

Beyond the Classroom with Purpose: Service Learning in a Japanese Language Course

目的を持って教室から飛び出す：日本語コースにおけるサービスラーニング

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1. Introduction

In the age of AI, there is a general concern that AI and other tools will make it unnecessary to learn foreign languages or may eventually replace teachers. This concern has led me to think critically about the purpose of formally learning a foreign language and how teachers can remain part of the learners' educational journey. In this context, I believe service learning (SL) can present a compelling case for enhancing learners' direct and positive engagement in an AI-driven world.

1.1 Service Learning

Service learning (SL) is a form of real-world, reflective, problem-based learning in which students provide meaningful service to a community partner (Goldberg et al., 2006). Goldberg explains the link between SL and effective citizenship in a democracy, which requires specific skills, sensitivities, and commitment. Furthermore, SL fosters learners' empowerment to become agents of their own learning and to develop lifelong learning skills (Goldberg et al., 2006).

From a different perspective, McLeod (2017) defines SL “as a two-way educational activity where students apply their classroom-acquired skills in a real community, taking real responsibility for a real product with real consequences” (p. 20). Service learning offers the tangible benefits to both teachers and students: Service-learning projects have strong motivational effects for both teachers and students because of engagement in an activity with a real-world impact. McLeod states that “much of classroom learning is compartmentalized and abstract; service-learning projects break down this compartmentalization because in order to address a community need, students must draw on a range of skills and integrate them in a concrete situation” (pp. 21-22).

The definition of Service Learning have various definitions ranging from scientific research texts to policy documents, “but the key to the approach is that the service component is not regarded as an additional or extracurricular activity but as an integral part of the teaching and learning process.” (Rauschert & Byram, 2017, p. 354).

Community-based Service-Learning places more emphasis on the importance of community. Baker (2019) summarizes the literature review on Community-based service learning (CBSL) and states that research outcomes showed L2 learners' gains in linguistic proficiency, cultural understanding, motivation and interests related to language learning, and/or civic engagement, concluding that there are demonstrated positive associations between CBSL and student outcomes in L2 education.

1.2 21st-Century Skills

Additional aspects that fit well with SL are 21st-century skills, which are defined by Panorama Education as the knowledge, life skills, career skills, habits, and traits crucial for student success in higher education, the workforce, and adult life. Concrete pillars of this framework include critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, global awareness, and social responsibility.

Among the various proposed frameworks of 21st century skills, the KSAVE model—representing Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes, Values, and Ethics—seems to align with foreign language education. It identifies ten essential skills, including critical thinking, communication, and both local and global citizenship, all of which are relevant to SL experiences. In foreign language education, SL can provide opportunities for students to use their language skills in real-life contexts (Sun & Yang, 2015). It creates authentic opportunities for practice and communication, enabling learners to contextualize the target language and engage in meaningful linguistic production with a genuine purpose (Sun & Yang, 2015).

1.3 Advanced Japanese Courses and the World-Readiness Standards

One of the objectives of the advanced Japanese courses I teach is to provide learners with opportunities to apply their language skills and knowledge in ways that contribute to a wider society. More concretely, it means integrating the 5Cs of the World-Readiness Standards with 5 goal areas: communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons and Communities.

Its syllabus states:

By the end of the course, you will be able to:

1. Comprehend and interact with authentic materials in Japanese
2. Communicate concepts and facts along with your opinions
3. Connect related issues from multiple perspectives and disciplines
4. Collaborate with peers to enrich discussions and support one another
5. Use your own skills and knowledge to help our community
6. Take an active role in addressing local and global issues
7. Take initiative to lead your own learning and become a lifelong learner

Among course requirements, what I call “community service” accounts for 5% of the final evaluation.

1.4 “Community” in Context

Service learning involves a community or recipient of the service. Caldwell (2007) illustrates SL project in Spanish at a local library, while Grim (2010) reports a case of students teaching French at a local elementary school as SL. Sun & Yang (2015) describe a case involving students creating YouTube videos for overseas students who are new to the school.

Although contexts vary, successful SL integration hinges on practical and purposeful implementation.

The language program where I teach is located in a region with no significant Japanese-speaking community, and Japanese is not widely taught. A handful of schools offer Japanese, only a few at the tertiary level and just one at the high school level. Within this context, advanced-level Japanese courses consider potential community partners to be fellow learners in other Japanese classes, the program itself, students in the local high school offering Japanese, or Japanese learners from other schools that my students meet virtually.

1.5 “Community Service” Tasks

Concrete examples of student-led contributions include leading language tables and supporting program-wide events such as an intercollege virtual language table and a speech contest. Students also completed a final project with the goal of serving the broader community.

a) Language table

Students were expected to lead the language table within the Japanese program, which happened about 10 times a semester. Prior to this arrangement, language faculty had led the language table, and now the teachers simply provide the space and some snacks and beverages to enjoy during the language table. How an advanced student would lead the table was totally their choice. Some did a message relaying game and some other word games requiring listening and speaking skills from the participants.

b) Virtual language table

Another task that the students were required to do was to lead virtual language table with students from another school. This included MCing and leading the breakout room sessions with games or talk points. Again, prior to this arrangement, teachers oversaw the roles of MCs and moderators of the breakout rooms. The details were left for the students of two schools to decide.

c) Speech contest

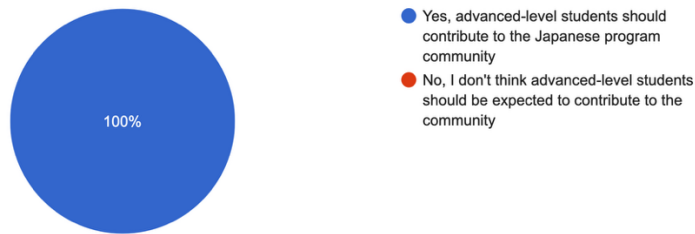
Last task was to lead the program-wide speech contest. Since there were 4 students in the advanced class, all 4 of them served as MCs. Scripts were provided, but comments in between were naturally on their own.

1.6 Feedback from students and faculty

After the semester concluded, I asked students for feedback, and my colleagues for thoughts on this community service component in the advanced course.

Students: Feedback was positive; all three tasks were well-received and considered an effective component of advanced-level study.

日本語上級レベルの学生はCommunity Serviceで日本語コミュニティに貢献すべきだと思いますか。
4 responses



Faculty: Colleagues found the community service component valuable and suggested extending similar opportunities to lower-level students.

2. Discussion

2.1 Gains

Sun & Yang (2015) argue that authenticity in context, task, and content is crucial in second-language acquisition, and that “authentic contexts and natural discourse” transform classroom language into meaningful real-world communication (p. 215). The community service component in the advanced Japanese courses underscores the importance of assigning the students real responsibilities that position them as leaders, and this was evident from some learners’ feedback Purposeful, real-world language use appears to boost both confidence and a sense of contribution. Furthermore, service learning could be the opportunity where the learners could promote their individual abilities and uniqueness.

2.2 Limitations

Litke (2002) notes that the effects of SL can be difficult to measure. Did it truly contribute to the learners’ proficiency level and did SL in this case lead to students learning? It was not the scope of this research, and it was not analyzed. However, I argue that across the board positive feedback is evident, compatible with other research studies in the field. I then argue that this positive feedback may be enough evidence which indicates promising directions for language educators to pursue and incorporate SL in their curriculum.

To stress the learning component, it is necessary to include more reflective process for students. To do so, more orientation needs to be provided to the students. Another point that needs attention is the recipients of the service. To properly examine the effect of SL, the recipients of the service need to be included in the feedback. This would ask them for instance, what kind of effects the service by the advanced-level students had on the recipients of the service.

3. Conclusion

In the age of AI, with its vast capabilities in translation, writing, and image creation, educators must provide opportunities for learners to engage in real-time, real-audience communication. Service Learning can enhance not only confidence and fluency but also social responsibility and leadership skills of the learners. Service Learning seems to be a great component to include in the curriculum of foreign language courses, precisely because we need to coexist with AI in current times and continue supporting students' learning journeys. AI cannot replace human experience or human to human connection. We teachers can provide the students opportunities of meaningful experiences through Service Learning.

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