

Advances in Service-Learning Research with English Language Learners

Adrian J. Wurr

Gulf University of Science and Technology,
Kuwait

ABSTRACT

Research on service-learning with English Language Learners has blossomed over the last two decades, but the literature is not well known outside the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). This is unfortunate in a world where issues related to globalization and immigration are common in public discourses. This literature review is intended to provide readers with a succinct overview of an area of growing importance. Using a previously published bibliography of the field, supplemented by searches of ERIC, MLA, and WorldCAT databases and Google Scholar, a meta-analysis of the literature was conducted. Results and representative reports are summarized for higher education settings, from language institutes and two-year colleges to graduate teacher education courses. The findings show service-learning leads to small but significant gains in second language teaching and learning, and has positive impacts on the communities in which English Language learners and teachers serve.

INTRODUCTION

While the use of service-learning and other forms of experiential education is well represented in foreign language education (e.g., Beebe & De Costa, 1993; Bloom & Gascoigne, 2017; Burke, 2013; Grabois, 2007; Hellebrandt, Arries, & Varona, 2004; Hellebrandt & Varona, 1999), its application in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) is less well known. This is unfortunate since scholars in both fields are sensitive to the nuances of language and culture and thus can contribute to public discourse on immigration, globalization, education, and civic engagement. Readers who live or work in culturally and linguistically diverse communities and settings can benefit from the insights gleaned from this literature base.

METHODS

A 2013 special issue of the *TESOL Journal* focused on service-learning. It included 11 articles and a list of over 50 other published reports in the field, including five edited collections. Using that bibliography as a starting point and supplemented by searches of ERIC, MLA, and WorldCat databases and Google Scholar, a meta-analysis of the literature was conducted. Since a recent review article (Swacha, 2017) used a similar data collection method but limited results to published journal articles with a focus on second-language writing, this review includes books, articles, theses, and dissertations that focus on service-learning with English Language Learners (ELLs) in domestic

and international settings, with a particular focus on works that can inform the design and assessment of programs for linguistically and culturally diverse learners in academic and community settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on service-learning in TESOL has not only increased our collective understanding of engaged teaching and learning in diverse settings, but also demonstrated increased theoretical maturity by systematically applying empirical methods to examine a range of assorted research phenomena. Key articles in the existing research base tell us powerful stories about language, culture, race, nationality, and can contribute to public discourse on immigration, globalization, education, and civic engagement, to name a few of the issues to which English Language Learners and their teachers can contribute. Because linguists are trained to notice nuances in language, researchers and teacher-scholars in the field are skilled at using a variety of methods to analyze discourse systematically. Analyzing student reflection journals using both qualitative and quantitative methods to triangulate data is common, but discourse includes oral, institutional, and socio-historical texts too, and a growing number of TESOL researchers demonstrate sophisticated understandings of how language and culture are inextricably represented in interviews with students and community partners and the teaching and learning spaces within which they interact. The shift in focus from communicative competence in the target language to intercultural competence in multilingual communities is described in the introduction of a recent edited collection on service-learning in TESOL (Perren & Wurr, 2015) and summarized in Figures 1 and 2.

Summarizing the shifts in theory over time in the field, the editors note, "Whereas the first generation of SL [service-learning] in TESOL scholarship tended to view the learner and society in two dimensional terms, generally transacting across two languages and cultures, the second generation of SL in TESOL scholarship accepts multilingualism and multiculturalism as the norm and views the teaching and learning space as dynamic, contested, and interconnected. Thus the 'social turn' in the Humanities (Block, 2003; Trimbur, 1994) heralded the 'multilingual turn' (May, 2014) in much of the scholarship today" (Wurr & Perren, 2015, p. 5).

Points of Contact: Intensive English and Bridge Programs

Intensive English Programs (IEP) are tasked with preparing students for main-stream college classes in English. Most include courses in listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, and culture for learners at different English language proficiency levels. Depending on course goals and the types of community engagement fostered, experiential learning offers ELLs with enhanced opportunities to improve upon all language skills. In one of the more impressive IEP studies to date, Askildson, Kelly, and Mick (2013) used series of quantitative and qualitative data, including pre- and post-language proficiency tests of all basic skills and intercultural sensitivity measures, to demonstrate the degree to which service-learning added substantive gains to students' linguistic development as well as their ability to use such language gains in socioculturally meaningful ways. They found students improved their English language skills at three times the rate normally associated with traditional language learning programs (p. 424). Additionally, results showed the service-learning component affected students' understanding of social service providers and how issues of social justice can be addressed in their home cultures and countries, an important learning objective given the expectation that they create service projects to implement in their home countries upon their return.

Another IEP study, conducted at the University of Maine (Sousa, 2015), used the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (ACTFL, 1999), or the "5 Cs," to analyze learning outcomes. This influential policy guideline from a leading professional language education organization includes as one of its five goals the need for language learners to participate in multilingual communities at home and around the world, a natural fit for service-learning. Sousa uses this endorsement of practice, quantitative survey data, along with qualitative document analysis and observation to show positive impacts on students and community partners. The ESL students participating in the project recognized the meaningful educational experience, in part for the development of their language skills, and also for their contributions to the local community school in promoting cultural awareness.

Finally, Perren, Grove, and Thornton (2013) each conducted separate and independent studies of ELLs at each author's respective university IEP, yet found remarkably similar outcomes with regards to impacts on learners. The researchers conclude "community engagement can promote a sense of empowerment in ESL students. This is accomplished by making them feel part of their community, allowing them to work cooperatively to develop authorial voice, increasing their audience awareness in writing, and fostering critical reflection that leads to a better understanding of social problems and civic responsibility" (p. 463).

Bridge programs are designed to help ELLs transition from Intensive Language Programs to mainstream college classes. Miller and Kosta (2015) describe an intergenerational service-learning project that formed the cornerstone of one bridge program in the U.S. For eight weeks, students conducted semi-structured interviews with multilingual low-income older adults and compiled data about their adult partners' rich life experiences. Students then constructed a literature review based on a thematically-charged social issue that emerged from the interviews and wrote an oral

history narrative based on their interview findings. The researchers use Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice framework to illuminate the converging and diverging experiences of students, staff, and instructors as they participated in and reflected on this project. This theoretical framework has only recently been adopted by TESOL researchers (e.g., Avineri, 2015; Curtis & Curran, 2015; Stewart, 2007) but aligns well with experiential learning theories because participation in communities of practice embody meaningful action, interaction, and collaboration among participants (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). The authors conclude by providing suggestions for conducting oral histories with English language learners and older adults and for service-learning projects that are intergenerational and intercultural following Perren's (2013) seven-step model for designing service-learning projects with ELLs: 1. Planning and logistics; 2. Obtaining Materials and Background Information; 3. Preparing for Field Experiences; 4. Implementing Field Experience and Civic Engagement; 5. Reflecting and Connecting; 6. Diversifying and Repeating; and 7. Expressing Gratitude and Evaluation.

Maybe I'll stay awhile: Service-Learning at Two-Year Colleges

Whereas international students at four-year colleges often plan to return to their home countries after graduation, English Language Learners at two-year colleges are often immigrants who have lived in the country for several years and have more integrative motivation with regards to learning the host language and culture. Initial reports on using service-learning with community college students found they gained academically and socially by having authentic contexts for learning about the target language and culture (Arca, 1997, Seltzer, 1998; Steinke, 2009). More recently, Sharon Bippus' (2011) doctoral study presents six case studies of adult ESOL students in a semester-long community college ESOL course that included service-learning. She notes that "the students, many of whom held professional titles such as doctor, engineer, architect, and journalist, in their home countries" (p. 4) believed their language skills at the beginning of the course prevented them from participating more fully as citizens in their new home, but gradually came to develop what Whittig and Hale (2007) call a "confidence to contribute":

Students gained communicative competence while developing confidence in themselves. Although the participants were nervous about working in the community initially, they overcame their anxiety by using various strategies. They realized they do have the ability to communicate successfully with English speakers in the 'real world,' and have valuable skills that they can offer the community. Additional benefits to the students included increasing their knowledge of American culture and history, developing a higher level of motivation, and forming connections to target community members. (Bippus, 2011, pp. iii-iv)

When the target community is the university community, service-learning projects with ELLs can impact retention. Maloy, Comeau-Kirchner, and Amaral (2015) describe a web-based, service-learning project with advanced ESL composition students at Queensborough Community College. Students researched and wrote about human rights issues for university website on the topic. While assessments of the students' writing showed marked improvements in all areas, the authors argue that an equally

important benefit for ELLs was positioning them as knowledgeable, contributing members of the university community:

Much like the project Perren et al. (2013) described, our students achieved similar goals and learner outcomes. The digital component of this project also provided numerous opportunities for language learning, teamwork, and ownership of the written products and corresponding design of those products. Moreover, as our students acquired more audience awareness about how those final products would be utilized outside of the classroom, they were better able to educate their fellow QCC students on human rights curriculum. (p. 263)

The research and discussion of human rights in groups of diverse learners and the feedback associated with multi-drafted writing assignments helped students to interact with and learn from others. One student wrote in a survey at the end of the semester, the project “is a good opportunity to give my ideas and listen and learn from other people with different culture. Also, it’s a good opportunity to see how I can behave in a group of people and work in a team” (Maloy, Comeau-Kirchner, & Amaral, 2015, p. 264).

The positive impact that positioning ELLs as service providers can have on learners’ identities and sense of belonging is an encouraging and robust finding in the research base to date. Glass, Wongtrirat, and Buus (2015) argue that cultivating a sense of belongingness is critically important for international students: “Belongingness assumes greater importance, for example, in social contexts in which individuals are more likely to experience isolation or loneliness or to feel invisible as they reconstruct support networks in a new cultural and linguistic environment” (p. 83).

Can I have that in Writing?

Writing instructors were among the first in higher education to embrace service-learning (Adler-Kassner, Crooks, & Watters, 1997; Deans, 2000; Author, 1999) and the writing students produce for instructors and community partners alike provides an excellent means of assessing the impact of instruction.

A useful typology of the types of writing students in service-learning courses can produce is Deans’ (2000) description of writing *about*, *for*, or *with* community partners. Initially, Deans (1999) contrasted John Dewey’s pragmatism with Paulo Freire’s Critical Pedagogy to posit that Dewey’s theories were better suited to projects in which students write about their service-learning experiences since the empirical approach Dewey promoted in using experience as the source of learning fit best with the types of research and writing typically taught in first-year college composition courses. Freire’s critical pedagogy suggested students should write to support and promote changes in society; that is, to write *for* community partners rather than *about* them even though the documents typically produced, such as websites, three-panel brochures, public service announcements, and grant applications, were more practical in nature and often better suited to more advanced writing courses. Deans’ (2000) well-received book, *Writing Partnerships*, expanded on this theoretical framework by adding projects in which students write *with* community partners to produce oral histories and other collaboratively written products. These three theoretical perspectives form the

cornerstone of the first generation of service-learning research (Kolb, 1984), as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 above, and although Deans' model is most commonly applied to teaching contexts, he has used the typology to identify promising areas of research too. TESOL researchers have adapted the model to address questions in their field as well, as shown in Table 1

Wurr's (2001) dissertation provides a useful model for the type of comparative, evidence-based research studies service-learning researchers (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Gelmon, Furco, Holland, & Bringle, 2005; Zlotkowski, 2007) say are needed to add rigor to the research base and attract potential funding agencies. He compared native and non-native English speaking students enrolled in introductory-level first-year college composition courses that did and did not include service-learning. The main research question was, "Does service-learning contribute to improved student writing? If so, in what ways?" Linguistic and rhetorical features commonly identified as affecting judgments of writing quality such as cohesion and grammatical accuracy were compared to holistic essay ratings to determine the impact of different teaching and learning contexts on writing performance. Results show a significant difference ($p < .001$) between the writing produced in service-learning and traditional writing sections, with service-learning essays being rated about 5% better than ones produced in traditional classes. Two other studies (Feldman et al., 2006; Hamstra, 2010) have replicated significant parts of Wurr's research design and arrived at similar conclusions. These results accord well with the bulk service-learning research to date, which generally shows a small but significant benefit to incorporating service-learning into the curriculum.

Service-learning projects in which ELLs tutor or share cultural information with children are also common. Meier (2015) describes one such project in a basic writing course at a large midwestern research university in which international students shared stories and artifacts from their home countries with elementary school students. Using field observation, surveys, and student reflections, she found the children obtained cross-cultural knowledge in alignment with the third-grade social studies curriculum, while the college students honed language skills and gained intercultural knowledge of the local community and U.S. culture more broadly. Meier's work highlights many of the qualities that make a successful service-learning project with ELL learners: one that provides real audiences and purposes, prepares ELLs well beforehand, and allows them ample opportunity to reflect on its meaning afterward.

Table 1: *Potential Research Questions to Assess Service-Learning in TESOL* (adapted from Wurr & Perren, 2014)

ELL Practices & Processes (<i>About</i>)	Teacher Practices (<i>With</i>)	Community Practices (<i>For</i>)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which discourses and language skills are most common in SL settings? Common master narratives? Patterns in formal or stylistic features? • What can we discern about the SLA processes and strategies of students in SL courses? Differences between SL and non-SL courses with respect to language acquisition and use? • Who interacts with the students? Students' sense of self and audience when doing community-based work? Other rhetorical concerns? • Who sees the students' texts? Who comments and how? How much gets shared, and with whom? How much goes public? • Do students evince any significant changes in identity or agency as they communicate for, about, and with the community? • How does SL impact motivation/investment to continue language learning? Volunteering? What is the source and nature of the motivation/investment? • How do students articulate the connections between formal classroom learning and natural acquisition in the community? Any evidence of improved meta-awareness of communicative competence? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do TESOL teachers prepare students and community partners for working with each other? • Do SL instructors arrange academic schedules differently? Patterns in sequencing of language skills and SL assignments? • What do instructors typically give up or de-emphasize to include SL? What assignments, classroom activities, and rhetorical concerns do they add or emphasize more? • Do instructors comment on SL projects differently as compared to typical academic assignments? • Do grading practices change in any discernible ways? • Do ways of student/teacher conferencing or mentoring change? Ways of talking about language, society, or self? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kinds of community partners are typically working with ELLs? Pre- and in-service TESOL teachers? • How do community partners feel about working with ELLs and their teacher(s)? How about agency's clientele? • What type of service projects are typically employed in TESOL contexts? • What role(s) do community partners play in crafting assignments, choosing genres, and advising students? • What kinds of comments do community partners make on student work? How does feedback impact revision? • What other role(s) do community partners play in shaping students' language form and use? • Do community partners value the relationship more than the actual texts? Other services provided more than the texts?

Going Global: Service-Learning in Language Teacher Education

Teacher education has always been well represented in the service-learning literature. Typically, university pre-service teachers tutor K-12 and adult ELLs (Hutchinson, 2011; Miller & Gonzalez, 2009; Moore, 2013). In doing so, pre-service teachers gain experience with ELLs, a population many fear due to their lack of TESOL knowledge. For example, Jesse Moore's (2013) study charts a shift in TESOL students' perceptions of ELLs as the TESOL students move from identifying them as an "other" with whom they would have "encounters" in the discrete spaces of ESL classrooms to seeing ELLs as potential students in their future content classes. With this familiarity came a sense of advocacy; as one student notes, "Because of the service-learning aspect, I believe I will not only be a better and more aware teacher and citizen, but a stronger advocate for ELLs!" (p. 563).

Integrating service-learning into pre-service education courses tends to have a strong impact on the career choices of Education majors. As far back as the 1980s, students were telling researchers at Portland State University that participating in service-learning projects in their Education courses confirmed or challenged their decision to be teachers as they learned first-hand what it means to interact with the public on a daily basis (B. Holland, personal communication, April 14, 2011). This ultimately led the researchers to devote an entire section of the student learning outcomes survey they developed to probing the impact of service-learning on career development (Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996; Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, & Kerrigan, 2001). More recently, Miller and Gonzalez (2009) investigated the impact of participating in domestic or international service-learning (ISL) on pre-service teachers' career commitment, understanding of ELL issues, and knowledge of the local community. They found positive outcomes for both groups on all dimensions, but slightly stronger ("Extremely positive" rather than "Positive") outcomes for ISL participants, who also noted an increased interest in working with ELLs in the future. "[R]esults indicated larger gain scores regarding interest in working with ELLs for international than domestic service learning participants. In this context, the international service experience appeared to have an enhancement, rather than questioning, effect on participant attitudes" (Miller & Gonzalez, 2009, p. 6).

On the international front, Wu and Ursuline (2015) report on a service-learning project in Taiwan in which undergraduate English majors tutored students at an elementary school in language arts and science using locally relevant resources. The study is one of the few to employ Amanti, González, and Moll's (2005) Funds of Knowledge as a theoretical framework, and one of a growing number of service-learning reports undertaken by and for stakeholders in non-Western countries (see Xing & Hok Ka Ma, 2010, for more works of this nature).

Kassabgy and El-Din (2013) provide another example of service-learning research in non-Western cultures, this time in Egypt. They investigated the impacts of an undergraduate experiential education course on the development, attitudes, and perceptions of the co-learners involved in the experience. Undergraduate students majoring in linguistics tutored university custodians and staff in English as a foreign language. The researchers used mixed methods to answer research questions related to academic achievement, civic engagement, and personal growth. Results were strongest in career development, with both groups reporting enhanced understanding of

teaching and learning in international contexts. Students also reported better understanding of applying theory to practice as a result of experiential learning tasks. Both groups also reported feeling closer to one another than they had previously; barriers between students and staff had been reduced as a result of working together for an extended period of time. Other reports (Dubinsky, Welch, & Wurr, 2012; Pietrykowski, 1996; Spack, 1997) in the literature base provide anecdotal evidence of service-learning's potential to reduce stereotypes of the "Other."

On the domestic front, Bloom and Gascoigne's (2017) edited collection, *Creating Experiential Learning Opportunities for Language Learners*, contains many reports on how foreign language and pre-professional students can "study abroad" in their own communities by partnering with immigrant groups and communities. Burke's chapter on expeditionary learning theory (Burke, 2013, Klein & Riordan, 2011) provides a clear outline of how the practices effectively developed in Outward Bound can be applied to foreign language education. Some projects described in the chapter partner migrant farm workers and foreign-language students in local high schools and colleges to increase intercultural awareness and understanding. Other chapters describe internships, externships, and other domestic experiential learning opportunities that immerse students in dynamic spaces for intercultural language learning.

Avineri (2015) reports on another teacher education course for graduate students in TESOL that, because of its focus on intercultural communication and use of qualitative research methods, can inform the work of others interested in developing students' skills in working and communicating across languages and cultures. Using action research and content analysis of reflection materials, augmented by pre- and post-course surveys, reading responses, in-class interactions, group meetings, and presentations, Avineri reviewed each of the four reflections in the course, coded for themes (e.g., knowledge and identities) and subthemes (e.g., specific knowledge and identities) as they were described by the students. Results show positive gains in students' knowledge (e.g., local history and issues, critical pedagogy, civic engagement), skills (communication, team-building, project management, grant writing, and leadership), and attitudes (awareness, creativity, collaboration). Collectively, she argues these outcomes develop a sense of "nested interculturality" in students due to the ways "in which layers of culture complement and inform one another" (p. 207). Survey results suggest students are able to apply these skills and knowledge to their career development and future professional practices.

CONCLUSION

Service-learning in TESOL has come a long way over the last few decades. The research to date indicates that service-learning gives ELLs insight on U.S. culture, provides authentic speaking and listening situations, enhances literacy skills, and has a positive effect on retention (e.g., Askildson, Kelly, & Mick, 2013; Bippus, 2011; Hamstra, 2010; Maloy, Comeau-Kirschner, & Amaral, 2015; Whittig & Hale, 2007; Wurr, 2002). When incorporated into TESOL teacher education programs, service-learning enhances pre-service teachers' understanding of ELLs, language learning theories and practices, and the communities in which they serve (Hutchinson, 2011; Lund, Bragg, & Kaipainen, 2014; Miller & Gonzalez, 2009; Moore, 2013). Becoming more familiar with this

important body of research can help inform future work with linguistically and culturally diverse learners in academic and community settings.

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About the Author:

Adrian Wurr (ajwurr@gmail.com) is Professor Emeritus at Gulf University of Science and Technology in Kuwait. He has worked and published extensively in the United States and Asia, exploring the intersections of applied linguistics, literacy studies, and service-learning. He co-edited *Writing, Service-Learning, and Community Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook* (Bedford/St. Martin, 2010), *Learning the Language of Global Citizenship: Service-Learning in Applied Linguistics* (Wiley, 2007), *Learning the Language of Global Citizenship: Strengthening Service-Learning in TESOL* (Common Ground, 2015), has guest edited several journals on service-learning, and is Managing Editor of *The Reading Matrix: An Online International Journal*. He is currently researching service-learning in immigrant communities worldwide.