The University of Mississippi is home to over 900 international students and over 300 international faculty, scholars and staff, representing more than 90 countries. Service-learning courses like IE 051, Topics in Intercultural Communication: Community Connections, create a bridge to facilitate exchange between international students and communities in Mississippi.

This service-learning course gives international students a platform from which to share knowledge about their culture, language, and customs with students from the United States. By engaging in this intercultural exchange, international students are also afforded the opportunity to improve their language skills and develop their cultural knowledge base.

Instructor Tracy Case Koslowski organizes visits to elementary schools throughout Mississippi, where the international students hone their English skills by giving presentations on their home countries, and the elementary school students develop public speaking skills with presentations about Mississippi.

“It has been an all-around rewarding experience for my service-learning course to continue our involvement with the elementary schools in our local and regional community,” said Koslowski. “Our international students gain from the practice of speaking English with the children, while learning more about the diversity of cultures in Mississippi and gaining a deeper understanding of their own cultures and languages as they practice telling others about their homes. The experience makes these visiting students feel as if they have made a contribution to the local community, which gives them a greater sense of acceptance and belonging during their stay here. We are very grateful to have our community partners.”

Many communities where the international students visit through the service-learning class are...
located in rural areas that lack regular exposure to international cultures. A student from Vietnam, Lien Phan, was struck by what she perceived to be a lack of resources in the Delta community she visited. However, upon entering the schools, the international students received a warm and enthusiastic welcome. Arthur Miguet, a student from France, wrote this reaction about meeting the school principal: “When we arrived at the school, I saw a tall guy coming to us, and my first thought was that it was a teacher because he was smiling and relaxed. Then he introduced himself as the principal of the school. I’m not used to seeing a principal like that; in France, often the principals are strict, busy and unfriendly.”

The prospect of giving an oral presentation can be daunting for many international students. Yuriko Hatano, a student from Japan, wrote this about her experience: “At first, I was so nervous because I didn’t know whether they were interested in Japan or not, and I worried if they would listen to our presentation. However, when they entered the classroom, some of them said hello in Japanese, and many of them showed their sparkling faces. I was so surprised that they knew how to say hello in Japanese, and they are interested in Japan. They eased my nervous tension.”

Through this service-learning course, international students are able to reflect on the experience of sharing language and culture with elementary school students. One student remarked, “Those children and I were suddenly friends. I learned with them and they learned with me.” The act of sharing one’s knowledge forges connections.

For students in Mississippi communities that may not have the opportunity to travel outside of Mississippi, these are powerful exchanges.

“Our school has benefited enormously from the partnership with the Ole Miss Intensive English program,” said Michael Cormack, Jr., Principal of Quitman County Elementary School. “The program provides a global awareness for my Delta students. They love the world mural map and really look forward to the World Passports Day, which has become an annual event at our school. They love learning about the home countries of our international students and comparing them to Mississippi cultures.”

Learning a new language can be a challenge. Topics in Intercultural Communication: Community Connections contextualizes language learning and cultural awareness around community service, leaving a lasting impact not only on international students but also on the communities they serve.

For more information about IE 051, contact Tracy Kosowski at (662) 915-1847 or tlcase@olemiss.edu.

“Our international students gain from the practice of speaking English with the children, while learning more about the diversity of cultures in Mississippi and gaining a deeper understanding of their own cultures and languages as they practice telling others about their homes”

— TRACY CASE KOSOWSKI, INSTRUCTOR