

LOST IN TRANSLATION? INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND NON-ENGLISH INFORMATION LITERACY

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Information literacy training for international students is essential, but how effective is it if the students are lost in translation? This presentation illustrates how information literacy sessions taught at the University of Pittsburgh meet the challenge and became a vital component in enhancing the experience of its international student community. Outlined are the planning and operation process details as well as the experience, outcomes, challenges, and future directions for the program.

ARE WE SINGING, THINKING, OR SINKING?

A recent advertisement for Berlitz International (Berlitz) showed a German coast guard who receives an SOS from a sinking ship. “We are sinking”, the crew pleads, to which the German guard responds, “What are you sinking about?”

This video is a powerful illustration of the complexity surrounding communication. It is evident that proficiency goes beyond the ability to read and write. As a result, international students can find themselves in confusing and unpleasant interactions with information professionals. IL sessions, even when simplified, can seem complicated: not only terminology is an issue, but so is the manner of its delivery. Learning differences and cultural influences can sure muddy the waters.

Here, I suggest that offering non-English IL will not only help eliminate miscommunication, but also augment the experience of international student. Some research certainly suggests “Native Language” instruction (Boer, Liestman and Wu, Natowitz); however, there’s little evidence of a commitment to non-English information literacy instruction for international students on our campuses. Some possible reasons are mentioned in the literature discussion below.

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LITERATURE AND IL FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS:

There’s a relatively small body of literature regarding IL for international students. An analysis of 18 core articles identifies 3 themes: culture, technology, and language (Natowitz).

The Cultural Discussion:

It is difficult to discuss any issues surrounding international students without including a discussion of cultural differences. Natowitz states:

Implicit in the literature is the question of whether international students will be seen as library users lacking the requisite cultural background, or as representatives of unique and valuable cultures, whose differences ought to be understood, responded to, and even appreciated. (p.5)

We believe that the time to respond to this question has come. International students represent different cultural values. Still, while many librarians recognize this fact, IL programs continue to be designed to help the students assimilate to our learning culture rather than consider changing our own teaching to fit their needs. Why do we need to do this? For one thing, it is important that international students feel comfortable and confident in their interactions. This is most likely to happen when they language is not an obstacle. Further, there’s evidence that teaching in native language increases the learning outcome (Liestman and Wu). Teaching non-English IL can also increase the library’s visibility and its outreach efforts.

The Technology Discussion:

Research has also discussed the issue of technological divide, which remains somewhat relevant – depending on the geography. Today, however, technology proliferation makes

competency in this area less critical to IL. Jackson indicates that recent surveys show consistently higher levels of computer literacy. (Jackson). This makes it difficult to generalize and/or predict the incoming skills of the students.

The Language Discussion:

This area seemed to generate the most debate, perhaps because it is more closely linked to the issue of communication. Feldman asserts that reading and writing proficiency doesn't correlate with oral proficiency (p. 164). This is one of the reasons why English instruction may be problematic. Many of the students have higher reading and writing proficiencies and tend to rely on this when learning the language. Oral proficiency is developed in time and that's one of the luxuries that one-hour IL sessions cannot afford.

Instead of non-English instruction, however, most articles suggest techniques for enhancing communication in English, such as using simple terminology and/or speaking more slowly. This makes covering essential research in one hour a challenging task. Additionally, there are issues that deal with differences in linguistic structure that complicate information retrieval efforts (see Jacobson p.27).

Suggestions and Concerns:

Unfortunately, research on IL for international students needs to be brought more up to date, especially in regards to technology and cultural concerns. However, there are some great suggestions on designing IL programs for the international student population: creating specialized tutorials or subject guides, redesigning contents, building partnerships, improving outreach, and training staff.

In terms of offering native instruction, there were concerns dealing with choosing a language of instruction and the sustainability of such service. Some also felt that native instruction might be a disservice, since the students learning environment is in English.

Whatever the case may be, literature makes it clear that IL instruction needs to be framed within all three areas discussed above.

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED: THE OLD FISHING DEBATE

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime. --A Chinese Proverb

The question here is: what is a fish?

In 2005, at a lecture at the McKay School of Education, Brigham Young University, Dr. Bransford answers this question elegantly by using Leo Lionni's children story "Fish is Fish". The story tells us about a frog who returns to a pond to tell the fish about what she saw on dry land. As the story unfolds, the fish envisions humans, birds, and other creatures with fins or gills. Dr.

Bransford explains that our world of knowledge is doesn't exist in a vacuum; that learners bring "previously acquired knowledge, correct or erroneous". (Bransford).

Information Literacy librarians understand this, but imagine what would happen if, instead of a frog describing what he'd seen, we chose a fish to narrate to fish.

The students will have plenty of time to develop and learn vocabulary that will help them with their research because they know it will be necessary to navigate databases. However, they won't be as successful if they didn't understand the basics to begin with.

THE PLANNING PROCESS:

Where We Were: 1997 - Present:

The University Library System had a long history of collaboration with departments that deal with International Students:

The English Language Institute collaborates with our librarians to offer information literacy sessions that are designed to introduce international students to the research process at an American University. These sessions include library tours, database training, and a hands-on period with access to a librarian for one on one assistant with their research questions. These sessions are taught in English and are mandatory. However, this population is much smaller and only includes students who've been required to attend the institute for further language training.

At OIS, our sessions were invitational and poorly attended, including our non-English IL effort, even though they reached a much larger group of students. The program needed revamp and a new marketing strategy.

Language Selection:

The choice of language depended on two critical factors: enrollment and staff availability.

Revisiting Enrollment Demographics:

According to 1984-2004 figures from OIS, there's an increase (though sporadic) in international student enrollment. Asian students represent the largest demographics, followed by Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa. Of the Asian population, China comes first, followed by S. Korea, then Japan (see figures 1-3). Enrollment demographics pointed to Asia and Latin America as two service populations.

Figure 1

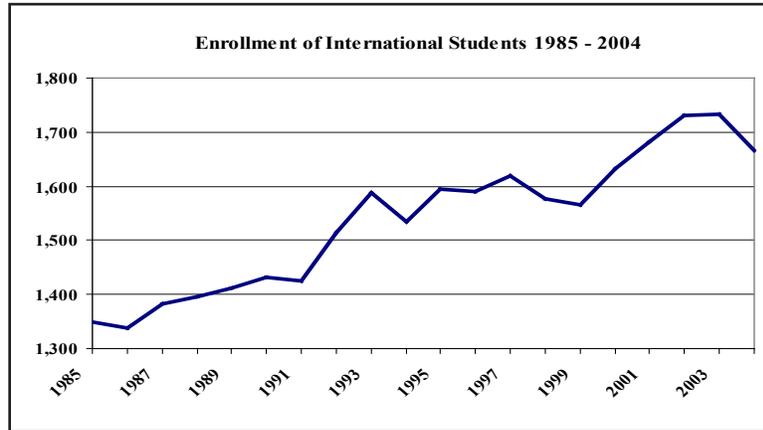


Figure 2

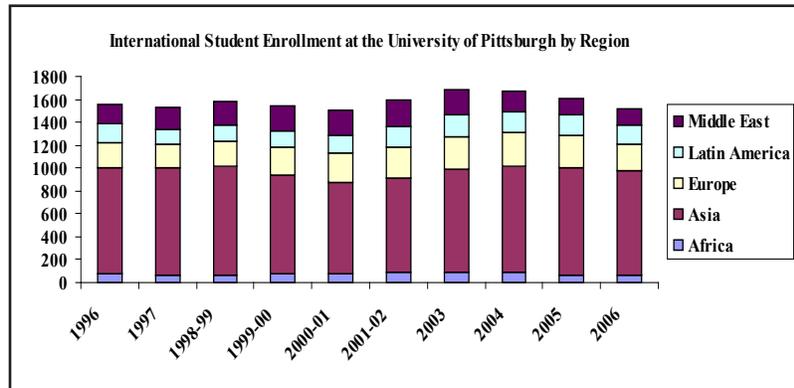
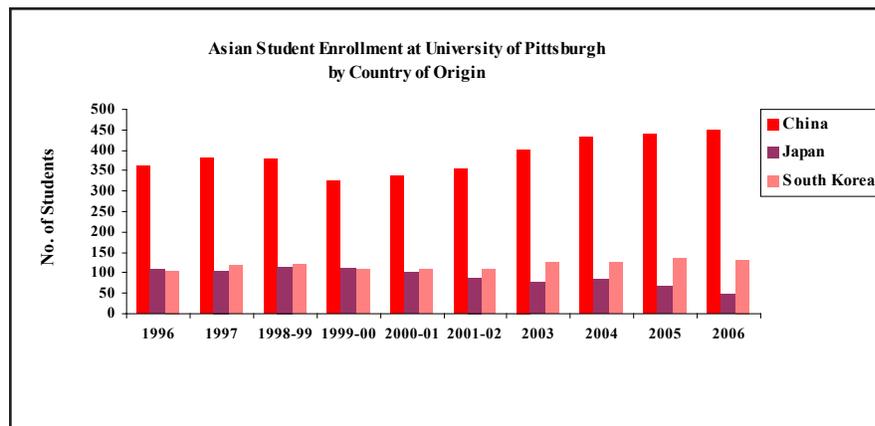


FIGURE 3



Selecting Instructors

As for instructors, we are fortunate to house two nationally known collections: East Asian and Latin American. For these reasons, we were able to find skilled staff that can provide instruction in the targeted language. We chose to focus on Asian, and later hope to add Spanish. In terms of sustainability, this is a non-issue regarding these particular languages.

The Instruction Sessions:

Regarding the sessions, we decided to offer a variety of instructional methods: there was a tour component, a brief lecture, and a hands-on interactive exercise portion. This allowed for maximum interaction which personalized the session, while ensuring that basic concepts were grasped.

In terms of scheduling the sessions, the sessions were offered as part of their orientation and they had the choice of attending a non-English session or the English session. We noticed the English session dropped slightly, while attendance of the non-English sessions increased. However, there were students that attended both sessions.

Where We Were: 2004 - Present:

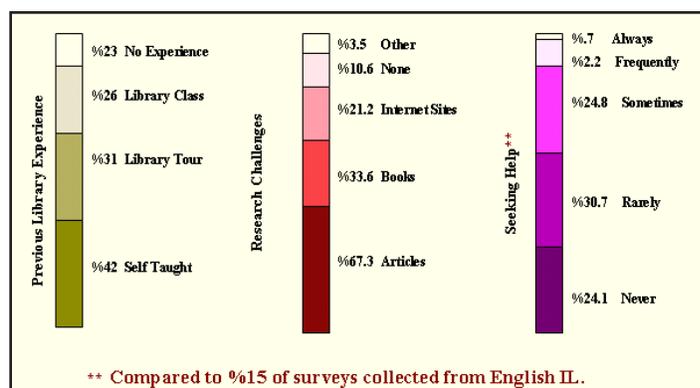
Today, we offer instruction for international students in both English and Non-English. This service is designed to be more interactive and personal by increasing the mode of learning via tours, lecture, and hands-on experience. The sessions have been well received.

OUR EXPERIENCE:

The sessions: Generally there was a 2% increase in attendance in the Chinese and Korean sessions, and 4% in the Japanese. In terms of satisfaction, 53% found the sessions extremely useful, and 33% found them useful (there's a notable difference between the level of satisfaction of international students and the general student population. The results of satisfaction surveys for other students indicated that only 16% found the session extremely useful, and 49% rated it useful. Taking into account that this population included international students, the satisfaction gap might even be larger for the general population).

The Students:

In terms of the international students' perception of self-efficacy, it was interesting to see that the trends mirrored those of the general student population (again, taking into account that this population included international students, the difference in perception might be larger for the general population):



Important to note, are the discrepancies between their perception of efficacy and the challenges they face in terms of acquiring the information they need. Also noteworthy is that the students remain relatively hesitant to ask for help. Another opportunity for research would be to survey these students at a later point in the term to measure the change in their attitude towards seeking help from a librarian.

Challenges:

Regarding the challenges discussed in literature, the resources available at our university provided for a unique opportunity to manage this program. In terms of sustainability, we find ourselves fortunate to have skilled librarians and collections that match our student demographics. The most challenge we faced was in providing instruction for smaller demographics of students, such as Arabic and Turkish. However, we do offer one on one instruction on a need basis.

As for the question of this form of IL being a disservice to students in terms of learning English, it is unfounded. There were a couple of reasons for this statement: first, international students continued to attend English sessions (such as ELI) during the rest of their learning experience; second, we feel that acquiring the language is a long term goal and is also beyond the focus of information literacy. We are more concerned with increasing the students' comprehension of basic research concepts, their confidence, and the visibility of librarians and services, among other things such as the presence of diversity and cultural inclusion.

WHAT'S IN OUR FUTURE?

- Creating non-English handouts, instruction materials, and tutorials.
- Adding Spanish.
- Further Research Possibilities:
 - o Measuring Pre and Post testing to measure actual learning.
 - o Compare learning between non-English and English participants.

CONCLUSION:

Librarians recognize the need for creating specialized IL programs for International Students. Here in the U.S., however, these programs tend to focus on content delivery and are administered in English. This presentation illustrates how non-English IL sessions at the University of Pittsburgh enhance the experience of its International Students community.

While we recognize that our university might be uniquely positioned to offer such service, we hope that we were able to offer information that can encourage the implementation of similar services at your own academic institution. In recognizing that this iteration is relatively a new endeavor, we hope to advance our services and explore additional research opportunities that look closer at services to this particular demographic.

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