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Biography

Fiona is the Reference Librarian (International) for the University of Adelaide's Barr Smith Library. Her job involves coordinating and teaching information literacy classes for the University's various cohorts of international students as well as developing online content for the Library's website.

Prior to joining the Barr Smith Library Fiona worked for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) on the VOCED database and as an Information Officer with EdNA Online and the Government Education Portal. Before becoming a librarian Fiona trained as a teacher in the field of ESL (English as a Second Language). She has taught ESL both in Australia and overseas in Japan, Poland and Germany.

The teaching librarian: ESL and the academic library

Abstract

The line between librarian and teacher has become increasingly blurred, and never is this more apparent than in the academic library. A further layer of complexity is added when working with students who have English as a second language (ESL). These students' grasp of language and culture does not always compare to that of a 'local' student, and so we cannot make the same assumptions as to their pre-existing knowledge and abilities when engaging them in information literacy (IL) training. This paper discusses IL from an ESL perspective and as a form of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). It offers a pedagogical (i.e., method- rather than content-based) approach to the provision of IL to international students and includes suggestions for best practice and examples taken from the author's own experience.

Introduction

Nowadays it is a given within higher education in Australia that any university campus is likely to contain a significant number of international students; in 2002 an average 18% of all higher education students studying in Australia were international students (DEST, 2004) many from countries where English is not the first language. For librarians working in academic libraries it is likely that, sooner or later, they will find themselves in a position of having to provide information or instruction to international students, either informally (for example, on the desk) or formally (for example, in an orientation session). This can create tensions on both sides.

Librarians can find it difficult to deal with students whose level of English is not that of a native speaker. Students, on the other hand, may recognise the importance of using the library, but may also find it a difficult or frustrating experience to do so. Information literacy programs aimed at helping international students can go a long way towards improving this situation, but only if students who are also English as a Second Language (ESL) learners are taught in a way that recognises the unique differences and difficulties faced by such students and attempts to incorporate this awareness into teaching practice. Although this may seem like a daunting prospect for librarians who may not have had much (if any) training in teaching from an ESL perspective, there are some strategies that can be easily applied to information literacy programs.

This paper is intended as a practical introduction to ESL methodology for

librarians. The first part will look at the reasons for incorporating an ESL perspective into information literacy while the second will look at ways of using it for course development and in the classroom. Throughout this essay, when speaking of international students it will be assumed that they are those from countries where English is not spoken as the first language.

Incorporating an ESL perspective into information literacy

It may be the case that your library is currently already running several orientation programs or informational literacy classes, and you may well wonder why you should need more. However, there are several good reasons why specialised information literacy programs should be provided for international students. It has long been recognised that these students' knowledge of and use of libraries can be somewhat different in their home countries (Di Martino and Zoe 2000) and that they may have difficulties adapting to the systems used and resources available in Australian university libraries. International students may not participate in or gain much benefit from general orientation programs (Conteh-Morgan 2001) and may also be reluctant to ask for help from library staff (Di Martino and Zoe 2000) especially if conscious of their own lack of English language skills.

Given the amount of information now available online, it is important that all students familiarise themselves with a variety of different tools such as databases and search engines, but here again a lack of vocabulary and difficulty with understanding Boolean logic can

disadvantage international students (Di Martino and Zoe 2000). Add to this the fact that they are simultaneously coping with an unfamiliar educational system, the demands of a student course load and the difficulty of doing all this in a second language and it is easy to understand why international students can exhibit high levels of anxiety about using the library (Onwuegbuzie and Jiao 1997).

Providing a space where international students are encouraged to participate and in which they will hopefully feel more comfortable asking questions will help to alleviate this. As Baron and Strout-Dapaz have noted: ‘

Both the survey research and literature analysis promote the idea that effective instructional services help international students find assistance and raise their comfort levels’ (2001).

Of all the difficulties that international students face at university the most obvious is undoubtedly language (Moeckel and Presnell 1995), which is why it makes sense to approach information literacy from an ESL perspective when working with international students. By adopting this approach we are recognising the importance of the language dimension and its impact on students’ academic success. In one sense information literacy can be seen as a form of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which is characterised by being designed to meet specific learner needs and making use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves (Gatehouse 2001). Viewing information literacy from this perspective allows us to regard it as not

just an exercise in learning a particular skill, such as how to use the library catalogue, but also as an exercise in language-related areas such as vocabulary, functional language use, speaking and listening. If one agrees with the aim of information literacy classes as providing ‘students with a foundation in information seeking and communication skills’ (Webber and Johnston 2000), then the similarities between information literacy and ESL become evident.

When learning library concepts, students are also using language skills and hopefully learning critical thinking skills as well ((Conteh-Morgan 2002). By giving students the opportunity to practice their language skills at the same time as they are learning information literacy skills, we are engaging in a practice that will ultimately benefit them in both areas and recognising that what we are teaching the students can have a wider impact that benefits other areas of their study.

There is much to be said also for integrating information literacy into pre-degree English language programs, such as are run by many universities as a entry pathway for international students. The reasons are firstly, that students can learn library skills in a familiar and comfortable environment (the ESL classroom), and secondly that they have a chance to practice and develop these skills before they start their degree coursework, rather than attempting to deal with them both simultaneously. By using ESL methodology librarians are using a teaching model that students in academic English programs will already be somewhat familiar with and this

again can help to reduce student anxiety.

Strategies to use in the library setting

It is obvious then that ESL teaching methodology has much to recommend it; so the next step is to look at practical ways of applying it to the library teaching situation. A good starting point for any teacher or librarian faced with a new class is a well-designed course, and the most important aspect of this is a comprehensive knowledge of the students and their needs. Whether you are developing an entire information literacy course or a couple of lessons it is important to have some knowledge of the students with whom you will be working.

A good source of general information to start with is your university's International Office, who can provide details of the international population on your campus (Moeckel and Presnell 1995). For more detailed information talk to the students' regular teachers or lecturers as they will have more specific details about, students' cultural backgrounds and probable levels of English; and what assignments and topics students will be given for their course. This information can then be used as the starting point for lesson content and practical exercises that are pitched at an appropriate level for the students and that are relevant to their coursework. The relevance aspect is critical; if students can see how the skills that they are learning will benefit them in their study, or even just help them to pass their latest assignment, then they are much more likely to be:

- motivated to attend the classes;
- engage with the learning material; and

- continue to practice such skills after the lesson has ended.

As well as knowing whom you are teaching, you also need to have a clear idea of what you are teaching. What is the point of the lesson and what do you want students to have accomplished by the end of it? You need to be clear about the lesson focus and the expected learning outcomes and communicate this information to the students so that they too understand what they are learning and why. Be realistic about what you can accomplish in a certain time period; it is better for students to master one new skill well than three new skills badly because the instruction was rushed.

A basic knowledge of learning styles, particularly those of ESL students, is useful for classroom practice in information literacy. There are many different models of learning styles; some are based on theories of information processing, such as Kolb's Learning Styles inventory, while others are based on personality patterns such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicators (Putintseva 2006). Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences is also a popular model of learning styles. Based on this model there are three basic kinds of learners:

- visual, those who learn best from visual displays;
- auditory, those who learn best through verbal lectures and discussions; and
- tactile/kinaesthetic, those who learn best through a hands-on approach (Putintseva 2006).

What the various theories share is an awareness that students learn and

assimilate information in different ways and that therefore not all students can be taught in the same way (De Vita 2001).

In practical terms, what this means is that employing a variety of teaching strategies in information literacy classes is likely to engage a greater number of students. Consider, therefore, having a well-designed visual presentation (e.g. on PowerPoint) as an accompaniment to a verbal presentation as this will assist both visual and auditory learners. Ensure that there are plenty of 'hands-on' activities for the tactile/kinaesthetic learners in the class. If you are working with a predominantly Asian group of students, which is not uncommon in Australia, group or pair work might be particularly appropriate as studies have shown a preference amongst these students for cooperative, rather than individualistic, learning strategies (Ramburuth and McCormick 2001).

Learner-centred teaching

Learner-centred teaching practice has had a big impact in the ESL field, and is equally relevant to information literacy. It represents the shift in emphasis from the teacher as fount of wisdom (the 'sage on the stage') to a facilitator of learning (the 'guide on the side'). It recognises the importance of learning by doing, and has several advantages.

A lesson that gives students a chance to interact and to practice what they have learned will engage them more than a simple lecture-style presentation. As Conteh-Morgan has noted: 'students do not like the instructor-dominated lecture demonstration format that typify library skills classes' (2001). Students need to construct information in a personally

meaningful way (Webber and Johnston 2000) as this makes it much more likely to be remembered. Experiential learning also means that students are practicing what they've learned while it is still fresh in their minds rather than trying to recollect it later.

From the teacher librarian's perspective there is also an advantage. Giving students practical exercises to do also provides an excellent opportunity for you to give attention and assistance to individual students while the whole class is involved in the exercise. A practical exercise still needs to have some structure, however, particularly if students are experimenting with something completely new. Simply pointing the students at a database and telling them to find a journal article, for example, is unlikely to produce much useful activity.

By comparison, a demonstration of the use of a search technique for a particular database followed by an exercise giving students several articles to find on a particular topic in the same database is more likely to produce results as students are clearer about the expected outcomes and have seen the search strategy modelled by the teacher. It is often a good idea to give students a time period in which to complete an exercise; otherwise, you may find students spend half the lesson doing one exercise and that you don't cover the rest of the lesson content.

The other point of practical exercises is that they provide the best and most immediate feedback on the success of your lesson content. When assessing students' comprehension, simply asking them if they've understood you is

unlikely to result in any meaningful response. Many international students, particularly those from Asian backgrounds, will answer “yes” to this question whether it’s true or not, either from a reluctance to disappoint the teacher or because of not wanting to appear foolish. By setting a practical exercise and then monitoring students as they are doing the exercise, it quickly becomes obvious whether or not students are having problems with either the exercises themselves or the related instructions.

Often it can be beneficial setting students to work in pairs, as this allows students to assist each other and studies have shown that students often prefer to ask a classmate for help rather than a teacher. Also, as noted earlier, this is a preferred learning style for some students.

When designing or giving exercises to students break them down into smaller steps that build on what the student has already done. This approach, known as schema theory, has the advantage of taking students from the familiar to the unfamiliar and building on their pre-existing knowledge. It stresses the importance of making connections between material already known and new material (Conteh-Morgan 2002 p 194). and is often used in the ESL classroom as a learning strategy. A common pattern in ESL teaching is pre-activity, activity and follow up, starting with simpler tasks and then moving to more complex activities (Sysoyev 2000).

In terms of printed material, you may also want to consider whether or not you want to give the students handouts to take away with them. This is a good

idea for several reasons. Firstly as a reminder for students of what they have learned in the lesson. Secondly, it supports the visual learners in the class, and thirdly, from a language perspective, students can check unfamiliar vocabulary after class.

You will probably already have a large variety of generic library handouts for students and may wonder whether you need to reinvent the wheel by producing more. However, if using generic handouts it is important to review them with a critical eye as to their suitability for ESL students. Look at the language, check for library jargon and see how relevant the information is for the class you are teaching. If the generic material is a close enough match, then use it. If not, consider writing handouts specific to the course and subject area that you are teaching in. Again, this has the added benefit for the librarian of being able to tailor material particularly to the needs of a particular group of international students.

In the classroom

Important as the preparation undoubtedly is, what actually happens in the classroom is equally important. There are a number of points to consider here. The first is the atmosphere that your international students are coming into, which should be as welcoming as possible. Students need to feel relaxed and comfortable because learning conditions, including physical conditions, can have an enormous impact on students’ success in learning (Conteh-Morgan 2002 p 193).

Unfortunately for librarians in an information literacy class, there often is

not the luxury of being able to build up a relationship with a class over time, as an ESL teacher or lecturer would be able to do, and which would give the students an opportunity to become more relaxed and comfortable working with that person. However, even things as basic as a welcoming smile, a genuine enthusiasm for the topic and a patient manner will make students feel less anxious.

Both verbal and non-verbal communication should affirm students and make them feel comfortable (Baron and Strout-Dapaz 2001). If time permits, consider some kind of 'icebreaker' activity or even something as simple as a brief round of introductions, with students giving their names and some information about what their degree programs are. The latter information also adds to your knowledge of the students and again, can be very useful when creating exercises and activities for the students that are closely aligned to their areas of interest.

One of the things that can be difficult for new teachers is to gauge the appropriate language level for ESL students. Many people have a tendency to either talk too slowly (which can appear condescending) or too fast (which impedes understanding). In a library situation this is further complicated by the use of library jargon and the kinds of terminology that are prevalent in the profession that librarians often use unconsciously. Consider when talking to ESL students that terms such as 'document delivery' may be completely new and that even concepts such as 'database', which students may be familiar with in their first language, may not be known to

them *in English*. If you are introducing new terminology, write it down so that students can look the word up later and give functional definitions (for example, what does a catalogue do?). If time permits, then pre-teaching vocabulary that you think may be new or difficult can also be beneficial. This can quite easily be done through an activity such as a matching game or crossword. Also consider providing students with a glossary of library terms that they can review after the lesson.

When speaking to students, rather than slowing down your delivery think about speaking clearly and 'chunking' your speech instead; that is, allowing pauses between 'chunks' of information to allow students a chance to assimilate what has been said. If information can be imparted simply and with less use of jargon then that is even better. If you say something and don't think that students have understood it properly, rephrase rather than simply repeating. If you are giving instructions, break them down into steps and if possible, give students a chance to complete the first step before introducing the next.

Another point of language to consider is keeping it positive. Telling students that what they are about to do is difficult or complex is not going to make them feel confident. Consider whether, if the information is difficult, students need to know it at this point in time and if the answer is still yes, think about how you can break down the information or activity into more basic steps. Remember that you are setting your students up to succeed, not to fail.

After the class has ended, allow time for reflection and analyse how well the

lesson went. Did the students understand the content? Did they engage with the material and was there sufficient time allowed to complete it? What else might need changing the next time around?

You might want to consider some kind of course evaluation or feedback form that will enable students to comment on the lesson and that can be used to adapt content or increase the effectiveness of your teaching strategies. There are several other ideas that you might want to consider. The first is writing a detailed lesson plan for each class, so that you have a reminder with you of what you plan to cover in the lesson and the order. If you are delivering a session for the first time or if you are new to teaching then consider scripting dialogue in dot points and including running times so that you can keep on schedule. Some teachers may also like to try team teaching, which again can be an advantage for a novice when paired with a more experienced teacher.

If it appears that teaching international students is going to impact significantly on your role as a librarian then it might be worth investigating the possibility of

gaining some kind of teaching qualification, particularly one that is ESL-related. Examples of the latter are the Cambridge Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) or the Certificate IV in TESOL. Bear in mind that learning teaching is an ongoing process, and that you will find that both your lessons and your approach to teaching evolve over time. To use Sysoyev's words: "In teaching, instructors are constant learners" (2000).

Conclusion

There is much that can be done to make the learning experience easier for international students and the benefits are manifest for the students, the library, and ultimately the university. Not only will students be more adept at and confident about using the library and its facilities but they will also have gained familiarity with at least one library staff member whom they will hopefully feel comfortable about approaching in the future. Looking at the bigger picture, we are also introducing students to lifelong learning skills that will benefit them for the whole of their academic career and well beyond and that enhance their university experience as a whole..

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