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Bringing the outside world into an intensive English programme

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Camilla Vásquez*

This article describes the efforts of an intensive English programme to design a class that addressed the challenges of bringing authentic English into the curriculum. This class exposed students to a variety of authentic English language input, while providing support. Through this class, students volunteered with various community organizations. These placements were linked with the curriculum of our intensive English programme. This hybrid class consisted of class meetings, electronic discussions, the community placement, paper journals, a final reflection paper, and a capstone experience.

Providing ‘real’ English input in a meaningful way is a dilemma that faces most English language programmes. This article describes the efforts of one US intensive English programme (IEP) to address the challenge of providing a curriculum that includes structured English language instruction, along with English in a real world context.

During the last ten years, the number of programmes using service-learning to address the challenge of offering meaningful English language input in different contexts has grown. Minor (2004) defines service-learning as an educational tool that provides learners with the opportunity to gain language practice in authentic, meaningful contexts—while they are involved with helping others—and at the same time, enables learners to bring what they learn through their community experiences back into the classroom in order to enhance their language learning. Individual service programmes can differ in the extent to which they emphasize the dimension of ‘helping others’ or ‘developing human values’ (Minor 2004: 1). Our programme differs from most service-learning or project-based approaches (for example, Bringle and Hatcher 1996; Elwell and Bean 2001; Fried-Booth 2002; Legutke and Thomas 1991; Minor 2004) in three important aspects. First, our primary focus is on exposing students to authentic English. Although the dimension of helping others, often associated with service-learning situations, is certainly a positive side-effect, this is not the primary purpose of our course. Next, students are not placed as classes or groups, but rather, students select their volunteer sites based on their individual interests, thus encouraging student autonomy. Therefore, the class is not focused on a particular content area, but rather it is specially

designed to address the multiple needs and interests of our students. In this way, our programme differs from the majority of ‘encounter projects’ presented in Legutke and Thomas (1991). Finally, students participate in their assignment for 16 weeks rather than for just a short period of time. Although Fried-Booth (2002) presents project-learning in terms of both short- or long-term activities, the majority of examples she provides can be completed over several lessons, or in several weeks. In our course, students’ volunteer experiences serve as a catalyst for language learning strategies and other topics discussed during class meetings throughout the semester.

Our primary objective in developing the course we named ‘multi-experience’ was to expose students to a variety of authentic English language input, while providing some level of support for that input. This class involved placing students in various settings in the community, and linking those placements with a class in our intensive English programmes curriculum. Unlike the other classes in our curriculum that meet for two to eight hours a week—see the appendix for a brief outline of the programme curriculum—the multi-experience class is a hybrid that consists of class meetings, electronic discussions, the community placement, paper journals, and a final reflection paper. The capstone event for the multi-experience class is a mini-conference with poster sessions by the students that describe their experiences in their various placements.

The need for a multi-experience class

Our university IEP typically serves between 20–30 full-time international students. Specifically designed to prepare students to be successful in their future university careers, the primary emphasis of our programme is on academic English (reading, writing, note-taking during academic lectures, library research, etc.). Each semester, a range of different countries are represented among our students, but the majority comes from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand.¹ Most of our students have intermediate-level English proficiency (i.e. 450–500 TOEFL) and are enrolled in our programme to improve their English skills and meet the university’s English language proficiency requirements (i.e. a minimum TOEFL score of 525 for undergraduates).

Many of our IEP students major in Hotel and Restaurant Management, Business, or Parks and Recreation. These areas of study have a strong service component and students completing these degrees can expect to interact with the public in several different contexts (for example, presentations, service encounters, meetings, etc.). From past programme evaluations, we became aware that even though our curriculum includes two courses that concentrate on speaking and listening, former students felt that it was sometimes a struggle to make themselves understood, and at the same time it was often difficult for them to understand their interlocutors in their undergraduate classes (for example, classmates and professors) as well as those outside the classroom (for example, staff, office workers, sales clerks, etc.). As a result, we designed a multi-experience course which would enable students to interact with a wider-variety of speakers of English and simultaneously provide several forms of structured support for these interactions.

Designing a multi-experience class

In the planning stages of the multi-experience class, we contacted representatives from organizations in the community who might be receptive to having students spend time at their places of service or business. For our programme we primarily approached service organizations, such as a visitors' bureau, an animal shelter, a cross cultural dance company, a food bank, and a local elementary school. In our initial communication, we described our programme in detail, including the roles and responsibilities of the students who would be placed with the organization. Interested organizations were provided with a letter, and a form to complete and return. It was essential for us to be explicit in communicating to each organization that our students did not have strong English skills, and that one of the primary goals of the placement was to expose students to as much English as possible.

Once organizations committed to participating, a list of organizations, and brief descriptions of each organization (see example below) were presented to the students during the first class meeting.

Visitor's Center (name of contact person and phone number) The Visitor's Center is located in the Amtrak station, between the campus and the downtown area. Student volunteers will gain valuable interaction with the staff of the center, as well as the many tourists who visit the center for information. The best hours to volunteer are between 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. because the center is busiest then.

After the students selected their own placements, each student committed to one hour per week of involvement with their respective organization. Very often students' academic majors played a role in their placement decision. For example, students interested in a Hotel and Restaurant Management degree often selected organizations such as the visitor's centre, where they would not only gain valuable interaction skills, but also have an opportunity to observe how professionals provide information to interested parties, much like a concierge of a hotel would. Students interested in becoming teachers often chose to be placed at a local elementary after-school programme. The variety of placements available was instrumental to the success of the programme. Every student was able to make a choice that was well suited to their academic or personal interests.

We decided that a minimum of two students should be placed at each organization. This decision had many benefits. First, it provided a connection for the students to get to know one another better, based on common interests rather than on merely being fellow classmates in the same IEP. Second, it provided a fellow student to go with to the organization, which served as a form of peer support, thus making the experience of going to a new location and interacting with new people less intimidating. And finally, it also allowed the logistics of the class to be more manageable for the teacher, because of the smaller number of organizations involved.

The multi-experience class consisted of four parts: the placement with an organization, class meetings, journalling (both a paper journal and an electronic discussion board), and finally a capstone project. The class met for one hour per week during the first two weeks of the semester. During the first week, the concept and format of the course was explained to students,

and students were presented with a list of organizations along with a description of their role in the organization for their community placement options. Students were expected to select a placement and contact their organization before the class meeting the following week. When the class met the second week, students reported back about their communication with their organizations and reported when they were scheduled for the one hour a week meeting with their organization. After this second class meeting, the class met as a group during a regularly scheduled time for one hour every third week for the rest of the semester. However, each student was required to turn in a written journal entry to the teacher once a week and to make at least one weekly posting to the class electronic discussion board. An overview of the semester is provided in Table 1.

Week	Venue	Tasks
1	Class meeting	Overview of class and organization descriptions
2	Class meeting	Discussion of 1st week at placement
3–15	Electronic and face-to-face meetings	Student journals due every week; whole class meetings every third week; weekly asynchronous electronic discussions postings; students go to their organizations for 1 hour per week
16	Mini conference	Poster presentations and final reflection paper due

TABLE 1
Semester overview

The combination of regularly scheduled class meetings, along with electronic discussions and student journals, provided a mechanism for the teacher to be aware of the students' placement situation and also presented multiple opportunities for students to reflect on and share their experiences. Students could address more personal issues to the teacher via their journals, whereas the electronic discussion board provided a more public venue for students to share their experiences with other classmates as well as to read and learn about other classmates' experiences. The electronic discussion board provided a site for discussion and interchange of ideas, functioning to sustain the classroom community even during weeks when the class did not meet in the same physical space.

The variety of formats for this class had several benefits. Students were well motivated during the class meetings to discuss and share experiences. Also, because computer mediated discussions are common in many introductory university courses, the electronic discussion component of the multi-experience class provided students with exposure to and practice with an increasingly popular way of providing additional 'discussion' in American university classrooms (Bikowski and Kessler 2002; d'Eca 2003).

The variety of formats also provided the teacher with a springboard for class discussions on topics ranging from broader pragmatic and sociolinguistic issues to specific pronunciation problems. Using the input from students' journals and electronic discussions, the teacher could shape class time to be

both proactive and reactive. Based on student needs, class time was often used to role-play situations that students were finding difficult. For example, students practised role playing situations in which they were asked to initiate conversations with strangers, an area that several students indicated was difficult for them. Also, in their journals and discussion board postings, several students mentioned their awareness of specific sounds that were difficult for them to produce. (See Excerpt 3 below for an example.) These comments were followed-up by the teacher in class with lessons on a particular aspect of pronunciation.

In addition, the experiences outside the IEP classroom walls provided valuable feedback to students on their English language skills. Often in an ESL classroom setting, students may not have an accurate sense of their communicative competence in English, because ESL instructors and others that students regularly interact with are ‘sympathetic listeners’, who are accustomed to accommodating to the students’ English proficiency. Thus, the real world experience of their organization placement served as a valuable measure of students’ English proficiency, and also as a powerful motivator for the students, that transferred to other classes in the IEP.

Student feedback

Since this class was an innovative approach to providing exposure to real language situations, while also providing a support system, the class meetings and student journals provided valuable feedback to the teacher. Class sessions often focused on problem solving. An example of collaborative problem solving was initiated by a student who had chosen the visitor centre as his placement. During one class meeting, this student expressed his frustration that very few people came to the centre during the times when he was volunteering. Through the class discussion, other students suggested that he find out when the centre was busier, and then ask to change his hours to those times. This whole class discussion involved several aspects that are often stressed in ESL classrooms—identifying a problem, discussing possible solutions, and then implementing the solutions. The outcome of the situation was positive: the student successfully requested and changed his scheduled time at the visitor’s centre. However, the outcome may not have been as successful if there had not been a platform (i.e. the class meeting) for the student to voice his concerns, and the language lesson may not have been as meaningful if it had only been the teacher suggesting the change of schedule. By adopting a student-centred approach in the class, the language goals of the student were addressed and the problem was solved—largely through the collaborative and supportive efforts of the student’s peers—before it became a major issue. Excerpt 1, below, from the student’s final reflection paper sums up this experience in the student’s own words.

Excerpt 1: Korean student, visitor centre volunteer, final reflection paper

Actually I went to the Visitor’s Center during weekday, but it was so bored to me because few tourists visited in the Visitor’s Center. So I decided to change the day from weekday to weekend. After changing the day, I went to the Visitor’s Center every Saturday 11 am to 12:30 pm and especially whenever I went there on Saturday, a lot of tourists visited in the Visitor’s Center and also I was getting excited. I think that I had a good choice.

Some examples of valuable language insights gained during student involvement with their organizations included greater awareness of the need to speak clearly (Excerpt 2), awareness of pronunciation problems (Excerpt 3), and a willingness to take risks and increased self-confidence (Excerpt 4).

Excerpt 2: student from Niger, dance company volunteer, final reflection paper

I totally enjoyed my volunteer, because it was one of the ways that helped me to improve my skills in English. How? During the volunteer I met many people and friends I need to be understood for this reason I have to speak and express my feelings and opinions.

Excerpt 3: Thai student, visitor centre volunteer, electronic discussion board

Anyway, this class will help me get my 3 goals. First, I want to practice English as much as I can. I had to talk to [name] and lots of visitors who helped me practice a lot. Not only speaking but I learnt listening in the same time. I know that English is very hard for me especially 'r' sound. Sometimes I try to practice but it still not so good. So I think if I can talk to American people everyday, I will improve it.

Excerpt 4: Japanese student, visitor centre volunteer, final reflection paper

They thought I was staff there so I was so nervous and felt bad because I could not answer their questions. I did not want visitors to ask me because I was scared not to be able to answer. But one day, I realized that I should not have escaped from this. It was not easy to answer for visitors because I did not know about [town name] well and I was not confident of my English but I thought if I tried to do my best to help visitors I might be able to do it. So I changed my mind and tried to help visitors when they asked me. I could not answer the questions every time but when I could help them in somehow I was really glad.

The final component of the course, a capstone event of a mini-conference, provided a real context for students to be experts and to demonstrate their knowledge about organizations in the community with an audience wider than only their peers and teachers. The audience for this mini-conference consisted of students and faculty in our MATESL and PhD in Applied Linguistics programmes, teachers and part-time students in our IEP, and members of the community who had been involved with the student placements. The mini-conference also provided students with a tangible measure of their increased English proficiency. At the beginning of the semester, many of the students who participated in the multi-experience class could not have imagined speaking to strangers in English, and yet at the end of 16 weeks, these very students were able to give information, answer questions, and feel confident as they enthusiastically described their volunteer experiences to the audience who came to see their posters and to hear about their experiences.

Feedback from participating organizations

The multi-experience class provided a platform for a variety of complementary language learning experiences which increased students' English proficiency as well as their self confidence. It also provided a valuable link to the community outside of the classroom context. The feedback from organizations that participated was very positive, as can be seen from the excerpts below.

Excerpt 5: Programme Coordinator, dance company, final evaluation

Three young ladies met in the class. Before then they had not known one another and came from three different continents. They always came here together and helped one another to accomplish tasks. A joyful and effective way to learn English and the entire good experience. You have done a fine job in preparing us (non-profits) and the students. A good experience for everyone. Good program—keep up the good work!

Excerpt 6: Assistant Principal, elementary school, final evaluation

Our experiences with the IEP students have been exceptional this year. In the past, we have had international students at the graduate-level and many were not dependable. This year's undergraduate students were like clockwork—on time, flexible and well-mannered! I want to invite the students back to our site any time.

Conclusion

We believe that the design of the class was crucial to its success. The careful articulation of local organizations' expectations, the variety of related class activities and tasks, and the students' enthusiastic participation coupled with the teacher's commitment to the successful implementation of this curricular innovation, created a valuable learning experience for our students. Because of the positive response to the course—both from students and participating organizations—we have decided to continue to offer the multi-experience class as a regular component of our curriculum. The course is currently in its second year.

Because we are in the second year of our programme offering the course, we have had some time to reflect on the challenges as well as the benefits of offering such a course. Clear communication between the teacher, participating organizations, and the students is both a challenge and a benefit. Because the teachers in our IEP are graduate students, our staff changes every year, making it somewhat challenging to maintain long-term relationships with representatives at participating organizations. New teachers are required to keep detailed records about their communication with the participating organizations, to ensure that the programme can maintain these important relationships, which are crucial to the success of the course, particularly since the staff at many of these organizations also change, as do our students.

Another challenge affecting the selection of organizations is proximity to the university campus. Like in many US cities, access to public transportation in our area is limited, and most students do not own cars. As a result, we have made an effort to locate organizations that are within reasonable walking distance from campus. Scheduling can also present challenges. In the first year of the multi-experience class, our IEP class

schedule was compatible with those of participating organizations' schedules. However, our IEP course schedule changes each semester, sometimes making it difficult for students to attend their placements during regular business hours. Yet each of these challenges also represents an opportunity for the teacher and students to practise and gain valuable skills (for example, time management, record keeping, communication, problem-solving, etc.).

As the class has evolved, we have become aware that different teachers and groups of students respond differently to various aspects of the class. For example, some semesters not all students were equally engaged with the electronic discussion board, however, other semesters students have actively participated in the electronic discussions. Current students have commented that they enjoy reading what others have written. Last year, some students indicated that they often did not know what to write about in their journals. This year's teacher has responded by suggesting topics or posing different questions each week for students to reflect on. Although not an issue for our programme to date, it is also important to be certain that students are in positive situations and that they are not simply carrying out office tasks in isolation, instead of truly having opportunities to interact in English. The multiple formats (i.e. class meetings, electronic discussion board, paper journals) for students to communicate with the teacher are an essential component for ensuring the positive climate of a class that has such a strong out-of-class component.

All in all, the course has run smoothly. Students, teachers, and community organizations have expressed great satisfaction with the class and the opportunities it provides, but we are a small programme in a relatively small city with good community relations. As other programmes in different settings implement such a course, they will undoubtedly face their own unique set of challenges. However, from our perspective, the gains are well worth the challenges of bringing the outside into the IEP classroom.

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Note

1 Currently the IEP has over 70 students, with the majority of students coming from Saudi Arabia and China.

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Appendix: Timetable of Classes in IEP

Course	Hours per week
Core	8
Writing	3
Reading	3
TOEFL	3
Pronunciation	3
Intercultural communication	2
Multi-experience	2