

Current Issues in Reference Service: ESL Students, the Reference Interview, and the ACRL Standards

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November 2011**

1 Introduction

Each year increasing numbers of ESL/international students (ESL/IS) enroll in U.S. colleges and universities, with the schools, the U.S. government, and the students' families all supplying money and resources to get them here. Essential to the students' academic success is the degree to which they can use library services effectively. The literature, however, shows a mixed response when it comes to academic libraries assisting ESL/IS, due to linguistic and cultural differences that are revealed in information-seeking situations. To guide library staff in developing greater cultural awareness and standards to follow when working with students, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of the American Library Association (ALA), has issued a number of documents with recommendations over the years. It is not clear how useful these documents are, however, and to what extent they acknowledge the unique ESL/IS population.

This paper will examine these problems associated with the increased number of ESL/IS needing library services on American college campuses. Over the years, numerous U.S. colleges and universities have implemented information literacy instruction for campus ESL courses. Sheila Stoeckel (personal communication, November 22, 2011) noted that at the University of Wisconsin Madison, for example, libraries conduct a number of information literacy courses for ESL classes each semester. But the one-on-one reference interview often does not reflect this level of accommodation to user differences. The reference interview, therefore, and all of its potential for misunderstanding between the participants, will be explored here, along with the ACRL standards and guidelines.

2 International Student Numbers and Sending Countries

According to the Open Doors 2011 report for the Institute of International Education (IIE), the number of international students currently studying at colleges and universities in the United States is at an all time high—723,277 students (2011). China leads the sending countries with

almost 22 percent of the total, or 158,000 students (2011). India and South Korea follow with 104,000 and 73,000 respectively (2011).

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) recently unveiled its “Study in the States” initiative, in which the United States hopes to attract even more international students to its campuses and encourage those students to stay once acquiring their degrees (2011).

Diane E. Peters (2010), in *International Students and the Academic Library*, notes that: ‘As part of the growing emphasis on globalization, North American universities are increasingly devoting resources to recruiting students from around the world.

International students bring cultural and intellectual diversity, and in times of decreased public funding and increased costs, they contribute essential income.’ (p. 2)

In countries like China, families of the ESL/IS also spend thousands of dollars, not only when seeking help with the U.S. admissions process (Bartlett & Fischer, 2011) but also when covering the expenses of sending a child abroad to live and study.

Under these circumstances—the rising number of international students in the United States, the money and resources U.S. colleges and universities continue to spend to attract international students to their campuses, and the money and resources the students themselves spend to study and live here—it would seem in everybody’s interest to assist these students as much as possible during their stay on campus. Liu (1993), speaking of library skills specifically, states that without a doubt, these “skills are fundamental to [international students’] success in the new educational system” (p. 26). Ishimura and Fitzgibbons (2008) stress that students must acquire library skills in order to accomplish their educational goals as well.

3 Challenges to Successful Information-Seeking by ESL/IS in the Academic Library

Many American students experience anxiety when trying to find their way around the campus library. International students who must make sense of the American academic library experience multiple anxieties—not only are they faced with a system that operates in another language, but they “are [also] trying to adjust to an entirely new academic system that is situated within an entirely new culture” (Walker & Click, 2011, Introduction section, para. 2). Much of this anxiety can be traced to the reference interview, which often poses difficulties for both the ESL/IS and the reference librarian. Citing Wayman (1984), Howze and Moore (2003) note that,

“the success or failure of the international student to adapt depends heavily on sensitivity of library staff” (p. 58). Citing Allen (1993), they continue to place the responsibility with the librarian, stating that it is the reference librarian who is obligated “to actively remove barriers to communication and learning” (p. 58). Sarkodie-Mensah (1992), chair of the ACRL Instruction Section’s Committee on Instruction for Diverse Populations, as reported in Howze and Moore (2003) states:

If we realized...how tiresome speaking in another language is, how much effort is required to use the jargon of a foreign language, librarians would grow more patient with, less frustrated at, and more receptive to patrons who may require more time at the desk.... (p. 59)

A review of the literature reveals a crowded field of studies that date back to the 1960s. Initially these consisted of surveys/interviews of library staff, but in the 1980s, researchers began to survey the ESL/IS users themselves about their library usage. The studies repeatedly cover much of the same ground, but many of them do offer insight into the situation and some sound solutions. It is not clear, however, if the recommendations made in the studies are being applied by librarians. These studies identify the difficulties that ESL/IS face when they begin to explore the American academic library and interact with library staff in order to use available services and systems.

Linguistic Differences

Perhaps the biggest barrier when ESL/IS and academic librarians come into contact is a linguistic one. Lack of competency in English means that ESL/IS will struggle to verbalize their information need in a library setting (Curry & Copeman, 2005) and will worry about making mistakes as they put their imperfect English to use (Ishimura & Fitzgibbons, 2008). Issues such as accent (Walker & Click, 2011), pronunciation, syntax (Curry & Copeman, 2005), and limited vocabulary (Ishimura & Fitzgibbons, 2008) will color each utterance they attempt with a native speaker. Although students must score within a particular range on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) to gain admission to an American college, students often do not have opportunities to practice English listening and speaking skills while still studying in their home countries (Morrissey & Given, 2006). “Librarians who have not worked with international

students...or who have not received training in dealing with international students lack awareness and understanding of the difficulties that these students face in clearly stating their information needs” (de Souza, 1996, p. 43). Library staff can become frustrated in this situation, “resulting in ineffective service” (Mundava & Gray, 2008, p. 39).

The American academic librarian often does not recognize that her own language and speech patterns are likewise foreign to the ESL/IS. Students report that librarians speak too quickly (Curry & Copeman, 2005) and use library terminology too freely without explaining the individual terms (Curry & Copeman, 2005). In finding the student difficult to understand, the reference librarian may rush the interview (p. 28), neglect crucial follow-up questions (p. 9), and try to end the interview before answering all of the ESL/IS questions (p. 28). Referring to a study conducted by Ross (2003), Curry and Copeman note that sometimes librarians completely forego “the interview process itself, the foundation of which is asking questions” (p. 22).

Misreading Nonverbal Cues

The misperception of culturally governed behaviors such as body language and eye contact often results in students hesitating to ask a librarian for help, conveying confusing behavior to the librarian when seeking help (Curry & Copeman, 2005), or simply being skeptical that anyone can help them (Ishimura & Fitzgibbons, 2008). De Souza (1996) stresses that the behavior of American academic librarians, too, will differ widely from the ESL/IS’s norms in terms of eye contact, body language, and personal space. Curry and Copeman (2005) note that differences in the “influence of gender and social status on communication between individuals” comes into play here as well (p. 7). Peters (2010) states that, “both librarians and students send silent signals that can be misinterpreted” (p. 7).

Deficiencies in ESL/IS Library Experience

ESL/IS will no doubt come to their new academic endeavor with little or no awareness of library systems in the United States—sometimes these students have no library experience at all because their communities back home have no public or university library (Walker & Click, 2011). They may have unrealistic expectations of what the library is for (Walker & Click, 2011). In many

foreign countries libraries are little more than study halls (Hoover Hill, 1994; Liu, 1993). ESL/IS sometimes use the American library as a place to socialize with peers from their home countries (Walker & Click, 2011; Buckner & French, 2007).

Additionally, students may well be confused by the profusion of services that are unfamiliar to them, such as self-service, open stacks, reference service, online assistance, and interlibrary loan (Curry & Copeman, 2005; Liu, 1993; Morrissey & Given, 2006). Furthermore, they “may be unfamiliar with North American classification systems and subject headings” (Curry & Copeman, 2005, p. 7). The classification systems used in China and India, for example, vary greatly from the Dewey and LOC systems used in the United States (Liu, 1993). Peters (2010) also points out that the LOC system used in academic libraries won’t serve ESL/IS needs because “it is Western-focused and does not always provide detailed access to subjects such as Asian literature, Middle Eastern history, or non-Christian religions” (p. 10). She adds that the system of alphabetization used in this country is also difficult for students who come from countries using a different alphabet and “shelving books from left to right is not standard in some parts of the world” (p. 10). Thus, it can be confusing to the ESL/IS when these systems are not fully explained (Curry and Copeman, 2005).

ESL/IS and Librarian Misperceptions

In the Morrissey and Given University of Alberta libraries study (2006) they discuss their Chinese student interviewees’ perceptions of librarians back in China. These students “described the library staff as the ‘keeper of the books,’ guarding the materials from the students” (p. 227) and as mere clerical workers who are not highly educated. In a country where libraries operate closed stacks, students are not used to interacting with the librarian beyond collecting the materials the librarian has retrieved for them. When one of the students was asked if he would seek a librarian for help with “other information-related activities,” in the United States, the student was “visibly surprised that librarians could do this” (p. 228). He added that he would ask “his colleague for this type of help” (228). Or conversely, because ESL/IS may not understand that the reference librarian plays a strategic role in helping students access key library services (Curry & Copeman, 2005), “they do not know that a reference librarian’s primary responsibility

is to answer questions, ...[and so] feel they are troubling the librarian with their queries” (Curry & Copeman, 2005, p. 6).

The reference librarian, too, reflects her culture’s norms of information-seeking, and her perceptions and assumptions about students. She may well approach the reference interaction with an ESL/IS in the same way she would an American student, being unaware of the enormous difficulties the ESL/IS must overcome in order to communicate with her. She may, however, approach the ESL/IS reference transaction with trepidation or impatience because she has concluded that all ESL/IS will be difficult to work with—she believes that they will all exhibit the same foreign linguistic/cultural characteristics. De Souza (1996) cautions:

against the common perception that all international students belong to a homogenous group, or that all Asian students share similar characteristics. Students from one geographical region may come from many countries and their cultural and educational backgrounds, as well as their language abilities, may vary considerably. (p. 42)

Citing Conteh-Morgan (2003), Peters (2010) notes that:

insistence on differences, the negative meanings attributed to them, and the persistence of these in literature over the decades, have led librarians, whether consciously or unconsciously, to construct a one-dimensional image of international students. These students are depicted as constituting an accretion of deficits, and this image has stuck in the collective minds of librarians. (p. 17)

Issues with Library Technology

Students may also have different levels of comfort with library technology (Walker & Click, 2011). Peters (2010) notes that for ESL/IS, “access to information...involves learning to use a bewildering variety of search engines and interfaces” (p. 11). Confusion sets in “when too many results are retrieved” (Curry & Copeman, 2005, p. 5).

When assisting a student with a database search, the librarian may simply fail “to include [the student] in the search process” and fail to explain what steps she took to carry out the search (Curry & Copeman, 2005, p. 25). The librarian also may not realize the student needs help in

selecting appropriate English keywords for a search. Undergraduates (native speakers) have difficulty using research databases. “Picking appropriate keywords and using controlled vocabulary are skills that must be learned, and these skills become even more difficult to develop for ESL students” (Walker & Click, 2011, Obstacles section, para. 9). Walker and Click conclude that, “Librarians should not assume that a student with excellent spoken English is necessarily able to identify keywords and potential synonyms when creating a search statement” (Obstacles section, para. 9).

Morrissey and Given (2006) found that most of the students surveyed in their study used Google to search for items because it was easier to search than the OPAC used in their library (p.232). These students didn’t use Boolean operators, either, and so didn’t “understand how they work” (p. 232).

Librarians may, after assisting the ESL/IS, simply leave the student unmonitored while the student attempts to replicate the search (Curry & Copeman, 2005). Furthermore, some of the librarians in the Curry and Copeman study did not “check whether [the student had] found...appropriate sources” (p. 28).

4 Association of College and Research Libraries Standards for Students and Librarians

Based on the issues outlined thus far in this paper, as ESL/IS continue to strive for English language proficiency in their ESL classrooms, in other college courses, and beyond the campus setting, librarians must find effective ways to assist ESL/IS when seeking information in the academic library setting. With 12,000 academic librarian members, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) has positioned its website as a go-to source for guidance with library issues (www.acrl.org). The ACRL website states that the “ACRL promulgates standards and guidelines to help libraries, academic institutions, and accrediting agencies understand the components of an excellent library. These standards, guidelines, and model statements are reviewed and updated by the membership on a regular basis.”

In the Instruction Section on the ACRL website, reference librarians can access various publications and guidelines proposing initiatives for the college/university level. Some of the documents are geared toward student proficiency; others speak to the librarian’s contribution in helping the student gain that proficiency, and more broadly, the librarians’ role in creating a

welcoming atmosphere in the library for diverse populations. There is very little discussion of these standards in the literature as they relate to working with ESL/IS; the studies that do are included here, where appropriate.

Standards for Students

There is one ACRL publication that details the levels of information literacy competency that college/university students need to achieve in order to be successful in school. In their “Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education,” the ACRL (2000) defines information literacy as “the set of abilities” that allows students to “locate, evaluate, and use [information] effectively” (Information Literacy Defined section, para. 1). Each student is “expected to demonstrate all of the competencies,” even though it is recognized that not all students will display the same proficiency (Use of the Standards section, para. 2). This is the closest that this document comes to indicating that there might be a population of students for whom competency with these standards could be a problem. There is no mention of ESL/IS in this document.

Baron and Strout-Dapaz, in their 2001 survey of American college libraries, reviewed the ACRL guidelines to determine how closely they correlate with the academic abilities ESL/IS possess. In each case they found that the skills identified by the ACRL highly overestimate what these students can accomplish with their varying degrees of second language competency and different cultural backgrounds (some of their findings will parallel earlier discussions in this paper).

Baron and Strout-Dapaz note here that the ESL/IS often will have no understanding of the topic or scope of the assignment, or what type of research is implicated (2001, p. 319). They state, too, that the ESL/IS will not know or will not be familiar with the reference resources or the technology the library uses and thus will not know how to use them. Additionally, s/he will not be familiar with the organizational system employed in the library, which may be different from the one used in their home country (p. 319). Finally, Baron and Strout-Dapaz counter that students won’t be familiar with “proper incorporation of source material into assignments” because concepts of plagiarism and copyright will be foreign to them (p. 319). Morrissey and Given (2006) spoke to Chinese students in their study who said that they “had not been

introduced to plagiarism and copyright issues in China...and felt that copyright and attribution were unimportant or were intended to be common-sense guidelines, rather than formal rules or laws” (2006, p. 234).

Standards for Librarians

There are a number of documents on the ACRL website that address, in varying degrees of specificity, the types of students the academic librarian will encounter and the role of the librarian when working with them. Some of these documents are outdated and some have been revised, although it is not always clear which document the new version is replacing. Overall there seems to be some overlap of recommendations and target audiences across documents. (The publications that deal specifically with instruction will not be discussed here.)

A. “ACRL Diversity Standards: Cultural Competency for Academic Librarians”

This ACRL draft document (2011a) consists of a rather confusing range of guidelines, some broad, and some specific. Students are variously referred to as “constituents,” the “learning community,” and “clients”; this diverging terminology is confusing and unnecessary. ESL/IS are only once referred to, as “English language learners” (p. 14). The recommendations here require librarians to develop an “awareness of their own assumptions, values...biases and prejudices and how these influence interactions” with users (p. 4); they are tasked with providing services to people of diverse backgrounds (p. 8) with “marginal experiences” in their library system (p. 6); and they are encouraged to take part in programs that educate and train employees to acquire cultural competency (p. 8). In addition, librarians should push for changes in LOC subject headings (p. 10), provide multilingual service and interpreters if needed, and improve their interview techniques (p.14). They should also recognize “the efforts of English language learners” and be willing to listen patiently and know when to revert “to alternative ways (technology or writing) to communicate with the constituent” (p. 14) if communication breaks down. Multilingual signage in the library is recommended, along with multilingual library guides and a directory of library staff who are bilingual and could act as interpreters (p. 15).

B. “Standards for Libraries in Higher Education”

This ACRL document (2011b), too, is broad, but does separate out the “educational role” of the librarian from her contribution to a student’s “discovery” of library services, which corresponds more closely to the reference interaction (paras. 3-4). Unfortunately, ESL/IS go unacknowledged as a group that might need special assistance. Librarians here are expected to contribute to the university’s wider educational goals by collaborating with faculty and staff to effectively integrate the library’s services, information literacy, and collections into the curriculum (para. 3). To assist students in exploring library services and the information they seek, librarians must ensure that information is organized for effective “discovery and access” and must integrate the library’s “resource access into institutional web and other information portals” (para. 4). Resource guides are required that offer guidance and instructions on “points of entry to information” (para. 4). Librarians should be available for “one-on-one assistance [via] multiple platforms to help users find information” (para. 4); additionally the library will maintain “interfaces and system architectures that include all resources and facilitates access from preferred user starting points” (para. 4).

C. “Guidelines for University Library Services to Undergraduate Students”

This ACRL document (2005) recognizes that many college and universities will have a separate undergraduate library. The description of “clienteles” here most closely parallels that of the ESL/IS thus far: learners who are new to the library system and are starting to acquire the skills needed to use the library’s vast “potential”; users who need a friendly space, “where assistance is offered and questions are encouraged”; users who could benefit from one-on-one library instruction to introduce them to the types of “services and resources available in university libraries”; and those students with “the least political” power (Primary Clientele section). But this is written with the undergraduate student in mind, and again the particular needs of the ESL/IS are not covered. Reference service to this population includes answering questions and setting up one-on-one service to assist a particular student with their search needs. Various library aids are encouraged that help introduce the student to the full range of online catalogs, databases, and other finding aids that will help the student access information within and beyond the library’s collection of resources (Reference Services section).

D. ACRL Bibliographies

The ACRL offers a number of bibliographies that provide the academic librarian with research studies (some annotated) and other sources of information on reference-specific topics. These bibliographies, however, are scattered across the ACRL web pages and are not always easy to locate on a return visit. They may not appeal to a busy librarian who will have to search for studies that relate to her particular make-up of student needs, library setting, and resources. One of these bibliographies is the “Library Instruction for Diverse Populations Bibliography” (n.d.), and although its purpose is to inform the instruction process it nevertheless contains useful studies on the learning styles of numerous diverse ethnic/international student populations.

E. “Multilingual Glossary”

One final ACRL document (2008) that will be of particular interest to reference librarians working with ESL/IS is this information sheet with translations of library terminology geared specifically for the second-language learner. This sheet, which includes 85 common library items, aids the ESL/IS understand terms ranging from “abstract” to “zip drive.” This document was difficult to find, however: An initial link identified in the readings did not function and a subsequent hunt for it on the ACRL website proved elusive at first. It is also dated, having last been revised in 2008.

Howze and Moore (2003) believe librarians should take the lead in addressing the special needs of ESL/IS. They state:

As the number of international students continues to grow at universities all over the country, libraries need to look at new ways of responding to the needs of these students. User-friendly guides, handouts...greatly assist the international student to become familiar with American libraries. pp. 57-58)

Howze and Moore go on to point out, however, that such materials are “woefully lacking” (pp. 57-58). They think the ACRL multilingual glossary is a “worthwhile exercise” but caution that “the usefulness depends on a perceived need for it by the intended user...the international student” (p. 58).

Unfortunately, most of the ACRL guidelines/publications for librarians are too broad to be of immediate use and neglect to cover the most basic elements of a successful reference

interview. In the literature, only a few studies integrated the ACRL information literacy standards into their research queries. Unfortunately, there's no lack of effort here, it's just not clear to what extent these guidelines are being disseminated to the library community beyond the ACRL website and to what degree librarians are finding them useful. A further problem is that most of the documents do not acknowledge the second-language learner. Only the most recent documents are beginning to mention these learners specifically, and so hopefully as more documents are revised they too will take into account this population.

Elsewhere on the American Language Association (ALA) website a librarian could access the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) pages. RUSA identifies the reference interview as that situation where “library staff recommend, interpret, evaluate, and/or use information resources to help others to meet particular information needs” (2008, Reference Transactions section). RUSA additionally offers a detailed description of the most effective behavior a reference librarian can exhibit when working with a user (2004). These behaviors include approachability, interest in the user’s query, good listening and questioning skills, a search process that includes the user and explains the process, and good follow-up questions and recommendations (2004). RUSA, however, may not be the first place an academic librarian would turn to for help, given the mission of the ACRL and its large academic librarian membership.

5 Conclusion

This area of ESL/IS experience with the U.S. academic library has been heavily studied and researched for decades, yet issues remain for the ESL/IS when seeking information in a library setting. Along with the fact that the ACRL standards and guidelines for students and librarians get a mixed review when considering the reference interview, perhaps the best course for librarians is to survey their own ESL/IS populations with regard to reference library services and respond on a localized level to the particular needs of their library community. Newer case studies are emerging that report on such localized efforts. One recent publication put out in fact by the ACRL, called *International Students and Academic Libraries: Initiatives for Success*, Pamela A. Jackson and Patrick Sullivan, eds., is a collection of articles that present a range of library/campus specific programs underway now across the United States. Here librarians may

indeed find the inspiration they need to begin evaluating their own circumstances; they may also find that in order to best achieve change in the reference interaction, a broader effort is needed, one that will require collaboration with other staff, faculty, and administrators across campus to effect an overall campus response to the issue, making everyone aware of, appreciative of, and responsive to the greater number of ESL/IS students arriving each year.

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