A Study of Integrating Service-Learning into University Curriculum: Reflections from EFL Students after Implementation

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Abstract

Service-Learning (SL) has been internationally gaining in popularity in the field of teacher education in higher education thanks to its benefits. However, this pedagogical method is still new in some EFL higher education settings like Vietnam. This qualitative study investigates the undergraduate students' attitudes after their implementation of an SL-integrated teaching practicum unit at some EFL community classes. In the study, seventy-eight fourth-year students of English in the pedagogy sector at a department of English of a university of foreign languages in Central Vietnam were involved as participants. They were guided to contact community learners of English, observe classes, design lesson plans, do micro-teachings, and finally write reflections. The findings from the reflections revealed that all of the students had positive attitudes towards SL and the teaching practicum unit, which made impacts on their personal growth, classroom management skills, profession, and community-related aspects. Recommendations concerning how to make SL and SL-integrated courses more effective were put forward at the end of the research study.

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1. Introduction

Linking universities with the society has been an important issue among administrators, researchers, and teachers at higher education institutions in Vietnam, and service-learning (SL), or community service-learning, has been considered as one of the possible options in dealing with the issue. Indeed, SL provides pre-service teachers with opportunities to do some activities to serve the community. At the same time, they could gain positive things from the community related to their academic learning. Through their community service, pre-service teachers become active learners, integrating skills and information from their community activities with the theory and curriculum of the classroom to produce new knowledge (Mitchell, 2008).

Another reason for integrating SL into university curriculums in Vietnam is the issue of experiential learning. Duff (2007) indicates that L2 learning is effective through experiential learning and opportunities for socialization in the target language community. By contacting the community, university students can contextualize the target language and thus facilitate authentic language use (Guariento & Morley, 2001).

In the field of teaching practice, authenticity is a very important aspect of making teaching practicum classes effective and successful. In fact, with the integration of SL into teaching practicum units, student teachers will find it beneficial to obtain authentic knowledge and experiences with real interactive environments for their teaching practice, which is different from their normal teaching practicum classes at their university.

The reasons mentioned above encourage universities in Vietnam to seek ways so as to include SL into their curriculums, particularly in the field of teaching practice, even though SL is still a new concept in the country. There have been project-based research studies concerning the implementation of SL across disciplines at higher education levels all through the country (Dinh et al., 2017; Lai, 2017; Pham & Huynh, 2019). The results showed to be insightful and encouraging. However, there need to be in-depth investigations in the country so as to make SL more realistic.

Despite a large volume of research studies investigating pre-service students' perceptions of SL in various contexts (Barwani et al., 2010; Bender & Jordan, 2007; Bowie & Cassim, 2016; Guo, 2013; Kesten, 2012; Salam et al., 2019), there has been a dearth of research focusing on implementing SL in Vietnamese setting until

recently. Provided the significance and contributions of findings from previous studies in this research area, it has been long overdue for an in-depth study of how Vietnamese EFL students perceive SL and what benefits they obtain from SL itself as well as SL-integrated units. The present study responds to this urgent need by investigating the students' reflections after implementing a SL-integrated teaching practicum unit in a Vietnamese university context. It was conducted at a department of English of a university of foreign languages in Central Vietnam, where the teaching practicum unit in the sector of pedagogy includes SL for pre-service teachers of English. This SL-integrated teaching practicum unit involves a component of observing authentic EFL classes, designing lesson plans, and doing micro-teachings. This report presents qualitative findings from written reflections of the students involved in the SL-integrated teaching practicum unit. It is part of a broader research project which investigated EFL students' and teachers' perceptions of SL and integrating SL into university curriculum (Truong et al., 2020). The research study aims to seek answers to the following questions:

- What do the students benefit from SL and the SL-integrated teaching practicum unit after the implementation?

- What are the impacts of SL and the SL-integrated teaching practicum unit on the students' personal development, teaching profession, and community-related aspects after the implementation?

2. Literature Review

To better understand the importance of integrating SL in university curriculums for teacher education in EFL contexts, it is necessary to review how SL is viewed in the literature and what benefits SL brings to pre-service teachers.

2.1 SL as Educational and Pedagogical Approaches

Service-learning is a term used to describe learning that results from some form of community-based activity (Prentice & Garcia, 2000). Service-learning pedagogy has its theoretical foundation from the experiential learning theory by Dewey (1938) in the early 1900s. Dewey (1938) believed in 'learning by doing' and investigated the role of academic institutions in overall community development. To make SL meaningful and effective, Sigmon (1979) argued that SL as an

experiential educational approach is premised on reciprocal learning from the service providers and the recipients. Daniels et al. (2010) focused on the pedagogical superiority of SL in comparison with traditional methods in making classroom interactions more structured, focused, productive, and practical.

It is necessary to make some distinctions between service programs so as to clarify the service-learning program implemented in this research. In fact, some service programs pay attention to either the provider or the recipient. For example, community service programs emphasize the service being provided together with the benefits the service activities have on the recipients, and internship programs are only concerned about providing students with hands-on experiences that enhance their learning. Service-learning programs, on the contrary, focus equally on the provider and the recipient of the service and ensure the equal benefits gained from the service being provided and the learning that is occurring (Furco, 1996).

It is noteworthy to deal with two different concepts of service-learning: traditional vs. critical service-learning. In traditional service-learning, learning takes place through the service when students make connections between their community experiences and course themes, and through reflections on the connections, they become students who are more active, tolerant, altruistic, and culturally aware, and who have stronger leadership, communication, and critical thinking skills (Astin & Sax, 1998). In critical service-learning, students are encouraged to act as agents of social change and make use of the experience of service to address and respond to injustice in communities (Rhoads, 1997).

SL also shows to be compatible with a recent shift in the theory and practice of second/foreign language teacher education, as stated by Johnson (2006). These authors emphasize changes from cognitive to social processes of teacher education, and in this shift, learning to teach is conceptualized as a long-term and complex development process that is the result of participation in social practices and educational contexts associated with learning. In the field of L2 learning, SL has received growing attention from administrators and language educators because it provides language teachers and learners with opportunities to contextualize the target language and thus facilitates authentic language use (Guariento & Morley, 2001).

To make the SL implementation effective, a four-stage process is suggested, namely, preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration (Kaye, 2004). It is very

essential to have a good preparation for an SL plan, and after the second step of action through a well-designed plan, the step of reflection is really important, since this step shows what will be gained from different groups of participants, particularly pre-service teachers. The demonstration step provides the students with opportunities to share what they have learned from the SL implementation.

The current research study is developed in the light of experiential learning theory by Dewey (1938), it emphasizes SL as a pedagogical method that links universities and the community for mutual benefits and with more attention to traditional issues, as suggested by Furco (1996), Mitchell (2008), Barwani et al (2013) and Astin and Sax (1998), and aims to examine students' reflections after implementing the SL-integrated teaching practicum unit through the four stages of preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration proposed by Kaye (2004).

2.2 SL and Benefits in Teacher Education

SL can be beneficial to all constituencies such as faculty members who act as facilitators, organisers, and coordinators between academic institutes and community members and students who are involved in SL (Salam et al., 2019). SL shows to help students gain vital skills such as communication skills, ability to work independently, teamwork, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, social awareness, and a sense of civic responsibility and engagement (Bowie & Cassim, 2016). Wade (1997) argued that SL offers students many opportunities to enhance their teaching strategies, to form a student-centered atmosphere, and to have a wide range of visions, concerning other roles for prospective teachers.

This pedagogical shift to SL creates a powerful tool that benefits relationships between universities and communities (Grabois, 2008). Indeed, SL provides universities with three academic benefits which can be summarized in terms of pedagogy discrimination, content comprehension and application, and civic engagement (Daniels et al., 2010). By pedagogy discrimination between community service learning and traditional methods, the emphasis is laid on the experiences which are more structured, more focused and productive, particularly with more hands-on experience and feedback. The pedagogy discrimination also results in content comprehension and application through SL projects when students carry out the projects and contact the community. Besides, SL offers benefits for faculty members by giving them opportunities to perform action research (Darby &

Newman, 2014) as well as enhance their teaching ability, and instructional productivity while actively taking part in fieldwork with students (Kinloch et al., 2015). Community members, as recipients, are considered as the most important constituency in any service-learning project (Bowie & Cassim, 2016).

SL is becoming increasingly integral to pre-service teacher education (Ball & Geleta, 2009; Butcher et al., 2005). A review of service-learning research in teacher education highlighted social as well as psychological and academic benefits for the student teachers (Conrad & Hedin, 1991). SL serves as a useful tool for helping students practice the theoretical knowledge they have learned in school and in real life and see the impacts of its operation in society (Kesten, 2012). Regarding the content of teaching practicum, Williams (2009) argued that teaching practicum units can provide students with an authentic educational environment that allows them to apply knowledge and skills previously gained in unit training.

2.3 Related Studies

Pre-service teachers' perceptions and practices of SL have been thoroughly researched in international contexts (Barwani et al., 2013; Bender & Jordan, 2007; Bowie & Cassim, 2016; Chambers & Lavery, 2012; Donnison & Itter, 2010; Kesten, 2012; Guo, 2013; Salam et al., 2019). For example, in a study with 168 third-year students in South Africa through a survey, Bender and Jordan (2007) reported that the students showed their willingness to enroll for a course in SL since the course added value to their career development and enhanced their personal and social development. In a different setting of Australia, a study carried out by Donnison and Itter (2010) exploring 100 first year students' perceptions of SL-integrated courses through reflections reported that the students experienced academic, personal, and professional growth. They were able to realise and enact their future professional roles as well as develop a stronger understanding of active citizenship and social responsibility. In a study with five pre-service teachers who were interviewed to evaluate a SL-integrated course taught at a university in Turkey, Kesten (2012) reported that SL had great contributions not only to the teachers' professional development but also to their human relations and leadership and that SL also helped the teachers build up a good relationship with local communities. In Australia, Chambers and Lavery (2012) found from a study of 101 pre-service teachers through reflections that the participants benefited from SL-

integrated units in terms of empathy, leadership, self and societal reflection, confidence, professional practice and increased knowledge and skills. The participants also revealed that the service-learning programs were important and valuable; both in enhancing participants' understanding of others' experiences and needs, and in assisting participants to learn more about themselves. In an Oman context with the participation of 37 preservice teachers through a survey, Barwani et al. (2013) reported that there was recognition of the value of SL as a significant and effective method of instruction and that SL could be a good solution for the development of skills as well as community engagement. In Myanmar, an investigation into seven preservice teachers' perceptions of SL through a service-learning project was conducted by Smolen et al. (2013) using both interviews and written reflections. It was found that the service-learning experiences contributed to their academic and personal development and enhanced their academic knowledge, civic responsibility, and personal growth.

In Vietnamese context, Lai's (2017) study of 15 preservice teachers getting involved in a communication class for handicapped children was found to be the key endeavor that shed light on the integration of SL into university curriculums. The results from interviews showed that all of the participants had very positive attitudes towards SL and the SL-integrated English class, which provided them with meaningful and insightful experiences in teaching and interacting with real learners in the community. In the same context of Vietnam, Tran and Truong (2019) in a study with 20 preservice teachers at a university in Central Vietnam investigating the participants' perceptions of SL and SL-integrated instruction through a survey and interviews found that the teachers strongly supported SL since SL connected them with universities and communities and made their practicum lessons meaningful. The results also revealed huge benefits that could be obtained from the preservice teachers such as classroom management skills improvement and personal quality development. It was also found that a number of challenges and obstacles prevented them from implementation such as lack of full support from the university and lack of timely feedback from the faculty. Another research study examined perceptions of SL and a SL-integrated course by both university teachers and pre-service teachers (Author, 2020). The findings from a survey showed that all of the university teachers and pre-service teachers supported the integration of SL into the teaching practicum unit and considered SL as an effective teaching approach. Challenges related to awareness of SL and conditions for SL feasibility and implementation are mentioned in the research.

The above review of related studies highlights preservice teachers' perception and practices of SL and SL-integrated units at higher education levels in the world as well as in Vietnam. In fact, participants' perspectives through research contribute significantly to the success or failure of SL and SL-integrated units. However, there has been so far little research on SL, particularly on integrating SL into university curriculums in Vietnam. There need to be numerous in-depth investigations that shed more light on the issue. The current research study was carried out at a department of English in a Vietnamese university, hopefully, to fill this gap of research.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This descriptive research study adopts the qualitative approach in collecting and analyzing the data. Qualitative research aims to describe social phenomena that occur naturally without any attempt to manipulate the situation under study, and therefore it is pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in participants' experiences and understandings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). This approach suits the current study since it aims to explore the participants' complex and realistic interpretations of SL and the impacts of the SL-integrated teaching practicum unit after implementation through their reflections. Besides, in the process of implementing the SL-integrated teaching practicum unit, the four-stage process of conducting SL by Kaye (2004) is adapted as the methodological framework for the study. To make the research more reliable and valid, the role of the researchers is emphasized, since they study things in their natural settings, community classes in this case, attempting to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings participants bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

3.2 Participants

The study involved 78 fourth-year students belonging to the pedagogy sector at a department of English of a university of foreign languages in Central Vietnam. There were 55 females and 23 males in the whole group, and their age was between 20 and 23. All of them had spent about 10 years in high school and three years at university learning General English, and thus their English was assumed to be at the

level of B2 in the Common European Framework of References (CEFR). Before becoming teachers of English at upper secondary schools, they had two more semesters for instruction. Among the units they had to study, the teaching practicum unit was required in the first semester, and teaching practice in the second one. The teaching practicum unit was therefore supposed to be a preparatory unit for teaching practice, in which students were sent to upper secondary schools to practice teaching with real classes and with the guidance of local mentors. To make the teaching practicum unit effective, these students participated in the teaching practicum unit, in which SL was integrated as one mark component. The reasons for visiting SL classes were mentioned in the literature concerning opportunities to contact authentic learning environments and to practice teaching skills (Ball & Geleta, 2009; Williams, 2009).

3.3 Instruments

The major instrument employed in this study included the students' written reflections. The role of reflection is essential in making learning effective since it links students' experiences with curriculum content (Vicker et al., 2004). Reflection is considered one important stage in the four stages of implementing a SL-integrated unit: Preparation, Action, Reflection, and Demonstration (Kaye, 2004). The written reflections were done by 78 students after they completed the SL-integrated teaching practicum unit. The guiding questions for the students' written reflections included the themes based on the benefits and impacts of SL and SL-integrated instruction in the literature review (Bowie & Cassim, 2016; Daniels, Patterson & Dunston, 2010; Grabois, 2008; Kesten, 2012; Morgan, 2001; Salam et al., 2019; Wade, 1997; Williams, 2009), which was as follows: "*Within about 1200-1500 words, write your reflections of the benefits you gained from SL and the SL-integrated teaching practicum as well as their impacts on your personal development, teaching profession, and community-related aspects after the implementation.*"

3.4 Procedure of Data Collection

The procedure of data collection was included in the process of implementing the SL-integrated unit. First, the SL-integrated unit was designed carefully by faculty teachers in the EFL methodology section and approved by the department

management staff. Before coming to community English classes in the city, the students had 12 hours to be exposed to the content of teaching practicum (Preparation). Next, teachers in charge of teaching practicum units and students worked together to implement the unit (Action). Students had 16 hours to visit in groups the evening classes of English where each of them spent time getting to know the learners, who were primary and secondary students, making class observations, designing lesson plans, and finally doing micro-teachings. The micro-teaching was observed by peers and the class instructor, and videotaped. The teaching materials included the *Family and Friends* series, by Naomi Simmons (Oxford University Press, 2016), and *Prepare!* series, by Joanna Kesta and Melanie Williams (Cambridge University Press, 2015). The materials aimed to help learners practice communication in daily life. After the implementation students were guided to write reflections on what they had dealt with and gained from the SL-integrated teaching practicum unit (Reflection) and made preparations for the demonstration stage. The lesson plans, class observation sheets, videoed microteachings and reflections were finally included in folders and sent to the teachers in charge of teaching practicum units for evaluation and analysis.

3.5 Procedure

The current research study attempted to seek qualitative data related to the existing theory by exploring 78 written reflections. The reflections were examined deductively on the highlighted themes reflected in the guiding questions for students' reflections by three researchers. For the purpose of data analysis, the reflections were coded from R#1 to R#78.

The procedure of data analysis went through six phases of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). In phase one, data familiarization, the researchers came up with a list of themes deductively based on the research questions using structural coding (Namey et al., 2008; Nguyen et al., 2021). The themes include *benefits from SL*, *benefits from the teaching practicum unit, impacts on personal growth, impacts on the teaching profession, and community-related impacts*. In phases two and three, generating initial codes and searching for codes, on five separate sheets of themes, they collaborated to explore citations through ten sample reflections for an agreed set of codes after each theme. An example of examining the ten sample reflections is shown in Table 1. When drawing up the frequency table, the

researchers believed that even though the frequency of occurrence is not necessarily considered an indicator of significance in qualitative coding (Saldana, 2013), it is still a common tool in qualitative content analysis, and high-quality content analysis uses both quantitative and qualitative analysis of texts (Weber, 1990). In analyzing the citations, the researchers focused on the number of reflections that mentioned a theme rather than counting the number of times which this particular theme was actually mentioned (Namey et al., 2008). In phases four and five, reviewing, defining and naming codes, all the labelled codes were compared and contrasted in reference to the research question so that redundant codes were left out and similar and related codes were pulled together. Finally, these codes were grouped into themes and transferred to sub-themes by the three researchers. It was noted in these phases that the coding was not exclusive, which meant the same citation with different characteristics could be coded more than once. For example, the citation "After about two months of interacting with these lovely children, I realized that I got closer to them more, and I wanted to participate in many other community programs to help more people" was coded twice: in the cluster of *impacts on personal growth* and in the cluster of *community-related impacts*. After the analysis of the ten sample reflections, the three researchers worked independently for analyzing the remaining data using a similar procedure. In the final stage, producing the report, they worked together again and looked at aspects of inter-coder reliability for agreement on a complete set of themes and sub-themes (Creswell, 2013).

Table 1
Theme 1 – Benefits from SL: Codes and Frequency

Codes	Representative citations	Reflections (Freq)	N^0#
Combining theory with practice	*It is important to learn theory, but it is more important to apply that theory to practice.*	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10 (8)	
Linking school with society	*I hope the school will have more courses to link school with society like this so that students would have more chances to understand the society for the benefit of their lessons.*	2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10 (6)	
Authenticity	*There are many real problems to handle, which I can never face when doing micro-teaching in my university class.*	1, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10 (6)	
Making SL a pedagogical strategy	*I could imagine the vision in which all teachers and students in the school employ SL as a strategy depending upon the characteristics of each discipline.*	5, 7, 8 (3)	

4. Results

The findings from the students' reflections are qualitatively presented under five headings of *benefits from SL, benefits from the teaching practicum unit, impacts on personal growth, impacts on profession*, and *community-related impacts*. These themes together with their associated subthemes are outlined in Table 2 below.

Table 2
Coding Framework for Analysis of Students' Reflections

Themes	Subthemes	Frequency (N=78)
Benefits from SL	Combining theory with practice	61
	Linking school with society	48
	Authenticity	59
	Making SL a pedagogical strategy	56
Benefits from the teaching practicum unit	Improving the effectiveness of the unit	45
	Adapting community-related activities in the future	25
	Improving students' classroom methodology	18
Impacts of SL and the teaching practicum unit on - Personal growth	Changing students' views of life	28
	Providing intrinsic motivation	12
	Realizing students' status and responsibility	21
	Fostering empathy and sympathy	42
	Towards holistic development	11
- Teaching profession	Practicing teaching skills	78
	Developing professional skills	65
	Teamwork	46
Community-related impacts	Commitment to profession	32
	Getting closer to learners and their backgrounds	57
	Commitment to community	41

4.1 Benefits from SL

This theme, together with its sub-themes, received support from half to more than two-thirds of the students. Indeed, most of the students indicated that SL was an excellent method since it added a novel and meaningful way of teaching and learning to university curriculums. One student said, "*I obviously like SL since I benefit from it so much*" (R#10). Another student mentioned, "*Knowledge from school should be supported by knowledge of the society, and SL will help*" (R#10). The following are sub-themes frequently identified from the data:

4.1.1 Combining Theory with Practice

This SL-integrated practicum unit made the students aware of the combination of theory and practice as well as the school and the society. The following reflections are indicative of this awareness:

It is important to learn theory, but it is more important to apply that theory to practice. With real classes, I know the value of practice. These community classes really motivate me to try out the teaching techniques I have learned from my previous methodology courses. From these classes, I realize the practicality of my lessons. (R#45)

4.1.2 Linking School with Society

Most of the students said they felt lucky to take this teaching practicum unit since they were allowed to visit community classes, contact real learners and understand the community better. One student revealed: "*I hope the school will have more courses to link school with society like this so that students would have more chances to understand the society for the benefit of their lessons.* (R#37)

4.1.3 Authenticity

SL component provided them with an opportunity to deal with something real and authentic, which was valuable for their lessons. Only by contacting real learners with their real problems could the students gain better insights into how to make their lessons proper and effective:

There are many real problems to handle, which I can never face when doing micro-teaching in my university class. The problems are generally complicated and sometimes very hard for me to deal with, but I can say that I really grow up when being exposed to these teaching and learning situations. (R#35)

4.1.4 Making SL a Pedagogical Strategy

More than half of the students revealed after the implementation that integrating SL into the university curriculum as a pedagogical strategy was a must for the whole school, and that this strategy should be made known to all teachers and students across disciplines:

I could imagine the vision in which all teachers and students in the school employ SL as a strategy depending upon the characteristics of each discipline. At that time, we both learn at school and in the community, and our lessons will be more practical and realistic. Therefore, I find it interesting to include SL in units, and the school should have a policy for that. (R#72)

4.2 Benefits from the Teaching Practicum Unit

The second theme relates to the teaching practicum unit, and it received the most positive attitude from the students. Almost all the students indicated that the teaching practicum unit benefited the students in numerous ways in comparison with a regular teaching practicum unit. It is the unit that conveyed a message on real learning as well as on how to make learning effective since SL was integrated into the unit. One student stated, "I prefer real classes of English like this since our methods would be meaningful when we deal with real learners" (R#21), while another remarked: "Thanks to this practicum unit, I could go out of the school and become more interested in our community, instead of remaining at the university classrooms for teaching practice" (R#34). Other common perspectives related to the unit are as follows:

4.2.1 Improving the Effectiveness of the Unit

By doing a SL-integrated unit, the students found out that the quality of the unit could be improved enormously, bringing it closer to its objectives:

As far as I know, many students who took this unit in the previous years had to deal with artificial learners and responded to unreal learning situations. In this unit, we are allowed and arranged to contact real learners and real classes. (R#43)

4.2.2 Creating Community-Related Activities for Learners

Many students revealed that the unit itself provided them a meaningful way of making classroom activities community-related in their future classes:

This experience helps me think of the value of creating community-related activities for my students in the future. I am certain that these activities are

practical and in many ways encourage them to participate. (R#62)

4.2.3 Improving Students' Practical Methodology

Many students said that they benefited much from the unit itself, particularly in terms of English teaching methodology. All activities are community-related and carefully planned from the beginning to the end:

Using simple English to elicit expected responses, particularly through pictures was my constant effort in teaching English language skills and elements, despite the learners' limited level of proficiency. I rarely used Vietnamese. At first, I failed, but gradually after some improvements, I could use easy and simple English to communicate with my learners, and the learners showed to be very happy about this and joined the lesson. (R#47)

4.3 Impacts on Personal Development

This third theme received positive support from the students, and all of the ideas dealt with different angles of their personal growth. SL was seen by the students as a tool to develop their personal qualities such as love for learners, love for their career and intrinsic motivation since the community and teaching practicum unit itself provided them with conditions for these qualities to be fully developed. A regular teaching practicum unit could not create all of these internal impacts. One student commented, "*It is the community and learners from this practicum unit that help me to develop myself internally*" (R#3). The following sub-themes are excellent examples of personal development thanks to SL:

4.3.1 Changing Students' Views of Life

One-third of the students revealed that this was the first time they got to know their learners and the authentic environment, which was different from what they had thought of previously:

Taking part in community service classes helps me to connect with the community, learn new skills and advance my career. Above all, it makes me happy and gradually I have positive views about life and future goals. This is a good opportunity for me to look at what I have gained from school for the benefit of my

community. (R#12)

4.3.2 Providing Intrinsic Motivation

Contacting the learners for a number of weeks brought the students pleasure and sympathy, which encouraged them emotionally to move forward:

Most learners were poor, they did not have good conditions, but they attended the classes regularly and studied very hard. I had chances to contact the learners before and after classes so as to understand them better. This made me very motivated in designing lessons and dealing with them in classrooms. (R#35)

4.3.3 Realizing Students' Status and Responsibility

SL activities also helped them to realize their current status by getting to know their family backgrounds. And by witnessing the learners' efforts to study, the students became more aware of their responsibility. One student stated: "*I realized that they all desire to study English but they do not have opportunities to be exposed to English. It is learners' efforts and circumstances that remind us of our role and responsibility*" (R#78).

4.3.4 Fostering Empathy and Sympathy

SL classes provided unique opportunities for the students to contact the young learners, who gradually attracted them and helped them realize the meaning of community service. For example, reflections 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 12, 24, 29, 45, and 68 reported that SL classes really brought them knowledge, understanding, and love:

After about one month of interacting with these lovely children, I realized that I got closer to them, and I wanted to participate in many other community programs to help more people. (R#68)

4.3.5 Towards Holistic Development

SL really made contributions to developing the students in a holistic way. It brought the students an environment and people that were meaningful for their whole-

person development. Through interaction, they can develop their cognition, emotion, profession, as well as their social skills:

I like this way of teaching and learning. Receiving lessons at school and going out to the community to practice. We give learners lessons and games, and in return, we modify what we have learned at school, and receive their love and sympathy. Also, getting close to the community helps us to be emotional in interactions and aware of our role as citizens. (R#8)

4.4 Impacts on Profession

This fourth theme received the strongest support from the students. Most of the reflections revealed that the teaching practicum activities assisted the students to develop their profession in various ways, from teaching skills to professional skills. One special aspect of this professional development was that the skills were seen to be more real thanks to the integration of SL. The following are frequently found data:

4.4.1 Practicing Teaching Skills

SL and the teaching practicum created better opportunities for the students particularly to experience and handle classroom management skills and other teaching skills:

*Using **-S card** is an interesting experience of mine when my learners did not pronounce -s in the verb forms of third-person singular or when they failed to use plural forms of nouns in English. This mistake was so common among my learners, and they showed to be very excited and cooperative when I showed the -S card to correct their mistakes.* (R#8)

4.4.2 Developing Professional Skills

Teaching is a profession that cannot be obtained in a short time. However, teaching practicum classes served as an initial step for the students to practice their professional skills such as patience, tolerance, self-confidence, and teamwork. These professional skills could be better developed in the context of SL integration. The following is just one example:

Confidence is gradually developed in my personality. Standing in front of a real class and dealing with things from the children has made my nervousness fly away. Besides, looking at my learners' lovely eyes and friendly smiles makes me pleasant and natural in handling the activities without any anxiety or hesitations. (R#9)

4.4.3 Commitment to Profession

Meeting with real learners, real English classes, and responding to teaching practicum activities made the students think of their careers in the future. The teaching practicum unit that integrated SL would meaningfully contribute to the students' commitment to their profession:

Observing the kids who truly enjoy learning new things makes me much more love children. I also learnt how to calm down and became more patient, which probably assists me to teach children more effectively and gradually develop my love for the teaching career. These community classes, so to speak, contribute to strengthening my determination to become a teacher of English in the future. (R#59)

4.5 Community-Related Impacts

This fifth theme was supported by more than two-thirds of the students. Almost all the students revealed that this was the first time they contacted community English classes in such a teaching practicum unit. They showed to be very eager to visit classes and meet learners in the community. Most of them revealed that this was a meaningful memory that impressed their life as a teacher. One student stated, "*Truly speaking, so far I have not had a chance to contact learners like this*" (R#8). Other common and far-reaching community-related impacts are as follows:

4.5.1 Getting Closer to Learners and their Family Backgrounds

Many of the students found that their lessons and activities would be more meaningful if they got closer to their learners and understood their circumstances. This made the current teaching practicum unit different from other regular teaching practicum units. One student said, "*This is a chance for me to get to know my learners and their family. What impressed me most was that most of their families*

were very poor, and that they had to work hard at home to help their parents and manage time to study" (R#12).

4.5.2 Commitment to Community

Thanks to the SL-integrated teaching practicum unit activities, the students got closer to the learners and understood the community, and this understanding would clearly bring about the students' positive attitudes towards the community. One student stated that by contacting community classes, she felt responsible and became committed to the community, and "*This has motivated me and reminded me to live responsibly with our community*" (R#11).

5. Discussion

This research study was conducted in the context where fourth-year students of English in the pedagogy sector were sent to community English classes for the first time to experience real interaction with learners in the process of implementing their teaching practicum unit. Amazingly, the research findings showed that the students' attitudes towards both SL and the teaching practicum unit were positive and that the impacts of SL and the unit made were interesting, profound, and multi-dimensional.

5.1 Benefits from SL and the Teaching Practicum Unit

The theory of experiential learning by Dewey (1938) points out that learning takes place from the experience of practices rather than just accumulated knowledge, and that learning takes place through the process of participation in practices of social communities. In alignment with Kesten (2012) and Tran and Truong (2019), this research pinpointed from the students' reflections the *benefits from SL* such as *combining theory with practice*, *linking the school with society*, and *authenticity*. In fact, these reflections emphasized the practical and realistic side that SL itself brought back to the students. More than two-thirds of the students revealed that SL should be considered to be adapted in the institution as a pedagogical strategy across disciplines (Daniels et al., 2010; Butcher et al., 2005).

This   is   also   a   successful   indication   of   the   teaching   practicum   unit

implementation. Contacting real learners of English so as to practice teaching effectively in terms of class observations, lesson planning, micro-teachings, and improving classroom methodology was supported strongly by the students in comparison with the regular implementation of the teaching practicum unit at the university with peers as learners. This finding is in line with the viewpoint of Williams (2009), when he argues that teaching practicum units can provide students with an authentic educational environment.

5.2 Impacts on Personal Growth, Teaching Profession, and Community-Related Aspects

Pre-service teachers become active participants who learn to interpret meaning and action through their physiological, intellectual, affective, and sociocultural experiences (LeDoux, 1996). Findings from the six sub-themes of *impacts of SL and the teaching practicum unit on personal growth* show to support this dynamic process of gaining experiences for the benefit of the pre-service teachers. Only by contacting an authentic instructional environment can the students learn practical lessons to supplement or modify what they have gained from school, and also only from regular contacts can empathy and sympathy be shaped and developed. The findings also supported aspects of teacher education, especially the aspect of approaching whole-person development, in which real learners and their backgrounds, community classes with authentic conditions and steps of classroom instructions could help the students develop their cognition of their personal identity as a teacher in general and a teacher of English in particular, become fully aware of their responsibility in teaching as well as in the society (Ball & Geleta, 2009).

The recent shift in the theory and practice of second/foreign language teacher education emphasizes teacher education rather than teacher training and considers it essential in the process of professional development through which pre-service teachers learn to teach (Johnson, 2006). In fact, the aims of education are long-term and include various aspects of individual and social development whereas the aims of training are short-term and only focus on single aspects of individual development (Sharma, 2016). The findings from the students' reflections in terms of impact on personal development show that SL can be a very positive start that enables the students to realize valuable identities for themselves and professional development (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Butcher et al., 2005).

Another practical and direct impact of SL and the teaching practicum unit is that community classes provided the students with authentic environments for teaching practice and that the students' teaching and professional skills are improved accordingly. Gradually, the students' love for the learners was felt and seen all through interactions and activities, and their love for the teaching career was shaped and developed. In addition, thanks to SL and the unit, they had more positive attitudes towards society and their future life. All of these findings support the views of Ball and Geleta (2009), and Butcher et al. (2005) in confirming the academic, psychological, and social benefits brought by SL and the SL-integrated unit to the pre-service teachers, and the findings are also in harmony with the claims of Wade (1997) and Morgan (2001) about boosting the roles for prospective teachers, especially community commitment, and citizenship awareness. The findings are also consistent with those in the previous studies by Chambers and Lavery (2012) in terms of community engagement and career commitment.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, almost all the findings reveal that SL, the SL-integrated teaching practicum unit and the teaching practicum unit itself show to benefit the students in several ways. First, after getting involved in the SL activities at the community classes of English, the students had very positive attitudes towards SL and the SL-integrated unit in terms of educational and pedagogical perceptions and classroom methodology. Secondly, the findings also show the good impacts of SL and the teaching practicum unit on the students' personal growth, and their teaching career as EFL teachers. Another meaningful result involves the students' enthusiastic engagement in the community and growing awareness of citizenship. The findings of this research study, together with the quantitative findings from a related research study mentioned previously (Truong et al., 2020) confirm the success of SL and the SL-integrated teaching practicum unit at a university in an EFL context, where SL has not yet been a popular educational approach and SL-integrated curriculums have not been developed on a large scale.

The findings of this study lead us to present implications and recommendations. First, the introduction of SL into the university curriculum should be considered by management staff to be a pedagogical strategy in the educational policy of higher education institutions in Vietnam and EFL contexts. This strategy shows to be an effective way in both theory and practice to link school with society and to bring

students closer to the community. Secondly, EFL teachers of English departments and other language departments in foreign language universities should plan to integrate SL into teaching practicum units. The success of the SL-integrated practicum unit implementation can be of great pedagogical value in comparison with regular teaching practicum units. Thirdly, the findings also provide potential evidence to assist SL and SL-integrated units to be adapted in other disciplines. Steps should be taken to make SL and SL-integrated curriculums familiar all through the institution by means of conferences and seminars, and by allowing departments to design SL-integrated units on the foundation of a consistent top-down policy from management staff at all levels. Finally, the findings also encourage us to recommend a well-managed plan for integrating SL into units in terms of familiarizing faculty staff with knowledge and information related to the field, and a well-organized plan for carrying out and managing the units from beginning to the end.

The research study has three main limitations. First, it was conducted at some community classes of English in Central Vietnam, and there were 78 students who participated in the classes. Secondly, the participants all belonged only to a Department of English at a university of foreign languages. Thirdly, the findings only focused on the students' reflections after the engagement in the implementation of the SL-integrated teaching practicum unit. Therefore, the scope of research is still small in terms of research site, participants, and methodology. Hopefully, similar empirical research studies will be carried out in the future in other units and at different departments with related SL sites and in Vietnamese universities or EFL tertiary institutions, and these studies will employ different research instruments with the involvement of other groups of participants. By so doing, more findings will be found out to make the implementation of SL and SL-integrated curriculums in EFL universities dynamic, realistic, and more convincing.

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