



Evidence Summary

Academic Librarians Should Be Sensitive to Language and Cultural Barriers When Providing Reference Service to International Students

A review of:

Curry, Ann and Deborah Copeman. "Reference Service to International Students: A Field Stimulation Research Study." *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 31.5 (Sep. 2005): 409-20.

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Abstract

Objective – To evaluate the quality of reference service provided to non-native, English-speaking international students in academic libraries.

Design – Field stimulation (unobtrusive testing).

Setting – Eleven college and university libraries in the lower mainland of British Columbia, Canada, in the fall of 2003.

Subjects – Library staff offering reference service at one of the participating libraries.

Methods – The study utilized field stimulation, whereby an individual, or "proxy," posed as a library user and initiated a reference encounter with library staff at each institution. In each case the proxy asked the same question to the library staff member. After the interaction was completed the proxy recorded all observed behaviours. Data were collected using a checklist of actions; a narrative record written by the proxy; and several evaluative questions. Each library was visited by the same proxy on two separate occasions for a total of 22 visits, of which 20 instances resulted in usable data. The narrative recordings of the reference encounters were analyzed using an open coding process.

Main results – In 75% of the cases, the proxy was “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with help received from the library staff member and was “likely to” or “definitely would return to the staff member” in the future. The reference encounters lasted between a few minutes to half an hour in length, with most lasting between 5 and 15 minutes. Encounters that were brief (less than 5 minutes) resulted in an evaluation of “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” and “not likely to” or “definitely would not return.” Encounters where the library staff member extended an invitation to the proxy to return in the future were all rated with “high satisfaction” and “willingness to return.” The following reference service actions were observed in at least half of the encounters:

- Asked questions for clarification (20)
- Avoided overwhelming the user with information (19)
- Provided instruction on how to use information sources (18)
- Explained what he / she was doing at every stage (17)
- Demonstrated awareness of language barriers and modified his / her behaviour accordingly (16)
- Had a respectful attitude toward the user and her question (16)
- Looked approachable (15)
- Used library jargon (12)

The remaining reference service actions from the checklist were observed in less than half the encounters:

- Accompanied the user to information sources (9)
- Invited the user to return if she needed more help (6)
- Asked the user if she had found what she needed (4)
- Referred the user to someone else (2)

The data collected from the narrative recordings of the reference encounters resulted in the identification of 17 themes.

Most of these themes corresponded with the literature reviewed as important qualities for positive reference interactions. Nine of these themes were found to correlate with the proxy’s positive evaluation of the reference encounter: approachability, awareness of language barriers, asking questions, rephrasing, explanation, library jargon, instruction, early termination of interview, patience, and follow up.

Conclusion – This preliminary study documents the actions of reference staff in academic libraries when answering a question from an international student. The researchers found a relationship between some library staff behaviours and the user’s level of satisfaction and likelihood to return to the staff member in the future. The research suggests that reference staff pay special attention to the needs of non-native English speakers in order to provide a positive reference encounter.

Commentary

This study looks at reference service provided to a distinct but significant portion of the academic population—international students. As the authors point out, these students originate from all over the world, and in many cases are unfamiliar with North American or Western culture. Many international students speak English as a second or even third language, and speak it with a heavy accent. These students are at a disadvantage compared to native English speakers not only due to the language barrier, but to the anxiety that can arise in anticipation of the reference encounter. Library staff, who are already trained in proper reference interview techniques, need to pay special attention to the unique needs of this population.

The field stimulation method employed for this study was appropriate due to the nature of the information sought. Engaging a proxy

with heavily accented English to pose as a student and approach library staff in their natural setting is an ideal method to gather data to answer questions about staff behaviour. The researchers note the advantage of using a single proxy who is also an MLIS student for maintaining consistency. In addition, the MLIS student posing as a "regular" student was likely better able to observe desirable actions and was less anxious about the encounter. The researchers also note the possibility of bias as the proxy's knowledge of library jargon, as well as her expectations of the reference interview may have influenced both her conduct and her interpretation of the encounters. Another issue could be the limiting nature of having a single individual represent the so-called "international student." The diversity of library users cannot be represented by a single user and thus the encounters observed cannot be generalized to all international students. An assurance of the validity of the data collected from the narrative recordings is their similarity to the literature on the topic.

One drawback of the study design was the inability to verify the status of the library staff being observed. It was assumed that these individuals were reference librarians, although the authors acknowledge the possibility that these individuals could have been support staff. It is important to keep in mind that whatever their status, the library staff observed in the study were in fact responsible for reference service at their respective institutions. Another drawback of observing study subjects in their natural setting, mentioned by the researchers, is the difficulty of replicating the study.

This preliminary study was conducted in a rather specific location on the West coast of Canada, an ideal setting due to its diverse population of students from many countries. Due to the sampling method, these results cannot be generalized to all international students in British Columbia, let alone North America. Yet the results are of great interest to all academic librarians, and other information professionals working in multicultural environments. This research reinforces the importance of a good reference interview and proper communication skills, and it highlights the actions or behaviours that are most important when interacting with an international student.