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# Creating a Volunteer ESL Program in Madrid: Action Research for Program Design and Service Learning

*by Anne McCabe, Therese Gleason, and Tom Hare*

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One of the challenges of accommodating North American students in study abroad programs is providing opportunities for volunteerism, a given in North American culture but not in Spain. Thus, Saint Louis University's Madrid campus began a program during the Fall semester 2001 in which fluent speakers of English volunteer to teach the English language to members of the Madrid community, who attend classes free of charge. We—Anne as faculty advisor, Therese as program coordinator, and Tom as the first volunteer teacher—had very little idea of how the program would unfold, since we did not know what kind of response it would initially receive, both from the community and from possible volunteers. This was the first time we offered a program like this, and we did not know of any other similar programs to turn to for suggestions.

From the outset, we decided to incorporate action research as an investigative means of moving toward our desired goal, finding the optimal approach to fit the needs of both the community and the volunteer teachers. Preliminary results from data analysis corroborate our efforts. After discussing our results, we suggest that programs such as this one can be of great benefit for volunteer teachers who would like to explore their development, in terms of understanding classroom contexts and the wider cultural context of their host country.

## **The Program**

The program got off the ground when the university placed ads in Madrid newspapers inviting community members to attend two initial informative sessions. During these sessions, the classes were described (i.e., immersion through a theme-based approach). The community members filled out questionnaires to determine their language levels and class groups. Approximately 100 people attended these sessions. At the same time, a call for volunteer teachers was sent around the campus, and 16 students responded.

Classes started at the beginning of October, 2001, and ran for eight weeks, meeting evenings, either twice a week for an hour, or once for an hour and a half. There were eight groups, with 12–15 students per group; student volunteers taught in pairs. Part of the initial rationale behind team-teaching was the concern that volunteer teachers might, at times, prioritize other activities in their lives, such as travel around Spain or studying for exams, and not be able to teach their class at a given time. It was believed that team teaching would ensure that at least one teacher would always be available to chart its evolution using action research.

Initial training was provided for volunteer teachers; this included instruction on planning a language lesson, ideas for themes, and classroom activities (e.g., role play and information gap). Instruction was also provided on teacher/personal development, through a strategy of "Cooperative Development" (Edge, 1992), which provided added incentive for team-teaching. That was how the program got started. Since it was important to ensure that the program would evolve in a way that best adapted itself to both the needs of the volunteer teachers and to those of the community, it was decided to follow its shaping through action research.

## **Action Research**

Action research allows for the investigation of "contextualized experienced," and of being sensitive to the ways in which those involved in the context view and construct their experiences (Richards & Edge, 1998). This understanding matches the desired goal of adapting the program to both the needs of the volunteer teachers and the needs of the community. The subsequent cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, with input from various participants involved in the experience, seemed an ideal way to work toward this goal. Thus, we used action research as a way to monitor the very organic process of the program's development and unfolding by collecting and analyzing data from several sources, as described in the next section. Some of our initial research questions guiding the process included the following:

1. What can the volunteer teachers learn about teaching English as a Second/Foreign language from teaching in the program?
2. What goals do community participants have in attending these classes, and do the outcomes approximate these goals?
3. How do expectations of the volunteer teachers and the program organizers play out throughout the program? In other words, how do the realities match or differ from their initial expectations?

## **Data Sources**

The data sources used during the Fall semester 2001 program included an initial treatise written by each of the volunteer teachers, the program coordinator, and the faculty advisor, covering goals, expectations, and concerns for the program. For example, the program coordinator wrote in her initial treatise that she hoped "to give the students a model by which to develop as teachers and to impart...practical skills so that they have some ideas about teaching." There was also a related desire to learn more about the training of novice teachers through a program such as this, as the faculty advisor wrote: "A wider-ranging goal is to gain knowledge about in-service training of teachers through a volunteer program-what are the benefits for the teachers themselves while the community is also benefiting?" At the end of the program, the initial treatises were returned to the participants, and they were asked to write about their experiences with a focus on comparing their initial goals and concerns with their experiences throughout the program. All of the program's participants were asked (but not required) to keep journals during the semester and to write in them regularly.

In December, the journals were collected; however, only five out of the 16 volunteer teachers handed them in. At this point, we handed back the participants' initial goal statements and asked

them to compare these initial goals with their experiences from the semester. Ten responses were collected from the volunteer teachers, and one each from the faculty advisor and the program coordinator.

Data collected from community participants included their initial questionnaires; in addition to questions to determine levels, we also asked them to write a paragraph (in either Spanish or English) that explained their reasons for wanting to learn English. Also, at the end of the program, questionnaires were distributed to community participants that asked them for their evaluation of the teaching and the materials, as well as what they felt they got out of the program, and what changes they would suggest.

## Data Analysis

### Goals and Expectations

The initial volunteer teachers' treatises included goals that fit into three main categories. These categories are described in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Volunteer Teacher Goals**

Teaching	Culture	Specific Personal
To plan, develop, and instruct effectively with a lesson plan	To help students understand my culture better	Have fun
Learn overall methods of instruction	Meet people of a different culture	Give back to community
Learn specific instructing techniques (games, activities)	Learn about Spanish culture	Learn about myself
Improve own communication skills (logical explanations)	Learn about life in Madrid	
Teaching a career choice?		
Discover which teaching style works best for me		
Gain experience in teaching		
Pass on interest in learning foreign language		

The greatest number of responses fell into the "teaching" category and ranged from specifics such as lesson planning to general terms of gaining experience in the classroom. For example, one volunteer teacher wrote, "I expect this program to be a great learning experience or at least an opportunity. When I do become a teacher, I do not want to be completely inexperienced and would like to have already thought through or at least discovered a few of my methods of teaching in an attempt to figure out which style works best for me." We also noticed a trend in the desire of the volunteer teachers to learn more about the culture of Spain and to teach their own culture. Finally, the volunteer teachers showed an interest in growing personally by participating with and enjoying interaction in the Madrid community.

For Anne (the faculty advisor) and Therese (the program coordinator), in addition to the goal of wanting the program to be successful in terms of being beneficial to both volunteer teachers and community members, they also felt a desire to provide opportunities for growth for the volunteers, especially in terms of their development as teachers. Related to this was a desire to learn more about in-service training of novice teachers.

The community participants' initial questionnaires show, above all, an interest in learning English in order to better job prospects, or in some cases, for exams. Followed by that is an interest in maintaining or renewing English language skills already acquired through schooling and abroad. There were also some responses from declared beginners that indicated a desire to learn English and American culture for their own sakes.

### Realities

Figures 2 and 3 show the relationship between the initial expectations of the volunteer teachers versus final realities for both the "Teaching" and "Culture," respectively. These figures sum up the responses from the volunteers.

**Figure 2: Volunteer Teaching Expectations Compared to Realities, Fall 2001**

Initial Goals for Teaching	Final Realities for Teaching
To plan, develop, and instruct effectively with a lesson plan	Teaching is more challenging than I had originally imagined
Learn overall methods of instruction	See now how comparatively different teaching styles can be
Learn specific instructing techniques (games, activities)	Gained patience

Improve own communication skills (logical explanations)	How to make students more comfortable
Teaching a career choice?	Reaffirmed that I want to teach
Discover which teaching style works best for me	Confidence in teaching
Gain experience in teaching	Gained significant experience in planning strategies and practical classroom experience
Pass on interest in learning foreign language	Learned how to explain concepts better and in more than one way

**Figure 3: Volunteer Culture Expectations Compared to Realities, Fall 2001**

<b>Initial Goals for Culture</b>	<b>Final Realities for Culture</b>
To help students understand my culture better	Came to understand Spanish culture better
Meet people of a different culture	Was able to interact with the people of the community in a way I would not have been able to before
Learn about Spanish culture	Met and now have a friendship with members of the Madrid community
Learn about life in Madrid	

What these figures do not show is the following surprising finding: rather than seeing it as a "learning about teaching" experience, as many participants initially wrote, the majority of the volunteer teachers saw it as a "learning about Spanish culture" experience. That is to say, while there were more diverse responses in the teaching category, the number of responses in the

culture category was far more numerous, especially those suggesting "I came to understand Spanish culture better." They also showed appreciation of contact with the Madrid community, which they found difficult to encounter outside the classroom. A comment from Margo's journal sums this up: "They're just like all the Spaniards you pass on the street everyday. I like learning about their everyday lives, opinions on stuff, etc. It's such a great window into the life of Madrid and its people."

In terms of teaching, for some, the experience in front of the classroom was more challenging than they had anticipated while others were reaffirmed in their career choice. Some volunteer teachers felt they grew in the methods they used to explain concepts and learned more about their personal teaching style. Interestingly, the volunteers who kept journals were those who were most interested in teaching. Their journals reflect this, with writings on collaborative teaching, theme choices, lesson planning, and giving explanations in the classroom.

This rather low focus on teaching clashed in many ways with Anne and Therese's desire to study teacher development. While, with very rare exceptions, the volunteers were always there to teach their classes, they were less likely to go to us in the ESL office for guidance in lesson planning or even for the training sessions. There was great enthusiasm for being in the classroom, but less for exploring issues related to teaching, except for those participants who plan to pursue a career in education. This may explain the low turnout in the number of participants who kept regular journals. Furthermore, while we thought "Cooperative Development" would prove to be helpful in team teaching, or helpful to those volunteers who might wish to explore teaching issues with either one of us, none of the volunteer teachers tried it out, except Tom (one of the volunteer teachers).

In Tom's case, analysis of his journal and his classroom narrative showed a heavy concern on his part with lesson planning. He wrote in his journal: "Overall, I would say I learned a lot more about education in the hour of this first class than in my education classes last spring. We were forced to adjust *everything* we hoped to do." When asked to write a classroom narrative, Tom wrote about his frustration at planning everything very carefully, and that the best lessons were "when the lesson plan remained in the closed binder and we talked."

Anne and Tom used Edge's (1992) "Cooperative Development" framework, with Tom as Speaker and Anne as Understander, reflecting back to Tom her understanding of his concerns, so that Tom could explore them through articulation. After this experience, Tom wrote that he discovered "more about my methods of planning and the development of this planning. I have developed away from the rigid lesson plan to the idea-centered class that moves on its own." Tom also reported that the Cooperative Development framework raised his awareness to his desire to find a median between the two.

Tom was exceptional in this sense; most of the volunteer teachers were content with the experiences they received in the classroom. However, while the volunteer teachers rarely, if ever, missed class, one frustration that was witnessed throughout the program, and which the volunteer teachers mentioned in their final write-ups and in the journals, was inconsistency of attendance on the part of the community participants. Some volunteer teachers suspected that the

community members did not take seriously learning opportunities that were offered to them for free.

Synthesizing the final comments of the community participants who completed the program, several themes emerged. Across the board, participants complimented and appreciated their teachers' efforts and enthusiasm, finding them approachable, friendly, and effective in the classroom. For example, one community participant wrote, "The teachers listen with attention and respect our opinions, and I just love this class, my teachers, and my classmates." Many others commented that they valued the focus on conversation and communication: many found opportunities to practice their listening and speaking and engage in authentic communication particularly useful and enjoyable, highlighting how much fun the classes were for them. Perhaps as a direct result, quite a few participants also mentioned the friendships they were able to form both with their teachers and fellow classmates, simply by having conversations about current and often "everyday" topics such as food, travel, and family, which for them was an unexpected and strongly positive outcome of taking the classes. As one participant expressed in her final evaluation: "It's being funny, and I'm discovering American way of life, humor, and culture."

Although the vast majority of the community participants enjoyed and valued the informal, conversational nature of the classes, there were a small number who mentioned that more formal grammar would be a useful addition to the class content. However, a large number of them emphasized more instrumental motivations for taking the classes as well as benefits reaped from them—most often in addition to or complimenting the more integrative advantages as opposed to competing with them. In fact, the general topic of jobs and job interviews was perhaps the most popular among the participants as a group, across all classes and levels.

Overall, the comments emphasized mostly integrative or emotional/social benefits from the classes, such as the pure fun and opportunities to form new friendships both with native English speakers as well as each other. At the same time, the benefits of practicing spoken English with native speakers for practical (i.e., to enhance employment options) reasons were also central. This was not surprising since many of the participants from the community had no other real opportunities to actually speak with and get to know native English speakers in their daily lives.

## **Reflection**

In the Spring 2002 semester, over 25 students volunteered to teach, and over 300 people from the community contacted us or came to the initial information sessions. This overwhelming response, due in great measure to word-of-mouth for both volunteer teachers and community members, speaks well for the success of the program in terms of perceived benefits to all participants.

At the same time, reflection on the data results provides directions for future planning of the program. One result is a need to understand more fully the reasons for the high drop-out rate of the community participants (which is again happening during the spring program) in order to continue to strive for the desired goal of fit with the community. Thus, it is important to reach out to those participants to ascertain their reasons for not continuing, and plan to send questionnaires by e-mail to all of the participants.



In terms of meeting the needs of the volunteer teachers, many seem content with the experience, especially with regards to contact with their host community and culture. From their final write-ups, it is clear that they also are content with just enough input from us to be able to go into the classroom with confidence; that is, they are content with the initial training sessions and our availability to them throughout the program for consultation.

For those who seek a more structured learning experience, the reciprocity between volunteers and the community places this project squarely in the camp of service learning, and we would like to pursue turning this into an accredited course, with more structured time for the volunteers to explore issues of teaching and enculturation. We suggest focus on language teaching methods and developmental procedures such as Cooperative Development and narrative analysis, including volunteer-designed classroom action research projects. For those volunteers interested in pursuing careers in teaching, it would allow exploration of classroom issues, such as attendance problems and "lesson planning versus spontaneity," an issue concerning Tom. For volunteer teachers who might wish to take a course in cultural diversity, it would allow for exploration of culture and processes of enculturation, in terms of their own in Spain and in terms of teachers as ambassadors of culture in the EFL classroom.

## Conclusions

Action research provided us with a method to observe this program and study how it unfolded and provided directions for decisions that affected the participants involved, especially the volunteers and the community participants. Furthermore, for the volunteer teachers themselves, action research included a cycle of reflection on outcomes (Wallace, 1991), a key step for successful service-learning experiences (Eyler, 2000). It also allowed for the combination of received and experiential knowledge (Wallace, 1991), which enhanced the learning experience for the volunteer teachers. Benefits reaped there will be passed on to the Madrid community, as improvement in teaching comes from opportunities for teachers to reflect on their own teaching (see Easen, 1985; Fullan, 1982; Belleli, 1993).

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