

3-19-2019

## Strategies for Teaching Information Literacy to English Language Learners


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### Recommended Citation

Tran, Clara Y. and Aytac, Selenay (2019) "Strategies for Teaching Information Literacy to English Language Learners," *Collaborative Librarianship*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 4 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol10/iss4/5>

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*Peer Reviewed*

## Strategies for Teaching Information Literacy to English Language Learners

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### Abstract

Academic librarians are encountering a growing number of English Language Learners (ELLs) every day, as our classrooms have become more linguistically diverse every year. In this dramatically changing environment, academic librarians are expected to meet the needs of increasingly diverse students speaking multiple languages. The purpose of this paper is to present widely used teaching strategies to support ELLs based on an exhaustive literature review. Study also suggests collaboration among ESL or classroom instructors and librarians to enhance semester-long learning experience.

Keywords: information literacy, English language learners, teaching strategies

### Introduction

Academic librarians are encountering a growing number of English Language Learners (ELLs) every day. Classrooms become more linguistically diverse every year with many students with varied English language skill levels. In this dramatically changing environment, academic librarians are expected to meet the information literacy (IL) needs of increasingly diverse students.

International student enrollment in United States higher education has increased about 59% over the past decade. In 2016-2017, there were 903,127 international students enrolled in institutions of higher education, whereas in 2007-2008, the enrollment was 567,039.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the

number of international students in Canada increased by over 40% between 2015 and 2017 alone.<sup>2</sup>

International students who study abroad leave their home and adapt to a new learning and living environment while generally needing to become proficient in a new language. They need to overcome the language barrier and cultural differences to assimilate and feel more comfortable in an unfamiliar environment.

Some international students may prefer to enhance their English proficiency through an ESL program at their university before advancing to their degree courses. ESL programs commonly include classes to cover the four language skills of "speaking, listening, reading, and writing."<sup>3</sup> Many students who are learning English already speak several other languages. Therefore, the



authors will refer to this target patron group as English Language Learners (ELLs).

Teaching IL skills becomes especially challenging when students who have limited English proficiency struggle with language and cultural issues. ESL instructors are trained in teaching English proficiency to students, while librarians are skilled in teaching IL to library users. Librarians have limited training in the most effective methods for working with ELLs, and it is unreasonable to expect all instruction librarians to pursue the same advanced degree as ESL instructors. Yet, some teaching theories, strategies, and pedagogies need to be learned to provide effective IL acquisition for ELLs.<sup>4</sup> Ishimura and Bartlett conducted a survey (N=254) to understand academic librarians' experience in teaching international students.<sup>5</sup> A majority of the respondents reported that teaching library skills to international students was not always smooth and that both librarians and students could cause difficult situations.<sup>6</sup> Importantly, 66.9% of participants answered that "they want to have opportunities for training."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Click, Wiley, and Houlihan analyzed 231 library and information science (LIS) publications to present a systematic review on international students, and concluded that further research is needed to identify best practices for teaching IL to this specific group of learners.<sup>8</sup>

We hope that this paper will support academic librarians in meeting the challenges of teaching IL to ELLs. We have a combined 30 years of experience teaching IL to ELLs. Through this experience, we have learned what works for this unique group of learners, and combined with the extensive literature review, we draw on this experience to share some recommendations for academic librarians.

## Literature Review

Teaching IL skills to ELLs is not an easy task as many ELLs face cultural and/or linguistic difficulties. The literature review reveals that there have been multiple attempts to ease IL acquisition challenges. While studying abroad, international students encounter all sorts of barriers, including economic, social, psychological, and technological. Moreover, there are many factors that hinder international students' educational success including both cultural and linguistic challenges.<sup>9</sup> Park, Klieve, Tsurutani, and Harte found that accented English is a factor that can have a significant impact on students' communicative and academic success.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, anxiety can also affect ELLs' learning ability.<sup>11</sup>

### *Library Support*

Libraries play a key role in student learning. Several studies show how librarians find ways to support international students in adjusting to a new learning environment. Adams states that librarians can make ELL students feel secure and welcome by providing access to library resources and services.<sup>12</sup> Cooper and Hughes studied first-year international graduate students' information-seeking strategies and reported that students found that conducting research for their classes is very different from their undergraduate experiences in their home countries.<sup>13</sup> In the same vein, Kim examined emotional changes of ESL students during their information seeking process.<sup>14</sup> According to her findings, students who received systematic intervention during the research process became significantly more satisfied and less frustrated as they progressed in their research projects.<sup>15</sup> Houlihan, Wiley, and Click found that a hands-on approach to library instruction was one of the top recommendations across the LIS literature, followed by campus collaboration.<sup>16</sup>

Other studies include international students' use of library resources and space.<sup>17</sup> Carlyle wrote that some of the international students at [Mount](#)



[Saint Vincent University](#) in Halifax did not realize that it was free to use the library since their home libraries required a fee, and suggested that the free-to-use nature be made clear to international students to encourage usage.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Conteh-Morgan pointed out that not many ESL students attended libraries' general orientation programs, as ESL students were generally "not typically regarded as undergraduates" until they finished their ESL program.<sup>19</sup> Thus, more promotional efforts need to be done to attract international students to use the library.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Collaboration Between ESL Instructors/Teaching Faculty and Librarians*

Notably, collaborative efforts between ESL instructors and librarians also make an impact on delivering information literacy to ELLs. Nilles and Simon state that "librarians [should] give up the idea that only they can teach basic library information skills".<sup>21</sup> In transitioning ELLs to a new academic environment, librarians need to work closely with ESL instructors to enhance international students' information literacy skills,<sup>22</sup> providing a meaningful collaboration between ESL instructors and librarians.<sup>23</sup> Kamhi-Stein and Stein collaborated with ESL instructors and applied six library instruction principles to enhance students' academic performance such as providing "students with comprehensible input" and "scaffolds."<sup>24</sup> To achieve the goals of enhancing international students' experience, ESL instructors and librarians innovate their instructional models to ease IL acquisition and support ELLs' academic success.<sup>25</sup> This model may only work if both instructors collaborate and take advantage of each other's pedagogical strengths. Conteh-Morgan demonstrates how the application of second language acquisition theories and teaching practices can impact IL instruction outcomes.<sup>26</sup> Conteh-Morgan further emphasizes the importance of using pertinent theories of second-language learning

and proposes a new and more effective collaborative model of using an ESL instructor-in-charge to teach IL to ESL students.<sup>27</sup> According to this model, better and more effective IL instruction can only be provided by ESL instructors since librarians' lack of many necessary teaching skills for this specialty group of learners. Therefore Conteh-Morgan proposes to teach ESL instructors how to teach IL rather than vice versa.

Likewise, Cooper and Hughes studied the research and information needs of first-year international graduate students at the University of New Mexico and found that collaboration with the teaching faculty led to a better understanding of what was expected from the students regarding their course assignments.<sup>28</sup> Lombard collaborated with an English class instructor and was embedded in the online course to help ESL students who struggled with information literacy.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, Bordonaro suggested another collaborative approach to better connect IL instruction to ESL classrooms which is the use of "scholarship as a conversation" metaphor.<sup>30</sup> This model places different IL scenarios into ESL students reading, writing, or speaking activities and facilitates IL acquisition within the ESL curriculum.

#### *Functional and Specialized Librarian Support*

Other functional and specialized librarians also help ELLs transition to a new learning environment. Lombard underlined the importance of multicultural awareness in a distance learning librarian, who should be introduced first in the Learning Management System prior to the introduction to IL in an online course environment.<sup>31</sup> Park et al. studied English learners in an Australian context and emphasized the importance of pronunciation instructions for all ESL students, not just beginners.<sup>32</sup> If students can pronounce English more proficiently, they may feel better about asking for help from librarians.<sup>33</sup>



*Innovative Teaching Models and Strategies*

Literature also shows that the flipped classroom model benefits international students.<sup>34</sup> The flipped classroom, which allows international students to review materials and videos before the class, is another innovative and successful teaching model that LIS educators should consider.<sup>35</sup> Mehring also reports on the benefits of scaffolding learning from the pre-class assignment through in-class learning by enabling ESL students to engage in material before class.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, Soules, Nielson, Lee, and Rifae established an embedded information literacy model in their MA TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) program at California State University East Bay to “improve educational effectiveness” and found that their “approach allows for meaningful practice and increasingly complements applications of core information literacy principles.”<sup>37</sup>

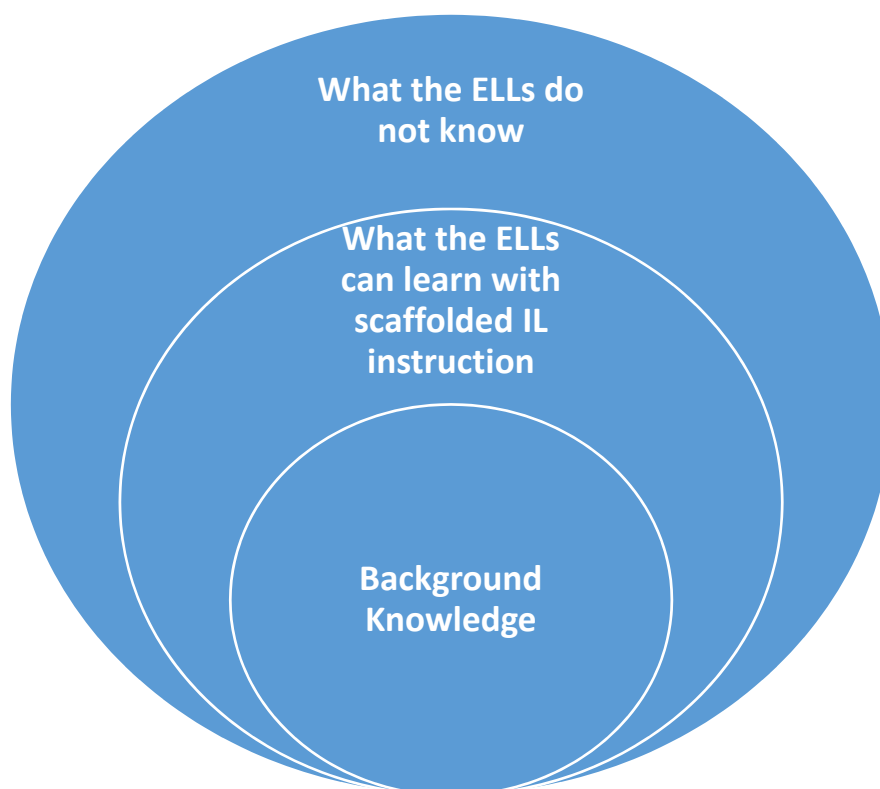
Librarians employ various teaching strategies in ESL classes to enhance international students’ English proficiency.<sup>38</sup> From her experience, Carlyle suggested seven strategies to work with ELLs: (1) slow down when working with ELLs, (2) do not assume librarians know what the students want, (3) use visual aids, (4) know the student demographic, (5) show interest, (6) break down barriers, and (7) smile.<sup>39</sup> Mokhtar et al. examined vocabulary learning strategies and found that vocabulary learning should include both “recalling” words and the ability to “apply” them to the language using context.<sup>40</sup> Johnston, Partridge, and Hughes studied Emirati ELLs who are learning English in the United Arab Emirates, and found that the ESL students only read the abstracts of the retrieved articles and made decisions based on this quick procedure.<sup>41</sup> They suggested that librarians should teach ESL students better scanning techniques to locate more reliable research articles.<sup>42</sup> Notably, Avery stated that strategies had to be adjusted to meet the needs of students when she found

out that students required “a more detailed instructional video for completing the concept map.”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Mokhtar et al. suggested that IL instruction should be tailored accordingly, using multiple strategies such as use of word walls during instruction.<sup>44</sup>

Other strategies also involve the use of technology. Green motivated ELLs to “create and share rich, multimodal and personal stories” through digital storytelling that would help students focus on the use of language.<sup>45</sup> Klapwijk and Du Toit used CD-ROM, short video clips, and interactive exercises in their blended-learning lesson to improve the reading comprehension of sixth grade ESL students.<sup>46</sup>

Scaffolding strategies can be beneficial to teaching librarians to focus and illustrate better understanding of IL practices. According to Vygotsky, scaffolding is an interactive process in which a teacher assists learners to build a ‘structure’ to contain and frame the new information.<sup>47</sup> The scaffolding metaphor originates from Vygotsky’s idea of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which lies in the social constructivist theoretical tradition. According to ZPD, there is a difference between what a learner can do without help and can do with help. If ZPD is applied to the IL framework, one will see that the ZPD is the distance between what students can do by themselves, and the learning that they can be helped to achieve with competent IL instruction provided by a librarian (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. The ZPD in IL Instruction.**

Some students learn best through visuals. Graphical organizers such as pictures, diagrams, and concept webs bring what may seem like disjointed elements together. A librarian might provide a diagram of a story. How can a librarian transform IL instruction with Vygotskian ideas? First of all, planning for IL instruction should be built on two salient features: using background knowledge of students and setting excellent objectives. Second, librarians should collaborate with classroom teachers in order to share responsibility for ELLs' learning and achievement. In a collaborative teaching environment, students have the opportunity to spend more time learning about IL skills while getting more individual attention from librarians during IL sessions. For more specific projects such as final papers, librarians can guide ELLs through each

step of the writing process with the model of the finished sample final paper in hand. This would be beneficial to show students how a final paper should appear. The following section includes the IL teaching strategies which were selected based on the above reviewed literature and the most popular textbook of methods and materials in TESOL.<sup>48</sup>

### **Discussions and Suggested Strategies**

#### *Background Knowledge*

This can be perhaps one of the crucial stages of IL lesson preparation. Questioning the students can help assess their background knowledge. For instance, a librarian can pose the following questions to ELLs prior to plagiarism instruction:

## Tran &amp; Aytac: Strategies for Teaching Information Literacy to English Language Learners

- Have you ever heard of the concept of plagiarism?
- Could you please give us an example?
- Have you ever seen anyone doing this prior to coming to the US to study?
- Is it acceptable?

Another example can be given from our general IL class instruction about the Library of Congress Classification System. Most international students are aware of library classification systems. However, most of them are familiar with the Dewey Decimal System, or Universal Decimal System. Once a librarian assesses this background knowledge of students, she can build new knowledge based on this existing background knowledge. Furthermore, communication with the classroom teacher can be beneficial to connect IL instruction with ESL lesson plans. In this way, even one-shot IL instruction can be relevant to ELLs as a meaningful part of a semester-long curriculum.

#### *The KWL Chart*

The letters KWL are an acronym for what students already **Know**, what they **Want** to know, and ultimately what they **Learned**. In the same vein, the KWL Chart is a great way to know what students already know about the content and background knowledge, and what they would like to learn (See Appendix A). By using this strategy, librarians can activate background knowledge and connect that with their IL lesson plan.<sup>49</sup> More importantly, KWL charts are a useful tool to assess what was taught in a very short period of time.

A good use of a KWL chart can be during the one-shot introduction to the library lesson plan for ELLs. A librarian can ask students:

- What do we **Know** about our Library?
- What we **Want** to learn about our Library?

- And at the end of the lesson: What we did **Learn**?

KWL charts can be used to engage ELLs in a new topic, activate prior knowledge, and monitor student learning. In the above example, a librarian can make a simple KWL chart and distribute or pass a blank sheet of paper and ask students to create their own chart. An example of a simple KWL chart can be seen in Appendix A. Students can respond, individually or in small groups, to the first prompt in column 1: What do you Know about this topic? The librarian can then create a master list of all students' responses as a display. Some students may not respond to the prompt in column 2: "What do you Want to know about this topic?" if they don't have much background knowledge. Therefore, it can be helpful to provide examples with a few questions about the library. At the end of the IL class, the librarian will lead the group in creating the "What we Learned" column by revisiting both column 1: "What we already Know" and column 2: "What we Want to learn."

#### *Visual Aids*

Just like KWL charts, graphic organizers and pictures can serve as scaffolding tools.<sup>50</sup> Particularly, graphic organizers can help students grasp IL concepts such as citing and citing correctly according to a citation style such as MLA or APA.

Many ELLs can benefit from using a visual aid with an annotated bibliography assignment or a challenging new assignment about literature searchong. Graphic organizers can be used when a librarian introduces citation styles to spell out the correct layout of the bibliographic elements according to a given style. Various kinds of visuals including pictures, diagrams, and illustrations are essential to good IL instruction.



## Tran &amp; Aytac: Strategies for Teaching Information Literacy to English Language Learners

*Realia*

The use of realia has been one of the most popular strategies in IL instruction for decades. Using realia – real things – to build background knowledge and new vocabulary makes the learning experience more sensory for ELLs. For instance, a librarian can bring copies of journal articles to the instruction lab to teach about peer-reviewed articles. Students can touch and feel the new type of resource while at the same time learning the new concept.

As another example, a librarian teaching citation styles and how to cite a source could use a monograph or a copy of a journal article as a visual cue for the exercise. This way the librarian exposes ELLs to more language as opposed to merely the concept of citing and citation styles.

*Word Wall*

A word wall in IL instruction is a powerful tool to strengthen new vocabulary skills for ELLs. A word wall can be an organized collection of words (and sometimes phrases) displayed on a wall or other space in the classroom. An example of a word wall activity and the rubric can be seen in Appendix B, titled “Library Lingo,” where students are asked to play a special game which is similar to “Bingo.” The purpose of this game is to introduce new vocabulary to students. Library Lingo cards are distributed among the students who are advised to listen to the lesson carefully and try to mark each new vocabulary word they learn during the lesson plan. This is an interactive lesson which requires students to walk around the library, visit different departments, and learn how to use the library website.

The second example of a word wall can be seen in Appendix C, titled “Library Word Wall,” in which IL instructors and ELLs use all of the newly acquired terminology to create a word wall together using a blackboard, whiteboard, and smart board. While marking new words on

the smart board, they are creating the word wall on the left by using the blackboard or whiteboard. It is crucial that the ELLs can see the newly acquired vocabulary both on the wall and in their handouts. Importantly, the IL instructors’ handwriting must be clear.<sup>51</sup> Some ELLs may have a hard time reading handwritten letters since their experience may be with non-Latin languages. The IL instructor can create the word wall while teaching the topic and stress the new vocabulary both in speaking and pointing to the board or can provide a list of new vocabulary prior to the IL instruction. This is another very powerful strategy and is referred to as front-loading vocabulary.

Pre-teaching vocabulary can take place in numerous ways.<sup>52</sup> A list of new vocabulary can be presented to each student as a printout and ELLs can be asked to read and research the meaning of the concepts within five minutes. Or the librarian can divide students into groups and assign the concepts to each group to discuss prior to instruction. If a librarian can form the groups based on students’ prior knowledge the librarian can get a useful pre-loading vocabulary session. Another way to expose ELLs to new vocabulary is to provide a page of new IL concepts to their ESL teachers. ESL teachers can use this new vocabulary in the ESL classroom and prepare the students for this very important and demanding IL session. With the dozen or so words front-loaded, ELLs are ready to tackle that challenging plagiarism session.

*Cooperative Learning*

Cooperative learning in the IL classroom can take many forms, but one of the most popular ways of using this strategy is the use of small group work to supplement lectures.<sup>53</sup> This can be used at any stage of IL instruction including the pre-loading of vocabulary. Students can be grouped based on their background or language skills. For instance, students can be grouped based on their first languages. This will assist





## Tran &amp; Aytac: Strategies for Teaching Information Literacy to English Language Learners

the group members in discussing the new library concepts in their native language. ELLs can be also divided based on undergraduate degrees or disciplines. Having similar educational backgrounds may ignite further collaborative interaction. This can be a beneficial collaborative environment for all the members of the class to learn equally and share the background knowledge of the given lesson in their original language.

Moreover, cooperative or collaborative learning provides the most stress free and friendly learning environment possible.<sup>54</sup> This can be an optimal learning environment for ELLs.

#### *Story Re-enactment*

Story re-enactment is a strategy in which students are encouraged to act out stories after they have read them. A good example of this strategy from IL classrooms is the acting out of a plagiarism situation. The IL instructor can assign different roles to students where they can create props and use them in re-enacting the plagiarism story. This strategy provides a unique opportunity for ELLs to learn the consequences of plagiarism firsthand.<sup>55</sup> Students can be assigned the role of someone who cuts and pastes passages or quotes information without quotation marks in their papers. By using this strategy, librarians can optimally teach ELLs that if the work is not cited or referenced they may receive a failing grade for their class.

#### *Flipping the Classroom*

“Flipping the classroom” means that ELLs will gain access to IL resources prior to class, usually via an online learning platform like Blackboard, and then use class time to do the harder work of assimilating those resources. The flipped classroom model contrasts with the traditional model in which “first exposure” occurs via in-class lecturing and ELLs further learn through homework and assignments. This could be difficult for one-shot library instruction sessions, but

with good planning the hardship can be eliminated. Particularly with assistance from the ESL program and collaboration between the IL coordinator and the ESL program, the IL instructor can share the preliminary information through handouts with the ELLs prior to the library session.

#### **Conclusion**

Teaching information literacy to ELLs may require a different set of instructional skills than with traditional college students. Based on an exhaustive literature review and our own experience, we have presented commonly used strategies for teaching IL to ELLs. Some of the scaffolding strategies examined are the use of background knowledge, KWL charts, visual aids, realia, cooperative learning, word wall, story reenactment, and flipped classrooms. Many of these strategies would likely be effective for all learners, not just ELLs. However, they are specifically pertinent for ELLs because of their unique needs.

Besides the use of above-mentioned teaching strategies, librarians must be aware that ELLs may have a harder time understanding every word of the instructor’s language. Whenever possible, everything should be written on the board or a handout should be provided as a supplement to a library instruction. Librarians should remember that students who grow up with non-Latin languages such as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or Arabic will have a harder time reading English handwriting, and that even those whose first language uses Latin characters may struggle to understand U.S. handwriting. Moreover, it would be beneficial to show ELLs what, in most cases, a final paper should look like. A librarian can guide students through each step of the process with the model of the finished product in hand. This could be a great use of the above-mentioned scaffolding strategies.



## Tran &amp; Aytac: Strategies for Teaching Information Literacy to English Language Learners

One lesson that can be learned from this paper is that librarians should collaborate with the ESL teacher or the classroom teacher. This should include planning and sharing strategies about IL instruction and more specific tactics such as providing a copy of the word wall to the ESL teacher and using the same vocabulary in the ESL class prior to the IL class. Ideally ESL teachers would regularly get copies of IL lessons plans and supplemental materials such as word walls or KWL charts. Collaboration between ESL instructors and librarians is crucial for building a sense of community and strong foundation for ELLs.

Any chance to give ELLs the exposure to the curriculum beforehand will increase the odds that they will understand it on the day the librarian presents it in the library class. This will enhance the effectiveness of face-to-face time by exposing students to the resources for an extended period of time. In addition, since the factual knowledge has already been provided to students, librarians can dedicate the limited

face-to-face time to critical thinking and the advanced challenges of IL. This, too, can be helped by a good relationship with ESL instructors, who can help by distributing relevant material ahead of time.

In conclusion, we presented IL teaching strategies and some recommendations for academic librarians. A future study should examine all the aforementioned teaching strategies for ELLs as to their instructional effectiveness. Teaching ELLs can be a challenge for librarians due to their lack of expertise in second language development. Therefore, collaboration with ESL instructors is key to creating a good learning experience for ELLs. Librarians can also collaborate with ESL teachers outside of the classroom to better understand the needs of ELLs and how to adapt IL instruction appropriately into ESL curricula. Successful collaboration requires high levels of planning and mutual trust among the different stakeholders involved in the process.

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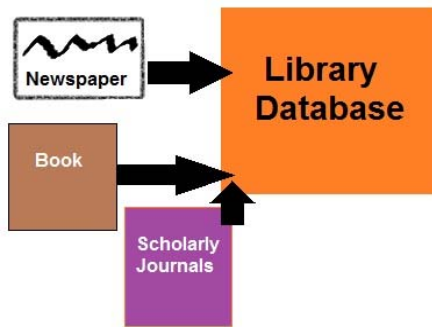
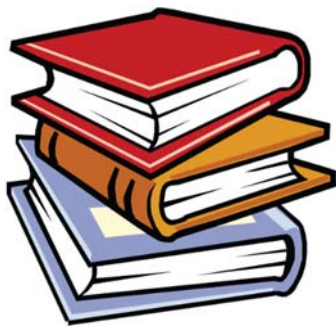
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### Appendix A. KWL Chart

<b>K</b> <b>What I Know</b>	<b>W</b> <b>What I Want To Learn</b>	<b>L</b> <b>What I Have Learned</b>



**Appendix B. Library Lingo Game**

<b>L I B R A R Y</b>				
<b>L</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>O</b>
<b>Library Homepage</b>	<b>Periodical(s)</b>	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>Scholarly</b>	<b>Journal(s)</b>
<b>Database(s)</b>	<b>Citation Styles</b>	<b>FREE</b>	<b>References</b>	<b>Volume</b>
<b>Online Catalog</b>	<b>Full-text</b>	<b>Issue</b>	<b>Magazine(s)</b>	<b>Author</b>
<b>Article</b>	<b>Abstract</b>	<b>Newspaper(s)</b>	<b>Citation Styles</b>	<b>Publisher</b>



<b>LIBRARY</b>				
<b>L</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>O</b>
<b>Newspaper(s)</b>	<b>Periodical(s)</b>	<b>Volume</b>	<b>Scholarly</b>	<b>Journal(s)</b>
<b>Database(s)</b>	<b>Citation Styles</b>	<b>Online Catalog</b>	<b>References</b>	<b>Abstract</b>
<b>FREE</b>	<b>Full-text</b>	<b>Library Homepage</b>	<b>Magazine(s)</b>	<b>Author</b>
<b>Article</b>	<b>Issue</b>	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>Citation Styles</b>	<b>Publisher</b>





## Appendix C. Library Word Wall

### *Plagiarism: Library Information Literacy Class Word Wall*

Abstract

Article

Author

Bibliography

Citation Styles

Database(s)

Full-text

Issue

Journal(s)

Library Homepage

Magazine(s)

Newspaper(s)

Online Catalog

Paraphrasing

Plagiarism

Periodical(s)

Publisher

References

Scholarly

Summary

Volume

