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Service-Learning Helps ELLs in Elementary Schools

■ **In a service-learning project designed for preservice teachers of an undergraduate linguistics course, survey results determined that the service-learning component of the course transformed student thinking about teaching in the public school classroom, working with English language learners (ELLs), and interacting with students of other cultures and languages. Students reported a great difference in understanding the applicability of the material being studied, and they were much more satisfied with the course based on their real-world experience. In turn, public schools that partnered in the service-learning project reported that the elementary students who participated in the project showed greater attendance, more enthusiasm for schoolwork, greater oral participation in class, and increased reading ability. This service-learning project was designed to not only benefit the preservice teachers at the university and the elementary ELLs they worked with but to create a future school system that has better-prepared teachers for the benefit of the entire community.**

Introduction

The explosive growth of English language learners (ELLs) in public schools in the US has prompted a strong reaction in the TESOL community to convince policy makers and teacher-training programs that the teachers of today must be prepared to provide ade-
quate assistance to all pupils in the classroom, including ELLs (TESOL, 2006). Because Florida is one of the states with some of the strongest growth of ELLs, teacher-training programs have now implemented various curricular changes to meet the needs of teachers who must have a background in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) training to work effectively in the diverse school system.

Because of the 1990 consent decree (LULAC, 1990), the Florida university systems have implemented curricula to train teachers in ESOL techniques so that any elementary school, early childhood, language arts, or exceptional education teacher graduates with a bachelor's degree as well as an ESOL endorsement. Although every university has made individual decisions about what courses and content to offer in order for students to receive the endorsement, a linguistics course that addresses ESOL methodology is ubiquitous among the universities offering the ESOL endorsement. The linguistics course under study, which was transformed into a service-learning course 2 years ago, is one of two required courses at the university designed to give preservice teachers the training needed to qualify for the ESOL endorsement.

The undergraduate course involved in this service-learning project is the linguistics course for preservice teachers designed to teach linguistics, methodology, and second language acquisition (SLA). Considering that in the local region the ELL population grew 256% in just one year (FLDOE, 2005), the preservice teachers at this urban university are in dire need of training in how to teach ELLs. Service-learning was introduced in this class to offer students the opportunity of more experience in working directly with ELLs in an elementary classroom. Specifically, students were able to implement the concepts they were learning in the linguistics course in a real-world setting, one of the main goals of a service-learning course. Ideas in morphology, syntax, and semantics are vital for any teacher to understand, but it is often challenging for students to see the immediate application to

their work as future teachers. This service-learning project was designed to give students that connection between content, application, and the community in which they would eventually serve. As Ward (2004) states, students must probe their personal involvement in their education, challenge their fundamental assumptions, and contemplate their impact on students and the community.

According to the university guidelines at the University of Central Florida, Orlando, there are five criteria the university designates that every course must meet to be considered a service-learning course:

> Reciprocity—The service and learning must be worthwhile for both the student and the community. There must be reciprocity between the server and those served.
> Reflection—Intentional, systematic reflection of the experience must take place in order to thoughtfully connect the Service-Learning experience with the assigned curriculum. Reflection is what transforms experiences into learning.
> Development—Service-Learning occurs in different stages: servicing to enabling to empowering; observation to experience to leadership.
> Meaningful Service—Service tasks need to be worthwhile and challenging in order to strengthen students' critical thinking while fostering civic responsibility.
> Diversity—A priority is placed on involving a broad cross-section of students working in a diverse setting and with a diverse population within the community. (University of Central Florida, n.d.)

In this project, preservice teachers from seven sections of the linguistics course worked in 15 local elementary schools during Fall 2005, spending one-on-one time reading with ELLs who were struggling to read at grade level. After the preservice teachers were paired one-on-one with an ELL, they worked once a week throughout the semester reading to the student, having the student read to

them, and doing various activities related to course content. The students were encouraged to make the hour enjoyable, allowing the ELLs to read books of their own choosing, or reading to the ELLs, trying out the concepts they were learning in class, such as phonemic awareness and minimal pairs.

Students were required to reflect on each week's activities, using guided reflection topics (see Appendix A). While Butin (2003) argues that the quality, conceptualization, and assessment of service-learning projects need further multivocality to better define them, the inclusion of a reflective piece is almost universal in every definition of the project. In fact, when the National Center for Education Statistics surveyed K-12 schools on the scope of service projects in the nation, it concluded that a systematic reflection or critical analysis piece must be a component of the service project to be included in its survey (Skinner & Chapman, 1999). Many published studies of curriculum across levels require reflection or dialogue as an essential component of the project. (Please see Werner, Voce, Openshaw, & Simons, 2002, for the elementary level; Battistoni, 2004, and Berman, 2004, for the secondary level; Blieszner & Artale, 2001, Lohman & Aitken, 2002, Morris, 2001, for the undergraduate college level; and Cowan, 2003, for application to an international setting).

As an example from this project, one reflection question related to course content was: "Analyze words through affixes. Give examples of slang, idioms, and phrasal verbs (Chapter 2) ESOL Standards 3, 10, 13." The student was to take this content idea from chapter 2 of the textbook, related to ESOL Standards 3, 10 and 13, and answer, "What words were in the books you read with your student that represent these categories/labels in the English language? Did the student understand these phrases or did you explain them to the student?" The objective was for the students to meld their reading, their understanding of the English language, their understanding of the ESOL standards, and their work with ELLs. Our goal, of course, was to transform the students' thinking about

how our content and curriculum actually relates directly to their future jobs, and how this content is not about learning for them but about their own quality of teaching. Through a greater understanding of linguistics and the challenges that face ELLs, they could be more effective teachers in the future.

Student Reaction to the Program

As part of the goal of continual program improvement, two sets of surveys were implemented: one for students and one for the schools where they were working (see Appendix B for the survey instrument for students). The surveys for the students were designed to determine the effectiveness of the project and whether students thought they were gaining valuable experience with the program—an essential component of evaluation to determine if the service-learning project has had any impact on the students' learning, thinking, and knowledge (Spencer, Cox-Peterson, & Crawford, 2005). The surveys were also designed to question their thinking about working with ELLs and whether the experience altered their thinking in any way. In a longitudinal study, Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee (2000) found that students in service-learning projects demonstrated improvements in academics, values, leadership, and self-efficacy. The goal of this survey was to measure gains along similar lines.

In the third semester of the program, a survey of 129 students in seven sections of the course was implemented during class time. The student population in these sections was fairly traditional for educational majors: 123 students were juniors and seniors, 62% were elementary education majors, 11% were language arts majors, 5% were exceptional education majors, and 2% were early childhood majors. The rest were either "Other" or undeclared. Most (94%) were female. The vast majority (91%) had taken a service-learning course before, which was not surprising considering the impetus on our campus to implement service-learning into the curriculum. Many of the courses with this component are education courses. In fact, Campus Compact (2005) reported that in 2004 more than 30% of university students participated in some service or volunteer project for an average of 4 hours a week.

Service-Learning Time Commitment

Our university requires a service-learning course to have a minimum of 15 hours of direct community contact to be officially designated service-learning, and this project requires students to have contact with their ELLs for a minimum of 15 hours as well. The surveys were designed to determine how much actual time the student spent preparing for and spending time with the ELL, though, and while 90% of the students reported they spent between 15 to 25 hours directly with the ELLs, that same percentage of students reported that they spent from 3 to 5 hours per week preparing, tutoring, reflecting, and traveling each week. While students had to spend this amount of time on just the service-learning project, which was only a part of the course requirements, 84% said that overall this experience was well worth the time spent in order to get their ESOL endorsement. Some of the comments written on the survey were, "I feel more confident as a teacher now. I am not afraid of working with ESOL students, I am excited about it," and "It really opened my eyes as to how many ESOL students there are in Fl in Public Schools and how accomidations [*sic*] have to be made to teach them." Some students did comment that it was a lot of work and cut into their study time for other courses.

Student Learning

The goal was also to determine the students' perception of their own learning and to discover if the students had made that vital link between theory and practice (Brown & Howard, 2005). The impetus for this change in the class curriculum was the recognition of the fact that the students, although coming from a diverse community, were often quite ignorant of linguistic and cultural issues in the classroom. Through tests, reflections, and

student work, the instructors of the various sections could see that students had a difficult time recognizing the challenges someone might face in studying a language for the first time, and how culture affects student behavior in the classroom. In fact, discussions in the class sometimes devolved into outright resentment of spending time getting the ESOL endorsement. While this was certainly the minority, there was a recognition that while the students were able to process the content, they did not have the opportunity to see how this might connect to their future teaching experience. Further, these students wanted to be great teachers, but they had a fear of not understanding their ELLs and not being able to work with their different needs in a packed mainstream classroom.

The decision was made to address these issues by giving the students this service-learning opportunity. A service-learning project should give the students an opportunity to learn more about the students and community in which they will teach and to feel more culturally connected to those students with diverse backgrounds (Boyle-Baise, 2005; Brown & Howard, 2005). They would have a once-in-a-lifetime chance to work one-on-one with a student every week and to get to know that student well. The feeling was that not only did student learning in this course involve understanding linguistic concepts and how they related to teaching in the mainstream classroom today, but it involved learning about the community in which they would probably teach, and how that would involve diverse learners of many types. We did not want to send out fearful teachers but confident teachers who could develop empathy for students who are challenged in the classroom for any reason. Therefore, our survey questions were a mix of content questions and questions about their ELLs.

Course Connections to Community Service-Learning

When students were asked to report on any connections they saw between the aca-

demic material of the class and the service-learning project, 89% reported that they saw a strong connection between the two, especially with regard to the reflection questions. Most reported that they applied their learning at the school site and used it to form their weekly reflections. The survey indicated that students were able to make a strong connection between course content and the service-learning experience. The weekly reflection questions assisted them to put the two together. As Eyler (2002) has suggested, "The key to effective reflection during service is continuity; observations need to be continually processed, challenged, and connected with other information" (p. 10). On the other hand, when asked if they are drawing on the service-learning site to help understand the readings, only 41% reported that the school site was helpful to comprehension of the readings. This may be a reflection of the focus on the ESOL standards for their reflection questions as opposed to directly relating the question to our textbook material.

Because all of the course sections have an on-line component through WebCT, students are required to share many of their reflections with other students on-line. This is helpful to the students, as they have the opportunity to share their experiences with their classmates, for which there is no time in the class periods. It is also valuable to the instructor, who can easily monitor student work on-line while avoiding paper copies and the delay in handing those in to the instructor. On-line tools provide a powerful platform for implementing shared reflection and can result in greater reflection on the part of the student and a more collaborative approach toward learning and teaching (Tucker, Jones, Straker, & Cole, 2003). The survey asked students if those on-line reflections were helpful in their own work, and 80% of the students thought that the on-line discussion reflections were critical to their own understanding of the class, and by sharing them with each other, they were able to feel more like a community. This was important to the course goals, as service-learning can be a lonely experience if stu-

dents are working one-on-one in schools with no chance to collaborate or share with their classmates. The on-line discussions were meant to foster this idea of shared reflection and a learning community.

At the end of the content questions, students were asked what impact that they thought the course had on them personally, professionally, and academically; 86% reported a profound effect on their academic learning that transformed their thinking in many ways. One student wrote, "It has impacted me in a major way because I got to have personal experience with students while learning the content. Another student reported, "I got to work with an ESOL student first hand and practice all the methods with the student that had been discussed in class." When questioned specifically about the advantages and disadvantages of a service-learning course, students overwhelming reported that the service-learning project made them more confident to be a teacher in the classroom, but that it is time consuming compared to a class without the component.

Student Response to ESOL Learners

Because one of the goals of implementing service-learning was to give the preservice teachers a firsthand experience with a young student learning ESL for the first time, our survey contained specific questions about this topic. Morris (2001) notes that working directly with a language speaker of another culture tends to have a much greater impact on the cultural understanding of both parties, as opposed to just reading about or seeing various cultures through the media. In fact, this was considered one of the main goals of the project—creating this opportunity to connect with ELLs and possibly transform their ideas about what that means in the mainstream classroom today. Working in a public school setting such as this through a service project is one way to help preservice teachers expand their knowledge of the ethnolinguistic diversity of public schools today (Dome et al., 2005).

We got an overwhelming response to our question on whether their understanding of, respect for, or attitude had changed toward ELLs in the classroom after this project. While some students reported no change, or that they always respected working with an ESOL student, most students commented that the experience changed them. One student wrote, "Yes! Now I see students differently. I don't assume they have a disability because they have trouble in certain areas." Another participant stated, "It really opened my eyes to how many ESOL students there are in FL public schools" and "I do have a desire to help ESOL students succeed." Most students (more than 70%) reported greater motivation to teach ESOL students and thought the service-learning experience helped them to relate better to the classroom of today. When asked about ESOL students and their culture, students interestingly reported mostly on the difference between academic and social language. The instructors have also seen this reaction in the classrooms. When discussing their initial meeting with their ELL partners in class, students were asked to talk to their students and find out about their language, culture, family, likes, or dislikes in order to get to know their students. Afterward, most students would say something such as, "I don't understand why this student needs help. They're fine. They were a little shy at first, but I don't think they really need any help." After just a few weeks of working with the ELLs doing reading and activities, most of our preservice teachers would report that now they see the difference between basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) as described by Cummins in 1979. While their students could communicate with them on an informal level, when it came to classroom reading and work, the university students soon discovered that the ELLs were greatly challenged and needed assistance to help them keep up with the class. This theme was reported most often in our survey about learning about ELLs.

While we are still working on improving our service-learning component, and all com-

ponents of the class, we think our initial program has been beneficial to the preservice teachers. Our goal was to add a component to the course to allow students to apply linguistic knowledge in the classroom, see the relation between our content and teaching, and experience working with an ELL in a personal and academic manner. We wanted to bring our course into the real world so that our teachers would feel more confident in the classroom and be prepared to work with a diverse population. Further, we wanted students to feel more empowered to get involved in their communities and with each other in a learning community (Berman, 2004) such as we formed on-line.

In addition, we wanted to create a program that not only benefited our program but benefited schools both now and in the future. We truly wanted the school and community to benefit from our interaction so that we could form a real partnership in this endeavor, so vital to a sustainable service-learning project. We thought the schools would want to cooperate with us if they could see the direct benefit to their students in the classroom. So our midterm survey was designed to ensure our schools were happy with our program and could see the benefits firsthand.

School Reaction to the Program

A midterm survey, which is an informal e-mail, was used for evaluation of the partner schools' satisfaction with the project. In this program, the 15 partner schools received the e-mail. A service-learning project should have a built-in component of service to the community in which it happens (Boyle-Baise, 2005; Werner et al., 2002), not just be a project for students to do to meet a class objective. It was decided to do this survey midterm to create the opportunity to address any problems that might be developing and solve them before the end of the semester. Also, knowing how busy the end of the semester is, the feeling was that more detailed responses would be forthcoming at midsemester when teachers are not finishing their grading. Therefore,

in addition to keeping in constant contact with the schools to monitor the program, and a final survey of program satisfaction, a midterm e-mail was sent to the main contact at every partner school with the following four questions.

1. Have there been any problems with scheduling, timeliness, or appropriateness of activities? Is there any way we could work with you to make the program better?
2. Have you seen any progress on the part of the ELLs in the classroom? Do you think this volunteer program has been beneficial academically and/or socially for the ELL student/s?
3. Have you seen progress on the part of our preservice teachers? How do you think they benefit from this experience for their own development?
4. Please share any comments that you would like to make, positive or negative. All information is used to the greater development of our program.

Answers to the second and third questions have been the most enlightening to read. Not only have schools reported that the ELLs involved in this program love their university reading mentors, but that they note a strong difference in their schoolwork. Schools report that these students have better attendance, are more comfortable in the classroom, and they definitely see an improvement in their reading skills. One teacher wrote that after her ELL got involved in our program, 3 weeks later she spoke up in class for the first time to answer a reading question. Other teachers have reported immediate improvement in both academic and social skills in the classroom.

As for the preservice teachers, what most schools reported seeing was an increase in confidence. Sometimes the schools expect a seasoned professional to show up to tutor, forgetting that this is sometimes the first time the student has been in the classroom, and it is certainly the first time to tutor an ELL one-on-one. They report that the preservice teach-

ers at first seemed a little fearful and unsure of what to do. Schools have mentioned, though, that after a few weeks they saw the university students really grow in confidence and create exciting activities for their ELLs. One partnership created its own book, and the preservice teacher had it professionally bound for the ELL to keep. Other students have helped ELLs create their own study aids, dictionaries, and flash cards for continued academic success.

Final Thoughts

While the initial surveys have been positive for this service-learning project, there are areas that still must be addressed, including the dissatisfaction with time spent on the project, and an overall satisfaction rate of 85%, leaving room for improvement. While the project has created great partnerships with schools in the region, there are many more schools in need, and to encourage the students to become more involved in the schools with the most critical needs is a strong goal. Service-learning has created the kind of educational class that is needed for universities today: content oriented, career minded, community driven, and both academically and socially challenging.

Acknowledgments

Author

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Appendix A
Reflection Topics

These reflection topics are a way for you to tie your learning to your future career as a teacher. They are also an opportunity to think on a higher level about why you study linguistics and how it can help you to teach in a diverse classroom. They will help you to make a connection between your class and your life, and help you as a teacher to develop ideas about how to create lessons that are inclusive, high-quality, and help all your students to learn language.

Reflection Question Prompts

Use these four questions to help you articulate your reflection for that week:
1. What did I do this week with my student?

2. What did I learn?
3. How specifically did I learn it?
4. Why does this learning matter? or Why is it important?

Week	Class Objective and ESOL Standard	Reflection/Comment on
1	Determine the background of the student and his/her linguistic abilities. *ESOL: 5*	It is most important this week to build a relationship with your student. Try to find out these types of things: What do you know about your ESOL student? Country Language Culture Age Speaking ability Reading ability Background Favorite books or activities (Some of these can be discovered over the course of the semester)
2	Define and give examples of terms used in linguistics. (Chapter 1, pg. 7) *ESOL: 9*	Discuss competence vs. performance. Have you seen a difference between your student's communicative language and his/her academic performance in reading? Reflect on how etymological changes and the difference between prescriptive and descriptive grammar might affect an LEP.
3	Identify problematic English sounds according to your student's L1. (Chapter 2) *ESOL: 10*	What pronunciation problems did you notice the student had? Use the IPA to indicate the sounds the student had problems with. What minimal pair words/exercises designed for class did you use?
4	Analyze words through affixes. Give examples of slang, idioms, and phrasal verbs. State the grammar of phrasal verbs. (Chapter 2) *ESOL: 3, 10, 13*	What words were in the books you read with your student that represent these categories/labels in the English language? Did the student understand these phrases or did you explain them to the student?
	Dialectology and Language Variation (Chapters 4 & 5) *ESOL: 3*	Reflection question TBD based on student background.

6	Identify the part of speech of every word in a passage. (Chapter 19) *ESOL: 3, 10*	Did you find it necessary to define parts of speech to the student? To explain placement in the sentence? Did this help him/her understand the content better? If so, which parts of speech were the most important to explain?
7	Articulate from text material and in-class practice how other languages are written (compared to the English alphabet). (Chapter 11) *ESOL: 9*	If your student is literate in their L1, ask them to teach you how to write in their language—even if it is only single words. Learn about the alphabet of their L1. Talk with them about it. If possible, learn some phrases in that language.
8	Recognize whether a sample of reading material is top-down or bottom-up. (Chapter 11, pgs. 176-177) *ESOL: 5, 6, 9, 11*	Analyze one of the books you have read with your student this semester for being a top-down approach or a bottom up-approach to reading. Give the name of the book and the author. Be specific for your choice of approach.
9	Modify teacher classroom language according to student's L2 ability. Explain and give examples of how teaching English to native students is different from teaching ESOL? *ESOL: 12, 13*	What accommodations did you make when working with the student that you might not have made with a native speaker? For example, did you modify your behavior based on anything you learned about your student's culture or experience?
10	Give examples of individual differences in 2nd language acquisition. (Chapter 13, pgs. 227-232) How might Krashen's model for 2nd language acquisition influence the classroom environment? (Chapter 13, pgs. 221-223) *ESOL: 5, 6, 7, 9, 13*	Having worked with your student, which of the individual factors do you think have influenced their L2 acquisition: motivation, attitude, or personality factors (e.g., risk taking) Think about the affective filter hypothesis. Has your student said or have you seen any sign that his/her emotional affect (i.e., anxiety, eagerness, other feelings) has hindered or positively influenced English learning?

11	Articulate the order of 2nd language acquisition. (Chapter 13, pg. 220) Explain the parts of Krashen's model for 2nd language acquisition and how they might influence an ESOL teacher's lesson. (Chapter 13, pgs. 221-223) *ESOL: 5, 6, 7, 9, 13*	At what stage of development is your student with regard to the order mentioned in the textbook? Give specific examples. Think about Comprehension + 1. Have you noted in your communications with your student a time when the student did not understand you because of your vocabulary? What did you do when that happened?
12	Articulate how a student's L1 influences L2 (Chapters 12 & 13) *ESOL: 5, 12*	Having learned about your student and having studied various languages in the class, how do you think your student's L1 has influenced their L2 (English)?
13	Final Experience	Reflect on the totality of your experience. Use your four Reflection Question Prompts to discuss what the Service Learning Project accomplished for you as a pre-service teacher. In what ways has this service learning experience transformed your views on teaching ESOL students in the classroom?

Appendix B
Survey Instrument

STUDENT EXIT SURVEY

BACKGROUND

1. What year in school are you?
   _____ Freshman _____ Sophomore _____ Junior _____ Senior
2. What is your subject area?
   _____ Ex Ed _____ Elem Ed _____ preK _____ Language Art _____ Other
3. Gender: _____ Male _____ Female
4. Had you heard any comments about the course before?
   _____ Yes / _____ No
   If yes, please state them.

5. Did you know that there was a service learning component to this course?
   _____ Yes / _____ No
6. Have you taken any courses before that have had a service component?
   _____ Yes / _____ No
7. How much time did you spend **altogether** with the student?
8. How much time did you spend on the Service Learning Experience, including preparation, reflection, direct tutoring, and travel **per week**?
9. Overall, would you say the time was worth it for your own professional development for the ESOL Endorsement?
   _____ Yes / _____ No
   Please state why.

STUDENT LEARNING

1. Describe any connections you see between the academic material that you are learning about in class, and the work you are doing at your service site?
2. Are you drawing on the Service Learning site to help you understand the readings? How?
3. Does it help to answer the Discussion Questions? Do you reflect on what you are doing at the site?
4. Do your or your fellow student reflections change the way you perform your service?
5. Do your reflections enhance the classroom learning?
6. What kinds of reflection do you do in this course? What do you reflect on? How is self-reflection structured?
7. Describe any kind of impact that this course is having on you, personally, professionally, and academically.
8. Does this course require more work than your other courses?
9. Do you feel you have enough support/communication from your instructor in order to complete this experience in a valuable manner? How about the school? The teacher?
10. What are the advantages and disadvantages of a course based on service-learning?

ESOL STUDENTS

1. Has your understanding of, respect for, or attitude toward ESOL students in FL public schools changed after participating in the Service-learning Class? In what way?
2. Did the Service-learning Class change your desire and/or motivation to teach ESOL students?
3. How were you challenged by your service-learning? What was the result?
4. Complete the sentence: The Service-learning Class was a valuable experience because:

_____
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5. What did you learn about ESOL students and their cultures by participating in the Service-learning Class?

Thank you for your participation
in this research project