and fear (see Figure 3). Students in the study pointed out that they had certain expectation to the contest and they expect eagerly the activities as an occassion for them to use English. To them, the contest is exciting more than thrilling. This evidence showed that students believed the competition activities could be a stimulating learning environment for them to practice English in real-world context.

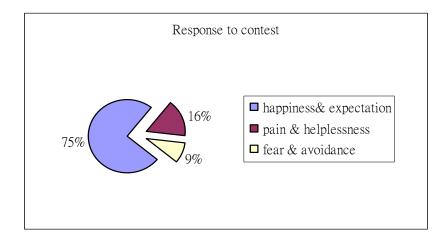


Figure 3. Students' response to contest

77 percent of the students and all of the teachers expected the chance to use English and to enrich students' learning experience through activities which are different from traditional English learning. 53 percent of the students reported that they met their expectation. Student G wrote in questionnaire, "it's a good chance to train my oral English." Surprisingly, none of the teachers expected the student to win the contest but to increase students' English learning experiences. Apparently, students and teachers in the study preferred the varied English learning experiences in the authentic environment. According to these participants, English should be as a communication tool rather than a subject. As student J reported, "everybody sings well, although I don't sing well. The activity is very interesting and makes English full of life." Obviously, students love to learn English by singing English songs as an activity. The involuntary repetition derived from songs can strongly activate the mechanism of the language acquisition device (Krashen, 1983; Murphey, 1992), because people's brains have a natural propensity to repeat what we hear in our environment. As a result, this repetition makes sense of the language. Participants believed songs could be interesting for them to learn English; however, how students transfer the songs they learned to use English is not examined in the study. As

Murphey (1992) argued, "just listening to and singing songs will not make students able to communicate in another language" (p. 6). In this study, it is evident that the competition activities not only create a learning environment for students to happily learn English outside of traditional classroom, but also make students use English in real-world context.

Positive Motivation

As previously mentioned above, the competition activities create a happy English learning environment for students. Consequently, this positive atmosphere can motivate them to learn. 32 out of 47 students answered "yes" when asked if the contest could motivate them in English learning, and 91 percent of the students regarded the contest as an effective way in English learning.

Furthermore, all of the teachers and 91 percent of the students valued the contest. Even 34 out of 46 students desired to take part in the contest again in the future. As student K responded, "I hope activities related to English learning can be held every year to remind students the importance of English." This showed that students in the study wanted to continue their English learning through the competition activities.

Additionally, students reported that the competition activities increased their confidence to use English in their life. For example, student L responded, "thanks for holding the contest which offers the way to use English in our life. Singing contest is a terrific activity. I will come back for the competition to test my courage and English." Student F also mentioned in the interview:

Many people in Taiwan dare not speak English in public. Actually, our English is not poor. We are just shy and we dare not to express ourselves in English. However, to compete in the contest makes me understand that my English is so good that everybody applauses for me, which is a really good feeling and makes me happy.

91 percent of the students in the questionnaire felt that the contest was appropriate for their English learning. The reason could be that students could choose the songs they were familiar with and the topic of speech was carefully designed for students. The more familiar the topic was, the easier it is for students to prepare and perform. This is experienced by student F who said, "as I enjoyed listening to English songs, singing English songs is not a burden for me. I just pick the one I like and interpret it by singing." and Student C believed, "as I am familiar with the song, it can be sung smoothly after the unknown words or the easily forgotten parts of the song are checked (practiced)."

In addition to the singing activities, students supported and expected to have more varied competition activities such as reciting contest and drama contest. Student

B said, "I suggest that reciting contest should be held and scheduled before speech contest because many problems referring to pronunciation and intonation are found in students' performance in the contest." Student F thought that drama contest was a very authentic situation for language learning. Student F mentioned, "we can learn the meaning of the word or the sentence from the script of the play. At least, I know what Cinderella is now. It also makes the students who are not interested in English learn the word or sentence through interesting plays." This is significant that students looked forward to having more varied competition activities to broaden their learning.

The contest is strongly affirmed and supported by both students and teachers as it offered students the very authentic and various situations in learning English. Namely, the competition activities placed more responsibility for students to communicate in English. When students have positive motivation to learn English, they would try their best to engage in language learning. The evidence showed the competition activities in this study stimulated students' motivation of English learning, and gave students confidence to keep learning English. The support of positive feelings and gaining self-confidence derived from the activities in the study had a connection to the goals of affective learning strategies (Oxford and Crookdall, 1990). Clearly, the competition activities encouraged students not only to play a more active role in their own learning process, but also to verify their English learning strategies. Student D indicated that "I become more active in learning" and "I want to take the GEPT test or to go to language school as only two hours of English class were scheduled in this school." This study presented that the competition activities allowed students to stimulate their learning strategies and increased positive motivation in language learning.

Attitude Change

58 percent of the participants were changed in their English learning attitude while 42 percent of the students were not. As this contest was quite different from the way they learn English in the traditional class, the activities offered them different learning experiences that led to the change in their learning style or method. Students experienced various ways in learning English and the competition activities was viewed as a more excited, active and attractive learning when English is practiced rather than being studied as a subject. The creation of an authentic environment is beneficial to students' learning. Students indicated that the experiences of attending the contest allowed them to make some changes on their English learning. For example, student A said, "the first change is that I paid more attention to the English songs on TV and tried to learn new songs." and Student D pointed out, "I paid more attention to teacher's intonation which was neglected before and I will ask teachers immediately the part I don't understand."

In addition, students also believed that presentation in classrooms is effective to motivate their English learning. For example, student F said, "to avoid being too nervous to say a word on stage, I train myself and require my courage through the practice of making oral presentation in class." This is the way for her to overcome her fear on stage.

This reported attitude change from the participants in the study significantly extended their understanding of English, and actively got involved in English learning. Meanwhile, this evidence indicated that the competition activities have a link to students' language learning strageties (Oxford, 1993).

...language learning strategies -- specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language. Strategies are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative ability. (p. 18)

Motivation is a key concern for students' learning. Yet while teachers hope to motivate our students and enhance their learning, we have to recognize that ultimately learning is the student's responsibility and avoid manipulating them in the learning process. Students in this study indicated that the competition activities enabled them to pay more attention on teachers' instruction, ask more questions, and encourage themselves to learn English. When the competition activities are learner-centered, students can be encouraged to develop their English learning strategies. This evidence suggested that we can take students' motivation and learning styles into account as we teach in order to improve their English skills. Namely, students' perceived attitude change from the competition activities motivated students' English learning which tended to be more active and self-directed.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study found that the competition activities held at this selected Science University were helpful to students' English learning. The competition activities provided students an authentic learning environment to practice English freely. The benefits of the competition activities included the creation of a learning environment, positive motivation, and attitude change. These perceived benefits of the competition activities contributed to students' confidence in varied learning ways beyond the traditional classroom learning contexts and to improve their English skills. The

challenges students met in the activities included English skills and impact of practice. Students perceived grammar and pronunciation were their main problems in terms of English learning. Teachers and students in this study believed that lack of practice resulted in their problems in fluency and fear in speaking English. This study explicitly examined the perception of students toward the competition activities upon their English learning, and identified the difficulties of students in English learning.

The findings of this study show that the competition activities are viewed by participants as an interesting and helpful way for their English learning. The following recommendations are designed to serve as a resource for educators and students who would be interested in holding the competition activities. These recommendations are suggested in light of the results of the study.

Suggestions for Teachers:

1 to focus more on pronunciation and grammar in curriculum planning

As the findings mentioned, the students in this study suggested and looked forward to improving their grammar and pronunciation to facilitate their English fluency. Teachers in this study mentioned that they thought students' English abilities should be improved, otherwise, teaching accountability would be decreased. It is recommended that teachers can focus more on pronunciation and grammar in their curriculum planning. This is a good learning opportunity to stimulate students to practice their English by re-learning pronunciation and deepening their concept of grammar structure. Meanwhile, students' fundamental concept of English can be improved by changing the focus of English teaching.

2 to give students more opportunities of making presentation in public

Students mentioned that they are willing to practice their English and overcome the fear of speaking in public by presenting in classrooms. Teachers are suggested to give students more opportunities of presentation to increase their confidence and courage to speak English in front of others. This recommendation will make students to specifically organize their thinking and express their ideas and perspectives in English.

3 to teach English songs in classrooms to stimulate students' learning

Students indicated that singing English songs is a good way to stimulate their English learning. They can learn vocabularies and sentence structures by reading the script of the songs they like, and pay more attention to English songs. When students have interests in singing English songs, they have higher motivation to know more about the songs. Thus, the findings in the study suggested that English teachers can use this way to stimulate student's English learning in classrooms. This

recommendation might make teachers change traditional teaching approaches to interest student learning.

Suggestions for Students:

1 to participate in the English-related learning corner (learning centre) more automatically and actively

Students thought that practice is important for the competition activities; however, they did not have the chance and environment to practice their English. The need to create an authentic environment is necessary and urgent since the competition activity is highly valued by students as a good chance to really use English. Although "Chit-Chat Lounge" is established for students to practice English with native speakers of English, few students attended this learning opportunities. It is recommended that students should participate in the English-related learning centre more actively and the function of the "Chit-Chat Lounge" should be promoted to motivate students to participate more. This is a good environment for students to practice English with native speakers as well as overcome the anxiety to speak English.

2 to attend more competition activities

As mentioned previously, students expected to have more varied competition activities to enhance their English learning. The holding of competition activities is positively supported and expected by students as it is a chance to use English and to test their speaking ability through competing with other students. Surprisingly, students do not fear English due to the competition activities, instead of expecting to experience more varied competition activities such as reciting activities and drama activities. It is suggested that students should attend more competition activities held by the school and the department. The holding of varied competition activities might create a school culture of English learning and make students' English learning more effective and multifaceted.

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以英文競賽活動探討大專學生之英文學習

黄怡靜*、呂昀臻**

摘要

本研究目的是了解學生及老師對英文比賽活動的看法,並探討比賽活動在英文學習方面的效能。在本研究中四十七位某科技大學學生透過演講比賽及歌唱比賽的參與及練習來加強英文的學習。本研究的資料是經由問卷、開放式問答及非正式的訪談來進行搜集。學生的問卷及訪談顯示學生認爲這些比賽活動(英文演講比賽及英文歌唱比賽)的舉辦,可以營造出一個良好的英文學習環境、學生也希望將來能再次參加比賽、以及期待老師更進一步的指導!本文闡明了老師及學生對這些比賽活動的看法;並針對將來在設計比賽活動以強化學生英文學習時提出建議!文中對教師提出的建議是:在課程規化中多加強發音及文法的練習,在課堂進行上提供學生更多口頭報告的機會,以在課堂教學中採用英文歌曲的教學。而學生則應多加參與口語練習的活動以及各項英文比賽活動!

關鍵字:英文學習、比賽活動、英文學習環境、學習態度、英文能力

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