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Translating the Libraries: A Multilingual Information Page for International Students

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University libraries have long recognized the special needs of international students on campus, but have struggled to find the best ways to bridge the cultural and linguistic barriers and thereby demystify the library experience. The University of Alabama's online Information Page for International Students (<http://www.lib.ua.edu/international/>), which was first mounted on the Libraries' website in 2004, was an attempt to meet this need; however, only when the page was translated into Spanish and Chinese, two of the campus's most prominent languages, did the advantages of library information in students' native languages become fully apparent.*

Introduction

The challenges to international students from non-English-speaking countries are daunting. In addition to the obvious language barriers, most international students have little experience with American-style college and university libraries. Researchers have observed international students' difficulties with concepts such as open stacks, self-service, and even the concept of reference help (Liu 1993). Others have noted the paucity of library instruction in other countries; international students' tendency to think of libraries as mere study halls or repositories rather than active research centers; and the prevalence of library anxiety among international students

(Gilton 1994; Sibgatullina and Lechner 1998; Jiao and Onwuegbuzie 2001). Hoping to open communication, some authors have focused on cultural differences, urging librarians to recognize international students' shyness and reluctance to ask for help (Natowitz 1995) and to become sensitive to the importance of gestures, authority roles, and appropriate conversation (Sarkodie-Mensah 1992; Lin 1994; Moeckel and Presnell, 1995a).

To remedy the situation, librarians have tested many creative approaches, from instruction sessions and tours designed specifically for international students to collaboration with faculty and ESL instructors (Kamhi-Stein and Stein 1998; Conteh-Morgan 2002) and instruction programs and materials in the students' native languages (Liestman & Wu 1990; Spanfelner 1991; Liu 1993; Downing and Klein 2001; Chau 2002/2003). Confronted with a large international population served in multiple campus libraries, two University of Alabama librarians hoped to learn from the experiences of others and create a more welcoming environment for international students.

Background

The University of Alabama (UA) is located in Tuscaloosa, a city of 81,000, located approximately fifty miles from Birmingham. Tuscaloosa's sister cities, Narashino, Japan, and Schorndorf, Germany, reflect the presence of two major international industries in the area: the Japanese electronics producer JVC and the German/American automobile company

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Daimler-Chrysler. These companies contribute both to the international population and to international awareness in the city. When the Libraries' international outreach project began in 2003, the university's student population of 19,828 students included 881 international students (4.4%), representing 86 countries. Like most American university campuses, UA experienced a drop in international enrollment following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. After four years of declining international enrollment, however, the September 2006 enrollment showed a 10% increase over the previous fall, though numbers still have not reached pre-2001 levels (Jones 2006).

Several years before the international outreach project began, the Libraries had designated a librarian to serve as a liaison to the international community on campus. This individual was responsible for facilitating communication with the international students and for promoting library instruction to that population. The Libraries had traditionally provided tours, orientations, and bibliographic instruction sessions for international students, but it soon became apparent that the Libraries needed to establish a more sustained presence among the international students on campus.

Working as a team and representing two of the campus's five main libraries, the authors decided to complement the personal, face-to-face nature of past interactions with a Web presence that could reach large numbers of students, in the library or elsewhere, at any time of day or night. A survey of international student pages on other American college and university library sites suggested two models. Some of these pages served as virtual library tours, offering an online orientation to the library building and its service points, but providing little instruction in the use of the library. Baruch College Library's Virtual Tour (<http://newman.baruch.cuny.edu/help/virtualtour.html>) for international students, available in nine languages, is an outstanding example of this approach (Downing and Klein 2001). Others websites, more analogous to an instruction session than to a tour, attempted to provide substantive information about

collections, databases, services, and issues of particular interest to international students. One excellent example of this approach, the international students' page at New York University's Bobst Library (<http://library.nyu.edu/services/international.html>), initially inspired our own page.

Since the UA library system comprises five separate libraries, a virtual tour seemed neither practical nor helpful. Furthermore, we felt that a substantive page would provide more lasting help to students whose reading skills often surpass their speaking and comprehension skills. An analysis of virtual reference transactions from the first year of the UA Libraries' online chat service revealed that approximately 10% of questions came from international students, even though they represented less than 5% of the student population, a statistic indicating that some international students are perhaps more comfortable in the written environment of virtual reference than in the oral realm of the reference desk. It was this population that we hoped to target with our information page.

While we anticipated that most often the page would be accessed directly by the international students, we also hoped that it would supply written support for the librarians, staff, and students working at the reference desk. At times when oral communication fails because of language difficulties, written instructions for finding a book or accessing the databases might bridge the language barrier and restore communication.

Phase I: Designing the International Students Page

Having selected our format, the next task was to identify the information we wanted to include on the page. The campus's Capstone International Center already had an excellent page for international students with information on immigration, admissions, campus news, and more. In the few cases where our purposes seemed to overlap, we chose simply to link to information on the Capstone page rather than to repeat it and cloud our already ambitious scheme.

While we hoped to provide material of specific interest to international students, such as information about our foreign-language collections or the international television programming available in the library, we also recognized the need to explain general library services. The outline for the page (<http://www.lib.ua.edu/international/>) therefore includes both basic services and services targeted to the international community:

- Libraries' Liaison for International Students
- The University Libraries
- Libraries' Floor Plans
- Library Terminology
- Locating Library Material
- Library Services
- Scholarships and Financial Assistance for International Students
- Student Employment
- Writing Assistance and Study Skills
- Some Useful Links
- Questions and Comments

The specifically international content is scattered throughout the guide. The section on Library Terminology includes links to the ALA/ACRL multilingual glossary of library terms (<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrlbucket/is/publication/sacrl/multilingual.htm>), while the section on Locating Library Material includes general information on books, articles, and dissertations, but also on foreign-language books, periodicals, and newspapers. Liberally scattered throughout the guide are links to other library and campus Web pages (e.g., the Writing Center and the Student Employment Office) and to Internet pages that complement the Libraries' collections (e.g., international newspaper sites and foreign-language dictionary sites). By using the links, we were able to include large amounts of information on a brief and simple page.

The English-language version of the page went live in the spring of 2003. We publicized it on the Libraries' website, in the student newspaper, and by emails to various campus lists, including the International Students Association. A counter on the page, which allowed us to monitor page hits,

showed heaviest use in the early weeks of the term but also during the summer months after we first mounted this page. This unexpected summer spike in use was likely related to various international recruiting efforts underway during that summer. University representatives visited India, China, Taiwan, and Mexico, and the Libraries' newly minted information page for international students may have served as an unintentional recruiting tool.

Phase II: The Translation

Although response to the page was positive and the counter showed steady use, we felt that we were missing an opportunity. The same page, translated into our students' native languages, not only would improve communications, but also would demonstrate the cultural respect and neutrality that we hoped to achieve, especially in the wake of September 11 and the subsequent decline in international enrollment on our campus. With almost 900 international students on campus, many with advanced language skills, a translation project seemed feasible.

As a pilot project, we decided to translate the page into Chinese and Spanish, the two languages most heavily represented among UA's graduate students. In planning the project, we identified several concerns:

- We wanted to use international student translators in order to reinforce a sense of community and ownership of the page.
- Though several students volunteered to serve as translators, we wanted to pay our students. The Libraries on campus are committed employers of international students. In addition to helping out students whose visa restrictions often prohibit them from working off campus, we consider our international student workers to be ambassadors for the Libraries to the international community on campus. Their very presence as employees in the Libraries helps to break down both the cultural and linguistic barriers that we strive to overcome.
- We wanted high-quality translations, yet neither of us had the necessary language skills to assess the quality of the translators' work.

- We needed to be able to update the information on the page after the translators had completed their work.

Clearly we would need funds for the project, and we would need to enlist the help of others on campus.

To fund the project, we applied for and received an Innovation Grant for \$1,600 from the UA Libraries. These small in-house grants are designed to promote “the creation and development of forward-looking projects.” We anticipated that the project would require approximately 40 hours of work for each language; with \$1,600 we could pay our students \$15 per hour. The period of the grant extended from October 2005 through May 2006.

For the quality-control and the ongoing support, we turned to our faculty for help: a professor of Spanish from Guatemala, and a professor of Geography from China. Both agreed to help us with recruitment of the translators, to review the translations for quality, and to assist with updates to the page in the future. Their expertise and enthusiasm for the project were instrumental throughout.

We advertised the positions on various international student email lists, through the English Language Institute, and through the language departments. With many applicants to choose from, we hired a library student from China and a Spanish literature Ph.D. student from Panama, both of whom had translation experience. Before turning them loose to produce the translations, we met with them individually to make sure that they fully understood the contents of the page. Howze and Moore (2003) have documented the disparity between international students’ perceived comprehension of library terms and their actual comprehension. Since our faculty consultants were not librarians and could not be expected to read for content, it was our duty to confirm that the translators fully understood the document and could reproduce it accurately.

Our faculty consultants reviewed the translations and in each case made only minor revisions. We were lucky to find two talented translators and

two generous faculty consultants. Once the translations were mounted on the Libraries’ website, we again advertised the pages via email, newspaper, and the Libraries’ website. Since the student population is always changing, we plan to send announcements about the page to the international students list at the beginning of each term. In addition, the Capstone International Center’s Web page includes a prominent link to the Libraries’ International Students Page.

Conclusion

The Libraries’ Information Page for International Students has clearly met a need, permitting us to reach large numbers of students in a systematic way. While the translated pages serve only a portion of the campus’s international students, we hope to add other languages in the future in order to expand the reach of the program. To meet the specific needs of the UA campus, other Asian languages would be the most useful additions. Response from the international community has been positive, and the pages continue to experience steady use.

We believe, however, that these pages will be most effective in the context of a larger program of outreach efforts. To maintain the human face that is inevitably absent from any Web page, the Libraries have continued to emphasize more personal encounters with international students:

- Each term the Libraries sponsor one of the Capstone International Center’s weekly coffee hours for international students, providing librarians an opportunity to meet with students in a casual setting.
- The Libraries maintain two televisions with programming in Mandarin, Japanese, and South Asian languages, as well as international soccer programming.
- The Libraries’ liaison for international students meets with students at the university’s orientation session for international students at the beginning of each academic year; following these sessions, each library offers tours specifically for international students.

- The Libraries routinely provide bibliographic instruction to ESL classes and to the international sections of the University's English composition classes.
- International scholars and artists are frequently featured in the Libraries' lecture series.
- The Libraries mount periodic exhibits featuring international collections and programs.

On the surface, the translation phase of this project offered only a small service to a small number of students, but it also provided many intangible benefits to the Libraries. As a

collaborative effort, it strengthened ties between the Libraries and many other units on campus: the International Center, the departments of our faculty consultants, the international recruiting teams, and the university administration that supported our efforts. More importantly, it opened lines of communication with the international community and created a sense of camaraderie and cooperation that can only come from a collaborative project.

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