

# EXCITING, NEW INFORMATION LITERACY OUTREACH EFFORTS TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

Universities across the U.S. are seeing steady growth in the enrollments of international students—currently at over half a million (IIE, 2005). Likewise, the numbers of ESL (English as a Second Language) students—children of immigrants—is increasing in higher education as well. In 2004, there were 9.9 million K-12 children whose first language at home was a language other than English (NCES, 2006). These children represent the next wave of incoming university students.

With the numbers of these international/ESL students in mind, one might ask “What kind of library skills do these students arrive with? What kinds of Information Literacy training have they received in their home countries?” Often, too little. Reaching out to these international/ESL students is frequently a challenge—they may feel self-conscious with speaking English or may be overwhelmed by the library’s unfamiliarity, and thus avoid taking advantage of library assistance or training.

Because of these challenges, the library at California State University Fullerton (CSUF) has launched several exciting, new outreach efforts to international/ESL students. These are not standard approaches—like orientation tours or one-shot instruction sessions—but rather innovative outreaches to specifically interest these students in the library.

This paper will first discuss some of the library challenges international/ESL students face, and then will outline the outreach efforts undertaken at CSUF.

## CHALLENGES INTERNATIONAL/ESL STUDENTS FACE

While limited Information Literacy is a problem of *all* college students, whether foreign or domestic, international/ESL students face extra challenges in this regard.

One challenge may be much more unfamiliarity with libraries than U.S. students. In the U.S., K-12 school libraries and public libraries are common. Nearly all children in the U.S., regardless of state, rural or urban locale, or economic status, have at least a basic understanding of libraries—e.g., that they can openly browse shelves, that they can borrow books, that librarians are helpful in providing information, etc. In many other countries, however, children do not grow up with these same understandings of libraries. For example, in some countries stacks are not open, materials may not circulate, and “librarians” may be mere volunteers, rather than trained professionals. Thus, a student from a country without developed school and public libraries may have a concept of libraries as not very useful, and librarians as not very skilled. Therefore their interest in using the library may be nil. One researcher—based on international student surveys—found that unfamiliarity with both open shelves and classification (Dewey, LC) were particular challenges (Liu, 1993).

Another challenge is the language barrier. The term “Circulation Desk” might be understandable to an English-speaking U.S. student, but may not be to an international/ESL student (who might think it has something to do with fans or air-conditioning). Also, those international/ESL students who are self-conscious about the ability to speak English may be very reluctant to speak with any library worker, for fear of not being able to speak well.

Still another challenge is the academic culture shock of U.S. research expectations. During a research trip to Asia, this author documented a commonality in many Asian countries: a curricular tradition of memorization and standardized testing, rather than individual research and composition. Thus, for many international students from Asia, facing an assignment from their U.S. professor to “choose a topic, go to the library and research it, and then write an original report on it” may be quite unfamiliar to them.

Given these challenges, it is understandable why many international/ESL students might have a lower familiarity or interest in libraries.

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### A 3-EFFORT SOLUTION

It should be noted that there is ample literature on library instruction to international/ESL students. The Instruction to Diverse Populations Committee of ACRL's Instruction Section, for example, maintains an online bibliography of many references (ACRL, 2003). However, most often these discuss tips and suggestions for teaching international/ESL students during library instruction sessions or Reference exchanges. The assumption is that these students are already in the library to get help. But what about the students who are *not* attending the instruction sessions? What about those who are avoiding the Reference Desk? How are those students reached?

This is where California State University Fullerton's 3-effort outreach solution came in. The following 3 efforts were designed to specifically outreach to international/ESL students, in a creative way, so as to interest them in coming to and using the library.

#### **EFFORT 1: LEARNING ABOUT, & NETWORKING WITH, FOREIGN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES**

Outreaching to international/ESL students as an entire group was deemed too impractical. Instead, outreaching to them by their specific countries (i.e., Japanese students, Indonesian students, Saudi students, etc.) afforded more appeal. So the first effort was to learn more about the library conditions in each of their home countries, to better understand the background they came with.

This author had a unique opportunity: to actually visit—in person—the academic libraries of many foreign countries represented at CSUF. During the 2005-2006 school year, a one-year sabbatical was taken to conduct a multi-country library tour. Because the majority of CSUF's international students are from Asia, various academic libraries in all 14 countries of East and Southeast Asia were visited. This was a major project, with over 200 libraries, in all, being visited. Conditions were studied, trends were observed, and the status of library instruction and Information Literacy was documented. This, then, gave the author invaluable insight into the library conditions international students at CSUF were coming from—from Indonesia in the south, to Korea in the north.

Not only were the various library situations documented, but contact and communication with many of these libraries was established. Sometimes these communications were merely informal emails; other times they piggybacked on formal university-to-university partnerships.

It is important to note that this one-year travel project was an exceptional "bonus" means of leaning about, and networking with, foreign academic libraries. However, such travel is NOT NECESSARY to achieving this effort. It can be done right from the library. First, doing a demographic analysis of what countries/cultures are most represented among international students is necessary. Second, working with the university's international

affairs office, or international education & exchange office, to determine if the university already has some formal partnerships or agreements, is valuable. And third, visiting the library Web sites of those universities to learn of the library and obtain email contacts, is essential.

An inevitable question is "How can one visit those Web sites or begin email networking if in a foreign language?" The reality of English being the world's *de facto* international language becomes an advantage here—many foreign universities and libraries have English versions of their Web sites, and the presence of at least one or more English-bilingual persons in foreign libraries is becoming more common. At CSUF, this author is enjoying continual email communication with librarian counterparts at universities throughout Asia, keeping informed of the latest situations and conditions.

In addition to the above, regular avenues of research—such as consulting the literature or speaking with library/university staff who may be from the target countries themselves, also helps with forming a better understanding. For example, an article about Japanese library users—although many years old—is still useful in learning cultural characteristics (Hendricks, 1991).

#### **EFFORT 2: PREPARING CUSTOM OUTREACH GUIDES (BOTH PRINT & ONLINE)**

Having learned about library conditions in targeted countries, the next effort is to use that knowledge to prepare custom outreach guides. These are general orientation/information guides to the library, but customized for international students based on the information learned.

For example, a guide for these students should go into much more detail about the role of librarians—that they are degreed information experts and are there for helping students do research. This helps in overcoming past stereotypes of librarians as unhelpful nonprofessionals.

If a sizable portion of international students is from one or two particular countries, then guides can be customized for those students, specifically. For example, a guide entitled "Library Guide for International Students from China" can go into detail about LC Classification system, since China libraries use a different system and Chinese characters.

Figure 1 is the first page of the library brochure for international students being used at CSUF.

#### **EFFORT 3: OUTREACHING TO THEM, BY GOING TO THEM (CLUBS, ESL CLASSES, PARTIES, ETC.)**

Effort 3 is where the first two efforts can be put into action: it is outreaching to international/ESL students by actually going *to them*. The traditional library outreach method is to hold instruction sessions or workshops and wait for attendees. But this doesn't reach (or appeal to) many students. So the key is to go to them.

How is this achieved? First, by identifying where international/ESL students congregate. It may be in cultural clubs (e.g., Chinese Students Association, Korea club, etc.)...it may be in ESL classes or activities...or it may be in informal gatherings (lunch spots on campus, etc.). For clubs, lists of current cultural clubs can be obtained by the university's student government. Then club presidents (or faculty mentors) can be contacted. For ESL classes, contact can be made with the ESL instructors (either individually, or as a group, at their departmental meetings). For informal gathering spots, one simply needs to start asking around (to international/ESL students themselves, as well as staff in the international education & exchange office).

Merely identifying where international/ESL students are is not enough. Next, there has to be some kind of "appealing" offer made. An offer of "Can I come give a lecture about the library to your group?" is not going to be successful. Instead, making their home country the main focus is the key. This author approached several cultural clubs on campus with an offer along the lines of: "Hi! I visited your home country last year, and saw many of your universities and libraries. It was amazing! I took some great photos, so I'd like to show them to you! Would you be interested? There are lots of similarities and differences between libraries there and our library." From there, the offer can be made even more appealing: mentioning that it will be a fun and informal "show & tell"...stating that popcorn or refreshments will be served...noting that the Web sites of many of their universities will be displayed.

For clubs, work with the club president or advisor to set a date. For ESL classes, work with the instructors. And for informal gatherings, ask to join the students on a future day. Then for each of these, on the designated date, bring the "show on the road"—bring refreshments, books of their country from the library, a laptop (or for larger groups, a laptop and LCD projector), customized brochures, and so on. Be enthusiastic about their country and make it exciting. The point is to first show interest in their country (by materials the library has on it, by photos, by linked Web pages, etc.) The presentation need not be long...perhaps as short as 20 minutes. The goal is not to provide all-out Information Literacy training, but to interest them to learn about, and come use, the library. In effect, almost like a movie trailer—just making them want to see more. Figure 2 is a sample flyer that could be given to the president of a Japan club, to email to all the club's members. Notice the appealing tone of the flyer.

## CONCLUSION

At CSUF, outreach presentations were given to five different groups (Indonesian, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai, and Korean students) during one semester. The presentations were very well received, and students were impressed with the interest in their home country. This author noted many students, at the end of the presentation, making statements like "Wow, I didn't know that about the library here; I'm going to check it out", "You've enthused me to start using the library", and "I want to make an appointment with a librarian to help me with my research paper." This is exactly the beneficial outcome such outreach efforts can produce.

The 3 efforts described in this paper are flexible and customizable enough to adapt to any library, with any international/ESL population.

## REFERENCES

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Figure 1

A guide to the CSUF  
**Pollak Library**  
for International Students



Welcome to the CSUF Pollak Library! This guide will introduce you to the resources and services in the library.

All libraries worldwide share certain common features, but you may notice some differences between the Pollak Library and libraries in other countries: Some examples:

- Open shelving: most all materials in the library are on open, unrestricted shelves, for self-service browsing
- Grouping by subject: materials are grouped on the shelves by subject, and the subjects are represented by a letter-number code or "call number" (the little white sticker on all items)
- Librarians=research experts: Librarians at CSUF are not just clerks; they're Master or Ph.D faculty in Library Science, specializing in teaching you research skills; feel free to ask them for help!
- Generous loan amounts: you can check-out up to 150 items at once! And you can keep them for up to two months (60 days)
- Scholarly publications rule: student thesis projects are often popular resources in libraries outside the U.S., but here, scholarly publications (journal articles & books) are preferred.

Figure 2

*Cool things about **Japan***  
*in the*  
*Library!*



*You will be amazed at what's there!*  
*Come check it out!*

Co-sponsored by:  
The Japanese Club & the Library  
Thursday, September 20, 2007  
5:00pm, Student Union, room AB