

HOW HELPING CHINESE ESL COLLEGE STUDENTS WRITE RESEARCH PAPERS CAN TEACH INFORMATION LITERACY

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Introduction

A primary problem of Chinese ESL (English as second language) college students is their lack of understanding of American educational style—in other words, how to be an independent learner. A study by Wyn F. Owen found that many foreign students who come to the United States, particularly from the Asia, are not all well acquainted with the American academic system and have a very difficult period of adjustment. These students must learn American academic practice and self-reliance (Owen, p. 2). Self-reliance, the ability to direct one's own learning, is prized in America. Information literacy is the key to independent learning, and it is here that the East Asian public service librarian can help ESL students from China adapt to the American college environment.

An independent learner understands the value of information literacy. An information literate individual has the ability to access, evaluate, organize, and use information for their lifelong needs. Take the example of writing a research paper, required for college students. From determining the paper topic to completing the paper in writing, the process is initiated and pursued by the students themselves. Although assistance from the instructor or librarian is available, it is the student's responsibility to find and ask for it. Most importantly, students need to use analytical and critical thinking skills to evaluate resources for accuracy and reliability.

In this paper I will focus on two groups of Chinese ESL college students. One group is made up of new undergraduate Chinese students who speak English with close to native speaker facility; the other group is made up of graduate students, foreign-educated adults with some knowledge of English. Since the late 1990s the little written about library services for native Chinese students has not addressed information literacy for Chinese ESL college students or integrating information literacy with the curriculum. In this paper I propose to discuss how helping Chinese ESL college students write research papers can teach information literacy. I will also touch on other support that a Chinese librarian provide.

What is Information Literacy?

From the perspective of Chinese students, the ability to read, write, and function within social contexts associated with daily living is literacy. However, the meaning of information literacy in American educational style is beyond these basics. In America, information literacy is an ability to think and reason, a way of living, and a means of looking at the world we know, and how we behave in the world (Li, P. 13).

The Association of College and Research Libraries has defined that an information literate individual is able to determine the extent of information needed, access the needed information effectively and efficiently, evaluate information and its sources critically, incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base, use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose, understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally (Information, p.3).

Moreover, information literacy forms the basis for lifelong learning. It enables learners to master content and extend their investigations, become more self-directed, and assume greater control over their own learning (Information, p.2). Other educational institutions around the world agree that Information Literacy is an essential element for lifelong learning (Australian, p. 1).

The Chinese ESL college students

The undergraduate Chinese ESL students who speak English fluently came to this country in their teens and speak Chinese at home with their parents and with their peers. Many learned English first in ESL classes in high school. By that time, he/she may be beyond his/her optimal learning stage for concepts crucial to information literacy, or the opportunity to learn them may be limited. Thus, even though these students

may graduate from high school, be admitted to a college, and speak English very well, they lack essential academic preparation. This may lead them to either mandatory remediation or difficulty with college-level courses.

The graduate Chinese ESL students are foreign-educated with some knowledge of English. They are often well educated in their native lands, with good native language skills; they have studied English as a foreign language and have good grammar and reading knowledge in English. Nonetheless, they may need to improve their listening, speaking, comprehension, and writing skills in English as well as learning critical thinking in order to succeed academically.

Both groups' students have similar strength and weakness. They are intelligent, diligent, conscious students who respect instructors; as a result, they are often the faculty's favorite students. On the other hand, they are not risk takers or critical thinkers. Most important for our context, they are passive or dependent learners. Thus, they are struggling to understand information literacy and to become independent learners. Their problems in English combined with social and culture unfamiliarity and their past educational experiences also contribute to difficulties of their adjustment in American educational style.

How can helping Chinese ESL college students write research papers teach Information Literacy?

- *Learn to become an independent learner:* The primary problem of Chinese ESL college students is lack of understanding of American education style-independent learning. Writing a research paper requires students to take charge of their own learning; thus, writing a research paper can help Chinese ESL college students learn the style of American academic learning. The author of a study of American post-secondary education for Chinese students cites the story of a Chinese Ph.D. student at Harvard (Qian, p. 82). The student was unprepared for the independent learning style that was in contrast to his native land style of dependent learning. Chinese students often received well-structured instructions and memorized them; then, they took in information and gave it back. They were not given the opportunity to define the question, define the information requirement of the question, determine the range of possible resources, and evaluate the different possible resources to determine priorities. The student felt that his whole academic world collapsed when he first started at Harvard University.

In the process of writing a research paper, students learn to use their skills in selecting available material, in determining those facts and ideas that are immediately pertinent to students' topic, in organizing and documenting student's information properly, and in presenting it clearly, logically, effectively, and correctly. Although assistance from instructors or librarians is available, it is also dependent on the student to find and ask for it. The lesson of writing research paper helps Chinese ESL college students to master essential skills as a true independent learner and an opportunity to understand information literacy.

- *Learn to be a critical thinker:* The crucial part of writing a research paper is using critical thinking skills that seek to differentiate truth from falsehood, fact from fiction (National, p 30). Take a simple example of writing a history subject paper. The student needs to consider the questions, such as, "Why are things the way they are now? What happened in the past and why? What was it like to live then? How has it influenced us now? What kinds of historical events are most significant and why? How do I learn what happened in the past? How do I reconcile conflicting accounts?" and "Is the world getting better?" (Paul, p.595-96.) All these questions and thinking are a set of skills that encompass observation, classification, summarization, and interpretation.

Chinese ESL college students grew up in a society in which they believed everything to be unassailably right. Even when they disliked some events, they rarely questioned the rationality of their existence; everything was perfectly justified (Qian, p. 90). In addition, their education also placed too much emphasis on learning basic knowledge. Such learning could build a solid foundation for the student, but when carried to extremes, it could stifle creativity (Qian, p.83).

In contrast, exploration is deemed as part of the learning process in America. American students were taught to judge the information they read and learned problem-solving process to conclude their

knowledge even in grade school. Chinese ESL college students need to develop skills in critical reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This is a core skill of writing research paper. It is also the important element of information literacy: how to evaluate information and its sources critically, and incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base.

- Learn to write in Western writing: Writing research papers is one of the requirements that each college student must fulfill in the American educational system. The Chinese Ph.D. student at Harvard mentioned earlier said that education in China lacked basic training in writing. He further said that Chinese students' essays are often filled with vague concepts without a well-defined context and with inadequate discussion and verification of a hypothesis (Qian, p. 83). In addition, the Chinese students often spent most of their times selecting words and polishing structures rather than speculating, questioning, and exploring ideas, and they do not necessarily cite the original sources (Wang, p. 99). Such different perspectives on writing cause Chinese students difficulty in producing good writing according to Western writing criteria. By learning how to write a research paper, students not only fulfill the college requirement, but also learn how to find and use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose, and understand how to use information ethically and legally as an information literate person does.
- Learn to use Library as their learning laboratory: Finally, another purpose of writing a research paper is to test the student's ability to discover and make use of the library's resources in gathering materials on given subject, as well as student's ingenuity in finding other sources. Again, a Chinese Ph.D. student at Harvard said he was unaware of many available branches of interdisciplinary resources in the library for his research. He was surprised to learn that statistical data and their analysis had become a routine method of research in social sciences in America, while verification through "pure theory" was still the norm in China. Furthermore, he learned that the cross-disciplinary research had become commonplace in America, whereas research still meant the studying of a single book for a lifetime in China (Qian, p.82). Clearly, Chinese students are not accustomed to use library as their learning laboratory.

The library's resources are an indispensable tool for the success of every research paper. As soon as students choose a research paper topic, they will have to use the library to find, gather, evaluate, and use information for their specific topic. Libraries have a systematic way of cataloging information, so researchers can locate their desired information. Librarians can also assist researchers in numerous ways. It is a learning process through the "learn by doing" method (Winkler, p. 4). Thus, Chinese ESL college students need to familiarize themselves with library organization, library resources, and learn to use them efficiently by going through the process of writing a research paper. An information literate person is able to determine the extent of information needed and knows how to access the needed information effectively and efficiently. The library is essential part of the research process.

What other support can a Chinese Librarian provide?

The basic goal of having a Chinese librarian assist Chinese ESL college students with writing research papers is to acquaint them with the U.S. educational style, including using library as their learning laboratory. Since Chinese librarians work as library professionals and have the advantage of acting as a bridge between two different educational systems, they can stand at the forefront to assist ESL Chinese college students. From my public services experiences, I found that most ESL Chinese college students felt the difficulties of writing a research paper. The Chinese Librarian can help minimize Chinese ESL college students' frustrations and difficulties in writing research paper and help them experience being an independent learner who understands information literacy.

- Be part of library orientation for foreign students: To write research papers, students need to use the library. Many libraries offer library orientation for foreign students to help them get acquainted with the library. However, there are very few Chinese librarians in the orientation session. The Chinese ESL college students still have difficulties in English oral expression and they are reluctant to ask for help from unfamiliar adults (Working, p.61); thus, having a Chinese librarian in the library orientation can reassure Chinese ESL college students that there is someone they can communicate with in their native language. Also, the presence of a Chinese librarian can make them feel more at ease in speaking up in

the library orientation. As a result, the Chinese ESL college students may learn more than just attending this session.

- Hold an extended orientation on the Chinese collection: This is an opportunity not only for the Chinese ESL college students to get acquainted with the Chinese collection and Chinese librarian. It is also a follow-up library orientation for them. The Chinese librarian can repeat the orientation on the library organization, such as reference desk services, using library's web pages, online catalogs and electronic databases, and the location of such things as books, periodicals, newspaper, and reference resources. The Chinese librarian can further introduce them to commonly used library terms in Chinese, such as LC subject heading, LC classification, index, call number, circulation, Interlibrary Loan. This approach can eliminate and prevent the need for subsequent remedial services for Chinese ESL college students who may have difficulties in understanding library functions.
- Hold a library research skills session for Chinese students: The Chinese librarian can prepare a Chinese subject topic that Chinese ESL college students are familiar with and then guide them through research techniques by using the library's resources. For example, they should learn to use the library's searching tools, like online catalogs, reference works in print or online, electronic databases, and other forms of resources, and how to best use of these tools. Also, they should learn to interpret the data information, such as title, author, imprint, call number, how to locate the resource, and who to ask for assistance.

Ms. Bick-har Yeung, East Asian Librarian at the University of Melbourne, has taught this kind of class for Chinese ESL college students. She found that those students learned quickly and gradually polished their research skills for their academic needs. Research skills certainly are major part of writing research paper. Having the assistance of a Chinese librarian will eliminate their frustrations in writing research papers.

- Hold a class or online session for an introduction to information literacy: The Chinese librarian can guide Chinese ESL college students on the skills of critical thinking in writing research paper and information literacy. For example, the East Asian Library at the Australian National University has offered "Information Skills Training" for researching essays or theses in Asian focus. The classes guide students to learn how to analyze a topic and identify appropriate resources for their research. Other East Asian libraries, such as the Australian National University, University of Melbourne, and University of British Columbia, also have offered classes for the Asian students to introduce information literacy.

In addition, at the University of Sydney, the librarian of Health Sciences created online learning guides, including critical research skills and information management (including information literacy.) At the University of Melbourne, the East Asian librarian also provided online tutorials for ESL students in academic writing in Asian subjects. Such online information research skill modules are proving very popular with students, particularly ESL students who like to learn at their own pace or who find it difficult to attend the library's face to face information research skills program. These examples show that it is critical for the Chinese librarian to engage students in their learning process toward information literacy.

- Be prepared to tutor them through the whole process of writing a research paper: Chinese ESL college students are accustomed to a structured and passive learning style, so individualized attention is very important for them. The Chinese librarian can help them to sort through all the information sources, teach them how to use new tools, answer their questions, and keep track of their progress until they complete their research paper for the first time. As the old saying says, if you give man a fish, he will be fed for a day, but if you teach a man to fish, he will be fed for a lifetime. The purpose is to guide them through the whole process of writing a research paper correctly, in the hope they will become an independent learners as well as lifelong "fisherman."
- Encourage them to ask questions: One of the primary purposes of any research paper is to answer a question or examine and analyze a disputed issue (Lester, p. 5). For example, probing an issue by questioning inevitably narrows the subject and refines it to a manageable topic. Unfortunately, Chinese

ESL college students were taught to listen, not to ask. The Chinese librarian should remind them to continue asking questions. This is the way to stimulate their minds for more intelligent and critical thoughts so they can become independent learners who understand information literacy.

Conclusion

According to the 2006 Statistical Portrait of the Nation's Asian and Pacific Islander Populations at the UCLA Asian American Studies Center, an official U.S. Census Information Center (2006 statistics, web page), there were 8.7 million U.S. residents who were born in Asia (1/4 of the nation's total foreign-born population) in 2006, and of them, 1.8 million were born in China. At the University of California, Davis, in the fall of 2005 (University, p. 5) 35% of International students were of Chinese origin. As the population of Chinese ESL college students grows, information literacy lessons must be provided to help them to reach their educational goals.

The process of writing research papers is a practical way for a student to learn what it means to be information literate, through research planning, finding information, using information resources (libraries and the internet), evaluation, citation, and general writing skills (Riedling, p. vii). It also helps Chinese ESL college students learn to be independent learners and thus be able to function well in an American educational institution. Personal assistance from a Chinese librarian is crucial to the Chinese students. The Chinese Librarian can guide them in learning to use library resources and help them become familiar with the library—a necessary laboratory of academic education. In fact, the value of writing research papers is enormous for Chinese ESL college students. The methods learned in writing research papers can serve them in business, in the professions, and in any civic and social activities they may pursue (Turabian, p. 1-2).

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