

Original Paper

Community Engagement and Improved Language Proficiency: The Case of Service-Learning in Higher Education in Oman

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Abstract

It can be argued that as an effective teaching approach, service learning can contribute significantly to improvement of the proficiency of learners of English as a foreign Language. This paper reports on the findings of a quasi- experimental study on the effect of service learning on EFL student-teachers English language proficiency in pre-service teacher education program at Sultan Qaboos University. The findings of the study reveal that the student teachers in the experimental group outperformed those in the contrast group in all language components tested by the TOEFL and the Oral test. These findings clearly indicate an overall improvement in the language performance of the student teachers as a result of the service-learning intervention. Comparison of the experimental group results in both tests between pre and post intervention reveals a significant improvement which can be attributed to the service learning experience.

Keywords

service learning, EFL, ELT, pre-service teacher preparation, higher education, MEPI, engagement, language proficiency

1. Introduction

1.1 Context/Background

It is imperative that all teachers achieve mastery in the content knowledge that they teach. However, evidence from the field reveals that a large number of Omani English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers do not possess the level of proficiency required of a language teacher. This is evident in the number of students who are required to take English foundation courses to be eligible for admission to the TEFL teacher preparation programs. In spite of the fact that the students have been exposed to English for 12 years in their school education (grades 1-12), the majority of them enter the university with inadequate levels of proficiency in English. Similarly, EFL student teachers who are tested on the Oral Proficiency Interview Test (OPIC) show low levels of oral language proficiency. In addition, over

the last three years, English teachers applying for admission to the M. Ed. Program, when tested in writing, revealed a consistently weak level of performance in writing.

The seriousness of the matter extends beyond ELT to include general academic preparation. Chapman (2004) indicates that even the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), which attracts the academically strongest students in the country, has over one-third of its students who need to take an extra year of academic preparation at government expense before they are ready to start their regular college-level work. He points out that considerable evidence suggests that the low student performance is due in large part to the limited professional capacity of teachers particularly at secondary level. He further argues that many of these teachers have only a limited command of the content they are expected to teach and some also lack a repertoire of pedagogical skills. These shortcomings are often attributed to weaknesses in Oman's secondary school teacher preparation programs (Chapman et. al., 2012).

1.2 Efforts to Improve Teaching

Over the last decade and a half, a series of initiatives aimed at modernizing instruction at the primary and secondary levels have been launched by the government of the Sultanate of Oman. While this demonstrates the government's commitment and willingness to experiment with and implement strategies aimed at improving the quality of education, it has resulted in the simultaneous existence of different curricula and instructional approaches across the country. Each of these reforms seems to indicate the inadequacy of previous efforts (Chapman et al, 2012).

In addition, the government engaged in a national strategic process that resulted in a national plan for economic development (Vision 2020) which among other things called for the reform of the educational system. In 1998 the basic education reform was implemented where four cohorts of the basic education graduates have already entered the university. One would assume that the reform process would have produced students with a better knowledge base and a better command of the English language than the previous system which offered fewer opportunities for exposure to English. In 2003, the Ministry of Education initiated yet another initiative which involved a pilot rollout of Learner-Centered Methodology. It was initially implemented in grades 1 and 2 in 20 schools and was then progressively expanded into higher grades and into more schools. In 2005–2006, the Ministry launched the Integrated Curriculum on a pilot basis, initially with two schools and then expanded it to ten schools in Muscat. In 2011 this Integrated Curriculum was introduced in two schools in each of the eleven regions.(Chapman and et.al, 2012). Surprisingly, none of these reforms seem to have produced academically better students.

1.3 Teacher Preparation

As a premier teacher preparation institution, the College of Education was established at SQU in 1986 with the aim of preparing and training teachers and professionals needed for the school system. Currently, it has a student population of about 2,223 undergraduates, 129 higher diploma students and 96 MA students (College of Education Annual Report, 2011/2012). Over the years the college had maintained a high reputation thus making it one of high-demand institutions admitting only the very

best candidates into the profession. It, therefore, maintains high admission and progression standards. The college has continually sought to improve academic standards through the provision of quality teaching, quality learning materials and a variety of other learning opportunities. Moreover, it strives to ensure quality through recruitment of a high caliber of international faculty who are engaged in collaborative strategic research and are active in providing consultancy services to the education community. In addition, the College has been involved in a number of research projects aimed at experimenting new teaching and learning methodologies. In such a research project, there is a move from teacher-led methodologies to more learner-centered ones. Thus, service-learning pedagogy was introduced as part of the teacher preparation program to experiment its viability in improving English language proficiency of EFL student teachers.

A US-Middle East Partnership Initiative brought together four higher education institutions (Sultan Qaboos University, United Arab Emirates University, Northern Kentucky University, and Yale University) in a project to improve EFL teaching through the collaborative development of a service-learning curriculum. The project aimed at linking EFL teaching to the needs of the community, improving pedagogical approaches to EFL teaching, encouraging student research, training expert EFL mentor teachers, raising the TOEFL scores of teacher education graduates, and impacting K-12 EFL learning and the Omani community positively (MEPI Project Document, 2006-2009, Al-Barwani, Al-Mekhlafi and Neisler, 2010).

To that end, a quasi experimental study was carried out as part of the service learning project and this paper presents the findings of this study as they relate to the improvement of English language proficiency of EFL student teachers.

1.4 Literature Review

Although the service-learning approach is generally considered to be a relatively recent methodology, its roots stem from Dewey's philosophical pragmatism, Lewin's social psychology and Piaget's cognitive development theories (Kolb, 1984, as cited in Al Khatry, 2011). The concept of service-learning was further developed by Kolb (1971) to include a cyclical process where concrete experience is followed by reflection, which in turn is assimilated into a theory of abstract conceptualization and finally reformulated into a hypothesis that is tested in new situations (Cited in Al Khatry, 2011).

1.5 Service Learning and Community Engagement

Incorporating service-learning in educational programs has in the last few decades been proposed as a promising approach to improve the quality of education. Through engagement and exposure to meaningful experience that connects theoretical knowledge to practical application of that knowledge, the learner is able to transfer their knowledge from the classroom to real-life experience and situations. Service-learning is said to yield social, psychological and academic benefits for the learners (Minor, 2006) and is also seen as an approach to education that can lead to enhanced personal and social responsibility, self-esteem, moral reasoning and problem-solving skills of learners (Conrad and Hedin,

1982). Moreover, literature has also identified a number of service learning objectives related to the enhancement of language and culture of which the most important ones were problem solving and their ability to address or overcome such problems, interaction with a culture that is different from their own, building bridges with other demographic groups, introduction to experiential learning, and appreciation of values such as service, tolerance, independence and humility (Battistini, 2002, cited in Hale, 2006). In addition to fostering students' personal growth, service-learning also provides meaningful contexts for language learning (Minor, 2006; Angelova, 2006).

When used as a method of learning a second language, Hale (2006) claims that service-learning has the potential of producing new motivation for language learners. She asserts that it exposes them to a new perspective of contextual language learning and it enhances their self-confidence while it gives them a depth of understanding of the relationship between culture and language.

1.6 Service learning and Academic Achievement

Empirical evidence of large-scale research shows that the service-learning approach generally leads to better learning than the other traditional approaches. Kamouche's (2006) evaluative study of the impact of service-learning on performance of 325 Basic Statistics students from 1997 to 2005 revealed a significant difference in performance between the service-learning group (n= 165) and the non-service-learning group (n= 160) students in favor of the service-learning group (cited in Al Khatry, 2011). Similarly, Hart and King's (2007) experimental study showed a significant positive impact of the service-learning approach on students' learning over those who used other traditional approaches.

With regard to teaching English as a second language (ESL), the current literature shows service-learning as "a philosophy, pedagogy and practice that can help ESL/EFL students acquire language skills and functions not ordinarily put into practice, or assessed through traditional classroom activities" (Reyes, 2009, p. 2). The goal of an ESL/EFL teacher should be not only to maximize students' learning of English but also to heighten their critical thinking and reflective skills so that they can function effectively as members of an increasingly multicultural, global society. This can be done through the philosophy, pedagogy and practice of service-learning, which will take students beyond the classroom to concrete, exciting and challenging learning situations. Reyes (2009) also suggests that by adopting service-learning "as an approach to helping ESL students integrate classroom concepts with actual hands-on community experiences students are able to develop cultural competence, critical thinking, and reflectivity in their everyday lives" (p. 1).

Service-learning can be seen as a useful pedagogy to enhance ESL students' learning and provide opportunities to students to discover for themselves the connection between their learning of English language skills through their courses and larger societal issues, such as social discrimination, poverty and health care etc. through context-rich assignments, oral presentations, journal reflections, discussions and debates (Chamot et al., 2002, cited in Reyes, 2009 p. 18). Language skills cannot be taught in isolation from meaningful contexts. "Whenever possible, students should be placed in context-rich situations" (Latulippe, 1999, p. 4) and meaningful activities provide an "ideal learning

opportunity for second language students to learn more information in a shorter time with less effort” (Christison, 1999, p. 4 cited in Reyes 2009, p. 18).

It is important that language teachers help their students gain “new understandings” through service-learning and make the required leap from settling for the classroom world characterized by a few questions, easy answers and perfect practices, to a real world beset with innumerable questions, often difficult answers and imperfect practices (Rojas, 1996; cited in Reyes, 2009, p. 26). ESL/EFL teachers should support their students in their travel out of the comfort zone of the predictable classroom environment and enable them to become critical thinkers through inquiry, reflection, discovery and risk-taking skills.

Embedding critical thinking skills in ESL courses can help provide ESL service-learners with the tools that are needed to enhance their daily learning experiences, solve problems, build teams and boost their “strategic spirit”(Reyes, 2009:26). The ability to apply what has been learnt in one context to another, i.e. transfer of knowledge and skills, as well as cognitive styles and attitudes, enables students to become better critical thinkers and effective in making key decisions and interacting with others in addition to good communication skills in the language. In other words, the goal of ESL/EFL teachers should be to trigger in their students a synergy of language and critical thinking skills as well as positive dispositions (Perkins & Gabriel, 1988; cited in Reyes, 2009: 26).

Service-learning, if it is carefully designed and integrated well in the ESL curriculum with appropriate instructional strategies, can help students to develop in themselves a sense of independence and confidence as learners, with a clear awareness of their own thinking and learning processes, which in turn will increase their motivation as they become academically more successful and accomplished in their real-life practice. Eyler & Giles (1997), report that a highly reflective service-learning curriculum component that integrates well community service with the academic courses is a predictor of critical thinking ability, the ability to identify issues and see consequences of actions, and the willingness to receive new ideas (Cited in Reyes, 2009, p. 17).

Many students decide to study abroad in an English-speaking country in order to improve their language skills by experiencing total immersion in the target language and culture. This is because when an environment where authentic interaction with native English speakers occurs on a regular basis, it offers ESL students the possibility and opportunity to grow linguistically and socially. In such a situation, introducing a service-learning component to an ESL program provides students with opportunities to interact regularly with native-speaker peers, to apply what they have learnt in class and to engage in various extracurricular and cultural activities in the target community without seeking study abroad opportunities which can be extremely expensive (Marlow, 2007).

The piloted service-learning component in the ESL program for international ESL students described by Marlow (2007) was designed to provide native English-speaking language and culture mentors to those students. Two groups of students engaged in activities, such as planning and taking part in campus-based events, community-based events, cultural events, group activities and practical help (e.g.,

in job search, finding an apartment, opening a bank account). The service-learning component focused on helping international ESL students integrate themselves culturally and socially with their experience in an American college by providing them with recurring opportunities to enhance their communication skills in English by practicing their language in an informal yet authentic environment. Apart from the social and cultural benefits gained by all students from such interactions, the ESL students gained confidence in their language and were willing to use their language skills in a non-threatening environment, take risks with their language and explore the use of new language (Marlow, 2007).

It is clear from the above that service learning is believed to have the potential to improve language proficiency and cultural exposure to learners. However, the field based evidence available seems more anecdotal lacking research rigor that establishes the impact of service learning methodology on EFL proficiency improvement. This study attempts to fill that gap.

2. Method

2.1 The Purpose of the Study

The study examines the effect of service learning experience on EFL student teachers improvement in English language proficiency in Oman as compared with other teaching methods.

2.2 Research Questions

The questions addressed in this study are:

- 1) Is there a significant improvement in EFL student teachers' performance in English as measured by TOEFL Test after involvement in the service learning experiment?
- 2) Is there a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in language skills as evidenced by their performance in the Oral tests?

2.3 Design

This was a pre-post control group design study involving two groups of EFL student teachers from the college of Education at the Sultan Qaboos University: one control group and one experimental group.

The study was designed so that student teachers would be involved in providing service to the expatriate community schools in Oman. Service was defined to be the teaching of Omani topics that are of interest to the expatriate community. Through the teaching of these topics, student teachers were expected to get a better exposure to the English language since the selected schools use English as the medium of instruction. It was anticipated that the service the students would provide to the expatriate community schools would require them to use English (both written and oral communication). Similarly, by providing the service the student teachers would gain a deep understanding of the community and develop skills such as analytical skills, problem solving skills, tolerance, engagement, accountability and a sense of responsibility.

2.4 Sample

The sample of the study comprised 61 student teachers (Experimental Group, n= 44; Control Group, n= 19) enrolled in a four-year Bachelor's degree program in EFL at the College of Education, Sultan

Qaboos University. The student teachers in the experimental group were distributed among the six sites according to the capacity of each site to accommodate the student teachers. This was determined by both the College of Education and the respective host schools. The student teachers' preferred site was also considered in order to ensure their sense of psychological comfort and continuity in the experiment. Student teachers were introduced to the theoretical aspects of service-learning during the previous semester and their permission to be involved in the service-learning experiment at specified study sites was also secured prior to the experiment.

2.5 Instruments

For the study, which was conducted for a whole semester (14 weeks), a number of instruments were developed to ensure the collection of maximum data and successful facilitation of the implementation process. Data was collected by means of the TOEFL test (Pre and Post). An Oral Test was also administered (Pre- and Post-). The Oral test was developed by testing experts of the Language Center at the Sultan Qaboos University. To ensure the reliability of the oral test three independent assessors participated in the assessment process. To ensure common understanding of the scoring rubrics among the assessors and consequently consistency of scoring, the test was piloted on a group of students where each interviewer assessed the student independently. Then, the three assessors compared and discussed their scores to come to an agreement on interpreting and using the rubrics in the actual test of the study. After that, the panel of the three assessors rated the students' oral performance independently and the average of the three scores was taken.

2.6 Sites

Six expatriate schools were approached to host the selected sample of student teachers who were involved in the experiment. The schools were all located in Muscat (Oman) and included two Indian, one Philippine, one Bangladeshi, one Sri Lankan and one Native-English-speaking School (basically British). After securing the necessary approvals, student teachers were assigned to the respective schools. The target sites were selected based on the criteria that they should allow enough exposure to English for the student teachers. The sites should also be willing to help in facilitating the exposure of student teachers to activities that yield themselves to not only allowing maximum use of English language and teaching techniques but also in making it an interesting experience in order to enhance student teachers' positive attitude towards English language learning and teaching as well as towards service to the community.

2.7 Activities and Tasks

Prior to conducting the experiment, student teachers prepared materials and lesson plans to be used in their teaching at the expatriate schools. The selection of topics was done through a systematic prior study that investigated which topics were considered to be of importance and which appeal to the needs and interests of the expatriate community in Oman (AL Barwani et. al, 2010). After selecting the topics, the student teachers had to research on the topics, prepare presentations, lesson plans and AV materials to be used in the classroom.

While the service learning group went to the service learning sites instead of the regular laboratory based microteaching course, the control group prepared lesson plans to be used in the regular microteaching environment.

2.8 Monitoring and Supervision

Prior to sending the students to the service-learning sites, two of the team members paid the necessary visits to the sites to finalize the arrangements between site managers and the College of Education. Discussions also focused upon clarifying the nature and goal of the project, as well as the plan of types of delivery procedures and support required for various tasks and activities in the light of the aims of the experiment. School rules, regulations and expectations were also discussed together with availability of resources to support students work.

The researchers paid weekly visits to the sites to monitor the progress and help the sites in solving any problems that may arise. Similarly, reflection sessions were held at the university where student teachers discussed various problems faced during the implementation stage.

2.9 Facilities, Logistics and Arrangements

The university made available all the facilities, materials and equipment needed for the service-learning experience. The university also provided transportation for the student teachers and supervisors. The budget for the TOEFL and the Oral Test was secured from the grant allocations of the MEPI project.

3. Findings and Discussion

To answer the main question of the study, the collected data was analyzed quantitatively using T-Test. The following table presents the findings of students' performance (both the experimental and control groups) on different components (Listening comprehension, Structure and written expression, Reading Comprehension) of the TOEFL prior to the intervention.

Table 1. Independent Sample T-Test of Students' Performance on TOEFL Pre-Tests

Test Description	Group	N	Df	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
Listening Comprehension	Experimental	44	61	50.11	3.859	1.71	.091
	Control	19		48.21	4.429		
Structure & Written Expression	Experimental	44	61	49.38	6.012	1.60	.114
	Control	19		46.89	4.701		
Reading Comprehension	Experimental	44	61	49.50	4.687	1.01	.314
	Control	19		48.15	5.112		
Overall TOEFL Pre-test	Experimental	44	61	49.67	42.784	1.65	.102
	Control	19		47.75	40.723		

To compare the language performance of student teachers in the experimental and control groups on the

TOEFL pre-test, an independent T-test was performed. Table 1 shows that there were no significant differences at the level of 0.05 in the overall language performance between the student teachers of the experimental and the control groups (i.e., in all skills tested) ($p = .102$) with overall means of 49.67 and 47.45 respectively. A more detailed analysis shows that there were also no significant differences in the performance between the two groups in individual language skills (i.e., listening comprehension; structure and written expression; and reading comprehension). This indicates that the student teachers' level of language performance in the experimental and control groups was similar in all language skills covered by the TOEFL, thus indicating homogeneity of the two groups prior to the intervention.

After the intervention, an institutional TOEFL Test was administered to both the experimental and control groups. The following table shows the results of the independent T-Test of the students' performance on the different components of the TOEFL.

Table 2. Independent Sample T-Test of Students' Performance on TOEFL Post- Tests

Test Description	Group	N	Df	Mean	SD	T	Sig.
Listening Comprehension	Experimental	44	61	51.77	4.252	1.80	.077
	Control	19		49.74	3.783		
Structure & Written Expression	Experimental	44	61	54.45	5.449	2.76	.007
	Control	19		50.47	4.694		
Reading Comprehension	Experimental	44	61	50.22	3.934	2.32	.023
	Control	19		47.57	4.610		
Overall TOEFL Post-test	Experimental	44	61	521.56	39.441	2.72	.008
	Control	19		492.52	37.257		

As shown in Table 2 above, the results of the independent sample T-Test of the overall student teachers' performance on the TOEFL Post-test reveal that there are significant differences in the level of their performance in the English language between the experimental and the control groups at 0.01 level of significance in favor of the experimental group. The overall means of the experimental and the control groups (calculated for all the skills covered by the TOEFL) were 39.441 and 37.257 respectively.

The results for each individual language skill on the TOEFL, however, show that there were significant differences in the student teachers' language performance with respect to 'Structure and Written Expression' at the 0.01 level of significance in favor of the experimental group. The means obtained by the experimental and control groups in this language skill are 54.45 and 50.47 respectively, with ($p = 0.007$). Similarly, reading comprehension was found to be significant at the 0.05 level in favor of the experimental group. A comparison between Table 1 and Table2 indicates that the experimental group's language skills improved more than that of the control group in two out of the three skills tested.

Given that TOEFL does not test oral skills, the researchers decided to administer a separate oral test to

both the experimental and control groups. The table below shows a comparison of oral performance between the two groups.

Table 3. Independent Sample T-Test of Students' Performance on the Oral Pre-Tests

Test Description	Group	N	Df	Mean	SD	T	Sig.
Oral reading of a text	Experimental	20	31	6.91	.740	.791	.435
	Control	13		6.69	.820		
Sentence completion task	Experimental	20	31	7.18	.847	1.193	.242
	Control	13		6.84	.675		
Expressing Opinion or preference	Experimental	20	31	7.26	.917	1.79	.088
	Control	13		6.67	.982		
Overall Oral Pre-Test	Experimental	20	31	7.11	.748	1.427	.163
	Control	13		6.73	.745		

With regard to the student teachers' performance in oral skills pre-test, Table 3 shows that there were no significant differences between the student teachers in the experimental and the control groups at the 0.05 level. This lack of significance was also observed in their performance in all the three areas of oral language proficiency (i.e., oral reading of a text; sentence completion; and expression of one's preference or opinion), thus indicating the equivalency of the two groups.

After the intervention, an Oral Post-test was administered to both the experimental and control groups. The following table shows the results of the independent T-Test of the students' performance on different components of the oral test.

Table 4. Independent Sample T-Test of Students' Performance on the Oral Post-Tests

Test Description	Group	N	Df	Mean	SD	T	Sig.
Oral reading of a text	Experimental	20	31	7.75	.758	2.52	.017
	Control	13		7.06	.783		
Sentence completion task	Experimental	20	31	7.71	.498	2.30	.028
	Control	13		7.33	.406		
Expressing Opinion or preference	Experimental	20	31	7.68	.591	1.65	.107
	Control	13		7.26	.833		
Overall Oral Post-Test	Experimental	20	31	7.71	.533	2.42	.021
	Control	13		7.22	.627		

Table 4 shows that, overall, there were significant differences at the 0.05 level in the oral performance between the experimental and control groups with overall means of 7.71 and 7.22 respectively ($p =$

0.021). There were also significant differences in the student teachers' performance between the two groups at the 0.05 level in favor of the experimental group with respect to two of the three components, i.e. 'oral reading of a text' ($p = 0.017$) (with means of 7.75 and 7.06 respectively), and 'sentence completion task' ($p = 0.028$) (with means of 7.71 and 7.33 respectively). There was, however, no significant difference with respect to the third dimension of oral proficiency, viz. 'expressing opinion or preference'.

4. Conclusion

Generally speaking, it was observed that the student teachers in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group in most of the language components tested by the TOEFL and the Oral test. Comparison of the experimental group results in both tests between prior and post intervention reveals a significant improvement which can be attributed to the service learning intervention. When the experimental group is compared to the control group on their performances on both tests, overall significant differences are noted in favor of the experimental group. Analyses of different components of the TOEFL test reveal significant differences between the experimental group and the control group in structure and written expression ($p = .007$) and in reading comprehension ($p = .023$) and no significant differences were found in listening comprehension ($p = .077$). This suggests the service learning experience provided EFL learners with more opportunities to improve their language in writing and grammatical structure as well as reading comprehension. It is understandable that the students showed improved performance in these language areas given the fact the service learning projects required that the students research their topics and write about them before they prepare their lesson plans and presentations.

As for the Oral test, significant differences were observed only in the following sub- skills: oral reading of a text ($p = .017$) and sentence completion task ($p = .028$) while no significant differences are observed in expressing opinions or preference. The fact that the students showed better performance in oral reading and sentence completion seems to support their results in the TOEFL. However, the fact that the students in the experimental group did not show significant improvement in expressing opinions and preferences can perhaps be attributed to the students culture where expressions of personal opinion or preference is not encouraged.

Based on the above discussion it can be concluded that the primary goal of improving language proficiency through service learning was achieved. Moreover, as indicated in the literature, service learning has the potential of enabling students to achieve other goals like problem solving critical thinking, engagement, interaction with the different cultures, building bridges with other demographic groups, tolerance, humility and appreciation of values of others (Minor, 2006, Angelova, 2006). Consequently, this research has confirmed this and that through students' engagement and exposure to meaningful experience that connected theoretical knowledge to practical application, the learners were able to transfer their language knowledge from the classroom to real-life experience and situations in

the community. In addition, the added value for the experimental group was in the preparation materials and implementing them in real life situations (service learning sites) rather than teaching their peers. This may be considered as the main difference between the control and the experimental groups.

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