Exploring Service Learning as a Tool to Improve English Speaking: A Study on Chinese International Students in Canada

Lu Wang and Manu Sharma

With the growing number of Chinese international students (CISs) in Canada, many achieve academic success but struggle with oral English communication and social integration. Grounded in critical pedagogy, this qualitative study explores how service learning facilitates CISs' oral English development and learner empowerment. Drawing on semi-structured Zoom interviews with nine participants, the study employs thematic analysis to examine how different types of service-learning roles—task-based, activity-based, and interaction-based—shape students' language use and confidence. Findings reveal that while service learning offers authentic opportunities for language practice, its impact is constrained in non-structured contexts due to limited institutional and emotional support. Participants in interactive roles demonstrated greater fluency and self-efficacy, and some began to challenge native-speakerism by redefining what it means to be a competent English speaker. The study concludes with a practical three-stage model—Plan and Prepare, Action, and Reflection and Feedback—to foster more inclusive, empowering, and community-oriented language-learning experiences for international students.

Avec l'augmentation du nombre d'étudiants internationaux chinois au Canada, nombre d'entre eux réussissent sur le plan scolaire, mais rencontrent des difficultés en matière de communication orale en anglais et d'intégration sociale. Ancrée dans la pédagogie critique, cette étude qualitative examine la manière dont l'apprentissage par le service facilite le développement de l'anglais oral chez les étudiants internationaux chinois et favorise leur autonomisation. S'appuyant sur des entretiens semi-structurés menés via Zoom auprès de neuf participants, l'étude utilise l'analyse thématique pour examiner comment différents types de rôles dans le cadre de l'apprentissage par le service — basés sur des tâches, des activités et des interactions — façonnent l'utilisation de la langue et la confiance des étudiants. Les résultats révèlent que, bien que l'apprentissage par le service offre des occasions authentiques de pratiquer la langue, son impact est restreint dans des contextes non structurés en raison d'un soutien institutionnel et émotionnel limité. Les participants occupant des rôles interactifs ont fait preuve d'une plus grande aisance et d'une plus grande auto-efficacité, et certains ont commencé à remettre en question la norme idéale du locuteur natif (native-speakerism) en redéfinissant ce que signifie être un locuteur compétent de l'anglais. L'étude se conclut par un modèle pratique en trois étapes — Planification et préparation, Action, et Réflexion et rétroaction — visant à favoriser des expériences d'apprentissage linguistique plus inclusives, valorisantes et axées sur la communauté pour les étudiants internationaux.

Keywords: Chinese international students, critical pedagogy, service learning, speaking skills; volunteer experience

From 2019 to 2023, Chinese international students (CISs) remained the second-largest group of study permit holders in Canada, with 102,148 holders in 2023 (IRCC, 2024) According to Global Affairs Canada (2022), CISs contribute significantly to academic institutions, the economy, and cultural diversity. Their unique racial, cultural, and global perspectives contribute to the institutions and are critical for other students in the classroom and learning surroundings (Zhai & Abu, 2020). For instance, they integrate Chinese philosophical perspectives with Western analytical approaches and bring intercultural insights into academic discussions (Xu, 2022). Meanwhile, CISs benefit from studying abroad as it provides a valuable opportunity to integrate with students and faculty from other countries, thereby enhancing their confidence (Zhai & Abu, 2020).

In this regard, it is crucial for CISs to develop communicative competency in the English language. Empirical studies underscore that English language proficiency is a critical determinant of academic success in English-medium institutions, particularly for students whose first language is not English (J. Li et al., 2016). Typically, CISs must complete standardized English proficiency assessments, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), prior to studying abroad to demonstrate their ability to meet the language demands of academic coursework, and some Canadian universities offer pre-university English language improvement programs such as English as a Second Language (ESL) classes to help non-native speakers enhance their academic English skills and prepare for future university studies (Wang & Zhou, 2022). However, despite their achievement in the examinations or language programs, with the different language systems and cultural differences CISs face significant obstacles in English academic communication (Abu Bakar et al., 2019). Consequently, CISs are frequently observed staying within their own social circles, leaving immediately after class, and showing limited willingness to engage with students from other cultural backgrounds (Xiao, 2021).

Although some institutions offer oral communication support, these resources are often underutilized due to a lack of awareness or misalignment with students' actual needs (J. Ma, 2020). In China, English teaching in mainstream public schools, especially within the K–12 system, emphasizes mainly reading and writing, whereas speaking and listening are often neglected (Jiang et al., 2017; Sang, 2023; Zhai & Razali, 2022). Many students arrive in Canada with the expectation of improving their spoken English through immersive exposure but find themselves unprepared for authentic communicative demands (Zhang & Beck, 2014). This gap between what was learned and what is required frequently leads to frustration and a sense of helplessness, especially in academic and social contexts.

In this context, service learning, a pedagogy that combines community involvement with reflective practice, has emerged as a promising pathway to enhance language learning. It offers authentic, low-pressure opportunities for oral language use, cultural integration, and self-efficacy development (Escofet & Rubio, 2019). However, existing studies on service learning often focus on formal university programs or structured coursework (Kravtsova et al., 2020; Swacha, 2018; Wurr, 2018). Limited research has examined how self-initiated, non-instructional volunteer experiences influence oral English development among CISs.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the volunteer experiences of CISs at a mid-sized post-secondary institution in British Columbia. British Columbia is one of the leading provinces in international education, enrolling about 21% of all international students in Canada and attracting roughly one-quarter of all Chinese students studying in the country (Basiri, 2020). As the researchers are based in that province, this context is both representative and accessible for examining Chinese students' service-learning experiences.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts service learning as a pedagogical approach and critical pedagogy as its theoretical framework to explore how service-learning experiences influence CISs' oral English development.

Service learning is a pedagogical approach that combines real-world experience with traditional academic learning to deepen students' understanding of theoretical concepts (Stukas et al., 1999). By engaging students in meaningful community-service activities, this method enables them to apply knowledge in authentic contexts while developing critical thinking, social responsibility, and intercultural competence (Escofet & Rubio, 2019; Salam et al., 2019; Stukas et al., 1999). As emphasized by Stukas et al. (1999), the structure of service-learning courses may vary, but they consistently involve student action and reflective practice, with reflection being the key feature distinguishing service learning from other volunteer experiences. Whereas volunteering typically focuses on serving community needs, service learning intentionally benefits both students and community partners through reciprocal learning (Crossman et al., 2024). We argue that when international students, particularly those whose first language is not English, engage in community-based volunteer service, their participation is often purpose-driven, with many aiming to improve their language competency, gain a deeper understanding of local culture, and explore potential career paths. They reflect on their experiences and actively adjust their behaviour throughout the process. Meanwhile, their contributions to the community, such as enriching cultural diversity, supporting local initiatives with valuable skills, and promoting cross-cultural understanding, are significant. Although these experiences may not follow a formally structured curriculum, they embody the key principles of service learning, which include purposeful action, reflection, and reciprocal benefit.

Drawing on critical pedagogy as theoretical framework, this study examines how service-learning experiences empower CISs in their language and identity development, helping them cultivate self-awareness, confidence, and expressive ability. Traditional education often positions students as passive recipients of knowledge, what Freire (1970/2005) referred to as the "banking model" of education. Rooted in Freire's philosophy, critical pedagogy views education as a practice of freedom, emphasizing empowerment, dialogue, and reflection (Gonzales & Zhang, 2025; Winans-Solis, 2014). Critical pedagogy challenges the traditional hierarchy in which teachers or native speakers hold authority, instead valuing learners' diverse experiences and linguistic resources as legitimate forms of knowledge (Echeverri-Sucerquia, 2020). Thus, using critical pedagogy as a framework, this study highlights the agency of CISs within service-learning contexts and explores how such learning experiences enable individuals to recognize their potential, achieve personal growth, and experience empowerment through authentic participation.

Within the context of service learning, critical pedagogy provides a theoretical perspective for understanding how community involvement can become a space for learning and self-transformation. In this study, critical pedagogy offers a theoretical foundation for analyzing how service-learning experiences create empowering spaces for CISs to use English authentically, gain recognition, and reconstruct their linguistic identities.

Literature Review

This literature review focuses on two core themes: the challenges faced by CIS in oral communication skills for speaking English and the impact of volunteer work on language learning. By reviewing existing literature, this study aims to identify research gaps and further investigate how different types of volunteer work influence the oral English proficiency of CISs.

CISs' Challenges in Oral English Communication Skills

The Linguistic Barriers

Although cross-linguistic transfer has been widely examined in second language research, relatively few studies have focused on positive transfer that facilitates learning. Yang, et al. (2017) conducted a meta-analysis and found small to moderate correlations between L1 Chinese and L2 English in phonological awareness, decoding, morphology, and vocabulary. Their findings suggest that shared linguistic features between the two languages can facilitate learning, indicating that language transfer is not inherently negative but can serve as a cognitive resource for bilingual development.

Nevertheless, many studies have identified negative language transfer as a key factor affecting CISs' spoken English development (Chang, 2021; Han, 2013; Jiang et al., 2017; D. C. Li, 2009). Han (2013), for example, compared the phonological systems of Chinese and English and argued that differences in stress and sound substitution can reduce clarity and fluency, potentially making it difficult for native English speakers to understand. Similarly, Chang (2021) suggested that CISs may unconsciously apply their native language patterns when speaking English, leading to pronunciation deviations and unnatural stress or intonation. In addition, Jiang et al. (2017) noted that cross-linguistic influence in areas such as phonology, semantics, and pragmatics may contribute to delayed responses, grammatical errors, or awkward expressions. However, M. Ma et al. (2023) found a mismatch between students' self-perceived English proficiency and their actual academic outcomes, which were comparable to those of domestic students. This suggests that language ability alone does not determine academic success.

Linguistic Anxiety and the Ideological Roots of Native-Speakerism

Previous studies have shown that Chinese international students often face challenges in oral English development due to both linguistic and affective factors such as cross-linguistic transfer, stress, and anxiety, which weaken their confidence and willingness to communicate (X. Fang et al., 2008; Jiang et al., 2017; Sang, 2023; Zhai & Razali, 2022). Growing up in exam-oriented educational systems that prioritize accuracy and written performance over communicative competence, many students internalize the belief that they must speak "perfectly." This perfectionist mindset, however, restricts their opportunities for authentic interaction and spontaneous language use in real-life contexts. The cultural emphasis on modesty and the avoidance of mistakes further reinforces learners' fear of speaking and their tendency to remain silent in communicative situations (Ran et al., 2022; Yan, 2024; Wu, 2019).

Beyond psychological and educational factors, research has revealed that such barriers are also rooted in the pervasive ideology of native-speakerism, an ideology that positions native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) as representatives of Western culture and as the ideal standard for English language teaching (Holliday, 2015). Under this ideology, "speaking like a native" is framed as the ultimate goal of English learning, while other legitimate varieties of English are marginalized (F. Fang, 2018). Consequently, non-native speakers, including CISs, often internalize deficit-oriented beliefs, perceiving themselves as "less competent" or "non-legitimate" users of English (Miao & Yang, 2022; Tavares, 2022). Within this framework, they come to view themselves as perpetual learners—constantly striving for linguistic improvement yet feeling that full "authenticity" or "legitimacy" as English speakers remains unattainable (Veliz & Veliz-Campos, 2021).

Lack of Oral Communication Support

Zhou (2015) stated that current support for CISs in language development focuses primarily on academic success, offering language support programs to enhance students' English proficiency, such as language courses, exam preparation, and cultural adaptation guidance. However, support for oral communication in everyday and community contexts remains inadequate. While many universities provide EAP (English for Academic Purposes) courses that include oral presentations, these activities mainly target formal academic communication rather than spontaneous or conversational English (Palmour, 2023). As a result, students have limited opportunities to practice authentic oral interaction beyond the classroom (J. Ma, 2020). Some teachers and peers may not fully recognize the challenges international students face in oral communication, leading to a lack of encouragement and support, which leaves international students feeling isolated and helpless in oral practice (Yu & Peters, 2019). Furthermore, cultural differences and language barriers often cause anxiety and a lack of confidence in oral communication among Chinese students, further limiting their participation in oral activities (Malik et al., 2021). Although some universities have adopted remedial language support models, such as one-on-one consulting, generalized English courses, and workshops, these models are often faced with problems such as low participation, high costs, and low efficiency (Kim, 2022).

Service-Learning Experience

Positive Service-Learning Experience for CISs

Service learning has a profound impact on the integration of ESL students into their local communities (Kravtsova et al., 2020; Swacha, 2018; Wurr, 2018). Kravtsova et al. (2020) indicated that service learning not only provides English learners with authentic language contexts where they can practice English in real-life situations but also helps to boost their confidence, expand their social networks, and reduce feelings of loneliness. Through participation in volunteer activities, ESL students can practice English in a low-pressure, supportive environment while building social connections and learning how to advocate for themselves and others (Kravtsova et al., 2020; Wurr, 2018). Additionally, within the service-learning framework, several studies have shown that integrating writing tasks with volunteer experiences in TESOL teacher education programs can help pre-service teachers better understand the learning challenges faced by ESL students, increase their sociopolitical awareness, and foster cultural adaptation and a sense of social responsibility (Schneider, 2018; Swacha, 2018; Wisla et al., 2017; Wurr, 2018).

Negative Service-Learning Experience for CISs

Despite the positive effects of volunteer work, volunteers—mainly English language learners—may encounter challenges that can undermine their sustained commitment (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019; Sundram et al., 2018). Volunteers are often driven by altruism, self-development, and the desire to build social connections. However, the mismatch between expectations and experience can lead to frustration, decreased motivation, and, ultimately, disengagement from the organization (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019; Sundram et al., 2018). For example, Sundram et al. (2018) asserted that volunteers often expect to have formal or informal appreciation. However, some organizations may fail to meet these expectations, leading to volunteer dissatisfaction and turnover. Similarly, Kragt and Holtrop (2019) indicated that some volunteers perceive a lack of social recognition and feel that their contributions are not adequately valued by the community or the organization, which may lead them to disengage from volunteer work. Additionally, volunteers in the research indicated that some organizations lack clear descriptions and

expectations for volunteer roles, leading to volunteers' lack of confidence and sense of direction (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019; Sundram et al., 2018).

Methodology

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of Chinese international students with their service-learning work?
2. How do different types of service-learning influence the development of their oral English proficiency?

The study uses a qualitative case study design to explore these questions in depth as it helps to understand how and why certain phenomena occur in real-life contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Both research questions focus on participants' lived experiences and the contextual factors that shape their oral language development. The case-study approach allows for the examination of individual perspectives and complex social interactions in detail rather than aiming for generalizable outcomes. It explains how different types of volunteer work create opportunities, or pose challenges, for oral English practice in authentic community settings.

Participants

The study recruited participants through personal connections, referrals, and snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria were (a) current enrollment in an undergraduate or graduate program, (b) age 18 years or older, (c) participation in at least 20 hours of volunteer service within the past year, and (d) sufficient English-speaking ability (equivalent to an IELTS speaking score of 5.5 or higher) to ensure effective communication during interviews.

Before the interviews, the researcher developed three levels of volunteering—task-based, activity-based, and interaction-based—which were based on observed differences in oral English use across various community volunteer contexts. These categories aimed to capture varying degrees of spoken language involvement and to facilitate comparison among participants' experiences (see Table 1). During recruitment, participants self-categorized their volunteer experiences according to these three levels. Two participants reported involvement in both activity-based volunteering and interaction-based volunteering; in such cases, classification was determined by the predominant nature of oral interaction. For example, Participant B1 had experience as an English tutor, but the sessions focused mainly on survival English and included Chinese explanations to aid comprehension. The overall oral English demand was therefore moderate, and this case was categorized as Type B. In contrast, Participant C1 participated in both tutoring and event-based volunteer roles, but most activities required frequent oral communication, particularly when introducing cultural content to the public, so this experience was classified as Type C. Finally, the categorization framework was validated and refined through participants' self-identification and their detailed descriptions during the interviews, ensuring consistency between the proposed types and participants' actual experiences.

Although participants' entry IELTS Speaking scores were used as an indicator of their initial English proficiency, these scores do not necessarily reflect their current speaking abilities. Most participants had either completed or were enrolled in university-level ESL courses at the time of the interviews. These courses focus on improving oral communication, academic listening, and interactive speaking skills. Therefore, despite some participants having entry scores below 5.5, all demonstrated sufficient English-

Table 1

Overview of Participants

Group	Participants	Backgrounds	Oral requirements	Type of volunteer	Specific volunteer work
A	A1	1 year in Canada; entry IELTS Speaking: 5.0; enrolled in ESL courses	Low	Task-based volunteer roles involving minimal oral interaction	Assistant in university orientation: organizing supplies, airport pickup, helping with registration
	A2	1.5 years in Canada; entry IELTS Speaking: 5.0; enrolled in ESL courses			Food sorting at the local food bank
	A3	2 years in Canada; not willing to provide Speaking score; enrolled in ESL courses			Worked remotely as a designer for a non-governmental organization (NGO), primarily responsible for creating visual materials
B	B1	1.5 years in Canada; entry IELTS Speaking: 5.5; finished ESL program	Moderate	Activity-based volunteer roles involving some oral interaction of short duration	Provided on-site support for vendors at a local market; volunteer English tutor for Chinese immigrants at an NGO, teaching survival English with the support of Chinese for clarification when needed
	B2	1.5 years in Canada; entry IELTS Speaking: 5.5			Volunteered with the City's Snow Angel program by calling seniors and individuals with mobility challenges to ask if they required snow-removal assistance
	B3	3.5 years in Canada; entry IELTS Speaking: 4.5; finished ESL program			Served as a volunteer teaching assistant at an elementary school, helping with classroom activities and supporting students under the teacher's guidance

C	C1	0.5 year in Canada; entry IELTS Speaking: 7.5	High	Interaction-based volunteer roles involving intensive oral interaction	Volunteer English tutor for Chinese immigrants at an immigration service NGO for survival English; participated in cultural events as a volunteer promoting Chinese culture; actively engaged with the public through cultural displays and oral presentations, which required frequent spoken interaction and a high level of oral English proficiency
	C2	2 years in Canada; entry IELTS Speaking: 7			Worked as a teaching assistant at a language learning centre, responsible for instruction and explaining course content to learners
	C3	1.5 years in Canada; entry IELTS Speaking: 7			Volunteered at an immigration service NGO, providing support to newcomer families from diverse backgrounds, particularly assisting them in finding appropriate local schools for their children

speaking ability to effectively engage in semi-structured interviews. Their communicative competence was further confirmed during preliminary conversations prior to data collection.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with the nine CISs in June 2025. All interviews in this study were conducted in English. When someone did not understand a question, the interviewer paraphrased it to ensure that the participant understood it before proceeding. On average, most interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using the auto-transcript function in Zoom. To ensure the reliability of the collected data and to identify recurring themes and patterns, the researchers listened to the recordings after each interview and compared them to the transcription multiple times.

The study employed thematic analysis to examine the interview data, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which includes familiarization, coding, theme searching,

reviewing, defining, and reporting. After each interview, the automated Zoom transcripts were reviewed and corrected to ensure accuracy. The analysis began with repeated readings of the transcripts while listening to the recordings to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' service-learning experiences and oral English development. Initial coding was then conducted to identify segments related to participants' motivations, language use, challenges, and reflections in different types of service-learning contexts. Through continuous comparison, refinement, and grouping, the codes were organized into broader categories and consolidated into key themes that represented recurring patterns in participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Excel was used to record and organize all codes, ensuring transparency and consistency throughout the analysis.

Ethical approval was obtained from the university's Research Ethics Board prior to data collection. All participants were informed about the study's aims and procedures, and their rights, and provided written informed consent.

Findings

Although the participants consistently used "volunteer" to describe their experiences, their motivations often reflected more than a desire to contribute to the community. Many emphasized personal goals such as improving oral English, building cross-cultural understanding, and enhancing future employability. These learning-oriented motivations are strongly aligned with the pedagogical principles of service learning, which emphasize reciprocal benefits for both the learner and the community. Therefore, this study applies to a service-learning framework to analyze participants' experiences. Nevertheless, the term "volunteer" is retained when presenting direct quotations to maintain the authenticity of participants' voices.

Task-Based Volunteer Roles (Group A)

Building Confidence and Belonging through Interaction

Participants in Group A reported experiencing meaningful personal and emotional gains from their volunteer work, particularly in developing self-confidence, social connection, and a sense of belonging. Through repeated exposure to real-life communication, they gradually improved vocabulary and pronunciation. For example, one participant explained that hearing unfamiliar words multiple times and asking for clarification helped them remember and internalize new vocabulary, illustrating how authentic interaction in service-learning contexts promotes active language processing and retention.

Beyond linguistic growth, participants emphasized the emotional rewards that accompanied their contributions. Many expressed pride and fulfillment when they were able to help others, particularly other Chinese newcomers, describing these moments as opportunities for social recognition and personal validation. Such experiences were especially meaningful for introverted individuals, as being approached by others made them feel acknowledged and valued within their new environment.

Participants also highlighted the supportive atmosphere in their volunteer settings. Encouraging peers and supervisors created a safe space for communication, where mistakes were treated as learning opportunities. This sense of acceptance and patience motivated them to speak more frequently and reduced language anxiety. Over time, relationships between volunteers and staff evolved from formal cooperation to genuine friendship, which further strengthened their sense of belonging and emotional well-being. Even in less interactive roles, participants described satisfaction derived from autonomy, task accomplishment, and the opportunity to contribute creatively to their organizations.

Navigating Communication Barriers in Volunteer Contexts

Despite the language development, the three participants reported experiencing language-related communication barriers that affected their ability to fully engage in their volunteer roles. These challenges, though varying in intensity and context, created moments of anxiety, misunderstanding, and hesitation. Participant A1, for instance, perceiving themself as having a strong accent, often had to repeat themself multiple times to be understood: "I have a stronger accent … maybe others couldn't understand me…. So I have to say again and again … for the most time I have to ask them for help … teaching me how … the right pronunciation." Similarly, participant A2 encountered significant struggles when unfamiliar with certain tasks and instructions, especially when they were explained in English. They recalled moments of anxiety when they could not understand their peers: "I feel, wow, my English is very … it's poor. I feel so nervous when I cannot understand what they mean." Working alongside volunteers from diverse cultural backgrounds further heightened the challenge, as they often had to ask for clarification multiple times: "Some people will speak English slowly, and some people will speak fast. So sometimes it's difficult for me to understand what they mean, so usually I will ask them again and again." They described how limited vocabulary slowed their comprehension and made them rely on others simplified explanations: "They told me all the things, but I still couldn't understand what they mean ….". Although A3 did not report major linguistic struggle, they did acknowledge occasional difficulty with fast speech or unfamiliar tone. Additionally, they stated that the cultural difference can sometimes cause some communication delay and misunderstanding, stating: "Typicality is the public holiday … they don't respond to any email … when they finally catch me, I found that they already offered the task to someone else."

These accounts reveal a common issue: language challenges affected participants even in volunteer roles that did not require frequent speaking. Difficulties with pronunciation, limited vocabulary, or ineffective communication often cause stress and frustration. These barriers made some participants feel less confident and reduced their ability to contribute fully to their volunteer work.

Activity-Based Volunteer Roles (Group B)

From Memorization to Application: Vocabulary Development in Authentic Volunteer Settings

Participants in Group B highlighted the fact that volunteer work provided rich opportunities for transforming passive vocabulary knowledge into active language use. Unlike traditional classroom settings, the authentic nature of volunteer tasks, such as tutoring newcomers or assisting in local markets, exposed them to real-life communicative situations. Participant B1 explained that they had limited opportunities to learn daily-life vocabulary before becoming a volunteer tutor for the survival English course. However, once they began preparing lessons for the course, they needed to study these expressions to teach their students (new immigrants in Canada) effectively. They emphasized that this preparation process required them to "make sure what I teach is local, that local people use it, and it is accurate," which significantly benefited their oral English development. In addition, they reflected on their volunteer experience at a local market, stating: "Actually, I prefer to be the vendor's volunteer. Because at that time I learn real English because I learned in person ways native speaker. And I can contact with different accent and different talking speed. So I learned broadly."

Participant B2 reflected on the value of interacting with native English speakers during their volunteer work. They described a situation in which a word they used was misunderstood due to its social connotation. For instance, they once used the word "intoxicating" in a casual conversation, assuming it meant "interesting" or "pleasant." However, the word was interpreted differently by the listener, carrying a more romantic or emotional implication. Although the moment was embarrassing, B2 explained that the

experience helped them recognize how meanings shift depending on tone, relationship, and context. They noted that such misunderstandings deepened their awareness of pragmatic nuances in English and encouraged them to pay closer attention to nonverbal cues and conversational dynamics, skills that enhanced their practical language competence.

Participant B3 highlighted how volunteer work provided valuable opportunities to observe and apply vocabulary in authentic contexts. They explained that although they had previously learned English words from textbooks or dictionaries, it was only during their volunteer experiences that they came to truly understand how those words were used in real-life interactions, how others said them, performed actions alongside them, or expressed them appropriately in context. In their words, these moments helped their transform "memorized vocabulary" into "practical language use."

From Classroom English to Real-Life Interaction: Coping with Listening and Cultural Challenges

Although volunteer work presented a language environment that differed significantly from their academic classrooms, and these experiences supported their oral English development, participants in Group B experience challenges, particularly in listening comprehension and cultural understanding. Many participants noted difficulties with fast speech, informal expressions, and accent variation, which required them to adapt quickly to real-world communication. B1 described their initial struggle with understanding local residents during their volunteer work at a farmers' market, even though they had no issue following classroom instruction. They reflected that in school, professors spoke at a slower pace and used clear, structured language. In contrast, interactions in the market were fast-paced and less predictable. They recalled: "I realized … when I was in school, our teacher or professor they talk with us with slow speed. But in daily talk between local people, they speak so fast. So like the first time I was there, I cannot understand what they said. I don't know what they want."

During their first shift, they often relied on help from other volunteers to communicate with customers. However, over time, they began to adapt by observing other vendors' interactions and interpreting the meaning from body language and tone. They explained that although they could not understand every word, they learned to guess customer needs based on context, such as recognizing when someone was looking for a particular booth or unsure how to use a coupon. Despite persistent language gaps, this gradual improvement in listening and interpretation helped them build confidence in handling spontaneous communication.

B2 described a similar adjustment process. They shared that one of their biggest challenges was understanding fast-spoken English, particularly when interacting with native speakers who often used idioms or wordplay. They recalled being confused by a joke involving the pun "Can February March? No, but April May," which left them unsure of the meaning while others laughed. This informal and culturally embedded language, often absent in classroom settings, highlighted the gap between textbook learning and real-world usage. B2 also noted difficulties when communicating with international peers who speak quickly or had a different accent in their speech. To address these challenges, they practiced daily pronunciation, wrote down unfamiliar expressions, and asked native-speaking friends to model clearer speech for them.

B3 highlighted pronunciation as their primary challenge in oral communication, noting, "The pronunciation for me is a problem, because I think my pronunciation not well." They also pointed out the difficulties arising from interacting with speakers who had varying accents and speaking speeds: "Some speak very fast. Some speak very slow." This occasionally triggered anxiety about making mistakes: "I worry. If I use the wrong words … even though I speak less." They expressed a fear of miscommunication, which sometimes led them to speak less or try to rephrase their ideas in simpler ways: "When I feel challenge in oral communication, I change the word or change the way … looking for possible ways to keep

going to communicate." Unlike other participants who frequently sought clarification or assistance, B3 reported fewer opportunities to ask for help during their volunteer work. They attributed this to time constraints and the fast-paced nature of the tasks: "… because a volunteer also is a job, I need to solve the problem myself, not create a new problem." The pressure to perform efficiently within a team setting shaped their approach to problem-solving: "So I adjust … find other ways to help myself, because we are in a work process."

Interaction-Based Volunteer Roles (Group C)

Reactivating and Refining Oral English through Role-Driven Interaction

Participants in Group C generally possessed relatively higher English proficiency prior to their volunteer experiences. As a result, their focus was less on acquiring basic vocabulary and more on practicing, refining, and refreshing their oral communication skills in real-world settings. Participant C1 shared that although they "had a certain amount of confidence in my English" before arriving in Canada, they still found it "very hard to open my mouth" in real-life situations. Volunteering, especially in the context of teaching English to others, forced them to speak regularly and helped them "get to use to speak." They described this "forced output" as a powerful driver of "re-evaluate my English" and "re-engage with the old knowledge." Furthermore, while they had picked up certain expressions through watching English TV shows when they were in China, they emphasized that only by engaging in authentic interactions with people's diverse accents and speaking styles did they begin to develop adaptive communication skills. Through this, they came to realize that "being clean" was more important than being "perfectly fluent."

Participant C2 noted that their experience volunteering at the Language Learning Center significantly enhanced their oral English proficiency through frequent, real-time interactions. Although they had achieved IELTS scores of 4.5 in speaking and listening before arriving in Canada, they admitted to feeling anxious initially, particularly about situations in which students might ask them questions and they could not answer. However, their responsibilities, such as planning events, facilitating gatherings, and leading language games, required them to clearly explain instructions and respond to students' inquiries on the spot. This necessity for clear and immediate communication gradually improved their language accuracy and confidence. They emphasized that face-to-face engagement with students helped them not only sharpen their speaking skills but also overcome their fear of making mistakes. Through these experiences, they came to value clarity of expression over grammatical perfection, stating: "Maybe one day or two weeks maybe you cannot see any like difference but after like a couple months, you will see a huge improvement of your speaking skills and your confidence and your working ability."

Participant C3 initially engaged in volunteer work to fill spare time and potentially support future immigration plans, rather than to improve oral English. However, throughout their experience, particularly during regular meetings with their native-speaking supervisor, they encountered many specialized terms related to the Canadian school system, such as "school psychologist" and "school settlement workers." While these terms may be familiar to native speakers, they presented significant linguistic challenges to them. They frequently struggled to understand key vocabulary during meetings but proactively sought clarification, which helped them internalize and retain new language knowledge. Although the experience was not marked by dramatic shifts or intensive language training, they described it as a gradual, natural process of language adaptation that supported their integration into English-speaking professional environments.

Participants in Group C reported varying experiences regarding the training and orientation provided before or during their volunteer roles. While all three had relatively strong English skills, the presence or absence of training significantly influenced their sense of preparedness, confidence, and perceived value within the organization.

C1 expressed strong dissatisfaction with the lack of training in their long-term volunteer role as an English tutor for an NGO. They criticized the absence of structured support, noting that many organizations treat volunteers as "just free labour." They emphasized the need for basic, role-specific training to help volunteers succeed, particularly in roles requiring sustained communication. They stated, "You need to train volunteers. That's the most valuable support I expect." Their experience made them feel undervalued, and they questioned the meaningfulness of their early volunteering, describing it as disappointing and exploitative.

In contrast, C2 described a more positive experience as a volunteer teaching assistant (TA) at the university. They attended a TA orientation session introducing institutional policies, academic integrity, and general responsibilities. While they noted that the training did not focus on English speaking skills, they still appreciated the opportunity to meet other TAs and learn about their roles. They expressed the hope that TRU would provide more such sessions to support international students' professional growth: "It was a really good experience for me … I hope (the university) can create more of this kind of training for international students."

C3 was generally satisfied with the level of training and supervision they received. Although they acknowledged that some volunteer groups struggled with motivation due to their unpaid nature, they praised their supervisor's efforts and felt the support provided was sufficient. They added that most volunteers in their program were expected to have a certain level of English proficiency beforehand, so additional language-specific training was not prioritized. Nevertheless, they believed the existing system met their needs: "I think our supervisor already does a great job … I cannot imagine how they could do even better."

These varied experiences demonstrate that volunteer training significantly impacts volunteers' sense of belonging and overall engagement. For some participants, the absence of clear guidance reduced their sense of connection and diminished the perceived value of their volunteer work. In contrast, others benefited from clearly defined roles and expectations, which contributed to a stronger sense of support and professional growth. The findings further emphasize the importance of providing context-specific and role-appropriate training. Such training not only enhances task performance but also fosters inclusion, language development, and cultural understanding. For international students navigating unfamiliar linguistic and social environments, structured support of this kind is especially critical for meaningful participation and sustained personal growth.

Discussion

This study aimed to address two key research questions: (1) What are the experiences of Chinese international students with their service-learning work? and (2) How do different types of service learning influence the development of their oral English proficiency? From the perspective of critical pedagogy, these findings demonstrate how service learning can act as a space of transformation, where students move from passive recipients of language instruction to active, reflective participants in their own learning. While many faced language anxiety and cultural unfamiliarity, their willingness to engage and learn allowed them to exercise agency and gradually build confidence, echoing Freire's (1970/2005) concept of education as a practice of freedom.

The impact of service learning varies across different types of service roles. For task-based service-learning roles, participants mainly developed a stronger sense of belonging and community connection. Those in activity-based roles gained more authentic opportunities to practice English in real-life contexts, while interaction-based volunteers experienced the most dynamic engagement, activating existing linguistic knowledge and reflecting on their communication with others. These reflective processes align with the critical pedagogical emphasis on praxis, where action and reflection lead to deeper understanding and personal growth.

The discussion section compares these findings with existing literature to develop insights and implications for supporting CISs' language development through service learning.

Limited Support in Non-Structured Service Learning

According to the interview findings, all nine participants demonstrated a strong sense of reflective thinking throughout their service-learning experiences, which aligns with the principle of student action and reflective practice commonly emphasized in service learning (Stukas et al., 1999). This study found that while service-learning provided CISs with valuable opportunities to practice spoken English in authentic contexts, its impact was often limited by a lack of both resources and emotional support, particularly in non-structured service-learning settings. This finding echoes previous research that identified similar challenges even in more formal service-learning environments (Kravtsova et al., 2020; Wurr, 2018).

Theoretically, service learning can help bridge the gap between formal instruction and real-world language practice by offering authentic, situated learning opportunities. However, this study revealed that only three interviewees had participated in formal, institution-led service-learning courses, while the other six engaged in volunteer work on their own initiative to improve their English and integrate into the local community. This form of non-structured service learning appears to be common at the mid-sized university involved. Although the institution provides structured language courses for students who do not meet the minimum English proficiency requirements, it offers little assistance for those who meet admission standards but continue to struggle with real-life oral communication. Consequently, despite their strong motivation to enhance their language skills and better understand Canadian culture through service learning, many students found it challenging to locate suitable opportunities or establish meaningful connections with service-learning organizations.

While participants generally appreciated the friendly and low-pressure environments of their service-learning experiences, several (three out of nine participants) described feeling invisible or undervalued in their roles. This finding aligns with Kragt and Holtrop's (2019) observation that students' involvement in service learning is often one-directional: while students perceive their participation as a learning opportunity, volunteer organizations may not share this perspective. Such a disconnect contributed to a sense of being "instrumentalized" among some participants, who felt their roles were viewed primarily as labour rather than as part of a learning process.

From a critical pedagogical perspective, these findings reveal both the transformative potential and the structural limitations of service learning in non-formal contexts. While students demonstrated agency and a desire to learn through self-initiated engagement, the absence of institutional and emotional support constrained the empowering possibilities of their experiences. Freire (1970 / 2005) emphasized that education should be a practice of freedom that enables learners to become active agents of change. However, when service learning lacks reciprocal recognition or guided reflection, it risks reproducing the same inequities it seeks to challenge, turning students' efforts into labour rather than growth. In this sense, the findings underscore the need for educational practices that not only provide opportunities for action but also create supportive structures that sustain reflection, dialogue, and empowerment.

Speaking Frequency and Role Suitability for Better Language Outcomes

While existing studies have demonstrated the general benefits of service learning for ESL students' linguistic and social development (Kravtsova et al., 2020; Swacha, 2018; Wurr, 2018), fewer have examined how variations in the type of service role and the level of interaction influence language outcomes for international students. This study refines and extends existing understandings by indicating that not all service-learning experiences contribute equally to the development of oral English proficiency.

Findings from this study suggest that the frequency and quality of oral interaction are more critical to oral English improvement than mere participation. Students who engaged in highly interactive roles reported greater gains in fluency, vocabulary, and confidence, whereas those in less communicative positions experienced limited progress. These findings indicate that participation alone is not sufficient; what matters is the extent of verbal interaction that service-learning roles involve.

Another important consideration is the match between students' current language abilities and the linguistic demands of their volunteer roles. For instance, one participant appeared to have chosen a position that exceeded their comfort level in English. Although they did not explicitly express frustration, the interview revealed that they struggled to articulate their thoughts and often relied on Chinese when trying to share a story. This finding indicates that ensuring volunteer roles are appropriately aligned with students' language readiness is essential not only for preventing discouragement or anxiety but also for enhancing their English communicative competence.

Native-Speakerism and Empowerment

Previous studies have shown that CISs often encounter challenges in developing their oral English due to negative cross-linguistic transfer and affective factors such as stress and anxiety, challenges that are further reinforced by the ideology of native-speakerism, which positions native speakers as linguistic authorities and ideal models (Chang, 2021; Holliday, 2015; Jiang et al., 2017; Sang, 2023). This study echoes previous research, revealing that eight out of nine participants expressed varying degrees of insecurity about their oral English, particularly when communicating with native speakers. Many worried that their grammar or accent might cause misunderstandings or make others question their competence. Such over-monitoring behaviours, such as hesitating before speaking, avoiding spontaneous interaction, or relying excessively on written preparation, reflect the psychological consequences of native-speakerism. The internalization of linguistic hierarchies creates a sense of insecurity and silence, diminishing students' agency and authentic participation in intercultural communication.

However, through authentic and situated interactions in service-learning experiences, six of the nine participants gradually began to question these assumptions. They realized that effective communication does not depend on "sounding like a native speaker" but rather on building understanding, empathy, and trust through body language, paraphrasing, attentive listening, and emotional connection. This shift illustrates a process of linguistic empowerment, in which learners reclaim their agency and redefine what it means to be a competent English speaker in intercultural contexts. Educators, volunteer organizations, and learners themselves should recognize linguistic diversity as a legitimate and valuable form of knowledge (Miao & Yang, 2022). Only when learners' linguistic experiences and cultural resources are valued can language learning move beyond mere knowledge acquisition to become a transformative process of empowerment, voice, and self-realization, helping learners rebuild confidence and a sense of agency in intercultural communication (Nicolaides & Archanjo, 2019).

Implications and Recommendations

This study explored three key issues: the lack of institutional support for service learning, the varied impact of oral interaction levels on CISs' speaking development, and the influence of native-speakerism on CISs' sense of empowerment. Based on these findings, this section presents implications and practical recommendations to inform future service-learning practices and research. The model (see Figure 1) integrates the Plan and Prepare, Action, and Reflection and Feedback stages to explain how service learning can work for both volunteer organizations and students.

Plan and Preparation

The Plan and Prepare stage is critical for successful service-learning implementation. Before engagement, both institutions and individuals should establish mutual respect, ethical awareness, and shared responsibility. This foundation helps avoid misunderstandings and upholds the integrity of the learning experience.

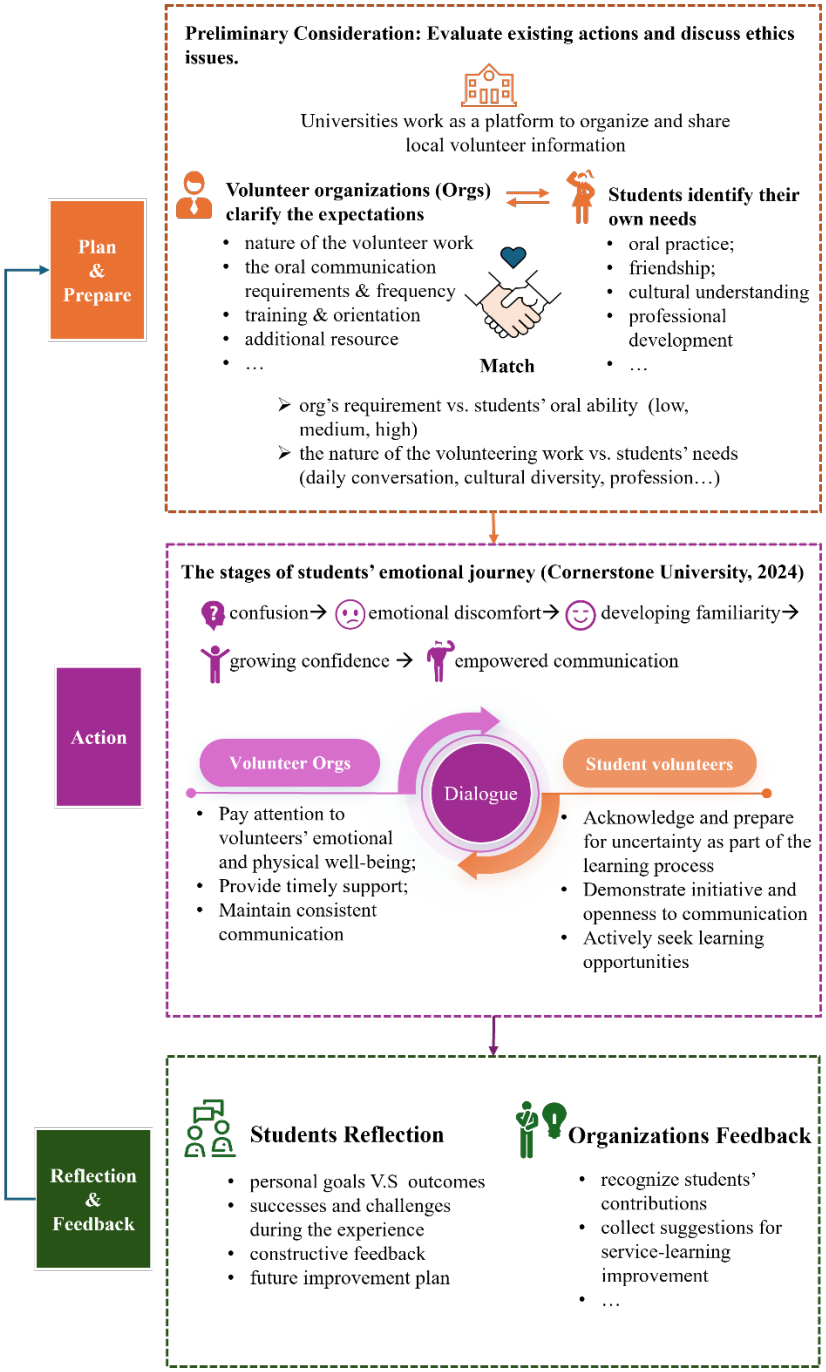
Once mutual understanding is established, institutions and organizations can move toward creating systems that facilitate meaningful volunteer participation. In this stage, universities can act as connectors by regularly sharing volunteer opportunities through clear and accessible platforms, such as websites or social media. These platforms should be transparent and easy to navigate, helping students find roles that match their interests and language goals.

Volunteer organizations can start by clearly defining their expectations for volunteers, including language proficiency, communication skills, and other essential competencies, while also articulating the nature of the roles they offer, such as task-based, activity-based, or long-term service-based roles. Accordingly, organizations can assess the appropriate amount of training and support needed. For example, short-term events lasting only one or two days may require just a brief half-hour orientation, while long-term volunteering may benefit from more structured training and ongoing guidance. Regardless of the role, providing training and orientation prior to volunteer experience can be especially valuable. Even a short virtual meeting before the activity can help ease the anxiety of first-time participants, clarify expectations, and foster a sense of belonging. It also communicates to volunteers that the organization values their involvement. In some cases, providing additional support resources may also be beneficial. For example, in tutor-based volunteer roles, supplying relevant teaching materials, instructional tools, or activity equipment can enhance the quality and effectiveness of the volunteer service.

International students at the Plan and Prepare stage are encouraged to take initiatives by identifying their personal goals and needs before engaging in volunteer work. For instance, students who feel their oral English is limited and wish to improve through real-life practice may benefit most from short-term volunteer opportunities that offer frequent but low-pressure interactions. On the other hand, those who seek to deepen their professional knowledge or gain experience relevant to future career paths can prioritize long-term volunteer positions, which typically offer more structured tasks, sustained engagement, and skill-building opportunities. For students who aim to expand their social network and make new friends, they might consider both short- and long-term roles that involve teamwork and task-sharing, as collaboration naturally fosters social connection. Choosing volunteer roles based on one's interests and learning needs not only enhances motivation and a sense of belonging but also increases the likelihood of long-term commitment. Such alignment is particularly beneficial for improving language skills and developing cultural understanding in authentic, meaningful contexts.

Figure 1

Authors' Service-learning model



Action

In the Action stage of service learning, both volunteer organizations and student participants play central roles. As noted by Cornerstone University (2024), students may experience a range of emotional transitions during a new action, from initial excitement and uncertainty to moments of confusion or discomfort, and gradually toward a sense of familiarity and confidence as they become more engaged. These emotional shifts can impact their motivation and level of participation, making it crucial for both organizations and students to be aware of the psychological and physical demands involved in volunteer work.

Organizations, regardless of the nature of the activity, are encouraged to check in with volunteers, remain attentive to signs of fatigue or discomfort, and offer timely support. For example, in short-term activities involving repetitive or physically demanding tasks, allowing volunteers to rotate roles can help prevent exhaustion. In long-term placements such as tutoring, maintaining regular communication can ensure that volunteers feel supported and able to voice any concerns. This type of ongoing care contributes to a more sustainable and meaningful volunteer experience.

Meanwhile, volunteer students are encouraged to take an active role in managing their emotional well-being during the Action phase and to prepare themselves for the uncertainties. Recognizing that feelings of discomfort or confusion are a normal part of the learning process can help them adapt more effectively. Additionally, students can demonstrate initiative, ask questions when unsure, and remain open to unfamiliar experiences, which helps ease their transition, fosters resilience, and enhances the overall quality of their participation. Particularly, international students can make full use of service learning as an opportunity for language practice. Volunteer work offers a valuable platform for real-world communication, enabling students to enhance their oral language skills, build confidence, and engage meaningfully with people from diverse backgrounds. By actively participating and reflecting on their experiences, students are more likely to achieve not only linguistic development but also personal growth and deeper intercultural understanding.

Reflection and Feedback

Reflection and feedback form a crucial part of the service-learning process, offering a meaningful conclusion to the collaborative experience between students and partner organizations. This stage not only acknowledges the contributions made by both parties but also provides an opportunity for critical reflection, appreciation, and continuous improvement.

For student volunteers, it is a time to revisit their goals, assess their personal growth, such as improvements in language skills, communication confidence, or intercultural understanding, and reflect on the challenges and successes they encountered. They can evaluate what they have gained from the experience and consider how it aligns with their future development plans. In addition, they may offer constructive suggestions to volunteer organizations to help improve future programs.

On the other hand, community organizations can use this stage to recognize students' efforts, express appreciation for their contributions, and provide feedback on their performance through various methods, such as volunteer certificates, thank-you emails, or even potential job opportunities. Additionally, they may gather feedback from student volunteers to inform future program development. More importantly, organizations can take this opportunity to reflect on whether the experience upheld core values such as empathy, inclusivity, and human-centred support. By creating a space where both students and organizations can exchange reflections and express mutual gratitude, this stage reinforces respect between parties and lays the foundation for more sustainable and human-centred service-learning partnerships.

Limitations

This study has some limitations that need consideration. First, all participants were Chinese international students whose volunteering experiences were based primarily in a mid-sized, inland city in British Columbia. While this context offers valuable insights, it may not fully represent the broader spectrum of volunteer opportunities and organizational support found in larger urban cities or different institutional environments. As a result, the findings may have limited transferability beyond similar geographic and institutional settings. Furthermore, although the minimum requirement was set at 20 hours within one year, participants' volunteer experience varied considerably in both duration and intensity, ranging from short-term engagements lasting several weeks to more sustained involvement over several months. These differences may have influenced the extent and depth of their perceived language development. Besides, it was not feasible to introduce within-group contrasts because the participants in each group varied in their academic backgrounds and study pathways. For instance, some were undergraduate students while others were in graduate programs; some had completed ESL courses, while others were still enrolled. Additionally, their time in Canada and volunteer contexts differed significantly, making direct comparisons within each group less meaningful. Therefore, the analysis focused on identifying broader cross-group patterns rather than fine-grained within-group differences.

Finally, this study focused solely on the student perspective. One of the core principles of service-learning is reciprocity; however, this research did not include the viewpoints of volunteer-hosting organizations. While most student participants reported positive interactions with organizational staff and fellow volunteers, a few expressed feelings about being "used as tools".

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to understanding how service learning fosters oral English development among CISs in real-world contexts. It highlights the pedagogical potential of service learning as an empowering approach that integrates language practice with community involvement. Moreover, by illustrating students' experiences across varying levels of participation, the study provides valuable insights for educators and program designers seeking to implement experiential learning opportunities that support both linguistic and intercultural growth.

Conclusion

This study explored service-learning as a tool to enhance the oral English development of Chinese international students. Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with nine participants of varying language proficiency and volunteer experiences, the research examined how different types of service learning impacted CISs' speaking skills and overall experiences. Findings revealed that although many participants initially struggled with language anxiety and cultural unfamiliarity, their active engagement and willingness to learn contributed to improved oral communication and increased self-confidence. Furthermore, the findings suggest that different service roles contribute to different outcomes. Task-based roles helped foster a stronger sense of belonging and connection to the local community. Activity-based roles provided authentic opportunities to apply textbook knowledge in real-life contexts. Interaction-based roles offered the most dynamic language development, as students continuously activated their language skills and reflected on communication in diverse social settings.

Comparing the interview findings and previous literature, this study discussed several key themes. First, consistent with earlier research, the study found that both educational institutions and partner organizations often fail to provide adequate language and emotional support to international student volunteers, especially those who meet the minimum language requirement but still struggle with oral English communication. This lack of support can lead to feelings of being "used as tools" during volunteering, which negatively impacts students' learning outcomes. Additionally, the study's original

contribution was that the frequency and quality of oral interaction played a critical role in students' language development, even among participants with similar English proficiency levels. This suggests that not just the quantity of language exposure but also the nature of communicative engagement significantly affects oral language improvement. More importantly, the study reveals a structural gap in service-learning practice. While students demonstrated reflective thinking and viewed their volunteer work as a learning opportunity, most of the organizations involved did not share this perspective. The students were largely self-directed in seeking out service roles to improve their language skills, understand Canadian culture, or gain experience. However, because these efforts lacked institutional or organizational guidance, their contributions were often viewed as labour rather than as part of a reciprocal educational process. This one-sided engagement deviates from the principles of structured service learning, which emphasize mutual benefit, reflection, and curriculum alignment.

Based on these insights, this study proposes a practical service-learning model that includes three key stages: Plan and Prepare, Action, and Reflection and Feedback. This model is not limited to formal course-based service learning but specifically responds to the realities of international students who engage in volunteer work independently, without institutional or curricular structure. This study calls for educational institutions and community organizations to share responsibility in supporting international students' learning needs. With timely guidance and emotional encouragement, non-formal service learning can become an empowering process of dialogue and reflection, helping students recognize the value of their own linguistic and cultural resources and rebuild confidence and agency through meaningful engagement.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Grammarly to improve the clarity and readability of the manuscript. Additionally, Elicit AI (by Ought) was utilized to aid in identifying relevant literature during the reference search stage. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited all content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

The Authors

Lu Wang is an emerging researcher with an MEd from Thompson Rivers University, Canada. Her interdisciplinary and international academic background informs her research on language development, inclusive education, and community integration. Through volunteer work in schools and community-based immigrant support organizations, she developed a strong interest in how communication, equity, and community engagement shape learning and social belonging. Her work aims to promote more inclusive and supportive educational environments for diverse learners.

Manu Sharma is an associate professor at Thompson Rivers University in the Faculty of Education and Social Work, where she teaches foundational courses in the Master of Education program. She brings a critical social justice lens to her teaching, research, and service and is committed to creating equitable public education for all students. She is the founder and president of the Canadian Association for Social Justice Education and the founder of the *Journal of Social Justice Education*. Her research interests and publications in the field of education are based on equity initiatives, social justice pedagogy, deficit thinking, and international teaching experiences.

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