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Introduction

The number of international students studying in the United States has increased steadily for decades and exceeded one million for the first time in 2016—an 85 percent increase from just a decade before.[1] More than 40,000 of these students are enrolled in intensive English programs in order to improve their English proficiency to enable them to pass the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and matriculate as undergraduate or graduate students. The students enrolled in these intensive English programs learn vocabulary words, improve their written and oral communication skills, and become acculturated to

Western academic norms such as critical thinking, academic integrity, and the paper-writing process.

Despite these increasing numbers of international students and a plethora of publications on the provision of library instruction to international and English language learner students, there is little in the literature about the development of online library resources that are linguistically appropriate for these students. A 2014 study found that just over 8 percent of academic libraries have websites for international students,[2] while a 2015 study found that fewer than half of libraries have research guides for English language learners, and just over half have research guides for international students.[3] An additional concern is that the few online library resources that are available for international students are often too linguistically sophisticated, but little guidance exists to aid librarians who wish to create research guides that are accessible to their intended patrons. The few mentions in the literature of research guides targeted at international students or English language learners are now dated "best practices" that have since been superseded.[4–6] This dearth of discussion in the literature is perhaps related to Witt, Kutner, and Cooper's finding that "though activities such as international student recruitment have increased, corresponding support services to these students have not."[7]

Best Practices for Research Guides and Online Library Resources for English Language Learners

While case studies of and best practices for research guides and other online learning resources targeted at international and English-language students are missing from the literature published in recent years, a quick internet search reveals that many research guides designed for these students are not linguistically accessible to their intended population. Reading long blocks of text can be a barrier to comprehension and usage, but research guides for international students are often dense with text and have few audiovisual components. International students in an Edith Cowan University study, for example, found university websites overwhelming and difficult to navigate because of the amount of text and number of hyperlinks, instead preferring webpages that limited text through the use of pull-down menus.[8] Other research guides aimed at international students use library jargon, which research and the experiences of academic librarians have shown to be incomprehensible and off-putting, even to North American students.[9–11] Overall, not much seems to have changed since Howze and Moore's 2004 finding that online library "materials that are both culturally and linguistically centered are woefully lacking."[12]

Additionally, many research guides for international students and English language learners do not differentiate their content for their target audience, instead reiterating information found in other research guides or elsewhere on the library website about academic integrity and search strategies. Given the nature of intensive English programs, which prepare students to apply for and succeed in North American undergraduate and graduate programs, English language learners in particular are likely to have specialized, specific interests different from their North American classmates, including: preparation materials for the TOEFL and IELTS language proficiency examinations; preparation materials for the SAT, GRE, and other graduate admissions tests; resources providing guidance on minimizing accents; and resources that improve the skills of listening, reading, and speaking in English. English language learners and international students alike may also be grateful for step-by-step instructions for overwhelming library- or research-related tasks such as borrowing a book and reading a scholarly article. This lack of differentiated content does not align with the literature on library services for international students, which "often recommend[s]… a dedicated library liaison, explicit help with language and communication, and targeted instruction with an emphasis on the known issues for international students, such as plagiarism."[13]

Instead, these students must extract recommendations from related topics. Multiple studies have found that English language learners and international students find library jargon difficult to understand.[14–17] These studies have generally investigated vocabulary that is spoken rather than written, but comprehension is unlikely to improve with the different format. As Amsberry notes, "Many library and research-related words have multiple meanings; for example, 'citation' could be something given for a parking violation, 'abstract' could be a kind of art, and 'article' is also a part of speech."[18] Library instructions should therefore avoid library jargon when possible and clearly define words when not possible. These instructions can also use pictorial representations as a way of making clear the meaning of new vocabulary words.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a method intended to increase pedagogical inclusivity for a diverse array of learners rather than a subset of learners, recommends multiple strategies which would be useful to the international student and English language learner. One of the principles of UDL is to provide simple instructions. Polger and Sheidlower suggest "adding headings, subheadings, bulleted lists, and tables" to written materials in support of this principle.[19] Another UDL principle is to provide perceptible information or information in a variety of formats. Video and audio recordings on research guides can be modified in support of this principle through the inclusion of transcripts and permitting of replays. Video and audio transcripts and replays have the further benefit of meeting Web Content Accessibility

Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0. Teaching new concepts in a variety of formats, such as through interactive activities in addition to textual instructions, also supports this UDL principle.

Case Study: Interactive Online Lessons through LibGuides

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) is an R1 (research-intensive) institution located in Richmond, Virginia. During the 2016–2017 academic year, its 1,600 international students made up 5 percent of the university's student population. The majority of those international students come from three world regions: the Middle East, with 40 percent of the international student population; East Asia, with 32 percent; and Southeast Asia, with 16 percent. Sixty percent of VCU's international students come from just four countries: Saudi Arabia, China, India, and Kuwait.[20]

As liaison to VCU's Global Education Office, I provide research assistance to the university's international students in the form of course-integrated instruction for our English Language Program (ELP), and I give library tours, manage the collection of leveled English-language readers, and create and maintain a variety of LibGuides. The library has enjoyed a robust relationship with the ELP. However, while the strength of this relationship is in many ways a blessing, the number and types of requests for library instruction had become a challenge by the time I stepped into the role of liaison to this group in 2015. Partly a result of ELP faculty wishing to expose their students to a variety of English accents and speaking styles through guest speakers, the number of library instruction requests alone was unsustainable given my role as liaison to other departments. Also, as is common in one-shot library instruction for domestic students, faculty often requested more learning outcomes than could be satisfactorily taught in a single session, with topics requiring even more time to teach due to existing language barriers. Additionally, instruction was often requested for lower-level courses where students' insufficient grasp of English and of Western academic norms made it extremely difficult for them to follow and participate in discussions of nuanced topics such as source evaluation and academic integrity.

Combined, these factors indicated a need to transform the instructional approach taken with these lower-level classes. In-person instruction needed to be limited to upper-level classes where students' English fluency and academic knowledge would be sufficient for library sessions on these nuanced, complex topics, yet support for the lower-level classes could not

be withdrawn entirely. My solution was to create stand-alone online lessons that faculty could use in mid-level ELP courses. VCU's ELP curriculum defines mid-level students as "able to write basic paragraphs that may include a topic sentence… [though] frequent errors such as run-ons and fragments may be evident" and able to "comprehend short conversations and recognize basic vocabulary."[21] These mid-level students, therefore, have sufficient fluency to benefit from short lessons but not enough to warrant in-person instruction.

To determine which topics to create online lessons for, I looked to the learning outcomes I was most often asked to teach by mid-level course faculty. These topics include how to paraphrase, how to find sources to prepare for a debate or argumentative paper, the peer review process, and the spectrum of source reliability from sensational to scholarly. I further narrowed down the list by determining which of these topics could be taught effectively via an interactive online format. Using these criteria, I settled on three topics: avoiding plagiarism, evaluating sources, and borrowing a book.

My intent with these online lessons was to provide a pedagogically sound alternative to in-person instruction that faculty would genuinely want to use, so I structured the online lessons in a way that enabled them to be used either as in-class assignments or homework. The medium used for each of the three online lessons was Springshare's LibGuides, mainly because VCU Libraries did not license other e-learning software at the time. The LibGuides platform has the added benefit of simplicity in that there are strict limits on the amount of information that can be presented on a single page. As a result, each online lesson addressed no more than two learning outcomes, which were listed at the beginning of each online lesson. For example, in the "Borrowing a Book from the Library" online lesson, the intended learning outcome is that students will be able to follow the described procedure for checking out a book from the university library. The "in order to" clause favored by ACRL is included in the learning outcome to help students identify situations when they may be desirous of borrowing a book.

Lesson 1: Borrowing a Book from the Library

In the "Borrowing a Book from the Library" lesson, six vocabulary words (author, book, call number, check-out, renew, title) are introduced at the beginning of the lesson with a representative icon (figure 6.1). The vocabulary words' definitions do not appear until the student hovers their mouse over an individual word; I chose this format to avoid overwhelming students with a block of text. Students then listen to a thirty-four-second audio clip of someone borrowing a book and asking questions at the circulation desk. This clip

can be replayed, includes a transcript, and omits video so that the student can focus on the conversation without being distracted by visual elements. After listening to the audio clip, students take a two-question, multiple-choice quiz that assesses their comprehension of the conversation. The online lesson ends with options for applied practice in both in-class and homework scenarios: in class, students take turns role-playing book borrower and librarian, and for homework, students are instructed to visit the VCU Library to find a book and check it out.
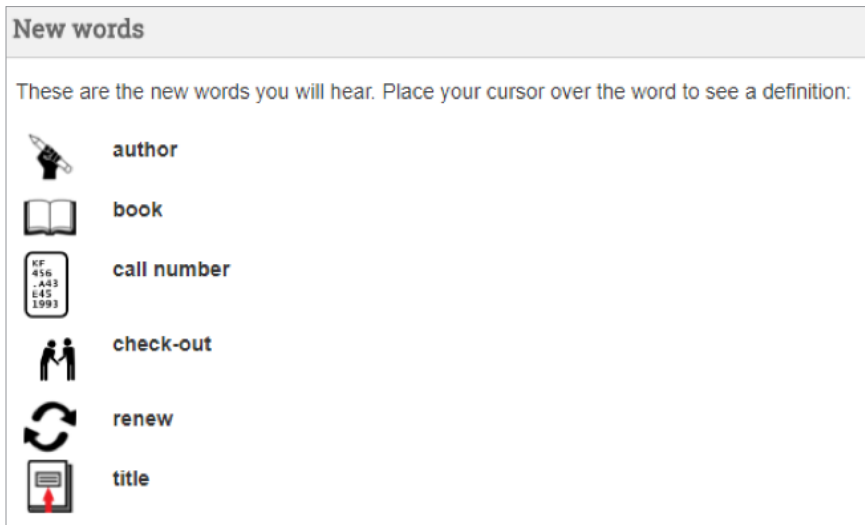

Figure 6.1. Six vocabulary words related to borrowing a library book

Lesson 2: Evaluating Sources

To help students determine which sources will be most appropriate for their research needs, the "Evaluating Sources" lesson introduces a variety of research-specific vocabulary terms which their future undergraduate and graduate professors are likely to use. The lesson briefly and simply defines thirteen terms, such as *abstract*, *peer review*, and *tertiary source*, with additional contextual information provided as needed. For example, the definition of the word "author" includes the information that "looking up an author's credentials (where they work and what degrees they have) can help you decide if the author is an expert on the topic they've written about and whether you can trust what they've written." Additionally, by clicking on a vocabulary term, students are taken to YouTube to see an image or photograph of the term and to hear the word pronounced by me. After reviewing

these terms, students take a short multiple-choice quiz that asks them to identify the appropriate term to use in a research-related sentence and alerts them whether their answers were correct (figure 6.2).

My professor has asked for high-quality, reliable sources, so I'm going to check whether the _____ is an expert on my topic.

Which new vocabulary word is correct?
(required)

○ author

○ peer-review

○ citation

Figure 6.2. Example Question on evaluating sources

Lesson 3: What is Plagiarism? Citing Your Sources

The third lesson, "What Is Plagiarism? Citing Your Sources," is intended to be used by ELP faculty as a supplement to an in-class introduction to the most complex topic of the three, avoiding plagiarism (figure 6.3). The lesson begins with short paragraphs of background information on how North American conceptions of copying and memorizing differ from some other countries. For example, "American professors really want to know YOUR thoughts when you write a paper, not just the thoughts of experts and scholars!" Students are then directed to partner with a classmate to discuss how plagiarism and copying are viewed in their home countries in order to activate prior knowledge on the subject. Several examples of plagiarism that are often surprising to international (and even North American) students are shared as discussion starters, such as using the same words as a friend on an in-class assignment and re-using an assignment that was written for another class. Students are then asked to spend ten minutes writing a comparison of North American conceptions of copying and plagiarism with those of their home country, reflecting on what they believe will be the most difficult aspects of writing in this way and identifying strategies they can use to be more successful at writing in their own words. This particular lesson is primarily implemented in ELP Written Communication classes, hence its use of a written assessment rather than the objective multiple-choice ones used in the other two lessons.
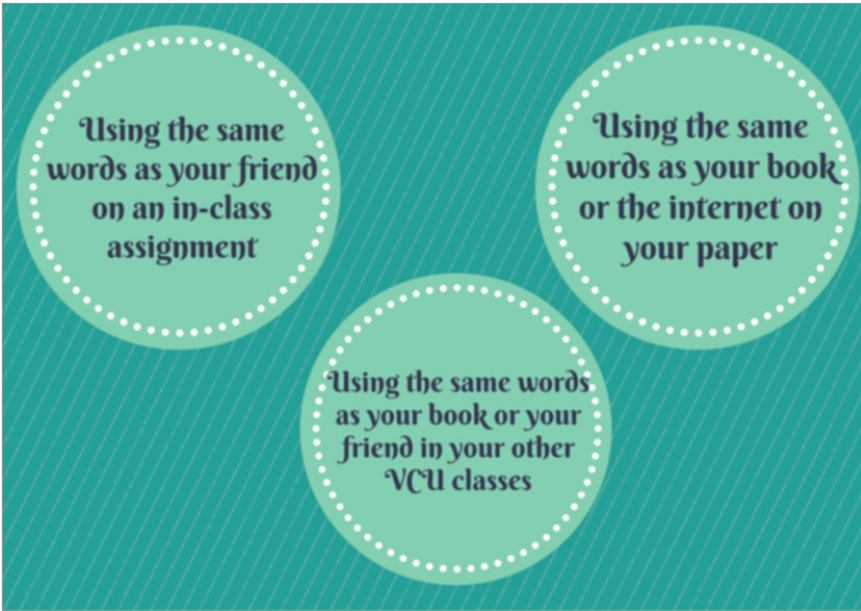
Figure 6.3. Examples of plagiarism activity

Results and Future Plans

All of my intended goals were achieved with these online lessons. In the two years of their existence, the three online lessons have received more than 350 page views. The high usage of the online lessons directly correlates with a decrease in library instruction for VCU's English Language program to sustainable levels, from sixty-five sessions during the 2013–2014 academic year to sixteen in 2016–2017. This reduced number of in-person sessions has multiple benefits: it enables me to target instruction at upper-level classes where students have sufficient English fluency to engage and comprehend a longer session introducing new vocabulary and new concepts, allows for curricular integration of library and research topics to spiral and build on each other intentionally rather than duplicating content, and has enabled me to balance instruction for this group with instruction and outreach to my other liaison groups. In the winter/spring of 2018, I plan to conduct a needs assessment of ELP faculty to gain insight into which areas need improvement and determine which topics faculty most wish to see included as new lessons.

Conclusion

Many of the international students in the US first experience North American higher education through English language programs, making the cultural norms taught by these programs vital to the academic success of these students; without them, students struggle to recognize plagiarism in their writing, find reliable sources, and more, resulting in lower grades and honor code sanctions, including expulsion. Librarians are uniquely equipped to meet this instructional need, a fact that is increasingly recognized by university ESL faculty.

Online learning objects offer a sustainable way of supporting English language programs. The online lessons outlined here have been designed to adhere to the best practices described earlier. The LibGuides pages for each lesson use text sparingly in order to avoid overwhelming students with a large number of words on the screen. Simply worded subheadings and bulleted lists further break up the text, making it more readable. Library jargon and sophisticated vocabulary are avoided, except when the intent is to introduce library-related vocabulary, in which case students can listen to the word being pronounced by a native English speaker and see a pictorial representation in addition to reading its definition. Each online lesson uses a library- or research-related task of particular interest to ELLs as a platform for expanding students' listening and reading skills. Further, Universal Design for Learning principles are upheld through the inclusion of video transcripts, unlimited replay of videos, and the use of interactive activities in addition to textual instructions.

Endnotes

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