

**Learning English by Helping Others:
Implementing Service Learning into the ESOL Classroom**

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Biography:

Mollie Hand Steinke currently teaches academic ESOL at the Albany County Campus of Laramie County Community College in Laramie, Wyoming. Her prior experiences include volunteering with Americorps, Boulder Reads, and Pasadena Reads, which have shaped her teaching style. Her first introduction to service learning was as a graduate student instructor at the University of Colorado at Boulder, where she coordinated a literacy practicum as a part of a freshmen-level linguistics course. After receiving her M.A. in linguistics in 2000, Steinke taught English to Students of Other Languages (ESOL) at a private language school and later at Pasadena City College's Community Education Center.

Abstract:

Service learning in the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classroom serves two purposes, to fulfill the language-learning needs of the students and help students overcome some of the common problems they face as learners. ESOL students are often on the receiving end of community services. At the Albany County Campus of Laramie County Community College in Laramie, Wyoming, the tables are being turned, and the students are encouraged to provide services to their American community. Along the way, their language skills improve, and they learn valuable cultural lessons.

Introduction

During the fall semester of 2007, a service learning course was developed which consisted of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) learners at the Albany County Campus of Laramie County Community College (LCCC). Combining community service with learning English as a foreign language was done for two purposes: to fulfill the language-learning needs of the students and help students overcome some common problems they face as learners. This paper will explain why and how to conduct a service learning course for ESOL learners.

Problems ESOL Learners Face

Studying at a campus far away from their home countries and cultures, ESOL learners must not only struggle to keep up with the high-level assignments, quizzes, mid-terms and finals that every student faces, but they must also overcome homesickness and culture shock. According to Buttaro (2004), "Adult ESL [English as a Second Language] learners face problems of controlling linguistic rules and of applications in various situations while attempting to deal with the shock of living in a new cultural environment."

Embarrassment is a second problem students face. Students often find it difficult or awkward to seek out opportunities for practicing English. Norrid-Lacey and Spencer (2000) expose the obstacle that embarrassment of speaking English in public poses. According to Seliger (1977), not all students seek out opportunities to practice English outside of the classroom, but those who do actively seek such interactions perform better in the classroom.

A third problem is the multi-level nature of ESOL classrooms. In the ESOL class at LCCC, students were at levels ranging from high beginning to advanced, though only eight students participated in service learning. According to Bell (2002), "so many factors affect the learning rate of ESL adults that even classes [initially] grouped by ability tend to demonstrate a

wide spread as time goes on." This can lead to group conflict. Lower-level students may fear to speak or advanced students may feel they are being held back by the group.

Needs of ESOL Learners

Memorizing the rules of syntax, pronunciation, punctuation, etc. is not enough for students to become competent speakers and productive members of society. Language learners must be given opportunities to use the rules as they are learning. Latulippe (1999) emphasizes the need to make lessons meaningful to the students: "Wherever possible, students should be placed in context-rich situations." Similarly, according to Christison (2001), "[s]econd 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." Context refers to the meaning behind the language; understanding context is often the reason students have chosen to learn the English language in the first place. Learning lessons that students can apply to real-world situations is essential. Providing context also motivates students.

Service Learning as a Solution

Service learning has been defined as follows:

Service-Learning is a course-based educational experience in which students: participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility. (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995)

Applying service learning to the ESOL classroom gives students opportunities to meet needs in their community, which keeps students focused outwardly rather than on their homesickness. It also provides students opportunities for meaningful speaking opportunities in real situations. The embarrassment of speaking is forgotten or becomes secondary to the tasks at hand, which still require using English to communicate.

Of course, not every service project serves the needs of ESOL learners. A good rule for applying service learning for language learners is described by Minor (2001), "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." For example, cleaning cages alone at the Humane Society would not provide opportunities for learners to practice their language skills.

Most documented instances where ESOL has been paired with service learning describe situations where the English learners are the beneficiaries of the service. For example, Shahan (2002), describes a situation where middle-school students served as literacy mentors for ESL students. In higher education, Hagan (2004) describes and evaluates her experience participating in a service-learning project in a Human Diversity course designed to foster multicultural competence in clinical psychology for doctoral trainees. Hagan helped ESOL students as part of her service.

Courses in which the ESOL learners are the service providers have been documented but are less common. Elwell and Bean (2001) have found that "[w]hile much has been written about the role of community service learning and learning experiences for kindergarten through twelfth grade and college 'mainstream' student populations, the ESL population is largely absent from the literature."

Among the earliest documented service learning courses for the ESOL classroom is described by Warschauer & Cook (1999). The authors report about a course where ESOL students help community members with technology skills. "Many ESL students at KCC [Kingsborough Community College] are terrified of getting involved in service learning. They fear in particular that their lack of language skills leaves them little to offer the broad

community. However, technology skills that students learn at KCC can become an important basis for extending assistance to the community." Thus, students overcome the embarrassment of speaking through teaching about a topic they are confident about.

Elwell and Bean (2001) discuss a project involving ESOL students enrolled in a reading class at Foothill College in California. Basing the course on John Steinbeck's novel, *Of Mice and Men*, students toured a farm near Sacramento after the devastating freeze of 1998. They then designed and distributed a flyer stating that Foothill College would be collecting supplies such as food, infant care necessities, and school items for children and adults in Porterville, a small town near Sacramento.

Most recently, Beck (2006) describes a 2005/2006 pilot year for service learning in a Legal English course in which students enrolled in a Master of Law degree program assisted members of the community offering free legal advice while practicing their language skills.

Each of these papers describes a larger classroom in which more than 20 students participate, and all students are at similar levels of proficiency. This contrasts with the situation which occurred at LCCC.

The Setting

The Albany County Campus of LCCC is situated in Laramie, Wyoming, a city of over 27,000 residents. The college, attended by over 1000 students annually, offers certificate and associate degree programs, college preparation, general education courses, and a selection of academic and career/technical degree programs. In addition to the credit ESOL course, noncredit English instruction is offered year-round. LCCC's mission statement includes civic engagement as a core responsibility of its students and graduates, and faculty are encouraged to engage students through participation in service learning.

For the Fall 2007 semester, eight ESOL students (three male, five female) participated in the service learning course. The students had been in the U.S. for widely varying lengths of time, ranging from less than two months to more than five years. The students came to the U.S. from the following countries: Argentina (1), Korea (4), Panama (1), Russia (1), and Thailand (1). Ages of the students ranged from 20 to 46. A standardized ESOL placement exam (the Compass Test) was given on August 27, 2007, and it placed five of the students in Level 1 (high beginning), two students in Level 2 (intermediate) and one student in Level 3 (advanced). Not only did their different levels of proficiency provide a challenge, but the differences in ages, cultures, and individual personalities also presented difficulties.

The Method

Students spent the first four weeks of the term learning English through American games. Students learned to write and follow instructions, and each student presented an American sport or game to the classroom orally. At this time, I got a feel for the students' levels, needs and challenges. For the remaining 12 weeks, students were engaged in service learning in addition to their weekly quizzes and essays.

In addition to allowing for studying grammar, writing essays, reading and conversation instruction, the syllabus required students either to write a 12-page paper or participate in service learning and keep a journal. Of the ten students enrolled in the class, eight opted to complete the service learning.

The syllabus included a listing of volunteer locations for students to contact as well as an example of what students might say when offering their services to an organization. In class, students paired off and practiced making their initial calls to organizations. The pre-service preparation took approximately two hours per student. After this orientation, students were left

on their own to decide where to apply their service hours. However, throughout the semester, I provided opportunities for students to work as a class in various locations.

Post-service reflection came in the form of a service learning journal, which took approximately five hours per student over the course of the semester to complete. Students were instructed to write one page per service hour that they completed. The journals provided students an opportunity to reflect on the culture of community service in the United States as well as practice the new vocabulary and grammar that was introduced throughout the course.

In order to keep track of the students' service hours, a star chart was created on which each student earned a star for every fifteen minutes of service. This chart motivated students who were falling behind other students and encouraged friendly competition. The college held an award ceremony for all service learning participants, and certificates were handed out. In addition, the student with the most service hours was given an American board game at the end of the semester.

Beneficiaries

At the end of the semester, the eight students had completed 124 hours of service to ten different organizations or locations. Those that were affected included the St. Laurence School, Eppson Center for Seniors, Laramie Care Center, Hospice of Laramie, Soup Kitchen, Albany County Public Library, Vedauwoo State Park, LDS Student Association "Helping Hands", Laramie Korean Association, and the Albany County School District #1 (Indian Paintbrush Elementary School).

In addition to improving their language skills, students got many opportunities to learn about their community and American culture through cleaning up a state park, volunteering at Halloween parties, serving Thanksgiving dinner, and baking Christmas cookies. On two different

dates, two of the students were on the front page of the local newspaper, the *Laramie Boomerang*. One student was photographed helping at the Library's book sale, and another student was serving a Thanksgiving Day dinner to seniors. They were both excited to be in the newspaper, and they sent copies to their families in their home countries.

The Impact

The best way to demonstrate the effect that service learning had on these students is to read from their learning journals.

"For me it was a great experience working as a volunteer in some places. In my personal life, I had a big change, it was very important to be close to other people who have a disability, physical or other disability. Working as a volunteer helped me a lot with my depression. Doing volunteer work is important. Working as a volunteer is not only helping other people, we also help ourselves. ... If everyone did volunteer work in their country will be nice experience in their life." –M.B.

Comments from their time spent at the Laramie Care Center, a convalescence home, expose the differences in how the elderly are treated throughout the world, and they also address the emotions at seeing the elderly.

"Every student felt good and tried the best because we understand old people need that. ... I think they were happy to have that [Halloween] party and play the games." -S.N.

"We were determined to be brave, and we approached them. They refused help at first, but soon they opened their minds. And then everything happened very smoothly. We lead them to enjoy playing games. ... We gave encouragement to her, she enjoyed playing during the feast, and she was satisfied with us. We accomplished our goals. I will remember it forever." -H.C.

"It was a happy evening for everyone, from the workers at the Care Center to the volunteers without exceptions and also there were little children visiting the center. I was happy to do this kind of community service because we spent a little time with them. The seniors sometimes feel alone, so it's a good will to share our time with them."-A.L.

"It is difficult to communicate with them. Some people didn't enjoy the party. Some people wanted to only watch the games. I looked around the room and I didn't feel happy about anything. I thought in my mind Why? Why did they stay here? Why don't they have a family to take care of them? I felt sad sometimes. I

felt very sorry for them. ... On Halloween I learned about the life of the elderly in the U.S., and how people care for them." -P.K.

"They had weakness in their bodies and some people needed help. ... Other volunteers came together this time. I think they did this especially because they do not decide to care for them everyday. If they did, the elderly would be happy everyday." -C.K.

"The volunteers were such nice people and they smiled all the time, but the elderly people were in a sad mood. I felt really sorry for them. .. After the party, I felt sad, and thought about the death." -S.C.

Serving Thanksgiving dinner at the Eppson Center for Seniors taught one student the importance of this holiday to citizens:

"Thanksgiving is the most important holiday in the U.S. ... Our family served drinks for [the seniors]. It was very important duty because they didn't was upset. ... It had great meaning to me." -H.C.

Cleaning up at Vedauwoo State Park helped introduce students to their local surroundings.

"We brought bags and picked up the trash. This trip was also very educational because Mollie taught us how to call some trees or bushes." -S.N.

"I love the contact with the nature."-M.B.

"I enjoyed it with my friends. I cleaned up the mountains. We did it to help save the natural place. I saw some people had made camps long ago because I saw they made a fire or had some soda, beer cans, plastic bottles. ... That day, I learned more English words. We took two hours to clean up Vedauwoo." -P.K.

One student's journal discusses the growth from volunteering at the Soup Kitchen.

"[First day:] I was a little nervous but very proud because this is my first time as a volunteer. ... [Second day:] I was relaxed because I knew what I had to do. ... I felt good, I think I did something different and helped other volunteers. ..." -A.L.

Time spent shelving books or assisting the book sale at the Albany County Public Library taught students about how the library is used.

"I felt that each society moves according to the service learning. ... In the library, many things happen. So we are always careful when we use it." -H.C.

"I looked around the library. I saw many people using the library: some people playing internet, reading the books. ... I very happy to help people something I can do it. ... I happy to have been to work there. Make me have experience up and to learn social in the library, how do people use the library." -P.K.

"I was impressed because so many people when over there and bought books, and now I know in the USA people like to read." -S.N.

Baking cookies for the Hospice Holiday fundraiser taught students an American Christmas tradition.

"The Hospice care program provides to patients who have a limited life expectancy. I was pleased that I could help this community. If we do volunteering again and again, it will start to grow into a strong society." -H.C.

"It was also a day I learned about American Christmas culture. In Korea I never made more than two kinds of cookies and cookies are not popular during the Christmas period." -S.C.

Challenges

The challenges that were faced included initial resistance to doing community service, fear of sufficient language competence, and inability to prepare for each and every speaking situation that might arise. These difficulties drove the instructor to come up with creative solutions.

Initially, when the students were introduced to the concept of service learning, they were hesitant. The thought of adding twelve service hours to their already busy schedules overwhelmed them. Originally intended to be completed entirely on their own time, the students objected. It was then that the instructor decided to incorporate half of the required hours the course schedule as field trips. This put the students at ease. In the end, once the students began volunteering, they became so involved that five of the eight students put in more service hours than required.

They also expressed doubt that their language skills were at a level sufficient for helping others. Overcoming embarrassment in speaking to strangers is difficult. Practicing dialogues and doing role play during class helped students gain confidence.

It was also a challenge to prepare them for the English they might have to use. With so many various organizations to help, my in-class preparation could not focus on every aspect of the language that they might encounter. A possible way to avoid this problem in the future would be to choose only one organization to partner with and establish a stronger connection. This would allow classroom discussion to be based on one common experience that each student has, and it would also allow for building vocabulary for one context rather than trying to account for many different situations. This lesson has been applied to the most recent rendition of the course.

Conclusion

Implementing service learning into the ESOL classroom benefits students in two ways: it improves students' language skills by providing real life, relevant speaking opportunities and it helps students overcome culture shock and depression by involving them in their communities. Not only do the learners gain confidence, but the community also benefits from their assistance. Service learning works well in a multi-level language course where the students' levels provide daily challenges to the instructor. Each student is provided with more speaking opportunities regardless of their proficiency level. This course can easily be replicated at larger community colleges and universities around the United States.

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