Engaging the Neighborhood: English Learning and Peace-Focused Service in a Multilingual **Community**

GATESOL Journal 2022, Vol. *32*(1), pp. 39–50 doi:10.52242/gatesol.148

ISSN: 2331-6845

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Abstract

Community-based organizations are a vital source of English language acquisition and community involvement for adult immigrants and refugee populations in the United States. By employing a framework of peace-oriented service-learning, educators can simultaneously develop English language skills while nourishing and sustaining students' agency and empathy in localized civic engagement. This article provides practices and perspectives for educators and administrators to create a curriculum that promotes a Language for Peace Approach framework coupled with a service-learning framework to establish and advance a civically engaged community.

Keywords

immigrant education, civic engagement, Language for Peace Approach (LPA), Service-Learning

Introduction

How can students, teachers, and community members work co-intentionally and collaboratively to create and sustain a civically engaged community? This article outlines a curriculum design for an adult English course titled Multilingual Community Peace Leaders (MCPL), providing pedagogical frameworks and teaching activities to develop students' civic involvement. The purpose of the MCPL curriculum is twofold: Firstly, the course facilitates community involvement by incorporating service-learning and Language for Peace Approach frameworks into a class as a means for students to develop localized civic engagement while simultaneously increasing students' agency and empathy. Secondly, the course aims to strengthen and develop English language skills alongside other spoken languages for multilingual students at community-based schools and organizations.

In this instructional design, I will begin by reviewing the literature regarding several supportive foundational frameworks for the MCPL curriculum. I will provide an overview of the contexts for where an MCPL curriculum could be relevant in adult civic engagement or ELL classes. An outline for conducting a needs assessment with potential civic partnerships will follow. Finally, examples of suggested activities created from the foundational frameworks will give the reader ideas for incorporating civic engagement into their classroom.

Curriculum Frameworks

Critical Pedagogy and Language for Peace Approach (LPA) frameworks serve as a foundational base to shape the goals and vision of the MCPL curriculum. Emerging from these concepts is an emphasis on Service-Learning education. Finally, the multilingual students enrolled in the class will improve their English skills through a pedagogy that validates and emphasizes translanguaging in the classroom.

Critical Pedagogy

In Freire's (1969/2018) seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the Brazilian activist and educator argued that liberation for marginalized groups can occur through communal education. A framework of "critical pedagogy encourage[s] students to identify inequalities in society and redefine their role in changing society" (Yep, 2014, p. 51) and allows students to think critically about the Englishes (both spoken or written) that they interact with, raising the learner's awareness of their environment and allowing for liberation from oppressive political and cultural ideologies (Sichula, 2018). By bringing a critical pedagogy into a communal classroom, students can engage in a critical examination of societal injustices that immigrants or non-standard English speakers experience. This engagement can allow students to recognize that their marginalization is not absolute but rather that they have the agency to liberate themselves through transformative work (Freire, 1969/2018).

Collaborative education is predominant in critical pedagogy, which states that both teachers and students are responsible for practicing co-intentional education and unveiling knowledge in a discerning and critical fashion (Freire, 1969/2018). With students, teachers, and civic partners working in tandem, communal education can take form both in classrooms and in the daily lives of the participants, transforming relationships and communities (Waterman, 2009).

Transformative learning theory. Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) emerged from a critical pedagogy framework to capture the need for personal and internal change. Mezirow (1997) declares that transformative learning is the process of effecting change in a frame of reference—that is, as adults adjust their cognitive and emotive habits of mind and points of view to new thoughts, they are undergoing transformative learning. This shift in frames of reference occurs when individuals critically reflect on the assumptions upon which "interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind, or points of view are based" (p. 7).

Mezirow (1997) also argued that a core feature of civic engagement was the development of "thinking as an autonomous and responsible agent" (p. 7). In discussing the role of the educator in the classroom, Mezirow stresses the importance of developing both short- and long-term goals. Short-term goals tend to be at the forefront of a student's agenda (e.g., graduate from this course, teach my child how to read in English, improve English pronunciation). However, long-term goals, such as nurturing critical thought or improved socio-civic engagement, are also tantamount and should be balanced alongside the short-term goals.

Theater of the oppressed. One way to stimulate the development of agency and critical empathy in the classroom is by including theatrical exercises that encourage collaborative relationships and critical reflections. Heavily influenced by the work of Freire, Boal's (1974) Theater of the Oppressed focused on a collaborative critical pedagogy in the public sphere by using theater activities. Boal's theatrical framework sought to transform the spectator of drama from a passive to an active participant. By placing the viewer into the creation and production of theater, Boal's goal was to provide an active viewer with the tools necessary to act against marginalization in their own lives, believing that, "theater is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theater can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it" (p. xxxi). By encouraging agency through active participatory theater, the student and teacher can link performative theater exercises in the classroom with both short-term goals

(e.g., expanding writing techniques while working on scripts or pronunciation while developing dialogue) and long-term goals (e.g., developing social empathy while engaging with scripts that may focus on controversial storylines) while also explicitly addressing localized issues through the lens of critical pedagogy.

Language for Peace Approach

A curriculum that draws heavily from a Language for Peace Approach (LPA) is another way to bring transformative peacebuilding strategies into a civically engaged classroom. First theorized by Oxford (2013), LPA's purpose is to foster peace understanding and peaceful communication through peace language activities, peace-oriented art, multi-method research designs, and peace-coded linguistic analysis (Oxford et al., 2020). The transformative essence of peace in promoting harmony, equality, justice, and agency within and among individuals, communities, nation-states, and the earth is employed to uproot the direct, structural, and cultural violence prevalent in societies (Galtung, 1969, 1990).

A classroom dedicated to peacebuilding allows for a space where individuals can create a culture of peace. Students can move toward transformative change by developing awareness about managing conflict without resorting to violence and establishing practices that create dignity and secure rights for the community (Jakar & Milofsky, 2016). While Oxford (2013) outlines six strategies for peacebuilding (peace through military strength, peace through justice, peace through politics, peace through sustainability, peace education, and peace through transformation), classroom educators can approach peacebuilding through the route of peace education and peace through transformation. Peace educators focus on identifying and advocating for peaceful policies, guiding students on how to manage conflict non-violently, and challenging systematic violence and oppression in societies. To increase peacebuilding through transformation is to respond to "violence, injustice, and inequality with nonviolent action" (Oxford, 2013, p. 43).

To foster peace understanding the LPA framework calls for the incorporation of peace-oriented art to develop peace values and to consider creative ways to uproot violence in its many forms. Oxford (2013) and Oxford et al. (2020) describe innovative techniques to increase students' awareness of peace through critical discourse analysis, peace poetry, visual imagery, peace journalism, and body movement. By employing creativity and empathy through art, students can approach issues of marginalization in their lives with creative solutions.

Service-Learning

Service-learning components of education have a long history of use in higher education classrooms across the country. While many different types of service-learning education exist, generally speaking, service-learning components consist of students spending time outside of the classroom working on neighborhood projects where they devote energy to serving community partners' needs (Tinkler et al., 2014). In the language classroom, service-learning projects have been found beneficial in increasing students' English skills in an EFL setting (Suwaed, 2018), improving self-awareness and adhesion of multicultural identity within immigrant youths (Knight & Watson, 2014), and raising students' confidence in communicative language practice in an Intensive English Program (Douglas, 2017). Despite the varied research on service-learning in the past 20 years (Salam et al., 2019), and perhaps because of the many varied types of service-learning programs, substantial confusion still exists over what exactly service-learning entails.

Service-learning differs from community service in a couple of distinct ways. Furco and Billig (2001) highlight the distinction between the two, emphasizing that community service is

often considered to be acts of altruistic kindness carried out by elite individuals to benefit their communities. On the other side of the spectrum, the authors emphasize the notion that community service is often stereotyped as something that convicts or juvenile delinquents perform to satisfy a government-mandated sentence. Therefore, service-learning advocates follow a rigid set of parameters to lend credibility to their courses (Suwaed, 2018).

For example, Furco and Billig (2001) discuss how service-learning programs tend to have clear learning objectives, student agency in selecting an organization for collaboration, a solid theoretical framework, integration with an academic curriculum, and the opportunity for reflection. Recent use of service-learning as a tool has started to take root in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classrooms, particularly in Intensive English Programs (IEP) for students matriculating into higher education, where it is presented as a beneficial addition to IEP classrooms (Douglas, 2017). Outside of higher education, recent arguments have been made for service-learning elements to be incorporated into adult education as it increases the development of problem-solving skills and critical thinking in students' additional languages while also creating reciprocal, authentic relationships in a space that is conducive to socialization and language acquisition (Riley & Douglas, 2016; Schneider, 2019). Meanwhile, some critics of service-learning argue that Service-Learning classes focus to strongly on student outcomes and meeting classroom goals and not on long-term community impact and sustainment (Burth, 2016).

Unfortunately, there is a significant gap in civic engagement or service-learning classes for adult ELL immigrants throughout the United States (Wurr, 2018). When service-learning programs occur in the ELL classrooms, ELL students are the focus of service-learning projects with L1 English speakers performing the service of working with ELL students, creating a "native"/"non-native" English speaker power dynamic. Very rarely are ELLs in the position of "serving" during service-learning experiences but rather are the "served". To that end, the service-learning that the teachers, community partners, and students undertake should strive to be decolonized (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). Stakeholders should interrogate the power and privilege that can be present in service-learning environments to create a holistic, transformational, and peace-oriented curriculum that reframes student-teacher-community power dynamics. When coupling service-learning with a framework of critical pedagogy ELL students can take pro-active roles in service-learning programs helping to disrupt a power imbalance. By ushering in a critical examination of political and cultural ideologies in the civic realm, the students have the power to make both the classroom and the service-learning locations spaces for equitable transformation.

Translanguaging

As this is a multilingual classroom, a framework of translanguaging will be fundamental to the curriculum design. Translanguaging, first coined by Welsh linguist Cen Williams (Vogel & García, 2017), is a pedagogical practice where students are encouraged to alternate between multiple languages in their repertoire. Translanguaging allows students the agency to communicate using a complete set of linguistic features that are not fixed to "the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national or state) languages" (Otheguy et al., 2015, p. 281). Further explored by García et al. (2017), the act of translanguaging also provides students additional resources to secure their voice in organizations that are dominated by monolingual language policies and ideologies by giving space for students' complex linguistic repertoire and personal identities.

English has a long and troubled history as a form of colonization. The forced acquisition of the English language and Western-style education has uprooted and destroyed various diverse

languages and cultures (Coelho & Henze, 2014; Sichula, 2018). "Named languages" (such as English, Kazakh, Spanish, or Basque) are social constructs arranged and maintained through political or social entities. By developing a critical awareness of what constitutes a named language and by encouraging students to bend the rigid barriers created by named languages, students can develop ownership of how they communicate their ideas and feelings (Otheguy et al., 2015, p. 281).

Students should be encouraged to employ their multiple languages collectively to scaffold their English acquisition. By using a translanguaging framework, the students are "emancipated from many negative ideas about bilinguals and bilingualism in the first half of the 20th century" (Lewis et al., 2012, p. 642) that are still prevalent in society today. Encouraging translanguaging helps protect and promote minoritized languages (Yilmaz, 2021) while also allowing for deeper academic participation and syntactic transfer (Dougherty, 2021). As multilingual students interact and collaborate with collective knowledge-building (Duarte, 2019), they can use their realities as a basis for development, allowing a reconstructing of their history and culture in tandem with the creation of a new culture (Rivera, 1999).

Context

The concepts laid out in this curriculum design are adjustable for adult language learners in various settings. The first focus of MCPL is to develop immigrant students' relationships with their neighborhoods and communities. This engagement could occur in adult education schools or immigrant-focused non-profits in high-density urban areas, or likewise, in organizations and institutions in mid-size cities, small towns, or rural villages. The secondary focus of MCPL is to increase students' targeted English language goals.

Common at many adult English schools are students that have diverse language capabilities and are English users of varying degrees of proficiency. An MCPL curriculum is adaptable to courses containing students with low, intermediate, or high English skills. The collective students do not need to be from a monolingual background or share a common language within the class. English classes composed of multilingual and multicultural groups should be inclusive to immigrants, refugees, migrants, or second-generation immigrants. By implementing the targeted language goals of an educational site, or incorporating learning objectives of the students through a needs assessment, educators of the MCPL curriculum can tailor the foundational frameworks and teaching activities of the MCPL to help students meet learning objectives.

Needs Assessment

To incorporate the MCPL curriculum into a community, a needs assessment of the various stakeholders involved will need to be implemented. First, an examination of the adult school or organization needs to be completed. Meet with the administration and discuss the resources available to implement a service-learning class at their organization. It is important to understand the school's educational goals to determine how a service-learning class can be adjusted to meet the needs of the school. Many U.S. colleges have toolkits that can be adapted to the adult ELL classroom to guide the teacher in implementing a service-learning course. For additional guidance, I recommend: Boston University's Center for Teaching and Learning Service-Learning: A Guide (Cordner, n.d.) Additionally, if the organization cannot accommodate a stand-alone MCPL class, the following activities in the next section can be adapted to general English classrooms to increase civic engagement and as a creative approach to language learning.

Since the MCPL curriculum allows students to be co-leaders and co-educators in their classroom, it is essential to conduct a needs assessment of the students who will be in the class. What is it that students hope to discover about themselves and their community during the course? Which language skills would students like to improve? What fears or anxieties may they have during a service-learning class? Consider other potential questions that may arise while discussing the MCPL curriculum with students.

In a partnership between the school and a civic institution it is equally important that the partner organizations' needs are being addressed and met. Partner organizations may have many different reasons for participating in a relationship; however, common reasons include feeling that it is part of their organization's mission to mentor students, helping produce future non-profit/civic professionals, and satisfying short-term needs through extra staffing (Stoecker et al., 2009). To have a successful collaboration the partner organizations needs to be informed about the goals of the class and the student. Communication is one of the most important aspects of a community partnership. Other key elements, according to Tinkler et al. (2014), include:

- 1. Be attentive to the community partner's mission and vision.
- 2. Understand the human dimension of the community partner's work.
- 3. Be mindful of the community partner's resources.
- 4. Accept and share the responsibility for inefficiencies.
- 5. Consider the legacy of the partnership.
- 6. Regard process as important. (p. 141)

The civic engagement component of the course will have students engaging with various organizations in their community that have a strong vision for meeting community needs or shaping local policy. Organizations should be chosen due to their mission of advancing and advocating for their local community and should represent the many different forms of civic institutions. Examples of organizations where students can be partners are food banks and resource centers; art museums and local theaters; mosques, synagogues, and churches; libraries; NGOs; public health organizations; or environmental non-profits.

Structure of Curriculum

The Multilingual Community Peace Leader curriculum incorporates data from the needs assessment and the pedagogical frameworks to create a holistic course focused on collaborative education. The curriculum comprises of three units that contain critical reflection, communal education, and civic engagement. In unit one, the students and the teacher, together as coeducators, will learn about different civic organizations in their community and the role of individuals in civic life. In unit two, they will spend time working at different organizations, with self-reflection being a key component of their in-class work. Lastly, in unit three, the students will think about their future roles in the city and what type of changes they want to witness in their lives and the lives of their neighbors. Within these three units, students will be encouraged to become transformational agents of change in their neighborhoods and communities through a curriculum built from the frameworks of critical pedagogy, language for peace approach, and service-learning. For a more general overview of the Multilingual Community Peace Leader curriculum, as well as sample lesson plans, visit here.

Overview of Curriculum Activities

In creating a curriculum centered around critical pedagogy, LPA, and translanguaging, it is vital to have activities that support and deepen students' critical thought and peace understanding. By incorporating LPA activities into a service-learning classroom, students will think critically about localized violence within the community. Furthermore, the LPA advocates for communicative practices that encourage critical and creative problem-solving in a safe and cohesive environment (Rothman & Sanderson, 2018). A bottom-up approach to creating and analyzing peace indicators in local communities will help participants take stock of their neighborhoods and become successful agents of transformational peace (Mac Ginty, 2013).

The process of introducing community-based service-learning projects into the classroom can serve as a resource for broadening students' points of view and counteracting preconceived thoughts leading to transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997). Students will have many opportunities to improve and reflect on their short- and long-term goals throughout the course. For instance, in unit two, as the students work on a biographical article of a person at their community site, teachers can guide students in improving writing skills, which can satisfy students' short-term goals in English development while also meeting long-term goals of more substantial civic engagement.

When the students are at their service-learning locations, they could be called upon to utilize their multilingual language skills to engage with the community. The linguistic features, (lexicon, register, cadence), will differ when talking to a monolingual English speaker in an office versus a neighbor with the same linguistic background versus their local shop cashier. Translanguaging allows them to pull the specific linguistic features they need, from a myriad of languages, to achieve their communication goal. Through pre- and post-service activities, teachers can work with students to create communicative links between their multiple languages that are brought into the service-learning site (see Table 1 in Dougherty, 2021) for ways to infuse translanguaging into the general content of a lesson plan).

While teaching a class that incorporates translanguaging, key resources and lessons could be in English; however, students should be encouraged to strengthen cognitive and emotive skills in all their languages. Teaching lessons in additional languages, focusing on overlapping linguistic features in multiple languages, and allowing students to express themselves in a deviation from standardized English are ways a teacher can promote peace linguistics in their classroom. In advocating for and allowing translanguaging in the classroom, "one can imagine a positive peace through language, one that can be achieved by long-range respect for and maintenance of linguistic rights, the ecology of languages, cultural and linguistic diversity, and language education" (Friedrich, 2007, pp. 74–75). Through a joint use of critical pedagogy and multilingualism, students can produce new forms of knowledge accessible to themselves and their community.

The following examples of activities are created using LPA, translanguaging, and critical pedagogy while also keeping in mind adaptability to different art teaching contexts and needs assessments. These activities encourage personal and collective agency while also increasing English capabilities through in-class exercises and service-learning projects. Lastly, like a ripple, they are designed to encourage peace to oneself, one's family, one's community, and one's environment.

Examples of Curriculum Activities

Service-Learning Sites

A significant component of the course are service-learning sites where students can develop a broader understanding of the multi-faceted elements of civic life. Organizations such as non-profits, food banks, resource centers, religious institutions, libraries, art institutions, and government agencies are excellent sites for student placement. Allow for a partnership that lasts several weeks to promote interpersonal community-building (Tinkler et al., 2014). After creating clear guidelines and community expectations, incorporate self-reflective exercises to guide students' service-learning experiences. See below for activities that include reflective practices or visit Kansas University Center for Service Learning Community Engagement Toolbox (2022) for an adaptable guide to implementing reflective practices in the classroom.

Everyday Peace Indicators

During unit one, conduct alongside students an analysis of peace indicators in your neighborhood or community by using the research outlined in Mac Ginty (2013). Through group work, have students consider what elements in their neighborhoods indicate a peaceful community. This exercise could be a simple in-class discussion, or students could be encouraged to do field research in their neighborhoods. Use the collecting and analyzing of data as a jumping-off point to consider what the community values and how the city may be marginalizing individuals or communities. For example, ask your students if these indicators change from neighborhood to neighborhood in your city, and if they do, what might be some reasons for that change? This activity will develop students' critical empathy of their community and help them name aspects of direct, cultural, or structural violence in their communities.

Reflection Journal

Students can write a reflection journal during the three units about their role in the community and their plans for civic engagement. The reflection journal can be composed of individual and collective entries that address prompts centered around civic engagement. Instead of writing, students can also answer prompts via voice or video recorder if desired or can even be encouraged to answer via multimedia collages, drawings, or photography (Oxford, 2013). Students can reflect in multiple languages, encouraging the translanguaging aspect of the curriculum and providing a space for linguistic justice. By reflecting, not only will students work on language development, but students can also consider the dynamics of service-learning.

Biographical Article

Students can choose an individual in the organization to interview at their service-learning site. The focus of the interview could be a biographical article on the individual and their choice to work in a civic role. Partner with a local community newspaper or news website to publish the interviews and raise awareness about important individuals and institutions in their neighborhoods, while simultaneously increasing the bond between student, teacher, and the community as coeducators. A sample lesson plan that introduces a biographical article activity can be found here.

Community Panel

Consider hosting a panel with community members centered around a specific theme relevant to your students. Have students participate, ask questions, and discuss their personal histories with

prominent community members. For example, by hosting a community panel focused on gender inequality, community members (such as domestic violence responders, female government leaders, and local business leaders) can discuss wage discrepancy, domestic violence, or legal protection for Lesbian, Bisexual, or Trans individuals. Multinational students should feel encouraged to share differences in gender inequality in past locales where they lived compared to their current residence, allowing for fresh and differing perspectives. By hosting a panel of community members, the students will be able to learn more and discuss specific topics and become connected to new individuals and agencies in their community.

Theater Activities

Self-reflective monologues. To develop students' critical opinions on specific topics participants can be given the same prompt and asked to write a monologue. Open-ended prompts such as, "How have you changed in the last five years," "Write a letter to your teenage self," or "What do I want most in life?" work well. Afterward, participants compile their monologues and, after coding them for similar themes, can shape and combine the monologues together in a process similar to documentary theater. While doing so, the participants cultivate self-reflective practices and simultaneously understand the multidimensional relationship between inner peace and interpersonal peace. For a deeper look at verbatim/documentary theater and additional resources, visit Council of Ontario Drama and Dance Educators: Verbatim Theater (n.d.).

Participatory theater. Adapted from Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed* (1979), participants will choose a prevalent issue in their community. Small groups will write and create a scene about the issue and how it could or could not be solved. They will present the scene to the rest of the group once. Then, they will perform the scene again, but this time, the spectators can pause and enter the scene with their own version of how to resolve the issue. This activity encourages agency and critical problem solving, could stimulate translanguaging, and would allow for full integration of comprehension skills to meet students' targeted language goals. For additional information, a detailed sample lesson plan can be viewed here.

On the street interview. Students can interview individuals in their community about a particular localized issue, such as new housing developments, increased fare rates, or pollution from local infrastructure. After interviewing the community, students can create dialogue from the interviews to highlight the multiple sides of the issue. After completing a script, students can take turns acting out different points of view. Following this, students can reflect on different solutions for each person's viewpoint. This activity encourages peaceful solutions to disrupting patterns of cultural or structural violence while allowing students to consider long-term goals for their community.

Environmental field trip. The class can reflect on their relationship with the earth and the natural or urban environment around them by going on an environmental field trip. The students, in small groups, will reflect on their relationship with well-known landmarks or neighborhoods. Each group will then write a scene placed in a different setting around the community. Then the class can visit each location (a park, a river, an alleyway, a prominent landmark, the public market) and present their scene to the rest of the group (and, perhaps, curious onlookers) at that location. Connecting person to place expands the element of peace into the neighborhood and can highlight the intersectionality of individuals with the environment around them, highlighting how the same spot can hold different values for individuals. This activity becomes a critical practice that draws upon the reflective nature of both Oxford et al.'s (2020) and Boal's (1978) frameworks.

Conclusion

In developing this instructional design, Multilingual Community Peace Leaders, I hope to present a peace-focused curriculum that encourages personal and collective agency in adult learners of English as they navigate being active members of their neighborhoods. The overarching frameworks of critical pedagogy, language for peace approach, service-learning, and translanguaging can be adjusted and formatted to serve the short- and long-term goals of students and civic institutions in various neighborhoods and municipalities throughout the United States. It is my hope that this curriculum design can improve the multilingual language skills of adult English language learners while increasing civic engagement at the local community level and allowing students, teachers, and civic partners to co-intentionally and collaboratively create and sustain a transformed neighborhood.

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Received: November 2, 2021 | Accepted: February 22, 2022 | Published: April 18, 2022