

# Giving Authentic Opportunities to Second Language Learners: A Look at a French Service-Learning Project

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**Abstract:** *Many college students feel that learning a second language (L2) is necessary to bring value to their future. However, many also feel that during their years of learning an L2, the only experience they acquire starts when they enter the classroom and stops when they leave it. This view may bring a lack of engagement in learning the L2. Research has shown that by integrating service-learning (SL) into the curriculum, students' role as L2 learners and speakers may take a new perspective as they feel more active and responsible for their learning. This article presents the impacts SL has on a group of college students of French who are involved in an SL project.*

**Key words:** *French, authentic use, National Standards, service-learning*

Most college students believe that a foreign language (L2) will bring value to their training, personal enrichment, and future. However, the use of the L2 is often confined to the classroom, and students do not picture a concrete application beyond the academic world. An approach that could fulfill this shortfall is service-learning (SL), defined as a teaching method that allows students to use their academic knowledge in real-life situations in order to meet needs in their own community (McPherson, 1996). According to the *Standards of Quality for School-Based and Community-Based Service-Learning* (Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform, 1995), “service-learning integrates curricular concepts with ‘real-life’ situations and empowers youth to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize these concepts through practical problem-solving, often in service to the community” (p. 2). The goal is to keep the learning process in the center of the curriculum (Terry & Bohnenberger, 2007), while giving opportunities to engage students “in responsible and challenging actions inside and outside the classroom” (Morris, 2001, p. 245). SL benefits not only the community but also students by providing active learning opportunities and development of professional skills, as well as a connection between the institutions (schools) and the community (Gascoigne Lally, 2001). In all cases, SL is structured around the application of curricular knowledge into a practical and realistic setting, such as the community.

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In many K–16 institutions, SL has been successful with service to the poor, children, food banks, local companies, towns, charities, etc. When an L2 is integrated into the focus of the SL, additional opportunities emerge. Not only does SL increase authentic L2 use, it also expands cultural awareness (Hellebrandt & Varona, 1999) and facilitates the implementation of the ACTFL National Standards for Foreign Languages (1999), as discussed further in the discussion and conclusions section.

To guide practitioners, the Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform (1995) instituted standards for SL, which are fundamental for an effective design of a SL project (Figure 1). Essential tools to ease the integration of the standards are the

syllabus and the reflective journals: the syllabus details the objectives, expectations, and articulations with the community (Heffernam, 2001), while the journals guide students in their development of “knowledge, skills, and cognitive capacities” (Eyler, 2002, p. 517). In-depth reflection, through readings, journals, and discussion, is an essential means to increase experiential and multicultural learning acquired in the community.

The present study is an overview and analysis of an SL project done at Colorado State University with students of French who participated in an SL French course that gave them an authentic learning and teaching experience. The course was designed to integrate students in the local

**FIGURE 1**

**Standards of Quality School-Based and Community-Based Service-Learning by Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform (1995, p. 5)**

- I. Effective service-learning efforts strengthen service and academic learning.
- II. Model service-learning provides concrete opportunities for youth to learn new skills, to think critically, and to test new roles in an environment that encourages risk-taking and rewards competence.
- III. Preparation and reflection are essential elements in service-learning.
- IV. Youths’ efforts are recognized by those served, including their peers, the school, and the community.
- V. Youth are involved in the planning.
- VI. The service students perform makes a meaningful contribution to the community.
- VII. Effective service-learning integrates systematic formative and summative evaluation.
- VIII. Service-learning connects the school or sponsoring organization and its community in new and positive ways.
- IX. Service-learning is understood and supported as an integral element in the life of a school or sponsoring organization and its community.
- X. Skilled adult guidance and supervision are essential to the success of service-learning.
- XI. Preservice training, orientation, and staff development that include the philosophy and methodology of service-learning best ensure that program quality and continuity are maintained.

community with the following goals: to expose preschool and elementary school children to French and the francophone cultures (there are many francophone cultures), to have a positive role in the community, and to acquire an intrinsic motivation to learn French. As with many other universities, Colorado State University offers SL credits, often combined with a course, to encourage civic engagement and service to the community, and learning through service. The ongoing SL course discussed in this article is unique, as there is no parallel to a specific French content course (e.g., business French, literature, culture). The objective of this article is to demonstrate how SL can be applied to benefit L2 learning, in particular with French students as an example, while bringing college students and community children together. After the review of literature, this article presents the elements of the project. It then highlights the role that SL might have on college students. Finally, it suggests implications the project might have on L2 college students, schools, and children.

## Review of Literature

SL is a relatively new pedagogical approach, and it can incorporate any subject matter (e.g., sciences, political sciences, English, foreign languages). The philosophy is to provide students with an increased knowledge of the course material through hands-on situations and concrete applications. Most research shows benefits to SL: It facilitates effective content teaching, encourages students to reflect on their experience, provides a deeper understanding and a concrete application of the content learned in class, increases the level of students' motivation and critical thinking, teaches independence in the real world, and offers students a valuable experience (Goldberg, McCormick Richburg, & Wood, 2006; McKenna & Rizzo, 1999; Morris, 2001). Enos and Troppe (1996) stated that incorporating SL into a curriculum encourages students to transcend traditional class bound-

aries, as it not only presents the course content but also adds the perspective of its context and its practicality. To them, not all courses should contain a SL component, but all disciplines could include SL, as long as the following questions are asked: "What purpose does this discipline serve in society? What does its knowledge base offer ordinary citizens? How can service be used as a text to illuminate the concerns of this discipline?" (p. 159).

Although it is not quite as common as in other subject areas, some studies have examined the implementation of SL with the support of L2s. Schrier (1996) suggested a model to integrate SL within Spanish curricula in elementary schools to stimulate young students' learning in order to assist the community. The model consisted of matching an elementary school child and a high school student, both learning Spanish, with a Hispanic senior citizen to share activities together (e.g., weekly outings, meals, shopping) during a minimum of one semester. The application of the model showed very positive outcomes on the part of the students, who increased their sense of civic responsibility, as well as their use of Spanish; on the part of the senior citizens, it allowed them to bond with younger minds for a certain period of time.

Overfield (1997) referred to the traditional L2 classroom as relatively artificial, because the L2 experience is created for students' learning. She suggested that SL is a unique opportunity provided to learners in order to expose them to authentic situations in a true community. Her project involved 13 students of Spanish in second- and third-semester college Spanish courses. The students and newly arrived Cuban migrants were partnered and participated in a number of small trips (movie night, art gallery visit, Latin American festival). Prior to the trips, a Cuban native introduced the students to Cuban cultural aspects. Students were very engaged in conversations in Spanish with the migrants and wrote compositions based on their conversations.

They felt encouraged by their ability to converse in Spanish with native speakers, while the migrants were more easily transitioned to a new culture.

In a fourth-year Russian class, Rosengrant (1997) implemented an SL component. Students served 20 hours in the community, wrote journals about their experience, and reported anecdotes orally in class. They worked in a social service and job search organization and in an elementary public school where Russian was spoken by Russian children. The college students deeply valued their experience. Rosengrant mentioned the benefits for her students as being "excitement, increased confidence, and a growing awareness of the possibilities for 'real' application" (p. 17). They gained valuable experiences, which in turn guided some students in their future career decisions, while others were offered a professional career in the organization they had served.

In her article, Heuser (1999) described an SL model with a group of English as a Second Language (ESL) Japanese students studying in the United States. They were involved in SL projects in social work institutions, such as a women's crisis center, a homeless shelter, youth centers, and a center for mentally ill homeless adults. Students also took a sociology course and an English course with very closely related curricula, alongside an SL component. Heuser observed the impact of the SL on the students' cognitive knowledge, cross-cultural awareness, and language proficiencies. SL brought relevance and language support to the content and appeared to provide the experience students needed to better understand people in need. Furthermore, students received opportunities to reflect on their experience and use English in an authentic situation. SL was, in this case, a resourceful tool for ESL students' personal and linguistic growth, as well as for service in the community.

Varas (1999) discussed how SL can increase cultural awareness. Students of Spanish were involved through their conversation

and culture course in the Migrant Education Program in Salem, Oregon. They served as tutors to migrants. Their experience truly opened their eyes to a population they were not aware of, which was made possible by their language skills in Spanish. In addition, they acquired a better understanding of a diversity of cultures. Varas was very positive about the role SL can have in a classroom, based on her students' reactions and progress.

Morris (2001) was particularly interested in the motivation students receive from SL and involved them in social services offered to native speakers of Spanish. In his study, Morris looked at the change of motivation of 95 students of Spanish for learning, using pre- and post-surveys to understand motivation. The results show that students' motivation increased significantly between the start and the end of their SL experience.

Gascoigne Lally (2001) presented a model of SL integrated in a Teacher Education Foreign Language Methods course. To acquire genuine teaching experience, college students spent 4 hours per week for 14 weeks tutoring or teaching mini-lessons in French, German, or Spanish to K-12 students. This project benefited students with firsthand teaching experience, application of concepts covered in class, lesson plan development, and a realistic transition to student teaching. They were exposed to learning styles and were able to learn more about the cultures they were teaching. While serving the community's needs through exposing children to an L2 and its cultures, this project was also an innovative introduction to student teaching.

Grassi (2003) noted that there is still a lack of involvement of L2 students in SL opportunities, particularly with languages other than Spanish, and little research has examined this specific population. In her study, Grassi observed three middle-school classes (composed of native language [L1] English speakers and L1 Spanish speakers) and their teachers, who were involved in different types of SL projects (study of

energy conservation, study of mining and river pollution, and study of violence and peace). Her focus was on the impact of SL on the children involved. She observed that in all three classes, SL was thoroughly incorporated throughout the curriculum. This particular example of SL showed that L2 learners had a variety of opportunities to communicate in an L2, improve their linguistic abilities, and reflect on the service provided. They produced more meaningful output due to the nature of cooperation in the SL and their teachers' techniques.

Caldwell (2007) proposed an SL project involving a college Spanish conversation class, in order to bring authenticity and meaning to the students' learning. She paralleled SL projects to "classrooms without borders" to allow for an authentic cultural experience. In her project, students participated in and read at a Spanish reading program in a local library. The experience encouraged students and gave them confidence in their ability to use Spanish. Furthermore, the community children benefited through learning some Spanish in an entertaining way.

Recently, Bloom (2008) implemented an SL component to her first-semester Spanish class in order to observe the linguistic and cultural impact it might have on learning. Twenty-four students were required to give 15 hours of their time to a public school or an after-school program. The SL element was intertwined with the class content, as numerous in-class activities were related to the SL experience, such as creating authentic Spanish reading material for children who were native speakers of Spanish, or going over Spanish literature for children. The findings showed that through the SL experience, 7 out of the 24 students progressed slightly in their intercultural competence. Bloom recommended a very structured project with well-organized activities for beginning-level speakers, so as not to overload their linguistic progress.

These few studies have shown that SL projects have been successful and beneficial to L2 students and communities. Looking at

a range of Spanish curriculum SL projects, one notices that most concern migrant education programs and services, health care, social services, summer camp, tutoring, translation, conversation partnership, education, Hispanic achievement, and preservation (Hellebrandt & Varona, 1999; Mollica, Nuessel, & Cedeño, 2004). In the United States, there are numerous opportunities for Spanish students to be involved with the Hispanic community. For other languages, instructors may have to seek more diligently for community needs to make the L2 meaningful to learning and sharing; however, most communities will be glad to share ideas, as they are often interested in students' involvement and in foreign languages. For instance, many elementary schools are interested in offering world language programs but are limited due to budget restrictions. This study is a model of an opportunity created for students and for the community. It particularly focuses on the impacts on students through the following questions:

1. How does SL involvement influence the language learning motivation of college students of French?
2. How does SL involvement influence professional aspirations of these students?
3. How does SL involvement influence students' roles as civic servants in their community?

## The Current Model and Its Outcome

Similar to the majority of foreign language departments, the one at Colorado State University has attempted to improve its outreach effort. In line with this goal, the idea emerged to create a program that engaged the students of French in the community, on a voluntary basis. Because of a desire to make French a practical asset to students and to fulfill a need in community schools, teaching French in local pre-schools seemed to be a perfect solution for

our initial focus. Due to the success of the students' response, the project was changed from being solely based on volunteer work to an official SL class, in order to reward students with academic credit. In addition to preschools, the SL program included a few elementary schools in order to expand the place of French in the community.<sup>1</sup> The motivation for the SL class was not only learning and outreach for the college students, but also benefiting community children by teaching them about other cultures and languages. This might also help compel these children to learn an L2 in the future. As an anecdote, one of the SL students was now learning French because she had been exposed to French in her own kindergarten class, which motivated her enthusiasm for the language. In order to enhance the benefit of this program, the coordinator was given the opportunity to attend a 6-week university seminar on SL to learn how to optimize the resources that were available and to better comprehend how a successful SL program should be structured. Furthermore, to acquire material to facilitate teaching, it was necessary to apply for grants.<sup>2</sup>

SL classes are typically structured around traditional classes, with an integrated component linking students to the community. A particularity of the current SL class is that it is not directly associated to a specific French course. This provides all students of French (with a minimum of two semesters of language instruction) a chance to participate. For that reason, this SL class includes only three meeting times (to regroup all SL students and the coordinator in one class) over a semester. Those meetings provide time for teaching development (such as the visit of an expert in early-education discipline), for reflecting on progress and experience among students, and for organizing a carnival and fundraiser. The requirements for the course are: attending three class meetings, creating 10 lesson plans, conducting 10 lessons of 30 minutes per week in the schools, recording 10 journal entries reflecting on

the teaching, and participating in the carnival and fundraiser.

Since the initial SL class, the attendance has been encouraging (Table 1), with between 10 and 12 schools involved in the program each semester. Some students have repeatedly taken the course, and the vast majority of them are also registered in one or more French classes concurrently with the SL project.

### **The Student Participants**

The participants who voluntarily agreed to fill out a questionnaire (see Appendix) on their experience were the students registered in the French SL course. Out of 80<sup>3</sup> students who had been officially registered in the program since its debut, 25 returned the questionnaire and the consent form. Fourteen of them were French majors, while the others were French minors or undecided (all but two majored or minored in French). From these 25 students, one was in the first year, 11 were in the second year, six were in the third year, and seven were in fourth-year French courses.

### **The Sites**

The schools that were part of the program were preschools and K–5 schools located in the community. The course instructor contacted them. All these schools were interested in integrating more foreign languages into their before- or after-school programs, at the requests of parents. However, due to budget shortfalls, it was not possible for these schools to hire foreign language teachers. The French SL program was an opportunity for the schools to offer an L2 to the children, in very economical ways. However, the present study's research focus was not on the schools, children, and parents, but only on the college students.

### **Lesson Plans and Journals**

SL students were required to turn in lesson plans and journals. The lesson plans helped them be prepared for the classes they would teach. In order to help students structure

**TABLE 1**

**Number of Registered Students and Volunteers Since Fall 2007**

Semester	Number of Registered Students	Number of Volunteers
Fall 2006	Not in place	24
Spring 2007	Not in place	14
Fall 2007	18	2
Spring 2008	16	1
Fall 2008	25	1
Spring 2009	19	4
Fall 2009	21	4
Spring 2010	21	7
Fall 2010	18	6

*Note:* Volunteers did not sign up to receive a credit for the course; therefore, they were not required to turn in their lesson plans and journals (although they were strongly encouraged to do so). Besides this difference, they were teaching alongside SL students (except for the first two semesters, as the SL was not set up yet).

their lesson plans, a template was designed. An abundant amount of material (e.g., worksheets, books, textbooks, toys, music, games, posters, hands-on objects) was available to support their teaching. Students learned that although teaching in an immersion setting was probably not realistic, they should include as many French phrases and short sentences in their speech as possible (e.g., “Très bien!” “Merci!”). Realistically, most students were not competent enough to teach entire classes in French. And because the main goal was to expose children to the language and mostly to the culture, students used English the majority of the time. The journals led them to reflect on their role in the community. To guide them in writing these journal entries, the syllabus mentioned: “The structure of your journal will have the following format: 1) Identify; 2) Describe; 3) List; 4) Analyze; 5) Analyze the impact on you.” Journals play a central role in SL, as they initiate students’ reflective interpretation of their service, as well as of their own learning. The

instructor checked and provided feedback on both lesson plans and journals on a weekly basis.

**Data Collection**

The instructor used several tools to collect data in order to triangulate and give more support to the findings. To record how the SL class might impact students, they filled out a questionnaire at the end of the semester. The questionnaire was divided into three major categories:

1. learning motivation: intrinsic motivation encouraging students to pursue their learning of the L2;
2. professional aspirations: effects of the SL program on students’ vision of their professional future; and
3. role of civic commitment: impact that students believed they were having on the children through the SL program.

Students’ weekly journals were also a primary source of data, as they provided

valuable insights on students' teaching and learning. They expressed their successes, their struggles, their highlights, their feelings and frustrations, what they had learned as teachers and individuals, and also their plan to improve their next class. As an additional support, the instructor initiated regular one-on-one interactions with the students in order to check on their preparations, understanding of the cultural aspects, and possible issues in their teaching.

### Impacts on Learning Motivation

Question 1 of the questionnaire asked:

- 1. Do you feel that your participation in this service-learning project has contributed to the improvement of your level of French? If so, how? If not, why not?

Although subjective, this question targeted the potential benefits students believed they had received toward their knowledge of French. Table 2 lists the answers from the participants. It is obvious that through the project, most students believed that their French had improved. Students added in response to that same question:

- Subject 1 Yes, it has. Intuition-based questions—the kind most asked by children learning French—provided me the opportunity to thoughtfully reexamine and introspect on [*sic*] my own language apprehension and retention patterns.
- Subject 9 Yes, it has improved my level of French. It gave me the opportunity to review more basic French subjects that I might not use often in upper-level French classes.
- Subject 12 I feel my French has improved as a result of this course. I reviewed all the basics thoroughly before teaching them and had the opportunity

- to use my French to communicate with my partner during class and when planning my lessons.
- Subject 15 I do, because it required me to go back to a lot of the things I first learned, and teaching something is a great way to learn it.
- Subject 17 Yes, it has. As I advance in French sometimes I forget simple vocabulary. Service-learning allows me to keep up with French on all levels.
- Subject 22 Yes! My vocabulary has improved especially as I am teaching the words to the children weekly and so must remember them myself.

Despite mostly positive reactions, two who answered “no” still admitted that reviewing basic concepts was of some benefit to them.

- Subject 2 No. Although the material that I taught was a nice review for me, it was nothing new.
- Subject 13 I did some, but not a lot. Since I am in a higher level of French, I should already know all the vocabulary, but sometimes there are words that are a review and help me remember old vocabulary.

Based on students' proficiency, teaching can naturally be somewhat challenging. If the student teaching is at an advanced level of French, his or her vocabulary and conversational skills are already well developed. Lower-level students are faced with teaching vocabulary or cultural facts they are not as familiar with. This SL opportunity gave them a chance to expand their vocabulary and their understanding of the francophone cultures. Even some advanced learners saw a benefit (see Subject 9 above). Most advanced university classes do not review vocabulary based on farm animals or body parts, often forgotten at higher levels of proficiency.



**TABLE 2**

**Answers to Questions 1–4**

Subject	Q1: Improved Your French?	Q2: Increased Your Motivation?	Q3: Pre-Profession	Q4b: Post-Profession	Q4c: Change?
1	Yes	Yes	Undecided	Perhaps but not sure	Maybe
2	No	No	Undecided	Undecided	No
3	No	Yes	French teacher	Early ed. teacher	Yes
4	Yes	Yes	Natural resources (environmental education)	Maybe teacher	Yes
5	Yes	Yes	Undecided	Maybe teacher	Yes, but older kids
6	Yes	Yes	Social science teacher in secondary ed.	Unchanged, with the addition of French teacher	Yes
7	No	Yes	I/O or Counseling psychology	Teacher/psycholinguistics	In part
8	Yes	Yes	Undecided	Teacher	Yes
9	Yes	Yes	Work for an environmental organization	Maybe teacher	Yes
10	Yes	Yes	Journalism	Teacher	Yes
11	Yes	No	Undecided	Teacher	Yes
12	Yes	Yes	College professor in languages	Unchanged	Yes
13	Possibly	Yes	Unsure but with business and French	Unchanged	No

TABLE 2 (Continued).

Subject	Q1: Improved Your French?	Q2: Increased Your Motivation?	Q3: Pre-Profession	Q4b: Post-Profession	Q4c: Change?
14	Possibly	Possibly	Political science—Public policy in education	Maybe teacher	Yes
15	Yes	Yes	Natural resources	Unchanged	No
16	Yes	Yes	Teaching, but not sure	Teacher	Yes
17	Yes	Yes	Undecided	Teacher	Yes
18	Yes	Yes	K–12 French teacher	Unchanged	Yes
19	Yes	Yes	French teacher	Unchanged	Yes
20	Yes	Yes	French teacher	Strengthened my decision	Yes
21	Yes	Yes	Translation and interpretation	Teacher if first option falls through	Yes
22	Yes	Yes	Ecology professor	Maybe	Yes
23	Yes	Yes	French teacher	Unchanged	No
Yes	18	20			
Possibly	2	1			
No	3	2			

Although the instructor did not quantitatively measure a comparison of their true linguistic progress, it is important to observe that most students perceived that this program had not only benefited their own knowledge of the language and cultures, but had also brought confidence to their oral skills.

Question 2 asked:

- 2. Do you feel that your participation in this service-learning project has contributed to the increase of your motivation for learning French? If so, how? If not, why not?

The overall results are in Table 2. The intent of the question was to get a sense of students' motivation in relation to the SL class because intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are positive factors in becoming a successful L2 learner (Gass & Selinker, 2008). The motivation in their learning was not based on a curriculum imposed on them by an instructor; rather, they chose their own content to share with the children, simultaneously acquiring it. This would naturally imply a higher and intrinsic motivation. The French faculty of the present department was also particularly interested in seeing if an authentic use of French encouraged students to pursue their studies in the field. The results support the positive impact of SL on students' motivation, as students have felt encouraged in their own acquisition of French through the SL project. Interestingly, out of the 25 students who filled out the questionnaire, all but two majored or minored in French. Fourteen took the SL class within their first two years of college French, and therefore it could be assumed that this experience encouraged them to pursue their study of French.

Subject 1 Yes. There's a certain amount of motivation that comes with young children, who start learning French with nothing and succeed, that prompts me—someone with much more linguistic

exposure—to drive myself to learn more.

- Subject 7 Yes, it has helped me realize I'd like to do something with my life that concerns French.
- Subject 8 Yes, teaching French to others makes me want to get better myself.
- Subject 16 Yes, teaching has been very rewarding. I'd like to improve my level of French so I can continue to do so, maybe at a higher level someday.
- Subject 18 Yes. I would like to be a French teacher when I graduate college, so the success in service-learning motivates me more to do well in French so I may teach it one day.
- Subject 20 Yes, because it is a definite boost in confidence in the language, knowing that I am able to teach it.

For this particular question, the vast majority of students were very pleased with their experience. They believed that their French was stimulated, improved, and practiced for a purpose. They were motivated to keep learning French in the future. However, one student in particular did not find the experience very encouraging in his learning of French, and he also discovered that he did not want to teach.

Subject 2 No. I'm not necessarily more motivated to study French but I am motivated to pursue a career choice away from teaching.

Nonetheless, from his journal entries, he did learn to appreciate his experience: "The class went really well today. I mostly just did fun things for the kids."

Because learning an L2 needs to have a purpose for learners' intrinsic motivation, the SL class allows for the language to become more meaningful and real. The pre-

sent SL project encouraged students to explore a variety of cultural realities they had to research in order to present them accurately to the children. Therefore, not only did the students have to make sure they were prepared linguistically, but culturally as well. Their cultural awareness was clearly enhanced, although not to the same level provided by native speakers often found in Spanish SL-based projects (Morris, 2001; Overfield, 1997; Schrier, 1996). The source of the cultural awareness came from their preparation and sharing of information with the children, and from the interactions with their instructor (a native speaker). Furthermore, many of them were exposed to a multitude of cultures through the children's own experiences and background.

Even though two students did not believe that SL was an inspiration for learning more French, they were still encouraged from this experience. None of the students regretted participating in the course. In her journal, subject 5 wrote: "This program has been immensely positive for me. I've learned from it that I enjoy working with children. The last day for me and my partner was filled with mixed emotions because on one end I was glad it was the holidays and on another end I wanted to continue teaching this class!"

### **Impact on Professional Aspirations**

Besides benefits for the community, SL provides students with valuable professional experience. Students are exposed to a professional environment and are given responsibilities that can guide them in the choice of their future endeavors. Rosengrant (1997) and Gascoigne Lally (2001) state that SL can have a significant impact on a student's professional future. One of the goals for this present study was to verify if students in this class were influenced in their professional aspirations, based on their newly acquired experience. Questions 3 and 4 were intended to collect those thoughts.

3. Before this service-learning project, what profession were you intending to enter?
4. (a) Do you feel that your participation in this service-learning project has given you a new perspective on teaching French? If so, how? If not, why not?  
(b) Are you considering becoming a teacher?  
(c) If yes, did the service-learning motivate/encourage this choice?

The results, in Table 2, show that many students were influenced by their SL experience in their possible choice for a future career. Some students realized that they did not want to become teachers. Others felt that this experience confirmed their previous choice. Finally, others saw teaching as a new possibility for their future. Among the students who decided to consider teaching as a professional option, some saw French as a likely teaching area. As an interesting anecdote, a change occurred for Subject 2, who had stated (see previous section) that the SL experience had discouraged him from becoming a teacher. However, that same student has subsequently decided to become a French high school teacher. So despite his original statement, he not only learned that he did not want to teach young children, but also that he really wanted to become a teacher of older children. Therefore, his experience with SL did have a positive impact on his professional decision.

Students' answers, for the most part, confirmed what other studies had found, making SL potentially critical for their professional decisions. From the journals and discussions, it is also evident that students acquired valuable professional and civic experience. Because they were given important responsibilities through teaching young children, they had to deal with behavioral issues, and they had to be prepared, just as a teacher has to be. They were also in charge of bringing the knowledge of the world to the children in order to expand their understanding of others, through teaching a new language and many new cultures. This

window into professional work was invaluable. Furthermore, for those interested in teaching, this opportunity allowed them to experience teaching before taking the student teaching practicum, after which it might be too difficult for a career change.

## Impact on the Role of Civic Commitment

Part of the collected data focused on how students perceived their effort in the community. Because SL implies that students are giving back to their community, it was important to better understand the sentiment that students had toward their roles as civic servants and teachers. The following questions were asked:

5. Do you feel that your participation in this service-learning project has had a significant impact on children's understanding of a different culture? If so, how? If not, why not?
6. Do you feel that your participation in this service-learning project has had a significant impact on children's understanding of France and the French language? If so, how? If not, why not?
7. Do you think the children enjoyed this service-learning? If so, how? If not, why not?

For question 5, all but one student answered that the SL impacted children's global cultural understanding, which is part of the objectives for instituting SL in the community.

- Subject 9 Yes. My students were always amazed to learn the differences between our culture and French and also that French is such a common language in the world.
- Subject 11 Yes! They love being exposed to different ideas and I can see that they enjoy learning about the French culture which is so different from their own.
- Subject 15 I think so. The kids I worked with had no idea about anything French, and now

they have a slight inkling about the culture. I think it opened them up to learn more in the future and realize that other countries are very different from the U.S.

- Subject 20 Definitely, because we covered a multitude of cultural aspects and I always tried to include culture in lessons because it is the most fun!

However, subject 2 did not think that 30 minutes a week was sufficient to teach the children anything—"I find it highly unlikely that preschoolers can understand the concept of what, exactly, a different culture is."

For question 6, most answers were also very positive. Some examples are:

- Subject 9 Yes, my kids always asked me how to say certain things in French, which shows that they were very interested in learning French.
- Subject 13 Yes, I was surprised every week by how much the kids had remembered from previous weeks.
- Subject 14 This class was the first time a lot of the kids had ever heard of French. I think the class was a great opportunity to open their interest to the language.
- Subject 19 Yes! The children learned so much French! We covered really a lot of material and were able to talk about lots of cultural subjects in our time!

For question 7, all students perceived that the children had enjoyed the French programs. The journals also strongly supported this.

- Subject 8 Our last class went really well! I was sad it was over! The kids were too, but that kind of made me feel good because I know they enjoyed themselves, and that was my goal!

- Subject 11 Though it was sad having my last lesson plan for today, the students still enjoyed it and are looking forward to next week for our party.
- Subject 19 The kids were active learners and seemed to have fun!

These examples suggest that students felt a sense of accomplishment in the role they held in the community. Most of them believed that the children had profited from their experience in that they were exposed to new cultures and a new language. It is important to specify that the study did not aim to examine children's benefits from the SL classes, but rather college students' feeling of accomplishment throughout their experience. The outcome seemed to be positive and encouraging, especially as their role increased their understanding of the society that they had impacted.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Eyler and Giles noted that "service-learning aims to connect the personal and intellectual, to help students acquire knowledge that is useful in understanding the world, build critical thinking capacities, and perhaps lead to fundamental questions about learning and about society and to a commitment to improve both" (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. 14). In this ongoing SL program, all the components of SL mentioned by Eyler and Giles are present. Indeed, students are exposed to others in a personal, yet intellectual manner. They create bonds with the children and the schools while implementing new knowledge in their own mind and the children's. The students acquire cultural and linguistic knowledge through the preparation of their lessons. They build critical thinking skills by solving challenges with children and in the preparation of their lessons. They discover a new relationship with the society around them and build their understanding of it, through fostering their civic responsibilities.

Based on this study, as well as the previous studies mentioned in the literature review, it is obvious that SL associated with L2s can have a positive impact on learners. As Overfield (1997) stated, "Learners become more aware of the communicative value of the target language as they use it in authentic situations where each speaker is engaged in the outcome of the interaction" (p. 12). The language is contextualized and authentic, just as prescribed by communicative language teaching methods and the National Standards. Through this SL program, the college students are in contact with the 5 Cs (Cultures, Communities, Connections, Comparisons, and Communication), as they (1) teach cross-cultural aspects to the children, (2) bring the target language community into the preschool/elementary classroom by being ambassadors of the language and cultures, (3) help children and themselves make connections through the teaching of subjects such as math (e.g., numbers) and natural sciences (e.g., animals, body parts), (4) often make comparisons with English and American culture, and finally, (5) communicate in French to the children and teach children to communicate with the use of short sentences. This practice aligns with the foreign language national standards (Enos & Troppe, 1996). L2 teachers are often looking for ways to integrate community and connection in their classroom; SL seems to answer this need.

The goal of this current SL was not to increase student grades, even though research has proven that grades on essays improve through SL experience (Kendrick, 1996; Strange, 2000). Its goals were:

- to encourage students to apply what they have learned, to use it in a real-life situation in order to provide themselves with authentic experiences, and to show they have the ability to use French outside the classroom;
- to show that knowing an L2 can benefit others;
- to generate confidence in oral skills;

- to acquire a valuable teaching experience, which could impact future professional plans, such as pursuing a teaching career; and
- to add to résumés demonstrating involvement in the community.

In looking at the comments shared in the questionnaires and the journals, it is evident that most of the goals were reached. Some goals might not be manifested until later in students' lives—for example, when they are seeking a job. The majority of the students certainly enjoyed their experience in the preschools and elementary schools. The benefits and encouragements they received outweighed the challenges that came with the program. The final question of the questionnaire asked, "Did you enjoy this service-learning experience? If so, how? If not, why not?" All students answered yes, even those who found the experience challenging.

- Subject 7 Yes, I love it! It gives me an opportunity to have some practical teaching experience, which will be very important to me not only for community service but for my choices about what I will do with my life as well.
- Subject 10 Yes, it was a rewarding and educational experience.
- Subject 16 Yes, very much. It's great to see a student speaking a little French and know they can do that because of you. Also, it's been beneficial to me to get a little experience teaching something. It's helped me learn different strategies.
- Subject 17 I truly enjoyed this experience because it was such a fun way to practice my French and also explore the teaching profession.
- Subject 18 Yes, I was nervous at first, but I feel so great and accomplished afterwards. It's making me looking forward to teaching for real!

Subject 19 Yes! I loved spending time with the kids and getting to share one of the things I really enjoy, speaking French! I am also now sure I want to be a French teacher, which is a really exciting decision for me to have made!

Subject 21 Absolutely! It reminded me why I like French, brought back that fun aspect to learning!

The comments in the journals were very encouraging as well.

Subject 5 This program has been immensely positive for me. I've learned from it that I enjoy working with children. The last day for me and my partner was filled with mixed emotions because on one hand I was glad it was the holidays and on another hand I wanted to continue teaching this class!

Subject 7 Can't wait for next semester!

Subject 10 Yes, it was a rewarding and educational experience.

Subject 12 I had no idea how much I was going to miss our fifth graders! (. . .) This experience was so incredibly rewarding. We had a lot of challenges, but I loved the chaos; every day was an adventure!

The students learned about themselves and others, which can only enrich their inner selves.

Even if no data were collected from the children's or schools' side, the impact on the community has been significant. From personal e-mails or conversations with school directors, teachers, program coordinators, and parents, it is obvious that the children and their parents are very pleased with this opportunity. The children are exposed to new cultures (the francophone cultures are numerous) and a new language. Naturally, they are learning very basic vocabulary and

much of the retention will not last, but the exposure to this experience may help them be more aware of others in the world, and as L2 teachers hope, inspire them to learn an L2 later on in their schooling.

Regarding the profession of K–12 teachers, this project suggests using a similar model to train pre-service teachers in the K–6 grades. In the state of Colorado, as in other states, L2 pre-service teachers are certified to teach K–12. However, the student-teaching practicum is often in grades 6–12, dismissing K–5. SL could fill parts of this lacuna. Asking students to participate in a similar project in parallel to their L2 methods course will give them valuable teaching experience and expose them to the diversity of learners and learning style, prior to their student teaching. Gascoigne Lally (2001) valued SL as a great opportunity to provide pre-service teachers, exposing them to what is forthcoming in their profession. Among the students involved in this project, several were interested in becoming K–12 French teachers or teachers in other content areas (e.g., history, elementary, social sciences). Through this SL, they were able to temporarily experience the profession. For students unsure of their decision, they were given the chance to reflect on a possible teaching career.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

The goal of this study was not to analyze college students' improvement in their L2 skills. However, data on students' linguistic abilities before, during, and after the SL experience could possibly provide important linguistic information. Nevertheless, such data could be problematic to gather, as students do not take the same levels or numbers of L2 classes. Their improvement could easily be attributed to their personal work in other classes. It is very possible that some students might have deeply appreciated their experience while barely improving their L2 skills. Questionnaires are not a sufficient tool to measure this variable,

although the majority of the students in this study did feel that they had improved their French skills in some way.

Another challenging research question that could bring valuable insight but that this study did not examine is to research how many children involved in SL classes voluntarily choose to learn an L2 once they reach middle or high school. This could show if early exposure to an L2 influences their future choices.

### **Any Drawbacks?**

This article cannot end without mentioning the challenges of organizing an SL course. At the beginning of each semester, the organization is very time-consuming: schools need to be contacted; children have to sign up for the French programs; students need to find a school that matches their availability; some students do not always take their assignments seriously; financial support is needed, particularly through grants or other sources, in order to purchase teaching materials; some discipline issues can occur with children and with a lack of experience on the part of the students doing the teaching.

Despite the challenges, it is hoped that this model of SL will be a seminal encouragement for starting other similar programs in local schools. The outcomes are often positive and rewarding, not only for the instructor in charge, but mostly for the students involved in the project. Students' language skills are, at the least, practiced in a meaningful setting, in which basic vocabulary, grammatical structures, and cultural information are reviewed or learned before being taught. SL programs are strongly recommended to those desiring more authenticity and outreach to the community as well as potential improvement in L2 learning. Finally, they provide students a chance to explore the profession of teaching. This type of project can be done with college students as well as high school students. The idea of pairing a French high school French student with a college French student needs to be explored, as it could create



a mentor-mentored relationship, which in turn might encourage the high school students to attend college. SL can also give high school students a taste of French in an authentic environment with the intention that they might opt to continue learning French (or another L2) in college. Giving a true purpose for learning an L2 can be decisive for intrinsic motivation. As a final note, SL supports the emphasis that the federal government has had for several years on assimilating college students into the community through service.

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### Notes

1. Because of the geographical location of Colorado, Spanish is a language taught more commonly than other foreign languages at the elementary schools, although it is not instituted in most elementary schools. A strong need is felt among school principals and after-school program coordinators, who cannot afford hiring teachers but would love to offer several foreign languages and cultures to their children.
2. I am immensely grateful for grants from the national and local American Association for Teachers of French, the Colorado Congress for Foreign Language Teachers, and the Service-Learning mini-grants of Colorado State University. They helped me acquire books, toys, music, and materials to enhance the lessons.

3. Students who participated in the program two, three, or four times were counted just once.

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## APPENDIX

### *Service-Learning Study Questionnaire*

Thank you for being willing to fill out this questionnaire for the study I am working on. Please, answer the following questions, and expand on your idea when necessary.

1. Do you feel that your participation in this service-learning project has contributed to the improvement of your level of French? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. Do you feel that your participation in this service-learning project has contributed to the increase of your motivation for learning French? If so, how? If not, why not?
3. Before this service-learning project, what profession were you intending to pursue?
4. (a) Do you feel that your participation in this service-learning project has given you a new perspective on teaching French? If so, how? If not, why not?  
(b) Have you considered becoming a teacher?  
(c) If yes, did the service-learning motivate/encourage this choice?
5. Do you feel that your participation in this service-learning project has had a significant impact on children's understanding of a different culture? If so, how? If not, why not?

6. Do you feel that your participation in this service-learning project has had a significant impact on children's understanding of France and the French language? If so, how? If not, why not?
7. Do you think the children enjoyed this service-learning? If so, how? If not, why not?
8. Did you enjoy this service-learning experience? If so, how? If not, why not?