

INTEGRATING SERVICE LEARNING ACTIVITIES INTO THE ENGLISH MAJOR UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM AT HUE UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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Abstract: With an effort to promote closer links between school and community throughout university training programs, service learning (SL) activities have recently been tried out in the English major undergraduate curriculum at the Faculty of English, Hue University of Foreign Languages (HUFL). This paper seeks to depict an overview of these SL endeavours illustrated by examples of implementation at HUFL and then makes recommendations as to the embeddment of service learning in English programs in Vietnam.

Keywords: service learning, English Language Teaching, community engaged learning

1. INTRODUCTION

In times of globalization and integration, the role of tertiary education is absolutely crucial as it contributes directly to the quality of labor force in society as well as interrelations between different countries (Marginson & Wende, [9]). In Vietnam, enormous efforts have been made in order to carry out reforms for the tertiary education; yet there are challenges to be tackled. One of these challenges concerns the practicability of learning at university and applying knowledge in real life after graduation. As Nguyen and Vu [12] put it, the curricular in many universities across Vietnam are laden with theories and learning does not go closely with practice. Thus, bridging the gap between students' academic knowledge and real-life application has become an issue of great importance for university teachers, curriculum designers and policy makers.

As a liberal arts and humanities institution, Hue University of Foreign Languages (HUFL) has been seeking to advance the ultimate goal of serving the population in the Central region of Vietnam through foreign language instruction and research as stated in its mission:

“Hue University of Foreign Languages offers training programs and conducts research activities in the fields of languages and cultures, including those of Viet Nam. Our training and research activities are directed towards enhancing the foreign languages proficiency and cultural understanding of Vietnamese people, especially those in the

Central and the Highland areas of Viet Nam; to assist foreigners to learn about Vietnamese language and cultures; and, through these pursuits, advance mutual understanding and strengthen ties between the peoples of the world.” (Handbook for HUFL students [6]).

HUFL has made considerable contributions to local communities through the teaching and training activities over the past decade. Nevertheless, in order for these community service efforts to reach out further to the needs arising from the mundane daily life of the communities, HUFL looks into innovative ways of organizing its training programs. In this context, service learning is very likely to meet our purpose of forging a closer, productive link between school and community. It is obvious that in adopting this vision of serving the people, HUFL is sharing the spirit of whole person education that should be inculcated in faculty and students. In other words, service learning promises to enable our school to strengthen its capacity to accomplish its mission as a major foreign language training provider in the central region of Vietnam. As such, incorporating this new instructional approach into our existing curricula is essential for us. This paper will present an overview of service learning activities in the arena of English language teaching followed by examples of service learning implementation at HUFL and then put forward suggestions in incorporating service learning in English programs in Vietnam.

2. SERVICE LEARNING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Service learning originally comes from John Dewey’s philosophy of integrating education and civil society. As defined by Jacoby and Associates [8], “service learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (p.5). According to Flecky and Gitlow [4], service learning may be a special aspect of education because it creates structured opportunities for not only students and educational departments but also community partners to look back on their activities in relation to educational objectives as well as community objectives. It bridges the school curriculum to community service in order to solve some social issues (Cumming, [3]). Service learning has been applied in several disciplines, including TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages).

Service learning has proved to bring considerable benefits to both students and the target communities (Ramsdell, [14]). Specifically, Hart [7] affirms that service learning boosts students’ academic ability, personal development and civic engagement. It also encourages students to link course materials to the target communities and be aware of their responsibilities to build sustainable and positive communities (Molee, Henry, Sessa & McKinney-Prupis [11]). In a stronger sense, Minor [10] emphasizes that service learning is a great way to lead to ‘the development of human values’ (p.2). Giles and Eyler [5] state that service-learning is oriented to action rather than scholarly pursuit; thus it is a promising practical component in the educational practice.

In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), English teachers can learn a variety of things with the integration of service learning. First, teachers have the chance to apply their ELT knowledge to real classes, thereby enhancing their hands-on teaching skills within the classes (Smolen, Zhang & Detwiler [15]). Second, there would be a huge gap if we miss out on the cultural competence that teachers can gain through deeply engaging in the community of their target students. Such cultural knowledge plays a crucial role in the ability of teachers to fully understand a language as well as teach that language. There has been much research done on the use of service learning in ELT around the world, which pinpoints both advantages and disadvantages of applying community-engaged learning to real-life skills.

An example of this research includes a case study conducted by Smolen, Zhang and Detwiler [15] of a service learning project associated with teacher preparation training in America. Interviews and written reflections were used in order to evaluate the service learning experiences of refugees from Myanmar. The findings showed that teachers who participated in service learning had enhanced academic knowledge, personal development and civic responsibility. This study provides concrete evidence that service learning is a great tool for mutual connection between English teachers and their communities.

Bippus and Eslami [1] carried out another case study in which viewpoints of six English adult learners were investigated as community service givers. This was conducted as a qualitative research in which student journals, interviews, observations and reflection papers were utilized. Some benefits as well as challenges were revealed during the research procedure. It was found that language barriers, feelings of fear and feelings of incompetence all created barriers for learners in the accommodation process into a community. However, after engaging in service learning activities, learners reflected that they were more active, more confident and more appreciative of an authentic atmosphere.

In addition, Nyikos and Dimitrieska [13] put forward a five-step model of community language teaching in the US. These steps include (1) finding personnel and developing a vision, (2) establishing contact with community centers, (3) recruiting undergraduate students, (4) orientation and initial pedagogical training and (5) co-teaching, debriefing and ongoing training. Within the scope of their study, non-native and heritage undergraduates volunteered as language teachers to teach young learners in the local community and found that their involvement in such a community program equipped them with invaluable pedagogical development.

Though service learning is quite common in the curriculum of many universities in the world, virtually no research has been found in Vietnam related to this topic. Recently, the Faculty of English at Hue University of Foreign Languages has been making efforts to apply service learning to the teaching and learning of English, with a step-by-step adoption of a community-engaged curriculum.

2. CURRENT SERVICE LEARNING ACTIVITIES AT HUE UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Service learning has found its way into the learning and teaching activities in the Faculty of English at Hue University of Foreign Languages since August 2016. A service learning project has been launched with two major stages: institutional capacity building and community engagement. The project aims at promoting partnerships between Hue University of Foreign Languages and the local communities. It first focuses on enhancing awareness and practice of service learning for faculty and students from the Faculty of English through workshops and activities. The project team attempts to integrate service learning into the curriculum so that it will become a component facilitating the students' full growth in academic, social and personal aspects. By offering English classes or language support to the community, the students will be able to both help improve English language capability of the community and build up their own competence as well.

The proposed service learning project aims to enhance HUFL's capacity to contribute to society's socio-economic development. In doing so, it needs to organize its curricula in a way that steers its students to take responsibility towards community development and apply their knowledge and skills more effectively to serve the diverse needs of the local population. The introduction of service learning to HUFL is expected to help solve the two following issues in contributing to local community socioeconomic development: (1) local communities' limited foreign language communicative ability to express themselves for their occupational needs or livelihood, (2) HUFL students' lack of foreign language skills to help the communities express sociopolitical and economic conditions.

Furthermore, the integration of service learning into the curriculum at the Faculty of English, HUCF is expected to empower the students in the following ways. The student's acquisition of the English language skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing will be contextualized in the context of the local communities. This will provide them with a clearer idea of the applicability of their foreign language skills to the settings they will encounter in the communities. Learning the foreign language embedded in the context of real local lives will also increase our students' understanding of the communities so that their use of the language will be relevant and meaningful. Consequently, students' engagement in communities will be more productive. In addition, the introduction of service learning hopefully complements the intellectual aspect of teaching and studying with social, physical and emotional activities in our institution. This innovation definitely comes with modification in instructional strategies and materials. With community-oriented situations of knowledge application as the instructional objectives, the teaching and learning activities will be more specific and creative.

Below is the timetable and activities in each stage.

| Timeline | Activities | Aims |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Stage 1: Institutional capacity building | | |
| Aug. 2016 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organize a national workshop in which two trainers deliver talks about service learning - Establish databases of service opportunities | To familiarize English teachers at the Faculty of English with service learning |
| Sep.–Oct. 2016 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Integrate service learning assignments into piloted English BA courses (teaching practicum, translation, lesson plans and materials) -Contacting communities Implementing analysis of needs for English in targeted communities (students' assignments) Faculty and students design materials for community-based purposes based on needs analysis information | Lesson/Materials design |
| Nov.-Dec. 2016 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Evaluating materials: Faculty and students evaluate materials/lesson plans for community-based purposes based on needs analysis information | |
| Stage 2: Community Engagement | | |
| Jan.-Mar. 2017 | <p>About 30-40 hours of service in communities</p> <p>Students will take ONE of these options:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teaching English for community-based needs (grammar/integrated skills) 2. Providing English language support (translation, interpretation, designing tourist brochures, bilingual phrase-books, etc.) 3. Students reflect on their community-based experiences. | To launch activities in communities |
| Apr.-May 2017 | <p>Preparing evaluation report according to each task group (teaching communication skills, designing bilingual phrase books, etc.)</p> | Determine the benefits of the new programs and ways to improve |

To be more specific, two main service-learning activities conducted at Hue University of Foreign Languages will be presented in detail. The first activity was integrating service learning into the practicum course for 4th-year class ELT students and the

second one was organizing a communication class for handicapped children in Hope Center (Hue City).

First, service learning has been integrated into a compulsory course called Practicum in the curriculum of English Language Teaching major in the Faculty of English at Hue University of Foreign Languages (Semester 1, Sept-Dec 2016). This was a 30-period course; the learners were fourth-year students majoring in English Language Teaching who aspired to being English teachers after graduation. Previously, this course required students were expected to do micro-teaching in class with peer observation made by their classmates and write up two reflection journal entries focusing on what they could learn from their micro teaching sessions. In the academic year of 2016-2017, aiming to integrate service learning into the curriculum, the course has been re-designed: students as volunteers would teach English to the community.

In particular, students in this course looked for a group of learners in the community in their neighbourhood who needed to learn English for certain purposes (e.g. those in Dong Ba market who want to sell souvenirs to foreign tourists, some street vendors who have some limited communication with foreigners, a dragon boat crew who need some casual communication with tourists daily, some monks/nuns at a pagoda who may use English to communicate with foreign visitors, security guards at a museum/tourist place who have some communication with tourists, etc.). Groups of students (3-4 people) approached one group of English learners in the above-mentioned communities, identified their English learning needs and taught them some English serving their daily work/activities on the basis of their identified needs. Then, students designed lesson plans in groups and took turns to teach for about 2-3 hours in total (about 30 minutes for one student), then handed in their lesson plans and a teaching journal to their Practicum lecturers. The teaching journal entries consisted of students' reflections on their teaching to the communities. Video-recordings of students teaching, together with their teaching journals, were sent to the lecturers for grading. The assessment of this course consisted of 60% for teaching English in the community, 30% for two teaching journal logs and 10% for students' participation in class.

Second, the Faculty of English at Hue University of Foreign Languages also conducted service learning in terms of teaching basic English communication for teenagers in Hope Center, which aimed to assist disabled and disadvantaged people by providing them with vocational training and work opportunities. This center is one of the popular destinations for many foreign tourists and volunteers to come and work to train learners new techniques in manufacturing more diverse products. Therefore, the manager of the center was highly cognizant of the need for basic English communication skills among potential learners. After the needs analysis stage, a group of three students including 2 fourth-year students and 1 second-year student (hereafter Service learning trainee teachers) came to Hope Center twice a week to teach 2 groups of learners. Group number 1 contained 8 youngsters suffering from mental retardedness, which means they find it hard to learn and memorize. However, in the service learning classes they made

every single effort in learning and using English. Group number 2, on the other hand, was more proficient in English than group number 1. This group had two officers from the center, together with 8 disabled people (between their twenties and thirties), who were learning to sew, make pottery and other handmade crafts. The course was divided into two main stages which lasted 40 hours and 30 hours respectively. The former provided basic knowledge in English communication while the latter focused on advanced practice, in which the learners were supposed to interact with native English teachers. After each session, the students who were in charge of teaching wrote reflections on their teaching practice.

Over the five-month period of the project at Hope Center, the learners at the center were familiarized with basic English whereas the Service learning trainee teachers had the opportunity to apply the communicative teaching approach in both classes. When interviewed, the three Service learning trainee teachers remarked that they truly sympathized with the difficulties and disadvantages that learners at the center might be undergoing. Moreover, they admitted that they had reaped considerable benefits in their teaching practice as well as heightened awareness about service learning. All three Service learning trainee teachers stated that they became more patient in teaching and they formed the habit of making regular reflections on their teaching practice. Alongside the benefits, some obstacles have been revealed. For instance, these teachers saw the multi-level class as the biggest challenge. They also recognized their limitations in teaching the disabled and in materials selection. Thus, they anticipated that university training should equip them with skills and knowledge to tackle such difficulties. Although the effectiveness of the service learning project at Hope Center has not yet been officially evaluated, the interview results with the Service learning trainee teachers enable us to embrace a positive attitude towards the applicability of service learning in university education.

In addition to the above-mentioned activities, further plans of service learning have been suggested. The following is one more specific plan for the service learning activities the Faculty of English intends to conduct at Huong Long primary school in Hue City. Huong Long Primary School is situated in the outskirts of Hue city, where most of the students were born in disadvantaged families. Consequently, they hardly have as favorable conditions to study as those who are in the center of the city, particularly to learn English. For instance, there are neither English clubs nor foreign language centers for students to join to improve their skills. The Faculty of English - Hue University of Foreign Languages has been training a class of students who are going to be teachers for young language learners. Aware of this situation, a group of English-for-primary-school lecturers have decided to implement service learning at Huong Long Primary School. By putting the frameworks and methodologies into operation, this project will bring Service learning English trainee teachers to the community to both try out knowledge and gain experience from the community engagement.

After the needs analysis, three main activities have been projected to be implemented at Huong Long Primary school. First of all, the Service learning trainee teachers will design activities with the intention of developing speaking and listening skills for the pupils about once a week. These teachers will apply what they have learned in the university in designing relevant activities for the pupils. After each session, they will also write teaching journals to reflect on their teaching practice. Secondly, there is currently an annual drama festival for some primary schools to join, in which each school performs a drama to compete with other schools in the city. However, most students in Huong Long Primary school are not so confident to speak English and to perform on stage. It will be helpful if some Service learning trainee teachers come and offer help during the time they rehearse. In addition, these trainee English teachers might organize an English speaking club so that students will have more opportunities to interact with English outside the classroom. If successfully implemented at Huong Long Primary School, this model of activities will hopefully be applied in other primary schools in the vicinity of Hue in the long run.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

It can be seen from the proposed service-learning project that service learning activities promise great benefits to the ultimate beneficiaries of this project - students, community residents and community-based organizations. In the area of Thua Thien Hue, there are a number of communities or organizations where use of foreign languages, especially English is central to their activities in the center of Hue and in the rural areas. Of these organizations/ communities, the rural communities show a need for the residents themselves to communicate in English with foreign tourists. These are mainly places whose agricultural lifestyles, rural means of livelihood or eco sites appeal to tourists who would prefer to interact directly with local residents. Therefore, the incorporation of service learning in English Language Teaching should be strongly encouraged in years to come. For the time being, service learning and its application are still a new area for most EFL teachers in Vietnam. Having thoroughly studied the positive effects of service learning on ELT, the authors have come up with the following suggestions.

First, familiarizing service learning among EFL teachers from theoretical background to its application in EFL is crucial, which means that service learning should be introduced to them comprehensively with frameworks and guidelines. Then, EFL teachers will be able to integrate it as a component of the teaching curriculum, with service learning being one part of the mandatory assessment. Meanwhile, training sessions about service learning and assessment in ELT need to be carried out for EFL teachers so that they can manage the implementation of service learning successfully. As service learning is in its infancy at Hue University of Foreign Languages as well as in Vietnam, it is highly suggested that when activities of service learning are applied by EFL teachers, there should be colleagues from another institution who are knowledgeable about service learning or experiential learning to observe and assess the effectiveness of the activities. For the long-term development of service learning in Vietnam, it is necessary that

teachers cooperate to help each other in understanding and conducting service learning in their teaching, and also contributing their part to building up sustainable plans with follow-ups and meaningful service learning activities for communities.

The second suggestion concerns favorable conditions created by administrators to support EFL teachers for acquiring knowledge about service learning. Accordingly, seminars and workshops to provide hands-on experience for teachers need to be organized so that teachers will be more confident in conducting service learning in their teaching. Teaching materials, at the same time, should be adapted to meet the needs of service learning. Furthermore, there should be appropriate policies to encourage teachers who are willing to apply SL in teaching as well as motivating those who still hesitate in changing the current curriculum. Relationships with some community service agencies should be established, the sooner the better, so that both teachers and learners will feel more comfortable to work with them and vice versa in a certain period of time.

Last but not least, educational institutions can apply service learning in their programs which target pre-service teachers, aspiring translators and interpreters, or even tourism-majored students. Participants of the service learning programs may consist of teachers at many faculties at HUFL such as the Faculty of English, the Faculty of English for Specific Purposes and the Faculty of International Relations. The scope of the project in the long term should include teachers from other institutions in Hue such as Hue Junior Teacher Training College and English teachers from other provinces in Central Vietnam. Within this trend, service learning will be integrated into the teaching curriculum as an indispensable part. We do believe that service learning will be an appropriate choice in the current trend in education, which will help gradually erase the gap between theory and practice in Vietnamese educational setting.

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