Service-Learning Benefits for English Language Learners: A Case of China–Hong Kong Cross-Border English Teaching

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Abstract

This study examines the burgeoning trend of Hong Kong university students conducting English language teaching as service-learning in mainland China, specifically in rural primary schools. The study reports the results of a questionnaire administered to Hong Kong undergraduate students after a series of such trips spanning a 4-year period. In particular, the study examines the students' perceptions of their own service orientation, cultural exchange experience, and language-learning outcomes. The findings allow for a broader qualitative discussion of the potential benefits for English language learners engaging in service-learning through teaching English. Recommendations focus on the potential for such trips to bolster the confidence and motivation of long-time English language learners, such as Hong Kong students.

Keywords: learning motivation, second language learning, service-learning

Over the last decade, the implementation of service-learning pedagogy in Asia has soared, staging a need for research in this context (Xing & Ma, 2010). In Taiwan, for example, a 2007 initiative by the Ministry of Education provided funding for service-learning projects and encouraged university students to improve civic responsibility and professional training (Yen & Yang, 2010). Similarly, Hong Kong universities have broadened their service-learning programs, taking advantage of a similar Ministry of Education initiative providing partial funding for Hong Kong and mainland Chinese university students to meet or work together for cultural exchange, learning, or service ("Ministry of Education Ten Thousand Student Interflow Programme," 2016; City University of Hong Kong, 2017). These institutions understand service-learning as a method to develop students' moral education and service orientation after graduation (Hok-ka, Wing-fung, & Cheung-ming, 2016; Powers, 2010); in some cases, service-learning is also used to bridge cultural divides (Al Barwani, Al Mekhlafi, & Neisler, 2010; Xing & Ma, 2010).

At its core, service-learning is a pedagogy grounded in Dewey's experiential learning model (Giles & Eyler, 1994), where formal study and reflection are paired with the performance of a service through volunteer work that meets a community need (Furco, 2001). Often, service-learning happens within the structure of a university credit-bearing course where students apply theoretical concepts to real-world problems; however, extracurricular service-learning activities may also be organized through university offices and colleges (Crabtree, 2008). Ideally, both the community and the student volunteers benefit mutually as the community's need is met and as the students increase their awareness of social issues, gain valuable practicum in their field, or learn about long-term social responsibility to local communities (Bowen, 2014; Cooper, 2014; Fullerton, Reitenauer, & Kerrigan, 2015).

Many existing studies on service-learning in English language learning contexts examine settings where English is the primary language spoken in the region (e.g., learning English in the United States) rather than settings where English is not the primary

language used in daily life (e.g., learning English in China). These studies often show the benefits of service–learning for students enrolled in college academic pathway programs (Miller, Berkeley, & Griffin, 2015; Perren, Grove, & Thornton, 2013). Service–learning in this setting aims to integrate, for example, students newly arrived in the United States into their new English language communities both linguistically and culturally through various volunteer activities, but not through the teaching of English as a service. A few studies do report on English teaching itself as service–learning, but do so for preservice English teachers during their teacher training rather than for students who are in the process of learning English. In these studies, the benefits of connecting hands–on practicum with service projects for teachers–in–training are the main areas of concern (Lin, Wu, Wu, Pan, & Liao, 2014; Su & Chi, 2016). However, no studies have yet investigated English language learners (ELLs) teaching English as service–learning.

Because university students in Hong Kong are now participating in English teaching as a service in mainland China, this study aims to investigate a new phenomenon in Hong Kong university service–learning by reporting on a series of non–credit–bearing service–learning trips wherein the researcher served as a coleading teacher. The service took place over four summers, initiated and led by the director of the university's unit for English language teaching. The trips were organized as extracurricular activities through a college of the university, and three of four successive trips received local and external funding through new Hong Kong and Chinese Ministry of Education initiatives. A Hong Kong university's Office of Academic Links states that the purpose of one such funding initiative, open to all Hong Kong universities, is to "promote exchange and collaboration among Hong Kong and mainland Chinese institutions and to enable local students to gain a thorough understanding of mainland China" ("Ministry of Education Ten Thousand Student Interflow Programme," 2016, para. 1). Within this funding source framework of cultural exchange, the financial support could be used for a variety of learning activities, including short–term study abroad programs, joint academic projects, or service–learning. The trip organizers were also free to set their own program agenda, themes, and learning objectives. The trips investigated in this study drew on this funding to organize service–learning experiences together with students from a mainland university in China. Each trip included English language teaching in a village primary school as the primary service performed by the university students (ELLs).

Herein, I examine the Hong Kong students' perspectives of their own personal goals for participating in these service–learning trips, and I set out to better understand how the students perceive the ways that the trips affected:

1. their public service orientations,

2. their cultural exchange in China, and

3. most importantly in this study, their perceptions of their own language learning development, given the linguistic focus of the service project.

The findings aim to inform service–learning organizers in Hong Kong as they consider best practices in arranging formats and developing curriculum for such student service–learning. With further research, the findings may also have implications for ELLs conducting service–learning English teaching in other contexts where cross–border service is possible or where there exists a community need for improved English language skills among pockets of linguistically diverse populations.

Review of the Service–Learning Literature

The Benefits of Service–Learning

Numerous studies have shown the benefits for all involved in service–learning programs in university settings. Engaging in service–learning can help students develop leadership expertise and professional competencies such as teamwork and communication skills (Fullerton et al., 2015; Hok–ka et al., 2016; Newman & Hernandez, 2011). A study by Markus, Howard, and King (1993) investigating service–learning in a university political science course found measurable academic benefits when the service was paired with formal classroom instruction and reflection. This pairing allowed students to apply theoretical concepts to real–world settings. That same study found that students in a service–learning course, when compared to students in a

traditional political science course, had higher final grades and reported rising to their maximum academic potential in greater numbers than students enrolled in the traditional course (Markus et al., 1993). In addition to career and academic benefits, when service-learning organizers prioritize reciprocity, service-learning can also result in benefits to the community (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Jacoby, 1996). When focused on social justice, as opposed to charity, service-learning projects can contribute to long-term solutions rather than temporary fixes (Bowen, 2014), helping to advance societal change (Cooper, 2014; Fullerton et al., 2015). A longitudinal study found that service-learning participants even grew in their appreciation for human diversity and experienced a long-term altering of their perception toward society for years after the service was completed (Fullerton et al., 2015). Finally, it has been found that students who participate in service-learning during university are more likely to continue volunteer work after graduation and maintain a service orientation toward society and their community (Astin et al., 2006).

Due to the number of benefits observed, service-learning programs have been embedded in a variety of contexts around the world. Briefly reviewing the research on service-learning across English language learning settings and Hong Kong university settings in particular allows for consideration of the potential benefits of service-learning English teaching as performed by the Hong Kong undergraduate ELLs in this study.

Service-Learning for U.S. ELLs

The incorporation of service-learning for ELLs in college and university pathway programs in the U.S. has been shown to produce various benefits. By participating in community service to low-income communities, international students develop a greater understanding toward issues of race and class in America. Interacting in communities through service also encourages better cultural cohesion, lends exposure to volunteer work, and improves awareness of the mutual benefits of service-learning (Miller et al., 2015). Beyond these social and personal benefits, studies indicate that participation in service-learning creates opportunities to raise international students' English language proficiency, especially when the service involves interacting in the community and is paired with reading, writing, and reflection (Askildson, Kelly, & Mick, 2013; Heuser, 1999; McCarthy, 1996). Indeed, service-learning activities align well with a communicative approach to language learning. When international students must interact in authentic and unscripted English language environments, as is common for much service-learning outreach, they are prompted to focus on and improve their own English fluency and intelligibility (Miller et al., 2015). In other words, these studies highlight how ELLs in the United States can benefit linguistically through service-learning; however, they do not perform English language teaching as a service.

Service-Learning for Hong Kong ELLs

Substantial research on service-learning at universities in Hong Kong is beginning to emerge. The first longitudinal study on the impact of service-learning was published in 2016 and looked across 425 Hong Kong students. In that study, researchers from Lingnan University, first to establish a service-learning office in Hong Kong, found that positive outcomes for students included workplace preparation, academic growth, and social development of long-term civic responsibility awareness (Hok-ka et al., 2016). These benefits were echoed by Ngai (2006), a professor of sociology, who found that students participating in a service-learning course at the Chinese University of Hong Kong benefited from increased self-efficacy and the ability to care for vulnerable groups in Hong Kong. Other Hong Kong–based studies report on university students' service to the elderly as part of a community psychology project (Chan, Ng, & Chan, 2016) and to needy children and new migrants from China (Ngai, 2006). However, no research in the Hong Kong context specifically examines service-learning through English language teaching conducted by ELLs.

Service-Learning Through English Language Teaching

Studies of service-learning within English language teaching (ELT) contexts remain focused, understandably, on teacher training programs (Lin et al., 2014; Rueckert, 2013; Su & Chi, 2016), not on ELLs. The impetus for teachers in training to engage in service-learning is the opportunity to

gain professional experience in real-life contexts. One study of community English language teaching in the United States found that teachers-in-training, when given the chance to participate in service-learning teaching during their MA program, reported greater levels of confidence to teach English postservice; those teachers also self-identified as professionals more strongly than prior to the service-learning teaching (Rueckert, 2013). Another study found that preservice teachers developed deeper reflective teaching abilities after service-learning teaching (He & Prater, 2014). Overall, teacher training programs turn to service-learning to improve professional preparedness and confidence in teaching.

Despite the growth of service-learning, research on ELLs teaching English as a service is lacking. The closest example may be a study on a service-learning course at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, which paired students to help the elderly at a community center. Although English tutoring is mentioned as one of the many services performed, in addition to teaching computer skills, dance, singing, and cooking, no specific details about the English teaching outcomes or preparation are given (Tam, 2014). Indeed, few reports also specifically engage service-learning trips happening between Hong Kong and China or give focus to ELLs teaching English in Asia (Su & Chi, 2016). However, recent service-learning trips to mainland China urge investigation. University ELLs in Hong Kong can now participate in English language teaching as service in mainland China, and the presence of new financial support from the Chinese and Hong Kong governments to build cross-border relationships among students expands such possibilities, again underscoring the need for scholarly examination.

The Hong Kong–China Service-Learning Context

Sociopolitical Context

Before introducing the research methodology and results, it is likely useful to briefly review the sociopolitical context as well as the English language learning context in China and Hong Kong. In 1997, after 150-plus years of British colonial rule, Hong Kong's sovereignty was passed to Beijing. Hong Kong is currently designated a Special Administrative Region of China. Given Hong Kong's distinct legal, social,

and economic structure, China instituted its "one country, two systems" policy to ensure high levels of autonomy for Hong Kong until 2047; nevertheless, Beijing's leadership is committed to the unification of all regions of China (Hartnett, Keränen, & Conley, 2017; So, 2011). As a result, the current leadership of the Chinese government deploys a domestic policy largely centered on a Confucian-inspired notion of national "harmony," which can be understood as "an explicit discourse on the rationalization, maintenance, and enforcement of stability and order by the State in reaction to the rapid economic–political changes and sociocultural diversifications" (Wang, Juffermans, & Du, 2016, p. 301). Amid this policy and discourse focused on the need for development and change, or "what ought to be" (Wang et al., 2016, p. 302), the Hong Kong and mainland China governments actively fund cross-regional projects designed to pave the way for harmonious social relations and integrations (Kuah-Pearce & Fong, 2010; Wu & Siu, 2017; Zhao, 2015). The English language learning context is included insofar as schools and universities are offered government funding to ensure that ongoing partnerships and relationships are formed between Hong Kong and mainland China.

The service-learning trips examined herein were partially funded through mainland and Hong Kong government sources presumably established to promote cultural exchange and implement long-standing policy (Kuah-Pearce & Fong, 2010; Wu & Siu, 2017; Zhao, 2015). However, the purpose of this study is not to build critical cultural insights about the relations of power forged through such government funding but, rather, to examine the Hong Kong ELLs' own perceptions of service-learning through teaching English in China and, primarily, to explore potential benefits to their language learning and their public service orientation. Nevertheless, sociopolitical considerations of the trip are not easily divorced from students' perceptions, and the research instrument, accordingly, captures responses about students' perspectives toward this cross-cultural exchange. The discussion and recommendations sections, therefore, recognize and evaluate the sociopolitical context but do so in reference to and in conjunction with the student-respondents' comments.

English Learning and Testing

Although Cantonese is the primary language used by Hong Kong people, Hong Kong, as a former British colony, has maintained English as one of its official languages since the handover in 1997. English plays a role in Hong Kong such that it has a greater curricular focus in the education system than in mainland China, where the British colonial legacy does not exist, though the focus on English training in China has been increasing in recent years due to its perceived links to the modernization of China, financial wealth, and personal well-being (Nunan, 2003). With respect to the service-learning trips investigated in this article, most Hong Kong university ELLs attending had already taken at least 12 years of English classes starting in elementary school, if not earlier. Further, after entering university, most Hong Kong students are required to take additional English classes to better prepare them for university-level academic English.

Since 2001, the mainland Chinese government has required all primary and secondary school students to learn English, but the number of years and the intensity of study are still significantly less than in Hong Kong (Nunan, 2003). Additionally, Chinese students participate in a number of provincial and national exams that include assessment of their English language proficiency for entry to junior high and high school as well as university, and it is widely recognized that these exams directly impact the educational, career, and life paths of Chinese students (Cheng, 2008). However, as education is funded locally, educational inequality has been found between schools on coastal cities in the east and those of rural areas in the west of China, which often have fewer resources for attracting highly trained English language teachers or for purchasing educational technology and supplemental learning materials (Yang, 2005). To further complicate matters, the English language has almost no significance in the daily life of rural schoolchildren, yet the chance of upward mobility relies, at least partially, on their ability to do well on China's national exams (Hu, 2003).

In light of this context, English language teaching became a salient mode of service to a rural Chinese elementary school. Indeed, the lack of educational resources in rural schools has been linked to lower proficiency in English, and poor performance on English exams is recognized as one of the factors that prevent Chinese students from entering university or finding well-paying jobs (Hu, 2003). Because service-learning strives for reciprocal benefits in meeting community needs and enhancing students' education, Hong Kong universities, such as the one connected to this project, have identified service-learning through English teaching as an effective way to meet an obvious need in a location a reasonably short distance from Hong Kong. By collaborating with a mainland university, Hong Kong ELLs would potentially benefit from cultural exchange, and by reaching out to a rural school, they would have an opportunity to grow in service orientation, while the rural schoolchildren would, in turn, benefit from the Hong Kong ELLs' more advanced level of English. It should be noted that this research focuses primarily on understanding the gains related to language learning, as perceived by the Hong Kong ELLs, as possible benefits of this service-learning outreach.

The Service-Learning Trip

From 2013 to 2016, a prominent university in Hong Kong arranged four service-learning trips to rural China, using the mainland government's subsidy for partnering with a mainland university for cultural exchange and colearning through joint service outreach. Hong Kong university ELLs of all majors joined the program to participate as teachers of English to elementary school students in rural China. Prior to departure, the Hong Kong ELLs prepared for several weeks, planning lessons and receiving training under the guidance of the leader, the language unit director at the university, and coleading teachers who were English language lecturers at the university. Each trip was attended by 7 to 15 Hong Kong university participants (ELLs) and one to three English language lecturers.

Upon arrival in China, the team traveled with its mainland university counterpart to a rural area where students worked together to teach English at a primary school. Teams of three to four university ELLs per classroom served as English teachers and stayed with the same class for five school days in the format of a week-long English camp. Lessons were theme-based and tailored to each group's level. The lead teachers rotated between classes to assist and oversee teaching. Regular feedback was given to the university ELLs to improve the teaching

and the learning experience of the children. During the service, several meetings were arranged for students and leaders to share their reflections, sometimes conducted in Mandarin to better accommodate the mainland university students who did not speak Cantonese and were less proficient in English. These reflections were often structured by sharing classroom highs and lows from the day followed by recommended solutions to troubleshoot problems. After each service trip, students were required to complete various reflection projects. For example, after one trip, students collaborated in groups to produce a multimodal reflective piece in English or Cantonese. Using a digital storytelling format, the university ELLs gave an open-ended reflective summary of their learning as it related to cultural exchange and service outreach.

Methods

The Participants and Questionnaire

The researcher collected data through an online questionnaire from 13 Hong Kong students who participated in the aforementioned service-learning trips from 2013 to 2016. An invitation was sent in 2016 to all previous participants of the service-learning trips, and 13 volunteered to participate. Prior to questionnaire dissemination, research ethics clearance for surveying human subjects (Institutional Review Board) was formally obtained through the university's Survey and Behavioral Research Ethics Committee. A participant information sheet was distributed and consent was obtained from the participating university students. The questionnaire was designed to collect students' perceptions of their personal experiences on the study tour through quantitative and qualitative responses. The following research questions guided the investigation.

Service Orientation Questions

Why did students join the service-learning trip?

What did students perceive as the main outcomes of the trip?

How did students perceive the service trip to influence their thinking about future involvement in volunteer work?

Cultural Exchange Question

Did students make personal goals for cultural exchange in mainland China, and did they perceive that these goals were achieved as an outcome of the trip?

Language Learning Question

How did students view their English abilities prior to the trip, and did they perceive any linguistic or language learning benefits from the experience of becoming a teacher of English for elementary school students?

To identify perspectives, the online questionnaire was distributed after the service trip per the example of Ngai's (2006) post-service investigation of a service-learning course; however, the questionnaire also utilized the attitudinal ranking questions composed by University of Central Florida researchers in their study of nine student participants of cross-border service-learning (Cox, Murray, & Plante, 2014) since the purpose of their trip, aim of their research, and scope of their study reasonably correlated with this one. Accordingly, the questionnaire in this study sought to capture numerical ratings to help interpret students' open-ended comments, overall seeking to qualitatively understand the student experience of service-learning English teaching.

The questionnaire used in this study consisted of 15 questions and three question types paired with write-in sections for collecting more detailed responses and explanations. In the first section of the questionnaire, yes/no questions were used to collect demographic data such as past volunteer work or service-learning experience. Next, multiple choice questions were used to identify students' main motivations for joining the trip, for capturing their perceptions of the main outcomes of the trip, and for detailing their reasons for believing that the service did or did not help them to improve their own English skills. In each case, participants were asked to choose one to three reasons for each answer, with the option of adding any unique reasons that were not listed. Finally, three Likert-scale ranking questions were used to capture students' perceptions of their pretrip levels of confidence using English and to understand

the frequency of their English communication with their mainland counterparts compared to the amount of English used with their Hong Kong counterparts. Since students could skip any question, the number of responses as well as the percentage are reported for each result.

Questionnaire Dissemination

An online questionnaire was sent to Hong Kong ELLs who had participated in any of the four service trips between 2013 and 2016. The questionnaire was not sent to the mainland university students as this research exclusively investigated the outcomes and benefits for the participating Hong Kong university students. Responses were collected anonymously and on a voluntary basis. The sample was limited by the small size of the service-learning trips (each trip ranging from 7 to 15 participants). Some students participated in more than one trip, and some students who had since graduated could not be reached — further limiting the possible sample size. Responses were collected from 13 participants, and roughly equal numbers of participants from each trip responded (2013 N = 3, 2014 N = 4, 2015 N = 4, 2016 N = 3), capturing a meaningful cross-section sample of student perspectives on this new service-learning program across 4 years.

Method of Analysis

As a qualitative study of student perspectives on language learning in a unique service-learning context, this research has followed the iterative approach of grounded theory, first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). As Charmaz (2006) has noted, this method depends upon sorting and making comparisons across collected data while consulting sources and one's own experience in an iterative way. Doing so creates "an open-ended study" that adopts the premise that the researchers are not neutral but "possess stocks of knowledge" and can "be reflexive about it" (p. 15).

Accordingly, for each question type, numerical data were gathered and calculated, offering a baseline from which to develop ideas about student perceptions. Relative percentages in conjunction with the actual number of responses serve as a starting point for thinking through the aforementioned research on service-learning and motivation. However, open-ended responses also inform an iterative inter-

pretation, that is, they offer another point from which to consider the effects of the service-learning trips. Thus, for each question type, open-ended follow-up questions were added and examined, giving nuance to this researcher's own interpretations of any numerical outcomes.

In cases where students responded in an unexpected way or in a majority, open-ended answers were listed as part of the analysis (see following sections). As evidenced in the discussion, open-ended questions were content analyzed for overarching themes, following recommendations by Charmaz (2006). Such methods proved useful, as they also align with past work on service-learning, such as that conducted by Ngai (2006) and Nickols, Rothenberg, Moshi, and Tetloff (2013), both studies turned to the principles of grounded theory to explore student development. Accordingly, the subsequent discussion is informed by my own experience of the service-learning trip, knowledge of the context, and understanding of the service-learning literature, deepening the interpretation of trends present across the numerical and qualitative data.

Findings

Service Orientation Goals and Outcomes

The questionnaire data show that students perceive themselves as having some service awareness prior to this trip. Ten students, or 77%, previously participated in volunteer work, such as working in homes for the elderly or orphanages. The data also show that a strong service orientation was a contributing motivator for the participants to join the service-learning trips. Nearly all students (N = 12, or 92%) reported that they wanted to "do good/help others" as one of their three primary motivating factors. The next most common motivation was to "learn more about volunteer work," chosen by nearly 70% (N = 9) of the student volunteers. The third most common motivating factor, chosen by nearly 31% of students (N = 4), was to "gain leadership experience for job/scholarship/society applications."

When given a similar list of factors, including helping others and gaining leadership experience, the reasons that students recalled for choosing to participate in the trip often matched the outcome that they perceived to have achieved at the end of the service. After the service trip, 92% (N =

12) felt that they did indeed "help others" through the service trip, and almost 70% (*N* = 9) "developed a desire to do more volunteer work in the future" because of service-learning. The numbers on leadership had more variation. Nearly 54% (*N* = 7) felt that they "gained leadership experience for job/scholarship/society applications" through the service experience.

When asked if they would like to participate in more volunteer work in the future, the majority answered "yes" in their open-ended comments. One student expressed a hope to perform "service similar to this one because I believe education can change one's future." Another wrote, "Yes, we can contribute our knowledge and talents in improving others' conditions."

Cultural Exchange Goals and Outcomes

Given that the trips were funded in part by government subsidies that link Hong Kong and mainland university students in joint projects, participating students were surveyed about their cultural perceptions of the trip. Out of three choices describing motivating factors related to cultural exchange, nearly 40% of respondents (*N* = 5) wanted to "exchange ideas with mainland students" as a primary motivating factor in volunteering, whereas only 23% (*N* = 3) chose "learn more about the mainland"; fewer participants, about 15% (*N* = 2), indicated a desire to "achieve a greater personal connection to the mainland" as a main motivating factor. One open-ended response suggested another motivating factor for joining the trip: "making friends with mainland and Hong Kong students."

Because the motivating factor "exchange ideas with mainland students" is often used in university materials to promote the exchange learning trips, the researcher aimed to better elucidate and isolate the meaning of that phrase. Thus, after selecting motivating factors, as reported above, the participants were asked to identify what they best achieved during the service. Among these options, students could choose cultural exchange outcomes: They could select that the trip allowed them "to learn more about the mainland" or to "achieve a greater personal connection to the mainland." Students could also choose "Other" and write in any response. Overall, 31% (*N* = 4) chose "to learn more about the mainland," and 15% (*N* = 2) felt that they

had achieved a "greater personal connection to the mainland" as a primary result of their joint service. In other words, when asked to describe the cultural exchange outcomes, compared to their own starting goals for attending the trip, more students selected "learn more about the mainland," but no additional students chose "achieve a greater personal connection to the mainland." No students chose to write in a new answer for "Other."

Language Learning Goals and Outcomes

The data show that improving English was the least motivating factor behind the students' choice to participate in English language teaching as a service; only one student identified with this language improvement goal. When asked to describe their levels of confidence in using English before the trip, one student (8%) felt "very confident" using the English language, and seven (54%) described themselves as "confident." Five students, or 38%, felt "only a little confident" in English. No students reported a total lack of confidence in their English ability. However, these "less confident" students (*N* = 5) provided additional written responses about their own confidence levels:

> "[I am] not fluent English at all time."

> "I believe I can do much better in writing and reading part."

> "I lack vocab in my mind and my speaking skill is not good enough but I think I handle the daily conversation."

> "Even [though] I got into university, I still feel a little bit afraid of speaking English."

All comments on confidence in English gave a specific self-assessment and focused on a weakness in one particular linguistic area: fluency, writing, reading, vocabulary. One comment focused on a feeling—fear of speaking. One comment focused on a strength, daily conversation, while contrasting that with a weakness.

After having taught English as a service for one week, 46% (*N* = 6) felt that their perspective of their own English ability had changed, although the other 54%

(N = 7) did not have a change in perception. A student comment illuminates this change and defines it as "attentiveness": "I became more attentive to my own pronunciation and writing skills." Another student perceived a change in confidence level: "I am more confident to communicate with others using English." Twenty-three percent (N = 3) felt that their English had improved as a result of teaching English. Finally, 53% (N = 7) reported feeling more motivated to continue improving their own English skills after returning from the service teaching. Some students' comments explain a little more about their improved motivation to study English:

> "English teaching makes me more interested in the language."

> "[I want to improve my English] to ensure that I really have the ability to teach English to the children."

> "[The elementary school] students . . . enjoyed learning English and gave me motivation [to improve]."

For those students who did not perceive an improvement in their English skills, they commented, understandably, on the low level of English teaching that they performed, the short time spent teaching (just one week), and the high frequency of Mandarin and Cantonese spoken between teammates throughout the trip. Indeed, when asked about the primary language spoken between teammates, for those students who attended a joint trip with a mainland university, 75% (N = 9) "rarely" spoke English to their mainland counterparts, and 25% (N = 3) "sometimes" spoke English with them. When asked the same question about the language of communication between Hong Kong team members, 23% (N = 3) "sometimes" spoke English with each other, 54% (N = 7) "rarely" spoke English, and 23% (N = 3) "never" spoke English with their Hong Kong peers. In other words, all Hong Kong students remember speaking at least some English with the mainland students, but 23% (N = 3) of Hong Kong students responded that they "never" spoke English with their Hong Kong peers.

For those students who did sense an improvement in their language skills (23%, N = 3), when asked to choose up to three supporting reasons, they focused primarily on speaking to elementary school students in English during daily lessons (100%, n = 3), receiving feedback on lessons from the lead teachers (67%, n = 2), and casually speaking with the lead teachers in English throughout the trip (67%, n = 2).

Quantitative data in questionnaire results, such as that reported here, help to focus the researcher in the process of developing a better understanding; yet in accordance with the dedications of grounded theory to sort through multiple depictions of the social world and to uphold reflexivity and personal experience (Charmaz, 2006), the quantitative data serve as one part of a broader qualitative reading. Thus, the following section advances a discussion organized around three considerations that arise from reviewing the numerical and open-ended questionnaire responses as well as from thinking through the researcher's familiarity with the service-learning trips and the Hong Kong context: the service orientations reported, the cultural exchange experiences, and the language learning outcomes. Subsequently, recommendations for ELLs conducting service-learning and, more specifically, for Hong Kong universities ELL programs are suggested.

Discussion

Service Orientation Considerations

One of the initial findings of this study suggests a positive impact of service-learning on students' service orientation, which accords with previous studies (Astin et al., 2006; Fullerton et al., 2015). The questionnaire data collected on service orientation demonstrate that many of these students would like to do more service work in the future. These responses, and others like them, reflect one of the Hong Kong government's priorities in education: to develop students' charitable inclination and whole-self education (Xing & Ma, 2010).

The idea of engaging in service work in the future was often tied to the idea of leadership in students' open-ended responses, including comments expressing a desire to provide education and improve others' conditions in the future. These comments, combined with the finding that students perceived that they learned more about leadership than they expected to, might suggest that this service-learning trip influenced students' perceptions about their

own future roles in society. Since students expressed a view that they received this personal benefit of leadership training by participating in the service trip, organizers may be able to strengthen this outcome by exploring the research on how to organize effective and ethical service-learning leadership structures. Heuser (1999), for example, proves pertinent, as he cautioned organizers about the leadership structure of volunteer service, suggesting that unchallenged hierarchical structures can unintendedly uphold negative or false stereotypes and disadvantage the poor. Service-learning participants might explore such sources, investigating the importance of reciprocity, ensuring that all parties benefit from the service. Mueller and Lee (2010), to take another example, suggested that service receivers work mutually with service-learners to identify the needs that the service will address. Perhaps including this step at the student leadership level while organizing the service, in addition to academically exploring concepts of reciprocity, hierarchy, and power, could prove beneficial for students' leadership training. Overall, service-learning is promising for its contribution to students' whole person development, but organizers must recognize that service-learning is most successful when following guidelines of best practices from the literature, such as considering the reciprocal nature of the service (Giles & Eyler, 1994).

Cultural Exchange Considerations

According to the data, the partial funding by government initiatives to help Hong Kong students learn more about the mainland and to connect through exchange with mainland university students both did and did not influence the participating students' perceptions toward the mainland. Although students do express an interest in learning more about China and sharing ideas with mainland students, most of those students do not primarily seek nor perceive to benefit from a greater feeling of connection to the mainland. This raises questions regarding the Hong Kong students' reasons for seeking greater knowledge and exchange of ideas. As other scholars have urged, more research into this issue can be conducted to better understand how this funding ultimately influences students' cultural identity (Kuah-Pearce & Fong, 2010). Curiosity about life in China or a desire to express their own identities as "Hong Kongers" could,

of course, be a factor here; future research could detail how regional and cultural identities and national discourses intersect with service-learning motivations and outcomes.

Understanding the cultural implications of service-learning amid the complicated geopolitics of the Hong Kong–China context proves especially difficult. Perhaps there is a balancing of concerns when evaluating the cultural exchange aspect of the trip. On the one hand, some activists and lawmakers indicate a political motive embedded in the available funding sources from the Chinese and Hong Kong governments in light of recent political and cultural tensions in Hong Kong. To them, the growing number of funded exchange opportunities for Hong Kong students on the mainland can be likened to the proposed national education curriculum that was shelved after protests in 2012, revealing a government motivation to strengthen the Hong Kong students' Chinese identity (Wu & Siu, 2017; Zhao, 2015). As noted across recent scholarship on China, the Chinese government remains dedicated to improving unification and national harmony across its regions (Hartnett et al., 2017), and these multiple funding sources likely play a role in this integration process.

On the other hand, taking advantage of such funding to initiate service-learning offers benefits to students, as documented in this article. Unlike a recent policy proposal from a top Hong Kong university, which was believed to require student exchange in the mainland by 2022 (Lam, 2015), the service-learning activities investigated in this article are not compulsory for students, and the funding sources are transparent. Additionally, improving relationships among students in a delicate geopolitical situation is itself an important social action and one that can productively ease political and cultural tensions and lead to mutual, cross-cultural understanding. Educators in Hong Kong all too often see a negative division between mainland and local students at Hong Kong universities and would likely support breaking down stereotypes and increasing students' open-mindedness; one interpretation of the data collected in this study suggests that joint service holds the potential to make a positive impact on Hong Kong university students, to promote open dialogue, and to strengthen students' intercultural sensitivity in addition to service orientation as documented in other studies (Al Barwani et al., 2010; Fullerton et al.,

2015; Xing & Ma, 2010).

Language Learning Considerations

Improving Hong Kong students' English was never a stated goal of the service trip, but this exploratory study reveals some unintended language learning benefits that suggest the value of investigations. Nearly half of the students reported a change in perception of their own English ability after the service teaching. This reported change in language ability, of course, is less likely to reflect an improved proficiency or accuracy than to represent benefits in other crucial areas of language learning development. First, one student comment reported a greater awareness (or "attentiveness") of their own language use, a comment perhaps demonstrating how teaching a subject can hone understanding of that subject in new ways. Next, there is some evidence of increased confidence resulting from the service–learning teaching. Most significantly in this study, a small majority of the participants surveyed perceived a feeling of greater motivation to improve their English as a result of the service–learning trip.

One possible explanation for this new motivation lies in the students' increased service orientation and care for the service recipients, as found in Ngai's (2006) service–learning study in Hong Kong. One student explained that her reason for wanting to improve her English after the service was "to ensure that I really have the ability to teach English to the children." Students' desires to address the community need and improve their own service skills might herein grow simultaneously. These student comments may also affirm the findings of Yihong, Yuan, Ying, and Yan (2007) by linking these Hong Kong students' new motivation for improving their English (helping the service recipients) with a consequential identity change because of their new relationship to the language (as a teacher of English), further propelling their interest in the language. Alternatively, perhaps this increased motivation can be explained by pedagogical research on power and learning; when power and autonomy are given to learners, and when everyone teaches and everyone learns, motivation increases (Kohn, 2010; Richard-Amato 2002). To allow Hong Kong students to teach English in a semiformal setting offers them a greater level of autonomy in the language than they have likely experienced during their 12-plus years of language study, and perhaps this new identity as an expert of the language could increase students' motivation.

Motivation, language awareness, and confidence, recognized as benefits by some students on this trip, have all been shown to contribute to the acquisition of a second language (Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994; Gardner, 1985; Kennedy, 2012; Little, 1997). Yihong et al. (2007) argue that research on these nonlinguistic outcomes of language learning, such as language identity, distinguished by Gardner (1985) from linguistic outcomes, have not been given enough attention by teachers and researchers in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings compared to English as a second language (ESL) settings. Indeed, the potential of service–learning to increase these nonlinguistic language learning elements is documented in ESL settings (Heuser, 1999; Miller et al., 2015), but teaching English through service–learning, if students' language enhancement is prioritized as a goal, could improve language awareness, confidence, and motivation. The reported comments from students to this effect, as noted, provide good cause for further research.

Recommendations for ELLs Teaching English as Service–Learning

Language of Leadership and Reflection

If increasing Hong Kong students' language learning outcomes through service English teaching is deemed a goal, then the comments given by those participants who did perceive an improvement in their English ability should be considered when organizing such service. Those participants who reported language improvements pointed to interactions in English with the lead teachers and to receiving feedback on their lessons from the lead teachers in English. The finding suggests that the leadership of the trips and the language that those leaders use to engage with the students may be important components to reaching any language learning goals. The finding provides assurance that daily feedback after student lessons as well as highly engaged leadership likely will improve outcomes.

To extend the reported benefit gained through interacting in English with the lead teachers, specific strategies for sharing experiences in English could be developed for future trips across a series of

integrated group activities. Indeed, Hong Kong students seem to fall back on speaking in Cantonese in joint trips with mainland students. Other service-learning trips have reportedly been organized with a goal of encouraging ELLs to speak more English outside the classroom (Miller et al., 2015); consequently, if this goal is to be pursued, then finding ways to support and enhance Hong Kong students' own reported moments of using English during the service trip proves vital.

Heuser (1999) found that the potential for language learning was maximized when students communicated in English about their experiences after performing a community service. Other studies found that the learning outcomes of service increased when reflection was added to the structure of service-learning (Perren, 2013). Drawing from the literature on the link between (1) reflection and service-learning outcomes (Perren, 2013), (2) communicating in English about the service-learning experience and increasing English language skills (Heuser, 1999), and (3) pairing service-learning with formal instruction (Markus et al., 1993), a path for maximizing the language learning benefits for Hong Kong ELLs becomes clearer. To aim for improved English language outcomes, service organizers should consider increasing the amount of reflective content shared in English both during and after the trip and could consider embedding English language teaching service in a formal course of English study. To date there have been no reported cases of service-learning English teaching embedded in an English language course, and Hong Kong provides a context where this may be possible.

Concerns About Teaching Quality

Part of developing recommendations is recognizing that there could, understandably, be concerns about the quality of English language teaching performed by English language learners who are not undergoing formal training in the subject. After all, as revealed in the questionnaire results, nearly 40% of the student participants reported feeling "only a little confident" in English prior to the service. However, the concern must be balanced with the reality of the English teaching context and with the benefits to the student teachers themselves and to the recipients of the teaching, primary school learners in rural mainland China.

Three observations from these Hong Kong–China service-learning trips bear on the quality of the service component and its impact on students and on the elementary school learners. First, the English teaching objectives were simplistic and graspable for the student teachers. As some rightly acknowledged in their questionnaire responses, "the English we used was not that much" and "only simple English words are taught." Some student teachers even acknowledged the simplistic teaching objectives as a main reason why they did not perceive an improvement in their own language proficiency. Second, set against a context of teaching in rural village schools that have limited English and teaching resources (Yang, 2005), the student teachers had a higher English proficiency level than the elementary school students and could provide more communicative English lessons than what was typically offered at the school. Lastly, keeping in mind principles of reciprocity in service-learning (Giles & Eyler, 1994), the organizers believe the Hong Kong students gain valuable service and leadership skills while the service may also benefit the children of rural China by making English studies more relevant. Despite these rationales, the organizers recognize that there may be a danger if professionalism in teaching is not ensured. The leaders of these trips thus played an active role in the service planning and execution. Lead teachers reviewed lesson plans, observed classes, and gave feedback to the student teachers throughout the service period.

Limitations

In pursuing recommendations, the limitations to the study should be kept in view, especially given the exploratory nature of the research. Because of the small sample size—owing to the small number of students in service-learning trips—the claims are limited. Further, this study investigates Hong Kong learners and their involvement in service-learning projects in a rural primary school in China; the expansion of these results and recommendations to other contexts is promising but requires further research. Furthermore, for such service-learning initiatives to be effective in any context, several factors limiting student growth in English during these trips need to be recognized. These include the short length of the service, the high frequency of other languages spoken throughout the

service, the complex regional identities and sociopolitical contexts that may limit language use and project sharing, and the need for strong, research-based leadership to ensure reciprocity through proper training and support before and during service.

Conclusion

Hong Kong university ELLs have begun teaching English in rural China through service-learning programs funded by government initiatives to unite students in cross-border service for the sake of cultural exchange and increased knowledge of the mainland. Since no prior studies have investigated ELLs teaching English as service-learning in China, this article addresses a gap in the literature by reporting on a series of four cross-border service-learning trips to China in which the participating university students of all majors taught English in a rural school as their primary service. Findings on service orientation benefits align with prior research showing that students perceive an increase in a desire to help others and to participate in future volunteer work after joining such trips. Although cultural exchange was a perceived outcome for some students, building a "greater sense of connection to the mainland" was not clearly articulated by the sampled students. Consequently, although cultural unification seems to be a persuasive motivator for the funding source of such service-learning trips, organizers might foreground mutual understanding between students as pursued in other service-learning projects that seek to build students' tolerance and intercultural sensitivity (Al Barwani et al., 2010; Xing & Ma, 2010).

The greatest concern for this study is the perceived language learning outcomes, and there is evidence to suggest that this type of service-learning could boost nonlinguistic features of language learning, especially when made a goal of the service-learning project. When the English teaching objectives are tailored to the university students' competencies and the service recipients' needs, such service-learning could effectively increase language awareness, confidence in using the language, and motivation to improve language skills. Student reporting of these benefits combined with the literature indicate possible ways to increase outcomes: including additional reflective communication about the service in English, pairing the service with formal study, and ensuring highly engaged leadership and feedback throughout the service teaching. Ultimately, undergraduates teaching English as a service are likely to reap benefits as the research in this area continues and as universities work together to reflect upon student and teacher experiences. Looking across 4 years of service-learning in the China context, and taking questionnaire results into account, the potential for teaching English as service-learning offers a new dimension to the educational experience for university ELLs in contexts where English language teaching proves salient as service.

About the Author

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