

Integrating Pedagogy and Practice: The Impact of Academic Service Learning in the TEFL Context in Higher Education

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Abstract

This study explored the transformative potential of academic service learning (ASL) within a Taiwanese university setting in the context of teaching English as a foreign language. The participants were students majoring in English, enrolled in a semester-long English teaching course. Their academic service-learning project involved teaching English to students in rural primary schools. By adopting both quantitative and qualitative approaches, this study illuminated how ASL influences students' academic, personal, and interpersonal development. Quantitative findings revealed a significant level of satisfaction with the ASL course and noted substantial gains in personal growth, professional development, and civic engagement domains. As for the qualitative data, the study brought forth the concrete ways in which the academic service-learning curriculum has augmented students' professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes. While the results aligned with many previous studies asserting the benefits of service learning in enhancing academic and practical learning outcomes, they also shed light on the potential areas of improvement, particularly in fostering civic engagement. Overall, this study underscored the transformative potential of a well-structured academic service-learning curriculum in enriching student learning experiences, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, and cultivating a deeper sense of civic responsibility.

Keywords: service learning; academic service learning; EFL education; professional competence



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Introduction

Service learning (SL) is an educational approach that combines academic coursework with community service. It offers students practical experiences while encouraging civic responsibility and community development. (Jacoby 2014). Originally focused on volunteer social work, the serve-learning philosophy has broadened its scope to encompass fields such as business, communication, and education. Service-learning programmes in education were initially developed in the United States and subsequently gained widespread popularity within the country. In recent years, this educational approach has been adopted and recognised globally. Educational institutions all over the world have integrated service learning into their curricula and have increasingly recognised its potential to cultivate diverse competencies (Salam et al. 2019). The widespread adoption of this service-learning approach has highlighted its effectiveness in providing comprehensive education.

In Taiwan, the incorporation of SL into the education system gained momentum after the introduction of the “Service Learning Scheme for Universities and Colleges” by the Ministry of Education in 2007. Reacting to this, universities set up dedicated units to champion service-learning curricula and boost student involvement in community services or related activities. However, the majority of these service-learning courses have placed a greater emphasis on labour-intensive work or volunteer activities, sometimes giving these aspects of service precedence over explicit learning goals. This focus has generated some controversy, with critics indicating it can potentially affect student motivation negatively (Ai et al. 2019). Boosting students’ service in connection with their learning in academic applications may be a more critical consideration. Thus, the integration and application of professional learning could perhaps be an effective method for empowering students’ diverse competencies and maximising the benefits of the learning.

Previous research has focused primarily on the benefits and challenges of service learning or its impacts on students’ personal growth and civic responsibility (Bingle and Clayton 2012; Eyler et al. 2001; Moely and Ilustre 2014). Relatively few studies have addressed its effects on students’ professional performances. There is a research gap concerning students’ perceptions of academic SL and how such an approach influences their professional competence development, particularly in the context of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) courses in Taiwan. As such, the present article aims to address this gap by answering the following research questions:

- (1) What are Taiwanese students’ perceptions of academic service learning (ASL) in the TEFL course?
- (2) How does academic service learning in the TEFL course impact the development of Taiwanese university students’ professional competence?

Literature Review

Historical Background of Service Learning

Service learning emerged in the social movements during the 1960s in the United States. These movements placed a strong emphasis on civic engagement (Eyler and Giles 1999). While service learning can be traced back to initiatives of volunteering community service, citizenship training and youth moral education, its formal inclusion in higher education was initially limited to a few groups that participated in community service (Furco 2006). However, by the late 1980s, universities began formalising service learning in curricula and academic studies, which distinguished it from mere community service. This shift aligned with Sigmon's (1979) views on the mutual benefits service learning offered to students and the communities they served. In the 1990s, service learning became widely adopted across higher education institutions. It has been regarded as a major force in educational change, and a central vehicle for fulfilling civic responsibility and practical knowledge (Eyler and Giles 1999).

The 2000s observed a global trend of adopting and endorsing service learning. Institutions have recognised its applicability and influence, adapting its principles to align with their specific contexts (Tuan and Bao 2021). For example, higher education institutions in Europe have shown increasing interest in experiential pedagogies, incorporating service learning to bolster community engagement and student mobility (Sotelino-Losada et al. 2021). African nations, with unique postcolonial educational challenges, have adopted service learning as a mechanism to address community needs while enhancing learner outcomes (Fourie 2003). In Asian regions, the approach to service learning has been influenced by intrinsic cultural and societal values. It emphasises fostering civic awareness, social responsibility, and promoting societal harmony amid evolving sociopolitical landscapes (Ma, Chiu, and Wei 2017).

Each region's adoption of service learning reflects a complex interplay of local knowledge frameworks, sociopolitical imperatives, and pedagogical objectives. Such diversity underscores the need for continuous research studies to understand and further the development of service learning in global contexts.

Theoretical Grounding of Service Learning

Service learning's theoretical underpinnings draw from diverse academic traditions, emphasising its interdisciplinary nature. Drawing from Dewey's principle of "learning by doing", it highlights the power of active participation. Expanding on this, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle illustrates how experiences become knowledge through a four-stage cycle, including concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. This theory not only validates service learning as a teaching method but also emphasises the central role of reflection in its theoretical and practical dimensions. Furthermore, Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory posits that critical reflection on entrenched beliefs can

lead to deeper insights. Through service learning, as students encounter societal issues and challenges, their reflections can catalyse a profound shift in their comprehension of societal intricacies and their place within them.

Additionally, Freire's (1972) cultural learning suggests that effective learning environments thrive on mutual cooperation, proactiveness, community focus, and a vibrant student culture. Within the realm of service learning, hands-on experiences enhance cultural awareness. When institutions and students collaborate with communities, it fosters mutual comprehension and drives change through meaningful interaction and exchange.

Beyond these foundational theories, the constructivist approach emphasises that knowledge is co-constructed, and service learning acts as a medium for this shared endeavour between students and the broader community. Collectively, these theoretical frameworks provide a robust foundation for service learning, emphasising its value in developing active, reflective, and socially engaged learners.

Service Learning as Pedagogy

Service-learning pedagogy is a form of experiential education that combines academic learning with community service, encouraging students to apply academic knowledge in real-world situations while addressing community needs (Bringle and Clayton 2012; Lovat and Clement 2016). The SL programme offers learners a platform for transforming knowledge from experiences into new applications, which entwines experience, reflection, and knowledge (McCarthy and Corbin 2003). Reflection, in particular, serves as a crucial bridge connecting service experience with learning (Eyler 2002; Jacoby 2014).

Continuous reflection during the service allows students to critically think about their service experiences in relation to course content and their personal and societal roles. This reflective process promotes the enhancement of their knowledge, skills, and cognitive abilities, ultimately fostering more active community involvement (Ash and Clayton 2009; Kawai 2021). Additionally, meaningful service learning emphasises the importance of reciprocal relationships between students and the community. Service activities should be co-created to address genuine community needs. Through mutual respect and collaboration, both students and community members benefit, ensuring that the learning and service are truly meaningful (Eppler et al. 2011; Jacoby 2014).

SL programmes have been shown to yield positive impacts on both the community receiving services and the institutions conducting the programmes (Bringle and Clayton 2012). Furthermore, enriched curricular offerings tied to SL have been associated with student participants' personal growth, civic engagement, and academic progression (Eyler et al. 2001; Moely and Ilustre 2014). However, to successfully incorporate SL into academic courses, careful structuring of programmes and alignment with course objectives are essential (Furco 2006; Jenkins and Sheehy 2011).

Implementation Phases of a Service-Learning Course

Designing a service-learning course requires systematic planning at every implementation phase. Fertman, White, and White (1996) propose four major stages: preparation, service, reflection, and celebration. Smith (1997) introduces a five-step cyclical process: Assess Needs, Plan and Prepare, Experience Meaningful Service, Analyse and Generalise, and New Application, emphasising the concept that reflection should continuously occur before, during, and after the service. Geleta and Gilliam (2003) present a three-phase core model: Preparation, Action, and Evaluation, with reflection occupying a central role and connecting each stage. Kaye (2004) advocates for a five-step dynamic process: Investigation, Preparation, Action, Reflection, and Demonstration. The first three are a cyclical inner loop connected by reflection. The last two, reflection and demonstration, form an outer loop that continues throughout the process, not in a linear manner. Students must continue to reflect and share the new insights and applications they have internalised.

In summary, the literature reveals that each cycle of SL primarily involves the stages of pre-service investigation and preparation, action during service, post-service reflection and evaluation, and subsequent transformation into new applications and sharing. Several iterations of this cycle are necessary to yield learning outcomes and applications. This study proposes a course implementation process suitable for the aspects of student learning, as shown in Figure 1.

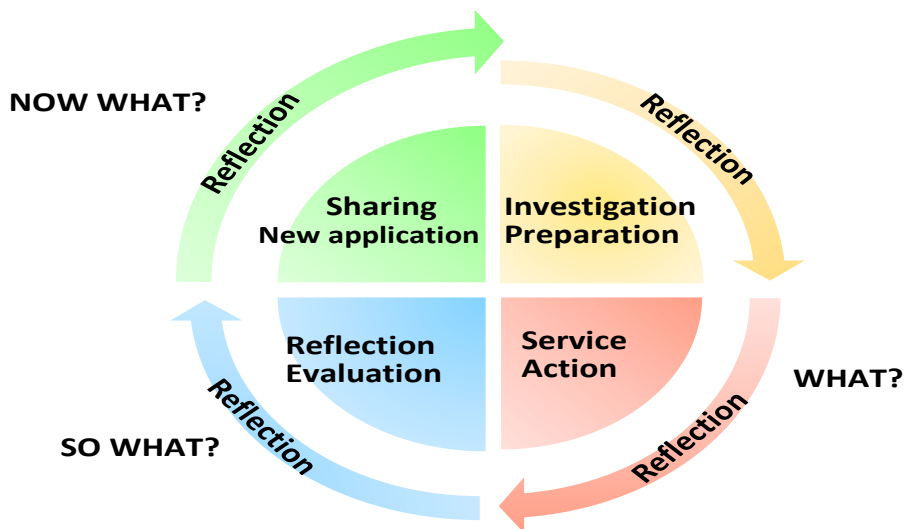


Figure 1: Service-learning cycle

The Learning Outcomes of Academic Service Learning

Over the years, numerous studies have investigated the learning outcomes of academic service learning, revealing its profound impacts across personal, social, and academic dimensions. ASL has been widely recognised for its contribution to personal growth. Research has shown that ASL improves students' self-efficacy, self-esteem, and personal values (Eyler et al. 2001; McCarthy and Corbin 2003), as well as critical reflections and self-awareness (Ash and Clayton 2009). Similarly, students participating in ASL programmes experienced significant growth in their leadership skills, moral reasoning, and spiritual development (Vogelgesang and Astin 2000), as well as enhanced interpersonal skills and cultural sensitivity (Kawai 2021).

The social benefits of ASL have also been extensively explored. Studies underlined the role of ASL in fostering civic responsibility, promoting active citizenship, and enhancing social awareness (Jenkins and Sheehy 2011). Furthermore, it has been proved that ASL programmes significantly boost students' empathy levels, cultural competence, and commitment to social justice (Mitchell 2015).

However, the effects of ASL on the development of professional competencies, such as discipline-specific knowledge and skills, have not received equal attention in the literature. Existing studies present mixed findings. Conway, Amel, and Gerwien (2009) found a positive correlation between ASL and academic performance, with students involved in SL demonstrating better problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. Furthermore, ASL experiences could foster the development of discipline-specific skills (Jameson, Clayton, and Ash 2013), career readiness, and professional competencies (Wang and Calvano 2018). In contrast, Moely et al. (2002) found that students involved in service learning noted a minor decrease in academic field learning as the semester progressed, despite this decrease being less pronounced compared to the decline observed in students not engaged in service learning. Novak, Markey, and Allen (2007) noted that while SL appears to contribute to various personal and social outcomes, its impact on academic outcomes is minimal. Hence, there is a pressing need for further research to investigate the effects of ASL on students' academic performance and professional competencies. More discipline-specific research is imperative to elucidate how ASL can augment professional competencies across diverse fields. This is especially pertinent to the domain of teaching English as a second or foreign language (TESL/TEFL).

Service Learning in the Discipline of English Language Teaching

In TESL education, it has been proved that service learning develops TESL practitioners' personal growth and community connections (Perren 2013). It has been documented as a transformative power that enables TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages) graduate students to significantly alter their attitudes towards service and enhance their understanding of English language learners (Cho and Gulley 2017). Furthermore, SL has been shown to be a potent pedagogical tool, allowing prospective

teachers to practically apply their theoretical knowledge (Perren 2013; Schneider 2019). On the other hand, relatively limited studies have been documented regarding the effects of service learning in the realm of TEFL. For instance, recent studies found that SL significantly impacts pre-service educators' personal, social, and learning outcomes (Shouman 2019; Tuan and Bao 2021). Similarly, Kassabgy and El-Din (2013) and Simsek (2020) indicate that SL made significant contributions to English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher candidates' academic development. Despite the value of these studies in English language teaching, research studies in Asia-Pacific regions are scarce. Given the gaps identified in the literature, this study aims to explore Taiwanese students' perceptions of academic service learning in TEFL courses and its impacts on their professional competence development. This understanding aims to contribute to the broader discourse on SL pedagogy, particularly its integration into academic courses to enhance professional competence among Taiwanese university students.

The English Language Teaching Context in Taiwan

While the integration of service learning in TESL and TEFL has exhibited transformative effects across different global contexts, it is paramount to understand the specific sociocultural and political backdrop in which it operates. Taiwan, with its unique linguistic, political, and cultural dynamics, provides a compelling context to investigate the role and implications of SL in English language teaching. Recognising the broader global dynamics of the English language hegemony sets the stage for understanding its localised implications in the Taiwanese scenario.

Global Hegemony of the English Language

In the ever-globalising world, the dominance of the English language has been the subject of many critiques. Phillipson (1992) introduced the concept of “linguistic imperialism”, elucidating the idea of English overshadowing regional languages and cultural nuances. Canagarajah (2005) expanded on this by highlighting that the global spread of English is not just a linguistic phenomenon. It is interwoven with cultural, economic, and even political threads of influence, a sentiment echoed by observations from places such as Taiwan (Chen 2011).

However, the narrative is not solely about dominance. Crystal (2003) acknowledges the universal presence of English, but emphasises its role as a vehicle for empowerment and global connectivity. It is not just a language of the powerful, but a bridge facilitating global dialogue and fostering cultural understanding. Tsuda (2008) provides instances where English can sometimes be appropriated and localised without obliterating local languages and cultures. This process of linguistic pluralism illustrates the dynamic relationship between global and local linguistic forces. Similarly, Makoni and Pennycook (2007) delve into the concept of “disinventing languages”. They champion the idea that linguistic borders are not rigid. This calls for a fresh look at how we understand and define the boundaries of the English language and its interplay with others.

Political and Cultural Implications for Taiwanese English Education

English holds a distinctive place in Taiwanese education, mirroring Taiwan's multifaceted ties with global powers and its aspirations for economic progress and international validation. Historically, Taiwan's educational ethos has been influenced by political dynamics. It transitioned from a Mandarin-centric approach aligning with its Chinese affiliations to a bilingual strategy that emphasises both English and Mandarin. This shift reflects Taiwan's inclination towards Western and global paradigms (Hsu 2021). Furthermore, a heightened focus on English proficiency could enhance its international competitiveness, especially given the political pressure from larger neighbouring countries (Chiang 2014).

However, this global orientation also triggers introspection about Taiwan's core identity and cultural heritage. Yeh (2023) delves into the nation's ambitious bilingual blueprint for 2030, a policy sometimes viewed through sceptical lenses as economically motivated, possibly sidelining indigenous languages and cultures. Chiang (2014) underscores concerns about overshadowing native dialects such as Hokkien and Hakka, calling for linguistic equilibrium. Contrastingly, Tsou (2015) offers an alternative perspective that English learning could foster a world-wise Taiwanese identity and harmonise global engagement with cultural preservation. In line with this, many Taiwanese TEFL educators have started integrating local content and culture into English lessons, presenting English as just another language rather than a superior mode of communication. In summary, balancing global engagement with local identity remains an intricate challenge in Taiwan's English language teaching context.

In the midst of such multifaceted deliberations about English in Taiwan's societal and academic context, this study explores the integration of service learning within TEFL paradigms. This approach provides a balanced way to combine English teaching with cultural and linguistic understanding, community engagement, and holistic growth. It has the potential to equip students with the ability to engage in meaningful interactions globally and locally, cultivating them into language-proficient individuals with social awareness. Furthermore, this integrative approach may also address some of the political and cultural challenges in the discourse of English education in Taiwan.

Methodology

Research Participants and Setting

Participants in this study were 48 university students enrolled in the "Introduction to English Language Teaching" course in the English Department at one central university in Taiwan, including 13 male students and 35 female students. This elective course marked the students' first experience with service learning integrated into their academic curriculum. The SL project, which was designed to blend into the course, mainly involved guiding students to four remote elementary schools, where they provided English tutoring services on five Saturday mornings during the semester. The community service targets were children in these rural elementary schools, who

generally had fewer English learning resources compared to their urban counterparts, resulting in a noticeable lag in their English learning progress. However, considering the Taiwanese government's 2030 bilingual education goal and the integration of English into content learning (Graham and Yeh 2023), English proficiency has become an essential tool. Consequently, it is evident that there is a pressing need for the children in these community schools to enhance their English proficiency.

Course Design

The course content included 14 weekly two-hour lectures and 16 hours of community English tutoring services. The process of SL mainly consisted of four stages: the investigation and preparation stage, the service and action stage, the reflection and evaluation stage, and the sharing and new application stage. These stages emphasise continuous reflection and serve as the cyclical process for each SL activity. The SL project also referred to the suggestions provided in the implementation checklist by Jenkins and Sheehey (2011). The implementation of each stage is explained as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Implementation stage and content of the course

Stages	Implementation
Investigation/ Preparation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Field observation to understand community needs 2. Students' preparation for the lesson plan and teaching activities 3. Pre-service reflection
Service/Action	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Academic service learning conducted in elementary schools 2. Collaborative guidance provided by the school and the community
Reflection/ Evaluation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Group reflection after each service 2. Completing individual reflection journal after the service 3. Students were encouraged to connect their experiences with specific course concepts
Sharing/ New Application	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sharing experiences after each service-learning activity 2. New applications for the next teaching session 3. End-of-term presentation and celebration in class 4. Post-service reflection

Research Instruments

This study employed mixed methods that combined formative and summative assessments and used triangulation for data analysis. The research methods and tools are as follows:

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was adapted from Moely and Ilustre (2014) to fit the specific context of our ASL course. The modified scale covered four main dimensions: course satisfaction, personal growth, professional competence, and civic engagement. It utilised a five-point Likert scale, with scores from five (strongly agree) to one (strongly disagree).

Several steps were undertaken to ensure the validity and reliability of the adapted questionnaire. Firstly, two experts in EFL and the service-learning field reviewed the modifications for content validity and assessed the relevance and appropriateness of each item. Secondly, a pilot study was conducted with a sample of 27 senior students who had previously completed the academic course. The feedback received was used to refine the questionnaire items for better clarity and comprehension. For reliability assessment, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to estimate internal consistency reliability. The questionnaire's overall reliability coefficient was 0.92, and its four subcategories ranged from 0.76 to 0.87. The final version of the questionnaire was then administered to the study participants at the end of the semester to gauge their perceptions of the ASL course and their learning outcomes.

Reflective Journals

After each of the SL activities, students were required to complete the reflective journal. The reflection focused on the content of the service (What), their thoughts and feelings during the service process (So What), and how these experiences have changed their self-awareness and attitudes, as well as any strategies they plan to adopt (Now What). A total of five reflective journals were collected from each student.

Interviews

Five willing students were invited to participate in a series of focus group interviews, which were scheduled at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester for three sessions in total. Each interview session lasted approximately one hour. The purpose of these interviews was to gain an understanding of the students' perspectives on the implementation of the ASL course and their changes regarding their personal growth, civic engagement, and professional competencies in the service-learning process.

Data Processing and Analysis

For the quantitative analysis, data from the questionnaire results were compiled, and the students' response level was assessed through a descriptive statistical analysis method. As for the qualitative data, the content of the verbatim transcripts from the interviews and the reflective journal entries were repeatedly read and analysed. Upon multiple readings and analyses of the documents, similar instances were categorised under the same subcategory, thereby classifying each major item under specific category titles. The content analysis of qualitative data was performed by two researchers who

inductively classified the data. In cases of discrepancies, discussions were held to reach a consensus and to assign the most appropriate categorisation.

Results and Discussions

Quantitative Results

The questionnaire results shed light on several key insights about Taiwanese university students' perspectives on academic service learning within the TEFL course. As detailed in Table 2, the mean score spanned across the four categorical divisions presented a value of 4.27 on a scale of 1 to 5, which implies a generally favourable response from the student body.

The students expressed satisfaction with the ASL course ($M=4.30$, $SD=0.88$), suggesting that they found the course beneficial. Furthermore, students reported considerable gains in personal/interpersonal growth ($M=4.33$, $SD=0.90$), professional development ($M=4.26$, $SD=0.86$), and civic engagement ($M=4.19$, $SD=0.95$). When examining the specific gains across personal, academic, and social outcomes, the data revealed that students perceived the most substantial gain in personal/interpersonal growth, followed by academic development. The least gain, though still positive, was found in the social civic domain. This trend contrasts with the findings of Conway, Amel, and Gerwien (2009), whose study suggests less significant effects of SL on personal outcomes but reported stronger impacts on academic and social outcomes. Despite these disparities, it is essential to highlight that both studies underscore the positive effects of SL on these three aspects of learning outcomes. This implies that although the distribution of effects may vary, the implementation of SL invariably contributes positively to student learning experiences.

Table 2: Overall results of the questionnaire

Categories	Mean	SD	Ranking
ASL Course Satisfaction	4.30	0.88	2
Personal/Interpersonal Growth	4.33	0.90	1
Professional Development	4.26	0.86	3
Civic Engagement	4.19	0.95	4
Average	4.27	0.89	
NOTE: $N=48$			

Course Satisfaction

Regarding course satisfaction, student feedback indicated a significant level of satisfaction with the ASL course. Ratings ranged from 4.13 to 4.41, as shown in Table 3. This reaffirms existing literature stating that well-structured SL courses can lead to

high student satisfaction (Eyler et al. 2001; Furco 2006; Kaye 2004). Specifically, students felt that service tasks enhanced their learning ($M=4.41$, $SD=0.93$), and they were satisfied with the course design ($M=4.36$, $SD=0.93$), which catered to community needs and academic objectives ($M=4.32$, $SD=0.93$).

Table 3: Results of SL course satisfaction

SL Course Satisfaction	Mean	SD
1. Enhanced learning through service tasks	4.41	0.93
2. Addressing community needs and course goals	4.33	0.76
3. Reciprocal benefits of SL	4.29	0.84
4. Understanding diversity through SL	4.26	0.79
5. Satisfaction with course design	4.36	0.89
6. Appropriate time and location	4.13	0.87
7. Continued promotion of academic SL	4.31	0.92
Average	4.30	0.88
NOTE: $N=48$		

Nonetheless, the element concerning “Appropriate time and location” garnered the lowest score. This outcome may be attributed to the non-congruent scheduling of service times with regular course timings, and a possible perception among students that the service location was inconveniently distant. This points to the need for meticulous planning of the service time and location in future iterations of the course to enhance the overall effectiveness and student satisfaction with service learning.

Personal and Interpersonal Growth

The questionnaire results for personal and interpersonal growth suggested ASL significantly impacted students’ development, with all sub-dimensions receiving ratings above 4.23 (Table 4). Key subcategories where students reported marked improvements included “Boosted interpersonal interaction” ($M=4.41$, $SD=0.96$), “Communication, coordination, and teamwork” ($M=4.39$, $SD=0.79$), “Self-reflection and critical-thinking development” ($M=4.38$, $SD=0.81$), and “Problem-solving skill enhancement” ($M=4.34$, $SD=0.91$).

These findings are congruous with earlier studies (Conway, Amel, and Gerwien 2009; Kassabgy and El-Din 2013) that emphasise the capacity of service learning to enhance personal and interpersonal growth. Furthermore, the reported enhancement in self-reflection aligns with research that supports structured critical reflection for amplifying learning in service-learning experiences (Ash and Clayton 2009; Eyler 2002; Kawai 2021).

Table 4: Results of SL personal/interpersonal growth

Personal/Interpersonal Growth	Mean	SD
1. Self-reflection and critical-thinking development	4.38	0.81
2. Confidence and achievement through professional service	4.30	0.98
3. Problem-solving skill enhancement	4.34	0.91
4. Communication, coordination, and teamwork improvements	4.39	0.79
5. Leadership skill development	4.23	1.03
6. Boosted interpersonal interaction	4.41	0.96
7. Enthusiasm for professional contribution	4.28	0.92
Average	4.33	0.90
NOTE: $N=48$		

Professional Development

In terms of professional development, students acknowledged that SL played a substantial role, as shown in Table 5, particularly in “Professional knowledge and skill enhancement” ($M=4.37$, $SD=0.73$) and “Classroom to real-world application” ($M=4.35$, $SD=0.72$). These results coincide with an array of research studies that affirm SL’s efficacy in bridging theoretical knowledge with practical experience (Cho and Gulley 2017; Perren 2013). Moreover, the data indicated that SL enables students to explore potential career paths ($M=4.30$, $SD=0.71$), which echoes Wang and Calvano’s (2018) research on the positive effects of SL on students’ career development.

Table 5: Results of SL professional development

Professional Competences	Mean	SD
1. Professional knowledge and skill enhancement	4.37	0.73
2. Classroom to real-world application	4.35	0.72
3. Boost in interest and motivation for professional competencies	4.23	1.08
4. Acquisition of community-based practical experience	4.28	0.77
5. Exploration of potential career paths	4.30	0.71
6. Enhanced study effort for superior service provision	4.16	1.13
7. Application of SL knowledge to other courses	4.11	1.09
Average	4.26	0.86
NOTE: $N=48$		

Civic Engagement

Regarding civic engagement, as indicated in Table 6, students indicated heightened social awareness and responsibility, particularly in “Building social concern and civic responsibility” ($M=4.31$, $SD=0.91$), “Giving back to society through service” ($M=4.29$,

SD=1.01), and “Empathy and effective support for those in need” (M=4.25, SD=0.86). These findings resonate with Yorio and Ye’s (2012) work, which emphasises SL’s role in cultivating civic responsibility and empathy among students.

Despite the positive findings, it is worth noting that the civic engagement scores were slightly lower than those in other categories. This could be due to the inherently complex nature of civic engagement and social responsibility, which are higher-level goals that may require more intensive efforts to achieve. These findings highlighted the need for potential improvements in the way SL fosters civic engagement, suggesting areas for further enhancement in future course implementations.

Table 6: Results of SL civic engagement

Civic Engagement	Mean	SD
1. Attentive to community needs	4.19	0.88
2. Building social concern and civic responsibility	4.31	0.91
3. Encouraging others for volunteer work	4.02	1.06
4. Giving back to society through service	4.29	1.01
5. Empathy and effective support for those in need	4.25	0.86
6. Sense of duty to community and social development	4.09	0.92
7. Enjoyment of teamwork for social contribution	4.20	0.75
Average	4.19	0.95
NOTE: N=48		

In summary, the study demonstrated that Taiwanese students held positive perceptions towards academic service learning in the TEFL course across all evaluated dimensions, including course satisfaction, personal and interpersonal growth, professional enhancement, and civic engagement. These results underscored the course’s effectiveness in promoting a rewarding learning experience, fostering personal development, strengthening professional skills, and embedding civic responsibility. Consequently, the findings highlight the transformative potential of well-implemented ASL for student development.

Qualitative Results

Upon examining qualitative data from interviews and reflective journals related to students’ professional development, three predominant aspects of enhancement concerning their growth as educators were identified. These aspects are professional teaching knowledge, teaching skills, and teaching attitudes.

Changes in Professional Knowledge

Incorporating TEFL Theoretical Knowledge

The ASL allowed students to reflect more actively on the integral role of TEFL teaching theories when transferred from an academic to a practical teaching context. One student reflected that, “It’s a very practical experience that we could put academic theories into real classrooms with diverse children” (R1-09-01). This direct involvement frequently prompted students to connect their theoretical understanding with real-life teaching situations, as another student articulated: “Sometimes the knowledge imparted in class doesn’t match up with our practical experience. In such cases, I would consult our course instructor” (R3-36-02).

Enhancing Lesson Plan Knowledge

During the service-learning activities, students brainstormed to develop lesson plans. Despite the challenges of creating and following a lesson plan, students found it to be a vital tool for coordinating group efforts. A reflection noted, “This SL experience certainly improved my abilities in TEFL lesson planning. We brainstorm many ideas and put them into an organised lesson plan” (R3-26-01). Another student observed, “Although creating a lesson plan can be cumbersome and sometimes the actual teaching does not strictly follow the time schedule in the lesson plan. However, the lesson plan provides great guidance for our whole group and allows members to coordinate their efforts” (I2-02-01).

Acquiring Insights into Child Learning Behaviours

Additionally, students found teaching children challenging yet were keen to understand their learning traits. This observation was captured in a student’s comment: “We got to know children are very lack[ing in] concentration, so we usually design very interactive activities” (R2-18-01). Moreover, students learned the value of informal interactions and building relationships with the children. One student shared, “We would try to chat with them during the break time. I found that being children’s learning partner is more effective than being their teacher” (R3-24-02). Thus, the ASL experiences enriched students’ understanding of young learners, which guided student-teachers towards a more learner-centred teaching approach.

Regarding changes in professional knowledge, the findings of this study indicated that ASL practical experiences contributed to participants’ confident application of TEFL teaching theories. This coincides with numerous studies suggesting that SL amplifies academic knowledge when applied in practical teaching environments (Cho and Gulley 2017; Simsek 2020; Yang 2014). However, Goodwin et al. (2014) noted some discrepancies in their findings and that some participants felt overwhelmed when applying theoretical knowledge in real classroom situations. Despite this, this study corroborates the findings of Kassabgy and El-Din (2013), indicating an increased understanding of the learning characteristics of target students through SL.

Changes in Professional Skills

Improving Presentation Techniques

Through consistent discussions and reflections on their ASL experiences, students improved their teaching strategies. Their reflections helped them tailor course materials to better meet children's needs. For example, one student remarked, "From the last teaching experience, I learned to adapt my lessons to be simpler and more engaging for kids" (R3-27-02). Furthermore, these experiences motivated students to try out various presentation techniques, such as storytelling. They learned effective skills to present and deliver an engaging story. One student shared, "I have developed effective storytelling skills for children. Using exaggerated voices, expressions, and gestures made the stories more engaging" (I3-04-01).

Advancing Classroom Management Proficiency

During the ASL teaching sessions, students enhanced their classroom management skills to maintain children's attention. They integrated visual aids and interactive methods. One student noted, "Keeping children attentive was a challenge. Using flashcards and games improved their focus and helped me manage the class better" (R4-12-02). They also recognised the significance of consistent classroom rules combined with positive reinforcement for discipline. Another student shared, "We reviewed our classroom rules before each session. Establishing rules and applying positive reinforcement ensured discipline and order" (R5-45-02).

Developing Problem-Solving Abilities

ASL further refined students' problem-solving skills, especially when it came to handling unpredicted circumstances while teaching. This is evidenced by one student's reflection: "I encountered many unexpected situations in teaching kids, and I learned to adapt solutions spontaneously" (R3-38-02). These experiences further taught students to handle frustration effectively and use it as a motivation to improve their teaching methods when faced with unanticipated challenges. Another student shared, "Initially, I was frustrated when the children didn't enjoy my carefully prepared activity. However, this experience taught me how to address challenges and improve my teaching methods" (R4-09-02).

With regard to changes in professional skills, this study found that students had greater enhancement in the skills of teaching presentation, class management, and problem-solving. This aligns with previous research that emphasises the positive impacts of SL on practical teaching skills (Eyler 2002; Jacoby 2014). Similarly, Shouman (2019) found that service learning helped participants enhance various professional skills, such as teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and classroom management.

Changes in Professional Attitudes

Enhancing Self-Efficacy and Professional Fulfilment

Through ongoing reflection, students reinterpreted their experiences into new perspectives, transitioning from initially introverted personalities to proactive attitudes, which are applied in the service field. This transition results in a sense of accomplishment, which in turn boosts their confidence, thereby enhancing their self-efficacy. They related the following:

We invested time in class preparation, and hearing them echo me during the lesson was deeply rewarding. Helping them learn brought me joy. (R2-21-03)

The children's smiles and happiness from my reading of storybooks made me feel a significant increase in my self-worth. (R4-41-03)

Cultivating Empathy and Responsibility

According to the feedback from students, participating in SL activities helped them develop empathy by learning to consider situations from the recipient's point of view. Reflecting on these experiences also allowed them to shift from subjective thinking to a more diverse perspective, which positively impacted their personal civic engagement. As students stated:

I closely observe children's reactions and try to understand any difficulties they may be facing, so as to find ways to help them learn effectively. (R3-34-02)

As a teacher, I could feel my responsibility becoming greater, especially when playing games with them, safety always comes first. (I3-05-03)

Aspiring to the Teaching Profession

By participating in ASL activities, students were able to directly interact with children in the community. This allowed them to gain a greater understanding and appreciation for the role of a teacher, which ultimately aided in their exploration of potential future career paths. As students reported:

I felt it was more like a professional exploration. It allows us to understand the difficulties of the teaching profession, and helps us to consider whether we want to pursue a career in teaching. (I2-02-01)

I truly empathised with the fact that being a teacher is not an easy task, so I really respect primary school teachers. At the same time, it also made me aspire to this teaching profession. (R2-38-02)

The ASL curriculum significantly influences students' professional attitudes. This influence is evident in the enhancement of self-efficacy and professional fulfilment, the development of empathy and responsibility, and a deeper understanding of the teaching

profession. These observations align with findings from Muturi, An, and Mwangi (2013), who argue that fostering students' positive attitudes towards SL projects is pivotal for the successful implementation of ASL courses. Additionally, research studies found that SL experiences have increased students' sense of self-efficacy, confidence, empathy, and compassion (Tuan and Bao 2021). Warren (2012) also indicated that SL allowed students to perceive issues from different perspectives and foster empathetic understanding. In a related vein, Perren (2013) observed that students gained a better understanding of the teaching profession and could make informed decisions about pursuing a teaching career.

To summarise, this study highlighted the positive impacts of ASL experiences on students' professional development. It demonstrated how such experiences can enhance their knowledge and skills, and foster a positive attitude towards SL projects. Among these SL experiences, it is noteworthy that the process of self-reflection played an important role in empowering students to further expand their learning to multifaceted aspects of competencies and equip themselves with competitive soft skills for teaching. Hence, the results suggest that a thorough self-reflection process among students during SL activities can significantly enhance their learning experience. This also implies that the educational benefits of ASL programmes can be amplified and extended when students are prompted to reflect critically on the practical experiences relevant to their interests and professions.

Conclusions

The present study effectively indicated the multifaceted impacts of academic service learning on students. The results of this study highlighted the positive perceptions of Taiwanese students towards academic service learning in the TEFL programme. These positive views span across various domains including course satisfaction, personal and interpersonal growth, professional development, and civic engagement. Quantitative data indicated that while students acknowledge significant benefits across all aspects, they perceive the highest gains in personal and interpersonal growth. In contrast, although still positive, the gains in the civic engagement dimension were comparatively modest. This might imply that building a sense of social responsibility appears to be a more profound challenge for students, requiring additional time to fully realise it. Thus, there may be a need to enhance the curriculum to better cater to this aspect.

From a qualitative perspective regarding the ASL curriculum's influence on students' professional development, the study revealed substantial enhancements in three primary aspects: professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The curriculum enabled students to effectively apply theoretical TEFL knowledge to practical settings. It refined students' vital teaching skills such as presentation and classroom management while nurturing their professional attitudes, including increased self-efficacy and a deeper understanding of the teaching profession.

In essence, integrating community service with classroom instruction can create a more inclusive learning environment. This study underscored the transformative potential of the ASL curriculum in nurturing students' professional competencies. The ASL approach has emerged as a catalyst, enabling students to adeptly bridge their acquired TEFL theoretical knowledge with real-world practical applications.

In a broader sense, this study showed how service learning in the Taiwanese TEFL context can empower students to use English for local needs, thus demystifying the language's foreignness. It bridged the gap between global aspirations and local realities, allowing students to see English as a tool for local change rather than just global assimilation. Hence, introducing service learning in the Taiwanese TEFL context can be viewed as one of the effective ways to reconcile the global hegemony of English with the need for linguistic democracy.

Implications

This study has limitations due to its focus on a single class within a specific Taiwanese university. This unique setting carries distinct cultural, linguistic, and educational features. These factors inherently influence the findings' applicability. Additionally, the relatively small sample size might not encompass a wide range of diverse experiences. Nonetheless, these conditions highlight the necessity for more expansive research designs.

In terms of practical applications, the study provides structured guidelines for the implementation of ASL courses. It stresses structured planning of service-learning curricula and proposes a detailed, cyclical approach for educators' references. This approach begins with investigation and preparation, progresses through service and action, and culminates in reflection, evaluation, and the application of learned insights. Enhanced learning experiences stem from ongoing reflection and diverse instructional strategies. Moreover, educational institutions are encouraged to establish robust collaborations with communities and to ensure that service placements and timetables meet educational objectives and community needs.

Looking ahead, the study identifies specific areas for further exploration, such as the lower levels of civic engagement reported. It highlights the importance of longitudinal studies to determine the long-term effects of ASL on students' career paths and personal growth. There is also a proposal for the adoption of quasi-experimental designs to deepen our understanding of ASL's impacts. Moreover, it is critical to examine ASL's effects on the communities served, especially in our increasingly globalised context. Future research should probe both the overt and subtle benefits conferred upon these communities. By adopting a research approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative methods, we can achieve a more nuanced understanding of these interactions. This strategy could be instrumental in forging an interdisciplinary approach to service learning in academic settings. Finally, this study advocates for more innovative research

strategies to foster meaningful educational experiences that not only enhance student learning but also contribute to positive societal change.

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