

# English Language Learners in Appalachia: Meeting the Need

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## **Abstract**

The English language learner (ELL) population in rural regions of the U.S. is growing at an unprecedented rate. Unfortunately, most public school systems in these areas are ill equipped to handle the unique challenges that are faced by this group of newly arriving students. We believe service-learning projects can serve an important role in this context. This paper describes how a service-learning project in Southern Appalachia met critical needs for English language learners while bringing benefits to multiple stakeholders.

## **Introduction**

In this paper, we discuss the design and outcome of a service-learning project that addresses the language needs of Hispanic English language learners in Southern Appalachia. A decade ago, we would not have imagined such a project. At that time, only a handful of Latinos lived in this relatively isolated mountainous region, and ELL (English Language Learner) was a scarcely used acronym. But much has changed in ten years. According to the most recent data from the NCELA (2005), states like Kentucky, North Carolina, and Tennessee, which traditionally saw only a handful of ELLs in the K-12 classroom, have seen these numbers rise dramatically (e.g. 417%, 371%, and 369% respectively). And

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unlike California, Texas, and New Mexico where teachers have grappled with language and culture issues for years, communities in these new growth areas are just beginning to address these challenges.

When the demographics of regions like this begin to change rapidly, it is common for local residents to respond out of anger and fear. With the widespread perception that immigrants have come to steal jobs and drain charitable resources, it is not surprising that school boards have had a difficult time finding support for programs that support this population. Research, however, has clearly documented the importance of careful and sustained intervention as immigrant English language learners enter the public schools. In one of the most comprehensive summaries to date, Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, and Christian (2006) reviewed over 4,000 reports and articles on the topic of educating second language learners. They concluded “continuous, coherent, and developmentally appropriate educational interventions are absolutely critical if ELLs are to achieve their full potential in school” (p.226).

Cummins (2000) also builds a strong case for early and sustained intervention by presenting a framework termed “collaborative empowerment” in which “students’ language and cultural background are affirmed and promoted within the school” (p.47). He later states that such intervention is “a crucial component of any educational reform process that is serious about reversing patterns of underachievement among marginalized groups” (p.280). Meanwhile, Gitlin, Buendia, Crosland, & Doumbia (2003) take the discussion one step further by examining the deep-seated issues that make intervention difficult. Describing a contradictory environment in which ELLs “are welcomed at the school and yet, simultaneously, made to feel unwelcome in many respects” (p.92), the authors describe how seemingly disparate issues such as teacher work load, concerns of local businesses, and parent attitudes all work together to create an environment in which ELLs are forced to the margins.

### **ELLs and Service-Learning**

Service-learning programs can play a key role as school systems struggle to navigate this context. Russell (2007) describes a project in which English language learners created a Spanish/English phrasebook that was distributed to Hispanic members of the community. The ELLs were linked with students in Spanish and English classes for assistance in proofreading and editing the document. Russell notes that ELL students who participated in the project became more motivated to learn English and developed a better sense of

connection with the community. Carney (2004) designed and implemented a Spanish service-learning course in which the university students contributed 400 hours of tutoring to Latino English language learners in the local public school system. Carney notes that both the university and public school students benefited from the project, with the university students improving their Spanish language skills and their understanding of the challenges of adapting to another culture. Hagan (2004) describes her own experience of participating in a service component of a university human diversity course. While providing English tutoring lessons to a 40 year old Korean woman, the author developed a better sense of her own identity and the cultural biases that she had initially brought into the project.

While these studies highlight the benefits that service-learning can bring to ELL programs, the projects have primarily taken place in urban areas where populations are heterogeneous and issues surrounding acculturation have been around for some time. Much harder to find is a model for incorporating service-learning in a community like our own where the immigrant population has only recently arrived and participants still hold each other at arms length. Although acculturation and identity development are key issues in second language acquisition (see Schwartz, Montgomery, & Briones, 2006; Pierce, 1995), educators in rural regions face unique challenges when trying to intervene at this level.

### **Overview of Estrella Brillante**

At the core of this service-learning project was an after-school alternative program for English language learners that focused on helping students to improve skills in English while developing their personal and social identities. We named the project Estrella Brillante (Shining Star) with the hope that it would communicate the talent and value that ELLs bring to our community. For three months, students from grades K-12 worked under the guidance of Spanish language students from the university to produce short stories, art, and drama that reflected their heritage cultures. On the final evening of the project, family and community members came to share an ethnic meal and watch the students as they received awards and shared what they had produced.

### **Logistical Details**

In the planning phase of the project, we met with the local school system's ELL coordinator, a faculty member from the university's Modern Foreign Language department, and one other ELL instructor in the school system.

Together, we planned the various service-learning roles that the university students would play in the project. These included mentoring ELL students as they prepared their writing and drama activities, assisting with the design and setup of the stage props, judging the essays submitted by the ELLs, and assisting the ELLs on the night of the performance. Since the Spanish and English proficiency levels of the university and K-12 students varied respectively, we planned a mechanism for matching the more advanced students in Spanish with the less advanced students in English in order to create a meaningful learning experience for both groups. We also planned an orientation session for the university students to familiarize them with the unique challenges that the immigrant population faces in this area. Permission forms were sent home for parents to sign with the understanding that they would be responsible for picking up their child from rehearsals. A criminal background check was run on all individuals who would be working with the children, and a sign-up sheet was created to maintain record of the contact hours that each university student spent at the school.

### **Project Components**

1) Research Paper - The purpose of the research paper component was to help the students develop their skills in reading and writing. The ELL students selected a cultural theme based on their ethnic background to research. Examples included art, history, food, famous leaders, and music. After the students had made their choices, the university service-learning volunteers worked alongside as mentors in the various stages of the research and writing process. As the ELL students gathered information from family interviews, library books, and personal knowledge, the university students learned as well. They were aware, however, that the work itself needed to be completed by the ELLs. Students in the university's English education program served as the judges for the submitted papers – awarding prizes in various categories.

2) Art Project - The art project focused on the development of kinesthetic and non-verbal skills and was evaluated separately from the essay. Volunteer judges scored the art projects on creativity, originality, and the relevance to the student's essay. For example, one student who wrote a paper on the famous Spanish artist Diego Riviera opted to create her own version of a Riviera painting.

3) Theatre Production - The theatre component of the project was aimed at helping students improve their speaking and listening skills. Based on the predominantly Spanish background of the students, we selected the play “El Conejo Verde - The Green Rabbit.” As with the writing project, university students came alongside the ELLs— assisting them with memorizing their scripts, pronouncing difficult words, and explaining key concepts by translating from English to Spanish. University students also assisted the project by designing and setting up some of the stage props.

### **Results and Discussion - The Stakeholders**

We decided to evaluate this project in terms of the key stakeholders. A stakeholder as defined in Freeman (1984) is “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objective” (p. 46). As demonstrated in a number of studies (e.g. Dymond, Renzaglia & Chun, 2007; Shaw & Jolley, 2007; Karayan & Gathercoal, 2005), analysis of stakeholders can play a vital role in the evaluation of a service-learning endeavor. Although the range of potential stakeholders in a project like this is seemingly endless, we identified four sets of stakeholders as integral to the outcome of this program: 1) ELL public school students; 2) parents of the ELL students; 3) public school teachers and administrators; and 4) university Spanish and English education students.

#### **ELL Public School Students**

The number of ELL student participants grew from 15 in the project’s first year to 45 in the second year. All but one of the participants were Latinos whose parents had recently immigrated to the area. Many were experiencing severe problems related to cultural adjustment and personal/social identity which manifested in skipping class, withdrawing from groups, and refusing to communicate either in English or Spanish. Our analysis of this stakeholder group was in the form of a written survey as well as oral interviews. Without exception, the students indicated that the project had helped them develop their English ability while also helping them gain a better understanding of their identity as Latinos. Following are several translated responses that are representative of the feedback we received from students:

- *Four years ago I would not speak my native language because I was scared of what other kids would think of me. Two years ago, Project Shining Star allowed me to be a Mexican. I learned about my culture and stories about Mexico. I now speak with my Mexican friends in Spanish and use English the classroom. I am proud of who I am.*
- *I have more confidence about my English after being in Project Shining Star. I ask more questions in my regular classroom in English and I don't feel bad when I make mistake.*
- *It [Estrella Brillante] reflects my culture while allowing me to learn English. There were things that I did not know about my country that I learned during this project. I learned about the history of Mexico and then I received an award on project night for my artwork.*

As we prepare for a 3rd year, we are encouraged that students are asking us about Estrella Brillante and telling us they can't wait to participate again. We hear and observe that many of these ELLs are now beginning to participate in class discussions and are slowly making friends. Although Estrella Brillante may not be the only factor behind these positive changes, the feedback from students as presented above is compelling evidence that it has certainly made a difference.

### **Parents of the ELL Students**

ELL parents represent a group of stakeholders who are often neglected by school systems. As described in Guo and Mohan (2008), conflict between teachers and ELL parents can easily occur due to divergent cultural backgrounds and communication styles. In our community, the ELL parents have viewed the school system with distrust, reacting to rumors that teachers or administrators may collude with law enforcement agencies to send them out of the area. Given this environment, it was heartening that 67 and 103 Latino family members attended the final performance on the first and second years respectively. As they shared a meal and interacted with other stakeholders, it became apparent that this service-learning project might indeed be the catalyst for uniting a disparate community. As with the ELL students, feedback from the parents on the survey was overwhelmingly positive with most of them indicating that the project had helped them to feel more connected to the school and the work their children were doing. By far, the best report we received came shortly after the project was completed; two sets of parents informed us that the project had helped them to see the importance of learning English and that they would soon be enrolling in English classes at the local community college.

### **Public School Teachers and Administrators**

As already discussed, the rapid increase in the ELL population has left area administrators and teachers in the difficult position of trying to find the means and resources to address an unprecedented challenge. Understandably, this service-learning project was initially viewed with a degree of skepticism. How could the schools support a new program when existing resources were already overtaxed? In the first year of the project, only three teachers participated. In the second year, the number grew to nearly ten, including an assistant principal. These individuals provided a welcomed show of support on the final evening as they handed out awards, translated information for parents, and assisted in serving the community meal. Although we did not administer a formal survey to this group of stakeholders (something we will do in future projects) we have heard numerous reports from teachers regarding the positive impact Estrella Brillante is having in their classrooms as the ELLs demonstrate increased self-esteem and motivation to participate in class activities.

### **University Spanish and English Education Students**

With the public school system already pushed to resource capacity, success of our project depended largely on the participation of students from the local university. This group of stakeholders was needed to tutor the ELLs, evaluate their work, and handle numerous logistical details on the final evening. At the same time, this facet of the project has proved to be the most challenging. In the first year, over 40 university students participated, but in the second year the number dropped to 15. This was due, in part, to the departure of a key university faculty member and uncertainty over how the service-learning project should continue to be implemented. Of primary concern was how much time the university students would be expected to contribute and how the service-learning would be tied to instructional objectives in both the Spanish and the English education course. However, in the post-project reflection survey, many students indicated that the project had been beneficial to them personally. A few sample responses are presented below.

- *This project is extremely important because it teaches people about one's culture.*
- *Project Shining Star allowed me the opportunity to work with the Hispanic community and their cultures.*
- *I think our university should continue work with Project Shining Star as a service-learning project, and hopefully other schools will catch on --maybe around the United States. We can make a vast difference in these students' lives.*

## Conclusion

Based on our experience, there is little doubt that service-learning can play an important role in rural communities as they face mounting challenges related to the English language learner population. We recently learned that four of the Estrella Brillante participants from one school had successfully made the honor roll. It was the first time for any of them to succeed in their academic history. When asked about their newfound success, they responded that they had more confidence to compete against other students within the classroom and had gained a self-determination that they did not once possess. They believed the project had helped them to be more confident when speaking in front of people and that they did not worry as much about the ridicule that they were facing in the regular classroom setting.

As Estrella Brillante moves into its third year, we are considering how we can employ more comprehensive measures of stakeholder outcomes. Of special interest is the broader impact that this service-learning project is having on the dynamics of parent / teacher / student relationships. In regard to the university stakeholders, we believe that Estrella Brillante has the potential to prepare students for an increasingly globalized society. Spanish language development, intercultural communication skills, and ELL instructional strategies are just a few of the outcomes that university students bring away from such a project – even in the rural mountains of Appalachia.

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