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## **Growing Your Instruction as the World Becomes Smaller: International Students and the Academic Library**

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# GROWING YOUR INSTRUCTION AS THE WORLD BECOMES SMALLER: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY

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## INTRODUCTION

The number of international students attending universities in the United States has grown significantly since 2010 and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) has one of the largest international student populations in the country. There are nearly 11,000 international students attending UIUC and over half of them are undergraduates. These students arrive with very different library and research experiences, yet the expectations for them in their academic courses are the same as those who attended high school in the United States. Academic libraries have the potential to significantly impact international students' educational experiences; the library instruction classroom is one of the primary settings where this can happen.

The Undergraduate Library (UGL) at UIUC provides library instruction for courses that fulfill the university's Composition 1 requirement, which includes approximately 1,100 first-year international students in English as a Second Language (ESL) and Rhetoric courses. While these students certainly need the writing and research elements that comprise the main focus of these courses, their needs go far beyond these basic skills. Not only must they immerse themselves in the English language, many of them must also acclimate themselves to a new culture. The classroom settings and teaching styles these students encounter in this country differ greatly from those in their home countries. Likewise, the academic library also differs substantially. Many of the challenges faced at UIUC in working with, and teaching, ESL students are likely to reflect those faced in libraries throughout the country.

Establishing a strong relationship with the international student services office and also the ESL department is an important step in effectively reaching ESL students. In order to address the unique needs of international students, the UGL has been actively involved with UIUC's ESL program. Working with the ESL experts, we have been able to identify specific aspects of the research process that presented difficulties for international students. As a result, the integration of the library into the ESL courses begins before library instruction takes place. Supporting international students outside of the classroom is important, too, and the creation of learning objects in different formats can support their varied learning styles and needs. They were all created with a primary goal in mind: to introduce international students to the research process and help them effectively understand and use an academic library.

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENT GROWTH

In a 2015 *Inside Higher Ed* article focused on the growth of Chinese students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, a Chinese student, when asked about differences between American and Chinese students responded: "They eat brown rice, we eat white rice." (Redden, 2015). The student meant this quite literally, but it serves as a fitting metaphor and raises important questions that all institutions should ask themselves. Who *are* the international students U.S. colleges and universities are serving? What are these students' actual, rather than perceived, needs?

In the past decade, the growth in the U.S. international student population has been astounding. In 2014-15 alone, the U.S. saw a 10% increase in international students, which *Open Doors 2015* notes as the largest single jump since the 1970s (Institute of International Education, 2016). Rather than merely reflect the national trend, UIUC appears to serve as a bellwether for rapid

international student growth and changing demographics. In Fall 2015, roughly 10,381 students were international; 22.3% of the total on-campus student population. Of that group, over 50% were from China, 12% were from India, 12% were from South Korea, and 11% were from other countries located in Asia (Division of Management Information, 2015). These numbers are more than double what they were in Fall 2006. Such growth certainly outpaces the national average, where 4.8% of students are international and 58% of all international students' country of origin is reported as being China, India, South Korea, or Saudi Arabia (Institute of International Education, 2016).

Likewise, there has been related growth in UIUC's international first-year student population. In Fall 2006, 350 (4.9%) of first-year students were international. In Fall 2015, 1,124 (14.9%) of first-year students were international (International Student and Scholar Services, 2016). While the growing number of international students enriches the U.S. college landscape, there are a number of challenges faced by international students and institutions alike. Some are natural to immersion in a new culture, while some are more varied based on institutional goals for international student populations or an institution's ability to respond to international student needs. Institutions must consider if their goals are academic, cultural, integration-based, economic, or a combination of all four. It cannot be ignored that many international students pay full sticker price, or 2-3 times the cost of in-state tuition, to attend college in the United States (Belkin & Jordan, 2016).

For students, beyond the cost of attendance and the expectations for success that often go hand-in-hand with high tuition fees, there are further obstacles. These include insular experiences for the most represented groups within the international student population, student life, and North American cultural barriers, and arguably the most challenging barrier on all accounts academically and socially, the language barrier. Kwon (2009) notes: "...the level of English proficiency had a strong impact on the feelings of isolation or even intimidation in English speaking classrooms" (p. 1025).

Prior classroom, library, and research experience also impact an international student's level of comfort in the U.S. college classroom. A July 2015 event hosted by UIUC's Asian American Cultural Center, "Western vs. Eastern Classroom Culture," as well as informal conversations with international students at UIUC, shed light on the variance in experience across educational settings. In Eastern countries, as well as in other geographic regions, lecture-style class formats that may not allow for questions or discussion are not uncommon. Likewise, there may be a stronger emphasis on the memorization and recall necessary to pass capstone-level examinations, as well as a higher level of expectation for academic performance due to a variety of nuanced factors. In addition to class format, prior library exposure appears to have an impact on international students' perceptions of what an academic library is and what purpose it serves. We have found at UIUC, that depending on where a student is from, their high school library may have served as a study hall or had limited resources. Moreover, library skills may not have been taught, or schools may not have had a librarian or library. Finally, some international students have indicated that they never had to complete a traditional research assignment requiring library resources (as we perceive them in the U.S.) prior to attending college. It is important to note that international classroom culture is not monolithic and these examples are solely intended to highlight a few common experiences shared by students.

## **INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND WRITING COURSES**

### **English as a Second Language**

International students entering American universities face a number of challenges. Not only are they in a new country, they are experiencing a new culture and attending classes spoken in English. Completing a test such as the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is a common requirement, but placement of first-year students into writing classes differs. At smaller institutions students are likely to be integrated into writing classes with other students. For larger institutions, such as the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, there is often an English as a Second Language (ESL) department that is responsible for providing courses that will fulfill writing requirements. Part of the admission process for international students at Illinois is the completion of an English Placement Test (EPT). The test determines the placement of first-year international students in an ESL course which fulfills the Composition 1 requirement for first-year students. Students with higher EPT scores are placed in ESL 115, a one semester class, and students with lower EPT scores are placed in ESL 111/112, a two semester sequence.

Placing students in ESL courses or integrating them into existing writing courses raises numerous questions. The purpose of ESL courses goes beyond teaching basic college writing and research skills and provides students with a setting in which to learn more about the culture of their new country and university. In ESL classrooms all students struggle with English proficiency to some degree and this can serve to alleviate any sense of anxiety. However, Kwon (2009) observes that ESL programs are "...not always helpful to international students" (p. 1025). Each institution must determine where they can best support international students as they are introduced to academic life.

## ESL and Library Instruction

At UIUC, the Undergraduate Library is responsible for providing library instruction for classes that fulfill the university's Composition 1 requirement and, as such, provides instruction for all sections of ESL 112 and 115. The purpose of the instruction in these courses is three-fold:

- Familiarize students with an academic library
- Introduce students to the academic research process
- Show students where and how to get help

While these outcomes do not differ from other Composition 1 courses taught, they do necessitate some modifications to the instruction. Library instruction for ESL classes takes place after students have selected topics for their research papers. The timing of the instruction is particularly important for international students in order to achieve maximum relevancy. Prior to the library instruction session, each student completes a concept map for their topic (See Appendix A). The concept map is then used in class to guide students as they begin to engage in the research process.

In Fall 2015, the authors conducted an assessment of students' concept maps in order to better understand how students in ESL 112 and 115 begin the research process and discover what aspects of it might be most problematic for them. A set of evaluative criteria was created and the topic statements and keywords were assessed and categorized as Ready, Refine, or Revise. As noted in Figure 1, students were fairly successful in writing a topic statement with 39% deemed ready to go and another 46% needing only some refinement.

**Table 1: Concept Map Topic Statement Assessment**  
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Identifying keywords and alternatives proved to be much more difficult for international students, as shown in Figure 2. This is not surprising given students were tasked with identifying not only keywords and phrases from their topic statements, but synonyms for these keywords as well. More than three quarters of the students needed work on identifying keywords and/or alternative terminology for these keywords. These findings are telling and mirror those of Hughes (2005) who discovered international students had difficulties with "...formulation and implementation of search strategies and evaluation of search results" (p. 175). While important for all students, it is particularly important to provide clear instructions in multiple formats for international students who are beginning research assignments. This also demonstrates the need to work closely with programs that support the academic success of international students. Sharing the outcomes of this study with the ESL program, the authors were able to facilitate changes in the introduction to the concept map assignment in the ESL classroom in hopes of facilitating greater success in this particular assignment for international students in subsequent semesters.

**Table 2: Concept Map Keyword Selection Assessment**  
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Integrating library instruction into ESL courses requires that librarians are aware of the needs of international students. While the approaches to teaching do not differ significantly, for those classes that consist entirely of international students there are some adaptations to consider. Metaphors and analogies can be confusing and it is best to avoid using them and, if used, explanations may be in order. Likewise, library jargon can be confusing. For example, a citation can be a reference to a traffic ticket and a journal might signify a personal diary. Librarians should also be cognizant of the pace of their presentations, being attentive to the facial expressions of students which can be telling at moments of confusion. As previously noted, for international students, prior classroom experiences in their native countries are likely to have taken place in lecture style classes where asking questions and class discussion were not encouraged. Attempts to initiate class discussion and student input in ESL classes can be difficult and assistance from the classroom instructor can be an asset in creating a more engaging, participatory classroom.

## Beyond the ESL Classroom

Creating learning objects specifically intended for use by international students is one strategy that can provide support outside of the instruction classroom. Being particularly attentive to universal design and designing learning objects in multiple modes are strategies to consider. For example, the Undergraduate Library provides directions for completing concept maps in several formats: a short overview video, a longer video with detailed instructions, written instructions, and an example of a completed concept map. They are all included in the concept map section of the course's library guide (For examples see: <http://guides.library.illinois.edu/c.php?g=348324&p=2347124>). Because of the likelihood students will need library resources after library instruction is completed, embedding links to library guides in course websites and encouraging departments and programs providing services to international students to provide links to library resources are important strategies. Likewise, librarians with responsibilities for working with international students should take the time to communicate with colleagues to develop a culture within the library so that it is best prepared to work with these students.

## CONCLUSION

The continued increase in the international student population in higher education institutions in the United States necessitates that libraries become proactive in responding to this change. Instruction librarians, in particular, have a responsibility to provide targeted instruction to international students, whether in the classroom or online through learning objects and platforms such as LibGuides. Similar to reaching other student populations, librarians must reach out to those academic programs and student service offices that provide support for international students. Working together we can create a positive impact on our campuses.

### **Acknowledgement:**

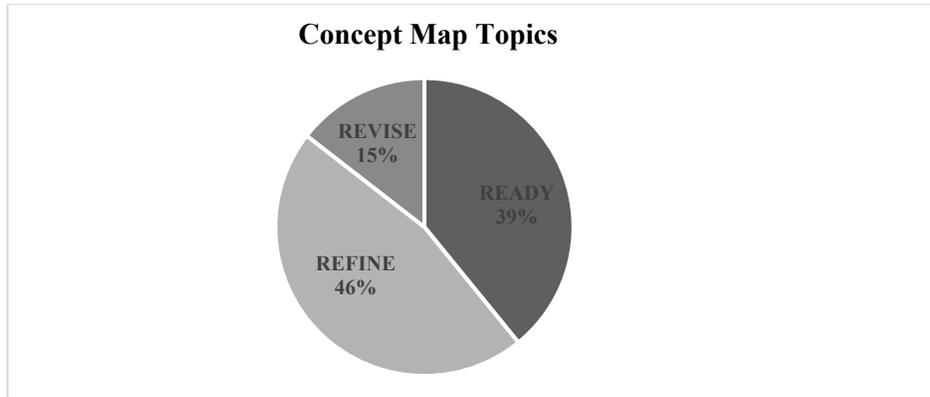
This project is part of the program “Assessment in Action: Academic Libraries and Student Success” which is undertaken by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) in partnership with the Association for Institutional Research and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities. The program, a cornerstone of ACRL's Value of Academic Libraries initiative, is made possible by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

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**Images for Tables and Figures (Editor will put in body of the text later)**

**Table 1: Concept Map Topic Statement Assessment**

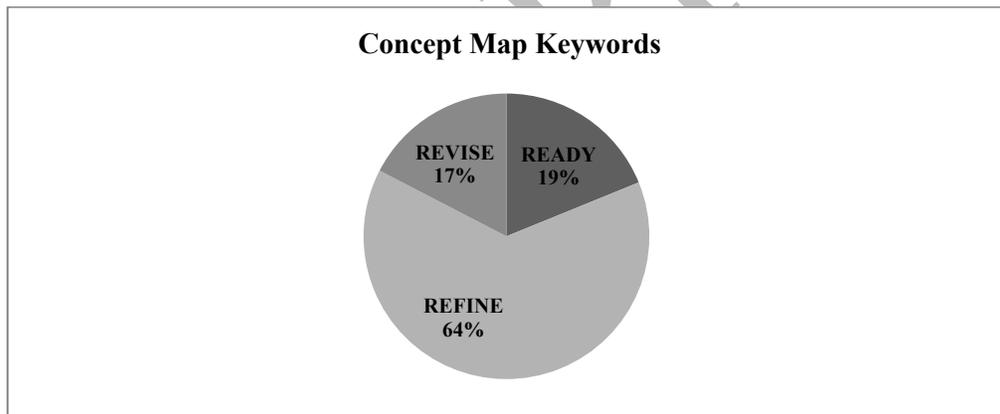


**Ready:** Fully developed. Topic statement is present and (mostly) ready to go.

**Refine:** In progress. Topic statement is present but requires a bit of focus and/or refinement.

**Revise:** Not developed or absent. Topic statement is either (a) present, but too loosely defined (e.g. "Obesity in Children," "Skin Cancer," etc.) or (b) not present.

**Table 2: Concept Map Keyword Selection Assessment**



**Ready:** Database ready. All main concepts with clear relationship to topic identified, and relevant alternative keywords provided for each concept as appropriate.

**Refine:** Almost database ready. All, or some, main concepts with clear relationship to topic identified and some relevant alternative keywords present, though refinement is necessary for successful database search.

**Revise:** Not database ready. Main concepts with clear relationship to topic not identified and/or alternative terminology missing or irrelevant.

## APPENDIX A

### Concept Map

### Create a Concept Map for Your Topic ESL 112 | ESL 115

Name: Alma Mater

Class/Section: ESL 112 D

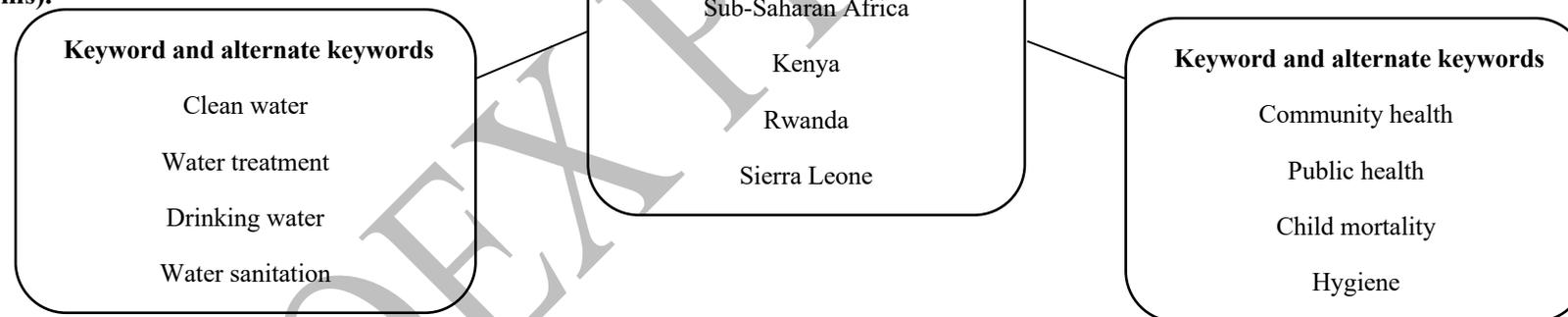
Complete a Concept Map to identify the keywords and concepts you will use when you search for articles about your topic. It can help you identify what you know about your topic and begin to think about your topic in new ways.

To complete your concept map follow the steps below.

1. Type your topic in the box below and underline your keywords or keyword phrases:

TOPIC: Improving access to clean water in Sub-Saharan Africa will promote better community health.

2. Enter your keywords in the boxes below and list alternate keywords (these will be synonyms).



#### TO BE COMPLETED IN CLASS:

3. List the subject areas of professionals who are likely to publish articles about your topic. Use the *UGL Find Articles Guide* to identify these.

Subject area #1

Subject area #2

Subject area #3