

Service-Learning: Boldly Going Where EAL Students Haven't Gone Before

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Abstract

Service-learning is an experiential pedagogy which integrates curriculum and volunteer service through ongoing reflection. Research suggests that service-learning offers notable benefits for post-secondary English-as-an-additional-language (EAL) students. However, most of the researchers have studied EAL students within the United States; far fewer have examined EAL students in the Canadian context. This paper reports on a study of the impact of service-learning on EAL students at a Canadian university in British Columbia. A first-year service-learning elective has been offered at the university since Fall 2009. This course is taught by faculty from the ESL Department who have a Master's degree or equivalent in a related field. This study investigated the impact of the elective on EAL students' English proficiency. Data were collected from students through surveys, interviews, and journals. Additionally, the grade point averages (GPA's) of EAL students in first-year university English composition were examined, comparing those EAL students who took the service-learning elective (Group A) with those who did not (Group B). Grade analysis showed whereas Group B had a GPA of 2.15 on a 4.33 scale for first-year English composition, the subset of Group A who took first-year English composition in the semester immediately following service-learning achieved a GPA of 2.55. The results supported service-learning as an effective pedagogy for EAL students.

Background

The service-learning course that is the focus of this study is offered as a first-year credit-bearing elective at a university in a mid-sized city in British Columbia, Canada. Thirteen thousand students were registered at the university in 2013, including 1,570 international students from over 85 countries. From Fall 2009, when the service-learning course was first offered, to Fall 2013, 238 students registered for the course. Of these registrants, a high number were from Saudi Arabia, with significant numbers also from China, Japan, Russia, and Nigeria; most of these students had also taken at least one English-as-an-additional-language (EAL) course at the university. In order to register for the service-learning, the EAL students must have been placed at level four or higher in the EAL courses. Level four entry requires English proficiency at 5.5 with no band below 5.0 on IELTS or 71+ on iBT TOEFL. The course itself is carefully designed to integrate three essential criteria for service-learning: Curriculum objectives, service for local needs, and structured reflections. In addition to class time, this elective requires students to serve at local not-for-profit organizations and gives them opportunities to:

- accomplish course objectives by serving to meet local needs;
- engage in real-life, meaningful, practical experiences in community settings;
- engage in ongoing structured critical reflection;
- develop a sense of community and belonging;
- facilitate their own learning;
- develop work skills and acquire organizational discourse;
- build friendships between domestic and international students; and
- connect and share cultures.

The course runs every fall, winter, and summer semester. Students meet in class three hours each week for the entire semester; they also spend a minimum of 24 hours serving at one of 35 local not-for-profit organizations such as health care providers, seniors' centres, and social service agencies. Students submit their top four organization choices to the course instructor, who then matches the service needs of the organizations with the students' preferences and learning goals. Each semester, anywhere from eight to 13 organizations accept the service-learning students. Course assignments include reflective journals, a final paper or portfolio, and a final presentation.

Informal feedback from students, university staff, and placement supervisors suggested that the service-learning course has benefitted EAL students in a number of ways; however, research is limited regarding the impact of service-learning on EAL students in the Canadian context. Our research investigated to what extent service-learning helps EAL students improve their English proficiency, learn about Canadian culture and society, and become integrated into Canadian society. This paper focuses on the impact of service-learning on the English proficiency of EAL students.

Literature Review

Service-learning is a pedagogy built on an experiential learning approach to education, namely, the idea that people learn through doing (Dewey, 1916, 1938; Duncan & Kopperud, 2008; Eyster & Giles, 1999; Perren, 2013). Dewey, a pioneer of experiential education, recognized the significance of the interaction between education and life experience, and service-learning exemplifies his theories. According to Duncan and Kopperud (2008), service-learning is “a teaching and learning method that upholds a commitment to appreciating the assets of and serving the needs of a community partner while enhancing student learning and academic rigor through the practice of intentional reflective thinking and responsible civic action” (p. 4). The service, usually provided for not-for-profit organizations, can vary depending on the needs of an organization, be individual or group-based, and involve direct or indirect contact with the recipients of the service.

Furthermore, service-learning is supported by the philosophy underpinning the communicative approach to second-language learning. According to Canale and Swain (1980), communicative competence includes not only grammatical and sociolinguistic competence, but also strategic competence consisting of strategies to compensate for breakdowns in communication. Such “coping” strategies are thought most likely to be acquired through real-life experiences and in order for communicative competence to lead to communicative confidence,

the learner must be exposed to realistic communication situations. When learners speak and write in real-life situations and realize the extent of their second language skills, they are pushed to use the target language more precisely and accurately in an attempt to produce comprehensible output (Swain, 1985). As Andrew (2011b) asserted, having the opportunity to apply communicative strategies in real community contexts promotes learning of literacy practices. EAL learners who serve in English-speaking settings are exposed to authentic language in real-life communication situations. Investigating the impact of volunteering on adult EAL immigrants in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, Dudley (2007) concluded that volunteering in an English setting had the potential to enhance EAL learners' oral communication skills, and help them to integrate into the society of their host country.

Service-learning has been the subject of a substantial amount of research over the past two decades (Cress, Donahue, & Ehrlich, 2011). For example, while not necessarily including EAL students, two extensive research projects were conducted by Eyler and Giles (1999). Between 1993 and 1998, they interviewed or surveyed nearly 4,000 post-secondary students throughout the United States about their experiences with service-learning. They found that post-secondary students who participated in service-learning during their studies expressed more appreciation of other cultures, developed an increased sense of personal efficacy, and felt more connected to the community. Another large study which examined 22,000 post-secondary students in the United States revealed that service-learning had significant positive effects on academic performance as measured by grade point average, writing skills, and critical thinking skills (Astin et al., 2006). These studies, it must be noted, focused on English-speaking American students studying within the United States.

In recent years, service-learning has attracted interest from educators and researchers engaged in the practice of teaching Spanish as a second language (Grabois, 2007; Hellebrandt, Arries, & Varona, 2004; Pak, 2007). The pedagogy's success in Spanish education has helped prompt interest in applying service-learning to EAL instruction, and the past few years have witnessed some growth in the quantity and quality of research in this field (Wurr, 2013). In 2013, the *TESOL Journal* published a special issue entitled "Engaged Teaching and Learning: Service-learning, Civic Literacy, and TESOL." In one of the featured articles, Askildson, Cahill Kelly, and Snyder Mick (2013) reported the results of their study of 36 international students from 12 developing countries in an eight-week immersion program that integrated service-learning (two days a week) and English language development (three days a week) in the United States. They found that the students gained 72 points on average between their pre- and post- tests of the paper-based TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). This outcome tripled the predicted gain based on a model described by Wilson (1987) and Hastings (2003) in which a typical intensive language program yields an average of one point gain for 10 hours of classroom instruction. This study (Askildson et al., 2013) found exceptional outcomes largely due to the "co-curricular service-learning and community engagement components" (p. 424).

Thus far, research suggests that service-learning offers notable benefits to post-secondary EAL students (Askildson et al., 2013; Minor, 2002; Steinke, 2009; Whittig & Hale, 2007; Wurr, 2002). However, most of the research has focused on EAL students studying within the United States; far less has examined EAL students in the Canadian context (Beck & Simpson, 1993;

Dudley, 2007; Hummel, 2013). Therefore, this study based in British Columbia, Canada attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1) How do EAL students perceive the impact of service-learning on the development of their English proficiency?
- 2) Is there a relationship between service-learning and EAL students' performance in first-year university English composition?

Methodology

This study used a mixed methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative research methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The quantitative method was used to analyze the survey results regarding the impact of service-learning on the development of the students' English language proficiency (see Appendix A). Archival data of students' grades was also analyzed quantitatively. The qualitative method was used with student interviews (see Appendix B) and journals; grounded theory (Palys & Atchison, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 2008) was employed to find themes related to language proficiency in interview transcripts and student journals. Coding was implemented using colors to categorize students' reflections on the course impact on the development of their language skills. Each categorized reflection was compared with others for similarities and differences. The design within the mixed methods approach was explanatory, and the purpose of combining the methods was to gain as comprehensive a picture as possible of the impact the service-learning course had on the EAL students.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection began after approval from the Human Ethics Review Board of the researcher's university. Vovici (currently known as Verint), a secure web-based survey tool and data storage program, was selected for the online survey, while a paper copy of the same questions was provided to those students contacted in class at the end of a semester. Interview questions were constructed in consultation with the service-learning course developer. One-on-one interviews with students lasting 30-60 minutes were conducted on campus by a researcher who was not the students' instructor. The majority of the interviews took place during the final two weeks of the course. Subsequently, all interviewees were emailed a copy of the related interview transcript for subject checks. In addition, upon request, the university's Registrar's Office provided archival data on the grades of EAL students in first-year university English composition. Finally, journals were collected at the end of the semester from students who gave their informed consent. The survey comments, interview transcripts, and journals were read and re-read to detect themes and sub-themes related to student perceptions of the impact of service-learning on their language proficiency.

Participants

For this study, EAL students are defined as those who have taken at least one EAL course at the university. The 108 EAL students who took the service-learning course between Fall 2009 and Winter 2012 were invited via email to participate in the survey. The email invitation explained

the purpose of the study and assured confidentiality. Thirty-three students completed the survey, for a 31% completion rate.

Paper versions of the survey were also administered in-person to the Summer 2012, Fall 2012, and Winter 2013 service-learning classes. Fourteen students from the Summer 2012 class were asked to complete the survey at home. However, only four of these 14 students returned their surveys, for a completion rate of 29%. In the Fall 2012 and Winter 2013 classes, the instructors permitted students to complete the surveys in class. Care was taken to have the surveys administered by researchers, not the class instructors, and confidentiality of participation was assured. Students were informed in writing that pseudonyms would be used in all research reports. The in-class surveys elicited a 100% completion rate of those present.

In all, 60 survey responses were received, representing 40% of the target group. Twenty-eight percent of the survey respondents were 25 years of age or older when enrolled in the service-learning course. Forty-three percent were female, and 57% male. Fifty-two percent were Saudi Arabian, 20% Chinese, 15% Japanese, and 13% from other countries. Eleven students surveyed agreed to be interviewed: one female and four males from Saudi Arabia, two females and one male from China, one female and one male from Japan, and one male from Ukraine. Sixteen students, eight from Winter 2013 and eight from Fall 2013, consented to their journals being used in the research. Seven of these journals were submitted by students from China, six from Saudi Arabia, two from Japan, and one from Ukraine. It is important to note that those students who participated in the research may not be representative of the entire EAL population in the service-learning course.

Results and Discussion

This section describes the results of analysis of data collected from the surveys, interviews, student journals, and student academic records. The goal is to address the research questions described earlier.

Students' Feedback on Their English Proficiency

What were students' perceptions of the impact of service-learning on their development of English proficiency? A theme that emerged from interviewing the students, studying their reflective journals, and survey comments is that the students felt the service-learning course helped them to improve their English proficiency, in particular their listening and speaking skills. The service experiences afforded them a valuable opportunity to practice listening and speaking in English. Students who worked with seniors credited the elderly service recipients with helping them to improve their English listening skills. For example, Hakim (Saudi Arabia) said that the seniors he worked with would "forget you in five minutes and have to ask for your name again." For this reason, they told him the same stories every day. This repetition helped him to understand their stories more deeply. Grace (China), who served at a seniors' centre, wrote in her journal, "Sometimes, the seniors would forget something they just talking before, so I need to listen for them and think what they need to do." Six of the 11 interviewees specifically mentioned improved English listening skills as a benefit of the course. These six all happened to be at a lower level of English proficiency.

Students also credited in-class interaction with peers and instructors in the service-learning course for helping them develop English listening and speaking skills. For example, Terry (China) wrote in her journal, “discussion with classmates [is] one of the best ways to get new knowledge directly. If you have any confusion about the knowledge your classmates can teach you with their own understanding. That’s easier than the teacher’s professional explanation.” One of the themes that became apparent from analyzing the surveys and interviews is that students aged 25 years or older upon enrolment in the service-learning course expressed the opinion that class discussions were helpful in improving their English listening skills. In his interview, Sadiq (Saudi Arabia), a more mature student with a wife and young daughter, explained that one of the reasons he had enrolled in the service-learning course was to discuss his service experiences: “In this course, I could talk about volunteering and people listened to me and about what I have done.”

Learning new vocabulary was another benefit mentioned by a few students. For instance, students who served at a health care organization mentioned learning new words like wheelchairs, bandage, and heart attack. Shiori (Japan), who served at an elementary school, wrote in her journal:

In music class, there are a lot of terms for music which I had no idea; however, I learn them naturally because I have to help students when they have questions. In addition, when students are asked spelling or definitions of words in reading class, I automatically listen to a teacher very carefully how she explains to students. I learn how to teach by listening to teachers. Both of them give me great opportunities to learn English vocabulary.

In nearly every interview and journal, students mentioned how the service and class activities had pushed them to speak. As Momoko (Japan) explained in her interview, “To be honest, I don’t like to talk a lot—not even in Japanese! But volunteering, I have to talk. I have to communicate in class too—to survive.” Ashar (Saudi Arabia), who served at a relief centre, wrote in his journal, “Most of the people there correct our mistakes in English language, and help us to improve and develop this language.”

In the interviews and journals, opinions were varied regarding how the service-learning course impacted their English writing skills. Hakim (Saudi Arabia), for example, said, “The course helped my writing improve—and it was personal writing, and that was different from writing done in other courses, and it was good.” Jaspar (Saudi Arabia) wrote in his journal, “Talking about the course I learned a lot. I did my first research. I learned the deference (sic) between qualitative and quantitative research. I learned how to write APA.” Sadiq (Saudi Arabia), a third-year student who had completed first-year university English composition two years earlier, said the review of APA helped him “get back” his writing skills. On the other hand, Clarence (China) said he still had more questions about English grammar. Ren (Japan) complained that the instructor was too easy on their grammar: “[the instructor] assigned the journal 3-4 times with specific topics. She gave me a high mark every time! For international students, we have grammatical mistakes, but she should point out more mistakes—be tougher.” As Figure 1 shows, only 38% of the respondents agreed that the service positively impacted their writing skills. However, 81% of the survey respondents agreed to varying extents that the

reflective journals helped them improve their English writing skills, including 37% who strongly agreed. Eighty-one percent also agreed to varying extents that the final paper or portfolio helped them improve their English writing skills, including 47% who strongly agreed.

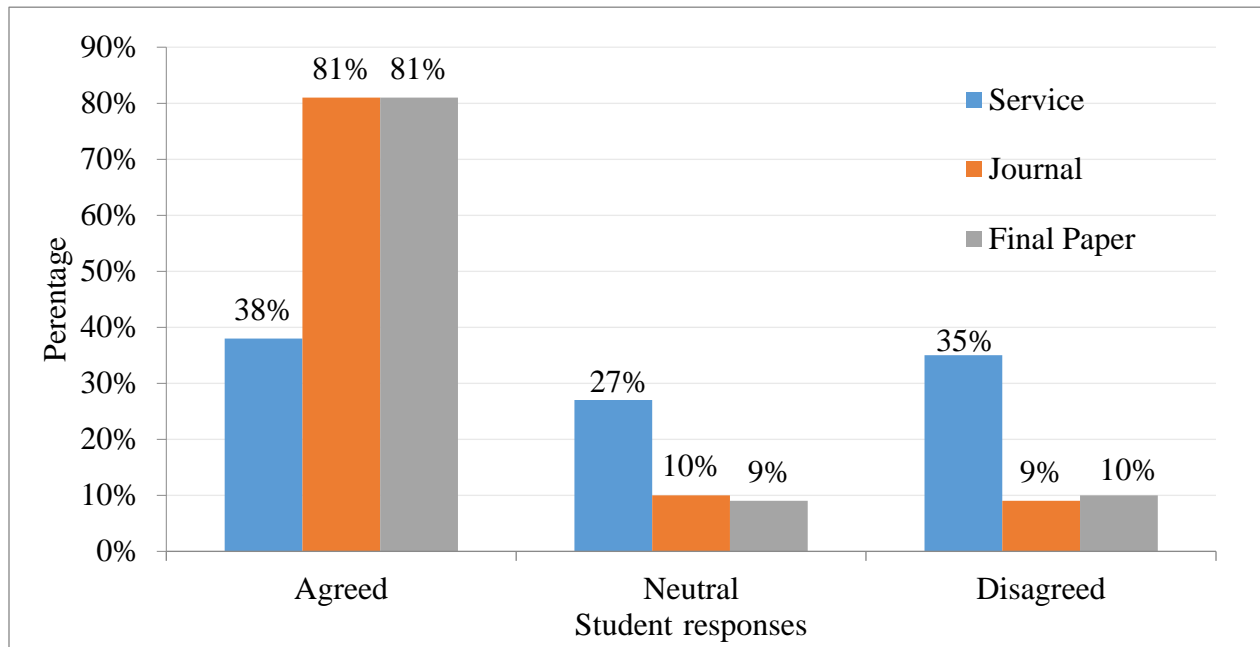


Figure 1. Survey responses to how service-learning helped EAL students' writing proficiency

Analysis of Archival Data

The second research question asked whether there is a relationship between service-learning and EAL students' performance in first-year university English composition. Upon request, the university's Registrar's Office provided the final grades that EAL students received in their first attempt at first-year English composition. The "comparison group" consisted of 878 students who enrolled between January 2010 and April 2013 in at least one EAL course at the university and then attempted first-year English composition without ever having taken the service-learning course. Of the 878 students, 13% withdrew, 6% failed, and 4% received DNC's (did not complete). Their average grade in first-year English composition, factoring in the "fails" but not the "DNC's", was 2.15 on a scale of 4.33, equivalent to the letter grade "C."

There turned out to be four distinct subsets of EAL students who had taken both the service-learning course and first-year English composition (see Figure 2). Students varied in the sequencing of the service-learning course and first-year English composition and in the length of time between completing the service-learning course and enrolling in first-year English composition. Figure 2 summarizes the differences in grades between the comparison group and various subsets.

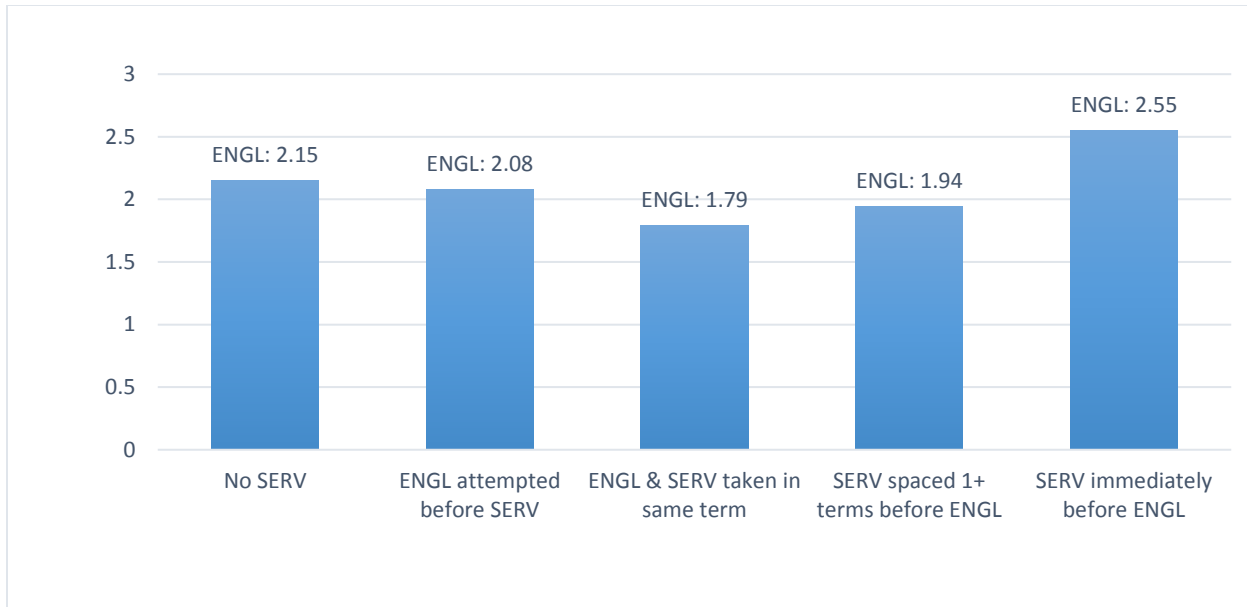


Figure 2. Average grades on a 4.33 scale in students' first attempts at English composition

The results suggest that taking the service-learning course immediately before first-year English composition has a positive impact on EAL students' English writing skills. The failure rate for students who completed the service-learning course right before taking first-year English composition was dramatically lower (0%) than for the comparison group (6%) (see above).

Conclusion

This study shows that the service-learning course helped the EAL students improve their English proficiency. As Figure 3 shows, most of the surveyed students agreed that various components of the service-learning course helped them to improve their English.

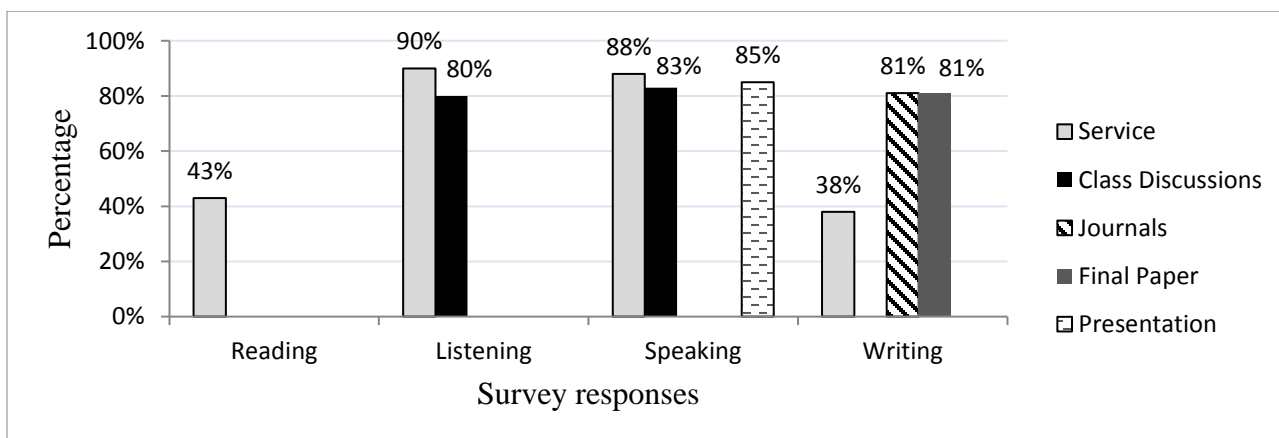


Figure 3. Percentage of students who perceived their English proficiency improvement because of the service-learning course

This study supports the use of service-learning to improve EAL students' writing skills. As other research has shown (Andrew, 2011a; Perren, 2013), students encounter words that they would never normally find inside a university classroom. This boosts their vocabulary, giving them a richer repertoire of words to use in future speech and writing. The reflective nature of journaling required by the course is a type of personal writing, less commonly practiced in a traditional academic environment. This helps students broaden their writing skills in different genres. The final paper, for which students are taught APA citation style and research strategies, helps students in other university courses. Archival data, comparing the grades in first-year university English composition of service-learning EAL students with those of EAL students who never took the service-learning course, suggests that taking service-learning in the semester immediately before first-year English composition can help EAL students perform better in first-year English composition (see Figure 2 above). Although the results must be interpreted with caution, failure rates in first-year English composition, which are on average 6% for EAL students at the university, were 0% for this sub-set of service-learning students.

The study supports the use of service-learning to help EAL students improve their English listening skills. Some interviewees credited the slower rates of speech used by both the course instructor and some elderly service recipients as helpful.

Finally, this study supports the use of service-learning to improve the English speaking skills of EAL students. Most of the survey respondents agreed that the service-learning course enhanced their English speaking skills. As well, most of the students acknowledged class discussions and presentations as having helped develop their English speaking skills. Older students were especially appreciative of the service-learning opportunities to improve their English, perhaps because these students were more likely to live with other speakers of their native language. From the interviews, it seemed that the students who lived in homestays tended to have so much exposure to English that they were less appreciative of the benefits of the service-learning course. As the university's Homestay Coordinator verbally confirmed, the EAL students who participate in homestays are generally younger than 25 years old.

Considering the benefits of the communicative approach to language acquisition and the positive effects of service-learning on academic performance and feelings of community connectedness, service-learning would appear to be a logical fit for international students studying in English-speaking countries. The students connect with a community of native English speakers outside of the classroom and, through these connections, boost their confidence in using English, expand their vocabulary, and improve their oral proficiency. The writing tasks at their service organizations and assignments in the course such as reflective journals, final papers, and presentations appear to improve their performance in first-year English composition. As EAL students benefit personally, psychologically, and socially from their service-learning involvement, their language acquisition benefits as well.

Limitations and Future Research

It is important to note the limitations of this study. First, this study was conducted at a mid-sized comprehensive post-secondary institution in British Columbia. It may not be possible to generalize the findings to different sized communities or different locales. It is important to note

that this study was conducted on an elective course open to all students. Also, those students who enjoyed the course more may have been more likely to respond to the survey, participate in interviews, and share their journals. Furthermore, in their journals, interviews and survey responses, the students might have been trying to please the instructors or researchers, and therefore gave what they believed would be desired answers. In addition, all the data collection methods were in English, and the students might not have fully understood all the survey questions. In regards to the archival data, there may have been lurking variables such as life circumstances and other educational factors that influenced students' performance in first-year university English composition. Finally, the sample sizes were limited, especially when split into sub-groups.

Since the pool of subjects for this study is small, it is recommended that data continue to be gathered and analyzed. It is important to hear from the EAL students themselves (Whittig & Hale, 2007), and reflective journals allow researchers to learn directly from students. These journals can be examined in at least two ways. In this study, they were treated as a resource, but they can also be used as a research topic to analyze the development of English writing skills. Therefore, all reflective journals, to which students give consent, should be archived for future research. Future studies can gauge the benefits of service-learning by setting up comparison groups using random assignment of students to a service-learning section of a required course. There is also a need for longitudinal research to find the impact of service-learning on EAL students. As this research focused on EAL students with higher levels of language proficiency, future research could include students with lower levels of language proficiency. Research could be expanded to look not only at the impact of service-learning on English proficiency over time, but also at students' retention at university, career paths, and socio-cultural development. Finally, future research must also include the perspectives of organization supervisors and community partners.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions for SERV 1000 Students

1. What is your country of origin?
2. What is your mother tongue (first language you learned)?
3. What is your gender? Female Male
4. What is or was your program of study at the university? Bachelor of Business Administration / Bachelor of Tourism Management / Bachelor of Science / Other (please specify)
5. During SERV 1000, with which organization did you do your volunteer placement?
6. Approximately how many English-speaking Canadians did you meet through your SERV 1000 volunteer placement? Staff members? Volunteers? Clients (people who received service from the organization)?
7. Besides earning university credits, what, if anything, do you believe you got out of taking SERV 1000 (check all that apply)? a) made new English-speaking Canadian friends b) gained Canadian experience c) helped others d) improved the community e) enlarged network of contacts f) gained a better understanding of Canada and Canadians g) learned new skills i) had fun h) became a better citizen of the world j) other
8. Since the end of SERV 1000, have you kept in touch with any English-speaking people you met through your volunteer placement? No Yes
9. If you answered yes to #8, how have you mainly kept in touch? Check all that apply: Texting / Phone Calls / In-person visits / Facebook / Tweeting / E-mail
10. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements [scale of 1 to 7]:
The following SERV 1000 course assignments and in-class activities helped me to improve my English language skills
The volunteer placement helped me to improve my English writing skills.
The volunteer placement helped me to improve my English speaking skills.
The volunteer placement helped me to improve my English listening skills.
The volunteer placement helped me to improve my English reading skills.
11. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements [scale of 1 to 7]:
“The following SERV 1000 course assignments and in-class activities helped me to improve my English language skills:
The SERV 1000 journals helped me to improve my English writing skills.
The SERV 1000 class discussions helped me to improve my English speaking skills.
The SERV 1000 class discussions helped me to improve my English listening skills.
The SERV 1000 presentation helped me to improve my English speaking skills.
The SERV 1000 final paper or portfolio helped me to improve my English writing skills.
12. Comments:
Thank you for your participation.

Appendix B

Interview Guide for Former SERV 1000 Students

1. Tell me about your background – where did you grow up, how long have you been in Canada, and what have you been studying at university?
2. What prompted you to enroll in SERV 1000?
3. Where did you do your volunteer placement?
4. Describe the typical duties you did at your placement?
5. Were you provided any orientation and training? If so, how many hours?
6. Since completing SERV 1000, have you continued to volunteer for this same organization? If so, how many hours per month and have your duties changed?
7. In the 12-month period before registering in SERV 1000, about how many hours per month were you able to volunteer? If any hours, where did you volunteer, and what duties did you typically perform?
8. While taking SERV 1000, did you begin or continue volunteering at another agency (not your placement)? If so, about how many hours per month were you able to volunteer? Where did you volunteer, and what duties did you typically perform?
9. Since completing SERV 1000, have you begun or continued volunteering at another organization (not your placement)? If so, about how many hours per month were you able to volunteer? Where did you volunteer, and what duties did you typically perform?
10. Did SERV 1000 affect your understanding of Canada and Canadian culture? If so, how?
11. Did SERV 1000 help your English proficiency skills? If so, how?
12. Did your contributions to your volunteer placement help make a difference to the organization? If so, how?
13. Did your volunteer placement give you any kind of award or certificate?
14. Do you keep in touch with any of the people you met at your volunteer placement? If so, how many people do you stay in touch with and primarily through what format (in-person, e-mail, telephone, Facebook, Twitter)?
15. Besides university credits, what else, if anything, do you feel you got out of SERV 1000?
16. Are there any other comments, suggestions, or questions you would like us to consider for SERV 1000 overall? Please explain.



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