

# Community Outreach From Within: Bringing Service Learning to Language Classrooms via Peer Tutoring

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*This paper describes how a successful peer-tutoring program served as the framework for a service learning project, with implications for potential use in Japan. The case discussed is a service learning program at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois. The program, initiated in 2006 and continuing today, aims at matching the needs of lower-proficiency language learners with more experienced learners in a peer-tutoring program. Experienced learners are introduced to the project within the framework of a service learning project, encouraging reflection on their own experiences and journey as language learners, while reinforcing the importance of service learning. This model can be used as a transition to larger service learning projects while also reinforcing language learners' needs.*

この論文は、ある成功したピア・チュータリングのシステムがどのようにサービスラーニングのフレームワークとして役立ったか、そしてその日本で将来的な適用の可能性について論じる。議論されるのは、イリノイ州シカゴのデポール大学において実施されたサービスラーニングのプログラムである。2006年に始まり今日も続くこのプログラムは、ピア・チュータリングにおいて、熟達度の高い言語学習者が熟達度の低い学習者の必要に応じることを狙いとしている。熟達学習者はサービスラーニングの枠組みの中でこのプロジェクトに参加し、サービスラーニングの重要性を補足されるとともに、自分自身の経験と言語学習者としての遍歴の内省が促される。このモデルは、言語学習者のニーズを強化するとともに、より大きなサービスラーニングのプロジェクトへの橋渡しとしても用いることができる。

## **Introduction: The Importance and Relevance of Service Learning for ELLs**

Increasingly, Service Learning (SL) programs are being implemented in higher education as a means of providing hands-on, experiential learning. These programs typically aim to bridge the gap between the academic experience and real world experience outside of the classroom. In an SL program, students typically work and interact with a diverse population outside their academic frame of reference. SL programs generally

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involve organized volunteer (service) activities, which take place in a variety of venues, such as schools, senior assisted living communities, food pantries (centers where donated food is collected for redistribution to those in need), or community gardens. Among the expected outcomes are that SL experience will open students' minds, promote respect for service and community involvement, and offer a broader range of contexts for learning and applying knowledge.

The National Youth Leadership Council stresses that an effective SL program should provide a context-rich experience which is appropriate, accessible, meaningful and enriching. The experience is appropriate in the sense that the requirements for the activity should match the students' language level and confidence in communicating. An SL program for English Language Learners (ELLs) should be accessible in that it suits their context, schedule and lifestyle. In terms of relevance, the project should correspond, on some level, to the students' interests and their course of study. Finally, the SL project should provide some degree of intrinsic satisfaction, which could lead to deeper investment in the project as well as a more meaningful experience.

Incorporating SL methodology in the field of ESL/ EFL is becoming more common. Where in the past ELLs were often the subjects or recipients of SL projects, it is now recognized that ELLs receive inherent benefit in active participation in SL programs. In a diverse, context-rich learning situation, ELLs can experience the empowerment and autonomy which accompanies self-directed application of skills and knowledge in real world situations. According to Bringle and Clayton (2012), service learning can promote critical thinking, academic engagement and intrinsic motivation. Moreover, SL makes a meaningful contribution to local community needs.

### **Implementing Service Learning in a Japanese University**

While teaching at a Japanese university four years ago, I was asked to research, plan, and implement a SL program for our study abroad students. Implementing SL in a rigorous academic English language program such as an Intensive English Program (IEP) can pose challenges in time and resource allocation for SL activities. Creating a SL framework which fits within a given curriculum can be time- consuming, and

mobilizing administrators, teachers (particularly those on short or part-time contracts), and students can be a large undertaking. Further, some might question the fundamental pedagogical validity in requiring students to participate in SL projects.

In conceptualizing a SL model for that particular program, I needed to take into account the students' time constraints, teachers' schedules, intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, as well as an appropriate way to integrate the English language component. Perhaps foremost, the SL program would need to offer students an opportunity to develop their English communicative skills, which might increase the students' motivation and participation. However, finding SL opportunities in Japan which met this language criteria proved to be a challenge.

This conceptualization process led me to reflect on my prior participation in a successful peer- tutoring SL program at DePaul University's English Language Academy (ELA) in Chicago, IL. The ELA is an intensive English program (IEP) which provides academic English courses for international students hoping to improve TOEFL and TOEIC scores and to enter undergraduate and graduate-level degree programs. In the fall of 2007, recognizing the potential value of both SL and peer tutoring, a small group of teachers initiated a Peer Tutoring Lab as an SL project. I participated with the initial implementation of the program, which was conceptualized and organized by Kathy Larson, the Associate Director for Curriculum at the ELA. Larson's SL program strives to address the aforementioned challenges of time and resource allocation, mobilization, and relevance. In addition, it effectively meets the communicative language criteria. This paper will briefly outline the program's design, objectives, continuing success, and implications for use in Japanese universities.

### **Service Learning Case Study: The Peer Tutoring Lab**

Several needs prompted the creation of this peer-tutoring program. The first was to address the students' needs in a fast-paced, rigorous IEP. A number of beginning/novice ELLs were not successfully progressing through the curriculum in one term, and many were repeating multiple courses. Teachers had limited ability to address these students' needs through additional contact hours and conferencing. While these beginner ELLs struggled to master course content, many advanced-level students were making no apparent progress in their language

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development after reaching a certain language proficiency or TOEFL score. The outcome for some was a sense of being stuck at a given language level with no hope of appreciable development or growth. In addition to addressing the needs of students and teachers, the peer-tutoring program aimed to integrate a meaningful SL project into the curriculum of a rigorous IEP in a university which promotes service and community involvement as one of its core values.

Larson's concept for the Peer Tutoring Lab addresses ELLs' needs by matching advanced students with beginning students in a twice-weekly peer tutoring program. Students at all levels are able to practice and reinforce their language skills while participating in a voluntary service learning program. Training sessions are provided for advanced students (tutors) prior to the sessions, which take place outside of regularly scheduled class time during students' personal study periods. Once the schedule is established, tutors volunteer once a week on a rotational basis. Beginning students (tutees) are encouraged to attend tutoring sessions as often as they like. Teachers from the ELA supervise the tutoring sessions on a rotational basis.

Tutoring sessions aim to create a relaxed but studious atmosphere where students can chat, become acquainted, and study at their own pace. To promote the relaxed atmosphere, snacks and drinks are provided and tutees are allowed to choose their focus for the sessions. In some cases, this would be grammar, reading, writing, or just English conversation.

One benefit of participation for tutees is that they receive additional language support from a near-peer tutor. A secondary aim of this tutor-tutee relationship is to encourage and empower tutees who are learning from someone who has experience as an ELL. By learning from their peers, students potentially become more confident and optimistic regarding their language development. Finally, by attending tutoring sessions and having some meta-awareness of their own needs, tutees become more autonomous. Goals for the tutors are slightly more complex. The SL component is reinforced through selected readings about service learning as well as weekly reflections. Reflection is an important element of effective SL programs, and tutors are periodically asked to reflect on their tutoring experience through in-class writing assignments and discussions

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as a part of their University Bridge research writing course. Additionally, by applying their knowledge of grammar and usage in a direct way, tutors are effectively reinforcing their own language ability and knowledge. Finally, tutors can assume more responsibility and accountability by helping others, while also increasing their communication and social skills (Falchikov, 2001).

In general, the objectives of the Peer Tutoring Lab are mutually beneficial for the tutees and tutors. It has been suggested that studying with peers can be more productive than studying alone (Falchikov, 2001), and that students tend to retain more information in collaborative learning sessions while developing critical thinking skills and motivation (Prince, 2004). In addition to these intrinsic benefits, there are a number of incentives in place for participants of this program. Both tutors and tutees receive participation grades for attending tutoring sessions. Tutors publish reflective essays in a class publication at the end of the term and receive certificates of completion. Both tutors and tutees participate in an end-of-term party and award ceremony to celebrate their accomplishments and give some closure to the term.

### **The Peer Tutoring Lab Today**

Now in its 7th year, the Peer Tutoring Lab at DePaul University continues to run successfully today, though my association with the program ended in 2009. Larson reports that the program is now somewhat self-sustaining, with “former tutors who help with the beginning of term tutor training... (and) talk about the benefits to their own learning. Tutors also write reflections on their service learning and we ask them to share highlights of their experience” (K. Larson, personal communication, November 13, 2013). Of course, the program faces some challenges. Initial investment in the program is critical, requiring buy-in from both tutors and tutees. Often, Larson reports, the program is a hard-sell for beginning students, for whom interpersonal dynamics (i.e., being matched with a tutor whom they can relate to) and motivation toward learning English can be determining factors in their participation and success. Additionally, while tutors’ investment and participation in the program is essential, Larson points out that “Occasionally we do have tutors who resent the requirement, who are only focused on getting through the program and into a university.” However, most tutors, according to Larson, are

motivated, “holding themselves to more precise standards of what they know, but may not be able to explain/clarify for another, and to realize they DO know a lot already” (K. Larson, personal communication, November 13, 2013).

Despite these challenges, many participants in the program are able to acknowledge the benefits of their involvement over the term, building meaningful relationships and developing cross-cultural understanding.

### **Implications for Japanese Universities**

Within the context of higher education in Japan, would it be feasible to implement this type of SL program? Certainly there are significant differences between the context in which this program was created and a typical Japanese university. Most English classrooms in Japan, for example, lack the diverse, multi-lingual and cross-cultural component which enriches the program at DePaul. Among administrators in Japan, there might be more resistance to or lack of knowledge about service learning, as well as a lack of resources or facilities. Finally, persuading students to spend more hours at school outside of their busy schedules and part-time jobs could stymie the initial buy-in.

The perspective-broadening aspects of SL are needed in Japanese universities, and the potential for increasing learner autonomy and motivation could be enormously beneficial to university students in Japan. Certainly there is always a need for opportunities to communicate in English within authentic contexts.

While I was unable to successfully launch a peer-tutoring program described in this paper due to unrelated constraints, I continue to actively consider its viability in a Japanese university. One possible approach would be to pilot a tutoring program in a university with an established study abroad program. Study abroad returnees are generally eager to maintain the language abilities they have acquired abroad. In this case, pairing returnees with freshman students or novice English speakers could be mutually beneficial. In addition to language support, it could provide mentoring and encouragement for beginning students, bolstering confidence in their communicative ability. In this way, study abroad returnees could become a valuable resource for universities while also adding qualifications to resumes for their future job search.

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Programs such as the Peer Tutoring Lab at DePaul demonstrate that SL projects can be implemented successfully with little cost and minimal resources. Initiating an SL project can be time-consuming, but the program can become self-sustaining over time. In a diverse, context-rich environment, the SL experience can reinforce language skills and knowledge. On an interpersonal level, effective SL reinforces communication skills and can position students to take a more active, autonomous role in their own language learning. More importantly, the experience provides a meaningful, memorable accomplishment of service that can be carried forward to enrich lives and careers in the future.

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