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Meeting the reference expectations of ESL students

The challenges of culture

University, college, and community college librarians know that many students, from freshmen to seniors, are intimidated by, or at least uncomfortable with, the library. The building is huge. The stacks seem endless. The classification system makes no sense. The databases are confusing. Most importantly, students harbor an intense fear of looking or feeling dumb. They certainly would not want anyone to know that they are not fully versed in using the library, and this anxiety sometimes prevents students from approaching librarians for assistance. Imagine yourself as this student. Now imagine that none of the resources in the library are in your native language.

Imagine that you are trying to adjust to an entirely new academic system that is situated within an entirely new culture. This scenario is quite intimidating, isn't it? It is also exactly what reference librarians need to keep in mind when working with international or English as a second language (ESL) students.

Providing high-quality reference service to ESL students requires an open mind and sometimes creative communication. While students studying abroad or attending an America-style university in their home country are the focus of this article, it is important to recognize that the United States is changing, and diverse ethnic groups now make up a large part of the population. The obstacles, tools, and techniques discussed in this article are certainly applicable to members of these ethnic groups, and as communities grow and change, the ability to understand and successfully meet the needs of these populations through library services becomes increasingly important.

Obstacles

ESL students are likely to be adjusting not only to a new academic environment, but to a new overall culture. They may be facing changes in every aspect of life, from grocery shopping to transportation. Or for students attending an American-style university in their native country, they may remain immersed in their culture, only venturing outside of it while on campus. Regardless, it is important to keep in mind that these students bring different perspectives and prior experiences to the academic environment. For example, many ESL students may arrive at college from a high school that had no library at all. In fact, some of the local universities in their hometowns may have no library.

Even public libraries are rare in many countries, making the university library as we know it a truly foreign concept. Often students from cultures in which this is the case view the library mostly as a conveniently located area for socializing. Of course, the concept of the learning commons has increased in popularity, and this space is intended in part for social activity, but it is up to the librarians to show these students that the library offers more than comfortable chairs and Internet access.

Oftentimes students who are studying abroad are relatively restricted to on-campus

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living because they do not have a local driver's license or vehicle while away at college. In places where public transportation is not an option, the library becomes the heart of the campus, a place where students can venture out of dorm rooms and socialize with other students.

At Cumberland University located in a suburb of Nashville, Tennessee, international students are frequent visitors in the library, often the first to arrive in the morning and the last to leave at night. Even for the commuter students at the American University-Cairo, the library has become a hub of social activity because the campus is located out in the desert, far from the buzzing activity of downtown Cairo.

ESL students also demonstrate a wide range of technological experience and ability. Some have grown up with full access to the Internet, others have never had an e-mail account. It is important that no assumptions be made regarding comfort with any aspect of technology, from basic Internet searching to Web 2.0 applications.

In addition, ESL students sometimes do not know what to make of the librarians. Is the man behind the reference desk a faculty member or a clerk? Are they there to assist students, or will a question distract them from more important work? Many cultures are extremely respectful of authority, and this extends to faculty and other university employees.

In other cases, however, students see the reference desk as akin to a fast food drive though window, where they can wait and chat with friends while the librarian scurries into the stacks to fetch a book. Some students are delighted with all aspects of using the library, from interacting with the librarians to checking out books.

Upon arriving to the Cumberland University campus last year, one particular international student was astonished when librarians told him that using the computers, checking out books, and other library services were available free of charge. Of course, these examples are on opposite ends of the how-

ESL-students-view-librarians spectrum, and it is the rare student who would fit squarely into one description or the other. Librarians should be prepared to serve each ESL student as an individual, and develop the ability to assess and meet needs.

The most prevalent challenge related to working with ESL students is certainly the language barrier. ESL students generally exhibit a wide range of English-language proficiency, both written and spoken. Even undergraduate students who are native English speakers often find research databases difficult to use. 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. Students at the American University-Cairo must take or exempt out of a noncredit-bearing information literacy course in order to graduate. Most take it as freshmen, and very few are familiar with the research process or library databases. Students participate in class discussion and write blog entries to express what they have learned. It is interesting to observe how some are more quiet, preferring to express themselves through written English on the blogs. 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.

In addition, the matter of accented speech must be addressed. It is an awkward situation for both librarian and student when a verbal disconnect develops during a reference interview. A colleague at a university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) shared the following experience. During her first few months in the UAE, a female Emirati student approached the reference desk and asked for assistance finding sources on "sexes and education." The librarian, excited at this opportunity to help with research, immediately began searching for sources using the keywords *gender* and *education*. Soon, though, it became apparent that there was some sort of problem. The librarian and student were just going in circles, with the student dissatisfied with both the search terms and results. Just when they

seemed to be at an impasse, the librarian asked the young woman to write down her paper topic, as a final effort to produce some sort of satisfactory result. She arrived at the "ah-ha" moment as the student wrote down her topic: success and education.

When working with ESL students, it is surprising how much confusion one unusually emphasized syllable can cause. Not only is it important to be cognizant of the speech differences of ESL students, but it is also necessary for librarians to maintain self-awareness about their own speech patterns or accents that could cause confusion.

Certainly all of these obstacles are easily overcome with patience and some simple techniques. Difficulties that these students face in adjusting to a new culture and education system are truly minor when compared to the ways in which ESL students can contribute to the learning environment with diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

Student expectations

ESL students tend to be bright and motivated; indeed they are ambitious enough to work towards a degree in a non-native language. They may see attending college as a great privilege, and even more of a privilege to study abroad in an English-language institution. Many international students view the library as a place where they can work towards their academic success. Quiet study areas and access to computers or other technology are common expectations.

Librarians must also recognize that students from different cultures may have learning styles that differ from those of North American students. For example, in China and the Middle East, students are not used to participating in class discussion. They are accustomed to being given information by a professor in an authoritative position, and quietly digesting what they have been taught.[1] Librarians may find that students from these cultures tend be remain quiet and let the person that is seen as an expert of the reference desk do the talking.

Tools and techniques

Learning to provide effective reference service

to ESL students is not difficult. Simply speaking clearly at a slower pace is immensely helpful. It is also wise to avoid using slang or colloquialisms, and to be aware of strong accents (American or otherwise) that may be difficult for students to understand. Students who are nervous about their ability to communicate may avoid asking librarians for help.

A study of non-native English-speaking students has shown that perceived barriers in communication with library staff causes high levels of anxiety for these students.[2] As a result, it is important for librarians to speak in a way that is easy to understand, thus increasing student confidence in verbal comprehension. It should be noted that many of the recommended techniques for interacting with ESL students are already considered best practices for reference service.

In addition to making a conscious effort at slower-paced, clearer speech, avoiding library jargon is an easy way to increase communication. In some cases, library-speak is necessary— what else would one call the catalog? Take a few moments to define terms like this, as well as *database, stacks, peer-reviewed, call number,* etc., which are likely unfamiliar terms to any new undergraduate. It is ideal to pause and carefully explain terms like these; this should simply be part of the reference interview process.

As illustrated by the "success and education" anecdote above, asking lots of questions can be very helpful. It is not always clear what a student is looking for, and this issue only becomes more problematic when a language barrier is present. Even if it seems that the student has given you two obvious keywords, continue to ask questions. Where have you searched already? What did you find? Of course, requesting that the student write down the research topic can sometimes truly clear up misunderstandings. Baron and Strout-Dapez encourage librarians to "make every reference encounter an instructional experience," using careful communication and questions so that the interaction becomes a teaching opportunity.[3]

It would also be worthwhile for a reference librarian to become familiar with a particular culture, or several. In the case of

an American-style university overseas, the majority of students may be local and thus share cultural and social characteristics. Some institutions in the United States may tend to have groups of international students from the same or similar cultures. This is, of course, not to be taken as encouragement to stereotype students into uniform groups. In addition, simply developing relationships with students can be a way to overcome barriers and move towards effective communication. Showing an interest in the student's home country or culture can go far in developing rapport and making them feel comfortable and confident not only in the library, but in the university setting.

Outreach towards this population can take the form of hosting a library orientation or workshop specifically for international students, creating marketing materials in other languages, or even ensuring that a representative from the library is in attendance at other gatherings, such as an international student club. These methods can help demonstrate that the library is aware and sensitive towards this group. Also offering information specifically for ESL students on the library Web site in the form of a FAQ section or a LibGuide can ease the learning curve. These Web guides could include an overview of library practices and services, a glossary of library terms, contact information for a reference librarian, etc.[4] The first step is to assess the needs of ESL students and then provide the information necessary to meet them.

Conclusion

When providing reference service to ESL students, it is crucial that librarians remain open-minded, patient, and persistent. Keep in mind that these students come from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. They may have little experience with libraries and librarians, or they may be perfectly comfortable in this setting. They may view the services offered in the library as privileges or as rights. They may speak or write perfect English or struggle with grammar or vocabulary. Of course, they may fall somewhere in the middle of all these extremes, and it is the librarian's responsibility to assess and meet their research needs appropriately.

By considering the ideas and using the techniques discussed in this article, perhaps librarians can become confident and competent in serving ESL students.

Further reading

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