Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Scholarly Material Access Barriers for Reference and Instruction Librarians Seeking Non-English Research

A Review of:

Absher, L. U. & Desilets, M. (2024). English as the scholarly language: Diversity, equity, and inclusion implications for academic reference and instruction librarians. *The Library Quarterly, 94*(3), 296–315. https://doi.org/10.1086/730464

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Abstract

Objective – To examine the use of non-English resources in academic libraries, specifically in reference and instruction. Research questions include: (1) Do academic librarians in the United States and Canada suggest non-English language resources in their reference and instruction practice, and to what extent? (2) What factors or cues prompt an offer of non-English language resources?

Design – Literature review and subsequent survey.

Setting – Online.

Subjects – Academic librarians from Canada and the United States.

Methods – A 32-question survey including demographics, language, educational background, collection development, reference activities, instruction, and librarian attitudes was disseminated in the winter of 2020-2021.

Main Results – The survey respondents were primarily native English speakers. Regarding collection development, more than 75% of 131 respondents indicated that they purchase or acquire materials in languages other than English. When asked about areas of collection development, the highest areas of concentration were social sciences and humanities. More than 75% of participants stated comfortability in responding to reference questions regarding non-English materials; however, only 10% indicated they would seek out non-English materials without a specific request.

Conclusion – Based on the survey responses, academic librarians use non-English resources reactively, primarily offering them only due to specific request. There may also be a disconnect between the perceived likelihood of patrons using these resources proactively and the actual practice of doing so.

Commentary

English as the dominant scholarly language has a history in the literature, such as the rejection of publications for perceived level of English proficiency (Balan, 2021). Additionally, there is literature on the history of this issue at large: until the mid-20th century, most nations used their native language as the dominant language for speaking, learning, and researching in their universities, but many have turned to English as the dominant language to appeal to prospective students more globally (Altbach, 2007). This paper's authors have dynamic publishing histories, with Absher's Google Scholar profile highlighting work in reference, race, and collaborative librarianship, and Desilet's profile including studies in usability and information literacy. While neither has a previous study in this area that was immediately discoverable, both authors seem equipped to tackle this difficult topic.

The EBLIP Critical Appraisal checklist was used to measure the survey's strength (Glynn, 2006). The surveyed population was found by purposeful sampling through electronic mailing lists and social media sites, with 166 final participants. When prompted to respond about fluency in languages other than English, respondents were able to choose a level of fluency in reading as well as speaking (poor, intermediate, and high). There were questions regarding the acquisition of non-English collections, as well as the reference of and instruction surrounding non-English materials. There were no weaknesses in the survey instrument via the checklist. While not a validated instrument, there is face-value validity, and the study received exemption by the institutional review board of the authors' institution.

An interesting note from the responses included the high-ranking choice, when asked about how non-English materials are mentioned in instruction, was "advised patrons on how to limit for language options for online searching." This answer seems to highlight the author's first research question that, by default, librarians often teach about non-English material from the standpoint of advising how to avoid these materials. This does not appear to be based on any preconceived bias of quality on non-English literature, but more of a (perhaps ill-informed) assumption that most students will only make use of English studies. However, this answer may be interpreted another way; perhaps survey respondents are "advising patrons on how to limit for language options for online searching" to focus on non-English materials, rather than exclude them.

The implications for institutional practice could be better addressed in this manuscript. Where there is a clear need for greater accessibility to non-English resources, there is also a need for greater translation services. It does not appear from survey respondents that there is a hesitation or reluctance to offer resources that are not conducted or published in English, but rather a barrier to accessing materials in a language that the librarian can understand and therefore confidently disseminate. The authors' call to action on further research in this area being student focused rather than librarian focused will certainly add more to the overall picture of student needs for non-English material.

References

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