Service-Learning and language revitalization: an innovative experience in Catalan teaching

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Abstract

This article analyses a Service-Learning (SL) experience in a Catalan-language course at the University of the Balearic Islands (UIB). This is the first SL experience implemented in a language course at the UIB. The article examines the requirements and challenges of this type of project, as it is an innovative methodology that still needs to be fully institutionalized. Although SL is usually perceived as a methodology for internship or social work-related courses, it is cross-cutting and can be implemented in less explored fields such as linguistics. Therefore, this article also explains how the tasks and activities were planned to achieve certain learning goals and to develop particular skills and competencies included in the course's teaching guide.

Keywords

Aprenentatge servei i revitalització lingüística: una experiència innovadora en l'ensenyament del català

Resum

En aquest article analitzem una experiència d'aprenentatge servei (ApS) en una assignatura de llengua catalana a la Universitat de les Illes Balears (UIB). Es tracta de la primera experiència ApS implementada en una assignatura de llengua a la UIB. En aquest treball s'estudien els requisits i els reptes que han d'encarar aquest tipus de projectes, atès que es tracta d'una metodologia innovadora que encara no està del tot institucionalitzada. Tot i que l'ApS se sol percebre com una metodologia per a assignatures de pràctiques i de treball social, és transversal i es pot implementar igualment en camps menys explorats, com la lingüística. Per tant, en aquest article també s'explica com es van planificar les tasques i activitats per assolir uns determinats objectius d'aprenentatge, així com per a desenvolupar habilitats competències concretes recollides en la guia docent de l'assignatura.

Paraules clau

Aprenentatge servei en línia, aprenentatge servei universitari, TIC, transferència de coneixement, llengües amenaçades; sociolingüística.

Aprendizaje-servicio y revitalización lingüística: una experiencia innovadora en la enseñanza del catalán

Resumen

En este artículo analizamos una experiencia de aprendizaje-servicio (ApS) en una asignatura de lengua catalana en la Universidad de las Islas Baleares (UIB). Se trata de la primera experiencia ApS implementada en una asignatura de lengua en la UIB. En este trabajo se estudian los requisitos y los retos que este tipo de proyectos debe afrontar, puesto que se trata de una metodología innovadora que aún no está totalmente institucionalizada. Aunque el ApS se suele percibir como una metodología para asignaturas de prácticas y de trabajo social, es realmente transversal y se puede implementar igualmente en campos menos explorados, como la lingüística. Por lo tanto, en este trabajo también se explica cómo se planificaron las tareas y actividades para lograr unos determinados objetivos de aprendizaje, así como para desarrollar habilidades y competencias concretas recogidas en la guía docente de la asignatura.

Palabras clave

Aprendizaje-servicio en línea, aprendizaje-servicio universitario, TIC, transferencia de conocimiento, lenguas amenazadas, sociolingüística.

1. Introduction

This paper presents the first service-learning (SL) experience in a Catalan-language course at the University of the Balearic Islands (UIB). The ApSUIB program, which promotes SL (ApS in Catalan/Spanish) at UIB, also contributed to the project design. This program's webpage gathers the SL experiences developed in the different degrees and this is the first one implemented in the linguistic field at UIB. This pilot project was designed for a Bachelor's Degree in Primary Education course. It was developed in a first-year group during the first semester of the academic year 2021-2022; it lasted three months approximately, from September to December. The collaborating organization was the Pro-language Platform (PPL), its territorial delegation in the Balearic Islands (Plataforma per la Llengua, Illes Balears).

The SL project could be implemented since, in a previous meeting with the lecturer—the author of this paper—, this organization explained that some volunteers might be needed to prepare materials and present data. This paper aims to analyze how this innovative teaching-learning experience was implemented in a Catalan-language course at a university level. It also seeks to elucidate the institutional improvements that should be considered to integrate this methodology into the higher-education philosophy and their pedagogical approaches (Ribeiro, Aramburuzabala & Paz-Lourido, 2021).

By discussing the requirements of an SL project and the challenges of language revitalization, this paper highlights how this methodology can support endangered languages, i.e., languages that have been minoritized and whose full intergenerational transmission is not ensured (Junyent, 1992). SL is presented as a critical tool to dig deeply into society's roots and, by doing so, point out the value of linguistic diversity. This includes all languages and their dialects (i.e., geographical varieties) in connection with their environment, whether they have been minoritized or not, regardless of the number of speakers, from an ecolinguistic perspective (Bastardas-Boada, 2017).

The need for the promotion of linguistic diversity and cultural heritage has also been stated by several worldwide organizations, such as the United

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Nations (UN). For instance, the Resolution A/RES/74/135, of the UN General Assembly, proclaims the period between 2022 and 2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL), which includes a *Global Action Plan* (UNESCO, 2022) to mobilize stakeholders and resources. Moreover, UNESCO (1996 [2010]) keeps updating the *Atlas on the World's Languages in Danger*, now in its third edition.

2. A contextualization of service-learning: goals and principles

SL is an experiential methodology that consists of acquiring curricular content while doing a service to the community. This service should be meaningful for all the involved agents: the students, the organization, and the community. Then, it will have an impact thanks to the "critical reflective thinking to promote student learning and student responsibility" (Klentzin & Wierzbowski-Kwiatkowski, 2013, 6). It might trigger an ultimate feedback effect if the students become proactive, committed citizens, as they are also part of the community.

Although SL is sometimes linked to human diversity and oppression content in the social work curricula (Maccio & Voorhies, 2012), it has proved to be transversal to all academic fields and educational stages. It was born in the United States and became very popular in Central and South America; since 2000, it is also spreading across Europe (Ochoa, 2010; Batlle, 2011). The term was used for the first time in 1967 by William Ramsay, Robert Sigmon and Michael Hart, in the framework of a project at the OAK Ridge Associated Universities in Tenessee, although the first community practices appeared in the curriculum in 1915 (Sigmon, 1990; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Sotelino-Losada *et al.*, 2021). The coining of the term was promoted by the New School pedagogical movement, which was in turn influenced by the experiential constructivist methodologies altogether with the learning-by-doing principle, especially encouraged by William James and John Dewey (Sotelino-Losada *et al.*, 2021). Thus, the first Service-Learning Conference, which took place in Atlanta in 1969, contributed to consolidating it (Sotelino-Losada *et al.*, 2021).

Volunteering and community service have existed for a long time. This might be why this new innovative methodology is sometimes confused with these

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kinds of community engagement (Batlle, 2011). Between in-class learning and community-based service activities, SL can visually be explained through the color-spheres analogy formulated by Furco and Norvell (2019). Following this analogy, in-class learning is represented by a blue sphere, whereas community-based activities are represented by a red sphere; as for SL, it is illustrated by a purple sphere. Thus, the blue and red spheres are independent of each other, whereas the purple sphere (i.e., SL) results from the interaction of both the blue and the red ones. Consequently, SL would only happen when classroom learning is combined with community service and they become fully integrated (Furco & Norvell, 2019).

This integration should lead to reciprocity as a key notion in the SL concept (Jacoby, 1996; Pusch & Merrill, 2008). Reciprocity implies that the partnership set in the framework of an SL project must result equally beneficial for all the parties (Sandaran, 2012; Petersen & Osman, 2013; Chika-James, 2020):

1. the students participating in the project, as they learn applied knowledge from a practical perspective.
2. the teaching institution that promotes it, as it contributes to knowledge transfer to the society.
3. the collaborating organization, as it receives a product made by the students to fulfill its needs.
4. the local community, as it benefits from the impact that the organization has on it.

The teaching institution should take the lead among potential stakeholders to promote these partnerships. The lack of institutionalization concerning this methodology, at least in the European case, entails that such collaboration agreements between the institution and the organization are not always easy to sign, even where the educational philosophy promotes social justice values (Opazo & Aramburuzabala, 2019; Meijs, Maas, & Aramburuzabala, 2019). The partnerships consist of non-profit organizations that show altruistic and social commitment to the community (Chika-James, 2020), based on democracy, ethical values, and civic engagement.

3. Plataforma per la Llengua (PPL), the Catalan-language NGO

PPL is a non-profit organization that works altruistically in all Catalan-speaking territories. Among others, their objectives consist of making Catalan a language for social cohesion (i.e., a common language or koiné) and a tool for social progression, to guarantee equal rights and opportunities (Plataforma per la Llengua, n.d.).

Indeed, some persecution periods throughout history, especially the Francoist dictatorship, have led Catalan to a minoritized status, which is why its social use can seem weak depending on the region (e.g., urban vs. rural areas), in what has been considered a stage of a language shift process (Junyent, 2019). This is one of the reasons why some speakers would not tend to begin a conversation in Catalan unless they assume that the other party is Catalan-speaking too. Although this language convergence is highly influenced by the context and other kinds of sociolinguistic situations have also been studied (Xarxa CRUSCAT, 2015), some Catalan native speakers might be found using another language among them. In this case, Spanish, Italian, or French would possess more political, economic, and symbolic power, depending on the language-in-contact situation in the corresponding country: Andorra, Spain, Italy, and France. As a result, Catalan speakers still struggle to fully live in their native language, even if it is the only official language in Andorra and has reached an official status, altogether with Spanish, in some autonomous regions in Spain: Catalonia, the Balearic Islands, and Valencia—where it is officially named Valencian.

Regarding this, PPL designs campaigns to encourage the use of Catalan in all registers as a fully-fledged language, disseminates some language knowledge among newcomers, legally defends the speakers' linguistic rights, and manages data and writes reports (Plataforma per a Llengua, n.d.).

4. Project methodology and development

Inspired by volunteering and community-based work, this SL project was not mandatory. It was one of the options given to the students for the oral presentation that was included in the teaching guide. The oral presentation

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weighted 30% of the final grade. This presentation sought the acquisition of some sociolinguistic content regarding language teaching, as the students were teacher trainees. So, the SL project should allow them to acquire this content. The other option consisted of choosing a topic from a list provided by the lecturer; the students had to do some research on the topic, work on it from an analytical perspective, and present the results to their classmates.

As a teaching-learning methodology, some institutionalization factors encouraged and helped to implement this project according to its pedagogical requirements and quality standards. For instance, in this case, there was a practicum agreement between the Department of Catalan Philology and General Linguistics and PPL (Balearic Islands)—although the course belongs to an education program, it was managed by a linguistics department due to its interdisciplinarity. The so-called Catalan-language NGO explained its current needs in an initial meeting before the beginning of the semester. Considering the course calendar, some tasks and activities were pre-designed so that the participating students could help this organization while acquiring the foreseen content and developing curricular skills and competences.

The project was presented to the students on the first day of the course. The benefits of the SL methodology were pointed out. However, only one student felt motivated enough to participate. Due to COVID-19, all the activities took place virtually, making this an online SL project. Table 1 summarizes the project tasks and activities regarding both their objectives and the learning goals that were achieved, considering the pedagogical and sociolinguistic content.

Table 1. Synthesis of the SL project

Tasks	Activities	Objectives	Learning goals
1. News about InformeCat 2021	Writing a piece of news regarding the 2021 annual report about the state of the language (InformeCat).	To summarise the main data about the state of the language from the 2021 annual report (InformeCat).	Analysis and synthesis of sociolinguistic data.
2. Activities for new speakers	Designing language teaching materials for migrant people.	To plan language teaching materials correctly, according to the target audience.	Detection of the social collectives in which Catalan shows less presence and development of strategies to present it as a tool.
3. Letter to a big company	Writing and sending a letter with a sociolinguistic justification to a big enterprise.	To convince a company of using Catalan in product labels, signboards, and websites, in case it does not.	Deconstruction of linguistic stereotypes regarding the number of speakers: it is politics that really determines the use of a language, as this big multinational's website was only available in state languages, such as Icelandic.

4.1. Examples of language activities

This subsection presents some of the materials that the student created for Task 2. Activities for new speakers (Table 1). The slide walls are all interactive and can be used online since they were created on Canva (Rouvrais & Gilliot, 2004). The student focused on basic vocabulary and locative prepositions. Once acquired the basic words (Figures 1, 2, and 3), the learners must use them in simple sentences to express the place and position following the examples (Figure 4). The vocabulary addresses two main topics: technology and food, and the nouns are presented before the prepositions. Also, after introducing the vocabulary (Figure 1) and before beginning with the prepositions (Figure 3), the learners adopt an active role to check the acquisition (Figure 2). To illustrate how a teaching-learning sequence works (Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4), an example of each phase is shown, based on the technology topic.

Figure 1. Initial vocabulary overview

Figure 2. Interactive vocabulary activity with key answers
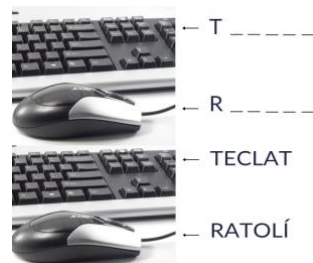
Figure 3. Initial prepositions overview

Figure 4. Interactive prepositions activity with key answers

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5. Evaluation, reciprocity, and impact

Once the project is finished, the collaborating organization possesses more teaching and informative materials, reaching the expectations of the SL philosophy (Pusch & Merrill, 2008). Thus, the student helped the organization to continue promoting the public use of Catalan in private companies as well as language rights. The organization technician acting as student supervisor sent a report to the lecturer to evaluate the three products and assess the student performance, which all of them were considered very good. The lecturer adopted a tutor role to provide additional guidance if needed and check that everything was working; he acted as a facilitator providing the necessary conditions to develop the SL project.

As for the student, she proved to have acquired the pedagogical and sociolinguistic content included in the teaching guide. The oral presentation worked as a project celebration, in which she argued very extended stereotypes towards languages and their number of speakers in front of the whole class; see Task 3. Letter to a big company (Table 1). As part of the celebration, ApSUIB (n.d.) and EOSLHE (n.d.) also contributed to its dissemination. The student reported to the lecturer her self-evaluation as well as the evaluation of the process, which she also valued very well. As a suggestion to improve, she mentioned that the online factor made communication less free flowing sometimes.

6. Conclusion

This project shows that the students participating in SL present a more meaningful acquisition of curricular content. Nevertheless, the increasing materialist and individualist ideologies among university students might hinder their motivation to engage in this kind of methodology (Bush, Edwards, & Jones, 2016). On the one hand, SL projects allow to improve qualitatively the development of the civic and social competence gathered by the curriculum, but on the other, it seems to be difficult finding the students' commitment to engage if the project is not mandatory. As a counterpart, if these partnerships and alliances between the campus and the community succeed, it would increase the participants' motivation (Zani & Guarino,

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2019), which would eventually contribute to a more equal, just, and democratic world.

Online SL projects can entail some extra challenges concerning the interaction between the students and their supervisors at the organization. However, the online environment also contributed to the implementation of ICTs, creating interactive teaching materials on Canva. Thus, the target learners—migrant people in this case—can complete the activities remotely and check their vocabulary and grammar acquisition, thanks to a self-correction application following a teaching-learning sequence. Therefore, ICTs proved once more their potential to reach a larger audience and adapt to several kinds of situations.

SL institutionalization in European higher education is still a challenge for all the involved agents. Yet, full institutionalization could contribute to these kinds of initiatives, without making them exclusively depend on the faculty's commitment, and would help to evaluate them more systematically. With this regard, institutions find themselves at different stages of the process, covering from the initial to the more advanced. This is why aligning with the university organization and policy could be a strategy to improve it (Paz-Lourido *et al.*, 2018). For instance, it would be interesting for the faculty evaluation and accreditation agencies to recognize these initiatives and include them in their assessment criteria (Furco, 2002). To help the visibility of these experiences, more teaching guides should mention the SL methodology as far as it is implemented in the course. The aim is for quality projects to stop being sporadic and began being replicated by other institutions (Paz-Lourido et al., 2018). In this connection, the thematic workgroups in the Spanish Association of University SL (Asociación de Aprendizaje-Servicio Universitario) should be welcomed, as they will encourage the collaboration among SL lecturers and researchers within the same field; e.g., there is a workgroup on SL and linguistic diversity. This should facilitate interregional and transnational projects, transferring the methodology to similar contexts, in pursuit of a response to both local and global real needs (Paz-Lourido & de Benito, 2021).

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As linguistic rights are also human rights, they can be addressed from a solidarity perspective (Rubio & Lucchetti, 2016). Indeed, all communities should be able to fully live in their native language if they wish, protecting their socialization with the immediate environment in an ever-changing globalized world. Proof of this challenge is the increasing demand for Catalan-language courses addressed to migrant people;[1] e.g., to guarantee equal opportunities in the health system, both as workers and users.[2] In this respect, the focus should be put on the ability to offer services to acquire these languages not only in the host society but also outside, raising awareness of diversity and facilitating language acquisition. In this sense, Xarxa Vives[3] (2023) asked the European Parliament to include Catalan in the Online Language Support (OLS) website of the Erasmus program, which includes the 24 official languages of the European Union, plus Icelandic, Norwegian, Macedonian, Serbian, and Turkish. Again, the connection with politics is remarked, as Catalan is a medium-sized language, having around 10 million speakers, which means that reaches the 13th position in the EU ranking (Plataforma per la Llengua, 2022).

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[1] In the last call, among 21,170 people that applied for an initial or basic Catalan-language course, 2,492 people could not obtain a place on any course and had to stay on a waiting list (Consorci per la Normalització Lingüística; cit. Arbós Junyent 2023).

[2] In the midst of the debate whether Catalan should be mandatory to work in the Balearic Health System, as it is Spanish, the Institute for Balearic Studies (Institut d'Estudis Baleàrics, IEB) organized Catalan-language courses, both online and in-person, especially addressed to health professionals; please see: https://llengua.iebalearics.org/ca/m%C3%A9s-llengua/sanitat.

[3] This international network assembles the 22 Catalan-speaking universities from the autonomous regions of Catalonia, Valencia, and the Balearic Islands (Spain), as well as Andorra, Perpignan (France), and Sassari (Sardinia, Italy).

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