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## **Composing Cultural Diversity and Civic Literacy: English Language Learners as Service Providers**

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: This paper reports on recent research investigating the effects of  
: service-learning on linguistically and culturally diverse college  
: students enrolled in a first-year composition course. Two separate  
: studies, a pilot and main study involving native (NS) and non-native  
: (NNS) English speaking college students, explore how students  
: from diverse sociolinguistic backgrounds respond to and gain  
: from service-learning. The results were mixed, with the initial study  
: indicating NNS students often experience more difficulty finding and  
: successfully completing work in the community while the main study  
: found a similar group of NNS students to expect and gain more from  
: service-learning activities than a comparative group of NS students.  
: Implications for introducing diverse student populations to service-  
: learning activities are discussed in light of these findings.

**D**espite the increasingly diverse student populations found in American schools, research investigating the efficacy of involving linguistically and culturally diverse learners in service-learning programs is not well represented in the literature. Although service-learning has been applied to some foreign language contexts, including the teaching of Spanish (Beebe and De Costa; Gerling; Hellebrandt and Varona; Hellebrandt, Arries, and Varona; Olesksak), Russian (Leaver), and English (Kendrick et al.), examples of



using service-learning with ESL students have only recently begun to appear (Barfield; Heuser; Minor; Seltzer; Wurr; Wurr and Hellebrandt).

Involving NNS students in service-learning activities, however, may raise issues typically not seen in foreign language contexts. As Hamp-Lyons notes, there are at least two distinct groups of NNS students on most American college campuses (227). One consists of immigrants who often have lived in the country for several years, attended American schools, and have a high degree of integrative motivation. This group is often referred to as generation 1.5 because linguistically they may exhibit NNS traits but identify themselves as more culturally aligned with NS students. Another consists of international students whose first day outside their home country is often their first day in an American classroom. Although well-educated and highly motivated, international students may not intend to live in the United States permanently, and thus might position themselves differently than immigrant or generation 1.5 students in respect to the surrounding local community. Such complexities may be unique to the NNS student experience and need to be investigated more thoroughly in the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) literature related to service-learning. As Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters noted nearly a decade ago, there is (still) a need to gain

a better understanding of how ideologies connect and affect interactions and understanding among students, instructors, academic, and nonacademic institutions and community members, each of whom may bring different ideologies and politics to the table. (11)

With this in mind, I review some early reports on service-learning in TESOL, then describe two studies, a pilot and main study, involving NS and NNS students enrolled in first-year composition courses that included a service-learning component. While earlier reports from the same studies have focused on student writing performance and research



methodology (Wurr, “Service-Learning” and “Text-Based Features,” respectively), this article focuses on student motivation and social orientation in service-learning.

### **Service-Learning in TESOL**

Initial research on using service-learning in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language has been largely limited to case studies, as illustrated in the following examples. Richard Seltzer was one of the first TESOL practitioners to explore the use of volunteer activities in his classroom. In a paper presented at the 15th annual Rocky Mountain Regional TESOL, Seltzer described how he had involved lower-intermediate level NNS students at Glendale Community College in service-learning projects as conversation partners for senior citizens at a local nursing home. The students, both resident immigrants and those on student visas, wanted native-speaking English conversation partners who might offer more insights into American culture. Since the goals for the speaking skills course included creating opportunities for the students to practice listening and speaking in real-life situations, creating volunteer opportunities for the students to work with native English speakers in the community made intuitive sense. So with the help of a service-learning coordinator at his school, Seltzer was able to find several community organizations that welcomed the students’ interest and involvement in their programs.

In a handout distributed at his presentation, Seltzer echoes the sentiments of foreign language teachers who have incorporated service-learning into their classes:

Since I started connecting the volunteer/service learning program to my ESL classes (primarily in the upper levels of listening/speaking), I have seen a golden opportunity to connect students with people in the community who can benefit greatly from what the students can bring them, while at the same time getting much needed practice in using English in real-life situations with native



speakers. Further, students can get a real picture of what life is like for some Americans, without the sugar coating of a video or a glossy textbook about American culture. Most importantly, human contacts develop far beyond the period of service for which student receives credit.

Integrating service-learning into NNS courses such as Seltzer describes adheres to the principles of good practice in service-learning identified by Congress and educators. As such, Seltzer is justified in describing the project was “a win-win situation” for everyone involved.

In 1999, Noah Barfield published a Web site outlining a rationale for using service-learning in ESL composition, and described one such course he taught at Washington State University. One unit of the course involved students in a service-learning project in which they researched environmental issues in an American city of their choice, analyzed the data from various perspectives, and then applied their knowledge to local volunteer activities such as writing information brochures for nonprofit agencies and cleaning up a local river bed. Though Barfield’s account is mostly descriptive in nature, he claims that learning outcomes for the course included an increase in student motivation, engagement, and writing quality.

One of the most significant early publications on service-learning in TESOL is an article by Linda Heuser that appeared in the winter 1999 edition of TESL Canada Journal entitled “Service-Learning as Pedagogy to Promote the Content, Cross-Cultural, and Language-Learning of ESL Students.” The article describes a sheltered-content course called American Society for Japanese college sophomores studying in the United States. Drawing on approximately six years of trial-and-error experience in integrating service-learning into the course, and invoking a critical pedagogy rationale enriched by the works of bell hooks, Ira Shor, Henry Giroux, and Paulo Friere, Heuser



describes the goals of the sociology and intensive ESL courses as being met through an inquiry- and experientially-based approach to learning.

All students accompanied instructors on two days of intensive community service at a youth and homeless shelter. Toward the end of the service activity, students had the option of joining one of two groups led by one of the instructors: either a women's crisis center or a residential mental health facility for adults. The two groups then reconvened to process their experiences together through a series of oral and written prompts that moved from the concrete to the abstract, from the personal to the social. Although this group reflection activity was followed up by an individual writing assignment in class the next week, Heuser admits that such limited exposure to and reflection upon such complex social issues was not enough to sufficiently challenge students' preconceived beliefs on the issues.

Such limited interaction threatened to reinforce, rather than to call into question, existing stereotypes and preconceptions. Thus, the questions that need to be addressed are: how can short-term activities be performed in a manner that is not patronizing or disrespectful, and how can they be carried out in a way that promotes content, cross-cultural, and language learning? (68)

Heuser concludes that although the impact of NNS service-learning activities on both the student and community partners must be carefully assessed, the opportunity for increasing language proficiency and cross-cultural understanding holds great promise.

However, the recent publication of an edited collection of works of service-learning in applied linguistics (Wurr and Hellebrandt) offers a glimpse of a second generation of scholarship on service-learning in TESOL and related fields. As Edward Zlotkowski notes in his forward to *Learning the Language of Global Citizenship: Service-learning in*



Applied Linguistics, scholarship in service-learning has matured across the disciplines significantly in the last decade.

Although it seems hard to believe, only a decade has passed since one had to make a case for the relevance of service-learning....

While one of the primary goals of the AAHE series was to demonstrate service-learning's academic legitimacy within individual disciplinary areas, the present volume has been able to take advantage of a far more receptive intellectual climate to reach out to a truly global scholarly community. (xv)

One of the sections included in *Learning the Language of Global Citizenship* is devoted to research reports, including a two-and-a-half-year ethnographic study by Gresilda Tilley-Lubbs that documents the emerging relationships between Spanish university students and members of the Latino community in southwest Virginia as they cross socially constructed boundaries of ethnic groups, educational levels, and socioeconomic status. Through numerous observations, interviews, and reflection papers the author concluded that both groups benefited from their service-learning partnership in enhanced understanding of and appreciation for diversity in second language acquisition and learning, and in building cross-cultural friendships. Research reports such as this and the ones reported below respond to repeated calls over the last decade by service-learning experts to move beyond anecdotal evidence in reports on research service-learning to ensure broader acceptance for service-learning among educational and political leaders (Eyler and Giles; Gelmon, Furco, Holland, and Bringle; Zlotkowski).

### **Pilot Study**

The pilot study outlined here contributes to the above case studies by introducing a more systematic exploration of the efficacy of using service-learning in TESOL. The goal of the study was to compare the impact of service-learning on NS and NNS students enrolled in a literature-based first-year college composition class. The course sought



to strengthen students' awareness and skills as readers and writers in different personal and social contexts. Readings and class discussions focused on the various forces—personal, social, economic, political, historical, and/or psychological—that shape the world in which we live. Community-based research assignments were included in order to provide students with “counter-texts” (Pietrykowski 93) to the portraits of the people and communities provided in the readings. Students struggled in their writing and class discussions to resolve the tension between what they read and what they observed; that is, they had difficulty resolving the dissonance created by the counter-texts of the secondary and primary sources of information on their research topics.

Formal and informal writing assignments given before, during, and after the students' engagement in service-learning activities were analyzed to determine the effects of service-learning on students' writing, critical thinking, and perceptions of community, academia, and self. The results of that study suggested that service-learning does appear to have a positive effect on participants' self-perception as students and community members, but that NNS students face greater challenges in successfully completing service-learning assignments than NS students.

Although NS participants were initially skeptical of the assignment while NNS participants were enthusiastic, the NS participants' opinions changed for the better once they became involved in their work while NNS participants became frustrated by their inability to overcome linguistic and sociocultural barriers—real or perceived—that stood between them and their research objectives. For example, NNS students' journals often spoke of frustration and disappointment in navigating their way through the social services bureaucracy, particularly those related to children's welfare such as daycare centers and homes for abused or at-risk children. One NNS student wrote in her journal,



When I mentioned to Mike that I want to volunteer to work there, he told me he has to interview me first, after that then I will know whether I will be able to work there. When I discovered that the earliest appointment he can make is early April, I know I'm in trouble. I hunt for another childcare.

This result was kept in mind in designing the main study, and additional attention and support was provided to assist NNS students in finding suitable service-learning placements.

### **Main Study**

The main study was conducted in an introductory first-year composition course grounded in rhetorical traditions of the early Greeks. (The pilot study was conducted in the second-semester part of the year-long sequence). This first-semester composition course introduces students to conventions of analytical, persuasive, and personal-reflective writing and to academic research practices and conventions. Native and non-native English-speaking students are typically placed into parallel versions of the course (English 101 for NS and English 107 for NNS); the writing assignments, grading standards, and required texts are the same in both, but the exclusive non-native English speaking student population in English 107 allows instructors to provide special attention to language and cultural issues that may arise in class discussions, assigned readings, and written work. A limited number of combined English 101/107 sections are also offered to students interested in international careers to provide increased opportunities for cross-cultural discussions and interactions.

Over the course of the semester, students wrote in and out of class to develop a repertoire of writing skills and prepare for different writing situations in the university and in public life. Service-learning composition classes such as those in the pilot and present study reported here apply an Aristotelian theory of rhetoric to public discourse. Students in these courses typically write for and/





or about local community groups, gaining the benefit of writing for real audiences and purposes, and on matters of importance to both the writer and the community. In the main study, students selected service projects related to the course theme of the land and people of the Southwest. Representatives from a variety of public schools and non-profit organizations were invited to the university to describe their organizations and projects so that the students could make a more informed choice concerning which organization to volunteer with, or whether to find others on their own that were better suited to their interests and needs.

### *Method*

The main study focused on issues related to student writing performance, motivation, and social orientation. The general research question guiding this inquiry was "In what ways does participation in service-learning impact student learning?" As mentioned earlier, the portion of the main study related to writing performance has been previously described in this journal (Wurr, "Text-Based Features") and another publication (Wurr, "Service-learning") and indicates service-learning had a positive impact on student writing (also see Feldman et al. for an extension of this work). The specific research questions pursued in this paper are concerned with the issues of student motivation and social orientation:

1. Do NS and NNS students anticipate the benefits of service-learning similarly? Why or why not?
2. Are NS and NNS students affected by service-learning similarly? Why or why not?

Following the service-learning assessment model advanced by Driscoll and her colleagues, these questions were addressed using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative research techniques. Data collection and analysis included course syllabi, assignments, pre- and post-treatment surveys, semi-structured interviews with representative samples of



students in the service-learning courses, informal and formal student writing, course evaluations, a reflective journal kept by the teacher-researcher. Those related to the research questions discussed in this article are outlined in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Research questions, data collection, analyses, and variables

Question	Data	Analyses	Variables
Do NS and NNS students anticipate the benefits of service-learning similarly? Why or why not?	Classroom and community observations; analysis of formal and informal writing samples; interviews and surveys.	Coding for attitude and motivation in completing course assignments and community service.	Attitude toward current service; awareness of personal strengths, limits, goals, and fears; understanding and application of community service to course content.
Are NS and NNS students affected by service-learning similarly? Why or why not?	Classroom and community observations; analysis of formal and informal writing samples; interviews and surveys.	Coding for social orientation, attitude, and motivation, including references to personal, academic, civic, and/or career goals or plans.	Reactions to demands and challenges of service; plans for and attitudes to future service; change in perceived understandings; current and intended roles in school and society.

Two surveys were used to measure the impact service-learning on student learning, motivation, and social orientation. The pre-activity survey was administered in the 8th week of the semester after most participants had settled on a service project but before they had started the service activities; the post-activity survey in the 14th week after most participants had completed their service activities. The surveys consisted of 22 questions with 5-point scaled responses (e.g., very much, some, little, not at all, and no opinion). The surveys asked



students questions such as: Prior to this class, how much experience have you had volunteering or with service-learning? How challenging is/was the service at the agency? To what extent does/did community service help you understand course concepts? To what extent does/did community service enable you to learn about a culture or cultures different from your own? To what extent does/did community service enable you to understand how communities and cities in America work or function? Does/did community service increase your sense of belongingness in the community? Does/did community service increase your intentions to volunteer in the community in the future? One week after the surveys were administered, semi-structured follow-up interviews were also conducted by independent researchers with a representative sample of the participants in order to explore further salient trends in the survey data.

Formal and informal writing assignments given before, during, and after the students' engagement in service-learning activities were also analyzed to determine the effects of service-learning on students' writing, motivation, and perceptions of community, academia, and self. As outlined in Figure 2 below, formal writing assignments consisted of three essays: a rhetorical analysis, a persuasive essay, and a reflective essay. Traditional library research and background knowledge on the topic formed the knowledge base for the writing students produced in the comparison groups, while students in the service-learning groups could also draw upon first-hand observations gleaned from volunteering at non-profit community agencies for 15 hours or more over a one-to-two-month period.

Informal writing assignments consisted of approximately 25 short writing assignments completed in class and online. These short writing assignments helped students develop ideas for their essays and community documents, reflect on course concepts and community engagement, and practice different writing styles (e.g., children and adult audiences) and genre (e.g., personal letter, business memo, email



to peers or instructor, and newspaper editorial). Interview data and informal and formal writing samples were analyzed and coded for referents related to the major research questions.

**Figure 2:** Essay Assignment Sequence and Descriptors for Service-Learning and Comparison sections of English 101 and 107

<b>Service-Learning Sections</b>	<b>Comparison Sections</b>
1. Rhetorical Analysis essay (5-7 pages): Students research a local environmental or social problem from various viewpoints.	1. Rhetorical Analysis essay (5-7 pages): Students closely examine one or more texts to better understand the rhetorical strategies used by the authors.
2. Persuasive Essay (4-6 pages): Students suggest ways to solve or reduce the impact of the environmental or social problem they researched.	2. Persuasive Essay (4-6 pages): Students research a controversial issue and attempt to persuade readers to their view of the issue.
3. Reflective Essay (4-6 pages): Students write a preface to a portfolio on their accomplishments over the semester, explaining why they chose the texts they did, whom they are intended for, and what purpose the texts or portfolio is meant to serve.	3. Reflective Essay (4-6 pages): Students reflect upon their semester-long inquiry of an issue or discipline.

### *Participants*

Participants consisted of a select group of NS and NNS students enrolled in separate sections of English 101 (for NS students) and 107 (for NNS students). Each class section (labeled C1-C4 in Figure 3) had a total enrollment of between 17 and 20 students and one graduate student or adjunct faculty instructor. Students in the service-learning sections did not know about the service-learning component of the course before enrolling, but were informed of this and other work related to the course in the first week of the course.



**Figure 3:** Language by curricula factorial design

	NS (English 101)	NNS (English 107)
Service-Learning	C1 (N=19)	C2 (N=16)
Comparison	C3 (N=19)	C4 (N=19)

There were a total of 19 NS participants in the service-learning section of English 101, 16 NNS in the service-learning section of English 107, 19 NS in the comparison section of English 101, and a combined total of 19 NNS students from two different comparison sections of English 107. Male and female participants were roughly equal in numbers and age, yet came from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds: English, Spanish, Arabic, Russian, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese. Additionally, over half the participants in the service-learning courses stated some religious affiliation in a demographic survey. The majority of these students identified themselves as Muslim, Christian, or Catholic; other religious groups identified included Jewish, Hindu, Greek Orthodox, and Lutheran affiliations. Students in the service-learning sections of the course also differed in their familiarity with service-learning or volunteer work. NS students in the service-learning sections had significantly more prior experience volunteering than NNS students. In these and other ways, the participants represented the cultural and linguistic diversity typically found on college and university campuses in America today.

## **Results**

*Do NS and NNS students anticipate the benefits of service-learning similarly? Why or why not?*

The data analysis to this question considered early differences in the participants' attitude and motivation in completing their service-learning and course assignments. Pre-activity survey and interview



responses, as well as class and community observations noted in a teaching journal composed the bulk of the data.

Overall, students in both groups displayed a similarly positive response to the service-learning component of the course, but the reasons for this response differed from group to group. Participants in both groups appeared to believe strongly in the ability of one person to make a difference in the world, as can be seen in the response of both groups to the pre-activity survey question, "Do you think that one can make a difference in this world? 4 = very much; 3 = some; 2 = little; 1 = not at all." The mean scores were 3.5 for NS and 3.7 for NNS students in English 101 and 107, respectively.

In the mid-term interviews, participants were asked, "Do you believe one has a social responsibility to help those in need?" One NS student responded, "I think so. It's just a Good Samaritan sort of thing. You might as well go out and help people because at some point in your life you'll need help as well. So why not?" This response was typical of the level of optimism and personal agency exhibited by participants in both groups.

Where the two groups differed was in what they believed they would gain from helping others as they completed their community service assignment. While both groups believed helping others was good, NNS students also mentioned the academic and personal benefits they would gain from service-learning more than NS students. In all, there was a significant difference between NS and NNS students on 7 out of 22 pre-activity survey questions focusing on cognitive and affective domains of learning, as well as task interest and prior volunteer experience.

In all cases except prior volunteer experience, the NNS students' mean score was greater than that for NS students, indicating that NNS students thought that service-learning would have greater benefits for them than the NS students did. Specifically, in terms of cognitive and



affective factors, NNS students felt more strongly that service-learning would allow them to learn about cultures different than their own and about how communities and cities in America function. In terms of academic benefits, they also thought the tasks in the community were a more interesting and useful way to learn about composition than did their native English-speaking counterparts. For example, in the interviews, all participants said they felt a responsibility to help others in need if they could. But NNS students also mentioned other reasons for doing community service, including the potential cultural benefits and opportunities for practicing English conversation skills. Likewise, in their informal writing assignments during the first half of the semester, NS participants were much more likely to mention civic-minded motivations for doing service-learning such as helping others and giving back to the community while NNS students tended to focus on academic and career-related benefits. This difference between each group's written and interview comments is summarized in Figure 5 and gives some indication of the differing motivations each group had for engaging in service-learning.

**Figure 5:** Percent of pre-activity comments by class and category

	English 101 (NS)	English 107 (NNS)
Career/Academics	52%	66%
Civics	33%	13%
Personal	15%	20%

As will soon be discussed, the NNS students remained more positive about service-learning throughout the semester than did the NS students. This result is both interesting and encouraging since it differs from results obtained in a pilot study. The teacher-researcher was the same in both studies, and so the results of the pilot study were fresh in his mind when the main study was conducted. Thus, the difference



in the NNS students' response to service-learning in the pilot and main study may be attributable to teacher-intervention to prevent the problems that occurred in the pilot study from reoccurring again.

*Are NS and NNS students affected by service-learning similarly? Why or why not?*

To answer this question, comments gathered towards the end of the semester from NS and NNS participants regarding their service-learning experience were analyzed. These post-activity comments included excerpts from participants' final reflective essays, informal writings, and post-activity survey and interview responses. The comments were analyzed in order to document any changes in student perception or understanding over time.

In the previous section, the results indicated that both groups responded positively to service-learning, but that NS and NNS participants were attracted to service-learning for different reasons. The question now is, "Were the students' expectations realized?" and the answer in large part is "Yes!" Though the actual service-learning experience was not an unqualified success, post-activity results indicate that most students left the course with positive feelings about having contributed to, and learned from, the community. The sentiments expressed in the survey results were reinforced by those expressed in the students' written comments.

What did the participants in each group learn? There was a significant difference between groups on 5 of the 22 post-activity survey responses. Perhaps most significant among these was the survey question which asked, "How much did you learn working at your community agency?"

4 = very much; 3 = some; 2 = little; 1 = not at all." As in the pre-activity survey, both groups answered the question positively, but NNS





students remained more enthusiastic than NS students did. The mean score for NNS was 3.4 compared to 2.8 for NS students.

The relative positions of NS and NNS participants in American society may help explain the difference between groups, particularly when, as was the case in this study, the NNS participants consisted largely of international students with little previous experience living in America. Such students are often eager for opportunities to interact with, and learn more about, American people and society, as the popularity of the program Heuser describes indicates.

Although few students initially saw a connection between their work in the community and the lessons they were learning in their composition class, more students began seeing some connection towards the end of the semester. The strongest course-community connections students noted towards the end of the semester tended to focus on rhetorical concepts such as audience awareness or the use of rhetorical appeals and details to support a point, as illustrated by the following excerpts from student journals:

[M]ost of the techniques that I learned in class, I was able to apply in helping Fort Lowell. This helped me learn exactly what works and why. Fort Lowell became a practical application of the techniques I learned in class. I learned in class to research for our Rhetorical Analysis and persuasive essay, but for Fort Lowell I did not have the luxury of a teacher pointing me in the right direction every step of the way. I had to do all of the research alone. [...] Overall, the work that I did for Fort Lowell Elementary School really helped me to connect the techniques I learned in class to the real world. (NS student)

The more I worked at Shalom House the more I began to experience totally different environment that I had been ever exposed to. [...] The more one can understand others' concerns



the better he can communicate with them and help them to solve their problems. [...] I learnt that the knowledge about my audience helps me to choose the right techniques in communication with them. But throughout my service learning project and my research I realized that knowing not only who they are but also what kind of people they are, what are their main concerns or problems makes me even more effective in interacting with them. And this discovery became a purpose of presenting my work to the young people, especially in college. (NNS student)

Civic participation, the sense of giving to and becoming part of the local community, was also a strong motivating force for both groups throughout the semester. But NNS students often also noted personal gains such as increased confidence and cultural awareness, while NS students were more apt to note an increased sense of altruism as well as gaining better organizational and time management skills.

As I carried on with my work, I realized that being an International student coming to the U.S. for the first time, it is very important to get oneself acquainted with the culture. Service learning has not only helped me achieve that, but it also helped me to build confidence in myself, and to improve my interpersonal skills in terms of persuasive and communication skills. (NNS student)

Looking back on my experiences with underprivileged children I am left with a feeling of satisfaction and pride. However, there were many distractions to my service learning and I accomplished to face them as small obstacles that one can overcome. After reviewing my work as a whole, I realized that I have learned a lot from my recent experiences and that putting them down on paper has helped me to mature as a writer. (NS student)



Civic and personal benefits were also complemented by an increased understanding of social issues. When asked, “Because of your experience, what community needs have you become more aware of?” interview participants were able to cite specific problems in the community and possible solutions to these. Comments such as: “After school programs and sports seem better than jails in deterring kids from getting into trouble with the law” or “We need to provide homeless people with programs to help them. I became more aware of how we need to not so much give them money, but help them get back on their feet again” help indicate the more complex understanding of social issues students developed. While such comments might still leave something to be desired, they do indicate a developing awareness of salient factors in the social issues discussed, and this after a short semester and 15 hours spent in the community.

To summarize the results to the second research question, then, NS and NNS students were affected similarly by service-learning on some measures and differently on others. Both groups left the course with a positive sense of having contributed to, and learned from, the community. Though NS participants acknowledged the academic benefits of service-learning more frequently in their post-activity responses than in pre-activity responses (a 10% increase), NNS participants remained more enthusiastic about what they learned from the community overall. These written comments suggest that the different language and cultural backgrounds of both groups had a significant impact not only on how the members of each group initially perceived the benefits of service-learning (research question #1), but also on what they ultimately gained from participating in such programs (research question #2).

## **Discussion**

This study found that service-learning had a generally positive effect on social, cognitive, and affective factors related to student learning. However, the results also show a marked difference between NS



and NNS students' response to service-learning. This between-group difference is largely due to the students' differing sociocultural backgrounds. NNS students had significantly less prior volunteer experience, and thus lacked what language professionals refer to as "process competence" (Legutke and Thomas 227) and service-learning specialists more specifically refer to as "civic literacy" (Barber 44). With regard to service-learning, civic literacy can include the background knowledge on service organizations in America, interactional patterns and performance routines likely to occur at a service site, as well as an understanding of the historical and cultural values and traditions associated with volunteering in America. NS students more familiar with volunteerism and the service industry in American society can more readily draw upon this knowledge to help them complete the task at hand.

This result underscores the importance of recognizing individual differences in students' awareness of and preparedness for service-learning activities. Many service-learning professionals already do, in fact, recognize this on some level as they select different types of service activities—from individual or group "one-shot" service assignments (e.g., Barfield; Gottschalk-Druschke, Pittendrigh, and Chin) to more involved projects that may continue for a semester or more and be explored through several different courses and disciplines (e.g., Flower and Heath; Herzberg; Warschauer). Service-learning providers could build upon this knowledge of how to scaffold service projects to better match a task's complexity to the learner's present abilities by considering more carefully the differing needs and motivations of NNS students in successfully completing a service-learning project.

One reviewer of an earlier version of this article noted similarities between the NNS students described in this article and the Basic Writers described in Rosemary Arca's chapter in *Writing the Community*. While NNS and Basic Writers often do share feelings of



marginalization in society, they also may have differing motivations to overcome this problem, as the responses of NS and NNS students to service-learning in the main study here suggest. Given that awareness of the similarities and differences between learners can help educators make more informed decisions in how best to adapt curricula to specific teaching and learning contexts, I conclude by offering some suggestions and resources for service-learning practitioners working with diverse student populations.

### *Applications for Instruction*

The difference between NS and NNS participants' previous volunteer experience in the present study suggests teachers and service-learning program coordinators might want to allow students new to service-learning to work in groups on projects of relatively short duration. The security and collective knowledge that group work fosters can be comforting to students venturing into unfamiliar territory. Helping students negotiate cultural differences is a common topic in the service-learning literature, particularly that focusing on multicultural education. (e.g., Boyle-Baise; Dahms; Dunlap; O'Grady). Below are some tips culled from these and other resources that I have found useful when involving NNS students in service-learning.

To assist in placement decisions, introducing students to the role volunteering and civic participation play in American society can be a useful first step in activating their schema for engagement in such activities. Inviting international students to describe service organizations and projects in their home countries with which they might be familiar also helps students connect prior knowledge and information to the task at hand and may help students planning international careers to remain involved in community service projects in the future. One way this was done in the main study reported here was to show students a video of a service-learning program at a neighboring community college, then initiate a discussion of similar experiences they may have had in the past and the rationale for and



challenges in undertaking service-learning projects in the future (“Commitment”).

Dunlap suggests sharing previous students’ anonymous journal entries and critical reflections as another useful method to help students prepare for service-learning projects. Such pre-service discussions, she notes, can provide “a vehicle for expressing concerns and for sharing experiences with the instructors” while also providing a model for future critical reflections students might be asked to engage in once they have begun their service-learning projects (“Methods” 208). Similarly, inviting campus service-learning coordinators and community partners to meet with students and describe what it is they do can also help students engaging in service-learning for the first time to make more informed decisions about where and how to volunteer; it can also help students overcome fear of the unknown by putting a friendly face on an unknown organization. Many campuses organize community service orientations or other events to promote various service initiatives and to help facilitate the information sharing and placement selection process. Activities such as these help NS and NNS students alike understand and prepare for service-learning projects.

Several community-based writing textbooks now available also provide useful strategies to help prepare students for service-learning projects (Berndt and Muse; Deans; Ross and Thomas). Ross and Thomas offer several chapters to help students understand and prepare for a service-learning assignment, including discussions on the nature of service, how to contact agency representatives and negotiate an effective service-learning contract. Deans includes readings appropriate for different stages and types of service-learning activities while also making the useful distinction between writing for, about, and with community. This is as helpful to NNS students as it is for others. Indeed, while neither of these books specifically mentions NNS students working as service providers, the activities and examples included in the texts target students who are unfamiliar with service-



learning and community-service organizations, a group that typically includes NNS students.

To help NNS students overcome linguistic barriers to successfully completing their service-learning projects, instructors can supplement the above-mentioned resources by involving students in role-play activities to practice common interactional patterns and performance routines likely to occur at a service site. Some earlier works in experiential language learning can be particularly useful in this regard (see for example, Eyring; Jerald and Clark; Kohonen et al.; Legutke and Thomas), as can more standard ESL Composition textbooks such as the one by Ruth Spack that include sections on primary research techniques such as interviewing, conducting surveys, and taking field notes. Kirlin also offers a useful taxonomy of the underlying background knowledge and cognitive skills necessary to effective participation in civic discourse.

Classrooms and communities in America are becoming more and more diverse every day. In order to ensure that all students and citizens have equal access to, and opportunities for success in, service-learning courses and community service projects, educators and service providers need to become more aware of the unique resources and challenges linguistically and culturally diverse learners bring to service-learning. As the marked contrast in NNS students' response to, motivation in, and learning from service-learning activities in the pilot and main study shows, with adequate preparation and support, NNS students, like all others, can and will excel in thoughtfully designed and well-organized service-learning programs, and may in fact, become some of the most enthusiastic participants.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of this article and Barbara Roswell for their helpful and thought-provoking comments on an earlier version of this article.
- <sup>2</sup> The pilot study is described in more detail elsewhere (Wurr, "Pilot").
- <sup>3</sup> One student in C2 and C4 declined to participate in the study, hence the difference in the number of enrolled students and study participants.
- <sup>4</sup> Because of a low participation rate in the comparison section of English 107, an additional group of NNS participants was added from a combined English 101/107 class, bringing the total number of comparison NNS participant to 19.
- <sup>5</sup> Percentages represent the total number of pre-activity comments in each category compared to the total number of all pre-activity comments written by students in each class.
- <sup>6</sup> NS participants said they had had "some" prior volunteer experience while NNS students indicated they had "little." The mean score for NS participants on this question was 3.2 compared to 2.1 for NNS participants.

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