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STUDENTS HELP STUDENTS: ESL CONVERSATIONAL HOURS IN ENGLISH FOR UKRAINIAN REFUGEES

ESTUDANTES AJUDANDO ESTUDANTES: SESSÕES DE CONVERSAÇÃO EM INGLÊS PARA REFUGIADOS UCRANIANOS

СТУДЕНТИ ДОПОМАГАЮТЬ СТУДЕНТАМ: ПРАКТИКА РОЗМОВНОЇ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ ДЛЯ УКРАЇНСЬКИХ БІЖЕНЦІВ

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ABSTRACT: This teaching report examines the experience of assisting Russian-speaking refugees from Ukraine, by students studying Russian at the University of New Hampshire (USA). The students offered the refugees practice in English as a Second Language (ESL) and reflected on their experience preparing for and conducting conversation hours. This experience fits within the community-based learning approach (CBL), specifically the service-learning approach.

KEYWORDS: Service-learning; ESL (English as a Second Language); Community-Based Learning (CBL).

RESUMO: Este relato de experiência docente examina a experiência de apoio a refugiados ucranianos que dominam a língua russa, oferecido por estudantes que estudam russo na Universidade de New Hampshire (EUA). Os estudantes ofereceram aos refugiados a prática de inglês como segunda língua e refletiram sobre sua experiência na preparação e condução de sessões de conversação. Essa experiência insere-se na abordagem de aprendizagem baseada na comunidade, mais especificamente, na modalidade de aprendizagem-serviço.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Aprendizagem-serviço; inglês como segunda língua; aprendizagem baseada na comunidade.

АНОТАЦІЯ: У цьому звіті про викладацьку практику проаналізовано досвід студентів програми з вивчення російської мови в Університеті Нью-Гемпшира (США), які допомагали російськомовним біженцям з України. Студенти надавали біженцям можливість практикувати англійську як іноземну мову та рефлексували над власним досвідом підготовки й проведення розмовних занять. Цей досвід відповідає підходу до навчання

через взаємодію з громадою, зокрема навчанню через суспільно корисну діяльність.

КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА: Навчання через суспільно корисну діяльність; англійська як друга мова; навчання через взаємодію з громадою.

1. Introduction

According to J. Clifford (2019), contemporary language education includes not only language teaching, but also promotes engagement with local and international communities. Often, this engagement comes in a philanthropic form. These practices provide students with valuable experiences that are essential for their personal and professional development.

One of the ways that American schools, colleges and universities are taking this into practice is community-based learning (CBL) where the community becomes "a partner in the learning process" (MOONEY; EDWARDS, 2001, p. 182). CBL is a popular method of language learning. Instructors often engage with language resources outside the classroom: they reach out to local shops, theaters, and professionals to connect with the target language and culture (ROBY, 2019, p. 120).

Lately, there has been a demand that has transformed CBL's formula: instead of working **with** the community, it's proposed to work **for** the community. This way, both parties involved get a richer experience. One of the community-based learning models is called service-learning which involves working and helping a local community. Going from the classroom into the community has an amazing effect on participants on both sides: it transforms them.

2. What is service-learning for students learning foreign languages?

Service-learning is a popular approach used in U.S. academic programs that involve community engagement. In many American universities, service -learning is strongly supported. Courses with this component are actively promoted among students, and in some institutions, it is even a required element.

Language programs often take part in service-learning when they are surrounded by a linguistic environment, even if limited. Students interact with speakers of the languages they study in order to gain linguistic and cultural experience while simultaneously helping the native speakers. Such help may include, for example, providing technical assistance to elderly speakers, for example when the students visit nursing homes, or helping with proofreading résumés and practicing job interview skills when working

with individuals who need professional language support. Knowing the target language and culture allows students to understand their partner's needs more effectively, clarify nuances, and provide meaningful conversational support.

At our university, there are no formal requirements to incorporate community resources, but language instructors are deeply aware of the importance of integrating language and culture beyond the classroom and of broadening students' skills and cultural awareness. Therefore, we especially encourage student initiatives to engage in communication in the target language for the purpose of helping others.

Collaboration with the community successfully fits into the standards and learning goals stated by the American Association of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) (2014). The standards are based on 5 pillars: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, Communities.

In our pedagogical setting, we have tested out a variety of community-based learning models by working with elderly homes, a local adult education center, as well as an ESL program over Zoom. In the fall 2023 semester we got a chance to establish a connection with a non-profit organization, the Samantha Smith Project (SAMANTHA SMITH'S GROUP, 2024; VENOT, 2023), located in Ireland but operating online. They offer language support to Russian-speaking Ukrainian refugees in a variety of forms: conversational hours and clubs for learners, language support for their ESL instructors, mock job interviews for professionals from Ukraine, etc.

3. Samantha Smith Project as community partner

The Samantha Smith Project emerged in response to the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The project was founded by Russian-speaking residents of Ireland — teachers of English as a foreign language — who offered online English-language support to refugees from Ukraine. According to the founders (NOREN, 2023), and later through private conversations with the project's manager and teachers, it became clear that the project was in extremely high demand due to the large-scale displacement of Ukrainians to English-speaking countries. Since the project was conducted online, access to resources was very convenient for both learners and volunteers. The initiative was available not only to refugees residing in Ireland but also to those who found themselves in other countries, such as the United States.

In its first year of operation, the Samantha Smith Project helped 5,900 people who sought assistance with language learning, job interviews, résumé writing, and more. Support was provided in several languages: English, Czech, German, Spanish, Swedish, and Finnish.

Since Ukraine is a bilingual country, the Samantha Smith Project offered students instructors who could explain the target material either in Russian or in Ukrainian. Because our students speak only Russian, they were assigned to groups that specifically requested a Russian-speaking teacher or conversation club leader.

4. Ukrainian refugees in the United States

It is known that during the first year of the war, approximately 271,000 Ukrainians — adults, children, and teenagers — entered the United States. Each category of refugees faced specific challenges, one of the key solutions to which was active knowledge and use of the English language.

Efforts to assist Ukrainian relocants in the United States extended to the linguistic sphere as well: refugees encountered a language barrier that created difficulties in everyday life — when seeking employment, communicating with social workers, finding housing, and more. In the United States, refugees typically have access to local language-learning resources available through libraries, churches, community centers (adult education programs), community colleges, and universities. In addition, ESL courses were offered to children in schools.

Online education became a popular option because it allowed people to study from the comfort of their homes without spending time or resources on travel to in-person classes. Volunteers participating in the project also did not need to travel physically, which created broad opportunities to provide assistance remotely. This was especially important for student volunteers balancing their studies with volunteer work.

5. Service-learning structure

Collaboration between Samantha Smith Project and our university was based on conversational hours. Only one of the nine students had ESL experience, so we decided first to do it in small groups and pairs and then, if students were comfortable, to do it on their own. For further reference, we will refer to the helping party as “American students” and the refugee party as “Ukrainian students”. The service-learning structure is described below.

1. Throughout the semester nine American students had to conduct four conversational hours.
2. American students picked a topic for each conversational hour.
3. They offered a day and a time that worked for Ukrainian students.
4. They picked a level and an age group. The majority of American students worked with A2-B1 students and teenagers. The European-level system was explained to American students before their sessions to meet their language level expectations and predict what kind of

communicative strategies they could use in case of misunderstanding. For those American students who had no prior experience with ESL, it was recommended to start with B1-level students. American students picked a variety of topics based on their interests and often their major: My favorite food; Travel in the US and abroad (A1 and A2 levels); Sports and Hockey (B1); Short stories in America (B1 and B2); History; Science (B1 and B2); American presidents (B2).

5. Ukrainian students signed up for the session.
6. The American students developed materials. Instructors created a list of tips on how to effectively lead a conversational hour, which included time management, activities selection, discussion starters, and the best ways to be a "teacher." American students were allowed to help Ukrainian students using Russian if there was a problem. As was reported by American students, this need for code-switching happened only once.
7. Before the American students started zooming in with Ukrainian students, topics to avoid were discussed. The majority of these topics were related to conflicts and hardships of wartime. However, during the sessions, there were a few discussions started by Ukrainian students about sensitive topics. American students sympathized with their experiences.
8. After each session, American students had to submit their reflections. All of the reflection prompts were different. The goal was to track students' pedagogical experience and their understanding of the foreign culture. Under their pedagogical experience, we wanted them to see their conversational partners in the same shoes as our students learning another language. We wanted them to reflect on the techniques they used to rephrase themselves to be understood, on the language level of their conversational partners, successful topic selection, and discussion flow.
9. After each session, students got feedback from the Samantha Smith Project. The area of improvement, as expected, was about the pace of speaking and rephrasing oneself, since almost none of our students had a background in ESL.

6. Service-Learning Outcomes

To make this experience more meaningful, students had to write a reflection after each session.

Reflection #1 was designed to identify students' learning styles and offer further reflections based on this style. They also focused on what their first encounter had taught them. Students mentioned the relief they had after teaching their very first class. Since most students had no previous

experience of ESL teaching or conducting a similar event, it was good to establish the ground for their further experience.

Reflection #2 was designed individually according to the learning style of each American student. The goal was to look at the teaching process from a teacher's perspective and come back with effective solutions for students. For example, those who said that they don't actively participate in class on campus, were asked to think about how they would engage those students who are not active. One of the students mentioned that the topic choice (travel) was engaging for everyone and participation was high. The student used fun videos to introduce travel to her country with a few follow-up questions about the video. The student created a positive ambiance by praising the students' achievements. Another student mentioned choosing more relevant content, creating more interactive activities, and using easier words for understanding as effective ways to engage his interlocutors.

Reflections #3 and #4 assessed students' pedagogical progress and cultural awareness. For the pedagogical progress, the goal was to identify how they manage small group discussions in the target language and the intuitive pedagogical strategies they employ. Regarding cultural awareness, we were interested in how their experiences helped them understand the cultural perceptions of their interlocutors, specifically cultural and behavioral differences.

Pedagogically, everyone admitted that they learned to explain things better. Students became more aware of different ways to convey the meaning of a word or expression using simplifications, synonyms, or visuals. Pronouncing words slowly was often crucial for lower levels. Topics selected should be relevant to people's interests: if people can talk about themselves, they will enjoy the conversation. A healthy balance of asking questions and sharing stories helps keep communicants engaged. Working with a small group was beneficial because every participant had the opportunity to contribute to the discussion in the target language and be heard. Students also mentioned that they were not strictly limited to the topic set for the meeting. They often talked about other related subjects, which felt very natural.

As students reported, they learned a lot from the stories and experiences of Ukrainian students. Some noticed cultural differences, while others did not. One student reflected that Eastern European experiences vary greatly from those of Americans. There are more problems and struggles in Eastern Europe, whereas Americans take many things for granted. A student with a Korean background mentioned that Ukrainian students were very passionate about expressing their opinions and asking questions, which, according to her, wouldn't be very common in a Korean classroom. This helped them improve their skills and helped her run the class.

Overall, the American students enjoyed this experience involving communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. They got a chance to help newcomers with their language skills. Students could try out the role of a teacher, as well as observe certain cultural differences with interlocutors from Eastern Europe. American students got very positive feedback from the Samantha Smith Project including their kind attitude, good choice of topics, and keeping young interlocutors engaged.

It's important to conclude that the demand for assistance with language needs is quite high among our students, and this kind of experience opens up new horizons for them, both from a humanistic, personal and professional point of view, by bringing together Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities.

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