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Academic librarians serving diverse populations of multilingual students

Tips to support success

In today's political and social climate in the United States, news stories focusing on language-related conflicts are becoming increasingly common. For example, two Montana women filed a lawsuit earlier this year against U.S. Customs and Border Protection for being detained after they were overheard speaking Spanish in a local convenience store.¹

Instead of viewing multilingualism as a problem, we embrace two orientations less commonly considered in the United States: "language-as-right" and "language-as-resource."² While these orientations are in sync with the Founding Fathers' preference for multilingualism in the United States, many Americans have been redirecting language policies toward sustaining a monolingual English-speaking society. When librarians and educators support multilinguals, they reject "language-as-problem"³ orientation and "subtractive bilingualism," affirming the value of language-as-right, language-as-resource, and "additive bilingualism/multilingualism."⁴

Why is this important? Understanding these concepts will allow librarians to develop cross-collegial networks that help multilinguals increase knowledge and advance disciplinary, professional, and social English skills. This article, based on our ACRL 2019 panel discussion "Academic Librarians Serving Diverse Populations of Multilingual Students,"⁵ focuses on three language ori-

entations and two types of bilingualism/multilingualism as the foundation of creating supportive, comfortable learning spaces where multilinguals learn academic content and advance their English. We present bilingualism/multilingualism as an asset and explain its connection to the language orientations, followed by suggestions on how to support multilinguals' success.

Who are multilinguals and bilinguals? The term *multilinguals* includes *bilinguals*. It is the broadest term that refers to individuals who speak more than one language or language varieties. Multilinguals learn the home language or first language from family and the majority language or second language at school and in socializing. Many American-born multilinguals learn the home

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language first and the new language, English, this way. Some use the home language for their religion, culture, and connection to their identity.

We use the terms *multilingual students* or *multilinguals* to refer to individuals who speak two or more languages and language varieties. Many are born in the United States, some are immigrants pursuing a better life or refugees hoping to return home and others known as *international students* are here temporarily, pursuing their education or taking courses in intensive English-language programs (IELPs). Once their education is completed, international students expect to return to their homelands.

Many colleges and universities in foreign countries offer science, technology, medical, and business courses in English through distance learning, on campus, hybrid, and study abroad programs. Both multilingual and international students can develop transnational loyalties to the United States and their native countries. Today's students have started receiving an undergraduate, graduate, and professional education across three continents, a trend that is increasing.

Multilinguals educated in American schools encounter learning challenges for many reasons. Many never graduate with undergraduate degrees. Below are a couple of educational terms used in pre-k-12 that will facilitate understanding this population's diversity.

- *Students with interrupted formal education*: Immigrant children and adolescents who enter the United States after second grade have two years less of formal education than their peers, have literacy and mathematical skills two years below their grade level, and may be pre-literate in their home (first) language.

- *Long-term English-language learners*: Multilinguals who have not developed proficiency in English after six years of American education.⁶

Many states no longer use terms that communicate negative meanings, including English language learners (ELLs) and English

as a second language (ESL). Some states have opted to use terms with a positive message, such as *bilinguals/multilinguals*, *emergent bilinguals*, *English as a new language*, and *English as an additional language*.

When librarians and academics respect multilingualism, they convey positive messages. Such behavior reinforces multilingualism as an "asset," valuing "language-as-resource"⁷ orientation. "Additive bilingualism" considers the home language an asset whereas "subtractive bilingualism"⁸ emphasizes becoming proficient in the majority language as the first language is lost. "Subtractive bilingualism"⁹ considers the first language a detriment, focusing on "language-as-problem" orientation.¹⁰

Another language orientation is "language-as-right."¹¹ Restricting individuals to English violates the right to use the first language as well as the freedom to be themselves, impacting identity. Language-as-problem orientation and subtractive bilingualism negatively influence multilinguals' self-esteem, self-image, and identity, as well as their physical, spiritual, and mental health, impeding academic achievements.

Oftentimes, multilinguals speak several language varieties and dialects, some without written forms and others on their way to extinction. Even American English-speaking monolinguals alternate between formal and informal language registers, pronounce and spell words differently, use different dialects and language varieties, etc. Still other multilinguals might have learned nonstandard varieties of English in the United States or other English-speaking countries. Some might have been educated in multiple English-speaking countries, causing confusion. As the use of "World Englishes" increases globally, more students in colleges and universities will encounter learning challenges based on language.¹²

Consideration should also be given to English Lingua Franca (EFL): English used as a bridge language. Some multilinguals use EFL outside the home, restricting English to

professional, survival, and social communication.¹³

Within the framework of these concepts, we provide the following tips on how academic librarians can support multilingual and international students, several of which require that librarians collaborate with other departments.¹⁴

1. *Introduce database tools to ease multilinguals into research.* Library databases embed tools that facilitate comprehending information delivered in English. These can be adapted in inclusive teaching, addressing diverse learning styles.

When using automated translators in the databases, the interface changes and the result list is re-populated. This occurs as different languages are selected. Translators can enhance learning, engaging multilinguals in building new knowledge, understanding complex concepts, and increasing English-language acquisition.

Closed or open captions in online tutorials and streaming videos allow multilinguals to study theoretical concepts. While watching videos, multilinguals can read the captions and practice pronunciation by listening to the audio. Some databases provide a dropdown menu to select particular English varieties—Canadian, Australian, Bahamian, Asian, etc.

2. *Implement innovative teaching and learning methods.* The flipped classroom introduces information sources and preparatory exercises prior to instruction. Flipped activities may include watching tutorials or streaming videos, comparing results between search engines and databases, and searching with several keywords.

First, the flipped classroom lays the groundwork for learning the basics and preparing questions in advance of instruction. Multilinguals can familiarize themselves with vocabulary and practice pronunciation in private. This way, they feel more comfortable and more confident in class.

Second, using visuals—including concept maps, mind maps, graphic organizers,

etc.—allows multilinguals to see related, broad, and subtopics without becoming frustrated.

Third, the flipped learning space facilitates quickly gaining insight to American and regional trends. Because newcomers may not immediately observe them, using concept maps helps them to easily discern these trends.

3. *Team-build with campus multicultural and heritage clubs.* Multicultural and heritage clubs celebrate ethnic and cultural themes. Some organize events and activities based on these themes. Academic libraries can showcase resources on these themes, collaborating with these groups in setting up displays, showing films, hosting guest speakers, etc.

4. *Design effective communication.* Stephen Krashen's "affective filter" hypothesis promotes using the right "affect" so that successful language acquisition and learning occur.¹⁵ Creating a comfortable, supportive learning environment provides multilinguals with a safe space to take risks using English as academic knowledge increases. As their confidence improves, multilinguals develop more self-efficacy, using English and taking ownership of their learning. See the sidebar for helpful communication tips.

5. *Collaborate with departments serving multilingual and international students.* Colleges and universities may have several departments that manage multilingual and international students and supervise IELPs. Together with the directors of IELP, research centers for bilingualism/biliteracy and language-advancing programs, librarians can collaborate on developing strategic ways to support these populations.

6. *Target specific learning outcomes in library instruction.* Academic librarians often teach information literacy classes and give workshops on particular topics. "Teaching English across content areas" is a methodology that can be used. For example, not only can Zotero workshops help multilinguals manage citations, understand

plagiarism and academic integrity, and become familiar with style manuals, they can also advance academic, professional, and social English- language skills.

7. *Promote the value and importance of the library at orientations.* Colleges and universities usually have orientation days for international students and those in IELP, language-advancing programs, etc. Librarians can reach out to orientation organizers, suggesting that they give a talk on library services at orientations. Two benefits are to establish contact for future reference and present libraries as a valuable resource.

Because most multilinguals are unfamiliar with American academic libraries, they appreciate learning about them.

8. *Introduce American and western concepts in education and information*

literacy. Multilinguals are often unfamiliar with western concepts in higher education, including plagiarism, academic integrity, and style manuals. Together with the writing/tutoring center and other units, librarians can educate multilinguals on the intricacies of these concepts and the consequences of violating the rules.

9. *Collaborate with colleagues to accommodate unique circumstances.* Institutions that offer advanced degrees can make allowances for international students regarding the official deposit date for Masters' theses and PhDs' dissertations. Generally, dissertation librarians are responsible for performing a "preliminary format review" of submitted works.

When students submit dissertations, they must include a signature sheet with

Tips for effective communication¹⁶

What to do

- Be welcoming and friendly: smile and be patient.
- Speak slowly, in a normal tone of voice.
- Pronounce words clearly.
- Use active voice. Avoid passive voice.
- Use simple sentences. Paraphrase often.
- Use simple words instead of complex vocabulary.
- Pose questions that require an explanation. Avoid yes/no questions.
- Use visuals to clarify unclear messages.
- Take advantage of teachable moments—e.g., write new terms down.
- Recast (repeat) pronunciation rather than overtly correct pronunciation errors.
- Observe when students appear to be confused, offering to assist them.
- Look directly at multilinguals when speaking. Do not cover your face or glance away.

- Respect personal space and cultural practices—touching, eye contact, handshaking, etc.
- Reiterate explanations. Ask students to explain something in their own words.
- Give extra time so that multilinguals can collect their thoughts and calmly respond.
- Use teaching and learning as an opportunity to assess knowledge, not translation skills.
- Allow space for translating—e.g., Google translate or peers.

What not to do

- Do not use negative tags in questions—e.g., is it not, isn't it, aren't we, are we not, etc.
- Do not use idioms, colloquialisms, and sarcasms.
- Do not use contractions in speaking.
- Do not use phrasal verbs—e.g., look for, look out, stand up, stand out, etc.

the chair's and committee members' signatures. Because the deposit date initiates the visa clock, some academic libraries allow international students to submit dissertations without the signatures. The adjusted timeline has two benefits: dissertation librarians are afforded more time to review the dissertations and international students have more time to correct dissertations, job hunt, and fulfill the visa requirements.

These students can submit the signature page on the last day of deposit, starting the visa clock at a later date.

Academic librarians and educators can help multilingual and international students in learning academic content and advancing English-language proficiency by creating comfortable, supportive spaces. Understanding the language orientations and types of multilingualism can facilitate designing strategic ways to effectively support this diverse population's success.

Notes

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