

Research Article

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AS A PATHWAY TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 4 IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Tran Thi Dung¹

¹ Faculty of English, Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance, Vietnam

Abstract

The incorporation of extracurricular activities into English language teaching (ELT) in higher education is increasingly important because such activities provide students with opportunities for authentic communication, learner autonomy, and intercultural interaction while also supporting their academic and professional development. This review looks at the role of extracurricular activities in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) in higher education and ELT. Drawing on recent studies in the Asian and European sectors, the review reviews literature on the aspects of language development, employability, soft skills development, intercultural communication and sustainable learning. The study shows that extracurricular activities (speaking forums, cultural events, exchange programs and ESP workshops) and student publications can enhance student engagement and self-directed learning. However, the literature also demonstrates significant challenges with regard to unequal participation, financial accessibility, institutional support and the growing instrumentalization of extracurricular learning for employability purposes. In addition, Vietnamese higher education and selected extracurricular activities are discussed in the review at Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance (UEF). The research indicates that well-organized extracurricular activities can contribute to sustainable and holistic language education in the context of SDG 4.

Keywords

extracurricular activities; English language teaching; higher education; learner autonomy; sustainable development goal 4

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Over the past few years sustainable development has become a major concern in higher education. In today's world, universities are expected not only to deliver knowledge in terms of academic knowledge but also to develop students to be global citizens in terms of knowledge and skills in the workplace. This is reflected in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) that is about inclusive and equitable education and

opportunities for lifelong learning for all (United Nations, 2015; UNESCO, 2020). Higher education institutions are moving away from content-based education in favor of a student-centered approach that supports active participation, critical thinking, collaboration and real-world engagement in education and are more involved in the world. Extracurricular activities (ECAs) have been gaining popularity as a key part of the education system as an extension of formal education. Not so much in class-based education as in social learning, but in real life and through the classroom and interactive and

*Corresponding author: Tran Thi Dung

Email addresses: Tran Thi Dung (dungth@uef.edu.vn)

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meaningful experiences with other students. Engagement and learner engagement in extracurricular activities are also associated with academic achievement and communication skills, employment opportunities, leadership and personal

growth as proven in various research (Stuart et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2013). In higher education, extracurricular activities are also seen not only as optional recreational activities but are also an integral part of the learning experience and complementary to formal curricula for sustainable learning. Extracurricular activities play a critical role in English language teaching (ELT) in which the use of English clubs, speaking forums, debates, cultural interactions, student publications, international programs and international programs are all an important aspect of the learning process and it is also a field of study for students. Language work and interaction and real-life face-to-face activities, which are not always the easiest parts of learning in the classroom. Dung (2024) argues that extracurricular English activities can enhance students' communication skills by encouraging active participation and authentic language use. Similarly, Bekteshi and Xhaferi (2020) state that English language education can also be used to raise awareness of sustainable development and global citizenship. In ELT, learner-centered and experiential learning has been a key topic in the literature. In this way sustainable language learning is not dependent on teacher-driven instruction, but on the students' active participation in their own learning. This is why extracurricular activities might help to develop autonomy, collaboration and reflection and self-directed learning. The experiential learning theory of Kolb (1984) states that meaningful learning is built out of real life experience and reflection whereas Garrison (1997) insists that self-directed learning is the bedrock of lifelong education. These theoretical perspectives demonstrate that extracurricular activities can be used not only to develop language skills but also to be used to achieve SDG 4 at the same time that universities in Asia are integrating internationalization and sustainability into their educational strategies. In Vietnam, higher education institutions are under increasing pressure to bring students up to competency in English as well as digital skills, communication skills, employment opportunities and globalization of the global economy. This is one reason for this rise in internationalization and international labor market needs (Nguyen et al., 2014). To overcome these challenges, universities have focused on increasing extracurricular activities and English use outside the classroom. At the Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance (UEF), for example, students take part in English seminars, speaking forums, bilingual events, cultural exchange, student publications, mock interviews and overseas exchange programs. Such activities show that English language learning is connected to intercultural competence, professional

development and sustainable education.

1.2 Problem Statement

While extracurricular activities are increasingly prevalent in higher education, research on the role of such activities in the education system and sustainable development is limited. Previous ELT research generally focuses on pedagogy, assessment, or teaching technologies, and extracurricular learning has received far less research attention. Moreover, studies on extracurricular activities often focus on job-related or student engagement activities without connecting them with SDG 4 and sustainable learning outcomes. Another limitation is that, as a whole, the literature is fragmented across various disciplines. On the one hand, some researchers find extracurricular activities beneficial in terms of improving communication skills, learner confidence, and employability (Mishra & Aithal, 2023; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022). Therefore, there is still a lack of synthesis on how extracurricular activities in ELT support language learning, learner autonomy, intercultural competency, and sustainable education. Moreover, while international studies of extracurricular learning are increasing, less attention has been paid to Vietnamese higher education. As the focus on internationalization and bilingual education in Vietnam and graduate employability of students is increasing, a systematic examination of extracurricular activities in ELT may give universities a better understanding of how to align programs with SDG 4. In this review, we aim to fill these gaps by analyzing the contributions, opportunities, and challenges of extracurricular activities in English language teaching in tertiary institution.

1.3 Purpose and Significance of the Review

The literature review aims at exploring the impact of extracurricular activities in English language teaching on Sustainable Development Goal 4 in higher education. Specifically, the review examines the role of extracurricular activities in language development, learner autonomy, soft skills, intercultural competence, employability, and sustainable learning among university students.

The review is significant for a number of reasons. First, it is part of the existing ELT literature by integrating data from extracurricular learning studies from both educational and sustainability perspectives. Second, the review offers a detailed understanding of extracurricular activities not only as extra educational experiences but as a path to sustainable and holistic learning. Third, the study can have an impact on higher education institutions working to enhance English language education through student-centered and experiential learning. Finally, the review may be particularly relevant to Vietnamese universities such as UEF, where extracurricular

activities are becoming more and more relevant to internationalization, graduate job acquisition, and lifelong learning.

1.4 Research Questions

This review is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How do extracurricular activities in English language teaching contribute to Sustainable Development Goal 4 in higher education?

RQ2. What opportunities and challenges are associated with implementing extracurricular activities in ELT for sustainable learning?

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations

2.1 Sustainable Development Goal 4 and Higher Education

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) is about inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all while providing lifelong learning opportunities to all (United Nations, 2015). In recent years, SDG 4 has become a key pillar to change educational strategies in higher education worldwide. Universities are increasingly expected to develop students' critical thinking and communication skills, intercultural awareness, and lifelong learning skills, and not only to focus on academic performance but also on learning skills. So higher education institutions have made the transition to student-centered and competency-oriented approaches that are more sustainable for personal and professional development.

Sustainable education should enable learners to respond to social, environmental, economic, and technological changes (UNESCO, 2020). From this perspective, learning is not just about teaching in the classroom or doing well in exams. Sustainable learning is also about continuous engagement, reflective practice, cooperation, and problem-solving. UNESCO (2009) also noted that education for sustainable development should encourage lifelong learning, social responsibility, and active involvement in addressing global problems. Aktas et al. (2025) similarly note that sustainability-focused higher education needs to be about active engagement and experiential learning, not passive knowledge transmission.

These perspectives have an impact on English language teaching (ELT). Language learning in many traditional education systems has been about grammar-based methodologies, memorization, and examination preparation, which do not prepare students for authentic communication or lifelong learning in an increasingly globalized society. Today's

ELT places greater emphasis on communication, intercultural skills, collaboration, and learner autonomy, which align closely with the objectives of SDG 4.

At the same time, scholars have argued that sustainable education should not be viewed only as curriculum revision or the inclusion of sustainability-related topics in classrooms. Piza et al. (2018) argue that sustainability in higher education is not only about learning in the classroom but also through the interaction of academic knowledge with real life and social engagement. Therefore, extracurricular activities may play a crucial role in supporting SDG 4 because they provide students with opportunities to apply knowledge, communicate effectively, and engage with wider communities beyond formal learning. Unlike traditional classroom education, extracurricular activities are often more flexible, authentic, and engaging for students. English clubs, debates, cultural exchanges, speaking forums, and international programs can help develop not only fluent English but also some skills for sustainable education (teamwork, leadership, critical thinking, and intercultural understanding). Thus, extracurricular learning can be seen as one of the most important ways of making universities more holistic and sustainable education.

2.2 Extracurricular Activities in Higher Education

Extracurricular activities in higher education are usually organized educational, social, cultural, or professional activities that take place outside of formal academic courses and are usually clubs, competitions, volunteer projects, seminars, workshops, student publications, cultural exchanges, and international programs. Extracurricular activities were once viewed primarily as recreational or supplementary experiences; however, recent studies have increasingly highlighted their significant contributions to educational quality and student development.

One of the major perspectives in the literature is on the role of extracurricular activities in enhancing graduate employability. Jackson and Bridgstock (2021) cite that students who engage in extracurricular activities can learn transferable skills (communication, teamwork, leadership, and adaptability) that are very much required for the job market today. Thompson et al. (2013) also found that students tend to regard extracurricular activity as "an extra string to their bow" so they do not lose their professional position and to be competitive with others. I think that extracurricular activities are practical learning environments that complement academic qualifications and improve employment opportunities.

However, other scholars argue that extracurricular activities are beyond employability alone. Stuart et al. (2011) suggest that extracurricular activity can further develop confidence,

social involvement, identity in students, and education as well. And Belikova (2002) also argues that extracurricular activities can help students build their self-confidence, creativity, and relationships in life rather than simply preparing them for employment. These perspectives reflect a broader comprehension of university contexts in which learning is linked to not only professional performance and career outcomes but also holistic human development.

The difference between these views is particularly relevant to sustainable education. While it is clear that employability is still a goal of higher education, over-emphasis on career competitiveness can lead to a reduction of extracurricular activities to work or résumé-building activities. In contrast to the above, sustainable education takes the more general perspective of learning that involves reflection, collaboration, civic engagement, and learning in the long run. So extracurricular activities need to be seen not only as optional part of formal education but as part of the learning environment and therefore can help in both professional and humanistic educational objectives and should not be viewed as optional.

In ELT schools, extracurricular activities are particularly important as language learning is not a one-off affair; it requires continuous practice and authentic communication. Classrooms in general are not as open to spontaneous exchange as extracurricular activities because of large classes, short teaching time, and examination-based teaching. But extracurricular activities might be more flexible and interactive in settings in which students can communicate in real, meaningful social situations. Speech and English contests, cultural events, and student publications are some of the activities people are able to engage in and talk at more than just a classroom level. Extracurricular language learning in Asian education is also a topic that has recently been explored. Dung (2024) found that extracurricular English activities increased students' communication skills and classroom engagement, and Mishra and Aithal (2023) found extracurricular activities to be an important part of students' soft skills development in higher education. Similarly, Munadi et al. (2021) suggest that extracurricular education can improve and develop leadership and cooperation at the university level and boost confidence in a student. The evidence suggests that extracurricular activities not only improve language proficiency but also contribute to sustainable learning in SDG 4.

2.3 Experiential Learning, Learner Autonomy, and ELT

The pedagogical value of extracurricular activities can be explained by experiential and self-directed learning theories. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory holds that

meaningful learning is a continuous process that involves concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation. From this perspective, learning is most effective when learners engage in real-life experiences rather than passively taking in information. Extracurricular activities align closely with this theory as they engage students in actual communication, collaboration, problem solving, and reflective practice.

Experiential learning is crucial in ELT because our language knowledge is heavily dependent on meaningful interactions and authentic language use. Classroom instruction may not always provide enough time for our students to learn English in a realistic social environment. In the extracurricular activities, students may have to do debates, speaking forums, cultural exchanges, and other international programs to have more natural communication situations where they can engage in real life and produce language by being in them. In contrast to traditional teacher-centered interventions (e.g., that of teaching to students as well as to students to learn the language for themselves), these activities are more learner-centered and more learner-centered with the students being able to learn language in the language environment, so that they do it more confidently and independently.

The concept of learner autonomy also plays an important role in sustainable language learning. Garrison (1997) argues that self-directed learning involves learners taking responsibility for planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own learning processes. Similarly, Nguyen (2017) notes that learner autonomy has become increasingly important in language education because successful language learners must be able to continue learning beyond formal educational settings. In this sense, extracurricular activities may support sustainable learning by encouraging students to become more active, reflective, and responsible learners.

This issue is also of particular relevance in Asian educational systems where language teaching has traditionally been based on examination-oriented systems and teacher-centered methods. Nguyen et al. (2014) point out that in Vietnam, grammar teaching and examination performance were more important than communicative ability. Although such approaches may support short-term academic achievement, they may not always foster learner autonomy or authentic communication skills. Extracurricular activities therefore offer valuable opportunities to complement classroom instruction by promoting interaction, collaboration, and independent learning.

At the same time, it would be unrealistic to assume that all extracurricular activities automatically lead to meaningful learning outcomes. The effectiveness of these activities depends largely on institutional support, student motivation, and the quality of program design. Some extracurricular

programs may become overly competitive, superficial, or participation-oriented without encouraging genuine reflection or engagement. Therefore, sustainable extracurricular learning requires careful planning and alignment with broader educational objectives rather than simply increasing the number of student activities available.

Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual framework guiding this review by illustrating how extracurricular activities in ELT may contribute to sustainable learning outcomes through experiential and self-directed learning processes.

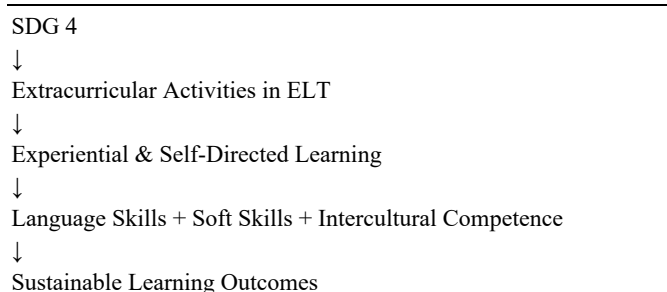


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Review

Overall, the theories discussed in this section suggest that extracurricular activities may function as meaningful educational spaces that extend language learning beyond formal classrooms. Through experiential participation, learner autonomy, and authentic communication, extracurricular learning may contribute to broader sustainable education goals associated with SDG 4. The following section therefore reviews recent literature on how extracurricular activities in ELT support language development, employability, intercultural competence, and sustainable learning in higher education.

3. Contributions of Extracurricular Activities to SDG 4 in ELT

3.1. Language Development Beyond the Classroom

Undeniably, extracurricular activities make a substantial contribution to ELT in extending language acquisition beyond formal classroom settings. Though language learning and teaching in classroom remains central to language education, many researchers claim that classroom-based learning alone is often insufficient for gaining a high level of communicative competence, particularly in contexts where exposure to authentic English interaction is limited. In Asian educational systems in general, and Vietnam in particular, English teaching has traditionally focused on grammar rules, grammar

structure, textbook exercises and examination preparation (Nguyen et al., 2014). These approaches possibly support academic achievement, but they hardly provide learners with adequate opportunities for successful communication and real-world language use. Personally, I have observed that a great number of my students improve English proficiency, especially communication skills, through continuous exposure to authentic language input from watching movies, listening to podcasts, and engaging with other English-language media.

Extracurricular activities cannot replace all those media sources, but they can create more flexible and interactive learning environments. Activities such as English seminars, ESP workshops, speaking forums, cultural events, debates, speaking-reading portfolios, and English contests encourage students to use language actively rather than passively memorizing linguistic knowledge. Compared with conventional classroom interaction, extracurricular activities often involve greater learner participation, spontaneity, and collaboration. As a result, students may become more confident and willing to communicate in English.

Several studies support the positive influence of extracurricular events on language development. Dung (2024), for instance, discovered that extracurricular English activities enhanced students' speaking and listening skills and classroom participation by increasing opportunities for authentic interaction. Likewise, Bekteshi and Xhaferi (2020) argue that ELT activities outside formal lessons may simultaneously support language development and broader educational goals related to sustainability and global citizenship. These findings suggest that extracurricular activities can function not merely as supplementary entertainment but as meaningful learning spaces that strengthen students' communicative competence and help the school develop a pathway to internationalization.

At the same time, extracurricular activities may also contribute to learner autonomy. Unlike classroom instruction, where learning tasks are often structured and teacher-directed, extracurricular programs typically require students to participate more independently and think more critically. Speaking portfolios and reading portfolios, for instance, encourage learners to practice English outside class hours through recorded videos of their role play or reading and summarizing novels in English. Such experiences may help students develop greater responsibility for their own learning processes. This aligns closely with Nguyen's (2017) argument that learner autonomy is essential for sustainable language learning because students must continue developing their language abilities beyond formal education. In reality, most exposure to authentic language input occurs outside the classroom. Therefore, if language learners do not utilize that time effectively, they may struggle to develop self-study

abilities and improve their target language proficiency independently.

Extracurricular learning particularly emphasizes the aim of facilitating interactive and collaborative strategies. Through speaking forums, student exchange programs, debates, or English contests, students are exposed to situations that require spontaneous interaction and negotiation of communication. These experiences vary considerably from controlled classroom exercises because learners must respond more naturally and collaboratively. In this case, extracurricular activities reflect more communicative and experiential approaches to language learning. Yu et al. (2024) similarly note that sustainability-oriented ELT should encourage students to engage actively with social issues, communication practices, and intercultural perspectives rather than focusing exclusively on linguistic accuracy. Correspondingly, Intan et al. (2025) argue that digital project-based learning in English education may support sustainable learning by encouraging collaboration, communication, and learner-centered engagement with real-world issues.

However, the positive influence of extracurricular activities should not be overstated. Some studies suggest that participation alone does not automatically lead to meaningful language improvement. The quality of engagement, student motivation, and institutional support are all important factors affecting educational outcomes. In some cases, extracurricular programs may become superficial or participation-oriented without encouraging deep learning or sustained interaction. For example, students may attend seminars or contests primarily to receive certificates or bonus marks rather than to improve communicative competence. Consequently, the effectiveness of extracurricular learning depends not only on the availability of activities but also on how meaningfully students participate in them.

The UEF context illustrates how extracurricular activities may support language development in higher education. Activities such as English seminars, speaking forums, English contests, and reading portfolios provide students with opportunities to practice English beyond regular classroom lessons. In particular, speaking forums focusing on global issues encourage students to discuss contemporary topics in English, thereby promoting both communication skills and critical thinking. Compared with purely examination-oriented learning, these extracurricular experiences may help students develop greater confidence and flexibility in language use.

Overall, the literature suggests that extracurricular activities can significantly enrich ELT by extending opportunities for authentic communication and learner participation. While classroom instruction remains essential, extracurricular learning may provide additional experiences that support communicative competence, learner autonomy, and sustainable language development. Nevertheless, these

benefits are most meaningful when extracurricular activities are carefully designed and supported rather than treated as merely optional or symbolic additions to formal education.

3.2 Learner Autonomy, Soft Skills, and Employability

In addition to supporting language proficiency, extracurricular activities are widely associated with the development of learner autonomy, soft skills, and employability. As higher education increasingly emphasizes graduate readiness for rapidly changing labor markets, universities are expected to prepare students not only with disciplinary knowledge but also with transferable competencies such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and problem solving. In this context, extracurricular activities are often viewed as valuable learning environments that complement formal academic instruction.

A major perspective in the literature emphasizes the relationship between extracurricular participation and employability. Jackson and Bridgstock (2021) argue that extracurricular learning can strengthen graduate employability by helping students develop practical and interpersonal skills that are difficult to acquire through classroom instruction alone. Similarly, Jackson and Tomlinson (2022) found that employers increasingly value extracurricular experiences because they demonstrate initiative, collaboration, leadership, and communication abilities. These findings suggest that extracurricular engagement may contribute to students' professional competitiveness in contemporary labor markets. Kim and Bastedo (2017) likewise found that participation in extracurricular activities may positively influence students' perceptions of career success and job satisfaction after graduation.

Within ELT contexts, extracurricular activities may support employability in several ways. ESP workshops, mock interviews, industry talks, and student publications expose learners to professional communication practices that extend beyond traditional language learning. For example, ESP workshops allow students to develop specialized vocabulary and communication skills related to their academic disciplines and future careers. Mock interviews, meanwhile, provide opportunities for students to practice professional self-presentation and workplace communication in English. Such activities may help bridge the gap between academic learning and professional expectations (Pham, 2025). Furthermore, Lai (2015) points out those activities contribute to forming "an ecology comprising various dynamic and interdependent elements, and these formal, non-formal and informal learning elements interact with each other to form an individual's learning experience".

However, reducing extracurricular learning solely to employability enhancement may oversimplify its educational value. Thompson et al. (2013) argue that extracurricular activities should also be understood as spaces for identity formation, confidence building, and personal growth rather than merely instruments for career preparation. Likewise, Mishra and Aithal (2023) emphasize that extracurricular participation contributes to broader student development, including emotional intelligence, leadership, and social responsibility. These perspectives reflect a more holistic understanding of sustainable education in which learning extends beyond economic productivity.

The relationship between learner autonomy and extracurricular learning is also important. Unlike formal classroom activities that are often tightly structured by instructors, extracurricular participation usually requires students to manage their own involvement, responsibilities, and learning goals. Through activities such as student publications, research symposiums, and collaborative projects, learners may become more independent and reflective. Munadi et al. (2021) similarly found that extracurricular activities in Indonesian higher education contributed significantly to students' self-confidence, collaboration, and leadership development. Comparable findings were reported by Ivanova and Logvinova (2017), who observed that both students and faculty members viewed extracurricular activities as vital spaces for personal development and social engagement within university life.

From a sustainable learning perspective, these forms of learner autonomy are particularly valuable because they encourage students to continue learning beyond graduation. Sustainable education involves not only acquiring knowledge but also developing the capacity for lifelong learning and adaptation. In this sense, extracurricular activities may help students cultivate habits of initiative, responsibility, and self-directed engagement that remain important throughout their professional and personal lives.

At the same time, some scholars caution against viewing extracurricular activities too optimistically. One concern is that universities may increasingly promote extracurricular participation primarily for employability branding or institutional competitiveness. When this occurs, extracurricular activities risk becoming instrumentalized rather than educationally meaningful. Students may feel pressure to accumulate certificates, achievements, or leadership titles for career purposes rather than engaging genuinely in reflective or collaborative learning experiences. This tension reflects broader debates within higher education regarding whether universities should prioritize economic competitiveness or holistic human development.

The UEF context again provides useful examples of how extracurricular learning may support both employability and

sustainable education. ESP workshops, industry talks, mock interviews, and student research activities expose learners to authentic professional communication while encouraging active participation and independent learning. Student publications and research symposiums, for instance, provide students with rich exposure to language resources and learning opportunities drawing on their circumstances within and beyond classrooms. Such experiences may contribute not only to employability but also to confidence, critical thinking, and lifelong learning capacities.

Overall, the literature suggests that extracurricular activities can play a crucial role in facilitating learner autonomy, soft-skill development, and employability within ELT. Nevertheless, the educational value of these activities depends largely on whether they encourage meaningful participation, reflection, and personal development rather than functioning solely as résumé-building opportunities. Sustainable extracurricular learning therefore requires a balance between professional preparation and broader educational goals associated with SDG 4.

3.3 Intercultural Competence and Global Citizenship

Another important contribution of extracurricular activities in ELT concerns the development of intercultural competence and global citizenship. In an increasingly interconnected world, higher education institutions are expected to prepare students not only for local employment but also for participation in diverse international communities. Consequently, universities have increasingly integrated internationalization, intercultural communication, and global awareness into educational policies and practices. These priorities align closely with SDG 4, which emphasizes inclusive and globally relevant education.

Within ELT, intercultural competence has become particularly significant because language learning is closely connected with communication across cultures. Mambu (2023) argues that English language education should move beyond linguistic competence alone and encourage learners to engage critically with global issues, cultural diversity, and social responsibility. Similarly, Bekteshi and Xhaferi (2020) emphasize that ELT can function as a platform for promoting awareness of sustainable development and intercultural understanding.

Extracurricular activities may provide especially valuable opportunities for intercultural learning because they often involve authentic social interaction and collaborative participation. Cultural events, student exchange programs, overseas internships, bilingual activities, and lectures with international scholars expose students to different cultural perspectives and communication practices beyond traditional

classroom environments. Compared with textbook-based cultural instruction, these experiences may create more meaningful opportunities for students to develop intercultural awareness through direct engagement.

Several recent studies highlight the positive relationship between international extracurricular experiences and sustainable education. Nogueiro et al. (2022), for example, found that mobility programs within the Erasmus+ framework contributed significantly to students' intercultural competence and understanding of sustainable development goals. Likewise, Papavasileiou et al. (2025) argue that sustainability-themed extracurricular activities can increase students' engagement with global issues and encourage broader social awareness. These findings suggest that extracurricular participation may help learners connect language learning with global citizenship and sustainability-oriented thinking.

The development of intercultural competence is particularly relevant in the Vietnamese higher education context, where universities are increasingly emphasizing internationalization and bilingual education. Hoang and Ngo (2025) note that intercultural competence has become an important dimension of English language curricula in higher education because students are expected to communicate effectively in international academic and professional environments. Consequently, extracurricular activities that encourage intercultural interaction may complement formal language instruction and strengthen students' global communication skills.

UEF provides several examples of how extracurricular activities may support these educational goals. Cultural events organized with international organizations and embassies allow students to experience diverse cultural traditions and communication styles. Student exchange programs, overseas field trips, and collaborative international programs further expose learners to intercultural environments where English functions as a medium of communication. In addition, bilingual events and lectures delivered by international scholars encourage students to engage with global perspectives while using English in authentic academic contexts.

Nevertheless, the benefits of international extracurricular learning should also be considered critically. Access to overseas programs, exchange opportunities, and international activities is not always equally available to all students. Financial limitations, language proficiency differences, and institutional resources may influence who is able to participate in these experiences. Consequently, intercultural extracurricular learning may unintentionally reinforce educational inequalities if universities fail to ensure broader accessibility and inclusion.

Another concern is that internationalization initiatives may sometimes prioritize institutional branding rather than

meaningful intercultural learning. Participation in international activities does not automatically guarantee critical reflection or intercultural understanding. Students may engage superficially with international experiences without developing deeper awareness of cultural diversity or global responsibility. Therefore, sustainable intercultural learning requires careful educational design that encourages reflection, dialogue, and meaningful participation.

Despite these challenges, the literature generally suggests that extracurricular activities can significantly contribute to intercultural competence and global citizenship in ELT. Through authentic interaction, cultural engagement, and international collaboration, extracurricular learning may help students develop broader perspectives that extend beyond language proficiency alone. Such experiences are increasingly important in higher education because sustainable learning involves not only academic achievement but also the ability to participate responsibly and effectively in global communities.

Table 1. Examples of UEF Extracurricular Activities and Their Contributions to SDG 4

Activity	Main Contribution
Speaking forums	Communication and critical thinking
ESP workshops	Professional language competence
Cultural events	Intercultural awareness
Student publications	Academic literacy
Mock interviews	Employability skills
Exchange programs	Global citizenship

Overall, the literature reviewed in this section suggests that extracurricular activities can contribute significantly to multiple dimensions of sustainable education in ELT. Beyond supporting language proficiency, these activities may promote learner autonomy, soft-skill development, employability, intercultural competence, and global citizenship. However, the effectiveness of extracurricular learning depends largely on meaningful participation, institutional support, and inclusive educational design. The following section therefore examines the challenges and critical perspectives associated with implementing extracurricular activities in higher education contexts.

4. Challenges and Critical Perspectives

4.1. Participation Barriers and Unequal Access

Although extracurricular activities offer many valuable learning opportunities in English as a Language (ELT), not all

students can easily participate. Many studies suggest that extracurricular activities provide a flexible and open learning environment. However, in reality, student participation depends on many personal, academic, and school factors. Therefore, not all students receive the same benefits from these activities.

One of the most common difficulties is the issue of time and workload. Le (2024) showed that many university students struggle to participate in English extracurricular activities due to busy schedules, part-time jobs, and other academic responsibilities. Similarly, Fares et al. (2016) argued that participating in too many extracurricular activities can cause stress and fatigue, especially when students have to balance their studies with out-of-class activities. This shows that while extracurricular activities are beneficial, they can also create additional pressure if not properly managed.

Financial constraints are also a significant barrier, especially for international programs and activities abroad. Opportunities such as student exchange programs, international internships, or study trips can help students develop intercultural communication skills and global awareness. However, not all students have the financial means to participate. Therefore, these opportunities can sometimes exacerbate disparities among student groups. Nuijten et al. (2017) argue that participation in extracurricular activities is often influenced by socio-economic conditions, not just personal motivation.

Disparities in participation levels are particularly evident at the university level, where many students must balance academics, work, and family responsibilities. In Vietnam, many students work while studying, making it difficult for them to regularly participate in extracurricular programs. Additionally, factors such as incompatible schedules, transportation difficulties, or a lack of confidence in foreign languages can also affect participation levels.

At UEF, students have many opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities such as presentation forums, cultural events, exchange programs, and thematic talks. However, the level of participation can vary depending on time, financial conditions, and personal interests. For example, overseas programs offer valuable experiences, but not everyone can participate. Therefore, increasing the number of extracurricular activities does not mean that all students will be able to participate or receive the same benefits.

These limitations highlight that universities should not assume that extracurricular activities are always easily accessible and beneficial to all students. To support sustainable education, schools need not only to create opportunities but also to ensure that students can participate in a fair, meaningful, and context-appropriate manner.

Another issue to consider is the growing focus on employability in higher education. Currently, extracurricular activities are often seen as an effective way to help students develop professional skills and increase their competitiveness in the job market. Jackson and Bridgstock (2021) argue that participation in extracurricular activities helps students develop many important skills such as teamwork, communication, adaptability, and leadership skills. For this reason, many universities encourage students to participate in extracurricular activities as part of their preparation for future careers.

However, some researchers argue that extracurricular activities should not be viewed solely as a tool to support job searching. Thompson et al. (2013) emphasize that these activities also contribute to the personal development, social participation, and self-reflection of learners. Similarly, Stuart et al. (2011) argue that extracurricular activities can help students build self-confidence, develop themselves, and foster a sense of belonging within the learning community, rather than solely serving career goals.

This perspective reflects a broader debate about the role of higher education. On the one hand, universities are expected to equip students with the necessary skills to meet the demands of the labor market. On the other hand, higher education also has a responsibility to support the holistic social, cultural, and ethical development of learners. This aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasizes inclusive, equitable education and lifelong learning, rather than focusing solely on employability.

In the field of English as a Foreign Language (ELT) teaching, this issue becomes even more apparent, as English proficiency is often seen as a crucial factor for international career opportunities and employment. Therefore, many students participate in extracurricular activities to improve their personal profiles, obtain certifications, or gain a competitive advantage when applying for jobs. While these are reasonable goals, overemphasizing career achievements can diminish intrinsic motivation and limit opportunities for collaborative, critical learning and personal development.

At UEF, activities such as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) workshops, mock interviews, and expert networking events all contribute to supporting students in preparing for future careers. However, these activities would provide greater educational value if they focused not only on career skills but also on developing critical thinking, self-learning abilities, intercultural communication skills, and personal growth. Therefore, to achieve sustainable educational goals, extracurricular activities need to balance career preparation with the holistic development of learners.

4.2 Employability Versus Holistic Education

Opportunities	Challenges
Authentic communication	Time constraints
Learner autonomy	Unequal participation
Employability	Financial barriers
Intercultural competence	Academic workload
Sustainable learning	Institutional limitations

Figure 2. Opportunities and Challenges of Extracurricular Activities in ELT

4.3 Institutional and Pedagogical Challenges

Besides the difficulties related to student participation, universities also face many challenges in organizing and managing extracurricular activities in English language teaching. A common problem is that extracurricular activities are not closely linked to the formal curriculum. In many cases, these activities are organized separately, lacking clear learning objectives or specific assessment methods. Therefore, students may participate simply to be present or fulfill requirements, rather than achieving truly meaningful learning outcomes.

Aktas et al. (2015) argue that education for sustainability requires coordination at the school-wide level rather than relying solely on individual activities. Similarly, Khalil et al. (2023) emphasize that learning towards sustainability should be integrated into the school's overall educational strategy rather than existing only as supplementary activities. This suggests that extracurricular activities are more effective when aligned with long-term educational goals and provide opportunities for students to reflect on what they have learned.

Another challenge is the quality and consistency of extracurricular programs. Some activities facilitate active communication, collaboration, and learning among students, while others are merely formal. For example, students might participate in workshops or competitions as passive listeners with little opportunity for interaction or reflection. In such cases, the educational impact of extracurricular activities can be quite limited despite the high number of participants.

In the Vietnamese context, these difficulties are even more pronounced. Nguyen et al. (2014) argue that English teaching and learning in Vietnam has long been influenced by an exam-oriented approach, focusing on grammar and test results. Although many universities now encourage communicative learning and participation in extracurricular activities, many students still prioritize grades and certificates over long-term language development. Therefore, extracurricular activities are sometimes seen as a supplementary option rather than a crucial part of the learning process.

Maintaining long-term student participation is also a significant challenge. Universities can organize many extracurricular activities, but ensuring regular and meaningful student participation requires continuous support from the university, faculty, and the students themselves. Furthermore, faculty often have to dedicate additional time and effort to organizing after-school activities. Without sufficient resources and commitment from the university, extracurricular programs may only be short-lived and difficult to sustain as a sustainable educational activity.

Despite existing limitations, most studies show that extracurricular activities still play a crucial role in supporting sustainable English language teaching when properly designed and implemented. The effectiveness of these activities depends not only on the number of programs organized but also on the quality of student participation, support from the university, and the level of engagement with learning objectives. Therefore, universities need to strategically develop extracurricular activities to complement the regular curriculum and contribute to achieving SDG 4 goals on lifelong learning, intercultural competence, and the holistic development of learners.

Overall, extracurricular activities do not automatically generate positive changes in education. Although they offer numerous opportunities for language learning, skill development, enhanced employability, and broadened global understanding, their effectiveness still depends on accessibility, genuine student engagement, and support from the school. The following section will present the pedagogical implications and future development directions based on the content discussed.

5. Implications and Future Directions

5.1 Pedagogical Implications for ELT in Higher Education

The literature reviewed in this study suggests that extracurricular activities can be used to promote sustainable learning in ELT. In the long run, extracurricular activities might not be a supplementary or recreational activity, but can be really effectively used for the purpose of authentic communication, learning autonomy, intercultural interaction and lifelong learning. In this regard, universities need to take extracurricular learning as a part of sustainable higher education as opposed to an optional part of formal education.

One pedagogical aspect of this is that we need to connect extracurricular efforts with language learning objectives. In traditional classroom education, exams, grammar and textbook-based learning are the bedrock in many Asian educational settings. While these approaches may be beneficial

for linguistic accuracy, they may not always provide sufficient opportunities for spontaneous communication, collaboration and reflective learning. Extracurricular activities can help address this issue and bring students to speak English in a more meaningful and authentic context.

Facilitation events such as speaking forums, debates, reading portfolios, and cultural events may create learning environments where students participate more actively and independently. Bekteshi and Xhaferi (2020) argue that ELT can contribute significantly to sustainability education when language learning is connected with broader social and global issues. Similarly, Yu et al. (2024) emphasize that sustainability-oriented ELT should encourage communication, critical thinking, and intercultural awareness rather than focusing solely on language accuracy.

The UEF context provides several examples of how extracurricular learning may support sustainable ELT practices. Speaking forums discussing global issues encourage students to communicate actively in English while developing critical awareness of contemporary issues. ESP workshops provide rich opportunities for students to develop ESP vocabulary and English terminology in their specializations. This contributes to enhancing their employability in international markets. Student publications and research symposiums (e.g., research projects, journal articles, conference proceedings, and posters) provide opportunities for academic writing and scholarly communication beyond classroom requirements. Cultural events and exchange programs further expose students to intercultural experiences that strengthen global communication competence in terms of collaborating with international universities, embassies or international associations in hosting events that showcase cultural features of countries around the world (Pham, 2025, pp.4-5). The language practice spaces also range from English seminars, contests, collaborative programs to lectures with international scholars, overseas field trips, mock interviews and so on aiming to enrich students' opportunities for using English within and beyond campus.

These activities may also contribute to learner autonomy because students are often required to participate more independently outside formal classroom structures. Through self-directed tasks such as speaking portfolios or reading portfolios, learners may gradually develop habits of independent learning and reflective engagement. Such experiences are particularly important within the context of sustainable education because lifelong learning requires learners to continue developing knowledge and skills beyond graduation.

At the same time, universities should avoid treating extracurricular activities merely as entertainment or promotional events. Their educational value depends largely

on meaningful design, reflective participation, and clear pedagogical purposes. Sustainable extracurricular learning therefore requires careful integration with broader educational objectives associated with SDG 4, including inclusive learning, global citizenship, and lifelong educational development.

5.2 Institutional Implications for Sustainable Education

In addition to pedagogical considerations, the literature also highlights several important institutional implications. Sustainable extracurricular learning cannot depend solely on student enthusiasm or isolated educational initiatives. Universities must provide long-term institutional support, inclusive participation opportunities, and coherent educational strategies that connect extracurricular learning with broader sustainability goals.

One important implication concerns accessibility and inclusion. As discussed in the previous section, participation in extracurricular activities may be influenced by financial conditions, academic workload, scheduling conflicts, and language confidence. Universities should therefore ensure that extracurricular opportunities remain accessible to diverse student populations rather than benefiting only highly motivated or financially advantaged learners. Flexible participation models, online learning opportunities, and varied activity formats may help improve inclusivity.

Another important issue involves institutional integration. Díaz-Iso et al. (2019) argue that sustainability-oriented learning becomes more effective when reflective learning experiences are integrated across university environments rather than isolated within individual courses or short-term events. Similarly, UNESCO (2020) emphasizes that education for sustainable development requires whole-institution approaches that encourage collaboration between academic programs, extracurricular initiatives, and community engagement. Rodríguez-Zurita et al. (2025) further highlight the importance of service learning and community engagement in promoting sustainable educational practices and socially responsible learning experiences in higher education.

The UEF context again illustrates how institutional support may strengthen sustainable extracurricular learning. Programs such as bilingual education, student exchange initiatives, overseas internships, and industry talks demonstrate efforts to combine language learning with internationalization and employability development. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives depends not simply on the number of activities provided but on the quality of student participation and institutional coordination.

Universities should therefore focus not only on expanding

extracurricular activities but also on enhancing educational coherence and long-term impact. Students can connect extracurricular activities to broader learning objectives if they do reflection activities, mentoring, and curriculum integration. Collaborations with industries, international institutions, and local communities could make for more authentic learning and global engagement. Ultimately, sustainable education should be quality-oriented rather than quantity-oriented. More than a few extracurricular activities don't translate into good learning. Sustainable extracurricular learning requires careful planning, inclusive participation, and opportunities for critical reflection as opposed to participation purely for symbolic or promotional purposes.

Table 2. *Suggested Strategies for Enhancing Sustainable Extracurricular Learning in ELT*

Area	Suggested Strategies
Curriculum integration	Connect extracurricular activities with ELT learning outcomes
Accessibility	Increase flexible and inclusive participation opportunities
Sustainability education	Incorporate SDG-related themes into activities
Learner autonomy	Encourage reflective and self-directed learning
Employability	Combine professional and interpersonal skill development
Internationalization	Promote intercultural communication opportunities

5.3 Future Research Directions

Despite increasing interest in extracurricular learning and sustainable education, there are still significant research gaps. Most of the literature is focused on participation levels, employability results, or student satisfaction at the internship level. The evidence is not comparable, with the authors looking at how extracurricular activities play a significant role in student autonomy, sustainable learning, and intercultural competence in ELT settings. Another direction for future research is to study the long-term educational impact of extracurricular activities in order to understand the long-term impact of extracurricular engagement. Although there is a lot of research that is done about immediate benefits like improved communication with students (like developing better communication skills or greater engagement), less is

known about the long-term implications of extracurricular involvement and how it helps in lifelong learning, fluent language skills, and career development after graduation. Longitudinal research in this field can help us understand the relationship of extracurricular learning and sustainable education outcomes to our research. The students' perceptions and experiences in the future should also be further investigated more systematically, and students' perceptions as well as their experiences from a student perspective. In the context of the students' motivation, language confidence, their academic content and class, and income level, extracurricular participation could also be influenced differently as they are motivated and have their perspective and school and social background. More qualitative research can help explain how students experience extracurricular learning and what factors affect meaningful engagement. Digital/online learning environments and the role of digital and online extracurricular learning is also an important area. As online education and digital communication have caught the attention of universities and the campus community with a new generation of students, universities are now offering virtual seminars, online portfolios, and hybrid international activities for students as well. Future studies may explore how digital extracurricular learning would enable students to have similar opportunities for communication and intercultural interaction, and autonomy as face-to-face learning.

Furthermore, future research should also focus on the role of language teachers and advisors who are organizing these activities. While students are the main participants, the teachers' perspectives, their workloads, and how teachers manage or design these programs are not yet researched very much in the literature. It is also necessary to study how universities can measure and evaluate the real quality of these activities instead of just counting the number of participants or student attendance for promotional reports. The Vietnamese higher education context is not yet fully explored, and the situation is also very complex. Although universities are more and more promoting extracurricular activities and internationalization, there is still little research on the relationship of extracurricular ELT in Vietnamese universities to sustainable development goals. Studies on Vietnamese universities might also provide regional perspectives in the international literature on sustainability and language education.

5.4 Conclusion

This literature review has investigated the role of extracurricular activity towards Sustainable Development Goal 4 in English language teaching in higher education. Extracurricular learning might help to foster language development, learner autonomy, employability, intercultural knowledge and sustainable learning as well. Speaking forums,

cultural events, exchange programs, student publications and professional workshops can push learning beyond the classroom and contribute to more authentic communication and learner engagement with the world. At the same time, the review also highlights critical issues for accessibility, institutional support, employability pressures and unequal participation. Extracurricular activities are not transformative educational tools and they depend on the extent to which learners get involved, reflective learning, inclusive design and long-term institutional support.

To sum up, universities should find a good balance between using extracurricular activities for career development and using them for holistic personal development. If we only focus on employment and job skills, extracurricular learning will lose its deeper educational value and sustainable meaning. Therefore, higher education institutions must provide stable budgets, clear guidance, and inclusive policies so that all kinds of students can participate equally.

The literature overall suggests that well-designed extracurricular activities can provide useful pathways to sustainable education in ELT. By integrating language learning with learner autonomy, intercultural involvement and lifelong learning, universities will be better equipped to prepare students for a globalized world. And as such, extracurricular activities in English language teaching should not just be secondary to education, but should be a part of sustainable higher education that contributes to the wider vision of SDG 4.

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