

Driving in a Parkway and Parking in a Driveway: Preparing for International Students in your Classroom

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The nature of the instruction librarian position is that it puts the teacher in front of classrooms filled with students from all kinds of learning experiences, cultural backgrounds and educational traditions. So how can a teacher with an insignificant understanding of individual experiences effectively teach a class of international students or that includes these students, within a typical 60-minute instruction class? One can, as Kris Gutiérrez and Barbara Rogoff suggest, simply have a “common objective across various approaches” that is the “desire to increase student learning” (19). While the objectives of library instructors may be altruistic, the theoretical approach to teaching multi-cultural students may be different than the practical experience. Cultural-historical theory may lead instructors to expect regularities in the ways cultural communities participate in education and communication styles. However, this approach can also restrict the instructor’s active engagement and limit the comprehension of the students (Gutiérrez and Rogoff, 22). In academic settings the diversity of the classroom is not limited to the cultural norms of a specific group, nor may it include only “international students”, rather it can be a complex combination of varied educational experiences. Students in the academic library classroom can be both non-native speakers of English or native English speakers that come from countries that have English as an official language, and attending college as either undergraduates or graduate students. These students can be referred to as ESL (English-as-a-second-language), ELL (English Language Learners) and LEP (Limited-English-Proficient). Thus, individual student development needs to be approached on a broad spectrum to encompass independent characteristics of individuals within the classroom.

These challenges for an instructor, are especially significant in academic library environments where the instructor and students have limited time together. It is imperative to successfully prepare for the opportunities that can come from the diversity of educational and cultural backgrounds. Information literacy instruction should be taught to students equitably allowing for adjustments to methods to best guarantee comprehension. Here are specific suggestions and tips for working with, and teaching to a classroom with students of diverse cultural and educational backgrounds compiled from literature on the topic.

Do not talk down to students

Studies of international students have revealed that language is the primary barrier in communication and instruction for these students (Amsberry, 354). Therefore, it would seem reasonable that by modifying vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar an instructor would better communicate with students. By applying “comprehensible input”, an aspect of language learning theory, instructors use speech modification to facilitate comprehension. However, using what is commonly referred to as “teacher talk” can have the opposite effect and negatively influence

classroom discussion and comprehension. Early studies of speech modifications in the classroom or “teacher talk” focused on describing the modifications teachers made rather than measuring the effect these modifications had on classroom learning (Amsberry, 356). Also many of these early studies did not consider the perspective or perception of the students to the modified speech of the instructor. By using “teacher talk” A.J. Lynch’s study found that these adjustments in speech could be considered intellectual rather than linguistic and perceived as “talking down” to the student (Amsberry, 356).

Expanding on this idea is Miriam Conteh-Morgan- according to her studies, international students at the university level in general have a high level of English proficiency (192). Adjustments to speech for these kinds of students have little impact on learning. Instead, she recommends speaking clearly and pausing frequently rather than speaking slowly when teaching. Exaggerated articulation rarely reflects real world communication and may seem as inauthentic. Eileen Blau in her research has found that effective comprehension does not come from “slowing down or simplifying syntax.” Instructors, by explaining the entire ideas with in the context of conversation will give students the opportunity to process the entire meaning of the semantic groups first, rather than spending time deciphering individual word meanings (Amsberry, 355).

Collaborate with other librarians, instructors and faculty

This is incredibly obvious, however by planning in advance for these types of scenarios, an instructor can almost guarantee preparedness and effectiveness of meaningful instruction. For this kind of collaboration between the different categories of professionals on campus to work, all parties involved need to share ownership of learning outcomes. Karen Bordonaro, in her investigation of the uses of an American college library by ESL students, advises that an “integrated program involving ESL and library personal can effectively cope with the difficulties and differences, making library use easier and more pleasant” (519). Combining the academic knowledge and expertise of all instructors involved can only help in the intellectual development of these students. Faculty-librarian teams working together for the benefit of the students will result in more constructive and effective teaching time (Bordonaro, 520). Conteh-Morgan believes that ESL classes are “natural avenues” for incorporating the teaching of information literacy. There is evidence in the literature that ESL instructors are already teaching information literacy at all educational levels within language education (Conteh-Morgan, 32). The collaboration between librarians and the teachers already familiar with the students, will permit for more beneficial learning opportunities because of the cross-application of information literacy concepts with potentially already acquired skills.

Library instructors and classroom teachers should not be repeating the same information and techniques to students within separate instructional lessons as this will bore the students and possibly discredit academic authority. Conteh-Morgan in her proposal for a new model of teaching ESL students, suggest that ESL teachers already have a foundation for a “low-anxiety” instructional environment. By “low-anxiety” she means an environment where established learning and teaching strategies are already in production and can put students at ease with new learning topics. This kind of environment is less overwhelming, preferred by students, and created because of the already establish relationship with the ESL teacher (31). There are so many advantages to collaborating with the students’ current instructors that can only benefit the

students understanding of information literacy. It is also important that the collaborating librarian has a current and complete understanding of the resources and concepts that have or will be taught in the classroom so to build on student learning. Without the constant and offered help of the instructor that primarily interacts with the students, there will be a lack of sustained and continued learning. Information literacy should be built into the already ongoing program, building on the students' prior knowledge and reinforcing known concepts.

Plan for extra time in the lesson for explanations and questions

Studies of international students in academic settings, has pointed towards the importance of interaction between the student and instructor in classroom discussion. While students may "indicate understanding by smiling and nodding," Amsberry explains, they may need further explanation but are embarrassed to ask, or do not comprehend the specific question (356). By providing built in time for self-reflection, students can assess their own learning progress, and some of the awkward silences filled with nodding heads will be eliminated. Also, many instructors may struggle with the meaning or understanding of the accented speech of their students and transcribe the meaning in error. The role of the instructor as listener can influence both the attitude of the students towards the instructor, and their own comprehension. Amsberry suggests that as an instructor it is important to practice "listening" especially to that of accented speech. Practicing and employing listening strategies, like listening for meaning rather than individual words will improve the understanding of speech and confidence. Command of foreign accented linguistics will improve with exposure to non-native speakers (Amsberry, 15).

Positive feedback will encourage student discussion and help check for understanding. Provide enough time for answers, and when no one at first volunteers rephrase the question using different terms or phrases. As mentioned above in the section on "teacher talk" it is important to use "real world" language without offending the students' intelligence. By asking open-ended questions, students are not able to nod to indicate understanding rather have to engage in the conversation. Amsberry cites literature that has promoted linguistic scaffolding techniques to ensure comprehension and not falling into the trap of filling in the gap when a student is struggling with an answer or question (356). For example offer whenever possible to show and demonstrate what they are asked to do/learn and use visual aids if appropriate. Schedule in time during the end of the lesson for reflective assessment allow the students to think critically about the lesson and analyze the success of their own learning. Conteh-Morgan determines that "summative assessment is, therefore, of not much value in one-shot instruction sessions because it does not allow for feedback necessary for effective learning" (195). Formative assessments that help evaluate the learning development of students are valuable to not only the analysis of met objectives but also evaluation of the teaching strategies.

There is not just one way to experience information literacy; support student's unique learning experiences

This challenge is no different than the ones faced by domestic students who for the first time are introduced to using information resources. Familiarity with the information-learning environment needs to be established. Hilary Hughes, in an investigation of international students, reported that few students have a formal information literacy education and lack awareness of

education sessions offered by the library (134). To help students learn it is helpful to understand their information literacy learning needs and experience. Christine Susan Bruce described this experience as “Informed Learning”. In this view, the task of the teacher is to understand the different ways it is possible to experience a situation or perceive a concept (23). The instructor’s responsibility is to “open the door” to informed learning by understanding how diverse views may influence the learning environment. International students have diverse worldviews and educational experiences that when shared can open the door to creative and critical thinking strategies that while different from traditional American techniques may be just as effective. Embracing these cultural and educational differences will make the librarian a welcoming and fresh alternative to the already complex navigation of academia.

Online information resources, can be especially complex for international students. The fluency of internet and database use is reliant on language knowledge and experience. Language and vocabulary skills may make the use of online resources more difficult for students trying to identify the appropriate search terms to find results. Introductory information literacy education may have not been part of the curriculum in the students’ native country of study, and thus needs to be revisited in-depth and the learning needs to be ongoing. Many international students according to Hughes’ investigation, recommended that these information literacy sessions be available throughout the year to continually build on experience. Repeat lessons should also be provided throughout the year as not to exclude students joining the campus on a later date (137). Flexible and ongoing scheduling of these introductory lessons are important to the ongoing development of international students’ education. This is especially important to students who may already have anxiety around online resources. Searching out individual attention from a library instructor may be intimidating and possibly seen as embarrassing. Students that arrived later in the year observed that unless the information literacy sessions were part of a specific course it was not available to them. In conclusion, educators need to not only be aware of the learning opportunities of their students but advance their own cultural confidence to better support the learning environment (Hughes, 143).

Become familiar with second language acquisition theories, the knowledge will make you a more thoughtful and effective instructor

Many library instructors are already familiar with, and incorporate behavioral and cognitive theories of learning to their teaching strategies. However, in order to better understand international students, a library instructor not only needs to understand learning theories but specifically second language acquisition theories. Miriam Conteh-Morgan discusses two major theories of second-language acquisition that she believes will aid library instructors in the development of better methods and cross-cultural communication:

Innatist Theory: “Innatists do not see language development as being influenced by responses to the environmental stimuli as behaviorists do” (Conteh-Morgan, 192). Instead second language learners as children, have a natural ability to process language rules such as grammar. Native speakers as children will absorb the aspect of the language spoken around them, this is why innatists theorize it is more difficult to learn a new language for adults. Learning the new language in a sheltered classroom environment is a conscious attempt to understand material rather than a “natural” process that does not have the filter of prior linguistic information. In the

classroom this may mean that international students need to process a meaning or deconstruct the meaning, by building on prior understating of the language (194).

Interactionist Theory: “Interactionists believe that as native speakers communicate with language learners, they modify their language to accommodate the learners’ communicative proficiency and level of understanding” (Conteh-Morgan, 192). Second language learners, therefore, by communication and interacting with native speakers can gain language proficiency and in many situations self-correct mistakes based on experience. Classroom learning based on this theory stresses the importance of real life, authentic, and meaningful interaction. Instructional librarians can take a communicative approach to teaching by stimulating conversations and acting as facilitators rather than just providing the information. Time to reflect and process the information is necessary for effective learning to take place with any student but particularly limited English proficient students (194).

Conclusion

International students bring unique educational experiences to the classroom creating diverse and sometimes complex opportunities for instructors. The suggestions above offer the instructor an opportunity to focus on their own limitations rather than that of the students. Librarians already have the skills to be effective teachers and by improving their understanding of information literacy as experienced by international students they will only enhance the learning environment. International students bring different worldviews and experiences that can benefit the entire classroom’s learning and encourage critical thinking. These tips when applied to the class will create a welcoming and effective learning experience for all students.

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