PROMOTING CITIZEN RESPONSIBILITY AND FLUENCY IN BENINESE EFL CLASSES USING SERVICE LEARNING

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Abstract
English language teaching and learning in Beninese Secondary Schools is much more examination-oriented than meaning acquisition-oriented. Real world issues and human values are not fully promoted as teachers hardly prepare the next generation for a lifelong commitment to productive citizenship. This study suggests the use of service learning to promote citizenship as well as to build fluency in EFL classes. The methods used during the investigation have considered introducing, experimenting and evaluating the proposed model throughout four regions in Benin Republic. The results show that the implementation of service learning has made a significant impact on learners. 97% among the participant EFL teachers acknowledged the value of the use of meaningful contexts in EFL learning.

Keywords: Service learning, human values, fluency, EFL classes, citizenship

Résumé
L’enseignement et l’apprentissage de l’anglais dans les collèges au Benin est beaucoup plus axé sur l’examen que sur les réalités de la vie. Les problèmes du monde concret et les valeurs humaines ne sont pas mis en avant et les enseignants préparent difficilement la prochaine génération à un engagement à long terme en faveur d’une citoyenneté productive. Cette étude suggère l’utilisation de l’apprentissage par le volontariat pour promouvoir la citoyenneté ainsi que pour améliorer l’expression orale en anglais langue étrangère. Les méthodes utilisées au cours de l’enquête ont consisté à introduire, expérimenter et évaluer le modèle dans quatre villes de la République du Bénin. Les résultats ont démontré que la mise en œuvre de l’apprentissage par le service communautaire a eu un impact significatif sur les apprenants. 97% des enseignants participants ont reconnu l’importance de l’utilisation de contextes significatifs dans l’exécution de l’approche.

Mots Clés: volontariat, valeurs humaines, expression orale, anglais langue étrangère (ALE), citoyenneté.
1. Introduction

1.1. Research Rationale

Benin National Teachers of English Association with the support of the U.S Embassy Cotonou has recently organized four workshops on service learning in four towns in the country: Aplahoue, Bohicon, Glazoue and Pobe. Service learning involves students going out into their communities and using that which they learn in class to help people, and bringing that which they learn in their community service back into the classroom to enhance their learning (Lieberman & Miller 2001, p14). Service learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility and as a result, strengthen communities. The main goal of the training is to raise participant teachers’ awareness on the importance of service learning and how to introduce the model into their daily teaching so as to promote citizenship as well as to foster fluency in EFL classes. The researchers happened to be part of the facilitation team and as teacher-researchers, we set out to solve two common problems found in many parts of the country, which was that the curriculum used was not sufficient to develop students’ communicative abilities, something which we highly want to improve. We also wanted to encourage volunteering spirit and citizen engagement in the country. Young people are the future generation. The actions of ordinary citizens are more likely to affect others across the country and even beyond. So we explore ways of using service learning as a means of promoting citizenship and evaluating participant beliefs about service learning in EFL classes in the four regions. The English language has no fixed subject matter, and as such the teacher of English could bring real world issues into the classroom, for students come to class expecting to have fun and be engaged in meaningful discussions. The role and function of higher education is to prepare the next generation for a lifelong commitment to productive citizenship (Howard et al; 1999, 41). This paper has attempted to examine EFL teachers and students’ appraisal of the introduction of lesson-based service learning in EFL classes and how EFL teachers can teach by creating meaningful contexts for the language learner by drawing out and cultivating human values.

1.2. Objectives of the Study and Research Questions

EFL teachers must teach differently and have greater success than ever before. In order to teach better, teachers have, according to Lieberman et al. (2001), to be at the centre of all efforts to reform and improve schools. This is the objective of this study. It is to explore ways to develop citizen responsibility and fluency in Beninese EFL classes using Service Learning. To reach this, the following three research questions have been considered:
• What meaning do the participating instructors make of the use of service learning in EFL Classes?
• What do the participating students think of the service learning approach?
• Is there a relationship between the implementation of Service Learning based on the learner-centered teaching activities and instructional techniques and the students’ fluency?

1.3. A Review of Literature

As language teachers, we all know that to learn a language well, learners need meaningful contexts. Facts and skills that are taught in isolation and not connected to something meaningful cannot be remembered without considerable practice and rehearsal. Second language classroom activities that are meaningful create an ideal learning opportunity for second language students to learn more information in a shorter time, with less effort. (Christison 1999, p.23). Latulippe (1999) suggests that wherever possible, students should be placed in context-rich situations. This point does not need belaboring. But there is another need that young learners have, especially at school level, which hasn't received much attention in the field of second and foreign language learning. The need is referred to as the development of human values. Service-learning is ideal for second and foreign language teaching because it meets the learners’ needs and creates meaningful contexts for the language learner and it draws out and cultivates human values (Berry et al, 1999, p.13). Along with the provision of meaningful contexts for language learning, service-learning has the added benefit of fostering students' personal growth. Service-learning makes learners think more and more about needy people (Akpovi 2018). Service learning also makes learners plan the future considering poor and needy people and gives a different point of view. It makes learners grow in spirit and mind and in their way of seeing things. This is a responsibility that until fairly recently many higher learning institutions took very seriously. As Mithra (2000) asserts, the role and function of schools were earlier seen as integral to the processes of social engineering, developing in students critical faculties, creative potential and initiative towards applying these to the tasks of freeing people from material want and intellectual deprivation (Berry & Chisholm 1999, p.12). Today there is a broadening concern for citizen responsibility. There is a growing number of educators who, like Howard (1999) believe that foremost among the purposes of higher education is that of giving learners the skills and breadth of knowledge to think deeply about the structures of their society and to appropriate values which must govern their personal and professional lives (p.17). And there are even those, like Louis (2005), who insists that preparing the next generation for a lifelong commitment to productive citizenship is the most important challenge.
facing educators and communities at the local, regional, national, and global levels.

The introduction of service-learning into ESL and EFL programs has revitalized its curriculum and made a significant impact on students. Knowles (1989) advocates that students learn best when they are committed, when the topic the learning session is concerned with is of immediate relevance, which means it can be applied right away in their personal and professional lives. Students learn best when they are doing. They learn more when they are engaged in learning for a purpose. Everything in the literature on pedagogy and how students learn supports using Service Learning. Successful language learning entails learner motivation, cooperation and it enables learners to assume responsibility for their own learning. This is one of the main objectives of education. In fact, it aims at linking the learners’ socio-cultural environment to the classroom experience so as to motivate them to become true agents of change and development in their respective communities.

2. Data for the Study

In order to understand teachers’ beliefs and views about Service Learning, one Service Learning ‘roadshow’ was conducted in each selected region in the academic year 2017-2018. Four towns were selected in total: Pobe, Aplahoue, Bohicon and Glazoue. During the ‘roadshow’ the Service Learning model was explained and its implementation elaborated on. A questionnaire was developed and distributed to 160 participant teachers (Forty respondent teachers per region) who attended Service Learning ‘roadshow’. The 160 participant teachers belong to Beninese Teachers of English Association. Table 1 provides more details on the participant teachers’ characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pobe</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aplahoue</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>09</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bohicon</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glazoue</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participant teachers with the facilitators made a list of community needs and decided on some actual service activities that can be carried out per town. The participants matched the service activities to the learning situations in the curriculum. They expanded to include a reflection activity in the learning
situation. The teachers tried to find out how the model could be translated into a lesson and were then given the opportunity to plan a lesson incorporating the solution of one community needs. See below more detailed information about each selected town, community needs and activities planned.

### Town: A

**Community Needs**: How to prevent erosion in the village?  
**Solution**: Planting trees  
**Curriculum**: Learning situation two of “Seconde”: “The Environment”  
**Procedure**
- Find some seeds with the students that they sow to grow baby trees/seedling  
- Bring the seedling to the village where the erosion is occurring and then the students and the community will plant the trees together  
- Raise awareness in the village to help fill in eroded areas with sand from other places  
- Raise awareness not to cut trees everywhere

### Town: B

**Community Needs**: Avoid catching STDs  
**Curriculum**: Learning situation 1 – Youth Problems, Sequence 1 – STDs  
**Solution**: Help the community know about dangerous sexual activities and their consequences  
**Procedure**
- Lead students to hospital to visit infected people and see their conditions  
- Students discuss with doctors and patients to get more information  
- Students get advice from doctors and patients  
- After coming back, students will write articles to build awareness in their classmates about STDs  
- Students will have an appointment with the chief of the village in order to organize a meeting with the villagers  
- During the meeting the students will share the causes, symptoms, prevention and consequences of STDs.

### Town: C

**Community needs**: Raise awareness about Sexually Transmitted Diseases  
**Curriculum**: Learning Situation 1: Sexually Transmitted Diseases  
**Solution**: Students make posters to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS  
**Procedure**
Promoting citizen responsibility and fluency in Beninese EFL classes using service learning

- ‘Troisième’ students visit ‘quatrième’ students in class sessions to present their posters
- ‘Troisième’ students go to the nearby hospital to present posters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Town: D</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community Needs:</strong> Clean environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Solution:</strong> Collecting litter from the hospital grounds, like plastic bags and other waste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Curriculum</strong> – Learning situation ‘two’ in the Second textbook “The Environment”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Procedure:</strong> Send students to the hospital to help raise awareness and clean the hospital ground</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Results

This part pinpoints the outcomes of the study. It is divided into two subsections: participant teachers’ meaning of the introduction and experiment of the model in EFL classes and learners’ feedbacks on the model.

3.1 Participant Teachers’ Meaning of Service Learning.

More than 99% of the respondents agreed that a well implemented service learning method has benefited teachers, students, and communities. Participants believed that Service Learning gave them a sense of achievement and satisfaction. The model has encouraged interactive teaching methods and reciprocal learning and added new insights and dimensions to class discussions. It also promotes the use of authentic learning tasks. Some of the participants even went further by opining that Service Learning has promoted students' active learning; engaged students with different learning styles and developed students' civic and leadership skills as well as encouraged highly motivated and engaged students. Teacher Gbetoho asserts:

*People who have knowledge but no action to help others never possess power.*

*The combination of learning and service is a powerful methodology in EFL programs and promotes citizenship.*

Teachers reported that they had been satisfied with the approach since the model provided them with different activities to engage in. These activities not only helped students to increase their English knowledge through gaining valuable insights but also contributed to learners’ community engagement. Respondents opine that Service Learning would please communities and enable teachers to be appreciated by communities. The majority of respondent teachers asserted that a well implemented Service Learning would also benefit the students. Students would thereafter be able to develop independence, a sense of responsibility and
self-esteem. However, 66% of respondents are afraid of always using the model in that there are many obstacles. Here are some excerpts from the respondent teachers which point out the challenges:

"Teaching examination-oriented activities make me feel guilty all the time. I wish I had more time for more interactive activities using service learning, but no, I don’t have time. We do not have time." (Agbolossou)

"I have always wanted to do something fun and creative. But I don’t think my headmaster will like [it]. We have to focus on drilling, my students are very weak." (Gbeto)

"Fun learning? For students who are not in examination classes, yes; not for candidates. Definitely not for ‘Troisième’ and ‘Terminale’; too much work, expectations are high. We are pressured under the syllabus." (Dossou)

The respondents point to a number of challenges that the implementation of the approach faces which include time constraints, curriculum and student background. Beninese secondary school classrooms are tightly regimented by a timetable and a number of factors that can constrain the experimental sessions with the Service Learning. These factors are related to a number of internal and external elements: teachers’ knowledge about the Service Learning pedagogy, current school pedagogical practices, availability of learning resources and study materials; students, skills and knowledge as well as their perception about the target language; and assessment procedures used to evaluate learner-centered teaching method. A successful implementation of the model also depends on the teacher’s mastery of how to design effective activities or tasks. Despite these challenges, the majority of the participants believe that the Service Learning model can solve many problems in the country in terms of civics and learners’ fluency.

3.1 Learners’ Benefits from the Approach

The approach has positively impacted students. Students have developed many skills, especially in the areas of communication, collaboration, and leadership skills. They got opportunities to act on their values and beliefs of community engagement. The model has increased students understanding of the class topics and students gain hands-on experience topics. They learn more about social issues and their root causes. The approach develops critical thinking and problem-solving skills in participant learners and they learn more about social issues and their root causes. The model has made the students more aware of targeting fluency in a systematic way. 73.4% of the students have improved self-confidence after the implementation of the approach, even among those who were generally
Promoting citizen responsibility and fluency in Beninese EFL classes using service learning

Anxiety as an affective state is defined as an uncomfortable emotional state in which one perceives danger, feels powerless, and experiences tension in the face of an expected danger (Blau, 1955). The findings suggest that the use of the model has alleviated learners’ anxiety. In general, students’ responses indicated that the activities that relate to the students on a personal level result in the most comfort. The study showed that increased exposure over time to many learner-centered activities and techniques brings about a decrease in anxiety (Egounléti, 2008). Several activities and techniques meet with mixed reactions even after the students have had considerable experience with them, and students’ reactions vary at different stages of proficiency. Through the experimentation, real-life problems can be used to motivate students, to challenge them to think deeply about meaningful contents. The approach has also made learners, teachers and communities work collaboratively. In addition to that, learners have been directed towards discussions with professionals in the communities. Students have tested out their skills, interests, and values in potential career paths, or fields of interest and they had the opportunity to connect with students, professionals and community members whom they learned from.

We were surprised at how readily students embraced self-evaluation and how they naturally fed information back to each other about their performance. The research project has not just impacted participant students, but has also had a positive wash back effect on other areas. Firstly, it has greatly influenced teaching styles, which have become more student-centred and focused on students being more aware of their learning. The project has made us more aware of targeting fluency in a systematic way. The researchers could have dug deeper and looked at speech rates, non-lexical fillers and interjections, and setting more effective criteria to establish a more student-centred approach. In future research projects, we would like to explore technology, in particular speech recognition technology, and also apps that measure students’ oral speaking in service learning.

4. Discussion

Beninese National Philosophy of Education encompasses the ideals of a national citizenry whose members are wholesome and balanced in all dimensions of human development, and who can contribute to the well-being of fellow members and to the nation. The school curriculum was thus designed towards achieving these ideals. One of the premises of this curriculum is that the teaching and learning process should allow for developmental growth of students in both the affective and non-affective dimensions of human development. This is clearly visible in the curriculum prescriptions at the primary and secondary school levels where teachers are to adopt a student-centered pedagogy in the classroom. In fact,
this approach called Competency-based Approach (CBA) is based on constructivism, a theory which states that the learner is the main actor in the building of knowledge, and the cognitivist theory of representation which selects, structures the information and guides the behavior. It focuses on acquiring life-coping skills while developing the language to perform it, by preparing and equipping learners with the qualities and abilities of a responsible citizen fully aware of his/her role in the community (Patinvoh-Agbayahoun2011). In other words, for effective learning to take place, students need to know that what they are studying will improve their lives. Hence, the promotion of Service Learning which stands the chance of giving a meaning to the learning by showing them what they are learning at school is for, in the active life; by putting a stress on the competencies that the learners must master, rather than on what the teacher teaches alone (Gelmon 2001).

Language learning/teaching entails five major components - students, teachers, teaching approaches, teaching materials, and evaluation. Conventionally, the instructor in the teacher-centered model determines what the teaching materials will be and tries to transmit them in one way or another. The test of learning is dependent heavily on the students’ ability to memorize and produce the data at stated intervals. In this case, the students’ task is to listen, remember, and then give evidence that they have recorded the materials in their minds. Students, in the EFL context, focus on memorizing vocabulary, phrases, grammatical rules, and sentence structure, but they have difficulties applying the target language to their real life communication. The teacher-centered model in language classrooms has been questioned in educational settings. One way to modify this traditional pattern of teaching/learning is to give students more responsibility for learning. Some educators have maintained that the teacher at best can only establish an atmosphere for learning; the student must learn as a result of individual efforts (Patinvoh-Agbayahoun2011). Teachers need to encourage students to rely more on themselves and less on the teacher. Students should be self-motivated with an inquiring nature (Liu, 2007). A number of studies reveal that motivation, engagement and attitude are closely related to achievement in language learning (Gardner and Lambert, 1972).

School is like home in the educational sense of the word. School as an appendix of family should not tolerate counter values but keep learners from steadily being transformed into streets dwellers. School should be an instrument of development, a manpower builder of the development of the nation and a leadership skills builder. EFL teachers are called upon their responsibilities of promoting civics, ethics and moral values among learners to prepare them for good governance, good citizenship and leadership, and motivate them to become true agents of change and development in the community. This sort of program can really put an
extra burden on teachers, [about seventy percent (70%) of the teaching force in Benin is untrained] (Lanmantchion 2016) for it assigns them a new profile just as complex as diverse and requires an acute imagination, creativity, and flexibility difficult to face by an untrained teacher. These multiple demands imposed on him/her require adequate training in many areas including updated pedagogical issues in language teaching/learning, in adolescent psychology, school practice, the world we live in etc. However, it has been demonstrated in this field that no such a program can be effective if capacities are not built in teachers to promote new ways of performing their professional roles. There is then an urgent need to reinforce teachers’ capacity in the teaching of English as a foreign language through the command of time management tools, etc. Beninese EFL teachers need to adjust their craft and expand their teaching toolkit so that they might be able to meet new challenges and educate students to their fullest potential (Carter et al; 2001).

Conclusion

This study explored ways to develop citizen responsibility and fluency in Beninese EFL classes using Service Learning in four regions in Benin Republic. The research has confirmed that effective teaching should create the need to learn by means of significant activities which, in turn, will activate motivation and thereby create an effective learning setting (Brown, 2001). Motivation coupled with the taking into account of learners’ needs is indispensable to ensure success in EFL learning. As a teacher of English, one should be more inclined to use methodologies which expose students to meaningful contents and topics, within the scope of their fields of study, so that students might feel they are not only learning English just to sit for examinations, but also that they are learning a lot through English, and more importantly for short and long-term life goals.

References


