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Integrating Service Learning into a Course on Teaching English Language Learners and Looking at Preliminary Data

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Teachers need to be well prepared to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students. This article discusses the integration of a service-learning component into an undergraduate course on teaching English language learners (ELLs), a requirement for teacher candidates created in response to a recent state mandate.

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Dramatically changing demographics across the United States pose a significant challenge for today's school systems. Mainstream teachers are being called upon to work with growing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse students enrolled in their classrooms, or, as Kramsch (2008) noted, "to operate in a globalized space where . . . exchanges will be increasingly plurilingual and pluricultural" (p. 390). English as a second language (ESL) teachers have a vital role to play in high quality programs for English language learners (ELLs), but regular teachers of the core subjects such as English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies also need to have an understanding of the linguistic, sociocultural, cognitive, and pedagogical issues surrounding these learners (Janzen, 2008). Most importantly, all teachers need to know how to adapt instruction to make content concepts comprehensible to ELLs so that these learners can achieve in school. Through service-learning, preservice teachers can gain, firsthand, the knowledge and skills needed to facilitate the academic achievement of ELLs, and at the same time, provide critical service to this growing community of learners.

The number of ELLs in U.S. public schools has more than doubled in the last two decades to over 11 million students and is increasing at seven times the rate of the school population overall (NCELA, 2008). While almost two-thirds of ELLs are Spanish speakers, on the whole, ELLs represent over 300 different languages, about 130 of which are Native American languages (U.S. Census, 2010). In Pennsylvania, the state where this research was conducted, over

42,500 ELLs claim 175 different home languages (PDE, 2013a).

In addition to obvious variation in language background, there is much sociocultural diversity within the ELL population (Wright, 2010). For example, those born in the U.S., which comprise the large majority of ELLs, typically enter kindergarten with virtually no literacy skills and limited content background knowledge, while foreign-born ELLs who attended school in their home countries will have a range of literacy skills and content concepts, dependent upon the number of years of schooling and the quality of that schooling.

New Course on Teaching English Language Learners

In response to changes in professional education certification requirements intended to equip PK-12 teachers to effectively instruct diverse learners in inclusive settings, faculty at West Chester University, a mid-sized public university, created a new course, *Teaching English Language Learners PK-12* (PDE, 2013b). Offered initially in the 2010-2011 academic year, the course was rooted in culturally responsive pedagogy and focused on second language acquisition (SLA) theory and sheltered instruction in the subject areas. Teacher candidates were exposed to culturally responsive practices, such as providing a classroom environment that is welcoming and inclusive, involving *all* of their students in the construction of knowledge, and assessing learning in a variety of ways that address different learning styles (Gay, 2010; Nieto, 2010).

Teacher candidates learned how to identify each of the five TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) English proficiency levels—pre-production,

early production, speech emergence, intermediate, and advanced—to ensure that students are receiving information that they can comprehend, or comprehensible input (Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Wright, 2010). Candidates reviewed instructional and assessment materials to determine their suitability for ELLs. They practiced adapting instruction and assessment at each proficiency level within the domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Fairbairn & Jones-Vo, 2010).

The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP[®]), a research-based model of sheltered instruction, was the framework utilized to guide candidates in developing adapted instruction and assessment. The eight components of the SIOP[®] are lesson preparation (including content objectives and language objectives), building background, comprehensible input, strategies, interaction, practice/application, lesson delivery, and review and assessment (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

Two instructors integrated a service-learning requirement into their sections of the new course to allow preservice teachers to gain real-world experience working with multicultural, multilingual learners. The purpose of the study was to examine the impact that service-learning would have on future teachers as they applied course concepts in teaching or tutoring ELLs in the content areas.

This article will describe each step of the service-learning project and explain the benefits of it for future teachers working with ELLs based on a quasi-mixed methods design. It will present results from an analysis of teacher candidates' reflections

Table 1. Furco Model: Typology of Service Learning

	Community Service (SERVICE learning)	Service Learning (SERVICE LEARNING)	Service Based Internship (service LEARNING)
Primary Intended Beneficiary	Recipient	Recipient AND Provider	Provider
Primary Focus	Service	Service AND Learning	Learning
Intended Educational Purposes	Civic and Ethical Development	Academic and Civic Development	Career and Academic Development
Integration with Curriculum	Peripheral	Integrated	Co-Curricular/Supplemental
Nature of Service Activity	Based on a Social Cause	Based on an Academic Discipline	Based on an Industry or Career

that demonstrate how the service-learning experience helped them develop their teaching practice, and it will include plans for strengthening future implementation of service-learning in the course.

Service Learning

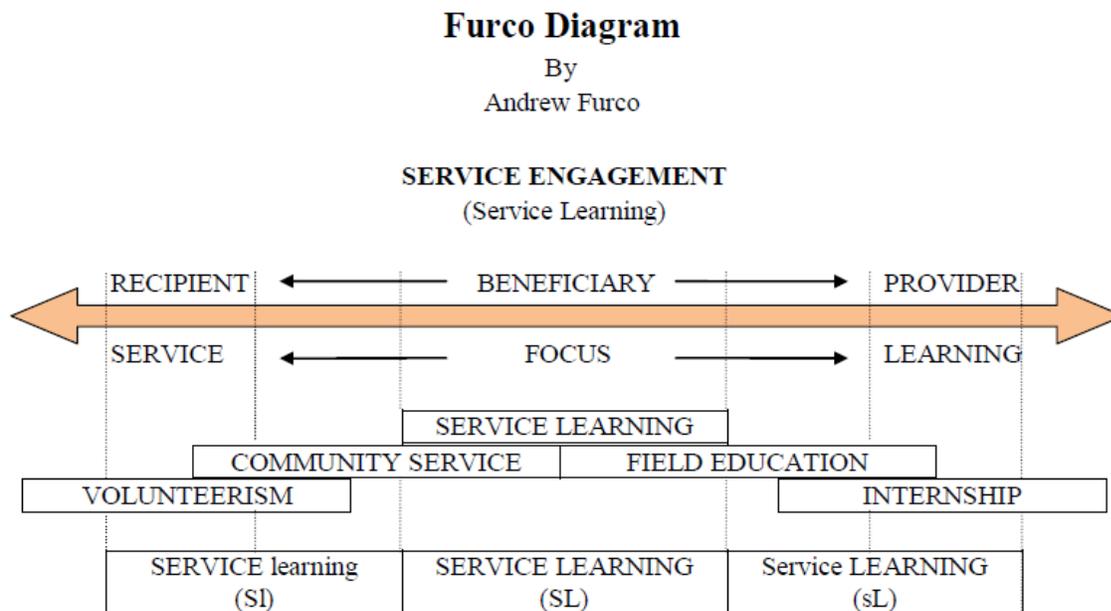
In the typology of service-learning programs proposed by Sigmon (1994) and further developed by Furco (2001), “each program type places a different amount of emphasis on service and/or learning and is defined by whether the primary intended beneficiary of the experience is the *service provider* or the *service recipient*” (p. 24) (see Table 1). Thus, the middle column of Table 1 represents the truest form of service-learning, in which the service outcomes and the learning outcomes are carefully planned and given relatively equal weight, represented as “SERVICE LEARNING.” The course instructors were mindful at the outset of the potential for a “SERVICE LEARNING” experience in this course. For example, primary intended beneficiaries and focus were both ELLs and teacher candidates (those served and those learning to teach), and the service-learning was to be integrated into the syllabus and class time as fully as possible.

Furco (2003) reconceptualized the table as a diagram to represent a continuum (see Figure 1). For example, as the experience slides to the right along the continuum, it is represented as “service LEARNING,” that is, an experience in which the learning of the service provider receives more emphasis. Note Furco’s (2003) placement of Field Education (to include, perhaps, pre-student-teaching field courses) at the middle right and Internship (to include, perhaps, student teaching) at the far right along the continuum. It is the course developer or instructor whose planning and teaching would place a service-learning course at some point along the continuum, dependent upon the service-learning criteria met.

The Service-Learning Project

As a basis for the study, the components of Eyler and Giles’s (1999) definition of service-learning were utilized: 1) learning through a cycle of action and reflection as teacher candidates worked with ELLs; 2) applying what the candidates were learning in the college classroom in their work with ELLs; and 3) self-reflection by the candidates as they sought to achieve

Figure 1. Furco Diagram: Typology of Service Learning



both real objectives for the community of ELLs and deeper understanding and skills as teachers.

Five service-learning outcomes were established. Teacher candidates will be able to: 1) identify, compare, and differentiate critical issues related to ELLs in the context of PK-12 education in U.S. schools; 2) apply knowledge of current legislation, such as NCLB, and court decisions to analyze structural inequities relative to the sociocultural and political experiences of ELLs in the context of PK-12 education in U.S. schools; 3) articulate an informed and reasoned openness to differences related to their work with PK-12 ELLs; 4) apply second language acquisition (SLA) theory, culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), and SIOP[®] instructional and assessment strategies in their work with PK-12 ELLs; and 5) apply knowledge of the five subsystems of language (phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, and

pragmatics) and the lexicon to analyze linguistic challenges of PK-12 ELLs.

Data gathered from a pre-project questionnaire confirmed what was presumed, that teacher candidates had little to no experience working with ELLs. Those who had worked with ELLs did not have experience using specific teaching strategies that would best meet these learners' needs. Thus, a service-learning component was integrated into three sections of the course to strengthen the teacher candidates' learning experience by having them engage with ELLs as they developed their pedagogy and, at the same time, served the ELL population in the surrounding communities (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Reitzel, 1999). The design was to require three to five hours of service-learning. However, after it became clear that placements with access to ELLs were attainable for 88 participants, the requirement was raised to eight to ten hours the following semester.

Methods

Table 2. Number of ELLs Served by Educational Level

Educational Level	Number of ELLs
Grades PK-4	70
Grades 5-8	19
Grades 9-12	18
Higher Education	5
Adult Education	6
Total	118

Participants

Eighty-eight undergraduate teacher candidates, predominantly female Caucasian monolingual English speakers, participated in the service-learning project. The majority of the participants were juniors (63/88) either majoring in early grades preparation (PK-4) or double majoring in early grades preparation and special education (PK-8). Other participants' majors included middle grades preparation (4-8), English (7-12), music (K-12), mathematics (7-12), and physical education (K-12). Teacher candidates worked with 118 ELLs in PK-12, higher education, and adult education (see Table 2).

Procedures and Data Collection Measures

A quasi-mixed methods design was used for the study, with the following methods of data collection: 1) a pre-project questionnaire; 2) a log that elicited demographic information about participants' ELLs as well as an overall picture of how participants were applying course content to their service-learning experience; 3) a journal in which participants reflected on various aspects of their service-

learning experiences; and 4) an evaluation of the service-learning project.

Pre-project questionnaire. Participants completed a questionnaire to glean their own language backgrounds, any experiences they had acquiring a second language, and any prior experiences they may have had working with ELLs. The following questions were asked: 1) What is your native language? 2) What other languages do you speak? 3) What experiences have you had working with language learners either in a U.S. context or abroad? 4) How prepared do you feel to work with students who are learning English as another language? and 5) What have you learned about working with students who are learning English as another language?

The questionnaire revealed that 52% of the participants had some experience working with ELLs and 45% had none, with 3% not reporting. Sixty percent of the participants reported that they felt only somewhat prepared to work with ELLs after they graduated. These data strongly suggested that the teacher candidates would benefit from working with ELLs prior to graduation, and that service-learning would benefit them.

Service-learning project requirements and agency list. At the beginning of the semester, instructors discussed project requirements and provided participants with a list of service-learning agencies. Requirements included: 1) candidates finding a school or agency at the beginning of the semester that provided them with an ELL to work with from mid- to end-semester; 2) candidates keeping a reflective journal about their service learning and providing information and insights during designated class activities; 3) candidates completing an evaluation of their service learning upon completion; and 4) candidates conducting themselves professionally during service learning.

Table 3. Service-learning Contexts

Service-learning Contexts	Number of Sites
Public Schools: K-12 Content Classrooms, in-school hours	17
School and Community-based Programs: After-school hours	8
Other Contexts: Sunday School, Private Residence	2
Public School: ESL Classroom, in-school hours	1
Private Preschool: In-school hours	1

Service-learning project log. Over eight weeks, participants logged information about their ELLs such as biographical data, grade level, present level of performance in relevant subject areas, and any particular learning challenges. In addition, they recorded their hours, the work they accomplished, and the teaching strategies they practiced.

Reflective journal prompts. During service-learning, participants helped their ELLs with school and homework assignments in the subject areas. They then reflected on their experiences by responding to a series of open-ended prompts. The prompts fell under five headings: 1) working with ELLs; 2) lesson descriptions; 3) SLA theory; 4) teaching strategies; and 5) assessment. During class time, structured small- and large-group discussion sessions allowed teacher candidates to share their experiences, questions, and insights with peers.

Evaluation of the service-learning project. At its completion, and as a comparative measure of their pre- and post-service-learning experiences with ELLs, participants were given a project evaluation that asked:

- 1) what the benefits of the service-learning project were for them as future teachers; and
- 2) what changes, if any, they would recommend for the service-learning project.

Data Analysis

Analyses and interpretations of the data collected were triangulated from the data collection sources. Perspicuous data were systematically analyzed and coded for emergent themes and patterns (Chapelle & Duff, 2003). Data gathered from the pre-project questionnaire were analyzed by listing and counting the native and other languages of the teacher candidates and by coding, categorizing, and counting the experience, preparation, and learning they had with ELLs. Data gathered from the project evaluation were analyzed by coding, categorizing, and counting the benefits the candidates reaped as future teachers of ELLs, and changes they would recommend. The log data were analyzed by counting the number of hours each participant performed service-learning and by categorizing and counting the service-learning contexts (schools and agencies) and the native languages of the ELLs. Finally, responses to

the reflective journal prompts were analyzed for common themes related to the impact of service-learning on the candidates. These were subsequently coded, categorized, and counted.

Results and Discussion

At the conclusion of the semester, 88 participants had logged a total of 396 service-learning hours, an average of 4.5 hours each. Typically, they worked in mainstream classrooms in local public schools during regular school hours (see Table 3). The 118 ELLs served represented 29 native languages. The predominant language was Spanish (n=98), followed by Chinese (n=35). Other native languages were Hindi, Russian, Korean, French, Hmong, Shabo, Farsi, Japanese, Thai, Vietnamese, Portuguese, French, German, Italian, Ukrainian, Tagalog, Polish, Norwegian, Hungarian, Ibo, Arabic, Romanian, Tamil, Swahili, Turkish, and Cambodian.

The service-learning project provided teacher candidates with practice in teaching academic content to ELLs based on the capabilities of these students at each level of English language proficiency. Candidates were able to experience, firsthand, the linguistic, academic, and sociocultural challenges of this learner population and share their ELLs' stories with their peers in discussions in the college classroom. An analysis and relative frequency calculation of the participants' reflective journal responses revealed that they were overwhelmingly positive about the service-learning work they completed with their ELLs. Three of the most frequently reported benefits were 1) the opportunity to apply SLA theory in the service-learning experience; 2) a change in attitude toward working with ELLs; and 3) perceived higher self-efficacy as teachers.

The most frequently reported impact service-learning had on participants was providing them with the opportunity to apply SLA theory in a real world context. Journal reflections evidenced much active practical application. Candidates reflected on their use of a variety of techniques as well as their incorporation of a number of SIOP[®] elements in their work with ELLs. They often listed "tips" discussed in class that they used when working with their ELLs, such as enunciating clearly, using gestures to aid comprehension, and supplementing instruction with pictures. Many journal entries also contained an assessment of the candidates' implementation of the "tips," such as, "They definitely helped," and "The approaches worked."

One candidate stated, "I certainly used tips we have talked about in class, like speaking clearly and slowly, ... and using pictures definitely helped."

For most of the participants, this course was an introduction to the SIOP[®] model and the first time they experienced applying it. One candidate declared, "I was astounded at how well these SIOP[®] approaches worked." Service-learning gave teacher candidates the opportunity to think through and work on aspects of their teaching specifically related to ELLs within the SIOP[®] paradigm, such as understanding their prior schooling and background knowledge and the cultural mismatches between their home cultures and the American culture. Another candidate noted, "It has helped me understand what kind of support I will need to provide and how to differentiate for the needs of each student."

The second most frequently reported impact of service-learning was a change in participants' attitudes toward ELLs. In general, teachers with limited experience

with ELLs have less supportive beliefs, attitudes, and practices (Karabenick & Noda, 2004). However, Karabenick and Noda (2004), along with other teacher education researchers (e.g., Youngs & Youngs, 2001), found that teachers have a change-for-the-better attitude toward ELLs with research-based professional development that focuses on ESL training and direct interactions with these students.

In reviewing the participants' reflective journals, more positive and open attitudes were found toward working with ELLs. Teacher candidates' entries revealed what they thought about their ELLs prior to starting the project. For example, many of the candidates believed they would have to speak slowly and enunciate very clearly in their dialogue with every ELL. But after they started the project, they found something to the contrary, resulting in a shift in attitude. For example, one candidate said, "I was expecting to have to speak slowly and clearly but he understood me 100%. It was just me that had some trouble understanding him." Other candidates expressed negative emotions toward working with ELLs prior to service-learning but shifted their perspective as they persisted. One candidate commented, "When the project was first assigned, . . . I was intimidated. But as I spent time with them [ELLs], I learned that it is not as intimidating as I thought and that it is actually a positive experience." Another shift in attitude that surfaced, and could not have come from studying course materials alone, was that participants gained a greater understanding of the difficulties ELLs face in studying English. One candidate reflected, "Unless you [work] one on one with an ELL, you do not fully understand their struggle."

Finally, the third most frequently reported impact service-learning had on participants

was perceived higher self-efficacy as teachers. Bandura coined the term self-efficacy in 1977 to refer to a sense of personal competence and belief that "a person can successfully perform behavior required to produce desired goals," and that "one's behaviors will lead to desired outcomes" (as cited in Spradlin & Parsons, 2008, p. 63). In other words, self-efficacy is confidence in one's own ability to handle a task at hand, in this case, working with ELLs. A realistic sense of one's own strengths and abilities is a key first step in building self-efficacy, as well as a key step in achieving success in working with ELLs. Service-learning allowed teacher candidates to examine how prepared they felt to teach ELLs. One participant reflected, "I believe this class and this project gave me the tools and confidence I needed to work with an ELL student . . . I feel that I have a better understanding of the different levels of proficiency as well as many new strategies to use in my future classroom!"

Teachers who have higher self-efficacy are more committed to teaching and willing to adopt educational innovations, and bring greater planning, organization, enthusiasm, and clarity to their teaching. Service-learning gave candidates an opportunity to assess and reflect not only on their abilities but also on their preparedness to work with ELLs. These benefits echoed Wade's (1995) findings of gains in preservice teachers' self-esteem and self-efficacy through service-learning.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Practice

A limitation of the study was the open structure of the project. A few middle grades (4-8) and secondary (7-12) candidates were not able to work with an ELL in their content-area concentrations. Avenues that would strengthen placements in future

semesters and ensure that candidates are placed with a certified teacher appropriate for their major are being considered. Concomitantly, the required number of service-learning hours will be raised to provide a higher impact experience for the teacher candidates.

Directions for Future Research

As research is continued on the implementation and practice of service-learning in this course, with more structured placements and more service-learning hours, it is the intent of the researchers to: 1) measure change in individual teacher candidates by providing more specific journal prompts to elicit more detailed responses; and 2) examine the impact service learning has on the ELLs. Skilton-Sylvester & Erwin (2000) pointed out that service learning is an excellent tool for enhancing the preparation of teachers and, simultaneously, looking at the impact on those being served.

While beyond the scope of this study, an important teacher-reported benefit for the ELLs was increased English proficiency and development of language learning strategies to help them achieve in school. The ELLs in the PK-12 context received instruction to help with both conversational English and academic English. They also developed language learning strategies they could use to help them to continue learning English. One candidate reported that the student she worked with now has “a better understanding of the vocabulary words and . . . techniques that she can continue using on her own.” Evidence of success in school was marked in different ways for the ELLs. One way was in their ability to complete homework. One participant commented, “The most progress I saw from the first week until now was that he was completing every single homework assignment correctly

as compared to when we first met when he rarely had homework completed or it was incorrect.”

Conclusion

The dramatic increase in the number of English language learners in PK-12 schools makes it imperative for teacher preparation to extend beyond the college classroom to develop teachers’ abilities and talents to effectively and successfully work with this group of learners. This study demonstrated the positive impact that service learning had on teacher candidates and their ability to provide adapted subject area instruction for ELLs. Working with ELLs raised teacher candidates’ awareness of ways diversity in their future classrooms will affect their pedagogy; their confidence in working with ELLs increased, and their understanding of the lives and challenges of ELLs deepened. Given that the number of service-learning hours that each candidate completed was small, class discussions and sharing helped meet the service-learning outcomes. As the researchers continue to develop the service-learning component of the course, there may be potential to increase teacher candidates’ academic achievement. This research advances the integration of service learning in preparing teachers to work effectively with ELLs and informs best teaching practices as it benefits culturally and linguistically diverse learners in U.S. schools.

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