

Service Learning and the Language Teacher

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Abstract

This article looks at service learning (SL) as yet another valuable tool in the language teacher's toolbox. The rationale for taking this approach centers on motivational issues, but support can also be drawn from other disciplines not normally associated with second language acquisition (SLA) theory, including customer experience management as well as change management. Two projects for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners are briefly introduced together with a working definition of service learning.

Introduction

The list of methods, strategies and approaches to second language (L2) instruction continues to grow. The aim of such endeavors is (or should be) to help learners toward more effective, efficient acquisition of the target language, and a big part of our job as language teachers is to weave together approaches we feel would most benefit our learners. A healthy dose of skepticism is required though to keep our personal or collective set of beliefs from degrading into dogma. With this in mind, Service Learning (SL) is offered as yet another approach to help learners along the road to target-language proficiency. A better way to look at this might be to think of SL as a teaching framework, which can include language-learning outcomes as well as other objectives in the cognitive, interpersonal, physiological and affective learning domains.

Our starting point will be to look at various definitions of SL, after which we will explore the rationale for using SL in second-language (L2) learning contexts. Two examples will then be introduced to illustrate how SL is being used in a tertiary-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context in Japan. Although the discussion here will center mainly on tertiary EFL learners, it is hoped that teachers in other context might also glean something useful from this paper.

Overview of Service Learning

Before outlining the rationale for including service learning in our language-teacher toolbox, we will visit some of the definitions offered in the field. A good starting point is the United States *National and Community Service Act* of 1990 (Sec. 101):

The term "service-learning" means a method (a) under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs and that are coordinated in collaboration with the school and community; (b) that is integrated into the students' academic curriculum or provides structured time for a student to think, talk, or write about what the student did and saw during the actual service activity; (c) that provides students with opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities; and (d) that enhances what is taught in school by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community and helps to foster the development of a sense of caring for others.

Several key issues surface from this definition. First, the endeavor needs to be "*thoughtfully organized.*" Then, the questions that follow for us as teachers are: How will the activity benefit the learners and community? What "*actual community needs*" will be met? How will

the experience be “*integrated*” into the curriculum? How much and what kind of “*structured time*” should be devoted to reflection?

The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (2010) offers this concise definition:

Service-Learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.

This is supplemented by the following:

Through service-learning, young people—from kindergarteners to college students—use what they learn in the classroom to solve real-life problems. They not only learn the practical applications of their studies, they become actively contributing citizens and community members through the service they perform.

Service-learning can be applied in a wide variety of settings, including schools, universities, and community-based and faith-based organizations. It can involve a group of students, a classroom or an entire school. Students build character and become active participants as they work with others in their school and community to create service projects in areas such as education, public safety, and the environment.

Here we see an emphasis on practical application, which will come up again in our discussion of motivation and relevance. This definition also delineates target age groups and kinds of projects that might be undertaken.

In her comprehensive guide to SL, Cathryn Berger Kaye (2010) offers the following (p. 9):

“Service learning can be defined in part by what it does for your students. When service learning is used in a structured way that connects classroom content, literature and skills to community needs, students will:

- Apply academic, social, and personal skills to improve the community.*
- Make decisions that have real, not hypothetical, results.*
- Grow as individuals, gain respect for peers, and increase civic participation.*
- Experience success no matter what their ability level.*
- Gain a deeper understanding of themselves, their community, and society.*
- Develop as leaders, who take initiative, solve problems, work as a team, and demonstrate their abilities through helping others.”*

Service learning can thus be defined as “*a teaching method where guided or classroom learning is deepened through service to others in a process that includes structured time for reflection on the experience as well as demonstration of the skills and knowledge acquired (Berger Kaye, 2010).*”

Together, the above definitions outline the who, what, when, where and why of service learning. They also highlight important outcomes of SL as well as stages of an SL endeavor, namely (a) preparation, (b) field work, and (c) follow up. These stages will be revisited when we get to our examples. Before that, however, we will look at the rationale for SL.

L2 Learning Motivation

Motivation has been identified as a major determinant in language learning success, but a clear understanding of motivation remains elusive. This opacity is alluded to in Dörnyei, (1998): “*Although ‘motivation’ is a term frequently used in both educational and research contexts, it is rather surprising how little agreement there is in the literature with regard to the exact meaning of the concept.*” Still, the expectation is that L2 learners that are motivated in their language learning endeavors and sustain a high level of motivation over an extended period will make better progress than their less-motivated peers. For our purposes, we can limit discussion to the four motivational factors identified by Crookes and Schmidt (1991) and expanded on by Dörnyei (1994) as influencing second language learning: (a) interest in the topic and activity, (b) relevance to the students’ lives, (c) expectancy of success and feelings of being in control, and (d) satisfaction in the outcome. Interest here is closely aligned with the theme of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985); relevance covers the connection between instruction and personal goals, needs, and values; expectancy is related to self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997) and the learner’s perceived likelihood of success; and satisfaction comes in the form of both extrinsic (praise or grades) and intrinsic (pride or fulfillment) rewards.

These four motivational factors thus lay the foundation for our rationale. Through SL projects, these factors can be leveraged to increase and sustain motivation to study the target language.

Intrinsic/Extrinsic Motivation Theory

Although we cannot take it for granted, it is likely that the learning tasks and outcomes involved in an SL project will be intrinsically motivating for language learners. Deci and Ryan (1985) claim that learners interested in learning tasks and outcomes for their own sake rather than for external rewards (extrinsic) are likely to become more effective learners. The teacher’s role will involve helping learners find the part of the project that is intrinsically motivating for them.

Relevancy

The real-life nature of the SL project helps ensure relevancy. At the same time, learners will gravitate toward parts of the project that align with their own personal goals and values. SL projects are also more likely to help fulfill learner needs at the upper levels of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1954), namely a sense of belonging, esteem and even self-actualization.

Self-efficacy

Individuals with high self-efficacy in a specific task are more likely to exert effort, and persist longer, than those with low efficacy (Schunk, 1990). A stronger sense of self-efficacy or expectations of mastery will lead to increased efforts (Bandura, 1977). On the other hand, low self-efficacy provides impetus to learn more about the subject (i.e. someone with a high self-efficacy may not exert as much effort toward a task). Our role thus includes designing in opportunities for learners to experience success but to balance this with challenges at the outer boundary of their existing skills. The importance of aligning the challenge with existing skills is also highlighted in Csíkszentmihályi (1996).

Satisfaction

Finally, students involved in SL projects are more likely to experience satisfaction than peers whose experiences are limited to the classroom and/or hypothetical problems. This satisfaction is related to the other motivational factors, and the rewards will be both intrinsic

and extrinsic. Intrinsic rewards will include increased self-esteem and feelings of accomplishment, while extrinsic rewards will come in the form of recognition.

This limited view of motivation as related to L2 learning provides the underlying rationale for our SL endeavors, but other support can be found in literature on business. We will look at two concepts that build on this rationale and add to our framework, namely *customer experience management* and *change management*.

Customer Experience Management

In their book *The Experience Economy*, Joseph Pine and James Gilmore (1999) use the progression of value chart (Fig. 1) to describe how a company's offerings can be categorized as extracting commodities, making products, delivering services, or staging experiences.

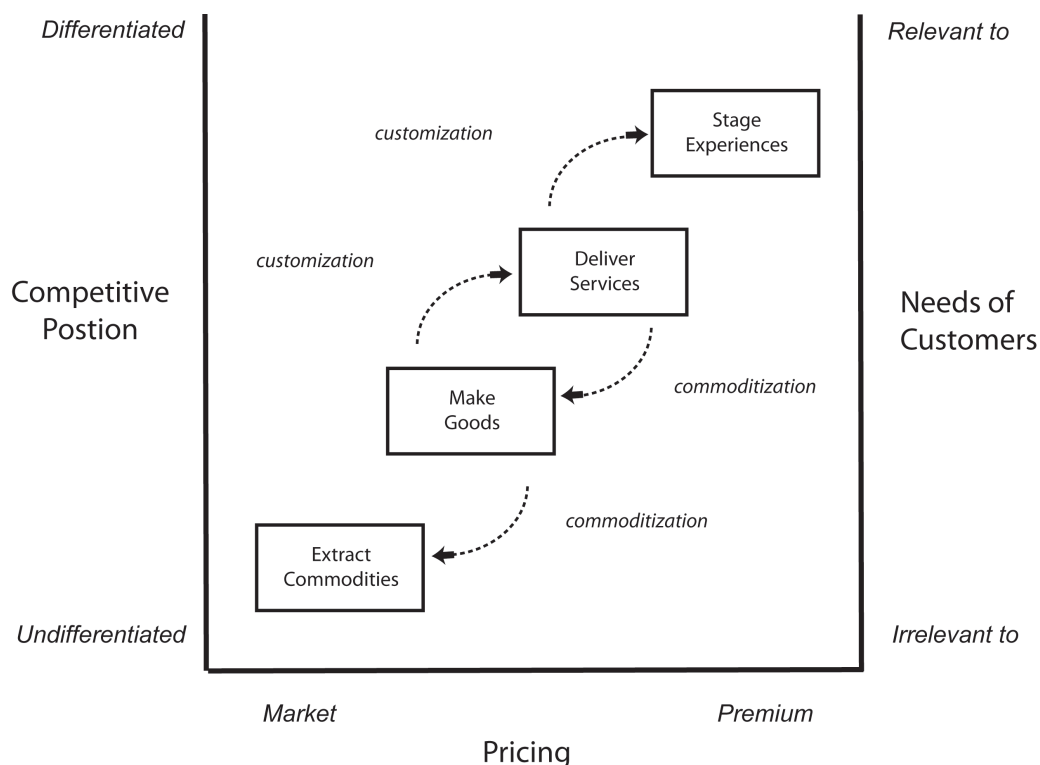


Figure 1. Progression of Value (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

The authors emphasize that companies can move their offerings up (customization) the progression of value as well as down (commoditization). This relates to our discussion of service learning for the language teacher in that SL provides a platform for customization, i.e. the SL project is a way to ‘experientialize’ our educational offerings. Moving up the progression of value also involves making our offering more relevant to the needs of the customer (i.e. learner), which is related to our discussion of motivation above. Finally, by moving away from educational products and services towards experiences provides a platform for differentiating competitive position at the level of the individual teacher, program, department or even institution.

The other concept from Pine & Gilmore (1999) that is relevant to our discussion of SL is the realms of experience. The basic idea here is that experiences can be viewed along two dimensions: active to passive participation, and absorption to immersion (fig. 2). Experiences

that mainly involve entertainment would be passive in nature and would be absorbed by the participant. Participants would also absorb experiences that are mainly educational, but would be more actively involved. Activities in which the participant is actively involved and immersed in the experience would be categorized as escapist experiences (e.g. survival games, casinos). Experiences categorized as esthetic involve the senses (e.g. museums, aroma therapy), and the participant would be immersed in the experience but toward the passive end in terms of participation. The authors highlight that *“the richest experiences encompass aspects of all four realms”* and that *“staging experiences is not about entertaining customers; it’s about engaging them (p. 30).”* Bringing the discussion back to service learning, we have support for using rich community-service experiences with our learners. Language teachers can use these business-oriented ideas to design and develop SL projects that are engaging and motivate learners in their target-language pursuits.

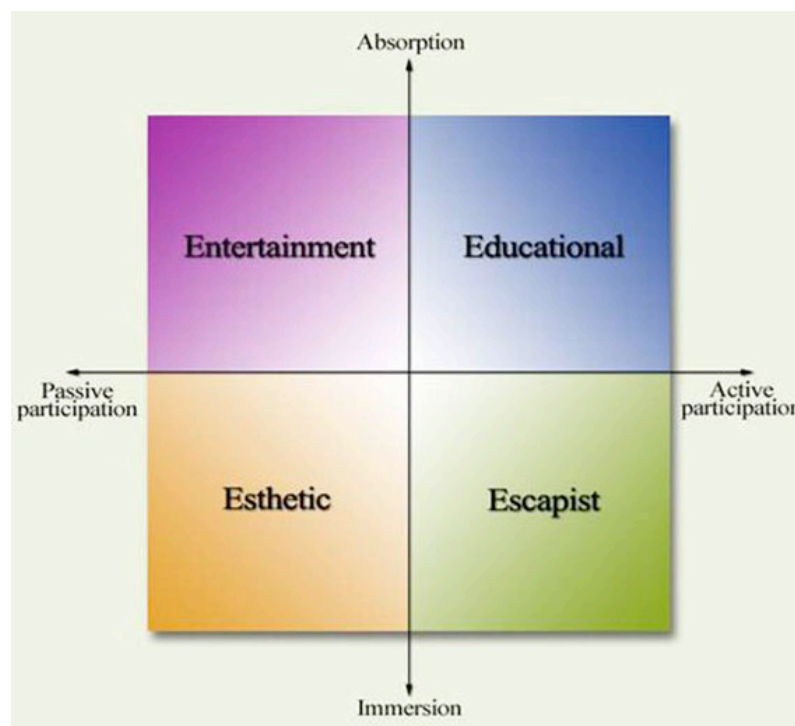


Figure 2. Realms of Experience.

Change Management

Another important part of our job as language instructors is to help our learners develop in the various domains of learning (cognitive, interpersonal, physiological, affective) as associated with learning a new language. Success in these endeavors often requires guiding learners toward new or altered behaviors, which are in turn dependant on attitudes and beliefs. The field of change management offers another piece to framework for designing and developing service-learning projects.

Change management has become an established part of business programs and the business administration curriculum, but has also found a home in other fields such as educational psychology and self-improvement. Although change management has many intricacies, we can limit our discussion here to ideas presented by the brothers Chip and Dan Heath, namely a framework for facilitating change outlined in their book *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard* (2010). Their framework (see Appendix 1) is an extension of the analogy of an elephant (our emotions) and it’s rider (our rational mind), introduced by Jonathan Haidt

(2005). Specifically, they feel that change is facilitated by (a) directing the rider, (b) motivating the elephant, and (c) shaping the path.

Including these perspectives in our SL framework helps us address learning in all four learning domains, but for the sake of brevity I will limit my discussion to the affective domain. Service learning provides a platform for engaging learners in activities and behaviors that have a positive influence on their attitudes and beliefs regarding target-language learning pursuits. SL offers us a way to:

- script the critical moves (e.g. relevant practice in all four language skills),
- point to the destination (involves both expectancy and satisfaction),
- find the feeling (a natural part of helping others),
- shrink the change (by limiting the scope of the project),
- build habits (through repetition),
- and rally the herd (working with peers).

This is of course a simplistic view of both change management and how it fits with our SL framework, but the intention is to show that change management ideas are easily implemented within the SL framework and that doing so has affective benefits for our learners.

Sample Service Learning Projects

In this section we will outline two SL projects that have been used in a content-focused EFL program in Japan. The learners are first and second-year students enrolled in a management course at a private university in western Japan. The first project involves students in preparing educational programs for underprivileged children in the Philippines, and the second is an oral histories project.

Philippines Study Tour (PST)

This project was developed for first-year management students who had just finished a semester-long course titled Global Challenges. Two of the issues covered in that course are poverty and child labor. The main goal of the project was to provide learners with the opportunity to experience up close some of the issues presented in their course work. At the same time, a list of specific learning outcomes was developed, including target-language (English) performance objectives (Appendix 2).

The preparation phase of the project involved students in gathering information on the Mangyan (a local indigenous tribe) and non-governmental agencies working with street children. They also compiled a pre-departure booklet with background information, schedules, emergency contact numbers, useful phrases, maps, etc. Finally, they prepared short lessons and activities in the areas of math, science, literature and physical education. These were prepared for the Mangyan children in the remote village of Banilad we would be visiting on the island of Mindoro, as well as street children staying in two shelters in Manila.

The fieldwork part of the project was divided between Banilad/Mindoro (4 days) and Manila (3 days). In addition to conducting lessons and spending time with the children, our students interviewed students and teachers, as well as administrators working for three NGOs, Bukid Foundation (Mangyan), Virlanie (street children) and House of Refuge (street children). Throughout the fieldwork phase, students were required to record their activities and thoughts in an English journal and meet with the instructor to discuss their progress, problems, etc.

The follow up phase included a debriefing session, writing up findings, compiling a comprehensive report and delivering two presentations: one for other students and teachers in their department, and another for a general audience.

In the proposal for this project, the number of contact hours was listed as eighty. In actuality, the students spent somewhere near one hundred and thirty hours on project-related work. Signing up for the project was voluntary and the students earned two credits toward their undergraduate degree.

Oral History Project

This SL endeavor took the form of a semester-long elective project for second-year students majoring in management. The students chose community service in the form of helping one of two groups (a local neighborhood association and an international school) compile audio recordings, documents and other artifacts related to their past. In the case of the neighborhood association, the focus was on events immediately following the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake of 1995. At the international school, the focus was on past teachers, who were members of the Marist Brothers religious order. Again, this project included specific learning outcomes, some of which were target-language performance objectives similar to those in the PST project (Appendix 2).

The preparation stage was spent (1) doing background reading on the theory and practice of oral histories, (2) writing group overviews/summaries of the readings, (3) gathering information on either the school or association, (4) identifying and contacting key individuals to interview, (5) preparing research and interview questions, (6) preparing a plan for archiving the recordings, and (7) learning how to operate the recording equipment.

During the fieldwork stage, groups of two or three students recorded three separate meetings with one of the interviewees, took notes, transcribed the interviews, clarified portions (or utterances) of the interviews that they did not understand, and analyzed the data. Interviews of the neighborhood association were conducted in Japanese while those of the international school were conducted mainly in English.

Finally, the two groups of students followed up by compiling reports from the different interviews, including their interpretations and opinions. These reports were presented together with digital copies of the recordings to the respective institutions for their archives. The students also prepared an archive of the reports and recordings for the school library.

Conclusion

Service Learning is probably not a viable option in many L2 teaching contexts, but for teachers with the freedom, means and courage to experiment with this type of project, SL offers a powerful framework for engaging learners in the target language as well as other studies.

“Community members, students, and educators everywhere are discovering that service-learning offers all its participants a chance to take part in the active education of youth while simultaneously addressing the concerns, needs, and hopes of communities (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2010).”

Expanding our view of our profession to include concepts from business such as customer experience management and change management can make these educational endeavors even

more engaging and meaningful, thus helping our learners toward more effective, efficient acquisition of the target language.

The author hopes that other language teachers will add service learning to their teaching repertoire, but also has some words of warning. To help ensure the success of such endeavors, the teacher needs to (1) consider what appropriate community needs might be, (2) identify and involve individuals and groups to support and promote the SL endeavors, (3) clarify for themselves and their learners what the actual target learning outcomes are, and (4) find effective ways to work toward those learning outcomes in the course of the project. With careful planning and a little bit of luck, it might just be possible to help our learners and make the world a better place at the same time.

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Appendix 1 - How to Make a Switch (Heath & Heath, 2010)

For things to change, somebody somewhere has to start acting differently. Maybe it's you, maybe it's your team. Picture that person (or people). Each has an emotional Elephant side and a rational Rider side. You've got to reach both. And you've also got to clear the way for them to succeed. In short, you must do three things:

--DIRECT THE RIDER

Follow the Bright Spots. Investigate what's working and clone it.

Script the Critical Moves. Don't think big picture, think in terms of specific behaviors.

Point to the Destination. Change is easier when you know where you're going and why it's worth it.

-----MOTIVATE THE ELEPHANT

Find the Feeling. Knowing something isn't enough to cause change. Make people feel something.

Shrink the Change. Break down the change until it no longer spooks the Elephant.

Grow Your People. Cultivate a sense of identity and instill the growth mindset.

-----SHAPE THE PATH

Tweak the Environment. When the situation changes, the behavior changes. So change the situation.

Build Habits. When behavior is habitual, it's "free"—it doesn't tax the Rider. Look for ways to encourage habits.

Rally the Herd. Behavior is contagious. Help it spread.

Appendix 2 – Learning Outcomes (Philippines Study Tour)

Upon completion of the project, students will demonstrate the ability to:

- identify useful and relevant text-based and web-based resources for the project,
- conduct project planning meetings mainly in the target language,
- prepare and implement lessons for children in the target language,
- conduct individual and group interviews in the target language,
- keep a daily journal of project-related activities in the target language,
- participate in target-language discussions at debriefing meetings during the fieldwork as well as follow-up sessions,
- prepare a target-language summary of their final report (written in Japanese),
- prepare and deliver a target-language presentation of their research findings and impressions.