Service to a Beautiful Mosaic: The Information Needs of the English as a Second Language (ESL) Community

Christina Sikorski

MLIS Student, San Jose State University & Information Desk Assistant, Ela Area Public Library

Abstract

The community of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners is important and growing as the number of global immigrants increases. These English language learners form a community around their need to increase access and ultimately increase knowledge, not only of the English language, but of other services that support their community. Working together to achieve common goals—learning English, seeking materials in their native language(s), getting help for their children in new schools—brings the ESL community together and fosters social connectedness to the community's partners, including ESL teachers, translators, librarians, and social workers. Reijo Savolainen's everyday life seeking model is useful in understanding how the ESL community seeks, uses, and shares information. This research paper seeks to understand the information needs of the ESL community and how libraries and information centers can best serve those needs. As part of my research, I scrutinized academic literature and sought out community-based sources to develop an understanding of the information needs of the ESL community. The thematic elements of technology use, community partnership and outreach, and moving beyond books are relevant not only to supporting the ESL community but also to fostering connection and engagement with the community at large.

Article Type: Research paper

Introduction

In 2018, there were more than 44 million immigrants living in the United States, representing more than 13% of the overall population. This data showed an increase over prior figures of approximately 31 million immigrants in 2000 and 14 million in 1980 (Pew Research Center, 2020). Given the immigrant trends in our country, it is important to examine the information needs of immigrants who seek public libraries as part of the community of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Members of the ESL community comprise a diverse and vibrant group of newcomers seeking to communicate, navigate, and flourish while learning a new language. U.S. Citizens and Immigrant Services (2006) reports that with more newcomers to the country, public libraries play a significant role in welcoming immigrants and providing services such as language instruction. Research has also shown that libraries are a place of comfort and a safe haven, "a quiet place away from the unpleasantness of daily challenges" as new language learners seek information in their daily lives (DeSouza, 2016, p. 41). The ESL community has specific information needs and unique information-seeking behavior

that will be addressed in this paper, particularly around the areas of technology, community partnership and outreach, and moving beyond books to incorporate broader collections, robust programming, and engaged library staff.

Literature Review

Much has been written about ESL and immigrant communities and public libraries, seeking to understand the perspectives of both the newcomers and of the library staff. In reviewing the scholarly academic literature on specifically the ESL community, and more broadly, the immigrant community, there were three main recurring thematic areas: technology use, partnership and outreach, and moving beyond books.

Technology Use

Technology has dramatically changed how the ESL community seeks, uses, and shares information. For the information needs of the ESL community, it is useful to employ Reijo Savolainen's Everyday Life Seeking methodology. He introduced the concepts of making choices ("way of life") and preference of activities based on choices made ("order of things") to categorize how people make choices in their everyday lives and how order is determined by given preferences that can be both objective and subjective (Savolainen, 1995). Scholars continue to use Savolainen's model to research and better understand the information needs of communities, especially as today's technology allows for enhanced and more agile communication. Technology addresses one of the main commonalities of the ESL community: the need to learn the English language. Suh and Hsieh (2019) found that even among generally savvy technology users, the language barrier was still an impediment to using and accessing information. Today's modern technology aids in accessibility for the ESL community to communicate and be understood in the English language.

Public libraries are ideal places for newcomers to use technology. Libraries provide free public internet access, while supporting both digital literacy and e-government tools that are particularly useful to immigrants searching for educational and social services (Kosciejew, 2019). Similarly, van der Linden et al. (2014) found that internet use was initially the most important part of visiting the library for new Canadian immigrants, particularly if there was no internet access at home. This technological aid is especially helpful to the ESL community if translated into the native language, perhaps allowing the community to navigate library services more easily (Holt, 2009).

Assefa and Matusiak (2018) observed how mobile technology guided the information-seeking behaviors of immigrants through photographs taken of their daily lives in and around Denver, Colorado. Subjects varied, from street signs to news websites, and from native language periodicals to digital/online translation tools. Some participants also took photos of social media sites in their native language, such as the native equivalent of Facebook, to feel connected to friends and family in their native lands (Assefa & Matusiak, 2018). Technology made this information-seeking behavior possible and enabled quick, handheld, mobile translation from English to the native language using smartphones. Echoing Suh and Hsieh's findings, Assefa and Matusiak (2018) also concluded that "language is the most critical factor. Many new immigrants, especially those with limited English language proficiency, tend to rely on sources and services that are prepared in their own native language" (p. 745).

Outreach and Partnership

Shifting gears to focus on the perspectives of library staff, the academic literature reveals a need for greater emphasis on community partnership and outreach. Williment and Jones-Grant (2012) called their research "humbling" after learning that the Halifax library's preconceived notions of providing services to immigrant patrons were not well aligned with community needs (p. 9). This feedback prompted a recommendation to establish an essential outreach partnership between library staff and

the community served, including involving the immigrant community in the decision-making process before designing programs or purchasing collections. Williment and Jones-Grant (2012) also called for partnering with other immigrant service providers to expand the outreach network.

In similar research, Cowles (2013) found that a word-of-mouth endorsement from one member of the ESL community resulted in increased library visits, particularly encouraging North American newcomers to make that first library visit. A trusted source, whether another community member or welcoming bilingual staff, builds momentum for future action. However, it is possible that after a positive referral from a trusted source, community members may feel overwhelmed by the array of offerings, even if they are impressed by them. Further, given the differences in services provided across worldwide libraries, ESL community members may not know all the public services available to them. In the research of van der Linden et al. (2014), they found many immigrants were unfamiliar with the operations of a public library or never thought to seek a library for continuing education, citizenship, or employment assistance, based on how libraries function in their native countries.

Community partnership and outreach are necessary to compensate for a lack of knowledge about U.S. government services or newcomers' potential wariness to public institutions. When developing strategies to include the ESL community in the broader library community, Holt (2009) stressed that winning trust and earning partnership is the first step. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services report (2006) offers a blueprint on how libraries can engage ESL patrons and make them feel a valued part of the community, including printing library brochures in English and native languages, participating in local community events, partnering with other immigrant service providers, and recruiting immigrants to volunteer for staff positions, including serving on library boards.

Beyond Books—Broader Collections, Robust Programs, and Engaged Staff

Libraries can engage the ESL community beyond their initial visits for internet use or beginner ESL classes. There is a need to move beyond books. An information professional can function as an advocate and ally for lifelong learning by supporting the ESL community with pursuits academic, emotional, and social (Dali, 2022).

The literature offers examples on how broader collections support learning. Jeffers (2009) argues that additional bilingual books are remarkably effective in children's learning, leading to "improved ability to communicate, better cognitive development, richer cultural awareness, improved academic performance, superior educational opportunities, and ultimately, better jobs" (p. 38). However, one potential area of weakness with this argument is that while the author is a writer herself, she is also employed by a publisher that produces bilingual books, giving her what could be a self-serving and profit-driven motive.

In other research, Reznowski (2008) offered several additional strategies for librarians including the opportunity to "live the language" by supporting ESL students in the library (p. 422). She writes, "Librarians not only have the opportunity to promote relevant language materials, but can also begin building a relationship that will continue to develop in future years of study" (p. 422). Librarians can promote different works to identify popular titles, music, and films that can aid in language development. Sometimes comic books or graphic novels may be appealing to a new language learner who can lean on photos to aid with context. Reznowski (2008) concludes that a librarian can serve as "an agent for motivation, support and encouragement to these students" with stimulating and high-interest materials, expanded technology settings that can translate frequently used web pages and social media sites, and being a positive role model of lifelong learning (p. 418).

Assefa and Matusiak's (2018) research also showed that the ESL community had demand for materials in languages other than English. New immigrants may struggle to find useful print information in their native language and often seek information in both their native language and English, switching between the two languages depending on the situation. Access remains critical, especially in the native language, to maintain connections with family and friends and sustain the traditions and cultural heritage of the native country (Assefa & Matusiak, 2018).

Language preferences remain paramount for students of all ages, regardless of their first language. In one study, international students at an academic reference desk preferred to ask their first question in English but then would switch to their native tongue if they could not understand or were not satisfied with the results (Ferrer-Vinent, 2010). The desire for incorporating the familiar (such as the native country language) was also evident in research for public libraries. Holt (2009) features several examples of robust and successful public library programs to include the ESL community, such as intergenerational story times, conversational book clubs, voting seminars and voter registration fairs, computer literacy programs, and cultural and holiday activities focused on native traditions.

While libraries gather feedback from their patrons, they must focus attention within as well. Libraries need to be inward-looking, as Dali (2022) argued, keeping dedicated staff engaged so that they can continue to work with immigrant populations and make these patrons feel welcomed, valued, and supported. Dali's research showed that librarians would engage with the immigrant community based on the meaningfulness of their roles and work interactions, their own emotional and physical availability relative to other personal commitments, and the safety of and support from their work environment. However, this group had some self-selection bias, as these particular librarians were selected for the work they were already doing with immigrant communities within the public library. Dali (2022) challenged library leadership to "retain the most brilliant, dedicated professionals" by "making an organizational climate more conducive to creativity, self-expression, and innovation; more supportive of librarians' genuine professional and personal aspirations" (p. 228).

This work cannot happen in a vacuum. To move beyond books, engaged staff is essential. Dali (2022) posits that librarians act as "community glue" serving as "cultural facilitators, community liaisons, and invaluable community resources" (p. 217). Dali (2022) argues further that this sense of mission informs employee engagement, and to retain talented and dedicated staff, libraries must support and encourage their efforts as a "genuine calling" and not a call of duty (p. 226). Libraries must look both outward toward patron needs and inward to hiring practices for recruiting and retaining diverse (especially bilingual) staff to best serve the ESL community.

While much has been written about the topic of serving the ESL community, most of this research is focused on younger K-12 patrons and how academic and school libraries can best serve this information community. There is a gap in the current research on how public libraries can serve their youngest patrons as well as adult patrons seeking to learn the English language. A review of the existing research also reveals limitations in knowing what combination of classes, programs, and outreach worked best in advancing the learning and reading comprehension of ESL students. Few studies mentioned follow-up assessments or feedback from the community on the efficacy of library offerings. Sample sizes can be small, and different libraries and ESL programs use different rubrics to measure success. Carlo et al. (2004) admitted such limitations in their own study of "closing the gap" between English learners in North American classrooms saying, "Because we had no general measure of English-language proficiency for the ELL students, we were unable to test the interaction between English proficiency and intervention effects" (p. 203). Without measuring the success

of various ESL teaching and serving efforts, it is difficult for public libraries to know how best to devote their resources.

Methodology

I used both research-based and community-based sources to examine the information needs of the ESL community. For my research-based sources, I started by reviewing scholarly articles across various Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA) databases, focusing on the information needs and information-seeking behavior of ESL students and immigrants. I initially focused on technology use and language learning in public libraries, then broadened my scope to include global information communities.

For the community-based sources, I am privileged to work at a five-Star public library (ranked in the top 1% of libraries nationwide) that offers many ESL services as well as several in-person ESL classes. Our library, which I will refer to as Ela throughout this paper, serves a diverse population with many immigrant groups including Spanish speakers and a recent influx of refugees from Ukraine. In my professional work, I have had the opportunity to meet and work with bilingual information professionals who work in and for libraries as managers, ESL teachers, and translators. They kindly advised me and shared a wealth of resources. I have been able to participate in and observe several cultural events at our library, speaking with both participants and presenters, including our recent Ukrainian newcomer welcome event and a bilingual (English and Spanish) "My Density Matters" breast cancer screening class (Ela Area Public Library, n.d.-f).

In studying the information needs of the ESL community, it is useful to follow the methodology of Reijo Savolainen's Everyday Life Seeking Model as first published in 1995 to understand how people use information to solve every day (non-work related) problems. Savolainen looked at how people use their own knowledge and life experiences to make choices. He introduced the concepts of "way of life" (making choices) and "order of things" (preference of activities based on choices made) to categorize how people make choices in their everyday lives and how order is determined by given preferences that can be both objective and subjective (Savolainen, 1995, p. 262).

Savolainen (2018) argued that "mastery of life" means minimizing the delta between how things are and how we want them to be; that is, the daily problem solving on the "order of things" in our "way of life" leads to an optimistic outcome (p. 1510). The Savolainen model provides a useful lens to understand the ESL community as their information behaviors deal directly with everyday life and the order of things. Activities are as varied as obtaining identification, negotiating transit, going grocery shopping, arranging schooling and activities for children, navigating healthcare concerns, and obtaining access to and support for social services.

Scholars have used Savolainen's model to research and better understand the information needs of new immigrant communities. Suh and Hsieh (2019) reviewed the information needs of Korean immigrants settling in the United States. They argued that while this group is particularly tech-savvy given high internet penetration in South Korea,

> language information is fundamental for interviewees to acquire, interpret, and utilize other types of information, so that it tends to underlie the other types of information needs … most interviewees faced a language barrier, and hence needed language information as a tool for accessing other types of information. (Suh & Hsieh, 2019, p. 43)

In Assefa and Matusiak's (2018) study, they learned that immigrants shift between their native language and English depending on the information they seek, and that even as their English improves, it is important to maintain a connection to the native language and culture. In the everyday lives of the ESL community, information-seeking behaviors are tied to language and affect how they seek, use, and share information.

Results and Discussion

In analyzing the findings of the research-based literature and the community-based sources, some information needs of the ESL community are being met by public libraries, while other areas require improvement. This discussion will focus on technology use, partnership and outreach, and moving beyond books. It will then offer suggestions for the future overall both in public libraries and in my home library.

Technology

For the most part, our public library technology offerings meet the needs of the ESL community. The ESL community employs technology to use, create, and share information, not only to navigate their new everyday life seeking in an unfamiliar environment, but to stay connected to their families and cultural traditions in their native lands. Public libraries offer computers for public use and free internet access. Public libraries may also offer printing, copying, scanning, and faxing services or have an on-staff aide to help with technology questions. Public libraries may also have dedicated resources for English learners or a series of reference books like dictionaries to aid language learning. At Ela, we have a stand-alone ESL reference collection housed on a rolling cart for transportability. Additionally, mobile applications like Google Translate can aid both patrons and staff to help communicate.

Specific to Ela, our digital media lab has equipment to convert older format media (like black and white photos) to more modern digital formats that are easier to share and store. Old family memories might be a comfort to family members and allow them to share that part of their story and cultural identity while away from home. We also have a wide variety of circulating items in our Library of Things, including accessibility tools that might make reading easier for an English language learner, like reading lamps, highlighters, and magnifiers. While these tools exist for patron use, it is important that we as librarians make these options known, which leads us to a discussion of outreach.

Outreach and Partnership

Concurrently with other inward-facing actions, libraries need to focus outward, actively partnering and engaging with the ESL community to learn how best to serve the community, then move forward on executing a plan based on that feedback (Williment & Jones-Grant, 2012). With differences in location, funding, and community needs, outreach will be particular to each public library.

As specifically related to Ela, we offer notary public, passport acceptance agent, and voter registration services; language learning through the World Languages Collection and several ESL classes; and reader aids from the Library of Things, all while being a safe space for families (Ela Area Public Library, n.d.-a, b, c, d, e, g, h). We provide outreach opportunities for the ESL community by periodically hosting open "office hours" for local elected officials to meet with the community and answer their questions (Ela Area Public Library, n.d.-f). As a five-Star library, we are fortunate to have the resources and large staff to make these offerings available to our patrons. It is understood that not all libraries enjoy Ela's many benefits. Given this perspective, this work may be most applicable to larger libraries with more resources that can afford broad collections and dedicated outreach staff.

While some outreach has been successful in engaging the ESL community, there is more to be done to continue to meet their needs. Lippincott (2015) argued that "often faculty and students don't realize what specialized technologies and expertise is available in the library." It is important to connect to the ESL community to inform them about other services that we offer and, more importantly, to find out what services or programs they would like to see in the future.

After the Ukrainian newcomer welcome event, the Ela library provided surveys about what services and materials would be most helpful to the community with the understanding that we need to meet people where they are to be truly

effective (O'Brien et al., 2022). One unexpected result of the Ukrainian newcomer welcome event was that we learned we had many more long-time patrons of Ukrainian descent in our community who had a desire for more materials in their native language. They did not know that we could purchase books based on their recommendations, and we did not know how much demand truly existed. In follow-up meetings, we discussed how we could best reach out to other community members to start changing and growing our collection of non-English materials. Directly engaging the community to seek their valuable insights led us directly to some on-the-ground actions we could immediately take at Ela.

Beyond Books—Broader Collections, Robust Programs, and Engaged Staff

As public libraries help to serve the ESL community, they can look to broaden their collections, enhance programming, and develop staff. There are several strategies for public libraries to better meet the needs of the ESL community. In the short-term, libraries can move beyond books by expanding their collections, purchasing more bilingual materials, and offering more classes and programs that can help this community forge new connections (Holt, 2009).

For Ela, this means more materials in more languages and more and differentiated programs celebrating our patrons' native languages, cultures, and customs. Ela can expand robust virtual and on-site programming to aid and support the ESL community such as past events like bilingual story time at a local Mexican ice cream shop (Ela Area Public Library, n.d.-f). Depending on the make-up of the ESL community, virtual and on-site programming might well look different. Feasibly, ESL patrons would be better served at off-site locations that are near public transit or existing community services, like a local place of worship. As public libraries partner with the community, they can better understand how to serve that community and offer programs that fit those needs.

Looking Ahead to the Future

There is room for improvement in how public libraries serve the needs of the ESL community. From a technological perspective, in addition to internet access, public library websites can feature more ESL and non-native speaker user-friendly pages, including listings of local resources or links to social services. Public libraries can also highlight existing tools, like electronic books, magazines, and newspapers available in different languages. Public libraries can partner geographically or as part of larger consortiums to pool resources and discover what other technologies would benefit the ESL community.

As the ESL community builds its knowledge base and experiences positive social support, this connectedness impacts the entire community. The public library can support this connectedness by incorporating the community-provided input into its planning process and executing these suggestions. In many places, the public library can be seen as a community hub and can strengthen those existing bonds by partnering with other community organizations. By tracking program attendance at Ela, we learned that there had been growth year-over-year in library patrons of South Asian heritage. Like patrons of Ukrainian descent, there was demand among these patrons for more materials in their native country languages and more programs celebrating their native country traditions. Knowing this, we at Ela can try humbly to make sure we are recognizing these patrons and celebrating the many languages, traditions, and customs that they bring to our doors.

Another way libraries can improve outreach and partnership to the ESL community is to utilize Williment and Jones-Grant's (2012) idea of asset mapping. This concept states that libraries need to plan and know their assets so they can both serve and engage the immigrant community in terms of information needs and community strengths, as well as how the library responds to and serves those needs. With more immigrants visiting local Canadian libraries, Nova Scotia and Halifax implemented tools to help librarians

discover information needs and the best use (and non-use) of library services for immigrant communities. They did this by going out into the community and asking directly what the community wanted. One discovery based on the asset mapping observation was that 25% of immigrants who enter the Halifax Regional Municipality library were referred by another immigrant service provider. Zeroing in on important connections like this, they argued, was the first step to gaining trust and building relationships in the community (Williment & Jones-Grant, 2012).

Ela has conducted surveys, both within the library and as part of the greater county and township, of how we are perceived in the community. Just as with Halifax, some of these findings might be surprising to library leadership, particularly around why language learners first visit the library and what services and programs are offered there. In my opinion, Ela would benefit from asset mapping and sharing those findings widely, both with patrons and staff, as well as with local community partners in the ESL community, such as the bilingual staff at the local school district. Many of these lessons learned from the Williment and Jones-Grant study can be immediately and directly implemented in our local library as we work to have conversations with patrons in our ESL community. This collaborative and inclusive mindset can empower both library staff and the immigrant community to work together, building trust and forming relationships.

Outreach to the ESL community needs to be an ongoing process. Public libraries need to check back in and make sure that the actions taken actually meet the community's needs. If the community's needs are not or only partially met, it is incumbent for the public library to reevaluate and propose changes. One idea would be a partnership between public libraries, the local school districts, and community leaders to develop specific, measurable, and achievable goals for ESL learning, maybe around a core set of vocabulary or everyday life scenarios such as visiting a doctor, shopping for groceries, or applying for a job. Ela could also make use of

some of Holt's strategies, such as hosting intergenerational story time as our library is within walking distance of both local preschool and elementary schools as well as senior living facilities.

In discussing how European libraries aid refugees, Kosciejew (2019) posited the idea of information as a basic right. He argued that when refugees leave their homes and are seeking basic needs like food, water, and shelter, information is equally important. Libraries can provide this basic right to refugees. The key, Kosciejew (2019) concluded, to libraries assisting refugees build their new communities is "language precedes action"—that is, information professionals have a mandate to break down any language barrier to serve patrons (p. 93).

This partnership between a library and its ESL community feeds directly into a discussion of diversity and inclusion, particularly related to library services and library staff. Bright discussed the importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion work, especially as the U.S. population continues to diversify. To meet the needs of diverse populations, she concluded that information professionals need to "provide support and resources that align with those needs" (Bright, 2022, p. 70).

One approach on how libraries can better serve the ESL community is to recruit and retain diverse staff who are willing and able to communicate with the ESL community, including in their native language. If public libraries used the asset mapping strategy and learned what languages were spoken in and would be helpful to the ESL community at the library, they could then seek to connect and hire people with those language skills.

At Ela, we can spotlight foreign language skills as a sought-after quality when interviewing candidates. Once diverse candidates are hired, Ela could highlight their featured language skills by perhaps giving them a special pin or button with a flag or a simple phrase (se habla español) so patrons can feel comfortable speaking with

them in their preferred language right away. Ela could also reach out to existing staff about how best to broaden collections and programs to better serve the community, focusing not only on the content itself but also scheduling convenient dates and times or making programming available virtually online or adding bilingual captions.

While many patrons think first of bricks and mortar and physical pages and bindings, it is important that public libraries move beyond books. To support lifelong learning, libraries can broaden their physical and digital collections. Of particular importance to the ESL community, this process means purchasing more bilingual materials and seeking guidance on what languages are of the most benefit and have the highest demand. For Ela, this means continued audits of the World Languages collections for both adult and children's books, as well as bilingual materials across various media, especially popular materials like movies and graphic novels. Ela could also include directions and instructions for some of our most popular Library of Things items like fishing poles, telescopes, and GoPro cameras in languages other than English.

Finally, no group, including the ESL community, is a monolith. In her writing about cultural competence, Cooke (2017) argued for distinction between and among communities. Not every ESL community member has the same information needs or comes to the library for the same reason. Information professionals have a responsibility and duty to be humble and understand the breadth of the community's needs in order to support patrons' individual needs.

Cooke (2017) goes on to say that having this cultural competence "on the front lines is crucial because that is what the patrons will see and appreciate first" (p. 19). If a patron does not feel welcome on that initial library visit, they may not return. Information professionals must harness passion and humility as they continue to develop cultural competencies and serve patrons, particularly those of the ESL community. As

public libraries try new methods, programs, and collections to serve the ESL community, it is important that these strategies be measured for effectiveness in partnership with the community and its goals. With feedback given, received, and executed on, truly the public library can be a partner to patrons seeking to learn the English language.

Conclusion

The ESL community exhibits diverse information needs as it seeks to navigate everyday life decisions in a new place and in a new language. Technology is critically important to this group to move forward in their new communities and to stay connected to their past communities and culture. To gain trust and truly partner with the ESL community, libraries and information centers must make outreach a priority, humbly learning the needs of the community it serves and acting on those suggestions. Libraries must also look to broaden their services, expand collections, offer new and nuanced programming, and create a welcoming environment for all, both for the patrons and for the staff who serve them. The implications for libraries meeting these needs are benefits that accrue to both the ESL community and the community at large. Trust, connections, and outreach build the tapestry of community where the public library can be a hub: a place of safety, welcome, and learning, reflecting our country and its best ideals.

In a speech at the University of Notre Dame on October 7, 1976, shortly before he was elected President of the United States, Jimmy Carter said,

> America is not a melting pot. We don't come here and lose our identity as we live among one another. It's more like a beautiful mosaic, where every person is an individual and where we can harness our common effort when we have the inspiration and the mechanism by which our lives can be more meaningful. (1976, American Presidency Project)

By serving the beautiful mosaic of the ESL community, information professionals meet some of the American Library Association's core values for information professionals including access, service, and education and lifelong learning (American Library Association, n.d.).

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