



Service Learning Project in ELT: Connecting Classroom Experiences to Community

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Abstract

Among the mandated functions of a higher education institution includes community extension. This area is also being evaluated by accrediting bodies for the upgrade of academic standards or levels. Schools have different and similar ways on how they extend community services. However, the task itself may not be a slice of the cake. There are certain elements, tools, and procedures to be observed by people who would be involved in the process itself. This is where the direction of this study emanated. Its main purpose is to describe and analyze the purpose of a particular service learning endeavor and how it connects classroom to community needs. The design of this paper is qualitative in nature. Moreover, the specific approach employed was ethnography. There were five participants involved in the study and the reflections of both the researcher and participants contributed to the development of the ideas leading to insights. In the selection of the participants, purposive sampling was used. The teachers are handling purposive communication, which is a general education course at college level. Two instruments (i.e. reflective essay and field observation) were used to collect textual data. Content analysis helped the researcher analyze and synthesize the data that were transformed into conclusions or insights. In concluding the study, the researcher found out how participants practice service learning project and with their critical reflections, a new definition of service learning was put into shape.

Keywords: classroom experiences; community needs; content analysis; ethnography; service learning project

1. Introduction

In the globally enhanced educational structure, language teachers need to be creative and flexible in preparing their students to become competent, reflective, and responsible workers or employees someday. Gone are the days when pure classroom lecture was used to teach the students. In the fast-changing world, teachers and students can work together to feel and discover the many opportunities and challenges outside of the classroom. If teachers can bring students outside, they (learners) can surely feel and witness the difference between theories and actual experiences that can help them improve further. This is where the concept of community service comes in. Through the process of reflection connected with community service, more and more learners are able to discover their worth and potentials, preparing them to become productive in the workplace.

Teachers need to be well-oriented to work with culturally and socially diverse students. Gradually changing demographics across the United States manifest a noticeable challenge for today's school structures. Language teachers are, therefore, called upon to work with a growing number of culturally and socially diverse students enrolled in their classrooms. Kramsch (2008) described that academic exchanges move in a modernized environment of increasingly plurilingual and pluricultural nature. English as a second language teachers have an important role in providing high quality programs for English language classrooms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 A Glimpse of Service Learning

Service learning, sometimes called community involvement, is a well-observed pedagogical approach with a long history and a strong theoretical underpinning. As a teaching method, people (who do it as a task) consider it as a passionate advocacy (McLeod, 2017). In her study, McLeod underlined the modes of service learning which include distance learning, offline, secondary school, collegiate, language session, rural school, and evening class.

The article written by McLeod (2017) aimed to invite readers in exploring service learning projects, tools, and techniques with their own classes. She described two countries (i.e. Macedonia and Australia) in the world where service learning was held. Service learning is one of the established pedagogies that use authentic experiences beyond the classroom set up. It aims to reinforce student willingness while enhancing their in learning. Advocates of learning by doing would view principles of service learning as a powerful tool to enhance relationship and cooperation in the community. It also encourages a centered and formalized process of self-analysis.

In the research of McLeod, it was discovered that students whose course had integration of service learning had better language skills compared to those who did not have such component. In addition, participants of service learning project gained a variety of non-academic perks such as life skills, people skills, communication skills, organization skills, collaboration skills, negotiation skills, technical skills, and the workplace skills of taking responsibilities.

McLeod (2017) discussed two approaches in conducting a service learning project. These are need-based and curriculum-based designs. The first is characterized by brainstorming of students on the needs and problems of the community. While the second approach is checking the content of the syllabus which may connect to the community needs of a particular place. This is linking the knowledge of the learners to the existing need of the community.

2.2 Perspectives of Experts

McLeod (2017) defined service learning as a two-way academic task where learners apply their classroom-acquired ideas for a real product in the community. With this, their learning experiences are shaped. One project that illustrates the definition was conducted by Elwell and Bean (2001) where they described a 12-week English reading course focusing on the novel “Of Mice and Men” with a diverse group of learners. The service component comprised of collection drive in which the assigned members coordinated to gather donations for food, child-care necessities, and school items for distribution. The project turned out successful because it helped the students develop vocabulary and oral skills, including reporting and presentation skills. Moreover, the project helped the students to further hone their comprehension skills because they were required to read the novel.

Service learning as defined by Warschauer and Cook (2009) is a form of experiential learning in which students are involved in activities that meet human and community needs with thoughtful reflections. From their study, service learning was carried out with the integration of information technology. The researchers with their ESL students brought information technology skills to children where internet and web knowledge were taught to the learners in the community.

Numerous classroom teachers integrate technology to their classes so that they can motivate learners to be more dynamic, interested, and focused. This makes the use of technology natural in the flow or sequence of lessons and activities, which shares the same goals with service learning. Based on the experiences of the researchers, the infusion of service learning into classroom was proved to be successful and fruitful.

Jacoby (1996) believes that service learning is a form of experiential education in which students are tapped to feel and address the human and community needs with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote learning and development holistically. This pedagogical strategy is rooted from the perspectives and purposes of progressivism. As cited in the current study, progressivism has been an important educational philosophy for a considerable part of the 20th century. One of the main figures identified with progressivism is John Dewey (see Armstrong, Henson & Savage, 2009).

Until the beginning of 20th century, education was crafted primarily for those few who were engaged into higher education. The general practice of education was that of extensive routine, authoritarian teachers whose word was law, memorization of facts, and no student rights. Progressivism depicts change as constant in the world. Rather than opposing change, progressive educators believe that individuals need to embrace the change and learn how to direct it for the betterment of a society. Thus, progressives see a major purpose of education as that of helping individuals learn to solve problems. In this context, students need to learn the scientific method for analyzing and solving problems. This means that the active involvement of students is critical.

Service learning adheres to two core principles i.e. reciprocity and reflection (Jacoby, 1996). It is reciprocal because two parties involved both benefit from the project, the learners who will participate and share their skills and the community whose needs will be addressed. Through this reciprocity, students can develop sense of belonging and responsibility to a community. Service learning is reflective because the main benefits to learners do not only emanate from the experience they have but through the reflective collaboration and discussion of experiences. Thus, the infusion of structured opportunities for reflection is a primary component of service learning projects and activities (Jacoby, 1996).

Although service learning is a wide educational movement in the United States, only little were discussed or reported within TESOL conferences or literature. This may be caused by the fact that there is difficulty in designing service learning activities for ESL students that include connection and reflection. Other language teachers have qualms how students who are not fluent in English could participate in service learning if they have limited or no language skills to offer. They also think how non English speakers can engage in collaboration and planning if there are language barriers (Jacoby, 1996).

Findings of Fairbairn and Jones-Vo (2010) showed how teacher-candidates evaluated instructional and assessment materials to determine their adaptability to ELLs. They practiced infusing instruction and assessment at each proficiency level within the domains of four macro-skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

On the one hand, Echevarria, Vogt and Short (2012) utilized the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), a research-based model of sheltered instruction, served as an instrument to guide candidates in developing assessment and instructional tools. The SIOP contains eight components which are building background, comprehensible input, interaction, practice, application, lesson delivery, review, and assessment.

Another definition of service learning from Warschauer and Cook (2009), states that service learning is a form of experiential education in which the learners engage in and reflect on activities that are connected to humanity and community. In their research project, they explored on how technology could be integrated into service learning. Results of their study showed that information technology literacy can serve as a medium both for carrying out service learning projects and for pondering on them.

In the same study, researchers found out the multiple benefits of integration of technology to service learning projects. First, anyone who is new to the community but has a knowledge of technology can contribute to meet the needs of the people by using his skills. Second, new technologies can serve as a medium to all people living in the community to interact and share their ideas for their own betterment. Finally, with the support of technology, online and virtual activities such as webinar, video conference, and other forms of communication can help facilitate exchange of ideas, interaction, and mutual reflection on actions and events.

Bandura in Spradlin and Parsons (2008) coined the term self-efficacy pertaining to a sense of personal capacity and belief that a person can successfully perform behavior required to produce desired purposes. He further stressed that a person’s behavior leads to a desired outcome. In other words, self-efficacy is one’s confidence to handle at hand different situations in case working with ELLs. The key to one’s success in working with ELLs is realistic sense in one’s ability and strength, a step for building self-efficacy.

Wade (1995), explored gains in pre-service teachers' self-esteem and self-efficacy through service-learning. For him, teachers who have higher self-efficacy are more committed to teaching and willing to adopt educational innovations, and bring successful planning, organization, enthusiasm, and clarity to their instruction. Service Learning gifted candidates an opportunity to assess and reflect on their abilities and preparedness to work in ELLs. From the views of Kistler and Crosby (2014), language teachers need to be well-prepared in handling English language learners in a culturally and linguistically diverse classroom. This is where they can integrate the practical applications of service learning.

2.3 Technology as a Springboard of Communication and Reflection

As stated earlier, a critical component of service learning is reflection. Through reflection, students can widen their understanding of needs and problems to community and service learning.

Motivating students to engage in a reflective process can be challenging especially among ESL students. Discussion in ESL classrooms tends to be teacher-dominated instead of letting students raise their concerns and express their ideas. This is a traditional pattern according to Cazden (1988). Some teachers make use of written dialogue journals to stimulate reflection, as opined by Peyton and Reed (1990) but such journals encourage teacher-student interaction more than student interaction.

Communication and cooperation between institutions of higher learning and the communities in which they are located is a common topic in higher education settings. In fact, 'town-gown' relationships are crucial for economic progress and sustainability. Many educational institutions and their community leaders today are more often working in collaboration to discuss ideas and share limited sources. Case studies proved that initiating a dialogue and opening lines of communication between school and its neighbors can foster a positive relationship. This form of communication promotes a healthy and thriving community. Research has shown that town-gown relationship contributes to higher quality of life to people involved. The most efficient way to inculcate to students the value of community engagement is through school-based service learning activities (Shelton, 2016).

2.4 Helping the Community through Service Learning

The process of service learning needs careful and patient efforts. There is no perfect community as there is no community without needs and concerns. If a community has existing problems most likely people have varied problems. Service learning is a tool to harness the skills and traits of those who inhabit the community by identifying the needs and problems. In many instances, service learning has value to the community in small aspect but small aspect also counts. Students' community engagement does not necessarily mean feeding all the needy, restoring all damaged forests, and saving all species from extinction all at once. An English-based project may be successful if members of the class will do planning and evaluation systematically. When students identify the needs of the community, they can easily formulate plans and actions that will benefit the people living there.

2.5 Possible Benefits of Service Learning

Service learning offers the following benefits to teachers, students, and stakeholders:

1. A service learning project will permit the group to make use of the available resources (tools and materials) in the community where they are going;
2. Service learning provides abundant supply of thoughts and learning plans;
3. Service learning projects have motivating effects for both teachers and students when both are engaged in a real-world activity;
4. Classroom learning is not confined to one place but rather it allows students and teachers to explore out of the box and socialize with others where they can use their ideas and share their thoughts;
5. Students can apply their knowledge to the real-world which can prepare them for their future duties and responsibilities;
6. By using service-learning projects, the professor leads students to understanding situations and principles related to workplace; When students are exposed to practices in business structures, the more they can prepare for their future jobs (Tucker, McCarthy, Hoxmeier & Lenk, 1998); and
7. Reflections and thoughts of participants can help stakeholders identify and describe deeper and essential realities they are involved in. Hence, they can develop mechanism for adjustment and improvement.

2.6 Types of Service Learning Projects

There are as many service-learning projects as there are community needs. A bonafide community-engagement project must not only address a community need, but it must also be blended with the ideas and skills developed and taught in the classroom. Reading between the lines, the purposes of service learning separates its meaning with volunteering. Anderson, Swick and Yff (2001) believe that if a project involves no clear integration of classroom ideas and skills, it is not classified as service-learning project no matter how much it might contribute to solving a community problem.

2.7 Community Needs

This, of course, involves systematic and organized process of meeting the community members or elders and asking them the common or emerging needs within the portals of the community. Part of the task is ensuring privacy of the data collected in the activity itself.

Most of the literature talked about how service learning is defined; however, this research focused on how language teachers (by handling purposive communication) connected and extended their own classrooms to the community they selflessly served in some sessions. Furthermore, a definition of the term service learning was attempted to recreate through the perspectives and reflections of the participants.

2.8 Statement of the Problem

The main objective of this study is to describe and explain how classroom experiences connect with community needs. Specifically, this study tried to answer the following problems:

1. How do you connect classroom lessons to community needs?
2. What is your concept of service learning?

2.9 Scope and Delimitation

This study was carried out from October 2019 to February 2020. Five English language teachers participated in this activity and research. Experienced teachers participating in community extensions were considered aside from other significant selection criteria. The main concern here is to describe and explain the function of the classroom in connecting lessons and experiences to the existing needs of the community. The researcher himself was also involved in the actual activity and his personal observations were examined and described.

3. Method

This research is a form of qualitative method. In order to identify the conditions and descriptions of the subject, the study went through rigorous process of ethnography. Textual data were gathered carefully by the researcher using essay questions which were validated and examined by a pool of experts.

Field observation and essay were the main instruments to obtain the textual data for the success of this study. Moreover, the researcher examined the data carefully. He described, coded, and classified all responses in the form of textual data until he synthesized everything to answer the questions raised earlier. In addition, the researcher had to be reflexive and objective in analyzing all collected data.

In the selection of participants, the researcher employed purposive sampling technique. There were only five participants who qualified for this study. They were considered based on the criteria such as length of service, experience in service learning, and specialization (English). A holder of master's degree in English language was a paramount criterion to qualify as a participant.

The researcher ensured all participants that their responses would be kept confidential. In this regard, identities were withheld; instead, codes were assigned to the names. When all responses were transcribed, the researcher examined and described them as textual data. Content analysis is a detailed analysis and interpretation of data. It is meaning-making.

4. Results and Discussion

The texts, that follow, show the textual data examined and described in this study. For privacy reasons, only codes were assigned to each statement representing the participants.

4.1 First Instrument: Essay Questions

4.1.1 How do you connect classroom lessons to community needs?

The first question sought views of the participants (see answers 1-5) regarding the linking of classroom lessons to community needs. Using essay with open ended-questions, the participants expressed their thoughts.

1. Perhaps, one way of connecting classroom lessons to community needs is to **address** major **concerns** in the community on the empowerment of macro skills which are very much relevant. Hence, ESL learners can provide **extension service** about **English proficiency** and **reading** programs. In that sense, they will be able to help the community while **developing** their own skill (P-1).
2. First thing to consider is to **identify** the **problem** of the community and try to **contextualize** by means of **classroom discussion** where the students and teacher able to share their **experience** likewise collaboratively answer or give solution to the problem (P-2).
3. In our school, we serve our students with **continuing education** through **remediation program**. After class in the afternoon, the English Teachers, who have found students with reading difficulty, are **extending** and speaking more time to address the problem in **reading** particularly students with no word-recognition, hardly read, and no reading comprehension (P-3).
4. I will first introduce the **needs** of the community wherein the students can better cater. I will ask the students to **list down** the **challenges** the community faces and allow them to think possible solutions to **mitigate** the problem. Moreover, I will ask the students on how they can participate on becoming a part of the solution (P-4).
5. This may be done by first making students accomplish an **inventory of the knowledge and skills** they gained in class in bulleted forms under a columnar box then have these students identify in a separate columnar box--preferably juxtaposed with the previously-mentioned box--the problems they see in their community, particularly the ones that they think need immediate solution. From there, students may be ordered to match the skills they identified with a particular community problem where they think their skills may be of good use, under another set of columnar boxes. Lastly, they have to justify how the pairing of identified knowledge or skills and **community problems** may be done or be made possible (P-5).

Most of the participants believe that classroom skills and experiences can be delivered and brought to the community through the service learning project. With the list of ideas they possess they can identify the existing needs of the community and from this investigation, they can launch this project to somehow meet the needs of the community. Moreover, the textual data reveal how teachers, with their students, collaborate to form good projects that can help the target community. This project requires rigorous discussion and brainstorming of skills they can share and the feasible measures they will take in order to successfully accomplish their goals.

4.1.2 What is your concept of service learning?

The second question explored the ideas and thoughts of the participants as regards their personal concepts of the service learning project. Through this question, participants got the opportunity to create their own definitions of the term service learning and how it functions as an approach (see answers 6-10).

6. Service learning is an **experiential approach** which provides education outside the four corners of the classroom. This coincides with the theory of John Dewey "**learning by doing**" and with the cliché "experience is the best teacher". Thus, the principle of this approach is that interacting with the environment is one of the best avenues for learning (P-1).
7. **Service learning** is a self-driven work with no material reward from the extended people who would benefit of the humble service of the **project proponent**. This is an act of academic **benevolence** where the primary concern of this project is the poor but deserving students, out of school youth, single parents, and less privileged community member of the society (P-2).
8. As part of the community outreach program in the department of education, both private and public schools are expected to provide an **alternative way** of extending help to the community by providing different programs such literacy programs, health campaign programs, tree planting program, waste management and the like. In this approach of learning, student-participants are encouraged to provide help in the community by integrating meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience (P-3).
9. **Service learning** is a modern concept of education where students learn outside the traditional concepts of learning inside the confines of classrooms. Students learn from their surreal **experiences** as they make real life contact with the community they seek to assist and empower. Through service learning students learn the value of servitude and compassion in the era where everyone should be absolutely connected to one another (P-4).
10. An example of service learning for me would be pre-service English teachers, who were taught about various **English language teaching approaches** (e.g., grammar translation, direct method, communicative language teaching, etc.), actually using or applying these approaches through teaching demonstrations executed not just in mere classrooms whose audience includes just their fellow pre-service teachers, but in communities or real classrooms that contain specific types of learners whose English language learning needs may be addressed with the help of the aforementioned **teaching approaches** taught in teacher education specialization classes (P-5).

Although, participants responded in varied words and expressions, it is evident that their concepts of service learning are similar and relatable. All of them are one in saying that service learning project is an approach of 'identifying' and 'examining' the needs of the community and reflecting on the talents, skills, and knowledge the participants (i.e. students, teachers, and stakeholders) to be later connected to the community needs. Service learning as both an 'approach' and a 'strategy' can shape the 'experiences' and 'skills' of the students by exposing those to social realities and community needs whereby involving them to critical and thoughtful reflections. Service learning requires specific and attainable objectives and organized planning. This conclusion was based on the responses and implications of the textual data.

4.2 Second Instrument: Field Observations

To check consistency of data, the researcher did field observation in which the actions, behavior, and prompts of the participants were carefully observed and described. This is the second phase of data collection where important ideas and insights were confirmed and consolidated.

There was striking cooperation and unity among the people involved. Questions were raised as need analysis. Wide preparation took place. Items needed for the project were collected and organized. Seen (among learners and teachers) was the reflection that led them to improve lives and create social awareness. The rare experience of going to community and mingle with its people shaped and reinforced communication skills and values of both teachers and learners. Reflections were noted. People involved (i.e. teachers and students) enjoyed the activity. They shared their skills through information and literacy campaign.

In the present study, engaging the students in service-learning is a rewarding experience and a golden opportunity to discover their potentials and expose them to work place. This project breaks class monotony and lets students immerse and engage in community needs and realities where they realize their functions, roles, and possible contributions. It also encourages support, collaboration, and team work. The thoughts stated in this section were culled and fused from the responses and behavior of the participants when they were observed.

Service learning project is an effective approach and strategy to involve the learners and teachers into meaningful, selfless, and reflective tasks of organizing ideas and extending services to a specific community with existing needs.

4.3 Insights and Implications

Students will discover the other side of life when they get the chance to mingle with other people. Part of extension is engaging in service learning in which students teach other people who have problems in reading, writing and literacy as a whole. There are several projects participants can do and execute. In one project, some students used knowledge in English to orient teenagers about the drastic effects of global warming and the effective methods on how to preserve and conserve mother earth. Not only did students develop compassion, collaboration, and teamwork but they also gained confidence and guts in teaching English language through the efforts they extended for the successful implementation of their projects.

Involving students and teachers in community engagement proves to be beneficial to both parties. Not only have they cultivated sense of responsibility and collaboration, they also lent their hands to improve others by using their talents and skills to educate the community they choose to serve. With service learning, concern for others is being stressed and students find a rare opportunity to share their talents and skills to those who need them. Service learning and community engagement can be a powerful tool to transform a community by helping its members to develop their skills in the form of literacy programs among other projects. From the task itself, learners discover further their potentials and their sense of community as they decide to serve others. More than that is their ability to adapt to any sorts of situation and the diversities they meet on the way.

Author's view: Engaging the students in service-learning is a rewarding experience and a golden opportunity to discover their potentials and exposing them to a work place. This project breaks class monotony and lets the students immerse and engage in community needs and realities where they realize their functions, roles, and possible contributions. It also encourages support, collaboration, and team work.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

From the findings of the study, following conclusions were drawn:

1. Classroom lessons and experiences can be connected to community needs by rendering and extending services to the target community and its people. This is possible and feasible when students, teachers, and stakeholders join hands to discuss possible ways on how they can extend their hands and connect themselves to help and serve others; and
2. The service learning project is an approach that involves reflection, experience, and action. This activity involves identification of problems of the community, reflection of resources and skills, and creation of concrete projects that can serve and help the target community.

Based on the conclusions of the study, the researcher offers recommendations i.e.

1. Schools should form committees with the involvement of stakeholders in proposing service learning projects. Having the stakeholders as partner can help them better understand and examine the existing needs of the both i.e. school and community.
2. Community extension like a service learning project in ESL should be a continuous process not only because it is a subject requirement but it is the mandatory function of a higher education institution and even basic education. From the extensions made, new insights and reflections are made bringing the school to the community in better shapes and conditions.
3. Teachers involved in the project should meet and discuss the objectives, outcomes, and plans for the accomplishment of this activity with their students and stakeholders.
4. Tourism and hospitality management students should write their reflections about their participation in the project. Hence, their thoughts can be used by their language teachers in the future for another community service involving English proficiency.

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