

# EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC CLUBS AND THEIR EDUCATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AT A VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY

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## ABSTRACT

*The study was conducted to investigate the EFL students' perceptions of academic club effectiveness at a university in Vietnam. Specifically, through a survey among 106 students, the study explored how students perceived the effectiveness of academic clubs in developing their social skills, civic responsibility and leadership skills. Data was collected through questionnaires, which were administered to students participating in some common academic clubs and those who had never been in any clubs. The findings revealed that academic clubs played a positive role in EFL students' development beyond language learning. Although their current impact was more evident in enhancing social skills than in developing civic responsibility and leadership competencies, they remained a promising extracurricular platform. The results offered valuable insights for university administrators, educators, and policymakers in enhancing the structure and management of academic clubs. By identifying the perceptions associated with these clubs, the study helped in devising strategies to maximize their positive impacts on EFL students. The proposed measures and strategies could then be implemented to improve the quality and effectiveness of academic clubs, thus providing students with a more holistic educational experience.*

**Keyword:** *Students' perceptions, Effectiveness, Academic clubs, Social skills, Civic responsibility, Leadership skills*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Academic clubs in recent years have become popular places where students choose to study, practice and develop their expertise and skills after class time. They are defined as “the second talent education training base after the comprehensive curriculum education.” (Fu et al, 2024).

It can be seen that academic clubs perform a variety of functions. Firstly, they help foster social skills that enable them to live freely and to realise themselves (Erginsoy & Kaya, 2013). Student clubs are a good environment for this function of education to be carried out.

Social skills, besides main functions mentioned above, are the way of behaviour exhibited in social situations (Hops, 1983). In other words, social skills are socially informed appropriate behaviours that make communication with others possible, and above all, it indirectly indicates a certain set of behaviours that is not socially approved. Gresham, Sugai, & Horner (2001)

proposed five groups of social skills: Peer-relational skills; Self-management skills; Academic skills; Compliance skills; and Assertion skills.

Secondly, academic clubs develop democracy education and leadership skills (Ata, 2019) The contribution of student clubs is especially great with regard to democracy education. By means of the preliminary meetings, discussions and exchanges of views, group activities, research and elections conducted during club activities, students gain democratic attitudes and behaviours. The effective guidance of teachers during the club processes enables students to acquire a democratic culture and to gain leadership skills. Valuable leadership skills include the ability to delegate, inspire and communicate effectively. Other leadership traits include honesty, confidence, commitment and creativity. In the sixth edition of *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, Northouse (2013) investigates twelve separate forms of leadership, namely trait approach, skills approach, style approach, situational approach, contingency

theory, path-goal theory, leader-member exchange theory, transformational leadership, servant leadership, authentic leadership, team leadership, and psychodynamic approach.

Thirdly, with regard to recreation, student clubs provide the opportunity for students to apply and adapt the things they have learnt at school or outside school to their daily lives (Çelebi, 2016). Recreation education and democracy education are similar to each other. These clubs enable students to perceive democratic principles, thereby making these an assimilated part of their personalities (Kılbaş, 2010).

Fourthly, as for the function of fostering civic responsibility, it is the performing of temporary tasks by students within the scope of social responsibility, aimed at solving an ongoing problem in social life and eliminating troublesome situations of individuals and groups, without expecting anything in civic responsibility. Although no single definition exists, it is clear that civic responsibility is not merely a matter of voting or obeying the laws. Concepts of civic responsibility include "citizenship for democracy," "participatory democracy," and "social responsibility." (Ömer Gökel & Gökmen Dağlı, 2017)

Based on the theoretical background, researchers and educators around the world have conducted research on club activities. In *An Examination of Student Club Activities from the Perspective of School Principals and Teachers* on the World Journal of Education, Çınar (2019) examined the effects of student club activities in high schools in Kars province, Turkey on the development of students' social skills, democracy and governance skills, recreation education and community service skills. The educators in the sample came to the conclusion that the student clubs achieved their objectives in the theme of democracy and governance skills but were not effective in the other themes. The reasons for this ineffectiveness emerged as deficiencies in the physical environment in the schools, lack of time for activities, excessive numbers of students in the clubs and unwillingness of teachers with regard to club activities.

In Vietnam, Nguyen & Tran (2000) analysed and explained the effects of scientific activities at specialized clubs, determining the importance of the attention of school leaders and the support of

the teachers as well as the efforts of students in organizing these specialized clubs.

These studies show that club activities have been of interest to researchers. However, research projects are limited to a certain educational institution as well as from administrators' perspectives. There is a lack of studies focusing on Vietnamese students' views on the effectiveness of academic clubs in developing their social skills, civic responsibility and leadership abilities.

Therefore, this study investigates students' perceptions of the effectiveness of popular academic clubs in Thai Nguyen University. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions: (1). What are the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of academic clubs in fostering their social skills?; (2). What are the students' views on the effectiveness of academic clubs in developing their civic responsibility?; (3). How do students perceive the effectiveness of academic clubs in developing their leadership skills?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design to comprehensively understand students' perceptions of the academic club effectiveness. The quantitative aspect involved a structured questionnaire to gather broad insights from the participants. This approach was chosen because quantitative research aimed to test objective theories by examining relationships among measurable variables using numerical data and statistical analysis (Creswell and Creswell, 2023).

### 2.2. Participants

The study targeted EFL students at a university in Thai Nguyen City, Vietnam. It exploited stratified sampling method to divide the individuals into two groups, who participated and had never been in academic clubs. Then, simple random sampling was conducted inside each group. In the sample size of 106 students, the number of surveyed participants included 21 first-year students, 16 second-year students, 40 third-year students, 12 fourth-year students and 17 graduated students. Out of 106 students participating in the survey, 32 male students (30.2%), 68 female ones (64.2%) and 6 students (5.6%) who preferred not to say their gender.

### **2.3. Data collection and analysis**

Data were collected using the questionnaire as the primary instrument. The questionnaire consists of two main parts. In Part A, demographic questions were included to gather information on participants' year of study, their club involvement and gender. In Part B, 25 survey question items were designed based on the theoretical framework. The questionnaire was divided into sections corresponding to different aspects of club effectiveness, including social skills, civic responsibility, and leadership skills to answer the research questions. A structured questionnaire was developed with items rated on a Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree) to measure students' perceptions of the effectiveness of academic clubs in various areas. The finalized questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms, with a link sent to students separately between those who joined the academic clubs and those who did not through their email. Participants were given two weeks to complete the questionnaire. Data collected from research subjects then were refined by Excel 2017 to calculate the percentage. For each survey item, frequency counts and percentages were computed for each response category, providing a clear view of how many students selected each level of agreement or disagreement. These summary statistics were presented in tables to highlight the most common patterns in the data. This descriptive approach ensured that the analysis focused on the distribution of responses and common patterns of agreement without overinterpreting the findings.

## **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1. Students' Perceptions on the Effectiveness of Academic Clubs in Fostering Social Skills**

As can be seen from Table 1, overall, the findings revealed that students viewed academic clubs favourably, with an average consent rate of 69.7%, indicating a generally positive evaluation of club participation. The majority of the participants agreed and highly agreed that the participation in academic clubs improved their ability to work in a team and to behave well with other people. This finding suggested that collaborative activities organized by academic clubs provided valuable opportunities for students to develop teamwork skills, which were essential in both academic and professional contexts.

Moreover, students also perceived academic clubs as effective in fostering self-expression, with a consent rate of 70.8%. Forty students strongly agreed and 35 agreed that club activities helped them express their feelings appropriately. Although 28 students selected the neutral option, very few students disagreed, suggesting that while many students experienced improvement in this area, some may not have had sufficient opportunities to practice expressive communication.

Regarding time management and punctuality, two thirds of the respondents believed that club participation helped them organize their schedules more effectively and taught them about punctuality. However, over one-fifth of the participants remained neutral, implying that the influence of club activities on time management and punctuality may differ depending on students' individual involvement and responsibilities.

As observed from the table, in contrast, the two lowest-rated items were understanding the importance of obeying rules and regulations (54.7%) and defending ideas appropriately (61.3%). Although more students agreed than disagreed with these statements, these lower consent rates indicated that students perceived academic clubs as less effective in promoting discipline and argumentative communication. One possible explanation is that club activities emphasize collaboration and participation rather than structured debate or strict rule enforcement.

The findings further indicate moderate positive perceptions regarding the ability of active listening. This question item received consent rates of 66%, indicating that about two-thirds of the participants believed club activities improved these skills. The relatively large proportion of neutral responses suggested that this ability may be influenced by factors beyond club participation alone, such as classroom practices or individual personality traits.

To sum up, the results demonstrated that students considered academic clubs particularly effective in enhancing teamwork, interpersonal communication, and social interaction, while their perceived effectiveness in developing critical discussion skills, self-advocacy, and discipline-related behaviours was comparatively lower.

Question items	Response result n = 106					
	1	2	3	4	5	Consent Rate %
1.Participation in academic clubs improves my ability to work in a team.	3	4	3	45	51	90,6%
2.Participation in academic clubs teaches me how to behave well with other people.	1	6	10	53	36	84%
3.Participation in academic clubs helps me express my own feeling appropriately	0	3	28	35	40	70,8%
4.Participation in academic clubs helps me organize my timetable better.	6	6	22	43	29	68%
5.Participation in academic clubs enhances my ability of checking the other people's understanding and asking appropriate questions.	5	4	19	44	34	72,6%
6.Participation in academic clubs helps me build up ideas from other people's comments.	9	8	22	31	36	63,2%
7.Participation in academic clubs teaches me being on time.	9	11	16	39	31	66%
8.Participation in academic clubs teaches me the importance of obeying the rules and regulations.	11	9	28	35	23	54,7%
9.Participation in academic clubs improves my active listening to understand the message thoroughly.	10	9	17	46	24	66%
10.Participation in academic clubs teaches me the way to defend my ideas appropriately.	18	10	13	41	24	61,3%
<b>Average</b>	<b>69,7%</b>					

Table 1: Students' Perceptions on the Effectiveness of Academic Clubs in Fostering Social Skills

### 3.2. Students' Perceptions on the Effectiveness of Academic Clubs in Fostering Civic Responsibility

Table 2 presents students' perceptions of the effectiveness of academic clubs in fostering civic responsibility. Overall, the average consent rate was nearly 52%, indicating that just over half of the respondents agreed that participation in academic clubs contributed to the development of civic knowledge, attitudes, and responsible citizenship. Compared with the findings for soft skill development, these results suggested that students perceived academic clubs as less effective in promoting civic responsibility.

Among the eight statements, the highest level of agreement was recorded for developing critical-thinking skills to make informed and responsible decisions (Item 16), with a consent rate of 68.9%. Specifically, 42 students (39.6%) agreed and 31 (29.2%) strongly agreed that academic clubs enhanced their critical-thinking abilities. This finding suggested that club activities encouraged students to analyze issues, exchange ideas, and make thoughtful decisions, which are fundamental components of responsible citizenship.

Similarly, 67.9% of the respondents agreed that academic clubs helped them recognize the characteristics and actions of effective citizens (Item 11). With 72 students selecting either "agree" or "strongly agree," the result indicated that participation in club activities contributed to students' understanding of civic values and the qualities expected of responsible members of society.

Students also expressed positive perceptions regarding the role of academic clubs in teaching the value of volunteering (64.2%). Nearly two-thirds of the respondents agreed that club participation encouraged appreciation for volunteer work, suggesting that clubs provide meaningful opportunities for students to engage in service-oriented activities and develop prosocial values.

The findings revealed more moderate perceptions in relation to respecting human diversity and continued community involvement. Consent rates for these two items were 58.5% and 54.7%, respectively. Although more than half of the respondents viewed academic clubs as beneficial in these areas, the relatively high numbers of neutral and disagreeing responses indicated that these civic outcomes may not be consistently emphasized across all club activities.

Notably, students expressed less favourable perceptions regarding the development of practical civic competencies. Approximately 50% agreed that academic clubs helped them evaluate information objectively and accurately (Item 14), while nearly 40% disagreed with this statement. This finding suggested that students may have limited opportunities within club activities to practice evidence-based reasoning and information evaluation.

Even lower levels of agreement were observed for raising awareness of local problems and their connection to national issues (Item 12), which received a consent rate of only 28.3%. Nearly 56% of respondents disagreed with this statement, indicating that academic clubs rarely expose students to community issues or broader social challenges. This represented one of the weakest perceived contributions of academic clubs to civic education.

The lowest-rated item concerned the ability to use information to help solve social problems (Item 15), with a consent rate of just 23.6%. More than

two-thirds of the participants either disagreed or remained neutral, suggesting that students seldom perceive academic club activities as providing authentic opportunities to apply knowledge to real-world social issues. This finding may indicate that club activities tend to focus primarily on academic or language-related objectives rather than community problem-solving.

Overall, the findings suggested that academic clubs were perceived as relatively successful in fostering individual civic awareness, such as understanding citizenship, appreciating volunteerism, and developing critical-thinking skills. However, they appeared to be less effective in cultivating active civic engagement, particularly in helping students understand community issues, evaluate public information critically, and participate in solving social problems.

students generally acknowledged the contribution of academic clubs to leadership development, the perceived impact was less than their contribution to soft skills.

Among the seven leadership-related competencies, the highest-rated item was "Academic club participation promotes my leadership skill in coordinating with other people" (Item 21), with a consent rate of 63.2%. Specifically, 40 students (37.7%) agreed and 27 (25.5%) strongly agreed with this statement. This finding indicated that academic clubs provided students with opportunities to organize group activities, collaborate with peers, and coordinate collective tasks, thereby strengthening their interpersonal leadership abilities.

Nearly half of the participants agreed and highly agreed with the question item 23. That meant they believed that academic club participation did not enhance their ability to manage financial and material resources. Question item 23 also had the lowest participants who disagreed and highly disagreed rated with 31.1% of consent responses. That meant many students did not see any improvement in their ability to manage financial and material resources. This finding suggested that financial planning and resource management were typically undertaken by academic club leaders.

Question items	Response result n = 106					Consent Rate %
	1	2	3	4	5	
11. Academic clubs help me recognize characteristics and actions of effective citizens.	10	16	18	37	35	67,9%
12. Academic clubs raise my awareness of local problems and their connection to national issues.	12	47	17	14	16	28,3%
13. Academic clubs teach me the value of volunteering	10	9	19	44	24	64,2%
14. I can evaluate information objectively and accurately through academic club activities.	8	32	14	35	17	49,1%
15. I can use information to help solve social problems	11	34	36	10	15	23,6%
16. I can develop critical-thinking skills to make informed and responsible decisions.	11	13	19	42	31	68,9%
17. Academic club activities help me recognize and respect human diversity.	11	19	14	37	25	58,5%
18. Academic club activities encourage me to engage in continued involvement in the community service.	12	13	23	37	21	54,7%
<b>Average</b>						<b>51,9%</b>

Table 2: Students' Perceptions on the Effectiveness of Academic Clubs in Fostering Civic Responsibility

### 3.3. Students' Perceptions on the Effectiveness of Academic Clubs in Developing Leadership Skills

As can be seen from Table 3, the findings indicated a moderately positive evaluation, with an average consent rate of 58.2%. This suggested that while

Question items	Response result n=106					Consent Rate %
	1	2	3	4	5	
19. Academic club participation develops my decision-making ability.	11	16	15	43	21	60,4%
20. Academic club participation enhances my strategic problem-solving skill.	9	20	14	38	25	59,4%
21. Academic club participation promotes my leading skill in coordinating with other people.	14	8	17	40	27	63,2%
22. Academic club participation fosters my negotiation and persuasion skills.	15	13	17	43	18	57,5%
23. Academic club participation enhances my ability to manage financial and material resources.	18	15	24	30	19	46,2%
24. Academic club participation teaches me how to operate personnel resources.	11	9	20	44	22	62,3%
25. Academic club participation forms my conceptualization of mission and vision of organization.	17	13	14	39	23	58,5%
<b>Average</b>						<b>58,2%</b>

Table 3: Students' Perceptions on the Effectiveness of Academic Clubs in Developing Leadership Skills

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The findings showed that academic clubs at the university made a meaningful contribution to students' personal development, particularly in fostering teamwork, interpersonal communication, and other leadership competencies. Students generally recognized that participation in club activities provided valuable opportunities to collaborate with peers, exchange ideas, and develop confidence in social interaction. These outcomes demonstrated that academic clubs served as an important complement to formal classroom instruction by creating authentic learning environments in which students could practice essential soft skills.

Nevertheless, the findings also revealed several limitations in the current operation of academic clubs. Students perceived the clubs as only moderately effective in fostering civic responsibility and leadership skills, especially in areas related to community engagement, awareness of social issues, financial management, and active participation in solving social problems. These results suggested that while academic clubs successfully promoted interpersonal development, they had yet to fully realize their potential as platforms for cultivating socially responsible and capable future leaders.

Overall, the study indicated that academic clubs possessed considerable educational value but required further improvement to maximize their impact on students' holistic development. To strengthen their effectiveness, club activities should incorporate more community-service projects, service-learning experiences, leadership training, and opportunities for students to participate in organizational planning and decision-making. Such enhancements would not only improve students' social and leadership competencies but also foster a stronger sense of civic responsibility and active citizenship.

In conclusion, the findings supported the view that academic clubs played a positive role in EFL students' development beyond language learning. Although their current impact was more evident in enhancing social skills than in developing civic responsibility and leadership competencies, they remained a promising extracurricular platform. With more structured programs and broader

student involvement, academic clubs can become an effective means of promoting well-rounded graduates equipped with the social, civic, and leadership qualities required in today's society.

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