

Information Literacy and International Students: cultural barriers and language preferences

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ABSTRACT

Even with the prevalence of a global culture, cultural and language barriers continue to present challenges for information professionals. Furthermore, international students are increasingly turning to library instruction classes for discovering library programs and resources. With the presence of cultural and language barriers, information literacy initiatives are forced to address the disparity in cultural displacement. The inclusion of language preferences in library instruction classes and information literacy initiatives would benefit international students and information professionals. The paper demonstrates that language and cultural barriers hinder international students from fully experiencing a library and its resources. Furthermore, this paper shows that limited exposure to library resources affects international students negatively by limiting their participation in the academic discourse. With a review of relevant literature, this paper calls for the inclusion of language preferences in information literacy initiatives and instruction classes. Moreover, the paper calls for

a review of training methodology for information professional to addresses the concerns of international students.

KEYWORDS: Information literacy, international students, cultural barriers, library instruction, language preferences, library orientation

1. INTRODUCTION

International students are an integral part of higher academia. Academic institutions around the world rely on international students for their economic, social, and academic contributions. These brave travelers leave what is familiar and enter a world with limited cultural and language background. Upon their arrival, they are introduced to various academic departments and student organizations. Out of all these encounters, their introduction to academic libraries and their resources play a vital role in their academic and social development. Academic librarians and information professionals facilitate this encounter by offering

library tours, instruction classes, reference services, developing tutorials and subject guides. Although these are effective methods for promoting information literacy at academic libraries, the unique case of international students requires some modifications to the traditional definition of information literacy. Patrick Ragains¹, using the ACRL's standards for information competency, defines an "information-literate individual" as a person who can: "determine the extent of information needed"; "access the needed information effectively and efficiently"; "Evaluate information and its sources critically"; "incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base and use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose." Based on this definition of an "information-literate individual," international students, with their cultural and language difficulties, will be in the periphery of information literacy "competency standards." The study edited by Patrick Ragains empowers information professionals by discussing the needs of students in various academic disciplines. However, information literacy programs, if promoted through a subject specific channel, will ignore the need for a language and cultural component. Without properly "setting the stage," information professionals and international students will encounter each other in a static environment, unable to fully experience each other's needs and aspirations.

Stressing the need for diversity in teaching information literacy, Lori S. Mestre² suggests a cross-cultural approach when interacting with students from diverse backgrounds. Acknowledging the presence of diverse cultures in an academic library setting, Lori Mestre highlights the linguistic needs of cultural groups. Moreover, Lori Mestre calls for a "culturally responsive instruction" when promoting information literacy to international students and other cultural groups. By providing a 'culturally responsive' environment, libraries can empower students from different cultural

¹ Ragains, Patrick. (2006). Setting the stage for information literacy education. In P. Ragains (Ed.), *Information Literacy Instruction That Works*. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 4.

² Mestre, Lori. (2008). Diversity: cross cultural instruction. In C.N. Cox & E. Lindsay (Eds), *Information Literacy Instruction Handbook*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 193-207.

backgrounds. As she states: "regardless of their background, students need to know that library staff care about them. Feeling ignored and disrespected will very likely adversely affect students' experience at the institution. Providing successful library experiences early on can foster the view in students that the resources (including staff resources) of the library can enhance their academic potential."³ Information professionals can successfully promote information literacy to international students with an understanding that language preferences and cultural issues are thoroughly integrated in their instruction classes.

2. CULTURAL BARRIERS

Even with the rise of a "global culture," information professionals are painfully aware that cultural barriers continue to pose a serious challenge to libraries and their information literacy initiatives. Under the current climate of "morally superior cultures and values," international students and information professionals are forced to address each other, with long established perceptions of their respective cultures. Furthermore, as Penny Moore points out, there are "cultural expectations and standards" for any information literacy curriculum: "...Resources issues aside, these pedagogical practices may not entirely compatible with those historically applied elsewhere. Information literacy demands a new way of thinking about learning and teaching that may be in conflict with cultural standards and expectations about the roles of students and educators."⁴ In order to defuse the "conflict of expectations and standards," international students and information professionals have to establish a communication system, which is based on cultural immersion. Librarians and information professionals for too long have relied on faculty and departmental collaboration for addressing the needs of international students. The cultural barriers experienced by international students and information professional is the result of limited exposure. By engaging international students directly through cultural and student organizations, academic libraries can effectively deliver information literacy education and initiate a dialogue on cross-cultural

³ Ibid., 194.

⁴ Moore, Penny. (2005). An analysis of information literacy education worldwide. *School Libraries Worldwide*, 11(2), 1-23.

understanding. International students have risked their comfort zone by engaging institutions and professionals in an unfamiliar culture and language. Librarians and information professionals can match their courage by actively participating in the social and academic development of international students.

3. LANGUAGE PREFERENCES

In addition to cultural barriers, international students are hindered from fully utilizing a library's resources by language limitations. These limitations are further exacerbated by the usage of technical terminology and the presence of diverse language families. In order to address language preferences, Miriam E. Conteh-Morgan proposes "a new model for information literacy instruction" by actively involving language instructors in library orientation classes. Although Conteh-Morgan's model specifically addresses ESL students, the inclusion of second language instructors in developing information literacy programs would enable information professionals to incorporate relevant language preferences. According to Conteh-Morgan, "...using the language specialists to teach both language and information skills, both of which are necessary for this specialized group of students' academic success, can only mean the enhanced language and library skills, and ultimately, empowerment of students."⁵ The inclusion of language specialists would strengthen information literacy initiatives, enabling information professionals to successfully deliver information vital to the international student's academic development; library programs, resources, materials, and reference services. In discussing the classroom environment, Dawn Amsberry, in "Talking the talk: library classroom communication and international students,"⁶ explores "classroom communication" from the perspective of international students. Using the "speech modification" methods from second language acquisition theory, Amsberry's insightful study

highlights the usage of "pronunciation," "grammar," "vocabulary" when interacting with international students.⁷ Since language is "the primary barrier" for international students, Amsberry recommends that information professionals change their "classroom communication" styles to match the needs of "non-native speakers." Among the changes proposed by Amsberry, the choice of vocabulary, usage of "library related jargon," and "idioms and cultural references," are particular areas where information professionals could implement changes in "classroom communication." If language preferences were to be included in information literacy education, then information professionals should include these modifications to their "classroom communication" style. Without a "language comfort zone," which welcomes language preferences, international students and information professionals will continue to operate with language barriers. Information literacy relies on effective communication methods, information professionals would benefit greatly if they utilize language specialists and educators when engaging international students.

Due to the broad of mission of information literacy education, information professionals are challenged to address language preference needs in electronic resources. As the study by Fu Zhuo, Jenny Emanuel, and Shuqin Jiao⁸ indicates, language preferences in the form of multilingual glossaries and databases with "additional language features," enable international students to access electronic resources as efficiently as the native speakers. The exhaustive study by Fu Zhuo, Jenny Emanuel and Shuqin Jiao emphasizes the importance of multilingual features in addressing the cultural and language barriers experienced by international students. Unfortunately, information professionals and libraries worldwide are dependent on corporate vendors for design and content features. The heavy reliance on corporate vendors prevents information professionals from properly conducting an assessment of their community. The diversity of communities and languages are incompatible with the model proposed by

⁵Conteh-Morgan, M. (2001). Empowering ESL students: a new model for information literacy instruction. *Research Strategies* 18, 36,

⁶ Amsberry, D. (2008). Talking the talk: library classroom communication and international students. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 34(4), 354.

⁷ Ibid., 355-356.

⁸ Zhuo, F. & Emanuel, J. (2007). International students and language preferences in library database use. *Technical Services Quarterly*, 24(4), 1-13.

corporate vendors. The development of community centered language features would accurately reflect the cultural and linguistic identity of international students and their support communities. The inclusion of language preferences in electronic resources would encourage international students to be active participants in their respective academic communities. The language isolation felt by so many non-native speakers urgently requires community developed language interfaces, glossaries, and dictionaries. The ideals behind information literacy require specificity and not a general template for all communities.

4. CONCLUSION

The presence of international students on college campuses enriches an institution's intellectual capacity. With their academic contributions, international students have advanced the cause for an integrated, multilingual, universal education system. As they embark on their academic careers, international students are extremely sensitive to cultural displacement and language barriers. Academic libraries and information professionals are in a unique position to welcome and assist international students effectively. With a special emphasis on language and culture, information professionals can develop information literacy programs and initiatives that are ideal for international students. Furthermore, academic libraries, with an inclusive agenda, can develop community based language resources that accurately reflect the needs of their international patrons. In addition to embedding language features in electronic resources, information professionals must make an effort include the following features in their electronic catalogs: transliteration tables, multilingual dictionaries, and glossary of library terms. Embedding transliteration tables in library catalogs would assist international students to fully utilize a library's print collection. In

addition to supporting multilingual features, academic libraries, with the help of international student organizations, should actively engage students through cross-cultural dialogue and collaboration. Information professionals and international students, through information literacy programs, can achieve what governments and international actors have failed to do thus far; they can exchange information without the need for self-preservation or self-promotion.

5. REFERENCES

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