

# GETTING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS TO THE SAME STARTING BLOCK

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## INTRODUCTION

With highly international campuses and limited student contact, ensuring Information Literacy (IL) instruction is as inclusive and impactful as possible for English Language Learners (ELLs) is paramount to and a tenant of the profession (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2012). How can instruction librarians help these students overcome the barriers faced in English-speaking higher education to arrive at the same starting block as their domestic or native-speaking peers?

Ranked as a top U.S. institution for hosting international students (Andrei, 2018), fifteen percent of the University at Buffalo's (UB) Fall 2018 undergraduates were international (University at Buffalo Office of the Provost, 2019). Supporting this, the UB Libraries' Education Services team continues to develop an embedded one-credit IL course (iLab) as part of the freshmen writing course in cooperation with the English Language Institute (ELI). Through teaching experience and the literature, the methods discussed below have improved instruction, built stronger student ties and promoted the library's contribution to campus.

## BARRIERS AND ANXIETY

Identifying ELLs' or international students' needs when these terms mask an array of linguistic, cultural, educational and even academic standard differences is intimidating. Language anxiety is "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, p. 284). This may be observed alongside an unwillingness to communicate, and compounds fears around participating in educational settings (e.g., negative evaluation, embarrassment or perceived language competence) (Peng, 2015). This apparent reluctance may be the time required for speech production or learning (Conteh-Morgan, 2002). A discussion-based classroom can therefore be daunting, especially if coming from a more traditional, lecture-style setting. Providing more successful communication experiences for a language learner supports growth and develops student relationships with the library (Carlyle, 2013; Peng, 2015).

## STRATEGIES

These strategies focus on low-effort and high-impact methods; however, stamina is required for continued development and collaboration.

### In the Classroom

Like most native English speakers, instructors may rely heavily on figurative language. Improving clarity for more inclusive instruction benefits all, not just ELLs. Simplifying language seems obvious, but can feel contrary to the training of academics.

When working with early undergraduates, strive to be explicit in directions, process and expectations. If you have an ELL student as a work study, ask them to review content. Use Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) sentence structure. Avoid jargon. When new terms are required, provide context for the term via visual aids or active learning. Encourage translation (e.g. Google Translate)

when necessary, and be patient during the process. The use of realia for background knowledge and language building creates a sensory experience for ELLs (Tran & Aytac, 2018).

Manage your pace. Endeavor for an even rate of speech and a more manageable amount of content in a single lesson. Early and more frequent IL support, including pre-research assignments, give ELLs a better understanding of expectations and more meaningful IL instruction (Avery, 2017).

Seek their input. ELLs have diverse experience, knowledge and information needs that change over time (Martin et al., 2012). Methods to gain their input vary: KWL charts (Know, Want to know and Learned) (Tran & Aytac, 2018), survey or formal assessment (e.g., pre- and post-test). The end result is responsive instruction. Topic selection may then involve student input or the selection of more universal topics based on student background knowledge. TED Talks provide transcripts in several languages and work well as topic background sources.

Pedagogically, flipped classrooms and cooperative learning fit well with an IL classroom and benefit ELLs (Tran & Aytac, 2018). Social constructivism has provided a strong base for the aforementioned iLab, utilizing peer support and applied concepts and techniques with facilitating librarians. Scaffolding the research process with intentional iteration of problem areas (e.g., keyword selection) models the process that undergraduates can apply to subsequent work.

## **Technology**

Multimodal delivery improves inclusivity and accessibility. Videos must have closed captions or transcripts. Provide instructions in more than one format (e.g., text, audio, etc.). If the classroom has a microphone use it regardless of the speakers' voice, and take advantage of recording options to enable students to revisit the material.

Common presentation tools have beneficial features. Google Slides' Q&A provides ELLs experiencing anxiety the opportunity to submit written questions, named or anonymously ("Accept and Present," 2019). Microsoft Office 2019 has translation capabilities within PowerPoint and forthcoming live, on-screen captioning and translation ("Present with Real-Time," 2019).

Point students to resources that provide similar dynamic options and seek feedback. Adopting technology only benefits students when it works and is better if it meets ELLs where they already are. Understand the platforms they utilize and what they are accustomed to having the ability to freely access.

## **Collaboration**

Collaboration can be time consuming and difficult, but is required to serve ELLs. Identifying stakeholders on campus and in the community builds on the institutional knowledge and expertise already available. Pursue partnerships with international student services, diversity and inclusion offices, and relevant student associations. Participate in events for and by international students to build these relationships.

Partner with English language instruction faculty by addressing the areas where they see their students struggling. Work together to create a suite of resources and support that meet faculty and student needs (Martin, Reaume, Reeves, & Wright, 2012), but also keep projects at a scale attainable by the librarian(s) involved. Begin with a pilot with intention to adapt and grow the collaboration based on successes and failures, focusing on taking advantage of the faculty member's and librarian's pedagogical strengths (Tran & Aytac, 2018). Since the creation of iLab, ELI faculty reported a marked improvement in freshmen research. This has provided buy-in for continued and more collaborative development and earned the libraries additional advocates.

## **CONCLUSION**

Improving the library experience of ELLs has a seemingly unmanageable number of variables, but is vital to the library, student success and the institution as a whole. Engagement with international students on campus and their faculty in formal and informal settings develops understanding of their needs and capabilities. One librarian may spearhead the charge, but this must be followed by collaboration with partners and professional development within the library.

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