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Reaching ELL Students in International School Libraries

by CELIA EMMELHAINZ

“**O**UR PARENTS CAN'T read this kind of book to their children. Do you have anything easier?” a teacher asks. She hands back *Someone Bigger*, which 4-year-old Bolat has chosen to take home. And she's correct. While it's a great book for Bolat's interests and listening skills, his Russian-speaking parents are unable to read it with him at home. In fact, his once-weekly library lessons may be the only time he hears someone read an English book of his choice.

As I scan the shelves, I see that we don't have a better story for Bolat's parents to use in helping him learn English. Teaching at an international school in Kazakhstan, this is an issue I face every day. Unlike librarians with access to the breadth of bilingual Spanish-English materials, bilingual Russian-English resources are few. Yet it's clear that more materials are needed to bridge the gap between each student and his parents, as well as between him and the next reading level. I have found some ways that international school libraries can better meet the needs of English Language Learners (ELL) both in America and abroad.

RESOURCES FOR ELL LEARNERS

English Language Learners (ELL) are those students whose first language is not English. Meeting the needs of ELL students has always been a concern for overseas school librarians (Pfoeffler 2003), but is increasingly a need for American school librarians as well. With Hispanic students comprising one fifth of American schoolchildren (Adamich 2009, 8), America has become “the second largest Spanish-speaking nation” in the world, after Mexico (Jeffers 2008, 38). And in a world with the highest rates of long-distance migration in history, many developed countries are now providing ELL library services for their diverse residents

(Stenbro and Nielsen 2007). Likewise, libraries in the developing world increasingly need to provide English and local language materials at all stages of education (Wessels and Knoetze 2008).

This need to work in multiple languages is especially pressing at international schools. At Haileybury Astana, children as young as seven have regular lessons in Kazakh (the state language), Russian (the home language), and English (the global language); some take courses in Spanish and Mandarin as well. A key challenge here is in facilitating multilingual fluency for children who come from diverse backgrounds and may move on to other countries in the future.

With the above in mind, key areas of concern for ELL students using school libraries include:

- ▶ **Cataloging.** English-language schools usually catalogue in English, but ELL students and parents may also benefit from subject and title searching in other languages. Bilingual books should be cataloged in both languages (Adamich 2009), while adding subject headings in the native language would improve access even to English books (Patton 2008).
- ▶ **Shelving.** One line of thought is to highlight easy English and/or first-language materials on separate shelving with prominent and attractive displays. Another is to “interfile” nonfiction in multiple languages, so that bilingual students can more easily find books by topic (Jackson and Robertson 1991). With transliteration, it is possible that even fiction could be interfiled, something we are considering with Latin and Cyrillic letters.
- ▶ **Ownership.** ELL students may thrive when they develop a sense of ownership of books in both languages. Such ownership comes not just from seeing their cul-



tures represented, but also from recommending books or helping the librarian select purchase options (Hook 1995). Working as library helpers or engaging children in story-writing in their own languages are other options our library has pursued with positive results.

- ▶ **Collection Development.** A diverse collection is crucial for ELL learners who may need a wider selection and more levels of books on each topic than the native reader. ELL students benefit especially from books about their cultures, picture dictionaries (for vocabulary building), and audio-visual resources for watching and listening (Eby 2012, 13-14). Picture books and illustrated novels may also help older students to understand concepts without the constant pause for dictionaries (Leeper 2001).
- ▶ **Simple books for complex interests.** Serving late-elementary ELL students becomes especially challenging when the easy readers suited for students' current reading levels are far below their interests and perceptions about the world (Peck 2007, 41). Yet adult-graded readers or simplified classics may be too mature for elementary students. Because of this, ELL students may benefit from books on popular topics (fashion, sports, global media) designed at simple levels for older students; *Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* stand out in this regard.
- ▶ **Enhancing first-language reading.** Students learning in a multilingual environment may struggle to read in

two languages. At our school, some local students speak freely in Russian but are still learning to read in both languages; international students have a similar problem in reverse (DelGuidice 2007, 34). Because of this, our school seeks out not just English and bilingual texts, but also Russian texts showing curricular and life-stage topics in simple language for middle-grade learners.

- ▶ **Bilingual and first language texts.** Librarians who have worked with ELL students often emphasize that bilingual texts do not harm progress in learning English. Rather than "cheating," bilingual books allow children to learn without stopping to look up each word (Leeper 2001). First-language texts provide children with cultural inclusion and can affirm students' success across the curriculum (Eby 2012, Patton 2008).
- ▶ **A need for library training.** Some ELL families are unaware of how western school libraries typically operate, or may struggle to understand monolingual brochures about the library. Visual notes may be helpful here: Jacqueline Jules recommends sending home pictures of "a bar code, a spine sticker, and library stamp" to help parent recognize library materials as distinct from other schoolbooks (2009). Jules also adds cover images to overdue notices, giving visual cues for parents who may not otherwise track their child's reading habits in English.

PARTICULAR CHALLENGES FOR INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL ELLS

The challenges and opportunities above are common to most schools who serve a bilingual student population, but other challenges may be particular to international school libraries. These include the time and distance involved in collection development, the need to revise curriculum for ELL needs, and even the possibility of developing new resources in local languages.

Time and distance: Many international school libraries face 50-70% premiums in cost of shipping, customs, and insurance costs when ordering books, as well as 6-8 months in time delay between ordering and receiving books. Out-of-print, small-press, or used books may be completely unavailable through major school library suppliers. Because of this, articles listing ELL vendors may be of limited value to international libraries, which depend heavily on aggregating suppliers in the source country.

Lesson modifications: Another challenge is that most library activity books assume a solid verbal grasp of English. ELL students, though, may struggle to understand where to find Judaism in the Dewey categories or what a grasshopper is; this means lesson plans must be heavily modified for ELL use. Our library changes and tests lessons multiple times before arriving at a good balance point for our integrated classes of high-English and ELL students. Pfoeffler writes from Bolivia that defining basic words and concepts takes much of her library time (2003). Similarly, our students require careful explanation, as well as visual and interactive library activities that can hold their attention across language barriers.

Lack of bilingual resources: Although there are thousands of children's books in Spanish, French, German, or Russian, many school libraries face limits to resources in less westernized languages. Because of this, creation of new dual-language resources may be necessary for school librarians who hope to provide access in languages such as Kazakh, Mongolian, or Albanian.

Lack of native language nonfiction: Another strong need is for engaging children's nonfiction in lesser-known languages, especially written and illustrated by local authors. Outside of simple folktales and history, children's nonfiction is unavailable in many African languages (Wessels and Knoetze 2008). We find this an issue for students here in Central Asia as well; students could use many more staged reading resources in Kazakh. In such cases, Ferlazzo recommends that teachers and librarians work with students to develop multilingual texts about the country or other curricular topics (2010).

FINAL NOTES

As seen in the experiences of international school librarians above, there are many ways to adjust school library services to better serve ELL students. Key recommendations include:

- ▶ Integrate languages across the library's fiction and non-fiction categories, while also highlighting both ELL and native-language resources in prominent displays.
- ▶ Seek engaging books at early levels as well as digital media in both languages.
- ▶ Catalogue bilingual books, easy readers, and native language books with subject headings in both languages to facilitate discovery.
- ▶ Be prepared to substantially revise lesson materials into simpler, more visual, and more interactive exercises with time set aside for vocabulary building.
- ▶ Use bilingual translations and pictorial handouts to improve communication with parents.
- ▶ Collaborate with students as well as local authors and illustrators in developing multilingual fiction and non-fiction for schoolchildren in the library setting.

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