CHAPTER 4

Tailoring Library Instruction to Meet the Needs of Multilingual Students in Higher Education

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Introduction

One of the challenges of library instruction is creating teaching sessions that support the needs of diverse groups of students with varying levels of comfort and experience with inquiry projects. This chapter provides a brief overview of the challenges multilingual students face in library instruction sessions and offers strategies for addressing those issues.

Multilingual students are "international students who speak English as a foreign language, visa students who speak a World English variety, recent

immigrants from non-English-speaking countries, and long-term residents, also known as 'Generation 1.5 students.'"[1] While these students are considered multilingual, the amount of information educators have about their backgrounds, behaviors, and literacy practices varies significantly. International students are the most-studied group, perhaps partly due to the fact that it is less difficult to follow their experience as their status is documented in multiple university databases. Currently, approximately 5 percent of the US student body comprises international students, with some campuses seeing as many as 20 percent.[2] International students' enrollment at US universities and colleges has grown considerably in the past decades, increasing almost forty times from 1949 to 2016 and reaching 1,043,839 students.[3] These students contributed $32.8 billion to the economy and supported more than 400,000 jobs during the 2015–2016 academic year alone; the overall impact of their presence is difficult to estimate.[4] Since the 2010–2011 academic year, China, India, Saudi Arabia, and South Korea have become the top four leading places of origin of international students. Students from these four countries account for almost 60 percent of all international student population during the 2015–2016 academic year.[5]

While many data sets focus on international students, information on immigrant and resident multilingual students is significantly more difficult to locate due to reporting constraints and personal reasons. For example, students might choose to focus on their English skills and omit reporting other languages. Even so, census data provides preliminary insight into this growing group. The American Community Survey (ACS) 2009–2013 data reported that there were at least 350 different languages spoken at home in the United States by residents who are age five years and over.[6] From 1980 to 2010, the number of US residents who spoke a language other than English at home increased by 158.2 percent.[7] This data covers all US residents who filled census questionnaires; thus, the information aggregated includes recent and long-term immigrants and individuals born in the US who are speaking other languages at home. There is no clear way to connect this data to enrollment statistics, but it can offer a glimpse in the linguistic diversity of domestic students, who are typically conceptualized as primarily English speaking. For the purposes of this chapter, the term multilingual is applied to any student speaking a language other than English or a less common dialect of English as their primary language.

Literature Review

Multilingual students face diverse needs and challenges in academic contexts, with one of the key challenges arising from the students' level of linguistic

proficiency and preparedness to fulfill complex academic tasks in English.[8,9] Several studies from Australian institutions compared the skills and need for remedial courses among international and domestic students respectively. Andrade reported on the connection between linguistic proficiency and academic achievement, stating that international students demonstrate higher levels of need for support and slightly lower levels of language skills.[10] While these studies have not been replicated in the US, it is reasonable to expect some transfer of results. Depending on the country where they received their education, international students who come to study in US colleges might be more proficient in writing and reading rather than speaking and listening, which leads to challenges with understanding lectures and participating in classroom activities.[11]

Studies focusing on students, faculty, and administrative staff have consistently identified communicative skills as a challenge in academic performance for international students.[12,13] A key study found that listening and simultaneously performing another task is a primary concern for international students.[14] In higher education, where active learning exercises have become popular, the combination of skills necessary to participate in these activities can be a challenge for Asian international students whose preference is to study alone or learn from lectures. However, as Wong notes in their study of Asian international students in Australia, the preference for active learning formats increased proportionally with the time an international student spent at an English-speaking university and the resulting increase in English-language proficiency.[15]

Contrarily, domestic multilingual students are more likely to exhibit significantly higher oral over written proficiency. The students from this group are also likely to have attended school in the US, either in mainstream or ESL classes. However, this is not always the case as some multilingual students may come from refugee families and may have had little or no access to educational opportunities in refugee camps,[16,17] or may come from communities that place a higher value on oral traditions (e.g., Somali culture), and thus may have limited exposure to written culture.[18,19] In addition, linguistic profiling and/or discrimination[20] might make domestic multilingual students less likely to speak in class or, conversely, lead to negative attitudes toward educational institutions and requirements to participate in very specific academic practices.

Both international and domestic multilingual students face challenges in adapting to their new academic environment. The first issue is mastering academic English in addition to general academic proficiency. This can be very difficult even for proficient students, as academic English is sometimes semi-jokingly described as a dialect of its own with its distinct vocabulary, syntax, and even grammatical structures. Academic language is filled with

specific terminology, with many words of Greco-Latin origin, longer clauses, and multiple clauses in sentences, as well as complex grammatical features describing probabilities and hypothetical situations.[21] Moreover, using academic English competently requires socialization into the specific discourses, i.e., being introduced to discipline-specific contexts.[22] These features make academic American English complicated for the majority of students, but multilingual students face additional struggles with getting accustomed to the new dialect and finding their communication style.

Moreover, vocabulary presents a particular challenge for multilingual students. First, search engines often produce desirable results with very specific terms only; as such, a student translating their search terms from a different language is likely to struggle. Second, using academic English often involves words that acquire specific "academic" meanings that can differ by discipline, thus making matters more complicated. In addition, nuances of arguments are often conveyed through subtle differences between words, which can be difficult for multilingual students to identify. For example, the strength of the author's conviction in their argument may differ as something they *claim*, *posit*, or *present*. On the opposite end of the spectrum are difficulties that arise when instructors use informal language, especially idioms and metaphors that rely on phenomena exclusive to the US experience. For example, baseball-based metaphors might be difficult to understand for students who have never played or paid attention to the game.

In addition to the technical challenges of deciphering complex grammatical clauses and inferring the meaning of new words, many multilingual students experience difficulties in understanding genre conventions. A genre, in this case, is the typical way ideas are expressed in a particular field. For instance, some conventions of a typical first-year writing course paper might include an introductory paragraph that uses a "hook" to draw the reader's attention, briefly describes the context, and introduces the thesis accompanied by a preview of claims. This format is very familiar to students who studied the genre of academic papers in US high schools but may be challenging for students from other cultures. This can translate into multilingual students' struggling to skim resources in order to select the ones most likely to be suitable for the assignment. Beyond struggling with genre conventions in terms of format, multilingual students may face additional challenges in more abstract areas—for example, defining what makes an argument strong and identifying appropriate evidence. Evaluating sources can also be challenging as ideas on what makes sources credible are culturally dependent. Last, understanding the importance of following a specific source documentation style is necessary for giving credit in appropriate ways.[23-25] American academic culture places a high value on citation practices, and that can be especially difficult for students from other cultures.

Specific to libraries, research indicates that international and multilingual students are more likely to experience challenges with linguistic demands of library instruction stemming from listening and speaking requirements. A library instructional session may present particular challenges for students in several aspects. First, the librarian might be using unfamiliar words (e.g., microfiche), familiar words in new contexts (e.g., discussing the logic of search queries), or abbreviations and acronyms (e.g., ILL instead of interlibrary loan). While these terms may not be familiar to students in general, multilingual students are more likely to struggle with deriving the meaning from context or devising possible explanations for the acronyms. Being able to learn new concepts while running practice searches and trying to find the most effective combination of search words requires a sophisticated understanding of academic context as well as high levels of proficiency with reading, listening, and possibly speaking.

A number of factors around library instruction can influence how the needs of multilingual learners are addressed, such as instruction approaches, class content, and theoretical and pedagogical considerations. It is important to note that while multilingual students face a particular set of challenges, each issue in particular is not unique to their experience and may present difficulties for other groups; therefore, this chapter focuses on using Universal Design principles in offering strategies, hoping that they will support not only multilingual students but others as well.

Discussion

Current library instruction approaches or methods vary by institutional context and discipline. Most common is the one-shot approach, which is defined as a librarian going into a class for a single lesson within a course. Bean and Thomas note that in most contexts, the one-shot's goal is "cram[ming] as much information about as many library resources as possible into a single class period."[26] The one-shot is widely criticized for the idea that students could become information literate in a single fifty-minute session.[27] While the one-shot is the most common instruction method, newer or blended methods have entered into the instruction sphere.

Online tutorials, podcasts, and video lectures have gained popularity with library instruction in both creating more accessible library instruction and for applying the flipped classroom model.[28] Online tutorials, video lectures, and podcasts can help give students on-demand access to skills or ideas they might have missed during in-person instruction. Library instructors can reuse these items to cut down on preparation time and promote them to colleagues facing similar challenges. The flipped classroom model, an

instructional strategy that reverses or "flips" learning by delivering instructional content outside of the classroom, helps promote active learning and thus avoids the passive approach that lectures may take. In the flipped classroom model, instructors engage with students through activities, experiments, discussions, and other project- or problem-based learning opportunities.

To illustrate, problem-based library instruction mimics real-life activities for researchers and students in order to get students to develop a solution for a research question.[29] While this model generates higher student participation than the traditional lecture-style one-shot, it can be more time-consuming for the library instructor and requires faculty support.[30] The cognitive apprenticeship model situates the learner in a real-world situation, where the instructor models behaviors of that skill or subject.[31] Modifying this problem-based learning to the library context, the library instructor creates a fictitious research character and has students act as a research consultant to said character.[32] Business presentation techniques, such as using storytelling as instruction, can help instructors with developing scenarios for one-shot classes instead of the typical lecture method.[33]

The approach a librarian takes to their instruction session is only one piece of the instruction challenge. The content is as important as the approach. The content of a typical library or information literacy instruction session includes orientation to the library and the library website, developing a research question, search strategies, and using general or discipline-specific databases. It is not unusual to be asked to cover all of the aforementioned items in a single class session.

The challenge—as mentioned in the criticism of the one-shot—is trying to decide how much to cover in a single lesson. Principles of Cognitive Load Theory suggest that instructional support should help balance the load placed on students' working memory.[34] Learners exert minimal cognitive effort when they are able to apply prior knowledge to new knowledge. On the other hand, students who have no prior knowledge of a subject experience higher cognitive load while comprehending, learning, and remembering. This can be a challenge for students when library instructors try to cover too much in a short period of time without connecting those items to students' prior knowledge. Pickens suggests that to minimize the cognitive load on students for library instruction, library instructors should augment instruction with research guides, multimedia tutorials, and modifying the search environment.[35]

A number of pedagogical and theoretical considerations add to this challenge. In addition to cognitive load, instructors need to consider what it means to become information literate and whether this should be the goal of an instruction session. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) recently introduced the *Framework for Information Literacy for*

Higher Education, featuring six frames with a novice to expert spectrum to each frame.[36] Each frame provides examples of knowledge practice and dispositions that library instructors can use as a guide to develop learning instruction sessions that lessen cognitive load with the aim of concentration and understanding instead of broadest-possible coverage. For instance, in the frame Scholarship as Conversation, an information-literate student should be able to identify barriers to entering scholarly conversations through various venues. It is challenging for a student to know what these scholarly venues are if they are not given the opportunity to discover them within their coursework. Integrating the *Framework* can be a challenge in library instruction because it may appear to be too theoretical. Using backward design approaches, like Wiggins and McTighe's Understanding by Design,[37,38] can help ease the burden of not having enough time to figure out what to cover. Understanding by Design, which helped inform the *Framework* to create information literacy lessons, is a three-stage approach to designing lessons and curriculum where the first stage focuses on the big ideas of learning and learning goals, the second on assessment evidence, and the third on planning of learning activities. This approach to designing instruction aims to ease learners' cognitive load by encouraging the development of learning over time, or what is known as scaffolding instruction.

With these considerations in mind, how can instructional best practices help serve multilingual students? The main consideration is to move from creating instructional sessions to meet the needs of each group of students toward creating sessions that address a variety of needs, i.e., using a universal design approach. While the one-shot approach is not necessarily the best context for instruction, it is quite often the only option. Thoughtfully planned instruction that is inclusive of the challenges multilingual students face can help both the library instructors and the students. Using the previously mentioned Understanding by Design[39] approach to backward design paired with what is known about the challenges students face around understanding American idioms and metaphors, the instructor could plan a lesson using more inclusive or understandable language and search examples. For instance, some instructors use Western pop-culture examples like *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, or *The Bachelor* in instruction sessions, aiming to be more relevant to students. While doing so may be more relevant to some students, it does not take into consideration students who might find these terms as confusing as "microfiche" or "interlibrary loan."

Planning a lesson with a relevant, universal example such as the research process may take longer, but the instruction would be more effective for all, not just for those with a prior understanding of the issue. Removing idioms specific to the American English dialect from the language used in instruction creates inclusivity and helps students avoid the cognitive overload of

having to learn and understand new skills while also having to contextualize the example itself. One strategy that may be effective is to show students how to work with language corpora to test their search terms, since multilingual students may struggle with finding the most effective search phrases for their queries. A language corpus is a collection of texts that can be searched and/or browsed to see how a particular word is used, such as the Corpus of Contemporary American English.[40] Using a tool like this enables the students to see the context and to understand what disciplines and genres are more likely to use specific words. For example, after running consecutive searches for "city planning" and "urban planning," a student will be able to see that "city planning" is used primarily in magazines and news articles, whereas "urban planning" appears in academic contexts as well. Other tools, such as Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE),[41] offer more advanced search options, enabling students to explore word usage by discipline, type of event, or the speakers' status in the academia. Using language corpora provides multilingual students with a versatile tool for addressing some of their vocabulary challenges as it allows them to focus on the context rather than the simple translation of a word.

Using inclusive examples with the help of a language corpus is not only suitable for one-shot sessions but can be a part of all library instruction, including problem-based learning and the cognitive apprenticeship model. One use of the cognitive apprenticeship model to help multilingual students is to focus on genre convention issues. Using this model, the instructor can plan for addressing and modeling appropriate genre conventions to all students. For example, the library instructor can model the communication between researchers and address abstract ideas around the academic research process without singling out students unfamiliar with the process. Taking this process further, students can work together to create research-related communication strategies and develop search strategies as a team. Students who have more familiarity with the context around the research process can serve as peer coaches to those who may be new to certain concepts. Working as a team can help minimize the cognitive load on students who are not as familiar with these conventions and help all learners apply their knowledge in contextual scenarios.

Given that multilingual students often struggle with genre conventions, library instructors can assist these learners by contextualizing the process of the American or Western scholarly conversation or the ACRL *Framework*'s Scholarship as Conversation. Viewing scholarship as conversation could help students develop stronger arguments, select more appropriate sources, and evaluate them in more insightful ways. Taking the abstract idea of scholarship and the concrete idea of publishing conventions can assist multilingual students to better understand the process. Contextualizing the ideas gives all

students a foundation for learning, making it easier to transfer their knowledge to their assignments and overall academic career. Students who have an advanced understanding of publishing conventions and functions can, for example, use this knowledge later to make connections needed for synthesis in a literature review.

Library instructors can also address genre conventions and language use when creating online learning modules and guides. To help remove some of the academic jargon, one suggestion is to use a writing app such as the Hemingway Editor[42] to assess the level of the language used on a spectrum of easy-to-read to hard-to-read. Library instructors can add their text to see if the language or words are readable at the level of the target student population.

Conclusion

With the growing number of multilingual students entering colleges and universities, it is increasingly important for all student support and instructional staff to understand the challenges these students face in interacting with higher education systems. While it is impossible to generalize the experiences of students from such diverse linguistic, cultural, and economic backgrounds, research into multilingualism offers insights that can be helpful in designing support programs with the needs of these students in mind. Addressing the learning experience of international and multilingual learners allows librarians to help individuals who may have less experience with information literacy practices common in US colleges. In addition to improving the experience of multilingual students, using universal design principles is beneficial for all students.

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