

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND AUTONOMY IN SERVICE-LEARNING ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES COURSES

Estela Ene and Honor Orlando

Abstract

Finding an answer to the effectiveness of autonomous learning in contrast to traditional forms of teacher-directed learning has significant pedagogical ramifications. Our study sheds light on the effects of increased autonomy in SL on the development of students and the role of the instructor. Furthermore, we focus on international student experiences in order to understand the consequences for their development, in the context of increased internationalization.

Our study compares autonomous (self-directed) and instructor- (other-directed) groups of students who engaged in SL as part of a university-level English language course. We collected data from 143 students' pre- and post-service surveys over 8 semesters. Both other-directed and self-directed groups benefited from the SL experience, suggesting that students can develop holistically in a SL English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. Other-directed students appeared to benefit more in terms of learning about specific social issues, service, and the target communities. Self-directedness was associated with perceived language gains more than other-directedness. Due to its potential to support the multi-dimensional development of international students, we recommend SL EAP and make pedagogical suggestions.

Learner autonomy, defined most frequently as the “ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 3), plays an important role in learning generally speaking and language acquisition in particular (Thomas & Rose, 2019). Enabling learners to function independently is an important, if not the ultimate, goal of teaching. In Service Learning (SL), learners can operate autonomously, and likely become more autonomous as a result of practicing autonomy. Thus, autonomy can be a means as well as a goal. Studies, however, have not paid sufficient attention to the role that learner autonomy may play, especially when it comes to SL performed by international

students. An important theoretical and practical question is whether increasing learners' autonomy leads to better learning outcomes than other-/teacher-directed SL. If students learned as much or more when given more autonomy, teachers could better use the time they invest in the logistical overload that comes with coordinating every aspect of SL (as also noted by Kwenani & Yu, 2018); for example, teachers could focus on designing tasks that would benefit students and community partners alike and preparing their students for operating autonomously without losing focus or doing harm (Tryon et al., 2008). Thus, it is important to finetune our understanding of whether learner autonomy supports learning, and which aspects of learning it can support most productively.

Service Learning and Autonomy

Service-learning (SL) is a “course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p.112). SL provides opportunities to learn both in the classroom and outside of it (Berman, 2006).

SL is acclaimed as a collaborative, democratic pedagogy (Bringle et al., 2016) within which learners can operate and develop autonomously. Garrison and Jaeger (2014), drawing upon Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (1985, 2008), point out that autonomy motivates students to engage when they have some sense of control (Garrison & Jaeger, 2014, p. 42). Agreeing, Werner and McVaugh (2000), contend that SL programs should give students “some freedom and control over how they actually do service activities” (pp. 118–119). They specifically point out that giving students the freedom to “choose particular projects allows students to judge what they're getting into, and that should increase satisfaction . . . personal responsibility and ownership of their activities. . . [and] the likelihood of future service” (p. 120). According to Billig (2000), SL “that leads to stronger outcomes is associated with student autonomy, responsibility and choice with regard to planning, participating in and evaluating [SL] activities” (p.6). Levesque-Bristol et al. (2010) offer that choice can take the form of choice of sites, activities, and content of reflection exercises (p. 210). When such autonomy or self-determination is present, it elevates students' competence (sense that they are doing their “job” well) and relatedness or sense of belonging, as demonstrated in Levesque-Bristol et al. (2010).

International Students, SL, and Autonomy

International students are a significant presence at higher education institutions in the U.S. and globally. The contributions of international students are significant in terms of not only tuition revenue and local economic impact, but also strengthened international relationships and enrichment of the academic environments, workplaces, and communities in which international students live (Burnett & Merchant, 2015; Guo-Brennan et al.,

2020; Tran & Gribble, 2015). While language-related needs are often primary for international students, this student population has an array of academic, psychological and sociocultural, financial, and professional needs as well (Guo-Brennan et al., 2020). Without a doubt, international students face many academic and personal challenges while studying abroad (Mesidor & Sly, 2016), but they also encounter many opportunities to develop academically, professionally, and personally by adjusting to novel situations (Gill, 2007; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011).

Studies show that SL can play an important role in developing international students' sociocultural knowledge, confidence, professional competencies, and connections (Brauss et al., 2015). Helping international students adjust socially and culturally by developing their social awareness, knowledge about social issues and communities, and language skills can relieve their stress and isolation (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Redmond & Bunyi, 1993) and lead to their greater success and satisfaction at their institutions (Brauss et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2015; Noels et al., 1996). International students with higher levels of contact with the community see their academic and social performance improve (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985). In turn, communities develop social consciousness and cultural intelligence (Parliament of South Australia, 2006).

Relatively speaking, SL is used less in university-level programs for international students than across the curriculum with domestic students. English language learners are likely to be the recipients rather than the providers of SL (Grassi et al., 2004; Hale & Whittig, 2006; Miller et al., 2015; Steinke, 2009). One concern is that international students have limited experience with autonomy (De Vita, 2007). However, some found that international students can “learn to recognize its importance, particularly in light of missed opportunities for interaction with native speakers of the language they are learning” (Sudhershnan & Bruen, 2014, p.37). Another concern that can cause hesitation about (English) language learners in service is related to how a lower linguistic or cultural proficiency might affect both the students and the service partners (Ene & Orlando, 2015). However, Ene and Orlando (2015) showed that high-intermediate English language learners were able to engage productively in SL through an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) reading course. International students who have better perceived command of the target language and autonomy also display increased curiosity, and combined, these result in higher personal growth (Cankaya et al., 2018).

International students in the U.S. who are introduced to service in the English language classes they might be required to complete have much to gain. The research suggests that students in SL language classes become interculturally aware (Askildson et al., 2013; Ene & Orlando, 2015; Wurr, 2009), socially aware and civically responsible (Ene & Orlando, 2015; Perren et al., 2013), more connected to their schools and community (Russell, 2007), and more interested in social justice (Cameron, 2015). In a multiple case study of six adult ESL students conducting SL activities, Bippus & Eslami (2013) found that their students improved both their language skills (similar to Askildson et al., 2013) and their self-confidence. University-level international EAP students in Ene and Orlando (2015) also gained self-confidence in their SL EAP course. Moreover, SL courses culminated with international, refugee, and immigrant students developing “a sense of self-worth” and “transform[ing] their identities from foreign students to active participants in U.S. culture” in Perren et al. (2013, p. 482).

Few studies speak directly to the issue of autonomy in SL with English-language learning international students, or what Dowling and Perren (2021) call TESOL SL, or TSL. For instance, the students involved in Miller et al. (2015) reported that service gave them a feeling of agency. Building on the findings of Askildson et al. (2013) that TSL students can experience similar learning outcomes when participating in different service experiences with a variety of community partners, Dowling and Perren (2021) recommend that “[s]tudents can also form greater autonomy by having the opportunity to independently reach out and find their own SL situations and service options” (p. 17).

Despite being advocated for, autonomy in SL in general or in TSL for international students in particular, has not been investigated much. To our knowledge, no studies have focused on the effects of learner autonomy on the development experienced by international students in SL EAP courses.

Purpose of the Study

The present study seeks to fill in a gap in our understanding of autonomy by comparing autonomous/self-directed and instructor-/other-directed groups of international students who engaged in SL activities as part of a university-level EAP course. We seek to understand whether increasing learner autonomy leads to better learning outcomes than instructor-directed SL, and what those outcomes are.

Research Questions

The guiding questions for the study were: What do instructor-/other-directed and autonomous/self-directed international students in a SL EAP course expect to learn? Do the outcomes related to their expectations differ, and – if so – how?

Study Design

Context

Our study was conducted at a mid-size urban university in the midwestern US. The university’s EAP program provides English language support for non-native-English-speaking students enrolled in degree programs. The students are predominantly international students on a study visa. Based on results from an English placement test taken upon entering the university, many students are placed into credit-bearing EAP courses, including a SL reading course called *Academic English Reading: Perspectives on Culture/Society*. Data for this study were collected over eight semesters of this course.

Course Curriculum

The course goals of the SL *Academic English Reading: Perspectives on Culture/Society* are to develop: (1) EAP reading skills, and (2) cultural understanding and civic-mindedness. For the first goal, students study and practice academic reading skills using authentic academic texts. To achieve the second goal, the course uses civically-minded themed readings focused on social issues of local and global relevance (e.g.: food shortages, immigration, philanthropic trends). In addition to reading, discussing, researching, and presenting their topics, the students conduct related SL activities which give them the opportunity to experience some of the realities they read about. Thus, the language and SL goals of the course are aligned, as advised by Dowling and Perren (2021).

The students are required to participate in a minimum of one service event per semester. In some cases, this single event may be a 2.5–3-hour shift at the campus food pantry, while in others it means volunteering at an urban garden for six hours. The SL requirement was designed so that the students would not be overwhelmed with the added hours. It was, likewise, important to not overwhelm the host locations, keeping in mind that our students were inexperienced as volunteers and had somewhat limited English proficiency. Such concerns frequently come up in the design of SL courses (Ene & Orlando, 2015; Tryon et al., 2008) but can be navigated successfully through a design that takes them into account (Perren & Wurr, 2015). Short-term SL has been successfully used in other settings: for example, in Voorhees & Furco (2005) the service was implemented in an eight-hour field trip, and in Wittmer (2004) the SL occurred in a single 8–10-hour placement. A longer SL experience is preferred by most community partners, which invest considerable amounts of time and labor into the experience; however, there are some organizations that are willing to accommodate short-term SL because they see it as a unique opportunity to provide students with an authentic, project-based learning experience, while at the same time benefitting from the students' enthusiasm and creative energy (Tryon et al., 2008). According to Hurtado and Thompson (1998), the length of the SL experience is less consequential than its design, specifically as related to the pre-service preparation and intensity of the experience (p. 19–20). With all this in mind, and having used a similar design in Ene and Orlando (2015), we required a single service event per student per semester. As indicated by our research questions, we focused this study on the student rather than the community perspective.

Before their service, within the first month of the semester, students complete a pre-service survey detailing their expectations. After the service, they complete a post-service survey in which they reflect on the significance of the experience. The pre- and post-service activities function to deepen and solidify the learning associated with SL, following with the SL literature which lauds the benefits of using a book-end or sandwich design, in which the SL experience is preceded and followed by various reflective tasks meant to prepare the students and transform the SL experience into learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Jones & Steinberg, 2011). For the final course project, called the Capstone Project, groups receive a 2000-word article on the course topic, and students individually complete reading-related tasks (e.g., take notes, learn academic words); in small groups, they discuss their article and prepare a presentation, leading fellow students through activities to interact with its topic. Students blend their own SL experience into the discussions and presentation part of the Capstone project.

Other-directed SL

When first integrating service into the course, the instructor, who was new to SL, preferred to oversee the service activities closely. The first semester, she directed all students to participate in a campus-wide “Day of Service” organized by the university’s Center for Service and Learning (CSL). On the prescribed day, the participants, instructor, SL assistant, and around 500 other students and faculty were organized into work locations. Coinciding with the semester’s theme of food scarcity, half of the course students were assigned to work at an urban farm and the other half went to a food bank distribution center. The second and third semesters, similar food-related themes were chosen, and similar group-service events were organized by the instructor. In the fourth semester of this study, the theme was immigration. While the instructor organized more than one option to alleviate scheduling conflicts for students, the SL experience remained other-directed as the instructor and/or the SL assistant led each activity. At each site, the students received tasks contributing to the workflow of the respective organization. In the other-directed condition, the course instructor or graduate SL assistant accompanied to take attendance, facilitate communication between the students and the site supervisors, answer questions from the students, and join into the service.

Autonomous/Self-directed SL

In the fifth through the eighth semesters included in this study, course themes focused on civic responsibilities, allowing students to choose service events that interested them. The themes were Election Issues (in 2016, with readings on topics such as mandatory voting and gun rights) and Civic Engagement (with readings on topics including employee volunteering programs and philanthropic trends of countries). Students were given a list of service opportunities to choose from (e.g., campus-wide service day, local food pantries, immigrant centers, etc.) and about six weeks to set up and complete the service. Students were also allowed to propose and conduct their own service. Neither the instructor nor the SL assistant attended service events with students. Table 1 summarizes each semester’s number of participants, condition (i.e., other- or self-directed), course themes, and service venues.

Participants

Data were collected from 143 students over the 8 semesters described above. Fifty-six students from 4 semesters were in the other-directed group, while 87 students from 4 semesters were in the self-directed group. The participants, 88 males and 55 females, were nearly all of traditional college age (18–22). A majority of the students’ first language was Arabic (110); other languages represented were Chinese (14), Japanese (7), Korean (5), African French (2), Russian (1), Turkish (1), Vietnamese (1), Spanish (1), and Swedish (1). Most of the students were pursuing majors in engineering, business, or health-related fields.

Table 1
Summary of Participants, Themes, and Venues by Semester

Approach	Semester	Number of students	Topic	Service venues
Other-Directed	1	26	Food scarcity	Campus-wide service day (2 groups) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urban garden • Food bank distribution center
	2	14	Food scarcity	Campus garden Campus food recovery/redistribution program
	3	4	Food scarcity	Urban farm
	4	12	Immigration	Refugee service organization
Self-Directed/ Autonomous	5	18	Elections	Campus food recovery/redistribution program CSL-led group activities Local food pantry
	6	32	Community engagement	Campus food recovery/redistribution program Campus-wide service day City beautification organization CSL-led group activities Local food pantry Refugee service organization State museum
	7	15	Community engagement	Campus food pantry Campus food recovery/redistribution program Campus-wide service day CSL-led group activities Local food pantry
	8	22	Community engagement	Autism training and resource center Campus food pantry Campus food recovery/redistribution program Church food program CSL-led group activities Elementary school Food bank distribution center Refugee service organization Local food pantry

Methods

To identify the effects of autonomy on the development of students enrolled in a SL EAP course, we compare the benefits of SL for the other-directed students and students who were given more autonomy. We refer to the latter group as self-directed, using Benson and Voller's (2014) term for learners who exercise agency and choice.

Data Collection

Data were collected from the participating students, with IRB approval, through pre- and post-service surveys which targeted the students' perceptions of their SL experience and gains from it. The pre-service survey was

administered about four weeks into the semester, after the students had been introduced to service and related social issues through course readings and discussions, but before they conducted service. The questions used in the pre-service survey were open-ended: “How do you feel about participating in this service event? What benefits do you expect to gain? What do you expect to learn?” The post-service survey, which was completed approximately two weeks before the end of the semester, included the following questions:

1. Through this service experience, did you change your ideas about anything related to the course theme, service, etc.? If yes, what? Explain.
2. Did you learn something new about the community? If yes, what? Explain.
3. Did you learn something about the people served by the organization. If yes, what? Explain.
4. Did you meet new friends? If yes, who? Explain.
5. Did you gain English language skills? Explain.
6. What was the most memorable moment or event for you during our service day? Think about these questions as you write: 1. Explain the moment or specific event. 2. How did you feel? 3. What did you notice? Why was that particular moment or event memorable/special/important to you? Did that moment or event help you realize something? What?

This pre-/post-service survey method was previously used in Ene and Orlando (2015) to explore the benefits of SL EAP. The current study expands on the previous one. Importantly, whereas in the earlier study we collected data from 31 participants from two sections taught in the same semester, in the current study, we gathered data longitudinally from 143 participants from eight semesters of SL EAP with differing levels of autonomy. In addition to the open-ended questions presented above, the post-service survey also contained some new closed-ended questions.

Data Analysis

The pre- and post-service surveys were analyzed qualitatively using a bottom-up approach (Maxwell, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994) typical of the inductive thematic analysis procedures applied to the analysis of open-ended, text-based survey answers (Guest et al., 2013). The author-researchers and a research assistant read the survey answers and co-created codes to capture the ideas in the students’ responses. An initial batch of twenty surveys were read and discussed together to begin defining comment boundaries and topic-based codes. Comments that addressed more than one topic were divided into parts and each part was coded separately. After the initial joint session, the three coders continued working separately through the remaining data, entering codes into an excel spreadsheet next to the comments extracted from the surveys. Upon completing this phase, the coders came together to resolve disagreements. The agreement rate was 78%. Disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. The entire data analysis process relied on co-constructing (Patton, 2002), refining, and interpreting the data through recursive interaction between the researchers and the data as well as among the researchers themselves. Similar constructivist methods were used in Ene and Orlando (2015), Gautam et al. (2016), and Miller et al. (2015). The themes and sub-themes that emerged through this process are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Sample Comment with Codes

Comment	Code
The most thing that I will learn is that there are many people who need food to live,	Community connections/Social awareness: Knowledge about society
helping community is something necessary in any country because people need to help each other to service.	Community connections/Social awareness: Relationship between service and community
Also, I will improve my English skills by speaking to the worker about the steps to prepare the food.	Language
I expect to learn how to help the community.	Community connections/Social awareness: Relationship between service and community

While we expected to discover some of the same themes found in our prior study, we were open to new themes emerging in this expanded context, as is customary in inductive thematic qualitative analysis. To remain in dialogue with the existing literature on SL, we phrased some of our themes and sub-themes similarly to Eyler and Giles's (1999) work on SL-inspired development.

In response to the pre-service survey, the students invariably shared that they were excited about participating in service, so we did not analyze the answer to that question further. For the question regarding the students' expectations, the 143 students' responses, analyzed as explained above, yielded a total of 339 comments. The responses to question (6) of the post-service survey yielded 263 comments that we coded as explained.

We used the pre-service survey data, analyzed qualitatively, to understand our students' expectations from the service experience. From the post-service survey, we used the answers to questions (1) - (5) to understand what the students gained from the experience; additionally, we refined our understanding of the experience's value through the qualitative analysis of the comments given for question (6). The findings below are summarized based on the themes that emerged from the thematic analysis. The themes are discussed in order from the most to the least frequent. While mostly qualitative, thematic content analysis lends itself to the quantification of the emergent themes (Hashemi & Babaii, 2013; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Within each theme, we clarify the similarities and differences between pre- and post-service findings for the two conditions in focus – other-directed and self-directed.

Findings

Learning and Fulfillment

The SL experience had a powerful effect on 70% the students: in the post-service survey, both the self- and other-directed groups indicated that they learned and even changed their ideas about the course theme and

service itself. More of the other-directed students (76.8%) than self-directed students (55.2%) perceived this transformation.

Nearly half of the pre-service comments – 48.7% from the other-directed group and 39.2% from the self-directed group – indicated that the participants expected to acquire new knowledge from the SL experience, as well as, to a lesser degree, to experience satisfaction through volunteering. The new knowledge our students expected to acquire referred to the course theme, the particular service tasks they were going to perform, and aspects we grouped in the themes below, such as English language and U.S. culture. The following is a representative comment which illustrates the constellation of expectations the students had from the SL experience:

Being a volunteer is a very important thing. There are many things that it could help me learn when I participate. For example, I'll learn about the food organization, because it is my first time volunteering there, and I'll have an idea about American food, too. I'll also practice the English language with the native speakers. Finally, I'll add this experience to my resumé to support my files [job applications]. (Rahman¹, Saudi Arabia, volunteer at the Campus food recovery/redistribution program)

Post-service comments focused mostly on the satisfaction and personal growth felt as a result of being involved in SL, according to 43.9% of the comments from the other-directed group and 46.7% of the comments from the self-directed group. The most striking comments emphasized the human connection, emotions, and thoughts experienced that transcended the individual and the moment.

People encounter challenges in life, and during some of the challenges people need someone to help [them] start a new life. Thus, we helped the family [of refugees] to start a better life than they had. We wanted to see them feeling optimistic. Every time we provided them with supplies, we saw tears of joy on their face. It was an emotional moment that can't be forgotten ever. I know some day if I need support in my life, people or friends will help, which encourages [me] to continue. (Abdul, Saudi Arabia, refugee service organization)

When I first entered the room, there was a man smiling in my face, and he talked with me about himself directly. And I thought that he's so social and funny. [The service] is an unforgettable experience for me because of the people who I met, and it's a new kind of experience. (Abdul, Saudi Arabia, refugee service organization)

It appears that the SL experience in our EAP course created opportunities for students to understand human nature and the meaning of human connections.

1. Participant names are pseudonyms.

Social Awareness/Community Connections

Dramatic changes for both groups occurred in gaining awareness of social issues and creating community connections – meaning, understanding the connection between a social issue, the service experience, and the community they served. By the end of their SL experience, more other-directed students (69.6%) than self-directed students (42.5%) answered that they learned something new about the target community. To a lesser extent, they gained a better understanding of the people served by the organization with which the students worked (55.6% and 18.6% of the students, respectively). The latter result may be related to the fact that some students were in settings or roles where they did not interact with the people receiving services (for example, in the kitchen or storage area of the Campus food recovery/redistribution program, or gardening at the Campus Gardens).

The expectation to gain a higher social awareness was initially about the same for both groups. It appeared in 15.4% of the comments from the other-directed group and 16.2% of the self-directed group. In the post-service survey, 29.6% and 32.7% of the comments, respectively, stated that the respondents had learned about the importance of community service and volunteer work. Thus, the experience of conducting service itself benefited both groups more than initially expected.

Most of the post-service comments about this theme showed an appreciation of the importance of volunteer work. A self-directed student from Japan, Keiko, who served at the campus food pantry was surprised to realize that even “staff and faculty [need to] take food from the pantry; I notice that there are a lot of people who need food.” Similarly, another student from the self-directed group understood the meaning of his service to the community:

... one of the students came back for seconds on his food. He said that it is nice to know he can always come on Friday nights for a full meal and people who are nice and will talk to them . . . it made volunteering feel a lot more important. (Hamid, Saudi Arabia, campus food recovery/redistribution program)

After experiencing the service, students gave more contemplative comments on this theme in the post-service survey. For example, an other-directed student showed the empathy he felt in the following comment: “It also was a wake-up call for me. That there are people in this world that don’t have enough to eat. While I whine about not having the latest phone” (Saad, Saudi Arabia, campus food pantry). As a result of learning about community needs, some students became more empathetic and gained perspective.

Interpersonal Growth

Interpersonal growth refers to developing one’s ability to work with others and/or build friendships. Post-service, 64.3% of the other-directed group and 62.1% of the self-directed group reported having accomplished this through the SL experience. In the pre-service survey comments, the hope that new friendships could be

forged in service was expressed in about 20% of the comments from both groups. Post-service, the comments offered related to this theme were primarily about appreciating the opportunity to learn how to work in teams. For example, an other-directed student pointed out that working with other people highlights “different ways to do one thing” (Alia, Saudi Arabia, urban garden). Another other-directed student realized that more can be accomplished in a team: “We do everything with our team together. If we do service by ourself, we can’t finish it in 2 hours. I realized teamwork is very important in our life” (Lee, China, campus food bank). Many students described the experience of making new friends and working in a team as “amazing.” Some, as illustrated in the next quote, made complex connections among the many dimensions of teamwork, such as creativity, collaboration, and its significance for productivity and career development.

When we did the volunteering work, we put stickers on each can. During the work, I found a way to make the process faster. To me, creativity is a key element to develop productivity. And we also did the teamwork. Some people were in charge of putting stickers on cans and some people for putting cans into boxes and some people’s job was to move the cans to the working table. Therefore, I know the importance of teamwork because it can not only develop our work productivity but also reduce our distance [bring us closer]. (Lily, China, local food pantry).

Language Learning and Practice

According to the pre-service survey, 16.2% and 23% of comments (respectively) had indicated that the students expected to “practice” or “improve” their English during the service activity. A student from the self-directed group commented that he thought he would “practice [his] language differently because [he] will talk with non-academic people” (Omar, Saudi Arabia, city food pantry). It is possible that, when completing the survey, the students were more focused on the novelty of the service experience and gains other than linguistic that they could get from it. It has been noted before that the “doing” in the service component of SL courses tends to get more of the participants’ attention than the regular content focus of the course – in our case, language (see also Ene & Orlando, 2015).

In the post-service survey, 48.2% of the students in the other-directed group reported language gains compared to 59.8% of the students from the self-directed group. Fewer – 46.4% – of the other-directed students reported having opportunities to speak English with a variety of people during their service experience compared to 62.1% of the self-directed students. Thus, it seems that the self-directed condition supported language practice and gains better.

The few students who shared feeling initially stressed about speaking English at the service site reported post-service that their interlocutors and teams helped them feel at ease, which boosted their confidence. Students also mentioned the merit of practicing their English outside of class, some of them pointing out that opportunities for practice are scarce in their same-language community. Some of the most rewarding

experiences happened to students who realized that they were valued for the English skills they had and that their own experience as international students and English language learners were assets during the service experience. Thus, while helping English language learners at an elementary school complete their activities, one of our students had this insight:

The most exciting moment when the students did their activities because I'm proud of myself for helping them. While I was answering their questions, I thought they did not understand me very well. However, when I saw the results, they were much better than what I thought. I noticed that they understood me better than the teacher because my English is a second language. In addition, I know how to communicate the ideas to the students because I understand the struggle of learning a foreign language. (Yussuf, Saudi Arabia, elementary English class)

Similarly, another student's self-confidence and sense of worth were boosted by encountering other speakers of the same language and seeing his knowledge applied:

I went there, and helped the teacher to teach one of the Immigrants. When I tried to explain to the immigrants things in English it was too hard, I felt how the teachers work hard to help others. I helped the teacher by translating some words because there was an Arabic [student]. When I tried to translate to the Immigrants things from Arabic to English it was easy. I noticed that there are Arab immigrants and that was nice, to find one who speaks the language you speak too. (Ahmad, Saudi Arabia, elementary English class)

Finally, some of our international students found meaning in the SL activity when they saw themselves mirrored in the language learners they were serving.

The best moment for me was when we shared our language with the students there, and they showed us how to speak and write in their language. I felt like we helped them to feel comfortable that they are studying a new language because when they explained their language to us, we felt that it was hard to understand. We were able to feel about their language how they felt about learning English. At first it was very hard - but if you work hard and feel free to learn a new language, it will be easy. It was important because as an international student, we were in the same situation, and therefore it was awesome to be able to explain for other people who are just starting to learn the language. (Fatimah, Saudi Arabia, elementary English class)

In the final example, language was not only the goal that both our international students and the immigrant learners at the service site were grappling with, but also the medium that facilitated their connection.

Discussion

The results we obtained show that international students in SL EAP courses have a positive perception of their development along several dimensions, regardless of being other-directed or self-directed. Our students reported learning about various things: course topics and SL while also enjoying the satisfaction of performing SL (see Learning and Fulfillment above); social issues and how they affect real communities (see Social Awareness/Community Connections); social, interpersonal, and career-related skills (see Interpersonal Growth); and language (see Language Learning and Practice). All of these learning outcomes were anticipated and expected by our participants, and they were by and large met. In addition to Ene and Orlando (2015), other studies have presented evidence that SL develops students in the ways identified here. Specifically, some have found that SL courses develop students' social awareness, their sense of connection with their social environment, and their understanding of social problems (Askildson et al., 2013; Perren et al., 2013; Reyes, 2000; Russell, 2007), as well as their awareness of community (Bippus & Eslami, 2013) and their linguistic proficiency (Askildson et al., 2013). Developing across these dimensions can boost international students' confidence and their sense of success and belonging (Brauss et al., 2015; Guo-Brennan et al., 2020), and is therefore a very desirable result.

Having different degrees of autonomy influenced the students' outcomes differently. More students from the other-directed group reported changing their ideas and learning something about the target community. It is possible that the teacher's or the assistant's presence at the service site and the facilitation they provided there made the point of the SL activities more salient. Additionally, the other-directed group's readings focused on the specific issue connected to their service – such as immigration – rather than service and its importance in general. The implication is that the teacher of an SL course and the course design remain ever so important, particularly for creating opportunities for the students to become aware of their own learning outcomes by including activities that elicit the students' metacognitive language, alternative views, and reflections on learning (Wenden, 1998, p. 530; also Levesque-Bristol, 2010). All eight sections of our SL courses followed the book-end (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995) or sandwich design (Jones & Steinberg, 2011) that the SL literature highly recommends. The fact that, within this design, the other-directed group worked with readings and other activities that focused on the same type of service they were being prepared for or had just experienced, helped focus them and led to more in this group perceiving that they had their minds changed. Like us, Hurtado and Thompson (1998), working in the context of a short international SL program, stressed that design is crucial, declaring: “Factors such as the pre-trip preparation and the actual intensity of the learning for the [nursing] students during the experience may have a greater influence on the outcomes than the length of time” (pp.19–20). Kackar-Cam and Schmidt (2014) found that tasks were most beneficial when they cultivated the students' competence (or sense that they are doing their task well/“know what they are doing”) and relatedness (sense that they belong), regardless of whether the tasks were required or not. In our case, the clearer alignment between the in-class work and out-of-class SL in the other-directed sections of the course, both pre- and post-service, may have helped build a higher sense of competence, which in turn led to a more pronounced sense of having learned. This further underlines that, besides student choice, course design is an important aspect of fruitful SL (Levesque-Bristol et al., 2010, p. 210).

As far as the linguistic aspects of the course, the post-service responses indicate that our participants felt that they had developed linguistically thanks to the SL experience. More members of the self-directed group reported linguistic gains. Without mediation from the teacher or her assistant, it seems that more students from the self-directed group might have taken initiative to use the target language. The SL EAP course offered all the students opportunities for linguistic interaction inside and outside of the classroom, as opposed to more traditional, classroom-only courses. In addition, the self-directed group operated more independently in that they had agency with regard to what organization they chose to work with, communicating with the organization, and conducting their service individually or in pairs. They did not attend the same service event at once, the way some of the other-directed students did when the class went together with the teacher or assistant to the Campus Day of Service. Thus, more of the self-directed students ended up interacting directly with the community. As a result, they had more opportunities to use the target language and push their own limits linguistically. Our findings suggest that SL EAP and self-directedness support the second language acquisition process by creating opportunities for contextual learning (Lantolf, 2006; Minor, 2002) and for producing linguistic output (Swain, 2006).

Our students repeatedly shared that the SL experience not only presented opportunities for authentic practice but also boosted their confidence and sense of connectedness to SL recipients (as was the case with the students who did their SL with elementary school English language learners). While the satisfaction of performing SL and of benefiting from it has been critically presented before as a type of “helper’s high” (Luks, 1988), we take the position that our international students’ sense of satisfaction and pride in practicing and developing their English, or even connecting to other participants through their native language, is a reflection of gaining self-worth. It has been noted before that international students face many difficulties and feel disempowered (Hale & Whittig, 2006) or minoritized (Gautam et al., 2016). One of many reasons for feeling this way has to do with “English language learners feeling incompetent due to their non-native speaking skills living in a foreign environment” (Miller et al., 2015, p. 345). Thus, when international students feel validated as “helpers” in SL – through their developing English language abilities or their native language use – their satisfaction is an expression of empowerment rather than putting their own gains before those of the population they are serving. As English language proficiency matters for both academic success and social adjustment (Andrade, 2006), the indication that SL EAP supports linguistic gains, especially for autonomous, self-directed students, signifies that SL EAP can in fact pave the way to less isolation and language-based discrimination (Gautam et al., 2016).

A limitation of our study is that we did not measure the knowledge (content) and linguistic gains reported by the participants using objective methods of assessment. The only study we are aware of that assessed linguistic gains by using a pre- and post-test remains Askildson et al. (2013). We expected reasonably that, being exposed to EAP instruction and SL, the students’ English would develop and their SL-related knowledge as well, given that instruction itself is a treatment. A linguistic and content-related pre- and post-test would provide an additional source of data to confirm the students’ thoughts and perceptions about their EAP SL experience. Such quantitative measurements of the learning outcomes of self- and other-directed international students in SL would help

verify the self-perceived outcomes reported by our students. Our study provides a starting point for continued research by showing how international students in SL EAP courses perceive the effects of the experience.

While short, the SL experience in our study contained elements of transformative learning and thus provides yet another example of how short-term SL can be implemented where a longer experience is not wanted or possible. After all, SL is a continuum (García & Longo, 2017); every implementation need not be expansive to have an impact. Autonomy can be implemented gradually (Benson & Voller, 2014, p.2). Our participants reported experiencing changes of mind and perception, in addition to cultural knowledge and linguistic gains. Some students expressed their resolve to volunteer more in the future, either in the U.S. or in their home country. Mezirow's (1997) theory of transformative learning encompasses learning experiences that lead to changes in attitudes and perceptions. We believe that a more in-depth final written reflection and a delayed questionnaire on the potentially transformative effects of the course would help clarify their extent and durability. For now, our study provides encouraging evidence that short-term SL can be fruitfully introduced to international students in a high-intermediate EAP course. As García and Longo (2017) point out, it may be that "a more appropriate emphasis for any kind of short-term international engagement including service-learning trips" is that the experience as a whole is "more about learning than service" (p. 41).

Conclusion

Overall, both other-directed and self-directed groups benefited from the SL experience, suggesting that students can develop holistically in a SL EAP course. Other-directed students appeared to benefit more in terms of learning about specific social issues, service, and the target communities. Self-directedness was associated with perceived language gains more than other-directedness. The design of the other-directed condition, in which course readings and activities corresponded more directly to the SL events conducted, facilitated the students' perceived learning gains. Therefore, our study suggests that SL EAP courses should both align the focus of the course readings and activities with the SL experience and grant the students the autonomy needed to push themselves to use the target language, preferably in direct interaction with community members, during the SL event. In agreement with other researchers, we found that the short duration of the service in our study was not a major limitation: our students reported developing in various respects, and design mattered for their success as much as their autonomy (Hurtado & Thompson, 1998; Tryon et al., 2008). Overall, our study sheds light on the fact that SL English language courses are uniquely positioned to improve the experience of international students (Macgregor & Folinazzo, 2017). Due to its potential to support the multi-dimensional development of international students, we recommend SL EAP.

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Author Bios

Estela Ene (Professor of English, Director of the English for Academic Purposes Program, and Director of the TESOL MA Program at IUPUI) is a researcher, teacher, and program administrator in the field of EAP. She promotes curricular innovations, such as SL implementation, in EAP curricula. Her scholarly work has been published in numerous books and journals, including the *Wiley Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*, *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *Assessing Writing*, *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*.

Honor Orlando (Senior Lecturer in the English for Academic Purposes Program at IUPUI) teaches EAP to international students and has been implementing SL in her EAP courses at IUPUI. This is her second publication on SL in EAP with the above co-author.