Two Student Groups Both Teach and Learn in a Unique Academic Service Learning Project

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Students in the Intensive English Program (IEP) at St. John’s University recently gained allies in their quest to speak English fluently. They partnered with undergraduates in the Language Acquisition course taught by Communication Sciences and Disorders Professor Monica Wagner — a joint project to help the English as a Second Language (ESL) students perfect their conversation skills.

This unique collaboration came about when, seeking conversational experiences for her students, Director of IEP Sheila Hakner, Ph.D., met with Prof. Wagner, who recognized a potential learning experience for her students. “Understanding the challenges of learning a second language would allow them to better understand the process of first language acquisition in children, which is the focus of my course,” she explains.

Prof. Wagner also saw it as an academic service-learning (AS-L) opportunity, linking service to those in need with students’ future career goals. “That has been a real success,” she says. “My students came to class, sharing insights and experiences.”

“It was a very great personal experience that I would recommend everyone have,” said Language Acquisition student Alesya Draganchyuk. “I tried to remember the things I wanted to talk about when I first came to the U.S., so I tried to make our conversations less formal and more comfortable.”

The ESL students — about half are from China, with others from Colombia, Mexico, Haiti, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Russia — met with their partners for one hour, five times during the semester for much-needed conversation practice. At the same time, Prof. Wagner says her students “developed an understanding of the many levels involved in language learning, e.g., sounds, words, idioms, grammar, etc. They also witnessed the daunting challenges faced when one leaves a homeland and way of life.”

Dr. Hakner notes that her students, who also used the University’s new Global Language and Culture Center to improve their language skills, “have few opportunities to interact with American students and practice their conversational skills. Almost all plan to apply for admission to St. John’s or are already admitted, so improving their spoken English has been important to their future success.”