ENHANCING LEARNERS' ENGLISH LANGUGE PROFICIENCY THROUGH SERVICE LEARNING: AN INVESTIGATION ON BRAC UNIVERSITY PERSPECTIVE

Md. Mahbubur Rahman
Centre for Languages
BRAC University, 66 Mohakhali
Dhaka-1212, Bangladesh
email: mahbubur@bracu.ac.bd

ABSTRACT

Service Learning concept shows the positive impacts on the active engagement of English language teachers as well as learners in creating appropriate scope for making a learning community both inside and outside the classroom. The students are perfectly connected to community service with the direct use of their integrated language skills unlike the traditional classroom teaching. Considering that fact, learners are put in real life situations to experience language skills so that instead of learning English, the learners have the scope for language acquisition. With a view to ensuring that principle, BRAC University has incorporated Starboard activity, English Week observance etc. as parts of integration between two academic courses: English and Ethics. This paper shows the impacts of these service-learning activities in improving the skills of language learners through investigating as well as carrying a message: "Serve to Learn". After gathering data, SPSS copyright version 14 computer packages and Microsoft Office Excel 2007 version have been used to assess them.

Key words: English language proficiency, service learning, investigation

I. INTRODUCTION

In order to ensure the best quality education to English language learners, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers strive to apply different approaches in their classrooms. Service Learning concept could be an effective tool for them in the context of Bangladesh, by bringing out a transformative change through using English language to community needs. When we can directly connect our classroom learning to our community needs, we learn better .Both teachers and students will surprisingly find that students develop English proficiency through acquisition, which is also the demand of the language specialists nowadays. During the 2008-2009 academic year, Northern Kentucky University, USA had over 110 service learning classes, ranging across nearly every discipline. (Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project 2008-2009 annual report). In 1997, the Govt. of Bangladesh introduced CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) approach through the establishment of English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP) to bring out a transformative change and to make language teaching and learning more functional in need of real life communication. According to this approach, students are actively engaged in the classroom through pair work, group discussion and thus the interaction, collaboration and cooperation among students develop. On the other hand, Service Learning is learning as well as giving. Surely, students discover their learning functional and interesting when they have proper contribution to community with the application of their own knowledge and skills through Service Learning. Thus, Service Learning concept seems to be helpful to EFL learners for language acquisition, as they try to produce language.

II. THE CONTEXT

BRAC University Savar campus, established in 2003, is the only residential semester in Bangladesh where there is an integration of three academic courses as follows: English language, Ethics and Culture and Bangladesh Studies (under one track of Centre for Languages of

BRAC University). These courses run for 3 consecutive months and are fully residential. Of course, the community life here is an integral part of this integration and plays a major role in disguise.

On the arrival of new students at Residential Semester, an RS (Residential Semester) orientation program is held and the social capital norms are set under the guideline of Dr. Golam Samdani Fakir, the Pro-Vice Chancellor of BRAC University. It is decided that English should be the language of classroom management as well as for the means of communication in the community life in this semester. But, it was noticed that after students' spending some days here, the social capital norm (practicing and promoting English) was violated by some students and thus the Social Capital norms could decline. So, it was decided that an English Week is to be observed. The main objective is to promote English-speaking practice in the community. The week is to be observed by the students to enhance their English language skills through community service.

On the other hand, the main goal of any English as a Foreign Language class is to make the learners efficient enough to use English in real life communication. With a view to achieving this goal, the faculty as well as experts of English language teaching demand to offer the learners to experience English language in different situations. So, the students are actively engaged in activity based process, such as reading for comprehension, writing (which includes thinking critically, drafting a plot by using clues, summarizing, proof reading etc), listening games, vocabulary games, grammatical exercises etc. Students are also put into group discussion for improving their speaking skill.

As Ethics and Culture course: HUM-103 includes "ethical theories such as: utilitarianism, virtue, care, justice etc", (HUM103 Course Outline-2011), it is demanded that students should reflect the influence of the theories in their personal as well as in the community life in order to sow the seeds of good habits.

Considering the above-mentioned facts, the students are directly engaged in an activity based learning process, which is called the Starboard activity (based on Service Learning concept)

Starboard activity (introduced in Summer 2011 semester at Savar campus) is an integrated activity between English language courses and Ethics course. The students improve their English language proficiency through serving the community. From Ethics, course students are encouraged to be moral and demonstrate the ethical change achieved in them. Others will be encouraged highly to know how they acted ethically to meet the community needs. Of course, they also should promote ethical values in the community. On the other hand, BRAC University CfL (Center for Languages) English course helps them to improve their proficiency to write correct English. Because of that, they can use their English language skills as a tool to publish their writings in English on Starboard to promote ethical values in the community. Students got to realize that English language has the major role to play in this regard. They started thinking critically on what to write: thought critically for developing the content, drafted it in English, summarized it, became conscious about choosing proper words, citing and references, proof reading and editing and re-editing before they submit writing for Starboard. The above-mentioned activities are integral parts of English language learning and teaching. They tried their best to improve the language quality and sought the help from their friends; faculty. This activity involved them in creating a learning and teaching community outside the classroom.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To measure the depth of the efficacy of Service Learning concept in enhancing students' English language proficiency, the following questions had been considered by the author, regarding the impact of Starboard activity on the students of Fall-2011 semester of Savar campus of BRAC University.

a) Could service learning be used as an effective tool to ensure English language acquisition? What were the practical steps initiated by them apart from their classroom?
b) How did the students find their language skills useful to promote morality in the community? If so, how effectively they did that?
c) Did the students find that Service Learning has integrated both of their (two academic courses) Ethics and English to serve the community?
d) Will they continue serving the community in the same way in future by using their skills?

In the case of English Week observed during Fall-2011 semester, to investigate the real impact in the community life, the following questions were considered:

e) What are the percentages of the recipients of hangman cards for violating social capital norms of speaking English?

f) What roles did they play during evening sessions for the performers to promote English speaking environment?[1]

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

"Service learning is defined as a teaching method where guided or classroom learning is deepened through service to others in a process that provides structured time for reflection on the service experience and demonstration of the skills and knowledge acquired." (Al Barwani, el at., 2007)
According to Kaye (2004) "Service-Learning is a form of experiential learning where students apply academic knowledge and critical thinking skills to address genuine community needs." Kaye (2004) The Complete Guide to Service Learning, Three *Spirit*.
Service learning concept has been introduced in a US act regulating and has been defined as "Service Learning is a method under which students or participants learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service. That is conducted in and meets the needs of the community, and is coordinated with the community, an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education, or community service program; helps foster civic responsibility. It is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students or the educational components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled; and includes structured time for the students and participants to reflect on the service experience."
(National and Community Service Trust Act: 1993. National Youth Leadership Council, November 11, 2008)

Service Learning is a bridge between the classroom and the community. It is a "Teaching Methodology" that gives the students a chance to contribute to community through their knowledge and skills. It is also a process, which ensures learning through nonprofit teaching.

The learning pyramid shown below will encourage English language teachers to follow Service Learning concept to improve language skills.

Average retention rates:
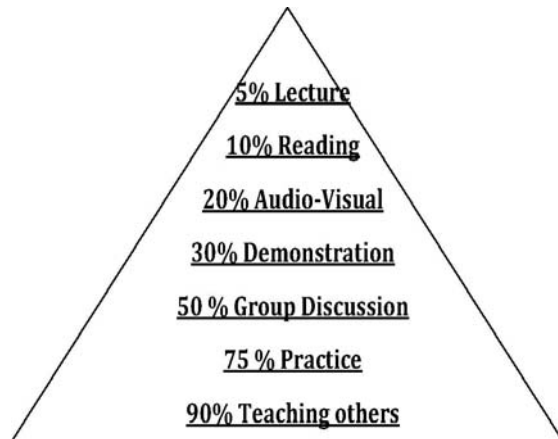
(Adapted from National Training Laboratories, Bethel, Maine)

The pyramid shows that when students are engaged in teaching others, they learn better than the other form of teaching method, such as: lecture, reading, group discussion etc. Here, the students find the chance to use their knowledge skills. So it is evident, why Service Learning is a potential methodology in the field of teaching and learning.

Case Studies:
1. In Germany, service learning as a teaching method is in its infancy. In one pioneering effort, a secondary school in Bavaria engaged students in different subjects in activities to preserve its culture. The music class staged a concert of Renaissance pieces to celebrate the 800th birthday of St. Elizabeth and to generate money to restore the organ in the church. The language class interviewed the citizens of the historic quarter and put together the interviews to create a book. (Baltes & Seifert, 2010)

2. A service-learning project in New Jersey involved a peer-to-peer study of education. Grades 6-8 students in English picked out social issues of their choice. They had lessons on online research and public speaking. A class was broken down to

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[1] *Starboard activity is a moral experience sharing activity at BRAC University residential campus. Students write their real life experiences in English to fix on the display board, thus create an opportunity for others to read them, and thus promote ethical behavior in the community.

groups of three to four students sharing similar interests like environment, teen pregnancy and drug abuse. The groups researched their causes and developed lesson plans to create awareness for their cause. (Rosevear, 2009)

3. Students learning a foreign language such as French pair up with students in Senegal learning English. The e-pals exchange emails in the language they are learning. The recipient will read, correct and email back the corrected letter. Thus, the e-pals learn about each other's written language and more. (Rosevear, 2009)

V. METHODOLOGY

To conduct the research and to have the necessary background knowledge of Service Learning and its impact on the academic course, the author attended the programs, seminar classes arranged by Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, USA during his study in Spring -2010 semester under the guidance of Dr Elaine Jarchow, Dean, International Education, Northern Kentucky University. In addition, the author went through possible reading materials as well as case studies on Service Learning for deeper understanding. In addition to that, necessary feedback and comments from the faculty of BRAC University were taken into account while conducting the investigation.

During the Summer -2011semester, students of Savar campus of BRAC University worked for starboard activity for the first time. It was noticed from the various observations, from the faculty, students, distinguished visitors, and management officials that language is a major concern to inspire others by writing on moral issues when they seek to draw the attention of others in the community. This fact was taken into account, especially in which areas students are to give serious attention.

The researcher followed a questionnaire for collecting data for investigation where the participants were the students of Fall-2011 semester, BRAC University. In total, 115 students took part in the survey on Starboard activity and the survey questionnaire was set and conducted in order to justify the real impact on acquisition of language. (The questionnaire attached in the appendix).

Before the students participated in the survey, they were well informed about the process. To ensure fairness, the participants were instructed not to write their names and identification number anywhere in the form. SPSS copyright version 14 computer packages and Microsoft Office Excel 2007 version have been used to assess data.

On the other hand, during the Spring-2011semester at Savar campus, an English week was observed from 3rd July to 7th July 2011 in order to promote English speaking in the community. Each day, during English Week, each of 281 students was given a card to wear from 9:00 am to 5:00pm. A team of students, faculty members, house tutors worked to mark in the cards of those who did not speak in English and it was recorded by them to investigate the real impact of English Week. In addition to that, students' performing sessions in the evening were also observed by the assigned faculty and taken into account. The same procedure was followed for the 275 students of Fall-2011semester.In total, 556 students were engaged in the two consecutive semesters.

VI. FINDINGS

Interestingly, it has been discovered trough the survey and observations from the faculty that many students at the beginning could not realize the direct use of their language skills to be used as an effective tool for their writing for Starboard activity. When they started submitted their drafts, which were immediately checked, by the peer learners and the assigned faculty, both grammatical mistakes and vocabulary problems were addressed. Therefore, they were reluctant to fix them on the board, rather they took their papers back for language corrections, redrafting and re-editing. They sought the help from their friends, faculty outside the classroom. The table below shows the positive impacts of students' engagement in developing their language proficiency. The investigation report reflects the response of students received by the questionnaire.

The learners found an opportunity to express their experiences through the questionnaire. Considering agreement and strong agreement responses (sum up), the activity has integrated a wide range of skills as follow: (Table: 1)

Table-1: Reflection on Starboard activity

Areas	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Interest in Starboard activity	25.4%	42.1%	19.3%	8.8%	4.4%
Importance given on quality of writing	54.8%	34.8%	7.8%	0.9%	1.7%
Engaged in critical thinking	26.1%	50.4%	15.7%	5.2%	2.6%
Importance on summarization	36.5%	39.1%	13.9%	7.8%	2.6%
Careful in choosing words	40.9%	46.1%	10.4%	1.7%	0.9%
Learning inside and outside the class	40.4%	32.5%	20.2%	4.4%	2.6%
Language accuracy concern	35.7%	43.5%	13.9%	6.1%	0.9%
Improvement of vocabulary	33%	25.2%	13.9%	16.5%	10.4%
Peer checking	37.4%	26.1%	21.7%	7.8%	7%
Use of 4 language skills	35.1%	40.4%	18.4%	4.4%	1.8%
Aesthetic skills of language	17.5%	50.9%	25.4%	4.4%	1.8%
Preparing draft and proofreading	27.2%	40.4%	23.7%	3.5%	5.3%
Teach other through sharing	35.1%	39.5%	19.3%	4.4%	1.8%
Help in learning	23.7%	41.2%	28.1%	4.4%	2.6%
Continuation of community service in future	57%	31.6%	7.9%	1.8%	1.8%

critical thinking(76.5%), summarization(75.5%), vocabulary skills(87%), aesthetic skills(68.4%), peer draft checking(63.5%), editing and proof-reading(67.6%),teaching others(74.6%), use of 4 language skills(75.5%), importance given on quality of writing(89.6%), determined to further continuation of Service Learning (88.6%), etc. All these activities ultimately help themselves for foreign language acquisition in a positive way and at the same time serving the community.

The table: 2 shows students' (summer -2011 semester, total participants: 281students) impacts on community life: English Speaking practice in the campus.

Table: 2: English Speaking practice in the campus: Summer -2011 Semester

Date/Time (9:00 am-5:00pm every day)	Day	Number of Participants	Marked Hang-man in the card (Number)	Number of fresh card Holders	English speaking students
3 July 2011	Sunday	281	07	274	97.51%
4 July 2011	Monday	281	06	275	97.86%
5 July 2011	Tuesday	281	01	280	99.64%
6 July 2011	Wednesday	280	01	279	99.64%
7 July 2011	Thursday	280	00	280	100%

Source: The author and the coordinators of English Week Committee, Summer 2011 semester

The table: 3 shows students' (Fall 2011 Semester total participants: 275 students) impacts on community life: English Speaking practice in the campus.

The tables do not reflect exact match between two cumulative semesters but they show that English Week observance can make a difference in creating interest in speaking English and making it a habit in the community life through service. The tables show 15 hangman card recipients were marked as hanged during Summer -2011 semester whereas during Fall- 2011 Semester the number was 36. The tables reflect that most of the individual students helped promoting an English speaking community.

Table: 3: English Speaking practice in the campus: Fall- 2011 semester

Date/Time (9:00am-5:00pm everyday)	Day	Number of Participa-nts	Marked Hang-man in the card (Number)	Number of fresh card Holders	English speaking students
25 September	Sun	276	09	267	96.73%
26 September	Mon	275	04	271	98.54%
27 September	Tues	275	04	271	98.54%
28 September	Wed-nes	275	08	267	97.09%
29 September	Thurs	275	11	267	96%

Source: The author and the coordinators of English Week Committee, Fall-2011semester

On the other hand, the students who failed to maintain the social capital norm (speaking in English); they attended the cobweb sessions in the evening during English Week. They shared their interesting experiences of campus life, told stories, drew posters, cartoons to encourage others to speak in English, and wrote reflections on different issues.

VII. LEARNING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The observance of English week and the Starboard activity are potential in order to promote an English speaking community in the context of BRAC University through the service of the students. Students got the scope to use their language skills in the real life situations through providing their service and at the same time reflecting a positive change in the community. Above all, they could realize their potentiality through gaining confidence.

If language teachers seek to achieve the goal in a different way, they can apply Service Learning concept as an effective tool to use. According to Aristotle's (384-322 B.C), virtue theory, intellectual virtues differ from moral virtues in the sense that intellectual virtues can be taught in the classroom while moral virtues cannot be taught in the classroom because moral virtues are skills. These skills develop through the practice in personal life. Thus, language skills develop through practicing them.

On the other hand, according to utilitarianism, the act, which ensures the maximum happiness or benefit to the maximum number of the individuals in the community, is morally a right action. The

students also feel happy and proud as their work is recognized and celebrated in the final RS reflection session.

Service Learning concept should be incorporated to language courses in a sense that it ensures the benefit to the community largely and learners get the real benefit out of it through developing their language proficiency and gaining confidence.

VIII. CONCLUSION

We acquire skills by doing. It is a process of learning by doing. In the same way, learners develop their language skills and moral skills by practicing them in their real life situations to make it a habit. Therefore, we find the immense possibility to apply Service Learning concept in order to comply with the virtue ethics as well as utility principle to enhance EFL learners' proficiency. Not only language teachers but also educators across different discipline should strive to use it as a teaching tool to practice and promote learning.

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