

Creating Authentic Dialog: ESL Students as Recipients of Service Learning

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*"Tell me and I forget,
Teach me and I may remember,
Involve me and I learn. "*
-Benjamin Franklin

Introduction

An environment where authentic dialog with native English speakers occurs on a regular basis presents ESL students with the possibility to grow both linguistically and socially. In this article, I will describe how introducing a service-learning component to an ESL program provides the students with the opportunity to meet regularly with native English speaking peers, to apply what they have been learning in class, and to engage in various extracurricular and cultural activities in the community. I will present guidelines about how to initiate a service-learning element to your ESL program, give examples of various activities our students have engaged in and provide tips on how to make the experience smoother for both the ESL students and the service-learning students. [\[1\]](#)

The Dilemma

Most ESL students decide to study abroad hoping to improve their language ability and to experience total immersion in the language and culture. Unfortunately, living and studying in a country does not necessarily ensure acclimation and acculturation since the basic structure of many English language programs does not provide much interaction with native English speakers. Indeed, the ESL students work hard to learn and master various language skills; however, outside of the classroom environment, they have little opportunity to practice and fine tune these skills with native speakers aside from their instructors. Therefore, despite a strong desire to integrate more fully into American life, most remain in the comfortable cocoon of the small international student [\[2\]](#) community, unable to cross the gap into the American life.

What Is Service-Learning and How Can It Benefit My Students?

Service-learning is experiential learning that uses community service to reinforce classroom learning objectives. It engages students in active learning and critical reflection while fostering their civic responsibility.

Service-learning combines service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activity changes both the recipient and the provider of the service. This is accomplished by combining service tasks with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content. (Clearinghouse. "Welcome").

Service-learning contrasts to volunteerism in that the service itself is directly linked to a course. It encourages the service-learning students to reflect not only on the service but also on how it directly relates to the subject of the class and the development of their own identity and awareness of the world around them. This self-reflection is seen as the key factor of turning a service experience into a more fulfilling learning experience (Rice & Pollack, p. 133).

The service-learning component related to our ESL program was designed to provide native English-speaking language and culture mentors for the international students. This provides a community-based support for the ESL program by helping integrate the international students socially and culturally into the American college experience. The ESL students are thus the recipients of the 'service' by the native speaking mentors. In addition to a weekly class session, the service-learning students and ESL students spend 30 hours together over the course of a semester; how they spend these 30 hours is entirely up to the pairs. Together they brainstorm ideas of activities and interests to create their unique experience, tailored to fit each individual peer group. Often, the peer groups join other peer groups to form a group activity. Since both the service-learning and ESL students share an equal voice in deciding the path, their personal investment increases as they take ownership of this experience.

Immediate initiation and clear yet flexible guidelines are paramount to providing a successful foundation for the semester. The pairs are introduced during the second week of the semester once the course syllabus and goals have been presented and discussed separately with each group. In the introductory class and in separate groups, students brainstorm various activities and interests that they can then share with their partners. Subsequent classes provide a controlled environment in which the service-learning and international students are engaged in context-based linguistic activities which apply the skills that the international students have been studying in their core classes. At the end of each class period, students have time to meet with their assigned peer to plan their next extracurricular activity. Limited only by safety and practical restrictions, the students' interests were transformed into a colorful plethora of activities for the semester.

Below are examples of some of the activities our students did.

- **Campus-based events:** campus tours, football games, introduction to the library and library skills, rallies, cultural events, class shadowing;
- **Community-based events:** concerts, festivals, lectures, sports events;
- **Culture:** museums, films, cafes, restaurants, trips to Wal-Mart & Costco;
- **Group activities:** pumpkin carving, cookie baking, amusement parks, pot lucks, game nights, study groups, ice skating, bowling, picnics, paint gun games, weekly lunches, cooking lessons, Chicago v. New York style pizza taste tests;
- **Practical help:** helping with job search, looking for an apartment, opening a bank account, navigating the local transport system and shopping at ethnic markets.

Both the recipient, in our case the ESL students, and the service-learning students benefit from this experience. For the service-learning students, this experience fosters civic responsibility by presenting them with the prospect to examine how their cultural identity influences the way they view the global community and to recognize that there are no superior or inferior cultures. Reflecting on how cultural identity affects her global perspective, one American student mentioned this in her paper:

In all, I think I am learning as much about myself and my culture as I am about them and theirs. Being raised in America, you have certain values and ideas instilled in your mind whether you know it or not. Meeting people from other countries has put my American values in perspective. I've learned more about the world than I ever thought without leaving Boise. I never realized how skewed the American view on the rest of the world is, but this class has opened my eyes. I'm more culturally aware now.

A service-learning course focused on helping integrate the international students socially and culturally into the American college experience promotes cultural diversity and gives service-learning students the opportunity to expand communication skills and share various language skills with the international peers. It also provides valuable experience, which may coincide with career preparation.

The international students benefit in many ways by being the recipients of a service-learning course. First, by having regular, direct contact with a native speaker, the international students have recurring opportunities to practice what they are learning in class in an informal yet authentic environment. Practicing and mastering listening, speaking and grammar no longer remains a wearisome task when real-life contexts and situations are in place and native speakers are present. The students leave their textbooks behind as they go out into the real world to use what they have been studying. As one of our Colombian students commented,

I realized that all of us live in different countries and have different cultures, but also we are young people and we can share interests and experiences. I liked (my service-learning peers) because I could express things that I didn't know how to say, just because they helped me.

Additionally, accompanied by a sympathetic native-speaking peer with whom they regularly meet throughout the semester, the affective filters wane as the ESL students become more comfortable in their language ability. As they gain more confidence, they are more willing to take risks, explore new language and practice authentic dialog in a non-threatening environment. In addition to the linguistic benefits of this service-learning component, the international students are exposed to various cultural and social events which enable them to adapt gradually and integrate more fully into the culture and community. When asked to summarize her overall experience, a Korean student wrote:

I really had a good time. Even though I made a mistakes several times in speaking English, my partner responed to me very nicely and helped my English speaking. Especially, I could know about her life. Also, throughout these activities international students can make native speaker friends and native speakers can make international students friends. It is great.

Laying the Groundwork for a Positive Experience

Below are some tips based on some of our trials and errors on making the journey smoother.

Establishing Communication

- Contact your local institutions' service-learning department to see if your program fits their criteria. If there are no universities that offer service-learning in your area, you could try contacting local high schools where community service is becoming a more regular element in curriculum.
- Meet with a service-learning coordinator to review the courses offering service learning that best fit your needs.
- Discuss goals with the service-learning instructor to provide insight to your program and your students' needs.
- Maintain open dialog with the instructor, the service-learning students and the ESL students throughout the semester.
- Don't be afraid to make changes along the way. This is a living learning experience that will need to be adapted to match its participants' needs, interests and desires.

Creating Curriculum

- Include this experience as a separate class in your master schedule. In our course description, we refer to it as the 'Conversation Lab.'
- Mirror the central theme of service-learning: Reflection.
- Increase ownership and involvement:
 - Include reflective journals to provide the ESL students a 'private' domain to discuss personal feelings, thoughts and perceptions. You may want to have some 'guided' journal entries to help them anticipate experiences, record new language or vocabulary, and reflect more deeply on the experience at hand.
 - Devote class time to discuss and exchange ideas about their experiences.
 - Encourage students to write discussion questions for the class reflection sessions. They then can become the facilitator of the discussion that their questions instigate.
 - Request students anonymously write both positive and negative feelings and use these comments to guide class discussions.
- In the first few days of the term and before contact with the service-learning students:
 - Help the international students write learning goals for the semester and brainstorm ways to help them meet these goals.
 - Check back throughout the semester during class reflections to see progress and to remind students of their initial goals
 - Consider having the students write new goals as the semester progresses.

- Enhance student accountability by involving students in assessment:
 - Encourage reflection on what they have put into the experience and how their contribution has aided them.
 - Devote some class time to discuss or communally create guidelines for assessment.

Tips for a Smoother Journey

- Make attendance in this program mandatory for the international students. The service-learning students are required a certain number of hours per semester (in our case 30). The international students should be required to meet the same number of hours. If both sides are committed, the road to continual and habitual encounters will be smoother. We found that when the ESL students thought it was optional, they were more likely not to participate regularly.
- Consider keeping this lab component of the program for the students with intermediate and higher levels of English proficiency. This allows for more linguistical exchange between the ESL and service-learning students, hindering distressing situations. Also, it can be used as a 'carrot' to motivate the lower-level students.
- If numbers permit, pair up same-level students with one service-learning student. This allows for a comfort zone for all of the students involved.
- Encourage group activities where several peer groups get together to do a large group activity. Our students feel more comfortable when more of their peers are present during the activities.
- Establish an electronic chat room where both ESL and service-learning students can meet to brainstorm different activities, share new language and post various announcements.
- Provide basic guidelines and establish clear expectations, but ultimately allow the students the freedom to create and define their own involvement and expectations.

Conclusion

As we reach the end of our first year of this pilot course, the feedback from both the international and service-learning students highlights the values of this rewarding experience on both sides of the cultural fence. When asked what they had gained from this experience, some American students wrote:

I have a better respect for Non-English speaking people who are trying to learn English. I'm also humbled by the amount of English they have learned in a matter of months. Makes me want to put myself in their shoes, move to France, and learn to speak French!

The cultural experience was awesome too. I didn't know a thing about Palestine or Korea and now I do.

I gained a better understanding and respect for students who move to America. I caught a glimpse into the struggles that they must deal with day in and day out. Combined with my own feelings of confusion and bewilderment that I feel every class session in French class, I can somewhat empathize, be it on a small scale, with what the ESL students go through all day every day while they are in America.

When responding to the same question, some of the international students wrote:

I gained new friendships and more confidence in my English. They understood what I was trying to say!

I really enjoyed this experience. I got to know cool people. I feel comfortable talking to them. After that, I had to talk to different Native Americans to get my admission at BSU done and I haven't had any problem at doing it. I didn't feel shy because I feel more confidence. My shyness is gone.

It was a great opportunity to get learn vivid words and idioms which are used by native speakers but not my teacher.

As a result of this experience, the ESL students have had many opportunities outside of the classroom to practice authentic dialog, to gain communicative competence, and to increase their confidence in their conversational abilities. Everyone involved,

both the service-learning students and the international students, has an opportunity to gain interpersonal and global communicative experience while enhancing cross-cultural awareness.

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[<!--\[if !supportFootnotes\]-->\[1\]<!--\[endif\]-->](#) In this study, the term service-learning students (or SL students) refers to the native or near-native English speakers who are enrolled in the service-learning course. In addition to their course instruction, the service-learning students complete 30 hours of community service. In our case, this 'service' is the time spent as a mentor to the ESL students.

[<!--\[if !supportFootnotes\]-->\[2\]<!--\[endif\]-->](#) In this study, the terms ESL and international students are interchangeable.

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