

# The impact of spare time activities on students' English language skills

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There is a widespread belief that young people in Sweden learn much or even most of their English outside of school, but is that really the case? My doctoral dissertation (Sundqvist 2009) is an in-depth investigation of how out-of-school activities can be seen to influence students' English. In this paper, I present some of my results. The main research question reads as follows: Is there a relationship between what teenagers do in English in their spare time and their learning outcomes? There is a lack of empirical studies on this particular relationship (cf. e.g. Higgins 2009: 401f.), and my study is an attempt to partly fill that void in research.

When I was an English teacher in junior and senior high school, I came across many students whose language appeared to be influenced by the English they met in their spare time.<sup>1</sup> Typical spare time activities in English can be listening to music, watching English-speaking TV programs or films, playing video games, surfing English sites on the Internet, and reading books, newspapers, or magazines in English. How much time Swedish teenagers devote to such activities varies, but the total amount can be as high as 18 hours per week – on average, as measured with so-called language diaries in my study (cf. Sundqvist 2008: 105). Such being the case, it is not strange if learners' English skills are influenced in one way or another (cf. e.g. Crystal 2001: 237; Sylvén 2006: 225). All results in the present paper are based on data collected for my thesis (Sundqvist 2009), which aims to explain the relationship between learners' "spare time English" and their language skills, with a focus on oral proficiency and vocabulary.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the terms *junior* and *senior high school* for Swedish *högstadium* and *gymnasium*.

## Background and previous research

For some time, researchers in applied linguistics have recognized the importance of access to and participation in second language communities as an essential aspect of language learning. However, as Higgins (2009: 401f.) argues, little research has focused on the links between instructed contexts of second language (L2) learning and L2 use in other contexts. Expressed differently, this means that there are few empirical studies which combine data on linguistic activities outside of school with learning outcomes in school. In the following, I briefly summarize findings from previous research on language learning in an out-of-school context in chronological order. After that, I present relevant terminology on the same topic, before I introduce the term I have adopted in my study, namely *extramural English*.

One study which aimed to document and verify what learners do outside of the classroom is Pearson (2004). He did a longitudinal study of English learning habits among eight Chinese students enrolled in a university course, English for Academic Purposes, and combined it with a questionnaire distributed to all 106 students in the same course. In his questionnaire, he used 11 predetermined spare time activities in English plus a final open category. Results revealed that his informants were most frequently involved in the following five spare time language activities in English (in rank order): (1) listening to/watching news on radio or TV; (2) studying in the library; (3) reading books, magazines, or newspapers; (4) watching TV programs, videos, or movies; and (5) listening to music or the radio.<sup>2</sup> Results also showed that several informants rated out-of-class language learning more highly as regards both enjoyment and learning than their formal classroom-based learning (Pearson 2004: 4). Unfortunately, Pearson's 2004 study did not attempt to identify or quantify potential language gains specifically from spare time activities in English, but he did conclude that, among other things, learner motivation and awareness were important aspects of out-of-class language learning (2004: 7). Moreover, he found that students' language proficiency (as measured by an initial placement test) was one factor which influenced what type of activities the informants engaged in, and how frequently.

One spare time activity not included in Pearson (2004) was playing video games. This type of activity in English has been investigated by others, however. There is, for example, a Finnish study by Piirainen-Marsh and Tainio (2009), which focuses on adolescents engaged in playing video games and the potential learning outcomes from such an activity. Based on data from video recordings of game interaction recorded in the players' homes (boys, aged 10–14, playing *Final Fantasy*

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<sup>2</sup> One activity, "listening to the radio", is in fact included in both (1) and (5), something which weakens the results. "Playing video games" was not listed among the predetermined activities.

X), the Finnish researchers argue that the informants developed their linguistic and interactional competence in English thanks to the lexical and prosodic repetitions that were integral features of the video game.<sup>3</sup> They found that the game enabled the players to practice, perform, reproduce, and play with different characters' styles and accents of English (Pirainen-Marsh & Tainio 2009: 165). On the whole, repetition offered a flexible resource through which players participated in the play actively and this practice was inextricably linked to learning (Pirainen-Marsh & Tainio 2009: 166).

Forsman's 2004 study was similar to mine in that she was interested in classroom practice as well as the influence of extracurricular activities in English on students' linguistic and cultural awareness and attitudes. Moreover, her informants were of the same age as the informants in my study. A difference, however, is that her study was set in a Finland-Swedish context whereas mine was in a Swedish context. Her empirical data consisted of one questionnaire (N=330) and a number of interviews, both with students (N=20) and teachers (N=8).<sup>4</sup> One question in the questionnaire addressed spare time activities in English. Ten predetermined activities were listed, plus a final open one. For each activity, the informants were to estimate how much time was spent on it. Overall, most time was reported for "listening to music", followed by "watching TV", "playing computer games", and "using the Internet". Very low values were reported for "reading books" or "reading magazines" in English, on average less than one hour for each of the reading activities (Forsman 2004: 92). As will be seen, Forsman's results were very similar to mine, for instance when it comes to which activities in English are more popular than others.

A final source on spare time English and learning outcomes that I would like to comment on is Sylvén (2004). She arrived at interesting results with regard to the importance of linguistic activities in English outside of school. For instance, the boys in her study (upper secondary school) had a larger amount of English input from media than girls, and boys also scored higher on vocabulary tests (Sylvén 2004: 226). Boys' involvement in video games and role plays proved to be an important factor contributing to their results on vocabulary. Sylvén (2004: 2006) also found that those who were involved in out-of-class reading scored higher on vocabulary tests than those who did not read.

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<sup>3</sup> *Final Fantasy X* includes voice-over dialogues, making spoken English an integral feature of the game (Pirainen-Marsh & Tainio 2009: 158).

<sup>4</sup> N = the total number of persons who participated.

## Second language acquisition and the out-of-school context

In the field of second language acquisition, many terms are used to refer to L2 language learning outside of school, for instance *unintentional learning*, *out-of-school learning*, *out-of-class learning*, and *spare time learning*. Forsman's 2004 study, referred to above, uses the first term, *unintentional learning*, which is defined as "accidental learning of information without the intention of remembering that information" (Forsman 2004: 173). The second term listed above, *out-of-class learning*, is defined in Benson (2001: 62) as "any kind of learning that takes place outside the classroom and involves self-instruction, naturalistic learning or self-directed naturalistic learning". This definition contains some concepts which, in turn, need to be clarified. *Self-instruction* can be understood as a deliberate long-term learning project which is instigated, planned, and carried out by the learner without any intervention from a teacher, or as any deliberate effort by the learner to acquire language content or skills. *Naturalistic learning*, on the other hand, occurs through direct spoken interaction with users of the target language or through interaction with target language texts, while *self-directed naturalistic learning* refers to situations in which learners create a naturalistic learning situation for themselves with the advance intention of learning the language (Benson 2001: 62). The third term listed, *out-of-school learning*, is, for example, used in Lamb (2004) and Yi (2005). It is synonymous with *out-of-class learning*. Finally, the fourth and most colloquial term for language learning outside of school is *spare time learning*.<sup>5</sup> This is the term Lundahl (2009), for instance, uses.

In my thesis (Sundqvist 2009), I introduce yet another term when talking about the English that learners come in contact with outside of the classroom, namely *extramural English*. There was a need for a term which had a broad definition, or rather, a broader definition than other terms currently in use. Basically, extramural English allows for any type of situation in which learners come in contact with or are involved in English outside the walls of the English classroom.<sup>6</sup> The term is explained in more depth in my thesis (Sundqvist 2009). When we speak of extramural English, no degree of deliberate intention to acquire English is necessary on the part of the learner, even though deliberate intention is by no means excluded from the concept. It is worth pointing out that the linguistic activities that learners may be involved in outside of school are not limited to those which were mentioned in the introduction of the present paper. For example, learners' use of self-access

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Swe. *fritidsengelska*.

<sup>6</sup> *Extramural* is an adjectival compound of Latin origin where the prefix, *extra*, means 'outside' and the stem, *mural*, means 'wall' (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, accessed June 11, 2009).

centers<sup>7</sup> (see e.g. Reinders 2007) and engagement in real life role-playing games (see e.g. Sylvén 2004) are other such activities from which learners might possibly improve their English.

## Material and methods

The data on which my study is based were collected for my thesis (Sundqvist 2009). I designed a longitudinal study, spanning one school year, which was carried out among four classes in ninth grade at three schools, all situated in Western Svealand. The sample consists of 80 students, 44 girls and 36 boys, and it is representative of ninth graders in Western Svealand.<sup>8</sup> Six of the participants chose to leave the study prematurely. This means that 74 students completed all parts of the study. Thus, the dropout rate was low (only 8%), in particular considering the fact that it was a longitudinal study where the number of informants who drop out during the course of the study can often become a problem (cf. Dörnyei 2007: 82f-).

Data for extramural English (which below will be referred to as *EE*) were collected with the help of a questionnaire and two one-week language diaries. In this paper, I will not discuss any results from the questionnaire, however, only the language diary data. The language diary was distributed twice, once in the fall and once in the spring. It aimed to measure the total amount of EE as well as the amount of EE students spent on specific EE activities. Students were encouraged to carefully fill in the time spent on seven such activities which were predetermined in the diary: reading books, reading newspapers/magazines, watching TV, watching films, surfing the Internet, playing video games, and listening to music.<sup>9</sup> Similar to Forsman (2004) and Pearson (2004), a final open category was also included. For this open category, students themselves had to list what activities they had been involved in or come in contact with. Using a language diary as the measuring tool involves a certain margin of error. The students were encouraged to fill it in on a daily basis, preferably before going to bed. Nevertheless, it is difficult to remember exactly what happened on a particular day with regard to the various EE activities. Therefore, participants were bound to make estimates. Most of these estimates were probably very close to what indeed happened, but, needless to say, some might be less accurate. Even so, based on informal talks with the participants and their teachers, and on the information provided in the diaries, I consider the data trustworthy (reliable) and useful. I inputted the information provided in the diaries

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<sup>7</sup> *Self-access centers* at schools and universities typically offer a wide range of support services to learners, such as learning support, language support, computer support, counseling, and so forth (Reinders 2007: 95).

<sup>8</sup> Ninth graders in Western Svealand are, thus, the statistical population.

<sup>9</sup> As suggested by Gee (2003: 1-3), the term *video games* is adopted to cover both games played on video game consoles (e.g. PlayStation, Nintendo, and Xbox) and those played on computers.

into the statistical software SPSS.<sup>10</sup> To minimize the number of mistakes, I systematically double-checked the times entered into the statistical software.

Speech data ( $\approx$  46 hours in total) were collected with the help of five interactional speaking tests. There were 80 students in the study to begin with. Of these, 74 completed all five speaking tests. The students were assigned to random dyads on each test occasion; i.e., the students were in pairs when they took the tests and they were not allowed to choose their partner themselves. When measuring oral proficiency in English among Swedish adolescents such as those in my sample, it is suitable to use tests with a dyadic set-up and interactive tasks because that is in line with the nationwide goals for speaking in ninth grade.<sup>11</sup> All tests were recorded. Based on these recordings, the students were assessed by four external raters. The raters worked independently and their work resulted in a total of 1,140 assessment forms. I collected those forms and used them in my analyses.<sup>12</sup> On each test, the student was awarded an overall grade for oral proficiency (the OP grade) from three raters; i.e., in total, I ended up with 15 OP grades per student.<sup>13</sup> The mean of these 15 OP grades is used in my analyses. The OP grade ranged from 1 to 6, where 1 was the lowest grade and 6 the highest.

Learners' vocabulary skills were measured with the help of two written vocabulary tests, one which measured productive vocabulary and one which measured receptive vocabulary, where the former was taken in the fall semester and the latter in the spring. Both tests used were shortened versions of standard vocabulary tests, namely the Productive Levels Test and the Vocabulary Levels Test, developed by Paul Nation, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, and Batia Laufer, University of Haifa, Israel. The tests are designed so that the words to be tested are from varying levels of difficulty; i.e., they are from different frequency bands, starting with words from the 2,000 most frequent word families, followed by words from the next 3,000 most frequent word families, and so forth. In short, test-takers' scores reflect the size of their vocabulary: the higher the score, the larger the vocabulary.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.spss.com/>. SPSS (Statistical Software for the Social Sciences) is the most commonly used software package in applied linguistics and educational research today.

<sup>11</sup> The goals for speaking are available at <http://www3.skolverket.se/ki03/front.aspx?sprak=EN> (accessed Aug. 20, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> The form of assessment was based on the so-called performance profile scheme in Hasselgren (1996).

<sup>13</sup> Interrater reliability was satisfactory or high for the OP grade: Pearson  $r$  ranged from .451\*\* to .703\*\*.

<sup>14</sup> For samples of the original tests, see Nation (2001: 416–428).

## Results and discussion

In the following, I will present and discuss my results. In addition to presenting the results at sample level, I will also account for results based on gender.<sup>15</sup> First, based on language diary data, it is possible to conclude that a majority of students reported spending time on extramural English, with a sample mean of 18.4 hours per week in total. The standard deviation was large (12.9) and the distribution of students' values for EE was skewed to the right, which means that there were more students piled up towards the lower end of the EE scale than there were students towards the higher end. The reported values for the total time spent on EE ranged from nothing to 58 hours per week. It is indeed worth noting that some students did not spend much time at all on extramural English, something which at least partly contradicts the widespread belief that so much English is learned outside of school; if very little time is spent on out-of-school English, it is not likely that the limited experience impacts on learning to any great extent. Overall, "listening to music" was the EE activity that students spent the most time on, followed by "playing video games", "watching TV", "watching films", "surfing the Internet", "other activity", "reading books", and finally, "reading newspapers/magazines" (see Table 1). On average, boys reported spending close to 21 hours per week on EE activities, which is more than what the girls reported (16.4 hours per week, on average). This gender-related difference was not statistically significant, however. On the other hand, significant gender-related differences were found for two of the EE activities, "playing video games" and "surfing the Internet", where the results showed that boys spent more time than girls on both. In fact, for the boys, video games and the Internet accounted for approximately 44% of their total EE time, whereas those activities made up only 6% of the girls' total time. As it turns out, this happens to be a crucial difference between boys and girls (see below).

Table 1. *Amount of time spent on the EE activities, in order of popularity.*

EE activity	Hours/week (sample mean)
Listening to music	6.58
Playing video games	3.95
Watching TV	3.71
Watching films	2.85
Surfing the Internet	.70
Other activities	.33
Reading books	.20
Reading newspapers/magazines	.02

<sup>15</sup> For results on class level, I refer to my thesis (Sundqvist 2009).

With regard to the results on oral proficiency, the distribution of the OP grade was normal. The mean OP grade for the whole sample was 3.3. Girls had a higher mean OP grade (3.5) than boys (3.2), but this difference was not statistically significant. In contrast, boys had higher scores than girls on the two vocabulary tests (see Table 2). For the test of receptive vocabulary, the difference between boys’ and girls’ scores was statistically significant. Considering the nature of the two tests used, where test-takers’ scores reflect the size of their vocabulary, the significant gender-difference on the second test indicates that the boys in my study had acquired a larger passive vocabulary than the girls. This is an important finding in my study, which is linked to the gender-related difference mentioned above, regarding playing video games and surfing the Internet, which is further explained below.

Table 2. *Vocabulary tests: mean scores for boys, girls, and in total.*

Test	BBoys	GGirls	TTotal
1. Productive vocabulary (45 p)	17.6	14.8	16.1
2. Receptive vocabulary (90 p)	64.3*	56.7*	60.1

\* Significant at the .05 level

With the help of a function in SPSS called “bivariate correlation analysis”, it is possible to examine the correlation, i.e. the relationship, between two variables, for example the relationship between EE and oral proficiency on the one hand, and the relationship between EE and vocabulary on the other. Regarding EE and oral proficiency, results showed a fairly strong positive and statistically significant correlation ( $r_s=.307^{**}$ ) on sample level between the students’ total time spent on EE and their oral proficiency skills, as measured by the OP grade.<sup>16</sup> This result indicates that almost 10% of the variation in OP grades is accounted for by the EE variable rather than by chance or by some other factor(s). Thus, on sample level, there appears to be a relationship between the total time students spent on EE and their oral proficiency. However, an important gender difference was identified in further analyses. For the boys, there was a strong, positive, and statistically significant correlation between EE and oral proficiency ( $r_s=.515^{**}$ ). That is, the more time the boys had reported for EE, the higher their OP grade was, and vice versa. This means that for the boys, as much as 27% of the variation in their OP grades was accounted for by EE. For the girls there was also a positive correlation, but it was weak and non-significant ( $r_s=.118$ ), which indicates that it did not seem to matter whether the girls had a low or high amount of EE because the correlation with their level of oral

<sup>16</sup> The Spearman rank correlation coefficient ( $r_s$ ) gives a measure of the degree of concordance between two rankings (Byström 1973: 142).

proficiency was negligible. However, the lack of statistical significance in the correlation analysis between EE and oral proficiency for the girls makes their results more difficult to interpret than the results for boys. Nevertheless, the conclusion is that the boys seemed to be much more sensitive to or affected by EE than the girls. Finally, for a group of students who had a low amount of EE (less than eight hours per week), there was a strong positive correlation between EE and oral proficiency ( $r_s=.590^*$ ). This finding implies that for such learners, even slight increases in the amount of time spent on EE activities might have a positive impact on their oral proficiency.

The correlation between EE and vocabulary was also fairly strong and statistically significant ( $r_s=.357^{**}$ ) on sample level.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, a gender difference was again identified, similar to the one that was described above. For the boys, there was a very strong, positive, and statistically significant correlation between EE and vocabulary ( $r_s=.590^{**}$ ). To clarify what this means, the analysis revealed that as much as 35% of the variation in the boys' scores on vocabulary was accounted for by EE rather than by chance or some other factor(s). In contrast, the correlation between EE and vocabulary was negligible and non-significant for girls ( $r_s=.011$ ). The result for girls is, again, difficult to interpret since statistical significance was not reached. I should add that there are, of course, other factors than EE that may influence learners' scores on vocabulary tests, or grades on oral proficiency for that matter. Other such factors are learners' aptitude for English or degree of motivation, only to mention two. Nevertheless, my results indicate that EE is a highly important variable in learning English, at least for the boys, who seem to be particularly affected by EE.

To find out which EE activities seemed more important than others for oral proficiency and vocabulary, backward linear regression analysis was used. This is another function offered by SPSS, which made it possible to establish two ranking lists: one for oral proficiency (see Table 3) and one for vocabulary (see Table 4).<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that the two EE activities that involved reading ended up on top with regard to oral proficiency, whereas "playing video games" and "surfing the Internet" shared the first place for vocabulary. Based on the results presented in Tables 3 and 4, it is possible to claim that students who spend time on reading, playing video games, and surfing the Internet in English most likely benefit from doing so, in terms of improved oral proficiency and vocabulary skills.

Table 3. *Rank of importance for EE activities in relation to oral proficiency.*

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<sup>17</sup> In this correlation analysis, an index variable for vocabulary, based on data from the two written vocabulary tests, was used.

<sup>18</sup> The final open category was not included in the analyses, since it covers several EE activities, which the students listed themselves.

Rank	EE activity
1	Reading newspapers/magazines
2	Reading books
3	Listening to music
4	Watching TV
5	Surfing the Internet
6	Playing video games
7	Watching films

Table 4. Rank of importance for EE activities in relation to vocabulary.

Rank	EE activity
1	Playing video games
	Surfing the Internet
3	Watching TV
4	Reading newspapers/magazines
5	Reading books
6	Listening to music
7	Watching films

### Explaining the results with the help of a metaphor

To highlight the main findings of my study, I will use the metaphor of a house, *the Extramural English House*, or simply *the EE House*. This house is a building with two floors and an attic (see Fig. 1). There are three rooms on the first floor, each representing one of the EE activities in the language diary: the TV room, the film room, and the music room. Upstairs, on the second floor, there are two rooms: the office and the library. In the office, there is a computer. This room represents the two EE activities that require a computer, namely “playing video games” and “surfing the Internet”. The library also covers two activities, which combined represent “reading in English” (books and newspapers/magazines). Finally, the open category for other EE activities is placed up in the attic. In Figure 1, I use a chest as a symbol for such activities: basically anything can be put in a chest in the attic.

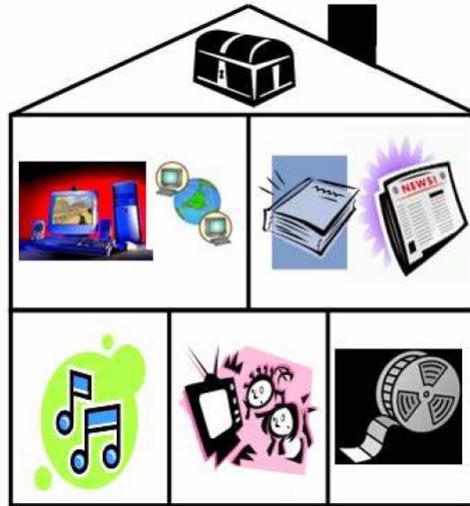


Figure 1. The Extramural English House.

The EE House is situated at some distance from school. Students generally know how to find their way to the house and, once there, almost everybody enters the house. However, a few turn around and leave, perhaps because they do not feel at home in the house, prefer to spend their time elsewhere, or they have not got a key (i.e. they have not deciphered the language code sufficiently). This is very unfortunate, because even a short visit to the EE House has been shown to be valuable.

Students in general spend most of their time on the first floor. This is because the first floor is easily accessed by everyone and does not require any effort. The visitors can relax and just enjoy themselves, for example in the music room, which is the most popular room downstairs. Students actually spend almost three times as much time on the first floor compared with the time they spend on the second floor. There are several reasons why less time is spent upstairs. First of all, visitors must know that the staircase is there. They must also climb the stairs, which requires some effort. This means that students must be knowledgeable and motivated if they are to ascend the staircase. Not all students make it all the way up, but many do since the second in order of popularity after the music room is the office with the computer. The library, however, does not seem to hold any attraction because the students who enter that room seem to leave after a short while. Not much time is spent in the attic either, another part of the EE House which is difficult to access.

The reason why not all students stay upstairs for long might be that the activities they do in the office (playing video games and surfing the Internet) and the library (reading) are fairly demanding and dependent on their language skills. It is

definitely intellectually challenging to spend time there. Furthermore, at times spending time on the second floor also requires that students produce output, i.e., they need to write and/or speak in English. This is particularly true of activities in the office. In short, if a student does not understand what is going on in the rooms upstairs, there is no point in staying.

It is unfortunate that not all students walk upstairs. Even though a claim can be made that students benefit from spending time in the whole EE House, because their oral proficiency and vocabulary might develop from just being in the house, the present study has shown that time spent upstairs in the office is particularly important for vocabulary acquisition and time spent in the library for oral proficiency skills. That is, the more time students spend in the office, the higher their scores on vocabulary tests will be. Likewise, in general, students who read in the library are likely to receive high grades on oral proficiency. One major conclusion of my study is that entering the EE House and spending time there is generally good for students' English. Furthermore, if they walk upstairs and spend time in the office and the library, it is even better.

Another key finding in my study is that boys and girls behave in totally different ways in the EE House. For example, boys spend more time in the house than girls. Another difference is that girls stay downstairs almost all of the time. Girls like spending time in the music room in particular. Boys, on the other hand, have their favorite room upstairs: the office. They spend almost half of their time in the EE House in that room, mainly playing video games, but also surfing the Internet.

My study shows that spending time upstairs in the EE House is very important for oral proficiency and vocabulary skills. The study also shows that boys spend more time upstairs than girls. Nevertheless, this does *not* automatically imply that boys achieve better in English than girls, because EE is, of course, only one of several factors that may affect students' learning outcomes. As I said above, other variables such as aptitude for language learning and motivation also influence students' learning outcomes. The fact is that girls, generally, outperform boys in all subjects in school, including English (see e.g. Björnsson 2005; Klapp Lekholm 2008). Such being the case, it is interesting to see that the boys outperformed the girls on vocabulary (but on nothing else) in my study. My explanation for why the boys did better than the girls on vocabulary is that they spent a significantly higher amount of time in the office, which was the most important room for vocabulary. Evidently, boys in my study benefited from spending so much time there.

## Conclusion

The present paper has discussed the relationship between students' extramural English and their learning outcomes in school. One important finding was that, in general, spending time on extramural activities in English had a positive effect on students' oral proficiency and vocabulary, at least as measured among the ninth graders in the present study. Another interesting result was that spending time on extramural activities which demand activity on the part of the learners, or which demand that they rely heavily on their linguistic skills, is particularly important. Learners in my study who spent time on such activities benefited from doing so in terms of improved oral proficiency and vocabulary. Based on these results, and others which have been accounted for in this paper, it is possible to claim that extramural English functions as a pathway to progress in English.

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