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The banner features a dark blue background with white and yellow text. On the right side, there is a silhouette of a person standing in front of a computer monitor, surrounded by various icons representing technology and education.

A photograph of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, California, taken at sunset. The bridge's iconic towers and suspension cables are silhouetted against a bright, orange and yellow sky. The water of the bay is visible in the foreground, reflecting the warm light. The overall mood is serene and majestic.

# Bridging Worlds

## Service Learning in EFL Education

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## **Bridging Worlds: Service Learning in EFL Education**

Life's most persistent and  
urgent question is,  
'what are you doing for others?'

— Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

### **Summary:**

Service learning as a teaching approach is not common in the Portuguese school system. However, it is a valuable pedagogy that can positively impact EFL learners given that it has the potential to enhance students' public speaking skills, confidence, and community engagement, while bringing the core values of the "Perfil dos Alunos à Saída da Escolaridade Obrigatória" to life. This article aims to briefly explore how EFL teachers can engage in meaningful service within the scope of the current curricula.

### **Introduction**

In the fascinating world of EFL education, innovative teaching approaches are constantly being explored to support learners' needs,

enhance language proficiency, and promote intercultural awareness. Among these approaches, service learning is an influential pedagogy, blending community service with structured learning objectives. This contribution explores the potential of blending service learning in the context of EFL education, illustrating its unique position as a pedagogical approach that extends well beyond traditional classroom boundaries.

Unlike conventional volunteering or service activities, service learning integrates direct service to the community with curriculum-based learning. It is not just about providing assistance, it is a reciprocal process where students apply their language skills in real-world contexts, benefiting both the learners and the communities they serve. When properly integrated in the EFL classroom, lessons become richer and more meaningful, considering they foster a range of language skills, learners' cultural competence, and civic responsibility.

At the heart of service learning is the concept of experiential education. Here, learners are not passive recipients of knowledge. Instead, they are active participants, engaging with the community, identifying needs, and applying their language skills in practical, impactful ways. Whether it is through organising community English classes for senior citizens, or assisting in local non-profit organisations, service-learning projects in EFL contexts are as diverse as they are enriching.

### **Service Learning and the Portuguese Curricula**

Service learning in the context of the Portuguese curricula, particularly as outlined in the "Perfil dos Alunos à Saída da Escolaridade Obrigatória" (henceforth PASEO), aligns seamlessly. It is well-known that the PASEO is a directive aimed at enhancing the quality of learning and ensuring the success of all students at the end of their 12 years

of mandatory schooling. It serves as a foundational document for the organisation of the entire educational system in Portugal, guiding it towards the challenges of the 21st century. This framework emphasises the importance of developing competencies and values in students throughout their schooling. Furthermore, it reflects a humanistic philosophy, encouraging students to mobilise values and competencies that enable them to make free and informed decisions about environmental, social, and ethical issues. This aligns perfectly with the goals of service learning which foster active, conscious, and responsible civic participation.

In the realm of service learning, such competencies and values include the ability to question established knowledge, integrate emerging knowledge, communicate effectively, and solve complex problems. Service learning, with its emphasis on experiential

education and community engagement, provides a practical context for students to develop and apply many skills. By participating in service-learning projects, students not only enhance their academic knowledge but also hone their social and emotional competencies (an area that has gained much attention in recent years). In other words, service learning is a meaningful pedagogy to bring the current curricula to life and develop a range of competencies that are central to this educational philosophy.

### **Service Learning Projects for EFL Contexts**

Engaging in service-learning projects in the EFL classroom involves a few key steps to ensure that the projects are both educational and beneficial to the community. Here are some rules of thumb:

1. Identify community needs. Start by identifying the needs of the local (or global) community that can be addressed through your students' English language skills. Engage with community leaders or organisations to find out areas where your students can contribute. This is the first step to establish a valuable partnership.
2. Align the project with learning objectives. Ensure that the project aligns with the EFL curricula and learning objectives. The project should aim to enhance students' language skills, along with intercultural awareness and critical thinking.
3. Plan the project. Design the project with clear goals, a realistic timeline, and roles. Decide how the project will be integrated into your regular teaching schedule. Consider the resources required and how to assess the students' learning and contributions. Assessment strategies may include portfolios,

rubrics, peer and self-assessment, among others.

4. Implement and monitor the project. Be flexible and ready to make adjustments as needed. It is important to maintain regular communication with all stakeholders involved.

5. Reflect and assess. After completing the project, have students reflect on their experiences. This can be done through class discussions, presentations, or writing assignments in English. Evaluate the project's impact on both the students and the community.

When bringing service learning to life, many challenges may occur. For instance, students may reveal varied interests and commitment levels. Remember that this also occurs in the classroom when using a more traditional approach to ELT. Another challenge concerns establishing and maintaining meaningful community partnerships. Nevertheless, regardless of the challenges it is always wise to consider the project's

sustainability by taking into account its long-term impact.

While there are many examples of service-learning projects online, here are some examples of potential projects:

**Project 1 – Community Language Workshops.** Students organise biweekly or monthly English language workshops for community members, such as teaching basic English to elderly citizens. This provides practical speaking and teaching experience for students, while providing companionship to the elderly.

**Project 2 – Storytelling with Children.** Learners visit local primary schools or libraries to read stories in English to children. This not only helps in practising pronunciation and public speaking but also fosters a love for language among younger students.

**Project 3 – Translation Services.** Advanced students can offer

translation services for a local non-profit organisation, translating documents or websites from or into English. This can be a great way to practise advanced reading and writing skills, while supporting a local non-profit.

**Project 4 – Local History Documentation.** Students work on documenting local history or folklore in English. They interview community elders and create articles and/or videos, helping preserve and share local culture while practising their language skills.

**Project 5 – Art and Performance for Language Learning.** Learners organise performances (like plays or music concerts) where they use English to write scripts or perform songs. This could also involve collaborating with local artists or other schools. If funds are raised, money should be donated to support a local cause.

Each of these projects not only enhances the students' language

proficiency but also helps them develop a sense of social responsibility and cultural awareness, which are crucial components of modern education. Service-learning projects can be short or long term and tackle many issues. Sometimes these projects are more teacher-led and other times they are student-led. The important part is that it is not an episodic volunteer programme nor one-sided. Everyone involved should benefit from the project.

### **Closing Thoughts**

In the tapestry of contemporary education, service learning in the EFL classroom stands out as a vibrant thread, weaving together foreign language acquisition with the art of meaningful citizenship. It transcends traditional classroom boundaries, transforming students into active actors of their learning and true ambassadors of change. By embracing this approach, one does not merely teach English, educators cultivate a

generation of linguistically skilled, culturally aware, and socially responsible students. As our learners step out into an unpredictable world, they are better able to establish bridges and make a tangible difference. Teaching English through service is not about formatting students to sit exams, it is about unlocking the potential within each student to reshape the world, one word, one action, one connection at a time.

### **Where can I find more information?**

US Department of State: <https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/teachers-corner-service-learning-language-classroom>

YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3\\_7zJ6Lm5-A&t=1s&ab\\_channel=Edutopia](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3_7zJ6Lm5-A&t=1s&ab_channel=Edutopia)

Youth Service America Toolkit: <https://ysa.org/resources/toolkit>



