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The Impact of Service-Learning on English Education. A Socio-Cultural Project as an Attempt to Increase Cultural Awareness

Abstract. There is a constantly growing need for implementing new pedagogical approaches to the classroom environment. Approaches aiming at the collaboration of students, teachers, and the community are desired as they create a perfect area for the teaching process and acquiring new knowledge within the specific subject field. The Service-Learning (SL) approach focuses on addressing students' needs efficiently and effectively, ensuring active student involvement in all stages of the lesson unit, and intentionally linking to a learning context. The aim of the paper is to answer the question about the added value of SL for university students in the process of integrating theoretical knowledge and its practical application. The article presents the benefits and drawbacks of incorporating SL into the curriculum of English lessons. The collected results prove that a SL approach and the knowledge of how to apply it in the academic process remain vital and constitute a significantly useful element in increasing cultural awareness of students and the training of future English teachers.

Keywords: intercultural language learning and teaching, Service-Learning (SL), English Language Teaching, teaching methods, interculturality

1. Introduction

In the present era of education culture has emerged as one of the central concerns. As Liddicoat & Crozet (1997, 18) state, various approaches to the culture factor have appeared in the process of foreign language teaching. Service-Learning approach originates in the idea of culture as literature and art, which is then moved through history

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and institutions to popular culture, festivals, and amusements. These approaches have brought interest and depth to language education, but they have failed to address the fundamental problem of language learners, namely the need to communicate in the target language. Many academics have begun to articulate a global approach to teaching foreign languages for this purpose (Byram & Zarate, 1994, 20–26; Kramsch, 1993, 95; Crozet, 1996, 38–42; Liddicoat & Crozet, 1997, 6).

Scholars are searching for the latest approaches to introducing intercultural language instruction to students at various levels of education. According to Regina (2017, 14–29), the SL approach, appears to be one answer. It involves teachers, students, and the community in an education project aimed at dealing with a specific problem or meeting current needs within communities while developing and implementing learning content. Within the application of this teaching method, students, and the community are actively involved in the search, formulation, and implementation of solutions and activities (Regina, 2017, 33).

As Salih & Omar (2021, 65–70) claim, there has been an increasing interest in intercultural competence within the globalized English language due to these changes. This phenomenon has accelerated due to rapidly growing populations of English speakers and advances in internet-mediated communication and information. In English language learning, there has also been an increase in teaching values of global citizenship. The aim of the present paper is, concerning these matters, to draw attention to the impact of the Service-Learning method on increasing cultural knowledge along with English language instruction and to provide possible pedagogical consequences that might arise from this context (Crozet & Liddicoat, 2000, 6–8).

2. Literature review

2.1. Intercultural Language Learning and Teaching

Intercultural Language Teaching (ILT), as Kramsch (1991, 57–60) claims, is a modern approach to the process of foreign language teaching and has transformed the aims of language learning, focusing more on intercultural competence rather than on communicative competence. Moreover, Kramsch (1993, 43) points out that whenever foreign language is spoken, the starting point of intercultural competence is performing a cultural act involving two cultures, the language learners and that of the target language. Thus, in this process, the foreign language learners must develop the cultural character that mediates between these two cultures.

Cultural and intercultural perspectives towards culture in language instruction are described by Liddicoat (2011, 837–856). The former involves learning about different cultures but does not require learners to alter their beliefs, values, or worldviews. The intercultural orientation is, nonetheless, transformative, and students are expected to deviate from their worldviews and create a new intercultural identity by engaging with

a different culture. Furthermore, Liddicoat (2011, 839) adds that cultural practices serve as a context-specific framework that people employ to organize and comprehend their social environment and interact with others. Therefore, culture is not about knowledge and objects; it is about deeds and comprehension. Learning about a culture requires interaction with its linguistic and non-linguistic activities as well as gaining understanding of how people live in a particular cultural environment. Thus, learning about a culture is only one aspect of cultural knowledge; another is learning how to interact with people from different backgrounds.

The cultural or socio-cultural factor seems to be a crucial concept in the foreign language learning and teaching process. Crozet & Liddicoat (1999, 68) define the cultural importance in the learning and teaching process as 'the need for learning about cultures and comparing them as well as the need for intercultural exploration'. Furthermore, Jayasuriya's (1990, 17) scientific research on the significance of culture in cross-cultural communication is exceptionally related to Intercultural Language Teaching. The researcher claims that the cultural aspect in learning and teaching is not a fixed autonomous entity. However, it is best understood as 'an interrelated configuration of archaic, residual and emergent cultures' (Jayasuriya's, 1990, 17). The definitions mentioned are vital for language teachers to help them discover the origins of cultural manners or interactions. As Byram & Zarate (1994, 112) theorize, the abovementioned aspects of culture in communication can be defined as:

- the archaic culture that is a source of the past-historical patterns, which can even be non-existent now, like proverbs, expressions, and colloquialisms.
- the residual culture which embodies the present, still effective and lived patterns of behaviour.
- the emergent culture that focuses on new approaches to being in a culture which are evident in the usage of neologisms.

Jayasuriya (1990, 14) puts forth the idea that to comprehend the interconnection between culture and individual behaviour, learners need to perceive culture not only as a blueprint for action but also as 'the manifest culture revealed in individual behaviour is selective, and not necessarily representative of a historical, cultural tradition in its abstract form' (Jayasuriya, 1990, 14). The learners choose from this cultural blueprint to act appropriately, but not reductively, in various social environments within the same culture.

2.2. Service-Learning pedagogy in ILT

As Regina (2017, 14–29) states, Service-Learning is a pedagogy combing formal learning with community service, integrating all the participants of the learning environment focusing on a specific difficulty or meeting an existing necessity specified by the community, while building and applying learning content.

There have been four crucial goals of Service-Learning pedagogy enumerated, which clarify its significance in the learning and teaching process (Regina, 2017, 14–29). These encompass:

- SL method provides comprehensive, inclusive, and quality education. The actions undertaken within SL practices provide simultaneous integration of academic excellence with community, scientific, and citizenship education, values education as well the development of the competences useful for daily life and work with the inclusion of diversity in education.
- SL method aims at fulfilling the community's real needs, developing in terms of solidarity and practical cooperation to address its challenges, with community beneficiaries playing an active role.
- SL methods engage students in project planning, development, and assessment phases. As an active pedagogical approach, it motivates students to take action and actively participate in the undertaken activities.
- SL method integrates learning content (theory) with community service and focuses on developing students' social competences.

Furthermore, as Erhlich (1996, 76–81) elaborates on, another way to distinguish SL from other forms of experiential learning is in the fundamental purpose of the endeavour. Experiential learning is generally regarded as a student-focused activity that aims at giving students opportunities to apply academic knowledge within the context of society. However, the target of the Service-Learning method is merely to satisfy the community's needs. Therefore, by showing that the needs of students do not coincide with those of the communities, both community and students have demonstrated their traditional roles in society's contractual obligations (Erhlich, 1996, 76–81).

Capella-Peris, Gil-Gómez & Chiva-Bartoll (2020, 102) provide a more recent definition of Service-Learning as "a teaching methodology that seeks to develop academic competencies and increase reflection, while providing a community service to meet social needs." That means that the SL approach rooted in experiential learning, simply requires the practical application of the knowledge and skills learned within formal education. The first distinction is that student reflections are vital to SL. The role of the students is not only to be involved in the community activities, but also to ponder actively upon their participation. Such inner reflection of the students engaged in the Service-Learning teaching method helps them establish schemas for the community, themselves, and their place in the community (Capella-Peris, Gil-Gómez & Chiva-Bartoll, 2020, 102–105).

However, scientific studies reveal some drawbacks of the Service-Learning approach. For instance, insights into a Service-Learning project undertaken by students of business communication are provided by Crews and Stitt-Gohdes (2013, 53–57). They performed surveys before and after the SL program and discovered that while students' attitudes toward SL had improved, their hopes and expectations had not been reached, and the students felt that the SL program had not benefited the community. Moreover, students who took a class as part of the SL program to be accepted into a university were compared to students who took a Service-Learning class as part of the program they were enrolled in. The results showed that the first group of students was less eager to take part in subsequent SL projects and was less likely to suggest their course to other students.

In essence, Service-Learning focuses on strengthening students' relationships with the community and providing an impetus for their personal development and civic engagement by giving them a chance to actively participate in solving real-world needs and taking time for critical reflection. It affords opportunities to strengthen partnerships on a project-by-project basis and opens up fertile learning experiences in foreign language education (Özdemir, 2017, 24–26; Wagner el.al, 2017, 39–42; Byram, 2019, 16; Hegarty & Angelidis, 2021, 174–175).

3. Methodology

3.1 The aims of the research

Since the study was the first exploration of the SL method in the process of teaching English both for the researcher and the participants, it was quite likely that the objectives assumed at the beginning of the study might need to be verified and adjusted accordingly as experimental treatment was conducted. The study, therefore, had three major objectives addressed:

1) to compare students' attitudes towards and preferences for the use of the Service-Learning approach before and after the experimental treatment.
2) to verify the feasibility of application of the Service-Learning approach in the process of increasing cultural awareness of students
3) to indicate benefits and drawbacks of incorporating Service-Learning in the English education.

Apart from these major objectives, the researcher sought to explore the field of the use of the Service-Learning method in English education at an advanced level, hence, it was intended to verify the usefulness of the SL method, find pedagogical ways of integrating SL with English teaching and with in-class face-to-face tasks, and pave the way for new research initiatives using the SL approach.

3.2. Participants and the teaching context

The quasi-experimental treatment was conducted between March and May 2023 in a graduate English Philology study programme at a middle-sized public university in Poland. The English Philology students attended a two-year M.A. course for regular students with the specialization Theories and Methods of Teaching English as a Foreign Language. The students took the English training programme heading towards a M.A. degree in gaining English teaching qualifications in varied types of public and private schools. The participating group comprising 10 English Philology students was ready-made when starting the research. The participants were Polish, all aged 23–24 years of age. As was evidenced by the pre-treatment survey, the participants had very

little knowledge of and familiarity with the Service-Learning method and its main assumptions as well as benefits and drawbacks.

The study participants were approached by the researcher about the possibility of enhancing their didactic skills within teaching English. The concept of the Service-Learning method was presented and the students were assured of the potential benefits they may gain from the participation in the experimental treatment. Most importantly, it was made clear that the application of the SL method would not lead to deterioration of their final grades, and that the major benefit of the participation, apart from enhanced didactic skills and strategies, would be the possibility of getting experience in teaching English in a real English classroom. All the English Philology students from the selected group agreed to participate in the study, assured of their right to withdraw and return to regular classes of the Didactics of English Language Teaching whenever desired.

The quasi-experimental treatment took part in the face-to-face weekly classes between end of March and beginning of May 2023. The learning environment was composed of the face-to-face class, with the instructor presenting input materials and task solutions for incorporating SL into the English teaching environment.

3.3. Design, procedure and instrumentation

The study proceeded according to the previously planned syllabus of the Didactics of English Language Teaching programme, however, enhanced and assisted with the application of the Service-Learning method. The blended and flipped model of the classroom applied meant that class time was used for presentation of the Service-Learning method, its main assumptions and application possibilities and SL training, while most work on the preparation of the conducted socio-cultural project was done by the participants on their own. Such a mode of work suited the planned experimental treatment, as it was interesting to find out to what extent the participants would resort to the SL method functionalities on their own, without pressure from the teacher or peers.

Since the study participants had to participate in the Didactics of English Language classes in their intact groups for research organization purposes, it was not possible to randomly assign students to experimental and control groups. Instead, the study used a one-group quasi-experimental treatment. As a result, the one-group study design was adopted as a suitable alternative for a preliminary study while being conscious of all the limits and drawbacks. In consecutive weeks, students were gradually introduced to the use of the SL method and its possible applications in English teaching environment, through the following tasks:

1. Week 1 – the introduction to the SL method (theoretical aspects)
2. Week 2 – SL method in its practical application in English education
3. Week 3 – initial diagnosis of the community in which the socio-cultural project was to be conducted (community's needs, possible problems, suggested alternatives)

4. Week 4 – SL method applied in the socio-cultural project – aims, possible tasks to be conducted, materials to be applied.
5. Week 5 – preparation of the socio-cultural project – English tasks, Quizzes, Kahoot tasks
6. Week 6 – the application of the SL method by conducting the planned socio-cultural project in the selected community of the selected primary school
7. Week 7 – evaluation of the SL method applied, pros and cons, student reflections.

The instrumentation for the study, apart from experimental treatment scenarios, comprised also a pre- and post-study survey, whose aim was to explore the participating students' experience and familiarity with the Service-Learning method, its theoretical aspects and practical application. The study participants were asked to mark their familiarity with the SL method on a 5-point Likert scale ("I do not know what it is", "I have only heard about it", "I have tried to use it, but not fully successfully" and "I use it quite often").

As the next step the study participants conducted the initial diagnosis of the selected community in which the SL method was supposed to be applied. This encompassed interviews with the primary school's headmaster and an English teacher of one of the classes in the primary school in question. The interview consisted of 5 questions enabling the study participants to gain insight on the English teaching environment of the school. The questions concerned the community's expectations, possibilities of incorporating the SL method into the English teaching environment as well as possible problems and solutions to omit unnecessary difficulties. The initial diagnosis indicated the cultural gap in the English teaching process of the primary school learners, which needed to be fulfilled. More specifically, the primary students lacked cultural knowledge concerning English-speaking countries and their customs because on a daily basis they are mostly focused on improving their English knowledge within four language skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking.

4. Results and findings

4.1. Pre- study and post- study survey

The analysis of the pre- and post-study surveys answered the first research question concerning the comparison of students' attitudes towards and preferences for use of the Service-Learning approach before and after the experimental treatment (research question 1). The results of the pre-study survey suggest that the participants are mostly not familiar with the Service-Learning method. They do not know much about its theoretical and practical aspects (90%, 9 out of 10 students). A significant percentage of the questioned believe that future English teachers should refer to supplementary methods when teaching English in schools (80%, 8 out of 10 students). Furthermore, it is supposed that engaging learners in practical tasks when teaching English is useful as they are exposed to finding solutions to problems on their own (60%, 6 out of 10 students).

In addition, the participants think that foreign language students who are trained to be future English teachers should be taught how to make good use of the newest pedagogical approaches (90%, 9 out of 10 students). The data confirm the scientific analysis by Angotti et al. (2012, 24–25) and Byram (2019, 16) who enumerate a myriad of advantages of incorporating the Service-Learning approach into the learning context. Additionally, a great percentage of the survey participants is of the opinion that there is a place for new pedagogical approaches like the Service-Learning in teaching English (60%, 6 out of 10 students). Furthermore, the study participants believe that the SL approach may be useful when teaching about culture and customs of English-speaking countries (50%, 5 out of 10 students).

Quite interestingly, the post-study results indicate a substantial growth in the number of students who became familiar with both the theoretical and practical knowledge of the Service-Learning approach in the process of teaching English (70%, 7 out of 10 students), which may show that the knowledge gained in the scientific experiment was of great advantage for the participants. Also, it confirms the finding of Álvarez et al. (2019, 34–36) and Capella-Peris, Gil-Gómez & Chiva-Bartoll (2020, 102) who state that the SL approach can facilitate a number of processes in a learning language context e.g., develop academic competencies and increase reflection, while providing a community service to meet social needs.

However, as far as the previous experience and satisfaction with the SL approach are concerned, the students' opinions are divided, which might suggest that the students are not fully convinced of the usefulness of the SL method in English education or they encountered some problems in the process of implementing it. This reflection confirms the findings by Crews and Stitt-Gohdes (2013, 63–65), Mergler et. al (2017, 70–73) and Hegarty and Angelidis (2021, 170–175) who proved some drawbacks of SL projects, especially in causing students' reluctance to active participation is SL activities.

In terms of meeting the second research objective, namely verifying the feasibility of application of the Service-Learning approach in the process of improving didactic skills of students trained to be future English teachers (research question 2), the results have been outlined in the table below, and grouped into three categories: theory, procedures, and attitudes.

Table 1. Results within the content of the Service-Learning project

Theory	Procedures	Attitudes
Knowing other/foreign realities.	Improving fluency and pronunciation in speaking English.	Improving socio-cultural relationships in the community.
Expanding knowledge of Christmas traditions/customs in other foreign countries.	Developing activities related to the socio-cultural project.	Showing a positive attitude towards others.
Expanding vocabulary related to Christmas traditions/customs of selected foreign countries.	Talking about foreign traditions and socio-cultural customs.	Respecting others' traditions, socio-cultural customs, and opinions.

The results within the context of incorporating SL into English education indicate that the participants of the socio-cultural project gain knowledge of English customs and traditions, enhance their language skills, improve their vocabulary, ameliorate the socio-cultural relationship in the community as well as learn how to accept and respect other people's traditions and socio-cultural customs.

Moreover, the scientific experiment shows the benefits for the study participants who are trained to be future English teachers when applying Service-Learning in the foreign language educational context (research question 3). In terms of competences, the collected results are presented within four areas in Table 2.

Table 2. Results within the competences of the project

Type of competence	Acquired skills
Linguistic competence	*English is used by project participants to express their Christmas traditions and speak about their socio-cultural customs. *Project participants try to be fluent in talking about Christmas traditions. *Project participants enhance their vocabulary related to Christmas traditions and customs.
Community competences	* The students acquire knowledge about varied realities and other people's behaviours by being engaged in the social activity. *The students raise their intercultural awareness. *The students participate in the community actions to change or improve it. *The students focus on developing positive attitudes towards tolerance based on the Civil Rights.
Cultural competences	*The students' cultural awareness expands in the process of being engaged in the community activity. *The students value community participant and become conscious of different social realities. *Participation in the socio-cultural project enables students to appreciate others' opinions and respect cultural diversities.
Lifelong learning competence	*The students get deeply engaged throughout the activity. *They are focused on promoting their learning process and engaging other participants. *The project participants develop their attentive perception for other people and their culture. *They learn the proper way of communicating in the community environment.

The results collected in Table 2. reveal crucial data connected with engaging the SL method into the English classroom. Regarding the relationship between applying the SL approach and increasing cultural awareness of foreign language learners, the results were mixed. Specific areas of language proficiency were enhanced, such as fluency and pronunciation in speaking English, while others were not indicated. The results of this study did not present that the Service-Learning method was profitable for the student participants' learning in and of itself. These results imply that while the Service-Learning method may not directly enhance academic achievement, its integration into foreign language curricula and programs may enhance several abilities that

indirectly influence academic outcomes, such as student motivation, self-assurance, and cultural awareness.

Thus, these findings suggest that SL may not improve academic performance directly, but rather incorporating SL into foreign language curricula and programs may improve specific skills that contribute to academic outcomes indirectly, such as students' motivation, confidence, and cultural awareness.

Quite interestingly, the results suggest vital hints for primary students, foreign language teachers, university students, and the community when applying Service-Learning in the foreign language educational context. As far as the benefits for the primary learners are concerned, these learners not only refresh their background knowledge on traditions/customs/manners in English-speaking countries, but broaden their horizons on the topic. Also, they are inspired to use their life experience while discussing similarities and differences in socio-cultural traditions and discrepancies in different countries.

In terms of benefits of foreign language teachers, they get practical experience of sharing their knowledge in a new class environment, which develops flexibility and adaptability, and increases the practical value of teachers' training. Moreover, they serve voluntarily as a cross-cultural mediator which adds to their social competencies. They also feel that their activities can make a difference and motive fellow students to have more active academic involvement/ performance.

As for university students, they have a chance to realize a possibility of the "knowledge transfer" to students of different backgrounds with no need of organizing costly international exchange programs. Moreover, it allows the voluntary students of teaching specialization to reflect on individual predispositions for their future career and the competences they have to master in teaching methodology.

5. Discussion of the findings

Regarding the learning outcomes, the results obtained from the conducted study based on a SL socio-cultural project are diverse and prove the significance of engaging students in socio-cultural projects. The Service-Learning method seems to be proper for increasing students' intercultural awareness. From one perspective, the goal of the socio-cultural initiative is to teach children how to recognize the different realities that exist in their neighbourhoods and how to work to make their neighbourhood better. From a different perspective, the priority in conducting the socio-cultural project is that students should be able to recognise other realities in their neighbourhoods and how to work to improve their neighbourhood. The project's varied exercises encourage students' enthusiasm, enabling them to complete group and independent activities. Students will be required to exhibit their newfound understanding of diversity and equal opportunity in the final discussion and project evaluation and show that they respect and value their fellow classmates.

Moreover, the study reveals several significant aspects of applying the SL method in English education as the implication for teaching and learning foreign languages. The study highlights several benefits for primary students, foreign language teachers, university students, and community when applying the SL method in the foreign language educational context. Regarding the scientific results of Capella-Peris, Gil-Gómez & Chiva-Bartoll (2020, 102–105), it has been proven that applying the Service-Learning in the foreign language educational context contributes to the increase of academic competences and helps to create a more social community. Incorporating the Service-Learning approach into studying a foreign language is crucial for encouraging students to embrace diversity and understand that equal chances are achievable as long as everyone works together in the community to make them a reality.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, the Service-Learning approach refers to an educational process based on a planned socio-cultural project. Students engaged in service-based activities that matched the demands of filling the curriculum gap within socio-cultural traditions and customs in the chosen English-speaking countries. In addition to fostering a greater sense of civic responsibility, the SL socio-cultural project sought to provide a more thorough understanding of English traditions and customs. Numerous advantages of the Service-Learning method for learning foreign languages were mentioned in the literature. Students' satisfaction, motivation and confidence in using the foreign language studied, the development of sensitivity and empathy for other cultures, a reduction in stereotypes, an increased sense of closeness and solidarity with the community in general, and a solid motivation to communicate in other languages were among the advantages that were also suggested during the empirical phase of this study.

The above discussion of the importance of introducing the Service Learning method into the university curriculum seems crucial. Dickson (2003, 60) states there is a constant need for new teaching methodologies by stating that an increasing number of educators are moving away from "traditional teacher-centric teaching methodologies that have focused on passive learning activities, and move toward skills that foster greater student-centred inquiries in a more interactive setting".

In addition, Duffy (2014, 108) highlights the problems of learners' misunderstanding of intercultural diversity. Students must develop a better understanding of intercultural diversity and have the communication skills necessary to relate to others to create societies that are tolerant and fair. With this goal in mind, the study has examined the relationship between intercultural teaching and the Service-Learning method, as it is believed that this approach is extremely helpful in fostering the social awareness that students sorely lack. Since students have not yet developed a plural consciousness, which is crucial, the introduction of interculturality in the classroom is essential. As

Duffy (2014, 115) points out, humans live in an interconnected world, so students must be prepared for a diverse world both in terms of environments and population. Thanks to the Service-Learning method and other active methodologies, it is anticipated that students will be able to develop their critical thinking skills in the fair treatment of others and respect for diversity in the future.

7. Limitations and suggestions for further research

The study has some constraints. Threats to internal validity include historical, maturational, and testing effects, which provide potential alternate explanations that may have influenced students' performance in the English teaching environment. The study's external validity is further limited because it used a small sample of students drawn from a single university department. Because of the aforementioned rationale, the results cannot be generalized to a larger population or even to students at universities. The study, nevertheless, has implications for students, teachers, and curriculum designers in addition to its own contributions to the corpus of research knowledge. The study also makes it possible for new lines of inquiry, making the knowledge it provides even more valuable.

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