

English Language Teachers' Perceptions of the Role of Service Learning in Enhancing University-Based Engagement Initiatives: A Case Study

تصورات أساتذة اللغة الإنجليزية حول دور التعلم الخدمي في تعزيز مبادرات المشاركة القائمة على مستوى
الجامعة: دراسة حالة

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Abstract :

Service learning is a teaching strategy which involves learning in meaningful and contextual situations. Its focus on real-life situations has made it a crucial element in twenty-first-century skills. Service learning and other forms of experiential pedagogy have left a great impact over the last two decades within the EFL context. The literature, however, appears to be not well established beyond Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). This article initially explores teachers' awareness of service-learning while teaching English as a foreign language to non-native speakers. It also describes how students' engagement aligns with and supports differentiated learning. To reach our findings, we used both qualitative and quantitative research methods. A sample of 13 teachers was set to answer our questionnaire which consists of 23 items. The purpose is to elicit the participants' perceptions regarding service learning in the EFL context. The results indicate that teachers believe that service learning positively influences a student's learning in the following ways: Academic achievement 15%, critical thinking 13%, sense of belongingness to the community 19%, motivation 18%, and autonomy 30%.

Keywords: Engagement, English Language Skills, Service Learning, Teaching, University

ملخص :

التعلم الخدمي "أو" التعلم الخدمي استراتيجي تعليمي تتضمن التعلم في مواقف ذات مغزى وسياق. و لقد جعل منها تركيزها الأكاديمي على مواقف الحياة اليومية و المجتمعات المحلية عنصرا حاسما في مهارات القرن الحادي والعشرين. لقد ترك التعلم الخدمي وأشكال أخرى للتعليم التجريبي تأثيرا كبيرا على مدار العقود الماضية في سياق اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. ومع ذلك، يبدو أن الدراسات السابقة لم تكن تبنى في جانب تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية للمتحدثين بلغات أخرى. يستكشف هذا المقال في البداية وعي الأساتذة الجامعيين بالتعلم الخدمي أثناء تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية للناطقين بغيرها. كما أن المقال يصف تماشي مشاركة الطلاب في التعلم المتباين والمختلف. بالنسبة للنتائج التي توصلنا إليها، كان لدينا فرصة لاستخدام كل من طريقة البحث النوعي والكمي. تتمثل عينة البحث في 13 استاذا جامعا قدم لهم استبياننا مكون من 23 عنصرا لاستنباط تصوراتهم فيما يتعلق بالتعلم الخدمي في سياق اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. أوضحت النتائج أن المعلمين يعتقدون أن التعلم الخدمي يؤثر بشكل إيجابي على تعلم الطالب بالطرق التالية: التحصيل الدراسي 15٪، التفكير النقدي 13٪، الشعور بالانتماء للمجتمع 19٪، التحفيز 18٪ والاستقلال الذاتي 30٪.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التدريس، التعلم الخدمي، الجامعة، المشاركة، مهارات اللغة الإنجليزية.

Introduction :

In recent pedagogical research, university-based service learning has been a crucial new emerging shift in advanced education. It has shown great potential for deep students' learning and engagement across different disciplines. Service learning in higher education offers a strategic blueprint to teach real-life situations. According to Holsapple (2012), Service-learning is a paradigm shift in pedagogy that has the potential for deep student learning and engagement across a host of disciplines and topics. This study explores service learning from teachers' angle and its implication on undergraduate students in various aspects of their university life. It also targets issues such as students' diversity, inclusion, and motivation. Students and teachers want schools to be worth their time and efforts. They expect the experience to hold meaning and purpose, and to explore fresh starts to plan their future. For today's youth, innovation, and creativity -which apply to both teachers and students- is a means to exist. Classrooms are considered as a context that confines exploration and discovery. Hence, Service learning has been called the fourth wall of a classroom that opens to the world. Just as the world presents diverse opportunities for learning, learners themselves experience new ideas and develop new skills in diverse ways (Kaye & Connolly 2017).

The National Youth Leadership Council(2008)defines service learning as "a philosophy, pedagogy, and model for community development that is used as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and/or content standards." Service learning offers students opportunities to engage both inside and outside the classroom according to the learning pedagogy. Teaching by implementing service learning in the EFL classroom relates to the theory of Second language acquisition (SLA) which sets a straight path to the American linguist Krashen's monitor theory (1970). For English language teachers, it is important to be aware of second language acquisition theories and how to apply them in practical teaching. Teaching profession when supported with appropriate second language acquisition theories can improve the professional teachers' performance in the EFL class. It can also help teachers integrate students' characteristics better in the process of language learning and achieve the strategies conducive to true English learning and integration (Guo, 2018).

2. Research Questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of the current teaching pedagogy in higher education as far as service learning is concerned?
2. To what extent can service learning empower teachers' performance in the EFL class?
3. How does the university and classroom environment foster leaning engagement initiatives within the EFL class?

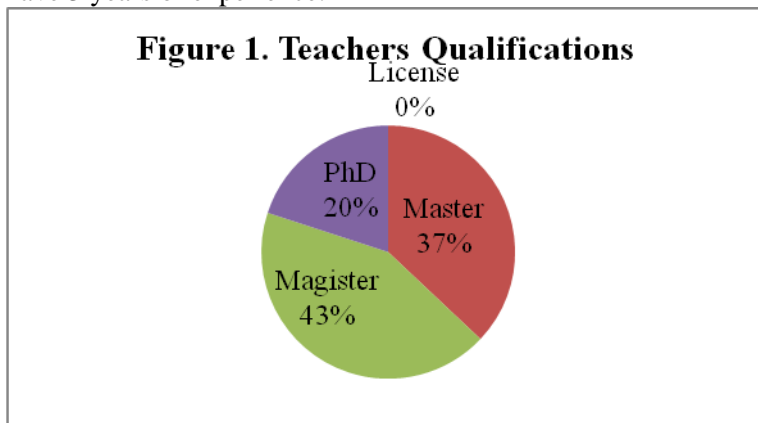
3. METHODOLOGY:

For the purpose of understanding and discovering teachers' perceptions on the role of service learning in enhancing University-based engagement

initiatives in the EFL context, the researchers decided to use both qualitative and quantitative research method. The purpose of quantitative research according to Monfared and Derakhshan (2015) is used to quantify the problem by way of generating numerical data or data that can be transformed into usable statistics. On the other hand, qualitative research as cited in Monfared and Derakhshan (2015) is primarily exploratory research. It is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. A Total sample of 13 teachers represented our target population. They had to answer 23 items to elicit their perception regarding service learning in the EFL context. In order to increase honest and reliable responses answers from the participants, we thought of stressing anonymity and confidentiality. For data analysis, the open-ended questions of the collected were analyzed using google forms. The quantitative results were tabulated as percentages and the interpretations were displayed in figures and charts. Qualitative results were developed descriptively in order to shape ideas or hypotheses for further research.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION :

The main purpose behind focusing on qualifications and teaching experience is to elicit as much reliable and useful information as possible from a variety of teachers. We know different ideas complete one another. In our case, 20% of the participants have a PhD degree, 43% have Magister and 37% are part-time MA teachers. As far as teaching experience is concerned, 18% percent have 9 years of experience, 25% have 5 years of experience and 57% have 3 years of experience.



Following the collection of data regarding some of the teaching techniques the teachers usually use in class, it was found that 52% of the participants use lectures. They state that they often use lecturing as a predominant teaching technique, 7% focus on pair group-work learning strategies, 13% prefer the use of presentations and pre-prepared discussions in the teaching operation.

The other 28% of the sample are aware of service learning yet are not sure of how to apply it in the EFL context.

Data analysis concerning challenges encountered by teachers while teaching shows that among those 13 (100%) teachers, 51% share the challenge of fulfilling students' interest in the given module. Hence, large group supervision difficulties constitute a true challenge for 18 % of the participants, 13 % of the teachers believe students obstacles are caused by emotional and psychological problems (stress and anxiety). In addition to the above findings, 18% of the participants find it difficult to implement this theory due to the lack of appropriate materials and facilities. (See Table 1)

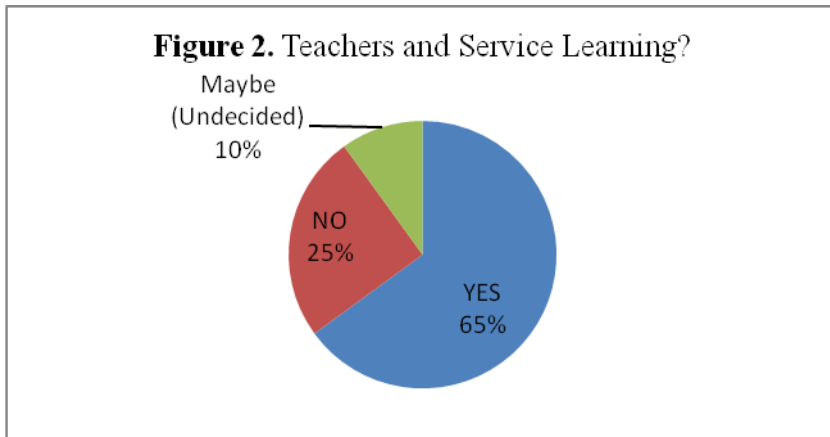
Table 1.Challenges

Challenges	Percentage
Difficulty supervising a large group of student and providing the assistance they need.	18%
Students feeling: anxiety, nervous, unconfident	13%
Students attention and interest	51%
Lack of materials and facilities	18%

Concerning our question which tackled the type of difficulties encountered by students while learning English, the findings indicate that low motivation for learning has been the center of attention for most teachers. Teachers stated that motivation and engagement in learning are the key elements for the learning to happen in the first place. Furthermore, we recorded that participants emphasised the suitable and active learning environment as one of the main challenges for EFL students in the Algerian University. Participants also highlighted that: “in a world of change, we have the responsibility to design rather more innovative activities for learning English as a foreign language”. As a summary, participants outlined four important difficulties that students of English may encounter:

1. Motivation
2. Engagement
3. Active Learning environment
4. Creative/ innovative learning activities.

When asking teachers about their awareness of the term service learning, the results indicated in figure 2 below show that 65% of teachers are not familiar with the term service learning. However, 25% are believed to have no clue about the term. 10% of the participants have left undecided responses towards service learning.

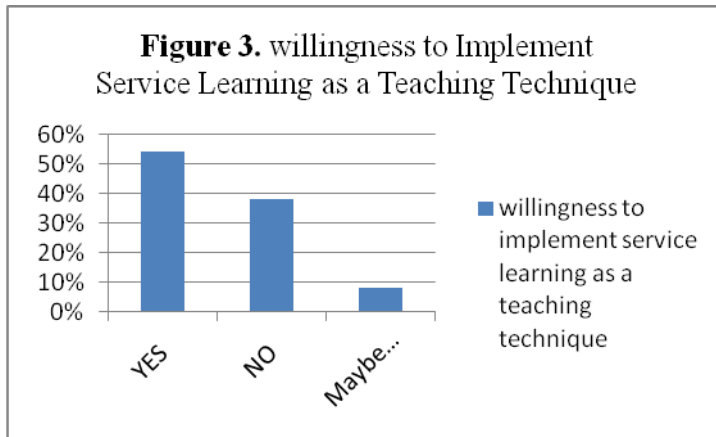


Teachers were asked to provide further explanation to their responses in the question above. As far as service learning activities are concerned, teachers illustrated different activities that they tend to use in order to create an active a positive learning atmosphere. As seen in the response, some answers were frequently mentioned by teachers: 77% experiential learning and interactive sessions, 23% online magazines and journals, 68% debate and discussions. (See **Table2.** below)

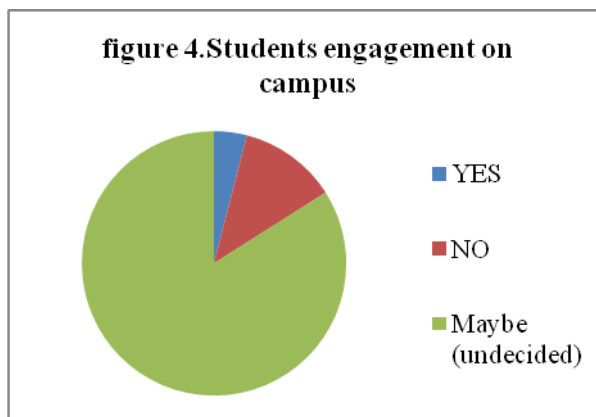
Table2. Service Learning Activities

Activities	Percentage
Experiential learning and interactive sessions	77%
online magazines and journals	23%
Debate and discussions.	68%

As indicated in figure 3., when teachers were asked about their willingness to implement service learning as a teaching technique, five teachers (54%) were willing to try this new techniques in the EFL classroom whereas seven teachers (38%) do not see an end to using service learning in their daily lessons and one teacher has left an undecided answer.



Participants were asked if their students are aware of service learning in the EFL context. The answers shown in the figure below, indicate that 84% of answers are undecided due to teachers' inability to supervise students outside the classroom. Teachers explained their answers stating that their students might be enrolled in activities outside the classroom that identifies as part of service learning yet they would not be aware of its terminology. The other 12% responded that the majority of students are being spoon-fed and they are only aware of what teachers provide in classroom. Whereas only 4% of the teachers believed that students are aware and are engaged in service learning activities.



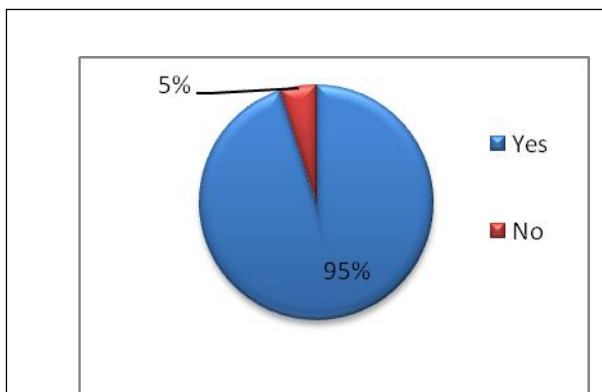
In order to uncover teachers' thoughts about their university of affiliation, we asked our participants about its flexibility to adopt service learning in the EFL department. All teachers(100%) claimed that their university is highly flexible to implement service learning in EFL courses. To qualify the above, we also asked teachers about the extracurricular activities that the university

organizes to foster service learning. They pointed to the role of service learning and student engagement in developing language learning in general and language skills in particular. It is believed that despite the lack of engagement in the university, students tend to create their own opportunities in and outside the classroom. Teachers pointed out to the recent emergence of university clubs and associations which constitute a learning space for students to practise what they usually learn inside the classroom. They also suggested that a language is dead if not used, they believe, as stated: “engagement opportunities are weak in our university, even though it is changing to the better, we still are crossing and bridging between learning and autonomy as we believe autonomy is part of service learning.”

As displayed in graph 5, when asking teachers about their beliefs on implementing service learning in the EFL classroom and its impact on students' overall performance, 95% of our sample agreed that service learning helps students with their overall performance in language leaning.

The other 5% of the teachers believe that service learning is not yet the key to teaching and learning, they stated: “we are still trying to cope with teaching English, various approaches and methods are emerging daily and we cannot implement them all at once and then again cannot apply them individually. It would be a mess”, they also added: “it is not the role of the teacher to create such opportunities but rather the faculties' and the universities' ”. This can be shown in the graph below:

Figure 5. Effectiveness of Service Learning



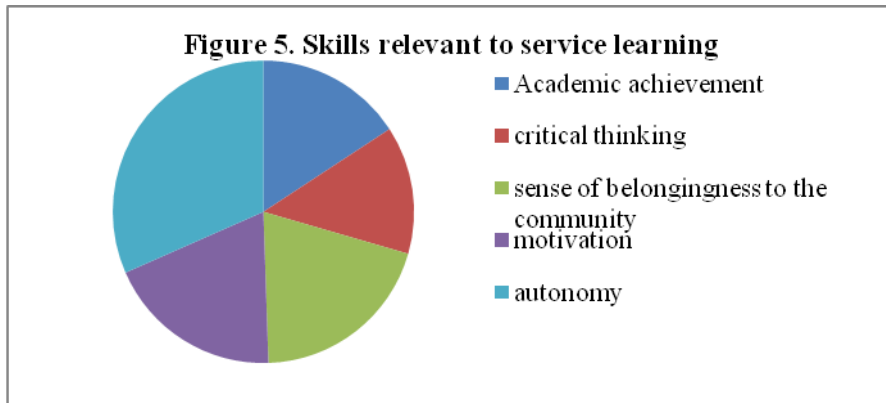
Moreover, teachers were asked to provide what they believe are the most effective activities of service learning that could be used at the university level. As show in the table below, teachers favored public speaking events with a value of 43. They also supported that creating department clubs with a result of 36% and a 10% for out of classroom workshops and training. Debate competitions and online journals and magazine writing scored as the least

favoured by teachers with a result of 8% and 3% respectively. The participants did no mention any other service learning activities they possibly used.

Table 3. Service Learning Activities

Activity	Percentage
Public speaking events	43%
Debate competition	8%
Creating Department clubs	36%
Out of classroom workshops and training	10%
Online Journal and magazine writing	3%

When it comes to teachers' responses in relation to the integration of the theory of service learning in higher education, the participants agreed that student's active participation and engagement in various campus opportunities organized and planned by the university. They also shed light on creating equal chances for participation for both genders. It is highlighted by the teachers that service learning ought to be implemented in the academic curriculum. One of the responses emphasised the importance of school/community coordination, the respondent explained: "Universities need to promote civic engagement and social responsibilities". Correspondingly, we inquired about the most relevant skills to service learning. According to all participants, it is believed that service learning influences students' skills on the following levels: Academic achievement 15%, critical thinking 13%, sense of belongingness to the community 19%, motivation 18%, and autonomy 30%. Service learning positively influences students' academic achievement through motivation to learn, critical thinking skills through problem-solving in real life situation, raises their sense of belonging to the community of the university and their citizenship towards their country; it also arranges a set of personal and professional growth which serves their future careers.

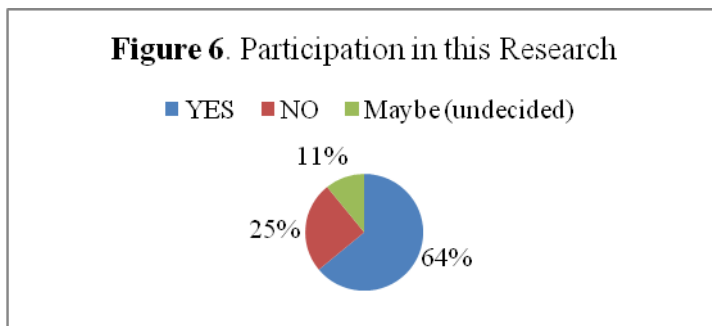


The findings, illustrated in the table 3 below, summarizes two open-ended questions represented to teachers regarding the impact of service learning on teaching EFL and on both students and teachers. The results show that on one hand, 86% of teachers believe that service learning brings a positive impact to teaching English as a foreign language. Whereas, 14% of the teachers answered with a 'No' regarding the positive impact of service learning on teaching EFL. On the other hand, 10 out of 13 teachers (77%) claim that service learning positively affects both students and teachers. However, 19% stated that this positive impact, if any, does not affect students and teachers. The other 4% has left undecided responses.

Table 3. The Impact of Service Learning on Teaching EFL

	YES	NO	Maybe (undecided)
Service learning bring positive impact to teaching EFL	86%	14%	
The positive impact reflect on both students and teachers	77%	19%	4%

In the last part of the questionnaire, teachers were asked whether their participation in this research would persuade them and provide insight on implementing service learning in their teaching. The results revealed that the majority of the participants 64% claim to implement service learning in their future teaching techniques.



4. RECOMMENDATIONS and SUGGESTIONS:

A Number of developed countries established a framework for teaching English through practice; they embraced the theory of engagement where learning by doing dominated the classroom scene. The difference between service learning and other educational methods is that service-based learning would be possible only if there is a full partnership between universities and communities and can affect students from many perspectives (Guo, 2018). In this respect, he insists on designing an inventory of service learning to help students distinguish between theoretical knowledge and practice within this theory. He adds that language teachers need to carefully create courses with rational planning from the perspective of linguistics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, cross culture, and education resources (ibid). In this way, service learning can, in the individual experience, achieve the goal of language acquisition and personal growth through interaction with the environment.

Traditional teaching approaches are still the basic path of certain students and teachers; it is undeniable that without those approaches, we would not achieve a certain level in the target language. However, those approaches are as indicated 'basic'. At some point of learning, the student will thrive for a more reflective and diverse experience. Thus, service learning helps both students and teachers to create an important connection between theory and practice, what they are learning and how it contributes to their world and future.

Findings showed that regardless of teachers' different opinions on service learning, they all held a positive view towards service learning. All participants believed it could bring a positive impact on the teaching and learning operation. Despite that, apparent challenges are still facing all teachers and researchers since this theory is still in its infancy. The recent research indicates that service learning provides insight into what is beyond the four walls of the classroom, by doing so, students, teacher, and faculty members could become more familiar with this important line of research which can help reform future work with linguistically and culturally diverse learners in university and community settings.

Furthermore, the implementation of service learning in higher education for undergraduate students would create an intercultural connection between different universities and communities in Algeria. According to Osman & Castle (2006), the critical education framework of service learning captures the contribution of both the collective and the individual to knowing where “mutual engagement involves not only your competences (as academics), but also the competence of others (in communities). The adaptation of exchange initiatives and programs could strengthen students’ identities, creativity, collaboration, team-building, project management and civic engagement beyond the university.

CONCLUSION:

The impact of service learning on students’ learning according to teachers’ point of view differs based upon module, level, and teacher’s knowledge. The research questions investigated in this study raise an important debate in higher education. The debate regarding which methods is more suitable for teaching English as a foreign language is endless. Both teachers and students need to understand that learning is not about the transformation of knowledge but rather the construction and the reconstruction of that knowledge.

Reconstruction is to understand what is done within the learning and teaching process and to implement what has been built into something real, practical, and concrete. Teachers must be both aware and flexible to the idea that what happens in the university does not stay in the university; it has to go far and beyond. As educators, our role is to construct a human brain so that once it steps out the learning context, it critically functions and innovates.

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Appendices

Teachers' Questionnaire

Dear teachers,

This questionnaire is an attempt to elicit your perceptions on the role of service learning in enhancing university-based engagement initiatives in EFL contexts. Thus, you are kindly requested to answer the following questions by selecting the answer that best reflects your opinion and making comments whenever necessary.

Thank you.

Section one: Background Information

1. Qualification

- a. Licence
- b. Master
- c. Magister
- d. Doctorate

2. Teaching Experience:.....

Section Two: In Classroom Experience

3. Which of the following teaching techniques do you usually use when you deliver your course?

- a. Lectures
- b. Pair/ Group-work learning strategies
- c. Presentations
- d. Pre-prepared classroom discussions
- e. Service learning and active learning
- f. Others:

4. What are the most frequent challenges do teachers confront in the EFL classroom?

- a. Difficulty of supervising a large group of students and providing them with the assistance they may need.
- b. Students' feelings: anxiety/nervous/ and confidence
- c. Lack of materials and facilities
- d. Students' attention and interest
- e. Others:.....

5. Have you noticed any difficulties that students encountered while studying English? Please mention some?

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Section Three: Service Learning

6. Are you familiar with the term service learning in the EFL classroom?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Maybe (undecided)

7. If yes, what service learning activities do you use in your teaching?

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8. As an EFL teacher, are you willing to implement service learning as a teaching technique?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Maybe (undecided)

9. Do you believe that your students are aware of what service learning is?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Maybe (undecided)

Please state why?

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10. Do you think that your University of affiliation is flexible enough to adopt this technique in the EFL department?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Maybe (undecided)

11. What extracurricular activities does your university organize to foster service learning?

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12. Do student engage in such opportunities outside the University?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Maybe (undecided)

If yes, please explain.

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13. Are your students actively engaged in these activities on Campus?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Maybe (undecided)

14. Do you believe that implementing service learning in the EFL classroom could improve students overall performance?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Maybe (undecided)

Please explain why?

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15. What are the most effective service learning activities a teacher can use in the EFL class?

- a. Public speaking events
- b. Debate competitions
- c. Creating department clubs
- d. Out of classroom workshops and training
- e. Online journals and magazine writing

16. Have you used any other service learning activity?

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17. Service learning appears to be relatively a new social and educational phenomenon. However, it still lacks a well-articulated framework. In your opinion, what is the best way to apply this theory in higher education?

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18. Which of the following skills is believed to be highly relevant to service learning?

- a. Academic achievements
- b. Motivation
- c. Critical thinking skills
- d. Problem solving in real life situation
- e. Sense of belonging to the community

- f. Civic engagement
- g. Interpersonal skills
- h. Others:.....

19. Would you recommend service learning to fellow teachers?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Maybe (undecided)

20. Does service learning bring positive impact to teaching English as a foreign language?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Maybe (undecided)

21. Would this positive impact reflect on both students and teachers?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Maybe (undecided)

22. Would your participation in this research persuade you to implement service learning in your teaching?

- a. Probably Yes
- b. Probably No
- c. Maybe (undecided)

23. Any comments

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