In a number of ways, community service learning (CSL) serves as a bridge connecting sometimes divergent aspects of higher education, e.g., campus and community, theory and practice, academic and civic learning, and students “doing well” and “doing good.” Despite this, it cannot address all the tensions accompanying these dichotomies. For example, while CSL spurs campus-community partnerships, it cannot resolve longstanding town-gown tensions that often exist in communities with institutions of higher education (Etienne, 2012). While CSL as an innovative pedagogy may bridge theory and practice in the classroom, it cannot resolve the tension around whether or not research and publications related to CSL qualify as scholarship deserving of tenure. And while it cannot resolve what universities understand as their raison d’etre—to prepare students for a broad liberal arts education or for a career—CSL aspires to prepare students both intellectually and practically for their futures beyond college.

There is a problem in many U.S. university foreign language departments for which CSL also may serve as a bridge—the way these departments have taught in the past and the way these departments might teach in the future. This arises because of the disconnect between the kinds of courses offered by foreign language departments and students’ rationale for electing to major, minor, or enroll in foreign language courses. As any online course catalogue will bear out, most university foreign language programs offer a wide variety of courses in literary studies and linguistics that prepare students for scholarly careers (Modern Language Association Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007); they do so by offering courses related to the literature of specific countries, regions, or time periods in which students analyze what they read through different critical lenses, or courses where student learn the basics of syntax, phonetics, semantics, or sociolinguistics. In contrast, undergraduates pursuing majors and minors in foreign languages increasingly do so to complement their professional studies—in fields such as business, education, medical professions, social services, law and law enforcement (Grosse & Voght, 2012; Long & Uscinski, 2012; Modern Language Association Working Group in English and Modern Foreign Languages, 2007). Aware of this disconnect, it is not uncommon to see such departments undertake perfunctory efforts such as posting on their Web page a list of professions in which a degree in language and cultures studies is useful as well as links to job boards and other career resources.

Can CSL serve as a bridge for this disconnect? In university language departments on campuses across the U.S., the work of providing actual professional experiences in real-world contexts that reconciles students’ rationale for taking foreign language courses with departmental course offerings rests with the faculty who embrace the pedagogy of CSL. Given that 75% of all higher education instruction falls to contingent faculty members (instructors who are not tenure-track, including full-time, part-time, and adjunct) (Bradbury, 2013; Grossman, 2013), it is not surprising that the teaching of CSL courses in foreign language departments falls to them (Lear, 2012).

While higher education institutions in general have not been able to adapt nimbly to the economic realities their undergraduate constituents face, CSL, across disciplines, with its commitment to the education of the whole person, does just that. In the field of foreign and second language education, the published literature on CSL is replete with anecdotal
accounts of success. It is clear that CSL is a force for good—making the world a better place one course project and one university-community partnership at a time while also advancing students’ academic knowledge and skills. Yet, the failure for higher education foreign language departments to elevate CSL to a substantive place in the curriculum persists.

Thompson’s 2012 volume about CSL in second language programs—Intersection of Service and Learning: Research and Practice in the Second Language Classroom—captures the tension thusly: departments of literature, language, and linguistics prepare students for a scholar’s life in the same way they always have (a bachelor’s degree as a mini-PhD program), while at the same time recruiting students to their programs with a promise that a language degree is excellent preparation for a professional career. He then makes an excellent case for CSL bridging that tension by providing real-world, practical, professional experiences to students studying in traditional literature and linguistics programs. At the same time, the book also makes it clear that CSL, like career preparation and other acknowledgements of the realities students face after graduation, is not gaining traction within these departments.

If the question is, “what is the place of CSL in university language programs?” then the answer must be similar to the place of conversation and composition courses, study abroad programs, and published anecdotal accounts of success—all parts of academic departments, but not central to their core mission, which remains preparation for a life of the mind in its traditionally-valued areas of literature and linguistics.

Yet there is hope that the field of CSL could be folded into the core mission of departments, and Thompson’s book is a step in the right direction, especially if this is his “tenure book” (which I hope it is). This volume, a much-needed single-authored monograph on the topic of CSL in language education, has an intended audience of two groups: practitioners using or who want to use CSL and researchers interested in the convergence of second language acquisition (SLA) and CSL. For the latter group, the news remains the same after the publication of this book: calling all researchers, we need research in the field!

This volume is the first comprehensive work of foreign and second language education as seen through the lens of CSL. It explores the how and why of CSL as a means to advance the fundamentals of language education, including structured, meaningful, authentic input; comprehensible output; the four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) + culture; and “the 5C’s” (communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities). Because the book is specific to language learning, it drills deep on specifics of meaningful learning, engagement, reciprocity, relationships, community service as it relates to academic content, and structured reflection. It does this while bridging all those elements to theories of SLA and foreign language pedagogy.

The first two chapters thoroughly describe what constitutes CSL and how that converges with established theories of SLA. Indeed, CSL provides students opportunities lacking in the language classroom: real-world, authentic communicative experiences with the target language, “to think and problem solve and a wide-range of activities to prepare them for the many different situations they will encounter” (p. 28). The practical content of the opening chapters has a strong emphasis on students, their language acquisition, and the role CSL can play in that. There were only a few places where I wanted more of the same. For example, Thompson seems to assume mandatory CSL components in the foreign language courses under consideration. An exploration of ways to make CSL optional (or at least ways for students to self-select into courses in which CSL is a mandatory component) might have been considered.

In the concluding pages of the first chapter, two very important points are underdeveloped. First, Thompson asserts that “many professors of upper division courses presuppose that students are prepared to function appropriately when, in fact, this might be an unrealistic assumption. Little articulation between levels results and the students have a great deal of difficulties as they move between levels” (p. 14), which leads to low enrollment in language courses beyond the first and second year of language study. This is an issue that almost universally plagues university language departments. To survive, language departments need students in their major programs. The faculty in those programs consistently encounter students who they find underprepared for that course of study (i.e., students who are not fluent speakers and writers of the language) (Modern Language Association Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007). The Modern Language Association, of which nearly all foreign language faculty are members, has issued clear statements to the effect that native-like fluency on the part of undergraduate students is simply not possible in the context of university language departments. Alas, these programs cannot quickly or easily adapt to these realities. However, what Thompson implies but does not explicitly say is that CSL could move departments in the right direction by attracting students to the major programs with the appeal of real-world, professional training, helping them develop stronger language skills, and providing upper division faculty with more and more advanced students.

The second related issue receiving scant attention in the opening chapter is the place of CSL work in
tenure and promotion decisions. It is briefly alluded to, and Thompson claims that “there has been a significant increase in the number of studies that evaluate its applicability, effects, and impact on administrative decisions such as tenure and promotion” (p. 14). If that is true, why is empirical research lacking? Why do we not see a body of work in the field of CSL that would be illustrative of its inclusion in tenure and promotion packages?

Finally, while other chapters go out of the way to avoid this pitfall, the opening chapter inadvertently privileges the university over the community, as reflected in this statement: “the service needs to be beneficial to the community so the instructor or students needs to determine what would be beneficial to a particular community” (p. 4). Neither the instructor nor the students are qualified to determine the needs of a community. The community partner alone knows what would be beneficial to its organization; once that is determined, the instructor and students can and should engage in negotiation, helping to align expectations, design project details, and set realistic parameters of a project’s scope and scale.

Thompson carefully articulates the importance of avoiding the charity model that perpetuates hegemonic models of ‘us and them’ and ‘the powerful and the powerless’ in chapter 5, where the topic is culture. He cautions against falling into CSL relationships characterized by oppressors who “do not always consciously oppress, but they are also not sympathetic to the situation of the oppressed and consequently do not help. Thus in society, university students may be considered the oppressors and the minority population they are serving the oppressed” (p. 73). This chapter presents fascinating theories of the stages of intercultural sensitivity that surprisingly align well with the stages of grief, as if mourning the loss of our own unexamined biases is part of developing intercultural competence: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. The development of intercultural competence is linked to learner autonomy in four stages that move from simple awareness of one’s own culture and its limits all the way to integrating foreign cultures.

Chapters 3 and 4 delve into specific skills targeted in foreign language classrooms. In chapter 3, “The Acquisition of Speaking and Listening through Service-Learning,” Thompson again positions students in authentic contexts: writing to solve real-world problems instead of the “pretend problems” typical of second language writing assignments. He wisely points out that the instructor must take an active role in proofing and editing any documents prepared by students for the community partner organizations while at the same time negotiating with community partners the limits of students’ abilities (even going so far as to withhold written products prepared by students that do not meet minimal professional standards).

Something not explicitly mentioned but implied in chapter 3 is the exposure to and practice with professional writing that students can acquire during a CSL experience. This is an important skill that typical university courses do not cover despite the fact that most language departments promote the applicability of language studies to professions outside academia. These writing projects can bridge that gap between traditional higher education and real-world, practical career preparation.

The chapter fails to address some important pitfalls related to student projects that are recommended here: translation and researched biographies. Translations are doubly problematic. First, because translation is a highly specialized field that requires extensive training (most university language instructors are not qualified translators), it is probably not an appropriate activity for language students. Second, if students provide community partner organizations with documents in Spanish (or another foreign language), but nobody at the agency speaks Spanish, the usefulness of the documents is limited to purely informational content that does not require any follow-up. Any documents that are about services provided by the organization are of limited use if those services are not available in Spanish.

Researchers biographies of community partners—another student project recommended here—is an excellent idea to advance student learning and help students to contextualize the work that they do for the community partner, but the biographies in and of themselves do not serve the community. In fact, providing researched biographies as the students’ service for the community partner organization may even exacerbate town-gown tensions by becoming yet another report generated by university researchers for university purposes. A researched biography qualifies as a service for the community partner if and only if the community partner specifically requests it.

Chapter 4, “The Acquisition of Speaking and Listening through Service-Learning,” is clearly the area in which Thompson has done research. He situates his work within the unresolved conflicts of the field: upper division courses that force students into the passive role of reader, writer, and listener without developing their active verbal communication skills. He points out that this model contradicts the 2007 MLA report (Modern Language Association Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007) that explicitly calls for development of students’ translusilng (the ability to negotiate meaning across language barriers without necessarily achieving native-like fluency in target languages) and transcultural (the ability
to not only understand and embrace other cultural practices, but to see one’s own cultural practices as an outsider might) abilities as well as acceptance of the fact that the goal should be successful communication with educated native speakers of foreign languages. Thompson argues that classroom learning limits the achievable level of language proficiency for most students and concludes that “it may be that more in-depth and real-life communicative settings are needed to break through the threshold/ceiling that some advanced learners seem to reach” (p. 68). Not surprisingly, he concludes the chapter by pointing out a general lack of research in the area and issuing a call for more empirical studies.

The progression from a general discussion of the convergence of CSL and SLA toward highly-specific aspects of language pedagogy continues as the later chapters probe the applicability of CSL to Heritage language programs and study abroad contexts. Chapter 6 presents another study conducted by the author—this time using participants who grew up speaking and hearing Spanish in the English-dominant context of the United States (i.e., Heritage speakers). There is a large body of research on Heritage language learners (American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, 2000; Potowski, 2004; Potowski, 2010; Valdés, 2002) that is not brought to bear in this chapter.

For example, scholars of Heritage languages struggle to defend language maintenance situated as it is in the context of the assimilation-minded “English-only” educational system in the U.S. Even where resources are brought to bear and more open-mindedness enters into the pedagogical dialogue, the deficit model still dominates the educational landscape when it comes to students who speak languages other than English at home (“What’s wrong with their Spanish, and how can we fix it?”). Heritage language scholars and practitioners build population-sensitive Heritage language programs that value the linguistic strengths of students while also meeting their language-learning needs. From the body of research on Heritage speakers, Thompson could have extrapolated the usefulness of CSL to Heritage language learning—a strategy he successfully deploys in the chapter on study abroad, where he presents an extensive array of research.

None of the research presented in the chapter on study abroad includes CSL, which reflects the weak position of CSL in the literature on SLA. Of course, Thompson suggests at every turn that CSL could improve study abroad outcomes represented in the existing research. The one practical example provided in this chapter is not about language learning, but about language teaching as it relates to the development of a study abroad CSL program.

In the final chapter, Thompson comes to the same conclusion as almost every article written on CSL in foreign and second language contexts: we need more empirical studies, we have many unanswered questions, and the field would greatly benefit from a better understanding of the benefits to both students (as measured by acquisition of language, among other things) and community partners.

Throughout the volume, Thompson seems to argue that CSL can serve as a bridge from the past to the future for university foreign language programs. The status quo is not entirely sustainable due to economic and personnel realities—universities depend more and more on income-generation and private support while the majority of teaching is done by contingent faculty. CSL does offer a lot of what students, parents, and administrators are looking for: students increasingly study languages to complement their professional career focus, parents want to see tuition money result in secure employment for their college graduates, and upper administration feels pressure to accommodate those demands—and to provide demonstrable evidence of having done so.

There is a case to be made for CSL as a gentle bridge from the past to the future—a way to allow the traditional humanities curricula to survive while also meeting the student and parent demands placed on institutions of higher education in the 21st century. Empirical data, as Thompson aptly concludes, would provide a lot of support for this. And faculty trained in integrating CSL into their long-standing curricula will fortify departments such that they can make forward progress toward genuinely preparing students for the challenging futures they face after graduation.

References


**Author**

DARCY LEAR (darcylear@gmail.com) is a career coach specialized in training language students through the transition from college to career. She has taught Spanish language and Spanish for the Professions at the university level for more than twenty years—currently as a lecturer at the University of Chicago. She is co-author of a forthcoming McGraw-Hill introductory Spanish language textbook.