

UN QUEHACER CON IMPACTO SOCIAL



Re-imagining the Classroom through Social Justice Projects: Portraying Students' Attitudes

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Abstract

This paper analyses Costa Rican college EFL learners' attitudes and challenges when conducting social awareness projects as an initiative in an English course. The *Think, Share and Act* (TSA) project was initiated in January, 2009 with 57 students from different majors at Universidad Nacional-Heredia. The students worked for about three months in planning and conducting the project in different settings. Students are given the opportunity to learn about different global issues, reflect on and discuss them, share their knowledge and experiences related to these concerns and even come up with possible action plans for social problems. The research concludes that these projects heighten interest in researching social issues, enhance social and linguistic skills and improve problem solving and leadership skills which grow levels of motivation to carry out humanitarian projects.

Keywords: global education, social issues, EFL learners, attitudes

Resumen

Este ensayo analiza las actitudes y retos de los estudiantes universitarios en las clases de inglés donde se trabaja con proyectos de consciencia social como una nueva iniciativa en los cursos de inglés. El proyecto *Piensa, Comparta y Actué* inició en febrero del 2009 con 57 estudiantes de diferentes carreras en la Universidad Nacional-Heredia. Los estudiantes llevaron a cabo este proyecto por tres meses en diferentes lugares. Tuvieron la oportunidad de aprender de problemas globales, reflexionar y discutirlos, compartir su conocimiento y experiencias relacionadas con estos temas y también realizar un plan de acción social. La investigación concluye que estos proyectos incrementan el interés para investigar problemáticas sociales y mejoran las destrezas sociales, habilidades lingüísticas en inglés y las habilidades de resolución de problemas y liderazgo, los cuales fortalecen la motivación para realizar proyectos humanitarios.

Palabras clave: educación global, problemas sociales, aprendientes del inglés, actitudes

Introduction

In order to break the paradigm of just teaching for linguistic components in language teaching and learning, the researchers have incorporated the initiative of conducting social awareness projects as a tool for language learning in the diverse English as a Foreign Language programs at Universidad Nacional-Heredia (UNA), Costa Rica.

Worldwide, students usually come to the English class with certain expectations about how to learn the language in the classroom. Traditionally, programs have the main goal to develop the linguistic skills through thematic units. However, studies demonstrate that social justice has been introduced in the curriculum of many educational institutions or schools with the purpose of involving students in developing their social conscience to critically analyze their own conditions as well and act upon social injustice.

The aim of this article is to analyze college EFL learners' attitudes and challenges while conducting social justice projects. The research concluded that social justice projects heighten interest in researching social issues, enhance social and linguistic skills and improve problem solving and leadership skills which grow levels of motivation to learn the language. In this way, learners also grow sensitivity towards helping others and develop a desire to make the

world a better place in which to live. As stated by Freire (2009, p. 3) "To be human is to engage in relationships with others and with the world." Therefore, as concerned holistic educators, we should make our voices be heard to claim social justice for the values that conserve humanity. At the same time, students develop a positive attitude, an important predictor of success in acquiring a second language, while conducting this kind of projects.

Attitudes in second language learning

Attitude has become an essential component in second language pedagogy. In fact, students who consider the learning of English as a positive and rewarding experience are less likely to suffer from foreign language anxiety. By contrast, they usually have higher levels of motivation, willingness to participate, and a very acceptable language performance. Students' attitude towards the foreign language is usually influenced by several factors, such as exemplified teacher-student relationships, a positive classroom atmosphere and the use of innovative tools and authentic teaching materials and activities. These constructive attitudes influence students' behavior, mood and consequently learning. As a result, teachers should always provide the appropriate classroom setting to let students excel in the accomplishment of their goals.

Likewise, students with positive attitudes develop leadership experience that allows them to self-select for participation. They need to be given different opportunities where they feel involved and motivated to take action in order to become proactive and responsible citizens of the country. Likewise, they can develop team-building skills, problem solving, goal setting, self-awareness and time management, by engaging in the challenge to come up with a project of interest in which they feel free to communicate their own proposals and outcomes in the target language.

By incorporating collaborative work in the English classroom, students can have an active role in the implementation of project work, which can both boost their confidence and also learn collaborative skills. Short-term or long-term projects can make students personally involved in the language learning process and increase motivation (Lee, 2002). Students are more likely to participate and focus on communication that reflects learning about content areas of interest and the outcomes of their work.

Teaching social justice issues

Students' opportunities in education do not just serve the purpose of teaching and learning about a subject matter, but also giving them the chance to understand how injustice can occur. No matter the subject matter taught, educators working for social justice have a mission, which is to reeducate students to open their minds and hearts and take action on social justice concerns.

Teachers around the globe have been engaged in this mission for decades. As stated by Russo (2004, p. 1), teachers can become “change agents through the content or topics they address as well as through particular pedagogical practices that tend to undermine patterns of oppression.” In this concern, Freire (2009, p. 4) also states that “throughout history men have attempted to overcome the factors which make them accommodate or adjust, in a struggle —constantly threatened by oppression— to attain their full humanity.” This is precisely the intention of having social justice issues in the classroom, with the purpose of becoming more sensitive towards the needs of others and finding alternatives to fight injustice and give voice to students' ideas.

An example of this pursuit is *Project NIA*, the *Chicago Freedom School* and *Teachers for Social Justice*, which have partnered along with other volunteers to develop a curriculum guide in order to contribute to the ongoing efforts by young people and teachers by analyzing the root causes of youth violence and creating local solutions (<http://www.teachersfor-justice.org/>). As many other documented initiatives, professors make a difference by raising concerns about the contents of the subjects taught and by challenging students to become social advocates. Nieto (2000), for example, suggests that teacher education programs need to promote diversity and “make social justice ubiquitous in teacher education, and encourage teaching as a life-long journey of transformation” (p. 180). Novak (2000) states that social justice involves “inspiring, working with, and organizing others to accomplish together a work of justice...that primarily involves the good of others.”

As a result, those teachers who follow critical pedagogy (proposed by Paulo Freire), which deals with questions of social justice and social

change through education, have “a certain love not only of others but also of the very process implied in teaching” (Freire, 2005, p. 3). Teaching becomes a challenge, one that is both daunting and transformative.

According to Akbari (2008), ELT has not been completely responsible to the demands made by critical pedagogy. So he exhorts language teachers to play a more active social role by including themes from the wider society in their classes and students' daily lives to enable them to think about their situation and explore possibilities for change. Similarly, Pulvernes et al (2002) point out that two decades ago there was a growing awareness of global context and the global implications of local actions. They cite the *Special Interest Group (SIG)* “whose aims are to stimulate awareness and understanding of Global Issues and to encourage the development of global education within language teaching to equip students with the knowledge, skills and values which can help them confront both local and global problems...” (p. 72). Also, Ross claims that as teacher educators, we are committed “to *transform* our teacher candidates into social activists and change agents in their classrooms. Social justice and equity are mandated dispositions that all teachers should acquire before they reach licensure.”

Teaching for change: Professors' initiatives

Great changes in education come about when educators are willing to take a stand and make a difference. Professionals in education have been characterized by the spirit of giving and struggling in the system. Freire (2005, p. 5) points out,

We must dare to speak of love without the fear of being called ridiculous, mawkish, or unscientific, if not antiscientific. We do all of these things with feeling, with emotion, with wishes, with fear, with doubts, with passion, and also with critical reasoning.

Education is a field of constant change and improvement. Those who teach feel the need to take risks and illuminate their profession with commitment, action and encouraging outcomes. Teachers who become involved in the decision-making and change process feel empowered to become the forces of organizational development and management for a better education (Oliphant in Crookes, 2003). Those educators are the ones who do

not complain about overtime work or sacrifices in their careers; they are instead the inspiration of learners since they are always willing to commit and back up the students in their pursuits for learning and broadening their horizons holistically.

We, educators, have our mission and devotion to inspire learners to not only to accomplish academic success but also to become advocates of humanitarian issues. As stated by Freire (2005, p. 7) “The problems of teaching imply educating and, furthermore, educating involves a passion to know that should engage us in a loving research for knowledge that is—to say the least—not an easy task.” Becoming an advocate to make a change and a difference implies dedication, discipline and enthusiasm to find out the best ways to lead students through the process of understanding, analyzing and creating their own manifestations of solidarity and response to the needs of others. As a result, teachers should “become critical, daring, and creative” (Freire 2005, p. 15).

Those who teach could really find their vocation in life, but they cannot call themselves educators if they have not accomplished their mission in life, which is not just to teach a subject but to reeducate themselves. According to Freire (2005, p. 32), “Teachers first learn how to teach, but they learn how to teach as they teach something that is relearned as it is being taught.”

The TSA project initiative

Because teaching social justice is something new in our English department, the researchers implemented an initiative for doing so, and that’s how the TSA (“Think, Share, Act: Teachers and Students Awakening”) project was born in January, 2009. As its words imply, students are given the opportunity to learn about different global issues, reflect on them, share their knowledge and experiences related to these concerns and even come up with possible action plans for social problems. Besides carrying out social projects, students also participate in co-curricular activities in the form of gatherings to awaken the social advocates in them. In addition, other language learning experiences offer students the possibility to improve their English skills as well as to continue their journey towards discovering their inner social selves.

Social justice projects

By working in groups, learners are first asked to select a global concern of their interest, before sharing, discussing and reflecting on them. Once they have chosen the issue they want to work on, students need to do research about it by accessing a great variety of materials in sources such as the Internet, books, magazines, newspapers, videos, interviews, surveys and the like. As they find information on the concern, they need to write and hand in reports in class related to what they are planning to do in their projects.

The third step is to actually carry out the project, for which they need to have an action plan with the name of the project, a logo and a slogan. In addition, students should document their participation with pictures, videos clips, interviews, notes, surveys and others while doing all the activities. With all this material, they create a 10 minute documentary, in English and using programs such as Windows Movie Maker, in which they talk about their experiences, challenges and insights while working on their projects.

The social projects students have carried out have been conducted in schools, nursing homes, communities, child-care centers, families, orphanages and others. To illustrate, a group of students planned a variety of entertaining activities to teach English vocabulary at an orphanage to brighten up the children's lives with company, learning and happiness. Other groups decided to teach human and children's rights at a kindergarten, make a paper recycling campaign at the university and ask for donations in order to improve a school's infrastructure, among others.

By giving learners the opportunity to work on a social project, they develop leadership and collaboration skills. Moreover, they have to deal with conflict resolution and maintain good interpersonal skills. The impact of social justice projects goes beyond learning and improving English, it makes students self-reflect about their lives and about the world and the people in it. They experience a lot of sensitivity by appreciating life, their families and the opportunities given to them as well as recognizing other people's needs. At the same time, students show a big commitment towards their projects by doing fundraising, asking for donations and being social advocates.

Language learning experiences

Besides the social awareness projects carried out during the semester in groups, students are given other significant language learning experiences, such as the creation of personal blogs. In them, learners write about their experiences with their projects and about class activities including a movie or documentary, an article, a song, a video or a group discussion. Creating blogs requires plenty of time from students, but they really enjoy it since it is a different way to put their knowledge into practice, both in terms of language and technological skills. Having a personal space in the Internet and personalizing it with pictures, videos, comments, reflections and others is a great opportunity for learners to show their creativity and abilities. Recording themselves for language improvement and handing in written papers about their projects and class activities are also required from students.

In order to raise social awareness and the need to practice English outside of class, the TSA project organizes “Awakening Gatherings”, where students share what they are doing in their social projects, motivate others to become social advocates and learn from personal and group social initiatives around the world. These educational and enriching meetings give learners the possibility to use the language, in an informal way, with their own classmates, other students and even professors from the university.

Last week of the semester, a closing ceremony is held with the purpose of presenting all the student-documentaries. Not only are the students participating in the TSA project present, but also other students from the university, faculty and even the university authorities, who are all invited to such important event. In addition, in order to recognize the students’ effort and commitment throughout the semester, they are given certificates of participation with fifty hours of community work. During this activity, learners celebrate their accomplishments with joy and pride of what they were able to accomplish.

Students’ attitudes towards the TSA project

After a semester of working hard on social projects, attending awakening gatherings, learning from several global issues and participating in language learning experiences, students show a positive attitude towards what

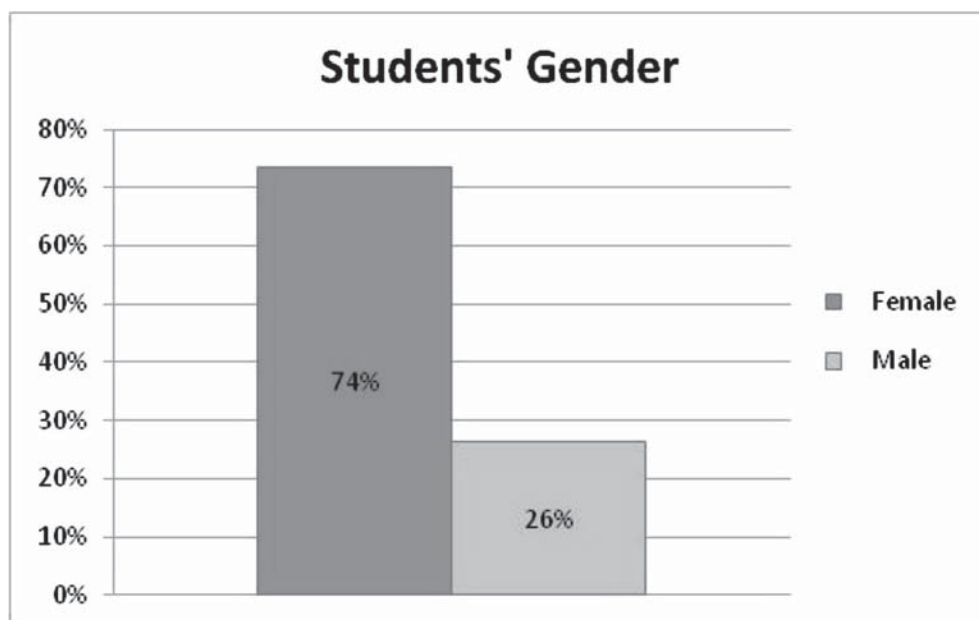
is gained by being part of the TSA project. The following are some of the benefits learners get:

- Get to know themselves better
- Grow as individuals and students
- Feel proud of themselves
- Realize their inner interests
- Become aware of different social conditions
- Give back to society by doing something useful
- Face challenges and overcome them
- Have a feeling of belonging to the university

The study

The TSA project was initiated with 57 students from different majors at Universidad Nacional, 42 were female and 15 male, as we can appreciate in the following graph:

Graph 1: Students' Distribution per Gender

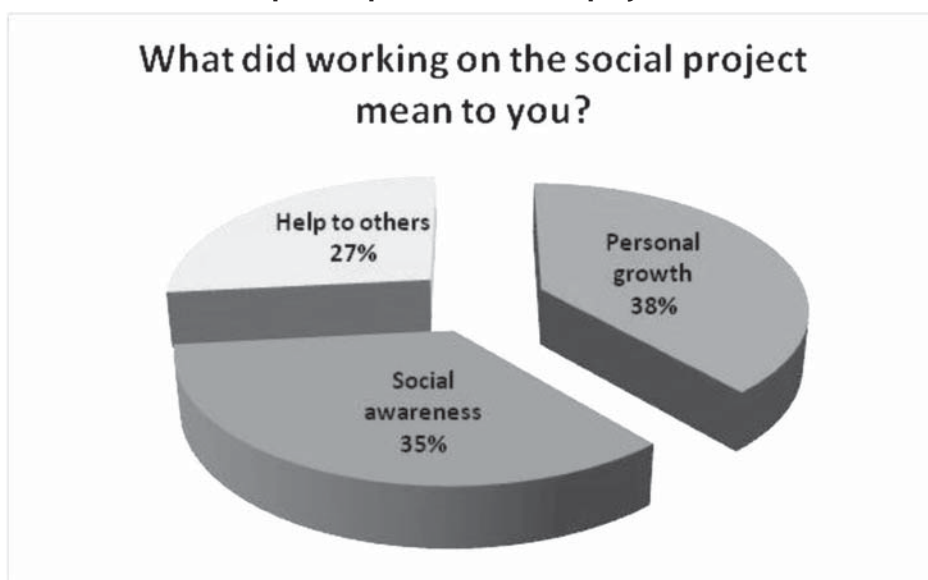


Source: The authors.

There were three groups of students, one from the English Teaching program in Elementary School, another one from the English program and the last one from the Integrated English for other Majors program. Since they were the first students participating in the TSA project, a survey and constant observations were conducted in order to know their opinion and attitudes.

Regarding how meaningful students considered their experience in their social projects, they answered three important aspects: personal growth (38 %), social awareness (35 %) and help to others (27 %).

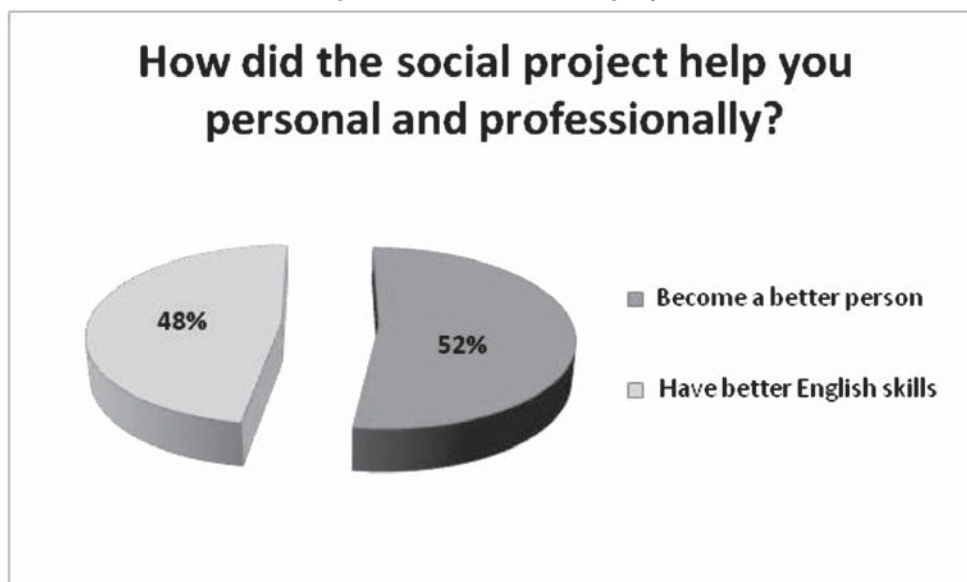
Graph 2: Importance of social project



Source: The authors.

When asked about the personal and professional benefits learners got by working on their social projects, they referred to becoming a better person (52%) and having better English skills (48%).

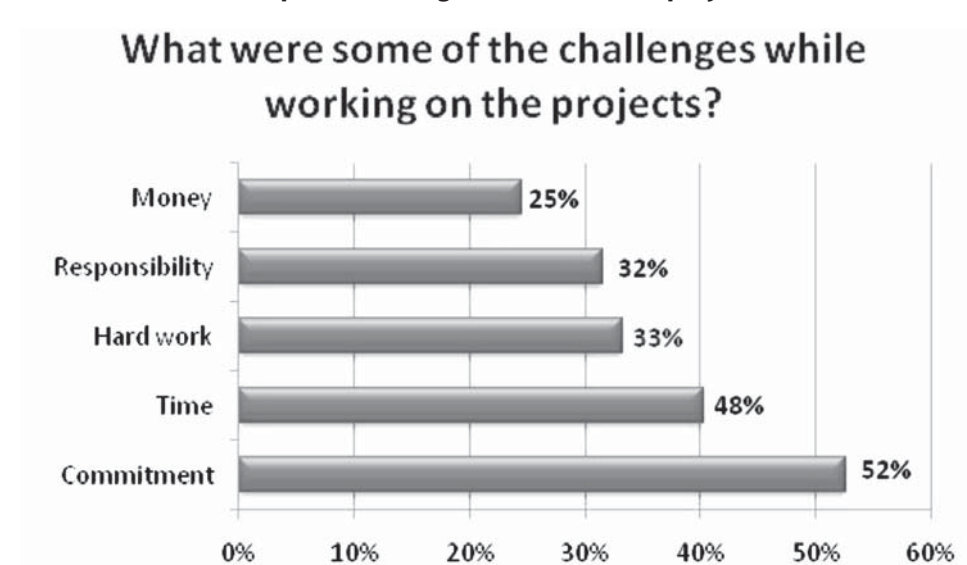
Graph 3: Benefits of social project



Source: The authors.

In terms of the challenges students faced while working on their social projects, they indicated commitment (52 %), time (48 %), hard work (33 %), responsibility (32 %) and money (25 %).

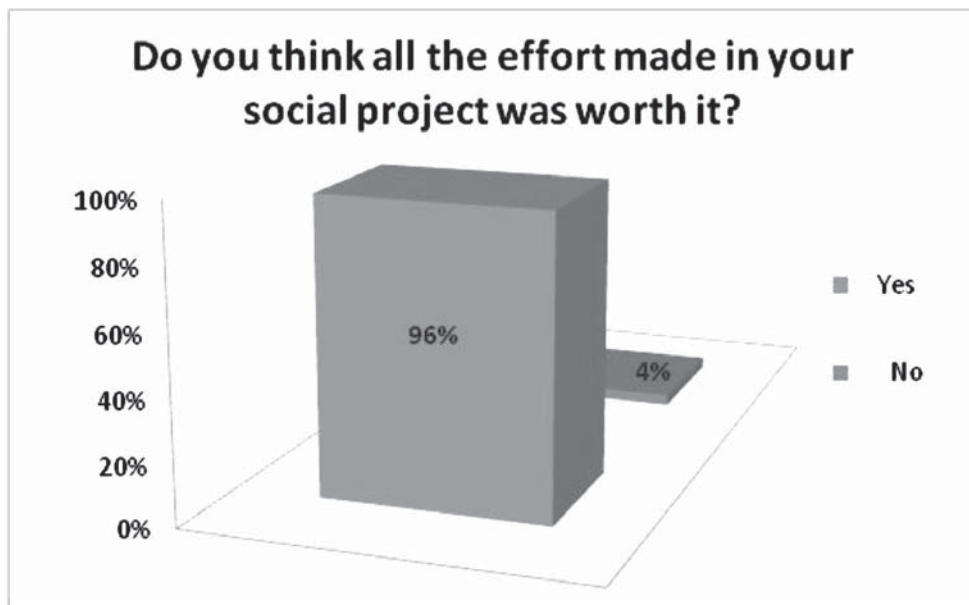
Graph 4: Challenges faced on social project



Source: The authors.

Finally, it was important to know if all the effort made in their social projects was worth it or not, to which 96 % of the students admitted its worth.

Graph 5: Importance of the Social Project for the Students



Source: The authors.

Students' insights

Some of the students' comments towards the experience of working in their social projects are the following:

We are doing this project in Casa Main that is a house for girls who have suffered from several problems. This life changing project means a lot because we are sharing with kids, and sometimes we get really involved with this kind of projects because we are treating really nice girls that suffered a lot from abuse or neglect from their parents. To help them we are searching for sponsors for this house, we are going to make raffles, look for donations. This project really touches our hearts. In my opinion, all the students should get involved in this kind of projects because students can make the difference, and there are many ways to help, some of them include cleaning rivers, recycling, recollecting garbage in different communities, doing community work. Besides, depending in the major that they are, they can teach people that do not have the opportunity to study. This has been an

excellent project in which I have learned and enjoyed a lot. Kenneth Salazar Chaverri (student)

The most wonderful and meaningful experience I have never had when doing a course's project. At the beginning of the course, I did not know that this experience was going to teach and help me to become a better person, the one who cares more about people issues and social problems. In our case, Francisco, Kenneth and I, decided to help nine beautiful little girls who live in an orphanage which is located in San Lorenzo de Flores – Heredia. Sharing with them has been wonderful I could learn from their innocence, enthusiasm and way of seeing life in spite of the fact that they have suffered a lot. We shared with them beautiful moments like teaching them a recycling class, providing them didactic materials, and the most special for me was making them a party. The party's experience was great. I will never forget it because it was amazing to see the girls' happiness. Lilliam Sánchez Alfaro (student)

Students as well develop skills in writing with their inspiration in the project. One example of this is a poem written by Francisco Chavarría Oviedo, a B. A. student of Teaching English in I and II Cycle.

Mom

Mom, it's really hard to go to bed,
My stomach is growling, there is no food in there,
No food or drinks have I had in days.
Mom, I hope tomorrow will not be the same,
That we will eat something I still have faith
I'm tired of lying about what I ate.
Mom, I cannot sleep as I think of the truth
That others are wasting plenty of food,
While we can only imagine our stomachs full
Mom, I know it hurts you a lot,
Not only the hunger, but watching me suffer,
All of this pain I have to endure.
Mom, I know there is no food today,
I know we will not eat tomorrow as well,
But your love gives me the strength I need to hang in there.

Conclusion

Besides raising social awareness in students through class activities, the “Think, Share, Act” project offers co-curricular activities, on-going fieldwork in the students’ chosen social justice projects and the use of technology to create blogs and the documentaries. All these learning experiences appeal to the students and provide them with tools that empower them to, as the project’s name points out, not only think or share but most importantly act.

By carrying out different social projects, language learners go beyond the traditional expectation of using the English skills to just communicate. Instead, students turn into more sensitive human beings who commit to make the world a better place to live by helping others and taking action in certain social concerns. This is essential if we think about the mission we, EFL/ESL professors have, which is to help students communicate a message of justice and hope by becoming social advocates that use the language for better purposes than just to fulfill individual needs.

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