

# NEW TRENDS IN 21ST CENTURY CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND SPANISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES: TECHNOLOGY, TRANSLATION, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Diana Ruggiero<sup>1</sup>, Sean Hill<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Foreign Languages and Literatures, Assistant Professor, The University of Memphis, Memphis, TN, USA

<sup>2</sup>Spanish, Instructor, Mid Michigan Community College, Harrison, MI, USA  
dmrggero@memphis.edu  
srhill@midmich.edu

**Abstract:** *This paper presents a qualitative case study of a virtual service learning project that connected high school students in rural Michigan with communities and a non-profit developmental organization in Honduras. First, students created individual research presentations over Honduran history, current events, economics, and poverty. Second, students were introduced to the concept of service learning, the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire, and Muhammed Yunus's micro-credit economic process through readings in the target language. Third, using collaborative and Internet-based technology such as Google Docs, students were able to successfully engage in a meaningful service learning opportunity to translate training documents for a micro-loan organization despite the lack of an accessible, locally based Spanish speaking community. Finally, students reflected on their experience with the service learning project. Additionally, the authors discuss the connection between the student translation project to ACTFL's World-Readiness Standards for Language Learning and the formation of a 21<sup>st</sup> century skill set. While proximity and access to such physical communities remains an obstacle for many foreign language instructors seeking to integrate civic engagement, this case study presents one possible solution that pushes the boundaries of the very concepts of community and service learning.*

**Keywords:** Foreign Languages; Civic Engagement; Service Learning; Technology; Collaboration; Translation; Social Justice

## 1. Introduction

Engaging students in meaningful work in the target language while incorporating communities outside of the physical boundaries of the school constitutes the basis for service learning and civic engagement for foreign language classes. Students apply what they have learned in a classroom setting to a service learning project that makes use of their particular knowledge base. In the process, students also provide much needed assistance to the community. Implied in this model, however, is the presence of a substantial community in the target language. Though many teachers do have the fortune of incorporating the demographic areas of their immediate surroundings, whether rural or urban, there are others who are unable to do so as a result of proximity or accessibility to local communities in the target language. In such cases, the ability to provide meaningful service learning opportunities for students is limited. As the following illustrates,

one potential solution to this problem lies in the use of technology to extend the concept of community beyond the geo-physical to the virtual.

This case study describes an example of a service learning project in which Spanish students at a small, rural high school in Michigan translated training materials designed to help promote micro-loans in Honduras. Inspired by the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire (1970), this project involved the use of Internet-based collaborative tools such as Google Docs to translate educational material on microfinance (Spanish to English) and produced an informative PowerPoint for use by English-speaking volunteers assisting Spanish-speaking micro-lending applicants in Honduras. This project was done in conjunction with the non-profit development organization Global Brigades. Through this project, students applied and grew in their language skills, provided a necessary tool to train volunteers, applied important 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, encountered the concept of microfinance, and discussed the philosophy of Paulo Freire. In addition, the students explored thematic concepts involving the history, economy, and poverty of the people of Honduras and provided a tool to the community to help them grow an entrepreneurial skill set in the process. Though indirectly, the service provided by these students was no less significant and no less meaningful for having been facilitated by Internet-based technology. To illustrate this point, the following briefly discusses the project as it relates to service learning in foreign languages and the *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* established by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) from The National Standards Collaborative Board(2015).

## **2. Service Learning in Foreign Languages**

Community service learning (CSL) works to bridge the gap between the college or university and the community. It emerges from a broader philosophical discussion concerning the nature and greater societal value of academic scholarship and institutions of higher learning at the turn of the twenty-first century (Hellebrandt& Jorge 2013, p. 205). Within foreign language (FL) departments, CSL roles historically included student voyages into the community (see Jorge 2003; Lear 2012). In more recent years, however, the types of service learning have diversified to include unmediated service learning projects, expansive collaboration models, and international service learning projects (see Jorge 2003). These diversifying trends allow students the ability to immerse themselves in the target language without taking practicum courses or studying abroad (Lear 2012). As a result, students and teachers are increasingly veering from traditional methods of foreign language learning and are becoming more interested in applying their language skills in a more immediate capacity.

As service learning becomes a viable alternative to traditional models of language learning, the academic literature on CSLand foreign languages becomes more readily available. The scholarship to date focuses on a range of topics from curriculum development (e.g., Barreneche 2011; Caldwell 2007; Doyle 2010; Hellebrandt&Varona 1999; Hellebrandt, Arries&Varona 2003; Lear 2012; Nelson & Scott 2008; Plann 2002; Ruggiero 2015a & b; Sánchez-López 2013), community partnerships (e.g., Lear & Abbott 2009; Lear 2013; Jorge, 2003), and the relative impact of CSL on FL students, programs, and local communities (e.g., Abbott & Lear 2010; Elorriaga 2007; Hellebrandt 2006; Lear & Abbott 2009; Medina &

Gordon 2014; Pelletieri 2011; Wurr&Hellebrandt 2007), to overviews of trends in the development of CSL in FL programs (e.g., Barreneche& Ramos-Flores 2013; Lear 2012), and critical assessments of the challenges and limitations of CSL in FL curricula (e.g., Abbott & Lear 2010; Lear & Abbott 2009; Zapata 2011). In addition, both languages for specific purposes(LSP) and CSL have many previously published curriculum guides and lessons plans that function as models for other professors and students attempting to either integrate, keep up with, or further develop CSL and LSP in the FL curricula (e.g., Abbott 2010; Doyle 2010; Doyle, Fryer& Cere 2011; Hellebrandt&Varona 1999; Wurr&Hellebrandt 2007).

The extant research supports the benefits of integrating CSL in FL programs. As a pedagogical method, CSL allows professors to combine research, teaching, and service in ways that keep students engaged and motivated (Hellebrandt 2006). CSL is also shown to be effective in aiding linguistic and cultural acquisition (Beebe &DeCosta 1993; Bloom 2008; Hale 1999; Weldon &Trautmann 2003; Zapata 2011). Furthermore, the few studies examining student development of CSL support the notion that CSL may be helpful in advancing student intercultural sensitivity (Bloom 2008; Westrick 2004). Beyond academic achievement, the above studies collectively highlight the fact that students gain invaluable professional and practical language experience while local communities benefit from the assistance and services provided as a result of CSL partnerships. Lastly, CSL allows FL teachers to satisfy the “community” goal area advocated by the ACTFL in its World-Readiness Standards (Abbott & Lear 2010; Lear 2012). This is significant in that the ACTFL standards, which include communication, culture, comparisons, connections, and communities (often referred to as the 5 Cs), are often difficult for FL educators to fully meet as a result of the seeming inaccessibility of local communities in the target language (Lear 2012). As shown below, CSL, in combination with twenty-first century technology, makes feasible the communities standard for educators and programs wherever they may be located.

### **3. Considering the Third, Fourth and Fifth Cs of the World-Readiness Standards**

The ACTFL's world-readiness standards include five major curricular areas known as the five Cs. These five Cs guide the curricular and communicative aims of the profession. Courses that involve service learning components can fully incorporate the five Cs (Lear & Abbott 2009). The first and second components deal with communication and culture, whereas the third, fourth, and fifth deal with connections, comparisons, and communities, respectively. This section will demonstrate how students were able to meet the expectations of the last three Cs while improving their communicative and cultural competencies.

To begin, the third C connects the use of the target language to different disciplines and to information and perspectives available through the target language and the cultures that speak said language (The National Standards Collaborative Board 2015). With the third C, the diversification of courses through the integration of LSP and CSL components, along with the use of modern technologies, make possible multidisciplinary projects. Effectively, it is an across the curriculum approach with one small exception: the a priori assumption that all knowledge comes from English sources is dismantled. The main goal of this project was to interpret a PowerPoint presentation from Spanish into English. However, the

project facilitated the interconnection of multiple disciplines such as Honduran history, politics, economics, and geography through the study of Spanish. Each student had a different area to research and present to their classmates: pre-Colombian history; colonial history; current events and the ousting of the Honduran president; the basis of the Honduran economy; and the question of poverty. One student commented on how little she understood absolute poverty prior to the research presentation. Her comprehension of Spanish led her to understand topics ranging from current events to economics and poverty. Likewise, students learned about the organizational structure and purpose behind credit unions, as well as the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire in Spanish. Afterwards, supplemental readings were given in English in order to correctly identify the terminology used in micro-credit and in the organization of credit unions. Thus, the nature of this project incorporated the third C of the World-Readiness Standards effortlessly.

The fourth C concerns comparisons. Specifically, students will better understand the nature of the target language and culture through comparison with their own language and culture (The National Standards Collaborative Board 2015). Experts see subject matters differently as compared to novices, and occasionally students offer concrete glimpses of their novice viewpoint regarding the learning of language and culture. Yearly, Spanish instructors across the United States teach lessons regarding family vocabulary with an explanation of how several generations often live in the same household. After an exhaustive look into the absolute poverty encountered in Honduras and the reasons behind a micro-credit service learning project, a student exclaimed how it made perfect sense for many family members to live together. This student was able to make a very concrete comparison between poverty, access to credit, and the likelihood of securing a mortgage between the United States and Honduras to discover a valid and perfectly plausible reason for young adults to live at home with their parents. Hence, this student compared traditional family values between her culture and another and was able to understand how economic factors can influence cultural differences.

Likewise, students made comparisons between English and Spanish structure and vocabulary. Each student translated a few slides from the Global Brigades PowerPoint and brought these to a writers' workshop. There had been previous discussion regarding the use of similar vocabulary and structure throughout the translation; however, each student was responsible for his or her own section. In the tabling process, the class reviewed the presentation as a whole and argued about the syntax or wording used. The teacher reserved interjections for when a translation was clearly misrepresenting the original work. This allowed the students to have ownership over the product. Therefore, the students were required to question others' work as well as defend their own investment of time and resources. Although much of the students' arguments occurred in English, the conversations demonstrated critical thinking about the translations. They discussed the contextualized vocabulary of unfamiliar words and concepts, which nouns were being modified by which adjectives, and exactly what the preterite subjunctive was expressing. In retrospect, watching these third through fifth year high school Spanish students cogently and feverishly discuss comparisons of grammar, vocabulary, and syntax with intensity and purpose amazed the instructor.

Lastly, the fifth C looks to move students' language use and learning outside the physical and temporal boundaries of the classroom. Students are to use the target language in the community and use the language for their own enrichment well into the future (The National Standards Collaborative Board 2015). The result is that a greater number of students are becoming much more interested in applying the language in an immediate capacity. Therefore, while many Spanish instructors are able to provide needed services for the local Hispanic community, others find themselves isolated from a community by physical or economic barriers. For many teachers, especially those that do not teach Spanish, this can be difficult and frustrating. Ter Horst & Pearce (2010, p. 367) agreed:

An additional impediment to integrating service learning into language instruction is that such projects are not easily applicable to languages other than Spanish, for which local communities often do not exist, or to nonurban areas in which there may not even be a sizeable Spanish-speaking community.

For this reason, they followed Overfield's (1997) suggestion that the "definition of community be extended to include not just local communities but also the global community of speakers of the target language, now accessible through modern technology, such as the Internet and satellite television" (Ter Horst & Pearce 2010, pp.367-368).

The instructor had previously experienced the same frustrations in attempting to engage students in Hispanic communities in rural Michigan. Although many regions of Michigan have a sizeable Hispanic population, the distances from the instructor's school to these communities presented a very real boundary to students at the high school. Therefore, the instructor sought out an international partnership with a community in Latin America to engage students in a service learning project. The students worked with one of the Global Microfinance Brigades based in Honduras that had previously provided college students alternative spring break service trips. Through an exchange of electronic communication, the instructor was able to find a need that his students were able to fulfill—translating a training presentation into English for college students. Though separated by thousands of miles, students successfully interacted with collaborators in Honduras by use of a virtual environment to help create opportunities for social justice.

In summary, this section described how students were able to access and incorporate ACTFL's last three Cs while increasing their communicative and cultural competencies. For example, students connected the study of Spanish with history, current events, economics, pedagogy, and sociology. Likewise, students were able to make comparisons between English and Spanish as well as compare cultural traditions between Honduras and the United States. Finally, students were able to bring their use of Spanish into a community that transcended the physical boundaries of the high school and national borders. Yet despite these trends, accessibility to local communities remains a perceived challenge for foreign language scholars and educators seeking to create service learning opportunities. This project seeks to build on the existing research on the benefits of community service learning in foreign languages by emphasizing the role of Internet-based collaborative technologies in expanding the notions of community and service learning beyond geo-physical spaces and limitations. One way in which to do so is to recognize and capitalize on the value of the unique 21<sup>st</sup> century skill set that

millennial students and future generations will possess upon entering the classroom.

#### **4. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills and Google Docs**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century skills movement looks to build a certain skill set within students that is different from that of 20 years ago (Rosenfeld 2007). Maurizio and Wilson (2004, p. 28) spoke to the importance of this issue, stating that, "Our nation's well-being throughout this century will be determined by how well we prepare our students today." For example, the ability for students to communicate and collaborate with others in a problem-based format with tools they will use as college students and adults is a crucial skill. They need to be able to communicate well in both English and mathematics. In addition, cross-cultural knowledge and foreign language are deemed essential skills, as is the ability to work effortlessly with technology. Foreign language educators are in a position to grow the students' required skill sets in a way that few other educators can. The project described in this case study helped students to collaborate efforts over two continents using current tools—a perfect example of practicing a 21<sup>st</sup> century skill set.

As previously mentioned, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills involve collaboration, communication, and technology. In regard to technology, this is particularly useful in providing a platform for collaboration online. Students can typically work independently on a computer, but sharing information simultaneously has traditionally been more difficult. Simply placing students on a computer is not enough to help teach 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. There are, however, online applications and websites that will facilitate this for students. Google's many applications allow students the opportunity to incorporate 21<sup>st</sup> century technology while actively collaborating together over tremendous physical distances. The main application used in this project was Google Docs and its use has become indispensable.

Google Docs provides an opportunity for students to collaborate simultaneously on a single document from any computer in the world with an Internet connection. A document, however, is not simply a written page; it includes word processing, presentation, and spreadsheet software. Therefore, any student that is familiar with the Microsoft Office software will recognize Google's versions of the software suite and will quickly be able to adapt to the new format. In districts with difficult financial circumstances, the Google software is free to use. However, if a school does have the Microsoft Office package, the Google Docs will download into Microsoft. Likewise, students can upload a PowerPoint or Word document into Google Docs. Unfortunately, formatting changes may occur in the process.

The power of Google Docs for enhancing collaboration derives from how any document in this format can be edited by as many people as desired from any computer with Internet access from anywhere in the world. In the project described below, Google Docs was used by students in two continents. In essence, students worked on the presentation document both simultaneously and separately from computers in the United States and Chile, and the final product was sent to Honduras.

Collaboration in Google Docs is highly accessible as it requires minimal training and effort. One creates a document and then shares access with other users. The creator can assign different limits of access, from the ability to view the document to complete editing rights. For this project, the instructor uploaded the

PowerPoint presentation sent from Global Brigades into the presentation software on Google Docs. Then, the instructor invited students to collaborate by sharing the file; students had access to edit and translate a prescribed number of slides. In case a student erroneously began working on a slide that another student was translating, they were denied access because only one slide was able to be edited by one person simultaneously. This helped to ensure that every student completed their own work. While the students in the United States worked side by side on the computers, they could have access to Google chat and videoconferencing with the student in Chile. This would allow students to discuss the issue of word choice so that the translation was consistent across the presentation. Using the Google Docs platform, students were able to collaborate in various ways, at different times, and in different places. In addition, the instructor was able to verify when each student had accessed and edited the document by tracking changes.

In conclusion, Google Docs presents an online platform that enhances the facility of collaboration among students across place and time. Students are able to utilize presentation, word processing, and spreadsheet software while the editing rights granted to them are managed by the instructor. While the presentation software was the only Google Docs application used in this project, the possibilities for collaboration are numerous. In this manner, students were able to incorporate 21<sup>st</sup> century skills into a service learning project as they grew in their ability to communicate in Spanish.

## **5. The Honduras Project: Successes, Surprises, and Future Considerations**

This section will begin with an outline of the general layout of the online service learning project. This is followed by a discussion of the problems encountered in the execution of the task. Then, there is consideration given to a few surprises as experienced by the instructor and students. Lastly, there is a consideration of how this type of work can be continued and made accessible to lower-level students in the hopes of providing a service learning opportunity utilizing 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

To begin with, the instructor made contact with Global Brigades and other microfinance corporations in the United States that have branches in Latin America. The organization agreed to work with high school students and related a need: a translation of a PowerPoint presentation from Spanish into English. This organization routinely serves as a provider of micro-credit service learning or alternative spring break trips to college students from the United States. They found that many of the students that travelled to Honduras did not understand Spanish at a level conducive to the micro-credit training. The students involved in this project would be helping to translate the presentation into English so that the college students would have a better grasp of the concept of the formation of a community bank and how to fill out the required paperwork. Global Brigades electronically mailed the document to the instructor and the instructor partitioned it into workable sections for the students' different ability levels.

Before allowing the students to get to work, the instructor wanted to provide them with an introduction into the importance of the work in which they were about to engage. The instructor assigned students individual presentations of the topics previously discussed, as well as readings on Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Muhammed Yunus, the concept of micro-credit

(Yunus&Jolis 2003) and service learning. The instructor found that students approached the translation project purposefully once they possessed a working knowledge of these issues. It is important to note that one of the students involved in the project was spending the last few weeks of a study abroad experience in Chile and many attempts were made to incorporate her into the project.

Students experienced firsthand the difficulties involved in translation in spite of translating the document into their first language. They learned how to utilize dictionaries and to read translations based on context. Likewise, they were able to make use of and distinguish between poor and adequate online translation sites. In addition, both the students and the instructor quickly realized that there was a gap in knowledge and vocabulary relating to the accounting and organizational terminology in both Spanish and English. This was beneficial because the instructor was able to demonstrate that he simply did not know everything. Effectively, the teacher became another student involved in the translation project. The idea of the teacher as a fellow student is analogous to how Freire embedded himself with and befriended illiterate Brazilian *campesinos* as he taught them to read (Ozmon 2012). However, the instructor was a more experienced student and was able to model effective strategies to deal with the knowledge gaps. This was beneficial because the students were able to see the teacher as a learner as well.

After the translations were completed, students tabled the final document through a writers' workshop. Students edited each slide and argued over word usage and even what the original Spanish document meant. Students quickly realized the care needed when looking up words in dictionaries. Some of the translations the students had chosen did not relate to economics or banking. This served as a great review for the students on all points related to grammar and word usage and provided a real world application of language to the specific career of translation. Finally, the group reached a consensus that the product was high quality and verified the formatting of the downloaded Google Doc into Microsoft PowerPoint. The file was returned to the Global Microfinance Brigades via email and was to be used shortly thereafter in Honduras. Students reflected over their work in an individual writing assignment and had to discuss their reflections as a group. Next, they had to write out critical reflections to questions the instructor had prepared. Approximately two weeks after they had completed their project, Global Brigades asked the students to comment on the "Honduras Project" in English. Since some time had passed, they had had time to really think about what they had experienced. Some student reflections are included in Appendix 1.

There were a few problems that caused frustration for the class. To begin with, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills come complete with 21<sup>st</sup> century problems in regard to technology. At the high school level, a number of websites are blocked as per district regulations. For example, the district superintendent had to give explicit instruction for the technology department to allow the instructor's group permission to access Gmail and Google Docs. In addition, broadband speed at the high school was slow and many times the program would crash before student translations were saved. Likewise, the difference in time zones proved to be difficult to coordinate well with the student living in Chile and lack of instant communication hindered her ability to participate. Lastly, there had been plans to have a Skype interview between the class and people in the Honduran communities that had prospered through the micro-credit program. This did not transpire, unfortunately,



as the students participating in this project graduated shortly before Skype was approved for use in the high school. Although there were problems with technological capabilities at the school, it was important to model the use of 21<sup>st</sup> century collaborative technology to better prepare students for life post high school.

Fortunately, there were a few positive surprises that helped offset the pitfalls that the class experienced. For example, the instructor learned that many students were interested in a LSP course, Spanish for Business. Therefore, course options may be offered that better reflect student interests. If an entire course is not feasible, teachers may still capture and retain student attention by incorporating business aspects into the general Spanish class. In addition, some students expressed interest in pursuing service-oriented occupations and signaled that participation in this project helped reinforce their career choice. Further, one student cited this experience with a college admissions officer who coincidentally was also involved in an international micro-finance project. Yet another student experienced collateral success by publishing an article regarding the project in the school and county newspapers as part of a journalism class. Lastly, the Global Brigades website featured the high school's efforts to incorporate service learning with micro-loans, which helped to bring positive press to the school district. Therefore, the "Honduras Project" was beneficial not only to the volunteers of Global Brigades and the Honduran community it served, but to the instructor, the students, and the school district as well.

Looking toward the future, it will be difficult to recreate exactly the same project given the specificity of the project and partners involved. Therefore, consideration must be given to a sustainable service learning project that incorporates many of the same themes with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. In addition, the instructor would like to make accessible a similar project to more students. In a small, rural school it is difficult to fill upper level classes with a sufficient number of students to accommodate district minimum class sizes. Therefore, a similar project that is within reach of a first or second year student would benefit not only a community, but that individual student as well. Kiva is another micro-lending organization that solicits volunteer translators and crowdsources petitions for loans from multiple countries. Typically, those requests are in Spanish and in order to meet a wider audience, they must be translated into English. Many of these requests could be translated by a second-year student, though first-year students could also potentially handle simple language tasks with guidance.

Lastly, translation is not the only service that foreign language students can perform with a virtual community. Nor do virtual service learning opportunities necessarily have to be limited to microfinance projects. There are innumerable ways in which foreign language educators can incorporate collaborative Internet-based technologies in the facilitation of virtual service learning projects with community and institutional partners around the globe. It remains to the individual instructors, administrators, and community organizations to seek out partnerships such as the one described in this case study and address the needs of local communities. In this way, one's geo-physical location does not necessarily need to be a limitation in providing meaningful service learning opportunities for students in foreign language classrooms.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper provided a case study of an online service learning project that exposed students from a small, rural high school in Michigan to the conditions of poverty in Honduras. While incorporating the last three Cs of the World-Readiness Standards, students also incorporated 21<sup>st</sup> century skills into an exercise in translation. In the process, it introduced them to Muhammed Yunus and a possible solution to some of the problems of poverty: micro-credit. In addition, students learned a different viewpoint in education, the philosophy of Paulo Freire, and found meaning in their work while they learned to understand the economic factors working against the poor. Lastly, the instructor considered the successes and pitfalls and looked ahead to opening a similar opportunity to a greater number of students. Truly, even high school students can be instruments for social change in solidarity with people in language communities far beyond the physical confines of the school building and local community. Virtual service learning projects create prospects for instructors that lack proximity to a community and allow students the opportunity to use languages for specific purposes.

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### **Appendix 1: Student Comments**

“Translating for the students who went to Honduras was a major project for me. Knowing that what I was doing was going to help the people of Honduras made me feel like I had a purpose. It was an amazing feeling, and one that I have never before had the pleasure of knowing. This sense of purpose combined with the learning of Spanish and how to translate documents only made the project that much better. I hope that I can have a hand in many more to come.”

“As our teacher, Sr. Hill is focused on more than just strict facts about the world of Spanish. He wants us to use what we learn in the classroom to reach out to the world around us. This project is revealing in that we aren't just here to get credit for school. We are able to use our abilities in everyday life, even though we are located in a minimal-culture society. It is great to know that my desire to learn Spanish is not going to be deferred by this “mono-lingual” area. I can continue learning through real-world projects and in the future, travel into the Americas and have previous experience and knowledge through these projects.”

“This was a great opportunity for me. I was nervous at first to do the translating but once you get the hang of it you can determine what makes the most sense. I am so happy to be a part of this and to be able to help in need. I have always wanted to do something like this where people could benefit from it and it's nice to know that something so little will help so many people. Learning Spanish has been very beneficial and could be even more. I hope to do more projects similar to this or completely different that will help the well-being of people around the world.”

“Helping translate for the Honduras project was an amazing experience. It gave me an idea of what I could possibly do in the future and a chance to help people. It was also a wonderful opportunity to learn more words in Spanish, as well as English, and open my awareness to the conditions in Honduras.”

“Translating for the project to help out Honduras was great. It helped me out by teaching me about Spanish and about banking. I know my part in it was small but in the big picture it will help out countless numbers of people. If I had the chance, I would do that type of project again.”