Integrating Service Learning into English Language Instruction: A Transformative Approach to Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

Service Learning (SL), which integrates academic instruction with community engagement, has emerged as a promising methodology that aligns with these evolving educational demands. This study investigates the effectiveness of incorporating SL into university-level English language teaching, aiming to evaluate its impact on students' linguistic proficiency and social competencies. Conducted as an experimental study among English philology students, the research assessed how SL influences learner engagement and academic outcomes in foreign language education. The results indicate that SL significantly enhances both language acquisition and students' active participation, fostering a more meaningful and context-rich learning experience. The findings support the pedagogical value of SL in higher education and highlight its dual benefit in promoting academic and civic development. Furthermore, the study offers practical applications, including sample lesson plans, to guide educators in effectively integrating SL into English language curricula.

Keywords: *Service Learning method; English language teaching; innovative teaching methods; experiential learning*

1. Introduction

The Service Learning method is an innovative educational approach that combines academic learning with active engagement in community service. In the context of English language teaching, this method offers students the opportunity to apply their developing language skills in real, meaningful situations while simultaneously supporting local social initiatives. The essence of the Service Learning method lies in integrating educational goals with community work, creating a mutually beneficial relationship for students and society. In the case of learning English, students can participate in activities such as tutoring language learners, volunteering in organizations supporting immigrants, or assisting with local language and cultural programs. These tasks allow students to use English in diverse social contexts, facilitating a more natural acquisition of the language. The Service Learning method effectively addresses several important educational goals, such as developing social awareness, improving language proficiency, and fostering collaboration skills in educational environments. By engaging students in authentic communication situations outside the classroom, this approach shifts the focus from traditional learning methods to experiential learning, where linguistic development goes hand in hand with personal growth and civic engagement. Given the continuously evolving trends in education and the emerging challenges in language teaching, Service Learning in English language instruction offers a dynamic approach that not only enhances language competence but also prepares students for active participation in social life. Through conscious involvement in community service, students gain both linguistic and intercultural skills, enriching their educational experiences and positively impacting their surroundings. Matuszewska (2015) strongly emphasizes the shifting trends in education, stating that "learning serves a fundamental role in society. Scholars have an obligation to share their knowledge and research findings (...). The development of public engagement and the openness of academic environments to the non-academic world will increase public trust in scientists and contribute to a better understanding of their work. Universities are becoming centers for disseminating knowledge and discussing important social issues" (Muszewska et al., 2015, p. 69). In light of the significant advantages of the Service Learning method, an important question arises regarding its role in English language teaching. This article aims to present the findings of a research experiment that highlights the significance of integrating Service

Learning into foreign language instruction, using the example of English philology students. Additionally, it provides several best practices on how to integrate English language teaching with the Service Learning approach.

Literature review

The Service Learning (SL) method in education is an innovative didactic approach that is gaining increasing recognition among researchers and practitioners. The literature emphasizes its unique ability to integrate theory and practice, enabling students to apply academic knowledge in real social contexts. This method is based on the assumption that through participation in community-based activities, students develop their language and interpersonal skills, as well as a sense of civic responsibility (Deeley, 2015). One of the primary theorists of the SL method is John Dewey, who argued that learning through action and reflection on acquired experiences is a key element of the educational process (Dewey, 1938). This approach assumes that learning is not a passive process but requires students' active engagement in real social issues. Eyler and Giles (1999), in their foundational work Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?, identified key elements of effective learning through action, such as reflection, collaboration, and the practical application of knowledge. Their research shows that students participating in SL programs gain a better understanding of theoretical material and develop deeper social and civic competencies. In the context of foreign language teaching, including English, the SL method is recognized as an effective tool for developing communication and cultural skills. Astin et al. (2000) proposed that SL programs positively impact students' motivation to learn foreign languages. Through interactions with local communities, students have the opportunity to practice language in authentic situations, which accelerates the acquisition process and increases their confidence. Harrison and Clayton (2012) highlight that the SL method fosters critical thinking and intercultural competencies in English language teaching. By interacting with diverse social groups, students can better understand linguistic and cultural contexts, broadening their perspectives and enhancing their global awareness. Reflection is a crucial component of the SL method, as it allows students to comprehend and internalize their experiences. Kolb (1984), in his experiential learning theory, emphasizes the importance of a cycle that includes active experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. In the context of SL, reflection enables students to critically evaluate their work and its impact on the community, leading to deeper learning. Bringle and Hatcher (1999) suggest that reflection in SL should be carefully planned and systematically conducted to maximize the educational potential of this method. In practice, this means that teachers should incorporate various forms of reflection, such as written journals, group discussions, or presentations.

Implementing the Service Learning method significantly contributes to the development of linguistic proficiency and other sociolinguistic factors involved in the learning and teaching process. The SL method has considerable potential to foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills among students. Through work on real projects, students learn to analyze situations, identify problems, and seek effective solutions. An example could be an ecological project, which requires investigating local environmental issues and proposing appropriate remedial actions (Brozmanova et al., 2022; Garcia, 2021; Motta, 2022). Furthermore, the SL method allows for the practical application of knowledge. SL enables the practical use of scientific theories, which enhances understanding and knowledge retention. For example, students may use mathematical skills to analyze data collected from field research (Furco, 2011; Brozmanova et al., 2020). Moreover, SL significantly contributes to developing research skills. Participation in activities using the Service Learning method often requires conducting research, collecting data, analyzing it, and presenting findings, which helps shape research competencies. Additionally, SL strengthens and enhances collaboration and communication skills. Service Learning projects are often conducted in teams, fostering interpersonal skills and the ability to communicate effectively. A unique advantage of the SL method is also the development of social awareness. By engaging in community-based activities, students become aware of the role of education in solving real social problems (Brozmanova et al., 2020, 2022).

Research conducted by Eyler and Giles (1999) clearly indicates that students participating in social projects abroad significantly improved their language skills, including fluency and pronunciation. Motivation increased due to authentic interactions with local communities. Lehmann (2020), in a program integrating French language learning through organizing local events for the Francophone community, observed that students significantly improved their language skills and gained greater motivation for further learning. Although the SL method has many advantages, researchers also highlight some challenges. Butin (2006) notes that implementing SL requires a significant commitment

from both teachers and students. It also requires close collaboration with local communities, which can be difficult to organize and sustain over the long term. Moreover, assessing educational outcomes in SL is not always straightforward, as the results can be challenging to measure using traditional educational assessment tools.

Research aims

Contemporary education places increasingly high demands on foreign language teachers, requiring them to adapt teaching methods to the evolving needs of students. In response to this need, Service Learning (SL)—a method that combines learning with practical social engagement—is gaining significance as an innovative approach to supporting the educational process. In the context of teaching English, SL not only enables students to develop their language skills but also fosters a sense of social responsibility, collaboration, and active participation in the local community. In order to examine the effectiveness of this method in teaching English, an experiment was conducted to compare the language progress of students who participated in classes using the Service Learning method with a control group following traditional teaching methods. This experiment is based on the verification of the following hypotheses:

1. **Main Hypothesis:** Students participating in classes using the Service Learning method will achieve a higher level of language proficiency compared to those attending traditional classes.
2. **Supporting Hypothesis:** The improvement in language skills among students using the SL method will be statistically significant compared to the control group.

The objective of this study was to determine how the Service Learning method—learning through social engagement—affects the development of language skills and students; motivation to learn English. The key research questions were:

RQ1. How do students' attitudes and preferences regarding the use of the Service Learning method in learning English evolve before and after the conducted research experiment?
RQ2. Is there a relationship between the implementation of the Service Learning teaching method and the effectiveness of the English language learning process?
RQ3. What benefits and challenges arise in the process of integrating the Service Learning method into English language teaching?

Research context and sample characteristics

The study involved 50 English philology students, divided equally into an experimental group and a control group. The participants were second-year undergraduate students of English philology. As part of their curriculum, they attended intensive classes and lectures aimed at developing advanced language skills, deepening theoretical knowledge, and exploring English-speaking culture and literature. Their coursework included the following subjects: Practical English Language Learning (PNJA): Development of all language skills, including listening and speaking, academic writing (e.g., essays, research papers), translation (from Polish to English and vice versa), and English grammar. Additionally, students improved their phonetics and pronunciation, as well as engaged in conversation practice, including discussions on cultural and social topics.
1. English Literature: British and American literature, along with literary text analysis focusing on style, narration, and historical context. 2. History and Culture: British and American history, studies in popular culture (e.g., films, music, media), and the development of the English language in a cultural context. 3. Linguistics: English morphology and syntax, semantics and pragmatics, and an introduction to sociolinguistics. 4. Additional Specializations: English language teaching methodology (for future teachers), specialized translation (e.g., legal, technical), postcolonial literature, or media and communication in English. During the experiment, the experimental group participated in English language classes incorporating elements of the Service Learning method, while the control group learned English through traditional methods. The study lasted three months (April–June 2024). Students in the experimental group engaged in Service Learning community projects, organizing language workshops for local primary school students and assisting pupils struggling with English. Meanwhile, students in the control group continued their lessons using traditional classroom methods

at the university. The experiment lasted for three months and included 12 sessions, each consisting of two lesson hours. The classes were conducted by two experienced English teachers, ensuring consistent teaching quality across both groups. In the first group, the experimental group, the Service Learning method was implemented, engaging students in social projects that required the practical use of the English language. In contrast, the control group followed a traditional approach based primarily on lectures and language exercises. To assess language proficiency before and after the experiment, two tests were conducted: a pre-test at the beginning of the course and a post-test at the end of the cycle. The pre-test covered grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills in English, while the post-test evaluated the same areas in a more advanced form, also incorporating elements related to the use of language in social contexts. Before the experiment began, statistical tests were conducted to verify whether the average pre-test scores differed significantly between the two groups (experimental and control). The condition for starting the experiment was the absence of significant differences in the pre-test results, ensuring that the groups were comparable at the start of the study. After calculating the t-value and p-value, the result obtained was: t-value = 0.85, p = 0.401. Since $p > 0.05$, the null hypothesis was not rejected, which means that the differences in average pre-test scores between the two groups were not statistically significant. This indicates that the groups were comparable at the start of the experiment, allowing the continuation of the study. After the experiment concluded, the post-test results were subjected to statistical analysis to determine whether the differences in average scores between the experimental and control groups were statistically significant.

As part of the study, the participants completed a survey before and after the project to assess their theoretical and practical knowledge of the Service Learning method, including its definition, key principles, implementation process, and benefits in integrating theoretical learning with practical application. Another research instrument involved educational projects using the Service Learning method within Practical English Language Learning (PNJA) classes. These projects were carried out in five groups, with each group tasked with developing a language-focused project while adhering to all the required Service Learning project stages: preparation, action, reflection, and evaluation. The final phase involved presenting the completed projects to students from a local primary school.

Project Implementation Timeline:

April 2024: Stage I – Preparation
- Introduction to Service Learning: definition, principles, and implementation stages.
- Analysis of existing national and international projects.
- Discussion of project goals, stages, expected outcomes, and potential challenges.

May 2024: Stage II – Action
- Needs analysis of local primary school students (via teacher interviews).
- Planning and designing individual educational projects using Service Learning.
- Community needs assessment, problem identification, brainstorming, and decision-making.
- Integration of technology to enhance content delivery.
- Implementation of projects with 7th- and 8th-grade students at the local primary school.

June 2024: Stages III & IV – Reflection and Evaluation
- Ongoing reflection focused on: the addressed problem, target group, participants, and content.
- Final evaluation through guided questions on personal contribution, key issues, gained knowledge, developed skills, challenges faced, application of learning, and links to academic coursework.

Results

After the experiment, another analysis was conducted to evaluate whether there was a significant difference between the experimental group and the control group in terms of their post-test results. To do this, a t-test for independent samples was applied again, comparing the average scores of both groups after the experiment. After calculating the t-value and p-value, the result obtained was: t-value = 2.96 and p = 0.004. Since $p < 0.05$, the null hypothesis was rejected, and accepted the alternative hypothesis, meaning that the differences in average post-test scores between the experimental group and the control group are statistically significant. The group that participated in the Service Learning-

based classes achieved higher scores than the control group, suggesting that this method had a positive impact on students' language skills development. To assess whether the Service Learning method influenced the improvement of results within the experimental group itself, a t-test for dependent samples was conducted, comparing the pre-test and post-test scores within the experimental group. After calculating the t-value and p-value, the result obtained was: t-value = 4.58 and p = 0.0001. Since p < 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis was accepted, meaning that the changes in results within the experimental group are statistically significant. Students in the experimental group, who participated in classes based on the Service Learning method, significantly improved their language skills compared to the level they achieved before the experiment.

Finally, a t-test for dependent samples was also conducted within the control group, comparing the pre-test and post-test scores. After calculating the t-value and p-value, the result obtained was: t-value = 1.22

and p = 0.230. Since p > 0.05, we do not reject the null hypothesis, meaning that the changes in results within the control group were not statistically significant. Based on the statistical analysis, we can conclude that the Service Learning method had a significant impact on improving students' language skills. The experimental group, which participated in classes using this method, achieved better results in the post-test compared to the control group, which participated in traditional classes. These results suggest that the Service Learning method is an effective way to support the process of teaching English and may serve as a valuable supplement to traditional teaching methods.

The detailed analysis of the pre-and post-experiment surveys provided insights into the first research question regarding students' attitudes and preferences toward Service Learning (Research Question 1). Pre-experiment survey results: 92% (23 out of 25 students) had little or no knowledge of the Service Learning method, both theoretically and practically. 92% (23 out of 25 students) believed that incorporating new teaching methods into English learning is crucial for optimizing learning outcomes. 100% (25 out of 25 students) agreed that engaging students in practical tasks during language learning is beneficial as it allows them to explore problem-solving independently. 96% (24 out of 25 students) stated that English teachers should be trained in modern teaching methodologies. 96% (24 out of 25 students) supported the idea that there is room for new pedagogical approaches, such as Service Learning, in English language instruction. 92% (23 out of 25 students) believed Service Learning could be useful for teaching about the culture and customs of English-speaking countries.

Post-experiment survey results revealed a significant increase in students' familiarity with the theoretical and practical aspects of the Service Learning method (92%, 23 out of 25 students). This suggests that the experiment had a substantial impact on their understanding and ability to apply the methodology in English language teaching. Additionally, educational projects carried out as part of the study helped answer the remaining two research questions: Is there a connection between implementing Service Learning and the effectiveness of English language instruction? (Research Question 2) What are the benefits and challenges of integrating Service Learning into English teaching? (Research Question 3) Below is a detailed description of the planned and executed educational projects incorporating Service Learning, conducted as part of the research experiment.

Table 1.
A detailed description of the planned and executed educational projects incorporating Service Learning

IMPLEMENTED PROJECTS USING THE SERVICE LEARNING METHOD
TOPICAL SCOPE/ACTIONS TAKEN
I. Title: "Culinary Festival – Traditional Dishes from Around the World"
Stages of the Educational Project Using the Service Learning Method –   -   PREPARATION and ACTION **Development and Implementation Goals/Benefits** Students will be able to discuss traditional dishes from Poland and English-speaking countries using thematic vocabulary (food, dishes, cutlery) and grammatical structures with modal verbs. Additionally, students will improve their listening and reading skills, learn about the cuisines of English-speaking countries, and compare different culinary traditions and dietary preferences of people from various nationalities. A brainstorming technique will be applied to help students define the lesson's topic. The prepared presentation will motivate students to learn more about food traditions in different countries (United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, USA). Furthermore, students

will have the opportunity to engage in group work and games to revise and implement active vocabulary and grammar.

Materials Used

Presentation, informational materials (vocabulary, fill-in-the-blank text, discussion questions), leaflets for the "MasterChef" game (cut-out pictures of ingredients and utensils, instructions), and domino cards.

Anticipated Problems/Challenges

Some students may not want to divide into groups, and not all students may fully know the rules of the "Domino" and "MasterChef" games.

Possible Solutions

We will use selection cards (photos of food items, students from the same group of pictures work together), at the beginning of the lesson, teachers will organize a warm-up, and teachers will provide assistance and instructions.

II. Title: "Saint Patrick's Day" – traditions and customs.

– PREPARATION and ACTION

Development and Implementation Goals / Benefits

Learning about the history, traditions, and symbols associated with St. Patrick's Day; Understanding the cultural significance of St. Patrick's Day celebrations in Ireland and around the world; Developing English language skills, including vocabulary related to the project's theme; Fostering an open-minded attitude toward other cultures and traditions; Enhancing teamwork skills by working together toward a common goal; Promoting student integration and creating a positive group atmosphere; Developing artistic and manual skills through the creation of decorations and props. Encouraging creative thinking by preparing performances, skits, or themed games.

Materials Used

- Presentation and informational materials (history of St. Patrick's Day, vocabulary, fill-in-the-blank texts, discussion questions).
- Conducting a quiz about Ireland and St. Patrick's Day.
- Organizing a performance: theatrical scenes, Irish dance, and recitation of Irish poetry.
- Integration games and activities, such as searching for a "pot of gold" or playing St. Patrick's Day-themed bingo.

Anticipated Challenges

Some students may be reluctant to work in groups. Not all students may fully understand the rules of organized games and activities.

Possible Solutions

Showing patience and understanding. Clearly explaining all rules. Being ready to offer assistance when needed.

III. Title: "The famous fictional detective – Sherlock Holmes".

– PREPARATION and ACTION

Development and Implementation Goals / Benefits

Providing knowledge about well-known fictional characters, such as Sherlock Holmes; Encouraging students to deepen their interest in British culture; Equalizing English language proficiency among seventh-grade primary school students who struggle with language acquisition; Overcoming language barriers among students with communication difficulties in learning English.

Materials Used

Presentation and informational materials (the story of Sherlock Holmes, vocabulary, fill-in-the-blank text, discussion questions); Leaflets for the "Domino" game (cut-out pictures of ingredients and tools, instructions). Picture cards.

Anticipated Challenges

Some students may be reluctant to work in groups. Not all students may fully understand the rules of the "Domino" game.

Possible Solutions

Using selection cards (pictures depicting Sherlock Holmes' wardrobe). Teachers organize a warm-up activity at the beginning of the lesson. Providing guidance and support throughout the activities.

Table 2.
Participants' opinions on the project – REFLECTION and EVALUATION

1. The project enhanced practical language use, though some learners faced linguistic challenges.

Participants highly valued the opportunity to apply English in authentic, real-life contexts rather than through abstract textbook exercises. Activities such as speaking with others, learning about culture, and engaging with meaningful content (e.g., British customs or Sherlock Holmes) contributed significantly to language development and cultural awareness. Many expressed increased confidence in using English, especially for travel and everyday communication. However, a minority struggled with expressing themselves when tasks involved advanced vocabulary or abstract topics, citing lack of confidence or insufficient language proficiency. This indicates that while the project was effective overall, language tasks may need to be better adapted to varying proficiency levels to ensure accessibility for all learners.

2. Motivation increased when students saw purpose and relevance in their learning.

The project's real-world relevance and cultural engagement made the learning experience more meaningful and motivating for most participants. Many appreciated that their efforts led to visible outcomes, which contributed to a stronger sense of purpose, greater enthusiasm for learning, and increased confidence in their abilities. That said, not all topics resonated equally with every participant. A few students expressed a preference for more traditional learning methods, especially when they could not clearly connect project activities with language improvement. This suggests a need for better alignment between project themes and learners' interests, as well as clearer communication of how each task supports language goals.

3.Soft skills were significantly developed, though time management posed a challenge.

Participants consistently highlighted the development of soft skills such as teamwork, communication, problem-solving, and time management. They appreciated the opportunity to build interpersonal relationships, collaborate effectively, and gain presentation skills—competencies often underdeveloped in conventional classroom settings.

On the other hand, some respondents noted that coordinating project work was time-consuming, sometimes at the expense of grammar or vocabulary instruction. This reflects a tension between skill-building and traditional language instruction, underscoring the importance of balancing content and form-focused learning within project-based frameworks.

Discussion of the results

The obtained research results allow for the formulation of the following conclusions:

1. Implementing the Service Learning method significantly supports the development of practical language skills, particularly in the areas of oral communication and vocabulary. Within Service Learning projects, students often participate in international exchange programs, communicate with native speakers, or conduct workshops, all of which help them overcome language barriers. The obtained results confirm the research findings collected by García (2021).
2. Students learning through social engagement showed higher motivation to learn a foreign language and greater satisfaction with the educational process. This is confirmed by the research conducted by Brozmanová Gregorová et al. (2020).
3. Engaging in social projects increases students' sense of agency, which positively influences their attitude toward learning foreign languages. Astin et al. (2000) indicated that activities based on the Service Learning method positively impact students' motivation to learn foreign languages. Through opportunities to interact with local communities, students have the chance to practice the language in real contexts, which promotes faster knowledge acquisition and strengthens their self-confidence. Additionally, participation in projects increases student engagement in the educational process. Contact with real social problems and people speaking other languages motivates students to learn, as they feel they are contributing to a meaningful cause.
4. Participation in Service Learning-based educational projects in English language lessons builds self-confidence in actively using a foreign language. Students involved in social projects notice an increase in self-confidence in speaking a foreign language, as they have

the opportunity to practice the language in authentic, rather than artificial classroom situations (Furco, 2011).

5. Engagement in Service Learning educational projects supports intercultural development. By learning in a diverse environment, students develop intercultural competencies, which serve as an additional motivation to learn the language as a communication tool in the global world (Brozmanová et al., 2022; Motta, 2022).

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