

SERVICE LEARNING IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: Foreign Language Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

In general education, in particular foreign language education, can be acknowledged as a lifelong learning process which can be transformed beyond the borders in global sense. Learning a foreign language requires proficiency in four basic skills which are reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Of these skills, speaking and listening are the most daunting tasks for learners and create obstacles when learners of target language do not get the chance of meeting native speakers. Such obstacles can be overwhelmed by integrating certain applications into education process. Service-learning through the internet as a teaching method can be considered one of the most striking one of those applications for foreign language learners. In this paper, the benefits of service-learning are discussed and some suggestions are offered for introducing this method in foreign language settings. By implementing service-learning, it is concluded that learners of any foreign language may get the chance of communicating with native speakers during the course time in foreign language without going abroad. Such an application may also enhance learners to get information about foreign culture by raising awareness of "otherness" and comparing other culture and their own culture. In addition, service-learning as a method of teaching, learning and reflecting combines academic classroom curriculum with meaningful service from the members of learning community and may generate conditions in which lifelong learning will continue.

Keywords: Service-learning, foreign language education, the internet, culture.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a lifelong process which is mostly carried out in schools, yet continues in many arenas of life. The main objective of education is to educate individuals. Accordingly, education process and goals need to be organized regarding the needs of individuals. The goals of education in schools, regarding certain principles, are related to life, choices and certain skills of the learners.

In general, the endeavours of education are to educate learners morally and to boost responsibility and particular skills which may be helpful for raising awareness, gaining responsibility, the desire to extend education after school (life-long education). In this sense, schools attempt to generate behavioural and mental transformations through theoretical data which are presented in the context of applicable processes.

However, in some situations, education is restricted with the borders of classroom due to the lack of appropriate contexts. In such cases, learners may not have the chance to transfer the theoretical information into different social contexts which contradicts with the principles of education. One of those fields in which such problems are often encountered is 'foreign language education'. Most schools around the world have foreign language programs and this is mostly the compulsory part of education.

In his respect, foreign language learners may not find a target language group in a society, with whom they can interact and share both cultural and linguistic information. In this sense, such restrictions may hinder the applicability of the classroom practice in various social contexts. Therefore, it is crucial to provide the available contexts for foreign language learners in order to increase their motivation, cultural awareness of the target culture, interest in the foreign language etc.

The Prerequisites of Foreign Language Education

The most striking requirement in foreign language learning environment is to practice in target language. When foreign-language classrooms are teacher-centred environments, learners are offered few chances to interact with each other. Teacher is viewed as an expert or an individual who both knows the language and controls the environment in which it is spoken (Boyle & Overfield, 1999).

Therefore, in for most part of the foreign language education, learners try to practice and use the target language with nonnative classmates in limited amounts of time and mostly with nonnative teachers who are considered as an authority having sources of primary input in the classroom. In such a context, it is not easy for learners to improve their speaking proficiency and cope with their psychological barriers since the only sources of input are the classmates who are nearly at the same level of linguistic proficiency and the teacher. It is now widely accepted that whatever the subject thought, the psychological environment of the classroom is of vital importance for effective teaching and learning situations. Ormrod (2000) states some instructions to follow for teachers which are: communicate acceptance of the learners as human beings, establish a businesslike, non threatening atmosphere, communicate appropriate messages about school subject matter, give learners some sense of control with regard to classroom activities, and create a sense of community among the learners.

In common sense, the quality of education is determined in the direction of meeting the needs of individuals and society they live in. In different fields, the objectives of education are varied depending on the requirements of the field.

In foreign language education, the main aim is to educate individuals for being talented in four skills. However, in recent years with scientific and technological developments as well as globalization, the objectives of foreign language education shifted to multicultural dimensions. Predominantly, with the language policy put forward by Common European Union, language learning and teaching policies become multicultural oriented by taking into consideration the values of "the other" and getting awareness for "the otherness" (Council of Europe, 2002).

As objectives change, the teaching methods, aids and materials are developed in the direction of those changes. Among those changes, technology is the main modification in education. Technology has been effective on foreign language education as well as on other fields. In recent years, with the notion of globalisation, the internet as a technological tool in educational surroundings is being increasingly used by both educators and learners to gather information and documents for teaching and learning

activities. The internet as a network of thousands of computers is a standpoint of the information age (Mike, 1996; Gillette, 1996). In the education world, it can open up a vast new collection of learning opportunities and better prepare learners to contribute effectively in knowledge-based global economy (Todd, 1996).

In addition, via the internet second language learners may integrate into the chat rooms for getting in touch with the other members of different communities. Although all those integrations are implemented individually, the prosperity of the internet can be included into language curriculum under the control of educators. Thus, language learner can be directed for utilizing the internet in conscious and productive ways. In this context, education system can be altered in the direction of recent technological developments.

In recent years, instead of face-to-face education, distance education has become favourable as an education system in many academic realms. In this system, many facilities of technology are offered for learners. Depending on the facilities, teaching methods have also been modified in the direction of learners' needs. Among these modifications of teaching methods, service learning which can be implemented via technological facilities in foreign language classrooms is an opportunity for learners to participate in different communities.

Advantages of Service-Learning

Service learning is a method of teaching, learning and reflecting that combines academic classroom curriculum with meaningful service from which learners, teachers and the community concurrently get benefits (Hartley, Harkavy, & Benson, 2005). In a wider sense, service-learning aims, by combining the personal and intellectual behaviours, to help learners acquire knowledge that is useful in understanding the world, build critical thinking capacities, and perhaps lead to fundamental questions about learning and about society and to commitment to improve both. Thus, it aims to prepare learners as lifelong learners and participants in the world. The real world becomes the classroom in which learners and community can actively engage together in service learning.

This process can transform learners from inactive to dynamic learners and help them to become responsible community members (Waterman, 1997). The learners' experiences become visible outcomes and powerful reminders of the impact they can have on their community (Seider, 2007; Serow, 1997). More specifically, it integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, to teach civic responsibility, to encourage lifelong civic engagement and to strengthen communities for the common good.

In addition, service-learning offers learners the opportunity to experience the type of learning. As Seider (2001) mentions learners can work with others through a process of acting and reflecting to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding for themselves. In an authentic partnership, the complex dynamics of the relationship mean that the partners face the continuing possibility of being transformed through their relationship with one another in large and small ways (Enos & Morton, 2003). Therefore, service-learning is accepted as an effective pedagogical tool that actively engages learners in the learning process and bridges the gap between theory and practice while connecting learners with the community to accomplish worthwhile and meaningful goals. It has the ability to energize learners, faculty and curriculum in a positive and productive way. In this context, learning is useful; learning is developmental; learning is transforming (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Another central element of service-learning is to link personal and interpersonal development with academic and cognitive development. In many studies, it is stressed that learners report service learning as a contribution to their ability to work with others. Further, service-learning creates opportunities for developing close personal relationships among learners. Moreover, through service-learning, academic study is integrated with larger public life, generally conceived as life outside classroom, although classroom is a place where learners also develop community relationships (Speck, 2001; Shumer, 2001; Chisholm, 2003). One of the most consistent outcomes of service-learning is in the reduction of negative stereotypes and the increase in tolerance for diversity. In order to avoid the possible risks to both parties, trust is a must in such a learning environment.

In the context of campus-community partnerships, trust can be understood as a mutual understanding of the interests of the partners, together with some faith that partners will stay in relationship despite obstacles or difficulties that will surely arise (Wade, 1997). Then, the success of service learning is, in general view, testament to the extraordinary ability of its proponents to build partnerships (Hollander & Hartley, 2003). In recent years, service-learning is in the core of the research since it promotes education beyond classroom and forming strong partnerships with other social groups. So, service learning facilitates learners to develop social-identity, responsibility and stronger social relationships internationally. Another common view about service-learning is that it is holistic. When learners notify what they learn from the service experiences, it is always more than just about subject matter: they learn about many things; they learn about themselves and their skills and abilities (Shumer, 2001).

Although it is essential to focus repeatedly on the elemental personal relationships that form the basis of all partnerships, it is also critical to emphasize that partnerships that tackle the big issues must be among institutions rather than individuals (Jacoby, 2003).

The functional service participations show significant positive effects on many outcome measures: academic performance (writing skills, critical thinking skills), values (commitment to activism and to promoting racial understanding), self-efficacy, leadership (leadership activities, self-rated leadership ability, interpersonal skills), choice of a service career, and plans to participate in service after college (Fisher & Wilson, 2003; Varas, 1999; Bacon, 1997).

Suggestions for functional service-learning

Service-learning keeps learners engaged by offering numerous applications of curricular lessons, using real world experiences to make school relevant. Due to the fact that service learning allows teachers and learners to connect with and benefit from their surrounding communities while integrating this learning back into their curriculum, it can be assumed as a favourable teaching method.

On the other hand, in order to participate in service-learning, it is not necessary to take part in campus community. Instead, the facilities of technology among which the internet is a prominent one can be induced for service-learning. For efficient applications of service-learning programs, some suggestions can be taken into consideration.

- As the initial phase for the plan, the most eminent issue is to question what learners learn from such an experience and what models are maintained to teach learners. Because, a foreign language learners sympathize to learn other culture, to study abroad and to be proficient at speaking foreign language they learn.

- **Designing and managing the program need to be targeted professionally and in a well organized schedule. The partners or adviser chosen for service learning cannot have sufficient knowledge about it. In such a case, learners may experience negative practices and tend to avoid such applications. Although the program is well-designed, partner group may find time, schedule, plans, or management challenging. For defeating such problems, the service need be provided in response to requirements mutually.**
- **Applying service-learning through the internet is the facility of learning globally at local environment without payment. Indeed, international education is what learners mostly want to have, due to the fact that being in another country enables both social and psychological integration during language acquisition. As Chisholm (2003) stresses today's learners are seeking opportunities for international education. Many travelled abroad already and are sophisticated enough to realize that programs that allow them to be immersed in a foreign culture will bring them greater rewards than study-only programs. However, the integration of study abroad may entail a number of organizational issues and problems. For a study abroad program, learners are provided with information about travel, currency exchange, health policies, and some other orientation about the destination country (Chisholm, 2003). Through online service-learning, such difficulties and hindrances of going abroad for language development are avoided.**
- **Service-learning can be applied for different aims. Among these, the partnership of two different languages and cultures may be a significant service. For instance learners of Turkish and learners of English can be assembled in such a program. In this respect, learners will have the chance to meet native speakers of the TL, discuss particular topics, cope with their psychological barriers, learn the target culture, transfer the language knowledge beyond the classroom and improve their language proficiency. Thus, it may promote social activism (Hollander & Hartley, 2003).**
- **Another advantage of service learning can be thought on the basis of the teacher training departments. Particularly foreign language teacher training departments can be assumed as the desired partners. While prospective teachers get the chance of practicing in foreign language they learn, they may get the chance of teaching their native language to their partners who learn it. In this sense, service learning has dual functions: one is foreign language practice, the other is teaching practice. Thus, teaching experience may boost their enthusiasm for teaching profession.**
- **Service learning cannot be assumed as a method for merely advanced level learners. At all levels, such a program can be designed regarding the linguistic and age levels of partners for fostering language desire.**
- **Service learning, on the other hand, cannot be taken for granted as a learning process which occurs only among partners. After the meeting sessions, learners may be directed to present their experiences they have had with their partners and share their ideas in classroom with their classmates as well. Such an attempt may direct learners to be voluntarily involved in the tasks they perform.**

How to implement service learning: Sample procedures

Under this topic some sample procedures for service-learning are presented. The procedures and instructions offered for implementing service-learning tasks via the internet outline some model points which can be modified regarding the expectations of partners.

Sample Procedures

1st Lesson Procedure

Language skill: Speaking and Listening

Duration: 60 minutes

Topic: Youth Culture

The aim:

- **The primary aim of the task is to make the learners feel free to talk about a particular topic.**
- **To make them inform their partners about the youth culture in their countries and make comparisons between the two.**
- **To make them find possible solutions for the problems of the young people in the target culture and discuss these ideas with their partners, which may increase their critical thinking ability and self expression in the target language.**
- **To encourage them in using the target language and coping with their psychological barriers by constructing friendly discussions with the partners.**
- **To improve their speaking and listening abilities through mutual interaction.**

Topic Suggestions: Under the main topic of youth culture, learners can discuss the following subtopics:

- **Behaviours and interests of the young people in two cultures**
- **Clothing styles, hairstyles and footwear**
- **Dialects and slang among young people**
- **Music genres**
- **Gathering places**
- **The role of young people in certain social institutions such as family, work, school and home.**
- **Youth subcultures**

PROCESS

- 1. Both instructors want the learners to make research about the mentioned topics and have at least superficial information about the youth culture of the target language community.**
- 2. Learners discuss the mentioned topics with their partners using any online program, for example "skype". The subtopics are mainly suggestive which means that learners can broaden them or include new subtopics according to their particular interests.**
- 3. Learners take notes in accordance with what they share with their partners and then discuss these notes with their classmates in the following class.**

2nd Lesson Procedure

Language skill: Speaking and Listening

Duration: 60 minutes

Topic: Food Culture

The aim:

- **The primary aim of the task is to make the learners feel free to talk about a particular topic.**
- **Learners can learn the food culture of the target language community which will contribute to their cultural awareness.**

- Learners can make comparisons between the two food cultures and eating habits of the target language community.
- Learners can relate food culture to the life styles of people and question the reasons for the differences between the food cultures of both communities.
- Learners can learn new food names and enhance their vocabulary knowledge.
- Learners can improve their speaking and listening abilities through mutual interaction.

Topic Suggestions: Under the main topic of food culture, learners can discuss the following subtopics:

- Cross-cultural perspectives on eating behaviours
- Gender and the food system (who is the cook in the family and why?)
- Religious perspectives on food
- Politics of the family meal
- Major foods and ingredients
- Eating out
- Special eating occasions
- Importance of diet and health
- Typical meals

PROCESS

1. Both instructors want the learners to make research about the mentioned topics and have at least superficial information about the food culture of the target language community.
2. Learners discuss the mentioned topics with their partners using the program skype. The subtopics are mainly suggestive which means that learners can broaden them or include new subtopics according to their particular interests.
3. Learners take notes in accordance with what they share with their partners and then discuss these notes with their classmates in the following class.

3rd Lesson Procedure

Language skill: Speaking and Listening

Duration: 60 minutes

Topic: Music

The aim:

- The primary aim of the task is to make the learners feel free to talk about a particular topic.
- Learners will get the chance of learning about the dominant music types in the target culture.
- Learners will get the chance of learning about the music education at schools.
- Learners will get the chance of learning about the function of music in entertainment.
- Learners will get the chance of learning about the tendency of the target language community towards foreign music.
- Learners will get the chance of learning the names of different musical instruments which particularly belong to the target culture.

- **Learners will get the chance of improving their speaking and listening skills through mutual interaction.**

Topic Suggestions: Under the main topic of music culture, learners can discuss the following subtopics:

- **Types of music preference according to age groups.**
- **Variability of music genres.**
- **Particular musical instruments.**
- **Music education at schools.**
- **Folk dances**
- **Variability of bars, clubs which play different types of music**
- **The perspective of the society towards musicians.**

PROCESS

- 1. Both instructors want the learners to make research about the mentioned topics and have at least superficial information about the food culture of the target language community.**
- 2. Learners discuss the mentioned topics with their partners using the program skype. The subtopics are mainly suggestive which means that learners can broaden them or include new subtopics according to their particular interests.**
- 3. Learners take notes in accordance with what they share with their partners and then discuss these notes with their classmates in the following class.**

After the application of the procedures, designing learner reflection forms and using them in different steps for getting learners' ideas and further expectations may prove evidence for the advantages and disadvantages of the present applications and highlight some points for better service-learning course designs arrangements. If the objectives of the applications are implemented and learner reflections confirm positive attitude, such an application can be assumed as a part of foreign language teaching curriculum. In this respect, if service learning becomes a part of foreign language curriculum, it might be possible to construct permanent partnership between institutions which means a higher level of cooperation. This is also one of the goals of service learning because as Jacoby states, although it is essential to continually focus on the elemental personal relationships that form the basis of all partnerships, it is also critical to emphasize that partnerships that tackle the big issues must be among institutions rather than individuals (Jacoby 2003).

Thus, as an alternative to other international projects, service-learning can widely be applied as permanent cooperation with international institutions. The learner reflection forms may be designed in the following order with the sample questions:

1st Journal (before the application of service-learning)

- 1. What are the factors that made you decide to study Turkish or English as a foreign language?**
- 2. What are your expectations from foreign language education?**
- 3. Have you had the chance to apply your foreign language knowledge in different contexts?**
- 4. What are the problems that you come across during your foreign language education?**
- 5. Do you have any friends who are native speakers of English?**
- 6. What do you know about the target culture?**

7. Do you think this project can contribute to your foreign language acquisition?
8. What are your expectations from the project?
9. Do you think online interaction can enable to form strong partnerships?
10. What are your greatest worries about the project?

2nd Journal (during the application procees)

1. Do you find the topic based studies interesting?
2. Do you have problems in constructing partnerships? Why?
3. Are the topics which you discuss online relevant to the classroom activities?
4. Do the discussions with your partners make you create additional goals?
5. Do you consider online interaction as face to face conversation?
6. Do you discuss the cultural topics in your classroom too?
7. Have you encountered any kind of problems during the application of the project so far?

3rd Journal (At the end of the applications)

1. Has the project done any kind of changes in your expectations?
2. Has the project contributed to your foreign language proficiency?
3. Has your interest in target culture increased?
4. Do you consider the project as a valuable part of your foreign language education?
5. Have you been able to form strong partnerships?
6. Do you think being familiar with someone in the target language community has contributed to your cultural awareness?
7. Have you got the chance employing the linguistic information which you learnt in the classroom during your interaction with your partners?
8. If you were the organizer of this project what would you differently? Do you have any further suggestions?

CONCLUSION

Service-learning which offers various tasks and opportunities for foreign language learners appears to be a natural fit for accomplishing the goals of educational settings, individual achievements, gaining consciousness, involving in different experiences, learning about otherness, gaining language proficiency. In this era of globalization, the internationalization of the academic curriculum has become a priority in many academic disciplines. Programs with an international component have become a part of the curriculum within the fields of social work (Jones, Gilbride-Brown & Gasiorski, 2005) Internationalization can be accomplished in many ways.

Classes can be designed around international topics and international experience can be incorporated in the curriculum. It is a supportive view that placing learners in settings in which they will deal with situations and issues related to the content of the course will help to assure that the experience enhances learning (Eyler & Giles 1999). Hence, appropriate online discussions for volunteer learner profiles can be cooperative and motivating for language learning as well.

Another goal of service learning is to increase the respect for cultural diversity and awareness of other cultures. As Eyler and Giles (1999) points out one of the most consistent outcomes of service-learning is in the reduction of negative stereotypes and the increase in tolerance for diversity. In this respect, designing topics, based on cultural interaction, might be valuable for learners in terms of getting to know particular some aspects of the target culture and relating them to their particular goals.

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