

How Libraries Support English Language Learners

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the services, materials, and programs that public and school libraries provide in order to support English language learners. It also discusses why providing services to English language learners is important at this time. Some programs offered through public libraries are described including collaborations between libraries and museums. Programs that teach English and computer skills are highlighted. There is also mention of methods to attract people who speak languages other than English to the library. A couple of funding sources for libraries are explained. Examples are given of work being done by school librarians to help support English language learners and their teachers. This includes adding books in languages other than English to library collections and helping students to feel comfortable in the library. Programs organized by ELL teachers and librarians working together are also discussed.

Introduction

Libraries and art centers in urban areas across the country are developing new ways to provide services to their patrons because of "...significant changes in the demographic composition of ..." those areas. There are now many more people living in urban areas who do not speak English (Henderson and Adler, 2005). Currently in the United States, "New immigrants are settling outside of traditional gateway cities where there are fewer resources to facilitate integration, such as English language instruction..." (editor, 2009, p. 121). In 2004, a group of library professionals and members of organizations who support immigrants met to discuss how libraries could assist immigrants. At the time, there were 33.5 million immigrants in the country who made up about 12 percent of the population (editor, 2009, p. 121). What is the role of libraries in helping people who are English language learners to learn English and gain access to the information that they need to get an education or find employment? Both public libraries and school libraries are working to assist English language learners in learning the language and succeeding in their daily lives.

The Situation's Relationship to Library and Information Science and its Importance

Libraries across the country are making use of a variety of programs and methods to help English language learners access the information that they need. This is important because according to Leonard Kniffel (2010):

The 2005 National Assessment of Adult Literacy found that 11 million adults in the United States—about one in 20—have such limited English skills that they can't read a newspaper, understand written directions for medication or help their children with schoolwork. (p. 11)

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Loriene Roy points out the benefits of English language programs to immigrant populations. She notes that, “English-language literature support aids in lifelong education and the attainment of individual goals, especially those related to education and employment” (Roy, 2007, p. 6). That is why English programs are important.

Supporting English Language Learners in Public Libraries

In order for libraries to assist English language learners, they must first attract them to the library. “By developing innovative outreach programs that partner art centers and libraries with community-based service organizations, target audiences are reached through trusted community ‘gatekeepers,’ thereby establishing cooperation with English language learners (ELLs) often wary of outsiders” (Henderson & Adler, 2005). As part of the eight-session Project Access program in Nashville, participants visit both their branch library and the main library. They also obtain library cards, learn to use the catalog, and explore their branch library in person (Henderson & Adler, 2005). At the Brooklyn Public Library in New York, library card applications are available in nine languages. Also, the library offers story hours in Russian and Spanish, and Chinese classes (Mack-Harvin, 2007).

Once English language learners have come into the library, they can make use of everything it offers. In order to support English language learners, libraries have a variety of services and they are developing new programs. One method suggested to support English language learners is building a collection of books for their use. A group of librarians and professionals from other immigration organizations suggests that libraries should become aware of the needs and wants of the immigrant group that they are supporting before developing a new collection. These collections could include materials to help immigrants learn English as well as materials that give them information on immigrating to the United States. Other suggestions to

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enhance collections included buying materials such as “Novels translated into other languages,” “Dictionaries in multiple languages,” and “Original source materials” (editor, 2009, p. 122).

In addition to building collections for immigrants, some projects for English language learners have included development of new materials and websites. Project Access, which is a collaboration between the Frist Center for the Visual Arts and the Nashville Public Library included developing quizzes, a new website, and an eight session program for English language learners. This program includes class meetings at the Frist Center as well as at the main branch of the library and the participants’ branch libraries (Henderson & Adler, 2005).

Project Access in Nashville teaches immigrants computer skills in addition to helping participants learn English through art and writing exercises. Teaching computer skills can help to attract more students to a program (Henderson & Adler, 2005). At the Brooklyn Public Library, Technology Literacy for English Language Learners known as TELL is a program that provides computer classes for people with limited English (Mack-Harvin, 2010).

The Denver Public Library calls its program intended for “new immigrants and economically disadvantaged residents” Tu Biblioteca Hoy or Your Library Today (Klopstein et al, 2009, p. 43). “The goal of TBH is to help adults obtain the skills and knowledge they need to engage in civic life in the Denver community and succeed in supporting themselves and raising their families (Klopstein et al, 2009, p. 43). To accomplish these goals, the library started by hosting “English conversation circles.” In 2004, Tu Biblioteca Hoy offered “English programs, GED study groups, life skills topics, citizenship workshops, and some concurrent children’s activities so that parents could attend programs” (Klopstein et al, 2009, p. 44). Eventually, the library partnered with the Denver Art Museum and Museo de las Americas. The two museums run cultural programs for children at the same time that the library offers programs for their

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parents. The programming is not only intended for people who have Spanish as their native language as the title *Tu Biblioteca Hoy* might lead someone to believe. The ELL courses offered by the Denver Public Library are open to anyone who wants to learn English. Their GED classes are taught bilingually in English and Spanish, but they are beneficial to anyone. The library also offers computer skills classes. The Denver Public Library hopes to expand its offerings to start a new program on “family literacy” (Klopstein et al, 2009).

Sources of Funding for Programs

Two sources of funding for library programs that support English language learners include The Dollar General Literacy Foundation and the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The Dollar General Literacy Foundation is providing financial support in the form of grants for libraries to create materials or programs that benefit English language learners. The grants, which are given for projects in communities where Dollar General operates stores, are managed by the ALA’s Office for Literacy and Outreach Service. The program is called “The American Dream Starts @ your library” (Kniffel, 2010, p. 11).

The library and museum partnership between the Denver Public Library, the Denver Art Museum and Museo de las Americas has been supported by an Institute of Museum and Library Services National Leadership grant (Klopstein et al, 2009). According to its mission statement, “The Institute of Museum and Library Services is the primary source of federal support for the nation’s 123,000 libraries and 17,500 museums. The Institute’s mission is to create strong libraries and museums that connect people to information and ideas” (Institute of Museum and Library Services).

Supporting English Language Learners in School Libraries

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Public libraries are not the only places where librarians work to help people to learn English and gain other skills. In school libraries, librarians are working to make sure that newly arrived students feel comfortable and that the materials that these students and their teachers need are available. “Well over 10 percent of all students in K-12 schools in the United States are English Language Learners today, and, according to the Educational Testing Service, that number is expected to grow to 25 percent by 2025” (Ferlazzo, 2010, p. 24). “According to the U.S. Department of Education (2006), limited English proficient students represent the fastest-growing student population, with 5.4 million currently in the United States and the number is expected to increase to one of every four students by 2025” (Corona & Armour p. 34).

The American Association of School Libraries began including questions related to ELL students in its annual survey in 2008. During their 2009 survey, the organization found that 58% of schools have library collections where one percent or less of their collection is in a language other than English. Only 3% of school libraries have collections where more than 10% of the books are in a language other than English. The AASL also noted their finding that “Among 14% of responding schools, a student body with 25% or more ELL was reported. The highest concentration was reported in elementary schools where nearly one in five (19%) have 25% or more ELL students with concentrations at this level dropping at middle (10%) and high (9%) schools” (ALA).

Library media specialist Bobby Riley wrote about what he has done and plans to do in order to help English language learners at H. O. Wheeler Elementary School in Burlington, Vermont. He explained how the school is now teaching Bantu students from Africa who have no knowledge of English and have never been to school before. These students were grouped together in a class called the Newcomer Program so that they could gain English skills and learn

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how to act in a school. Riley worked with their classroom teacher to provide support for the students. “We decided on computer use; interactive read-alouds; developing visual cues for common school occurrences, such as lunch or fire drills; and collection development targeted to this population.” He hopes to increase the library’s collection of books about Africa so that other students can learn about the culture of members of the Newcomer Program. He has been unable to find “bilingual” books in the Bantu students’ native language, but he writes that he hopes to create tapes of “some of our books in the library with Maay Maay translations” (Riley, 2008, p. 27).

Larry Ferlazzo, who teaches English Language Learners, suggests that “age-appropriate bilingual and graphic novel books” should be available. He also mentioned that students at the school where he teaches had access in the library to books in Hmong, Spanish, and Russian. They were also able to create displays in the library relating to their culture and use the computers to practice English language skills. He recommends websites to help students learn English be linked to the school webpage. “Also, displaying books and materials including those created by students-that share information about students’ native countries can help develop a welcoming atmosphere to ease student anxiety, which can be a major barrier to language to acquisition” (Ferlazzo, 2010, p. 24).

Collaboration between teachers and a librarian was also seen as useful in helping English Language Learners in a middle school. Heather Moorefield-Lang, who was a teacher-librarian in a rural middle school, with an increasing population of ELL students, purchased signs for the library in English and Spanish. These signs and other labels helped ELL students to find the information that they needed and to feel welcome in the library. “However, these signs did more than inform; they told ELL students that the library was a place where they were wanted and

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where they could feel comfortable” (Moorefield-Lang et al, 2010, p. 22). The school library also had a collection of books in Spanish. These books allowed students to learn material and conduct research without being slowed down by English. “Additionally, when they are able to use their language, they can depend more on prior knowledge, and spend less time struggling to find what they need to know” (Moorefield-Lang et al, 2010, p. 23). The library also had English books that were written at a variety of levels to help students while they were still learning the language.

The librarian-teacher collaborated with Dawn Shirk, the ELL teacher and Gabriela Anaya, the Spanish teacher. This collaboration allowed the teacher librarian to provide better support for ELL students. One activity that the group of teachers came up with was writing short skits that ELL students could perform in English and students learning Spanish could perform in Spanish (Moorefield-Lang et al, 2010).

In addition to benefiting ELL students, the materials in the library have benefited Spanish students and other students. “The library has joined cultures by offering diverse ways of getting students who are Spanish speakers and ELL students to interact with peer students who take Spanish or will take Spanish in the future” (Moorefield-Lang et al, 2010, p. 23).

Laurel Roth Patton, a teacher librarian, has used karaoke with English language learners during library classes. She got the idea after she saw how adults “seemed to become someone else-more confident-regardless of their ability to sing” when they did karaoke (2010). She later found that “Hearing one’s own voice leads to processing language faster and more precisely” (Patton, 2010). This idea is part of the Tomatis Method, which has been used “to help promote language acquisition” (Patton, 2010).

Conclusion

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It is important for libraries to provide services for English language learners because immigrants are now moving to areas that have not traditionally had large immigrant populations. This shift has made it so that some immigrants will find themselves in places where sufficient services for English language learners are not available. Public libraries can assist English language learners through a variety of programs including English classes and other activities. They can also provide services by developing multi-lingual collections. Some public libraries are collaborating with museums and other organizations in order to teach English and computer skills to English language learners.

School libraries are also working to assist English language learners in gaining language skills. By working with ELL teachers, librarians have been able to build collections of materials and create activities that are useful for English language learners. Librarians are working to be sure students who are learning English feel comfortable in the library. The programs and collections intended to benefit English language learners have also provided benefits to the rest of the learning community. Materials in Spanish can be useful for students learning Spanish in addition to students who are native Spanish speakers learning English. Students in the community can also learn about the cultures of English language learners who have just arrived in the United States through library materials.

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