

# Perceived impact of extra-curricular activities on foreign language learning in Canadian and Russian university contexts

*Veronika Makarova, University of Saskatchewan*  
*Anna Reva, University of Saskatchewan*

*This paper surveys language-related extra-curricular activities (ECA) attended by university students in Canada and Russia. Very little information is available about ECA in both countries. The study aimed to gather data about extra-curricular activities in Canada and Russia and to investigate the perceived effect of participation in extra-curricular activities on language learning by university students in these countries. The study employed a questionnaire-based survey as a major research method. The questionnaire constructed by the authors included 'yes/no', multiple choice and open-ended questions. The total of 119 university students from both countries participated in the study. The participants' responses to yes/no and multiple choice questions were entered on SPSS charts for descriptive statistics and an analysis across the groups (chi-square tests). The responses to open-ended questions were analyzed using key-word method. The results indicate that only about 1/3 of university students in both countries had some experience with ECAs. Russian students were more aware of the range of ECAs available through their universities. The array of language-related ECAs was different across the countries: Canadian students mostly attended ECAs that were offered through their universities, and Russian students – outside their universities. There was an agreement between the respondents from both countries that trips abroad were the most efficient form of ECAs. The evaluation of some other specific forms of ECAs showed significant differences across the two participant groups. The majority of respondents from both countries placed a high value on ECAs and thought that ECAs were beneficial for their language skills development.*

*Keywords:* university students, extra-curricular activities, language learning

## 1 Introduction

This section defines extracurricular activities, describes their origins, types, and history. Foreign language learning ECAs, the focus of the current study, are examined in Canadian and Russian contexts.

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Corresponding author's email: [v.makarova@usask.ca](mailto:v.makarova@usask.ca)

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### 1.1 ECA overview

Extra-curricular activities (ECA) fall outside of normal school curricula, they are voluntary, i.e., participation in them is not required, and neither participants, nor organizers receive any remuneration for their involvement. Students do not receive grades or academic credit for their participation in ECAs. These activities are offered outside of school hours, but within the school setting or via some association with a school (Holloway, 1999, 2002; Stoltzfus, 2007; Vermaas, van Willigenburg, van Dijn & van Houdt, 2009).

ECAs exist at all levels of education – from kindergartens to university and colleges. They were found to be typical of educational settings in a wide range of countries; schools try to attract students by advertising a range of extracurricular activities. On occasion, extra-curricular activities have been even included into governmental education planning documentation (Bryan et al. 2012; Nealon, 1950; Vermaas et al., 2009).

In the last few decades a decrease in funding of education world-wide was accompanied by a related increase in interest in ECAs from all levels of education, since they provide educational opportunities at little to no extra costs. ECAs are seen as a tool to enhance subject knowledge and professional skills development (e.g., Malinowska, 2011), as well as to create a more “well-rounded” student (Stoltzfus, 2007) or a “responsible citizen” (Brooks, 2007). For example, a number of governmentally sponsored programs have been developed in UK in the area of political education, in which volunteering is seen as “a means of educating for active citizenship” (Brooks, 2007, p. 7).

ECAs in educational practice have become so desirable that some schools and universities are making involvement in extracurricular activities a mandatory requirement for their students (Stoltzfus, 2007, p. 4) or even putting selected extracurricular activities on transcript as “experiential learning” (Kattner, 2009). However, this practice questions the notion of truly “voluntary” nature of these activities and leads to the controversy of ECAs perceptions as a “CV booster” that is expected (if not required) for academic admissions, grants applications, and employment (Brooks, 2007; Vermaas et al., 2009).

The social impact of ECAs is connected with the practice of colleges and universities using them as an additional factor on a CV in considering admittance and scholarships; in addition, employers may also consider ECAs participation in the hiring process (Vermaas et al., 2009). Withdrawal from extracurricular activities has been employed by teachers as a form of protest (Steffenhagen, 2012). Removal of students from participation in ECAs is often used as a punishment for poor academic performance (Reeves, 2008).

This study focuses on foreign language learning ECAs in university settings (ECAs explicitly or implicitly connected with the foreign language classes) that are described in full in section 1.3. Learners across cultures are known to have different expectations and beliefs regarding classroom procedures (e.g., Tartar & Horenczyk, 1996). For example, Russian immigrants in the USA have been found to be tolerant to cheating on tests (Hudgins, 1997). Russian immigrants in Israel need less assistance from teachers than other immigrant groups (Tartar & Horenczyk, 1996). Russian and British students have different preferences towards language teacher characteristics, whereby British students want their teachers to be encouraging, enthusiastic, helpful, patient and sympathetic, and their Russian peers prefer teachers who are respectful, kind, strict, do not familiarize with students, and are not condescending (Makarova & Ryan, 2000).

Language learning styles of Russian students were shown to be closer to those by Chinese than by Spanish students (Wintergerst et. al., 2002). Based on the above reported differences between Russian and Western students' classroom preferences, we became interested in exploring whether attitudes to ECAs may differ across Canadian and Russian language learners. The selection of Canada and Russia as the two countries for comparison was motivated by the situations in language-related ECAs in both countries where a range of ECAs is available, but ECAs are on the periphery of the language learning process. Finally, the choice of Canada and Russia reflects the personal interests of the researchers (both Russian with a lengthy experience of studying and working in Canadian universities) as well as availability of access to participants.

### *1.2 History of ECAs in secondary and postsecondary education*

Although the term "extra-curricular activity" appeared only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some forms of ECAs, such as debates, dramas, and competitions have been introduced already in Ancient Athens and Sparta (McKown, 1952; Reva, 2012). ECAs in modern understanding of the concept sprung into being in European and North American schools and universities in the early 1900s (McKown, 1952). Traditional forms of ECAs included student societies (literary societies, pen-friends clubs, and debate clubs), drama clubs, church-related charities, sports clubs, and other activities (Church & Sedlak, 1976; Reva, 2012).

The attention paid to ECAs in contemporary education does not only stem from their low costs, but also from the observed positive impact of ECAs on many educational, social and psychological aspects of learning. Most available studies of ECAs were conducted in secondary school contexts. Earlier research studies included mostly drama clubs, sports, debate clubs, music, sports, and similar activities (e.g., McCarthy, 2000; Bryan et al., 2012; Dumais, 2009). These studies demonstrated multiple positive effects of ECAs on grades overall and on grades in specific subjects, such as mathematics, science and English (Mahoney, 2000; McLure & McLure, 2000; Fredricks & Eccles, 2008; Dumais, 2009; Knifsend & Graham, 2012). There were also reports of some positive behavioral and psychological impacts of ECAs on school children, such as improved attendance and lowered absenteeism, decreased school drop-out, increased motivation, better concentration, facilitated personality development and personal exploration, as well as decreased stress (Dworkin, Larson & Hansen, 2003; Holloway, 2002; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Fujita, 2006; McCarthy, 2000; Reeves, 2008). In terms of social outcomes, according to earlier studies, ECAs develop a sense of belonging and strengthen connections and positive engagement with schools (Dumais, 2009; Fredricks & Eccles, 2008; Knifsend & Graham, 2012). ECAs improve group dynamics, improve social skills and help to make friends (Dumais, 2009; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Finally, they assist in the development of real-life skills, yield extra value to admissions, grants, job applications, improve time management skills, and can be an outlet for creativity (Reva, 2012).

However, negative effects of ECAs in secondary schools environment have also been pointed out. These include possible increased alcohol use during some athletic activities; cases of problem behaviour by the youths involved in some unsupervised informal activities, distracting students from fulfilling academic requirements (e.g., Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002).

The above studies of ECAs were conducted only in secondary school context, and they do not focus on foreign/second language related activities, but can serve

as a reference point for potential overall positive and negative effects of ECAs on students. Language-related ECAs are addressed in the following section.

### *1.3 History of language-related ECAs in secondary and postsecondary education*

In this paper, we focus on foreign language-related ECAs, which are one of the most popular forms of extracurriculars among students, but have not received yet adequate attention from scholars. In a study of American high schools, foreign language-related ECAs were the third most common ECA after arts and crafts (Vermaas et al., 2009).

Integration of ECAs into foreign/second language curriculum is advocated by theoreticians of Communicative Language Learning as a way to create an informal environment for learning (Krashen, 1981; Oats & Hawley, 1983). ECAs are also promoted within the framework of experiential learning (Kohonen, 1992; Nunan, 2004). While Communicative Language Learning is perhaps still the most widely spread methodology in North American language teaching, and experiential learning is supported by many curricula, hardly any contemporary research on language-related ECAs is available. ECA studies peak in the 1950s through 1980s (e.g., Campbell, 1973; Tumanov, 1983) was subsequently followed by an almost complete research vacuum. There is therefore a huge discrepancy between the overwhelming use of language-related ECAs in North American context and the lack of research studies that would support this use. More research into ECAs is justified as one of the “border-crossings into new ways of teaching and into non-traditional language learning communities” required in modern day FLA/SLA in order to get away from the transmission model of learning (Tarone, 2012, p. 5). ECAs are also in the foreground of language learning methodology and technique development, as they have become more technologically enhanced, e.g., web-site creation and blogging are used for language skills development (Trierweiler, 2009). Computer-Assisted Language learning formats are also beginning to be used for ECAs (e.g., Sylvén & Sunqvist, 2017).

ECAs in language teaching theory can be seen as an important tool of “post method” pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 2006) where “no unified method provides principles to guide” a selection of “learning activities (Littlewood, 2012, p. 7). ECAs are initiated by local learners and therefore could be an ideal learning practice “suited to the local context” and linking practice with theory and research (Littlewood, 2012, p. 8).

In Canada, first ECA descriptions (including foreign language-related ECAs) go back to 1925 and have become an intrinsic part of the educational landscape in secondary schools and higher education (Boehm, 1972). In Russia, during the Soviet era, extra-curricular activities were highly popular and strongly promoted by the Ministry of Education of the Soviet Union; secondary schools even had a specific administrative position “Vice-Principle for Extracurricular Activities” (зав. учебной частью по внеклассной работе) whose mandate was overview of the ECAs (Andreeva, 1958; Reva, 2012). After a period of neglect following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many educational institutions in Russia have recently been encouraging extra-curricular activities (Tsvetkova, 2002; Reva, 2012).

#### *1.4 Language-related ECAs in Canadian and Russian universities: theoretical backgrounds and current practical frameworks*

In extra-curricular learning of foreign languages, the students take the responsibility for their own learning into their own hands, which echoes the principles of learner autonomy (Holec, 1981; Benson 2001). While learner autonomy is only one of the current methodology trends, most language teaching practitioners would agree that some degree of learner “autonomisation” (Little, 2000), such as “finding their own way” (Nunan, 2000, p. 171), and an ability to study entirely on their own (Benson & Voller, 1997) is a characteristic of a successful language learner no matter what methods or methodologies are at stake inside the language classroom (e.g., Lightbown & Spada, 1997, p. 34). Participation in language-related extracurriculars can therefore be seen as a manifestation of a “good” (or autonomous) language learner. Regrettably, the bulk of literature related to learner autonomy focuses on classroom-related activities, and not on the individual or group attempts of learners to exercise “pure” autonomy with no direct reflection on their classroom tasks or grades (e.g., Benson, 2001; Healey 2007; Holec, 1981). Extracurriculars extend “the exposure of learners to the target language beyond school hours”, which is particularly important in non-immersive contexts (Aladjem & Jou, 2016, p. 161). Current studies of language learning in informal settings typically focus on technological tools (such as mobile devices and social networking services), but not on more traditional forms of ECAs (e.g., Aladjem & Jou, 2016). We find therefore a deficit in comprehensive studies of ECAs (understood broadly – from traditional to technological) in language learning research.

Yet, it appears that the amount of extra-curricular activities is important for universities in Canada and in Russia. In Canada, this parameter is often included in university rankings (e.g., Ainsworth-Vincze, 2007). In Russia, the official regulations for calculating instructors’ assignment of duties in universities may include some limited forms of extra-curricular activities, such as “conducting educational excursions or attending museums with student groups” (Ministry of Education and Science of Russian Federation, 2014). In Canada, no extra-curricular activities are typically included into instructors’ assignments of duties (except for official courses conducted during study abroad terms/trips that do not constitute extra-curricular activities). Interestingly, an ability to organize language-related extra-curricular activities in secondary and vocational educational institutions is listed as a characteristic expected from the graduates of a BA in Applied Philology of Moscow State Pedagogical University, but is not referred to in the Canadian universities we included in the study (Moscow State Pedagogical University, 2017).

Some evidence exists of successful extra-curricular activities (such as student clubs) in North American universities (e.g., Marinellie, 2005), however, contemporary research addressing language-related ECAs in university settings is almost non-existent. While a study conducted in the Russian university context showed some positive effect of ECA on students’ communicative skills and self-confidence (Druzhinina, 2009), a similar study conducted in the Canadian context showed no direct impact of ECAs on language skills, but there was evidence of an appreciation of ECA activities as being more meaningful and educative than those obtained in the classroom (Boehm, 1972). The authors were therefore interested in filling in the gap in contemporary ECA research by describing a scope of language

ECAs reported by students in both countries, and a perceived effect of ECAs on their foreign language acquisition.

To the best of our knowledge, there are no current studies that survey the scope of language-related extra-curricular activities in university settings in Canada and Russia with the exception of our previously reported study (Reva, 2012).

### *1.5 The aims and goals of the study*

We see that there is an interest in ECAs in foreign language education in both countries, Canada and Russia, but no sufficient research that would analyze the available ECAs or their efficiency has been conducted.

The goals of this study are to explore an array of language-related extra-curricular activities attended by students in Canada and Russia, as well as to evaluate the perceived impact of participation in language-related ECAs on foreign language learning by university students in the two countries.

Research questions of the study are:

- Do university students in both countries participate in language-related ECAs?
- In what specific language-related ECAs do students in Canada and Russia participate?
- How do students in both countries evaluate their experience with ECAs?
- How do students in both countries evaluate the effect of ECAs on their language learning?
- Can students in both countries identify any problems associated with ECAs?
- For the above questions, are there significant differences across the samples by country?

In the following section, we consider in details the methodology we employed to design the study that could answer the above questions.

## **2 Materials and methods**

The study was conducted in four universities, two from Canada and two from Russia: Novosibirsk State Pedagogical University, Moscow Pedagogical State University, the University of Saskatchewan and University of British Columbia. From personal experiences of both researchers with these universities, as well as from informal interviews with a few language teachers, we knew that some foreign language extra-curricular activities happen in all of them, but the exact scope of these activities was not clear.

In particular, these universities advertised study abroad trips and exchange programs for students online (e.g., University of British Columbia, 2017) and in form of pamphlets placed on advertisement boards, electronic displays in the halls (the latter observed in Canadian universities only) and distributed to students during counselling sessions. It is of course, questionable, if study abroad trips that have transferrable credits can qualify as extracurriculars, as they are incorporated into curricula. In contrast with study abroad/exchange programs, we observed little advertising of other forms of extra-curricular language learning activities. For example, one advertisement of a “Day of Languages” (in 2015) was

found on the webpage of Moscow State Pedagogical University (Moscow State Pedagogical University, 2015). There appears to be no integration of extracurriculars (besides terms abroad) into any curriculum planning. In both countries, most information about extracurriculars seems to be passed over to students during the language classes, or through student societies. There were some noticeable difference between Canadian and Russian universities that relate to ECAs. In Canada, first year language classes are normally accompanied by an extra hour of tutorials per week. Tutorials are not offered in the Russian universities.

The study (earlier partly reported in Reva, 2012) targeted a participant group of university students in Canada and Russia and employed an original questionnaire constructed by the authors in order to gather data related to language ECAs. The questionnaire included demographic questions (students' age, gender, year in the university, the native language(s), the country of birth (only participants who were born in Canada and Russia were requested to participate, and the questionnaires of immigrant/foreign students were eliminated from the data), the languages learnt at the university, and ECA study questions. The format employed in ECA study questions included multiple choice, Yes/No, and open-ended questions. These questions addressed the respondents' experience with language-oriented ECAs, their attitudes toward them, and the perceived impact of those activities on the students' language acquisition. The ECA Questionnaire is provided in Appendix 1. As can be seen from the Appendix 1, the research questions are based largely on self-assessment of the impact of ECAs. Self-assessment is a method used widely in research related to language teaching/learning context as well as in classroom practice (e.g., Duque Micán & Cuesta Medina, 2017; Huang, 2016), and was found to be "enlightening", going "largely beyond most teachers' feedback capacity," "far reaching and multifaceted," and bearing "great potential for learning and instruction" (Huang, 2016, p. 803). There have been some studies showing discrepancies between self-assessment and other-assessment of L2 performance (e.g., Trofimovich et al., 2016). However, in this study, we were not concerned with the intricacies of language skills assessment, just a very broad evaluation of the presence or absence of the impact of ECAs on them. Also, the method was appropriate for the study focusing on ECAs, since self-assessment has been associated with the transfer of agency from the teacher to the learner and with empowering learners (Huang, 2016, p. 804; Milne, 2009).

Questionnaires were distributed in paper format in the end of foreign language classes (French, German, and Russian for the Canadian sample; and English and German for the Russian sample) between 2011–2014. The choice of classes was determined by the language offerings in the universities and the consent of the teachers to let the researchers in. Russian data sample was obtained from questionnaires administered to students from Novosibirsk State Pedagogical University and Moscow Pedagogical State University, while Canadian data sample was compiled via responses to the questionnaires from students in the University of Saskatchewan and University of British Columbia. The participants were students enrolled in language courses in their universities, regardless of their major.

We offered participation in the research study to about 100 students in each country in the end of their language classes. Of those students who agreed to participate and fill in the questionnaire, the questionnaire return rates (the number of filled in questionnaires as compared to the total number of distributed

questionnaires) were 95% for the Russian sample and 87% for the Canadian sample. A total of 52 Canadian and 68 Russian students participated in the study by completing and returning their questionnaires. The students' participation was voluntary: no remuneration was provided. Purposive sampling (students attending language classes) was chosen to guarantee a sufficient number of responses from students with experience in ECA participation. As mentioned in section 1.4, students taking foreign language classes in both countries are likely to have some ECAs experience.

Data obtained from the questionnaires were entered on SPSS charts for processing. Results from Yes/No and multiple choice questions were processed with descriptive statistical tools. An evaluation of the significance of differences in the responses produced by the Russian and Canadian subject groups was performed using chi-square analysis. Open ended questions were analyzed using key word analysis and key word frequencies (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Spearman correlation was calculated to evaluate the existence of relationship between major subject characteristics and ECA related variables. Finally, Mann-Whitney U tests were used to estimate the significance of the differences in ratings produced by subjects while answering Likert scale (rating) questions.

### 3 Results

This section describes the relevant characteristics of participants and the major results of the study related to the participants' experience with ECAs.

#### 3.1 Participants' background information

A total of 119 students participated in the questionnaire (52 Canadian and 68 Russian students). The sample distribution by age and gender is represented below in Table 1 (earlier reported in Reva, 2012, p. 23).

**Table 1.** Sample distribution by gender (%) and age (average age and range).

	Gender (%)			Age (years)	
	F	M	Other*	Average	Range
<b>Canadian</b>	58.8	35.3	5.9	22.0	18-46
<b>Russian</b>	89.7	10.3	0	20.3	17-23

\*"Other" relates to the participant's self-description of their gender as other than M or F (three choices were provided to participants to describe their gender: "M", "F", and "other". The table was earlier reported in Reva (2012).

Student population in language classes with predominance of women students in both countries is represented in the sample. The differences in Female/Male ratio in the Russian and Canadian data subsets are not statistically significant.

As reported earlier in Reva (2012), the languages studied by Canadian subject group were: French (25.5 %), German (19.6%), Russian (15.7%), Spanish (7.8%), Japanese (7.8%), Ukrainian (5.9%), and Latin (2%).



Foreign languages studied by Russian participants were: English (100%), German (25%), French (2.9%), Chinese (2.9%), Spanish (1.5%) and Dutch (1.5%). Among other languages studied or spoken by the subjects in the Russian sample were Kazakh, Latin, Italian, Japanese, Moldovan and Yakut.

The native languages of the respondents in the Canadian sample were English (97%), also French (in addition to English) -1% and Ukrainian - 1%. The native language of all Russian respondents was Russian (100%).

The majors of the Canadian participants were: Linguistics (13), Computer science (6), English (3), Biochemistry (2), Business economics (2), Food science (2), Microbiology (2), Psychology (1), German (1), Native Studies (1), Finance (1), Anthropology (1), Political studies (1), Philosophy (1), Physiology (1), History (1), Environmental Science and Urban Planning (1), Sociology (1), and Kinesiology (1). The majors of the Russian participants were: Modern languages and translation (58), Education and Psychology with a second major in Foreign Language Teaching (English) (10). The differences between the samples reflect the educational contexts of the universities from which they were drawn.

### 3.2 Students' participation in language-related ECAs

As can be seen in Appendix 1, and reported earlier in Reva (2012, p. 27), the questionnaire contained two parts, of which one was demographic (background) information, and the second part contained research questions. There were a total of 15 research questions addressing the students' participation in ECAs, their knowledge of ECA, and the impact of ECAs on their language skills and some motivational aspects of language learning.

When asked about their participation in ECAs, 33.3% of Canadian respondents and 29.4% of Russian respondents reported that they engaged in ECAs in the university. The difference between the participant groups was insignificant for the given sample (Reva, 2012, p. 28).

In answer to the question about their knowledge of ECAs conducted in their institution, 33.3% of Canadian and 61.8% of Russian participants reported their knowledge of the ECA activities. The difference between the responses by the two groups was significant (at  $\chi^2= 11.010$ ,  $N=119$ ,  $df (2)$ ,  $P=.192$ ) (Reva, 2012, p. 28).

Of those students who answered positively the question about their participation in ECAs, 60.8% of Canadian participants and 23.5% of Russian participants expressed their interest in continuing ECA activities in the university. The difference was significant at  $\chi^2=99.982$ ,  $N=119$ ,  $df (2)$ ,  $P=.835$  (Reva, 2012, p. 28).

Very similar numbers of students in both countries expressed their interest in taking up ECAs activities in future (84.3% of Canadian and 88.2% of Russian participants) (Reva, 2012, p. 28).

In addition, we found a weak positive correlation between the Russian subjects' participation in the ECAs and their interest in taking more foreign language classes in future, i.e., Russian students who participated in ECA were more likely to take more foreign language classes in the future ( $r=.265$ ,  $p=.029$ ) (Reva, 2012, p. 29).

In sum, although there is considerable interest among respondents in both groups in trying out ECAs in future, the level of actual participation in ECAs in both countries is rather low (about one third of participants). Russian students seem to be more informed about ECAs in their institutions, but there are more Canadian than Russian students who would like to continue with ECAs.

### 3.3 *Types of language-related ECAs that students in Canadian and Russian universities participate in*

Overall, Canadian participants listed 28 ECAs they had participated in (0.6 activities per person), as compared to the 51 listed by the Russian participants (0.75 activities per person). In both samples, female participants reported more ECA activities than male, yet the differences were not significant for the given sample.

The following ECA activities were reported for the Canadian and Russian samples (the numbers of entries per each category of ECAs are in brackets):

#### ***Canadian Sample:***

- Stammtisch = German language club (7)
- Language club (3)
- Spanish Club Nights (2)
- German lunch hour (2)
- Language retreats (2)
- Exchange programs (2)
- German film night (2)
- Spanish Fiesta (2)
- Soiré de Variété = variety show, an evening of short dramas, songs and poetry in French (2)
- Circle François (French lunch hour) (2)
- Evening in Faculty Club (1)
- German club meetings at a local restaurant (1)

#### ***Russian Sample:***

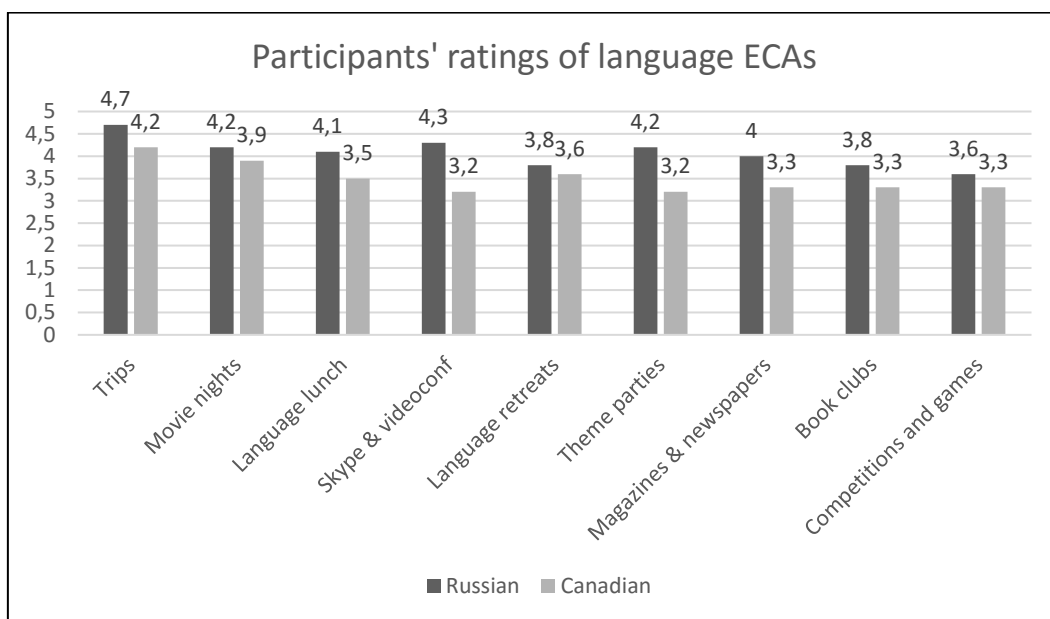
- Language school courses outside the university (19)
- events in the Linguistics center (13)
- conferences (5)
- career advancement seminars (4)
- language clubs (3)
- events held in the target language (3)
- book (literary) club (2)
- festivals celebrations (1)
- communication with native language speakers (1)

As can be seen from the data above, the involvement of students in language-related ECA was low in both countries. The arrays of language-related activities were quite different across the countries; in Canada, the most popular ECAs were language clubs and similar activities conducted in the university, whereas Russian participants preferred to take language courses and attend other language-related activities outside the university.

### 3.4 *Students' evaluation of ECA types*

The questionnaire contained a list of different types of language-related ECAs that the respondents were requested to rank (selecting 1,2,3,4, or 5) on a 5-point Likert scale from 'unimportant' (1) to 'very important' (5). The participants' ranking of language-related ECA activities is represented below in Figure 1. As Figure 1 demonstrates, all the average responses by both participant groups are above 3.0

values on the 5-point Likert scale, i.e., Canadian and Russian participants rank all ECAs as being “important” (Reva, 2012, p. 32). Russian participants’ rankings of ECAs tend to be overall higher than by Canadians (Reva, 2012, p. 32). This difference across the participant groups responses is only significant (according to Mann-Whitney U tests) for the ratings of *language lunch* (.001), *Skype and videoconferences* (.000), *trips* (.000), *magazines and newspapers* (.000), *theme parties* (.000) and *movie nights* (.041) (ref. Reva, 2012, pp. 34–37). While we cannot account for these differences, it is possible to suggest that Russian participants may be ranking higher the activities they are less exposed to, which look novel to them. Among the different types of ECAs, *trips* were of particular importance for both groups of participants. Canadian participants preferred *movie nights* and *language retreats*, whereas the Russian subjects ranked high *Skype & videoconferencing*, *theme parties* and *movie nights* (ref. also Reva, 2012, pp. 33–37).



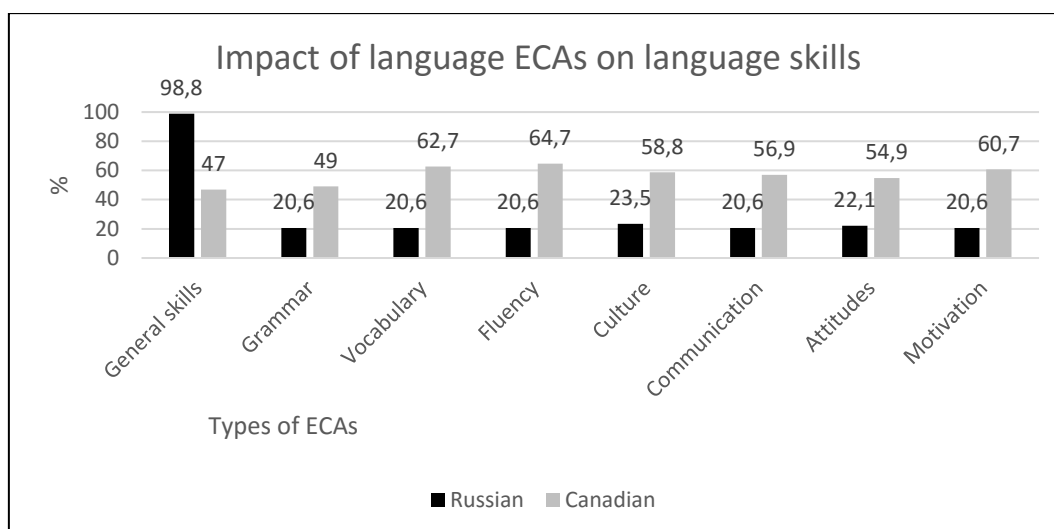
**Figure 1.** Students’ ratings of different types of ECAs.

Vertical axis represents participants’ rankings of ECAs importance on a five-point Likert scale. Horizontal axis represents different types of ECAs ranked by participants.

### 3.5 Students’ evaluation of the effect of ECAs on their language learning

In response to a question whether language-related ECAs were useful for their language learning, 98.5% of Russian participants and 86.3% of Canadian participants answered “yes.” There was no significant difference between the participant groups’ responses to this question.

The participants’ positive (“yes”) responses to questions about impact of ECAs on their language skills in general, as well as aspects of language skills, knowledge of the target culture, communicative abilities, attitudes towards the target language and motivation to study the target language are represented below in Figure 2 (also ref. Reva, 2012, pp. 35–36).



**Figure 2.** Participants' positive ("yes") answers to questions about a positive impact of ECAs on their language skills.

Vertical axis represents percentage of positive responses to the question whether participation in ECAs improved each given language skill of the participants. The horizontal axis represents the types of language skills.

As can be seen from the graph, most Canadian participants (between 55% and 65%) agreed with a positive impact of ECAs on their vocabulary, fluency, knowledge of target culture, communication skills, attitudes, and motivation. Their rankings of the impact of ECAs on language skills (47%) and grammar (49%) were also high. By contrast, Russian participants agreed that ECAs had a positive impact on their language skills overall, but did not think that ECAs had much to contribute to specific language skills, culture knowledge, attitudes and motivation. It should be pointed out that negative responses to the research questions addressed in this section constitute no more than 4.5% for each question, i.e., the cases with low positive responses for both groups were predominantly missing data. It appears that Russian participants had difficulties answering the question about the impact of ECAs on their specific language skills, attitudes and motivation. It is possible that they are less accustomed to thinking about separate language skills components in isolation as compared to their Canadian peers.

In addition to the above questions, the questionnaire also contained open-ended questions inviting the participants to identify in a free format the effect that ECAs had on their language acquisition, personality and motivation. As outlined above in Section 2, the answers to these open-ended questions were processed using key-word analysis (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), whereby semantically similar entries were manually entered under one key-word category on SPSS sheets, and the key-word frequencies were calculated. The results of this analysis are represented below.

#### *The reported effects of ECAs on language acquisition.*

The highest frequency entry in this category by both Russian and Canadian participants (21 entries each group) was "practice more," i.e., ECAs provide additional opportunities for practice. Russian participants also provided the following responses as per the effects of ECAs on their language acquisition (in the order of frequency of entries): "learn more (19)", "strengthening of comprehension" (15), "broaden vocabulary" (14), "give confidence" (11),

“easier to memorize words, rules (11)”, “motivates me (10)”, “expands the scope of vision” (9), “develops communicative skills” (7), “helps to gain experience (7)”, “develops creative skills” (6), and “improves public speaking skills” (5) (ref. also Reva, 2012, pp. 43–44). Canadian participants believed that ECAs assist them in “providing a more immersive and interactive environment” (13), “forcing them to communicate” (11), “providing additional exposure” (10), “gaining confidence” (9), “strengthening of comprehension” (8), “broadening vocabulary” (7), “adding a positive impact” (7), “easing the process of memorizing words and rules” (5), “learning more” (4), and “exposing them to different accents” (1) (Reva, 2012, pp. 43–44).

*The reported effects of ECAs on personality development.*

Russian participants only identified one effect of ECAs on their personality: “an improvement in their public speaking skills” (27). The entries provided by Canadian participants indicate that ECAs helped them to “become more interactive and outgoing” (7), “more comfortable in group settings, less nervous” (3), and “changed them” (3) (Reva, 2012, p. 44).

*The reported effects of ECAs on the participants’ interest in the target country.*

Russian participants indicated that thanks to ECAs, they are “more interested” (21) in the target country, and “want to visit it” (20). Canadian participants reported that their interest in the target country changed “for the better” (7), and two of them decided to “major in languages” (2) because of ECAs (Reva, 2012, p. 44).

*The reported effects of ECAs on the participants’ interest in the target culture.*

Russian participants’ interest in the target culture was reflected in the multiple entries “want to learn more” (14) (Reva, 2012, p. 44–45). Canadian participants also agree that under the impact of ECAs, they are “more interested” (10), they also can “see how the target culture differs from others” (5). They indicated that “more awareness means more acceptance” (1), that ECAs give them “increased knowledge of the target culture”, and one participant remarked that he/she “was always fascinated by other cultures” (1) (Reva, 2012, p. 44).

*The reported effects of ECAs on the participants’ motivation to study languages.*

When asked to identify any effects of ECAs on their language learning motivation, 18 Russian participants noted that their motivation increased. Similarly, 9 Canadian participants also found themselves “more motivated” by ECAs. Canadian participants also remarked that ECAs make them pay more attention (3), and that “the better you communicate, the more you enjoy the language” (2). Two participants found themselves to be “more determined”, and one participant noted that he/she “wanted to learn more.” (Reva, 2012, pp. 44–45).

### *3.6 Problems with ECAs as seen by the participants*

The participants were also asked to identify any problems they may have had with ECAs in their institutions. Russian participants would like to have “more ECAs organized” (8), have “more native speakers invited” (6), “have access to technical support” (4), “better advertising” (3) and “lower costs” (1). Canadian participants

found it “hard to understand native speakers” (4), they found that “organization of ECAs was bad” (2), that they need “more advertising” (2), that ECAs were “too hard to attend because of the scheduling issues” (1) and that it was “hard to speak in ECAs” (1) (Reva, 2012, p. 45).

## 4 Discussion

In this section, we discuss the extent of university students’ participation in language-related ECAs, the array of different ECAs that students attend in both countries, the positive effects of ECAs as well as problems with them.

### 4.1 *Extent of participation in ECAs and knowledge of ECAs*

Our results show that the exposure of students to language-related ECAs in universities in both countries was about 30% (ref. section 3.2). While we have found no earlier studies enabling a direct comparison, a study by Vermaas et al. (2009) conducted in a high school settings in USA showed that every student participated on the average in 2.9 activities, whereby language-related activities were the third most popular kind after sports and arts. We can therefore suggest that participation in language-related ECAs is “carried over” from high school to universities possibly with some “damping” effect. Over half of Russian participants (61.8%) knew about ECA activities happening in their university, as opposed to only third of Canadian participants (33.3%). This difference (although statistically insignificant) can be explained by the fact that only 27% of Canadian participants majored in Linguistics or Languages, whereas the majority of Russian participants (85%) were Language majors, thus Language majors were more interested in and informed about ECAs.

### 4.2 *The scope of ECAs*

The scope of reported ECAs in both countries was surprisingly traditional without any “technology enhanced” activities. This is likely explained by the fact that in both countries, the amount of funding invested in language education in universities is low and continues to decline. Languages are not seen as a priority by either the Canadian or the Russian governments, hence the low financing of traditional in-class language education, let alone of ECAs. The scope of ECAs reported by Russian students was more “structured,” formalized, research and career oriented (e.g., conferences, events at the Linguistics Centre, career advancements seminars, etc.). It was also somewhat “commercialized”, with language classes taken additionally outside of the university in language courses. Canadian ECAs were clearly more geared towards hobby pursuit, e.g., enjoying fiestas, language retreats, language clubs, movie nights and similar events. This difference can be explained by a higher value of knowing foreign languages in the Russian job market.

### 4.3 *Interest to continue participation in ECAs or to participate in them in future*

Almost three times more Canadian than Russian participants would like to continue with ECAs despite the fact that the numbers of students who claimed

they have participated in ECAs are very close across the countries. Perhaps, these results can be explained by the more enjoyable nature of ECAs in Canadian context as discussed above in 4.2.

Over 80% of surveyed students in both countries claimed that they would like to participate in language-related ECAs in the future, which clearly demonstrates their interest in ECAs. It should be pointed out that this interest may be partly due to the Hawthorne effect. However, even if the students' interest was partly triggered by the questionnaire itself, raising students' awareness of ECAs and making them think more about them could have been, as we believe, a positive effect of the questionnaire.

#### *4.4 Positive effects of ECAs*

Our results showed a positive effect of ECAs on the overall language proficiency as well as on all language skills. This agrees with earlier findings that ECAs "support grades" (Vermaas et al., 2009, p. 13). However, in our study, Canadian students were somewhat less certain about these positive effects.

We see that ECAs stimulate an interest in taking foreign language classes. They also work as a motivator in many other ways – stimulating a desire to visit foreign countries, creating an immersive and interactive environment, raising confidence, etc. These results are more diverse than the responses yielded in Vermaas et al., (2009) study which refers to "interest/fun" "future education" as the major motivating factors in ECAs participation in high schools (Vermaas et al., 2009, p. 13).

The results also confirm the positive effect of ECAs on personality development (Holloway, 2002). However, in the context of language learning in our study, the effect is specified as enhancing creativity, public speaking skills, encouraging participants to be more interactive and making them less nervous.

In contrast to earlier studies, in our sample, we did not observe any traces of the attitudes to ECAs as a "CV booster" (reported in Brooks, 2006; Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Lesko, 2001). This can be likely explained by the fact that these earlier studies were done in the British, American and European contexts, where the "social" and "labour market" value of the role of extracurricular activities may be higher than in Canada and Russia.

#### *4.5 Problems with ECAs*

##### *Poor advertising*

Twice as many Russian as Canadian participants knew about ECAs offered in their universities, and even for Russian participants the awareness ran only at 60%. These results show that there is not enough advertising of language-related ECA events in both countries.

##### *Organizational problems*

Of those students who did participate in ECAs, only 23% of Russian and 60% of Canadian students were interested in continuing them. This indicates the existence of some problems with organizing ECAs, particularly in Russia. Russian students wanted more ECAs organized with more native speakers and better technical support. Canadian students had difficulties following the native speakers in ECAs. The latter results suggest that the native speakers should be

better trained to conduct ECAs and lower their speech rates while communicating with low proficiency students.

#### *Timing*

Canadian students reported issues with timing of ECAs, i.e., it was hard for them to include ECAs into their schedules.

#### *Little interest of teachers and researchers in ECAs*

The paucity of contemporary literature on ECAs is truly shocking. It is likely that language teachers (who of course constitute the bulk of applied linguistics and education researchers) are too overwhelmed by balancing methodologies, learner types, cultural aspects, new technologies, and other aspects of language classroom, to actually notice the existence of ECAs. Even worse, ECAs by their definition are not integrated into foreign/second language curricular at university levels, and are therefore invisible for either teachers or curriculum planners. Our research studies show that ECAs still exist and attract students, and are therefore worth examining and accounting for in some shape and form in university curriculum planning activities.

#### *Native speakers of languages*

Some Canadian participants reported having difficulties understanding native speakers involved in ECAs, whereas Russian participants wish to have more native speakers involved. Clearly, this reflects the educational environment and sociolinguistic differences between the countries. In Russia, native speakers of foreign languages are still not easily available. In Canada, many languages studied in universities as “foreign” or “second” are spoken in the local communities within minority languages diasporas, and there are many native speakers of different languages available to participate in ECAs.

### *4.6 Limitations of the study*

Our study was limited by the number of participants, and was restricted to mostly two universities in each country. There was no balance in the sample by major and gender. Therefore, the results should be treated with caution as preliminary, and should be further confirmed in a larger-scale study. It should also be noted that the positive effects of ECAs were reported by students, but the existence of the effect should be confirmed in further experimental studies measuring the proficiency of students participating in ECAs in comparison to a control group.

There would be some merit to conduct a future study of the teachers’ opinions on the value of ECAs. In our study, we focused on students rather than teachers for two reasons. First, university language teachers may not even be aware of the whole scope of language-related ECAs that their students are involved in (as some of them are organized by students without teacher participation, and study abroad programs may be organized by administrative offices). Second, we could not recruit enough participants for a teacher survey. In future, the study can be complemented by interviewing language teachers and administrators on the value of ECAs and potential ways of accounting for them in curriculum planning.



## 5 Conclusion

It is known that “extracurricular activities allow students to broaden their regular curriculum, and pursue activities that help to create a positive atmosphere in school” (Vermaas et al., 2009, p. 26). In the current situation of insufficient financing of language courses and programs world-wide, undergraduate language programs in universities and colleges have been recommended to resort to enhancing extra-curricular offerings for survival (Davidheiser & Wolf, 2009). It appears that the theoretical foundations of ECAs need to be reestablished in research. ECAs are an overarching niche that can bring together findings from autonomous learning, informal learning settings, community language learning, computer-assisted language learning, e-learning, mobile applications for language learning and other related areas in order to provide a comprehensive modern landscape of language learning opportunities outside the classroom. This landscape can inform language teachers and learners about ways the learners can improve their language skills in peer groups and on their own.

Our results suggest that according to student views, language-related extra-curricular activities in universities are an excellent tool to motivate language learners and help them by providing an additional milieu for language practice. Learners in Canada and Russia report a positive impact of ECAs on all the language skills, on building confidence, developing speaking and communication skills. The learners also find that ECA participation helps to overcome shyness and nervousness. At the same time, the study suggests ways to improve ECAs by making them better advertised (on par with study abroad programs) and better structured (by accounting for them in curriculum programming and resource allocation).

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Questionnaire

#### Part 1. Participants' background

1. Your age .....
2. Your Gender (please, circle):        M        F        Other
3. Year at the university .....
4. Your major .....
5. Your native language(s) .....
6. What other language(s) do you speak fluently (except for the ones that you learnt via your university or high school foreign language classes)? .....
7. Please list modern foreign languages you are studying in the University now, or have previously studied in the university.....
8. Are you thinking about taking language courses in the University in the future? (please, circle):    YES        NO
9. Were you born in Canada? (Russia, for the Russian version of the questionnaire) (please, circle): Yes/No

#### Part 2. Extracurricular Activities Study

1. Do you know any language oriented extra curriculum activities being organized at the University? (please, circle):    YES        NO  
If YES, what kind of activities?  
.....
2. Have you ever participated in any language oriented extra curriculum activity? (please, circle):    YES        NO  
If you answered "No", please fill in the next question only.  
If you answered "Yes", please proceed with filling in all the questions below.
3. Would you like to participate in any language-oriented extracurricular activities in the future (outside or inside the university)? (please, circle): YES    NO  
If you answered "Yes", proceed to the next question.
4. Would you like to keep attending language oriented extracurricular activities at the University? (please, circle):    YES        NO
5. What kind of language oriented extra curriculum activities have you participated in during your studies in the university?  
.....
6. Do you think the language-oriented extracurriculars that you experienced had any impact on your language learning? (please, circle):    YES        NO  
If YES, what kind of impact?  
.....

7. Which of the listed activities seem most important to you?

(please rate from 5 – ‘very important’, 4 – ‘important’, 3 – ‘slightly important’, 2 – ‘important’ to 1 – ‘not important at all’)

Language Lunch	1	2	3	4	5
Movie nights	1	2	3	4	5
Book club	1	2	3	4	5
Theme parties	1	2	3	4	5
Student magazines/wallpapers/ newspapers	1	2	3	4	5
Trips/ Excursions	1	2	3	4	5
Skype/Video conference communication with students from the country of the target language	1	2	3	4	5
Competitions/Games in the target language	1	2	3	4	5
Language retreats	1	2	3	4	5

8. Do you think language-related extracurriculars have been useful for your language learning? (please circle): YES NO

If YES, in what ways?

.....

9. Have you noticed any impact of extracurricular activities on:

Your language skills in general? (please circle): YES NO

Your knowledge of grammar? (please circle): YES NO

Your vocabulary? (please circle): YES NO

Your language fluency? (please circle): YES NO

Your knowledge of target culture? (please circle): YES NO

Your communication abilities? (please circle): YES NO

Your attitude towards the target language? (please circle): YES NO

Your motivation to study the target language? (please circle): YES NO

Your personality? (please circle): YES NO

Your interest in the country(ies) of the target language? (please circle): YES NO

Your interest in the culture associated with the target language? (please circle): YES NO

Your motivation to study the target language? (please circle): YES NO

10. If you noticed any impact of ECAs on your language skills, could you please identify the kind of impact?

.....

11. If you noticed any impact of ECAs on your personality, could you please identify the kind of impact?  
.....

12. If you noticed any impact of ECAs on your interest in the country(ies) of the target language, could you please identify the kind of impact?  
.....

13. If you noticed any impact of ECAs on your interest in the culture associated with the target language, could you please identify the kind of impact?  
.....

14. If you noticed any impact of ECAs on your motivation towards studying the target language, could you please identify the kind of impact?  
.....

15. Did you experience any problems or difficulties during the language oriented extracurriculars you attended? (please, circle): Yes No.  
If "Yes", please specify the kinds of problems or difficulties.  
.....

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