

Using Service-Learning as Part of an ESL Program

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Introduction

The introduction of service-learning into our ESL program has revitalized its curriculum and made a significant impact on our students. In this article I'd like to explain how service-learning is well-suited for second language teaching, and give you some tips for incorporating service-learning into your ESL program.

What is Service-Learning?

Service-learning is a union of community service and formal learning. It involves students going out into their communities and using that which they learn in class to help people, and then bringing that which they learn in their community service back into the classroom to enhance their learning. It's service with learning objectives and learning with service objectives. The concept is not new. It's at least as old as The International Partnership for Service-Learning, which was established in 1982. And, as is evident in the name of this partnership, the concept is not uniquely American. It's a concept which is evidenced in countries all over the world and in many different disciplines.

Two Significant Second Language Learner Needs

As language teachers (and learners), we've all experienced what has been long proven by research: **to learn a language well learners need meaningful contexts**. Mary Ann Christison, in "Applications of Brain-Based Research for Second Language Teaching and Learning" (1999), deduced,

Facts and skills that are taught in isolation and not connected to something meaningful cannot be remembered without considerable practice and rehearsal... Second language classroom activities that are meaningful create an ideal learning opportunity for second language students to learn more information in a shorter time, with less effort.

Similarly, Laura Latulippe (1999) suggests, "Wherever possible, students should be placed in context-rich situations."

This point does not need belaboring. But there is another need that young adult learners have, especially at the university level, which hasn't received as much attention in the field of second language learning. The need to which I refer is **the development of humane values**. This is a responsibility that until fairly recently many institutes of higher learning took very seriously. As Mithra Augustine, a renowned educator of India, asserted at an international conference on service-learning,

The role and function of universities and colleges were earlier seen as integral to the processes of social engineering, developing in students critical faculties, creative potential and initiative towards applying these to the tasks of freeing people from material want and intellectual deprivation (p.12, Berry & Chisholm).

And still today there is a broadening concern for this responsibility. There are a growing number of educators who, like Howard Berry and Linda Chisholm (1999), believe that

Foremost among the purposes (of higher education) is that of giving young adults the skills and breadth of knowledge to think deeply about the structures of their society and to appropriate values which must govern their personal and professional lives (p.12).

And there are even those, like Louis Albert, who insist, "Preparing the next generation for a lifelong commitment to productive citizenship is the most important challenge facing educators and communities at the local, regional, national, and global levels" (p.15, Berry & Chisholm).

Service-Learning & ESL Programs

Service-Learning is ideal for second language teaching because it meets the two learner needs described above. It creates meaningful contexts for the language learner, and it draws out and cultivates humane values.

Since the summer of 2000 service-learning has been an integral part of Sacred Heart University's ESL curriculum. Each week students go to a local soup kitchen, an elementary school, a tutoring agency, a retirement community, a Habitat for Humanity construction project, or the like -- and they serve. They prepare and serve food, assist physical education teachers in gym class, share with kids about their countries, tutor in math or computer literacy, swing a hammer along with other volunteers, or help seniors with their grocery shopping. There are many ways our students can serve. Back in the classroom, students have the opportunity to discuss the myriad of feelings, thoughts, experiences, and observations that they've had. They also have opportunities to read and research the issues affecting the people they are serving (e.g., homelessness, welfare systems, treatment of the elderly, affordable housing, childhood education). This is meaningful learning! Their language tasks are no longer sterile, isolated or tedious. They become real responses to real issues -- students learning about and expressing their thoughts and ideas on issues of importance and personal relevance.

Along with the provision of meaningful contexts for language learning, service-learning has the added benefit of fostering students' personal growth. As one student from Turkey reflected, "(Service-learning) made me think more and more about needy people... It made me plan my future considering poor and needy people and gave me a different point of view." A Colombian student put it this way: "(Service-learning) makes me grow in spirit and mind and in my way of seeing the things."

Some Practical Tips for Getting Started

If you're interested in incorporating a service-learning component into your ESL program, here are some tips based on our own successes and failures.

1. Establish and develop some relationships with some community service agencies near you. Most of these agencies are volunteer-dependent and will jump at the chance of connecting your students with their programs. And with a good working relationship, you can find some mutually beneficial ways your students can participate.
2. Make sure the service is really service. In other words, do the activities that your students engage in really help people?
3. Spend at least 3-4 consecutive weeks at the same worksite. This develops a rapport between students and the people with whom they're working, and it gives students a chance to become more comfortable. There is inevitably an "ice breaking" period in the beginning, and the more familiar the place and people become, the more rewarding the experience will be -- both for the students and for the agency served.
4. Make sure the activities that the students are engaged in involve personal interaction with others. Remember that one of the main goals of this is providing meaningful language contexts. Students spending 2 hours digging a ditch by themselves may not afford any meaningful language use. But students spending 2 hours digging a ditch alongside an English-speaking volunteer will surely provide the students with some meaningful language contexts.
5. Model the kind of involvement you expect from them. Don't just drop them off and pick them up. Participate in the service, setting an example for them to follow.
6. Challenge your students to take initiatives. If they sit back and wait for others to interact with them, they will miss opportunities to develop their English. Some students will be reluctant to step out of their comfort zones. But with some encouragement, practice and good modeling, they will soon develop the skills and courage to initiate meaningful language interaction.
7. Pair quiet students with more outgoing ones. This will help increase the comfort level for quiet students, while encouraging them

to step out.

8. Have students keep a journal for taking notes on their experiences and reflections. This will provide a basis for later classroom activities and language tasks and will help students track their journey.
9. Make sure you bring the service back into the classroom. The amount of reading and research on the issues which students do in the classroom will depend on their level and the space you have in your curriculum. But be sure that you connect the service with their learning and give students opportunities to think about and react to their experiences.
10. Be patient with your students and with the service-learning developments. It can take some time to find opportunities that work for your program. But with continual evaluation and student feedback, service-learning can have a great impact on your students' learning experience.

"People who have high knowledge but no action to help others never have power," said a young Korean student. But the combination of learning and service can be a very powerful methodology in ESL programs.

References

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