

ESL Learning Resources and Services at the Canadian Public Library

by Chrissy Mylopoulos

The development of ESL collections and services in public libraries as a distinct and separate activity goes back as many as 30 years in large Canadian cities. This development is directly connected to the changing makeup of Canadian society over the past decades as a result of continuous immigration. Given the importance and constant demand for these services, it is essential that we examine their management and delivery in their totality in order to identify best practices, raise issues that need further examination, and make changes where needed.

The library literature on ESL resources and services in public libraries reveals adequate coverage of the need for these services and their inclusion into the multitude of collections and other services (Dilevko & Dali, 2002). There is a lot of information on adult ESL learners, and public libraries are well aware of the growth of this constituency and its language learning needs (Lavery & Livingston, 1999).

However, literature on the management and delivery of ESL services, including critical analyses and recommendations, is less plentiful. Unlike the organized and well-documented area of library-based literacy programs, resources, and services, ESL is subsumed under multicultural services in libraries, and its coverage is limited to providing descriptions of collections, information on ESL classes held in libraries, and more recently information

public libraries that were initially selected represented a sample of large libraries from the west, central, and eastern regions of Canada serving multicultural and newcomer communities. A medium-size library (London Public Library) was also included in the selection for added information. Staff responsible for ESL services at Canadian public libraries in Vancouver, Richmond, Edmonton, Calgary, Toronto, and London responded to the questionnaire.

In addition to this informal data gathering, numerous discussions with staff delivering ESL services as well as multicultural services librarians added information from the perspective of front-line library workers who deal with users of ESL services on a daily basis.

Historical Background

As mentioned earlier, the development of ESL collections and services in public libraries is directly related to the changing composition of Canadian society. This change has been caused by a continuing influx of newcomers in numbers high enough to have an impact on existing library collections and services. Starting in the 1970s, the Department of Manpower and Immigration¹ began to address the problem of providing facilities for learning or improving English to new immigrants by introducing free English classes that newcomers could join for specific periods of time. Many newcomers had low levels of English language knowledge and were concentrated in large urban centers that served as reception areas, such as Toronto and Vancouver.

Within such a setting, the public library was an obvious choice for the referral of ESL learners who had the motivation and the willingness—and above all, the need—to improve their English so that they could qualify for a job or further their education.

At the same time, at the provincial level, the Ministry of Citizenship and Culture, in partnership with boards of education in cities such as Toronto, organized and established community English language classes. Initially, schools and churches accommodated many of them, but later on, more were held in public libraries.

This was the time when public libraries in large cities started receiving increased numbers of requests for dictionaries and audiotapes for improving pronunciation, for comprehension exercises, grammar, and so on. By the mid-seventies, some library systems (including Toronto's) were persuaded that a service and a collection so essential to the needs of the newcomers deserved attention. Accordingly, they began extending support for the development of ESL collections and the accommodation of ESL classes on their premises. This support was facilitated by the fact that the ESL publishing industry in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada had responded to the growing demand for suitable materials, beginning in the 1970s.

In summary, the main forces behind the introduction of ESL collections and services in public libraries were:

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on language learning centers with software programs for learning English (Basi, 2004).

With this in mind, a questionnaire was developed and distributed to staff responsible for ESL services at selected Canadian public libraries during the winter of 2004. The objective of this informal data-gathering exercise was to collect information on management support of ESL services, identify common practices and gaps in service delivery, isolate factors influencing its effectiveness, and hopefully help us shape recommendations and suggestions for improvement of the services.

The questionnaire included 14 questions and covered areas of policies, goals and objectives, collection development and selection practices, accessibility and allocation of resources, ESL users' advisory services, staff training, links to ESL community programs and services, and evaluation and assessment of the services. The

¹Subsequently renamed Employment and Immigration in 1983, and Citizenship and Immigration in 1990.

- the growing number of newcomers arriving and requesting ESL materials
- the establishment of organized classes by the federal and provincial governments in cooperation with boards of education
- the availability of learning resources published in the UK and the United States
- the power of libraries, as community centers, to bring together newcomers

Profile of Adult ESL Learners

The profile of newcomers as adult ESL learners covers a wide spectrum of characteristics, reflecting varying immigration policies that determine the entry of newcomers. According to the latest census in 2001, though more people came with knowledge of English than before, still close to 50 percent of the newcomers spoke neither English nor French. The most disadvantaged categories of immigrants in terms of English language skills were sponsored family members and refugees (Facts and Figures, 2001).

Principal applicants, such as people with economic resources or professional skills, generally have some knowledge of English, but they still need to improve their language skills. In a 2001 survey done by Statistics Canada, one of the main employment barriers for immigrants was language (Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants, 2001).

The effort required to assimilate a new language, though it varies from person to person, remains one of the biggest challenges for most adult ESL learners. Poor education in the country of origin is the greatest obstacle to learning a new language. When combined with factors of age, family responsibility, employment circumstances, and emotional well-being, this challenge becomes significant.

In drawing the profile of an adult learner, we have to take into consideration Douglas Fleming's finding that "Every adult learner has different motivation, skills and abilities . . . and they gain English language proficiency at different rates" (Fleming, 1998, 30). In summary, characteristics that affect the learning of the new language include:

- attitude toward education and learning
- motivation influenced by the need to gain access to employment opportunities
- level of fluency and literacy in their own language
- influence of social variables, such as gender, class, age, and family responsibilities
- level of education and schooling

These characteristics either enhance or impede use of the library's ESL resources and services. Given that adult ESL learners constitute a nontraditional user base of the public library, services to them require appropriate policies, staff training, programs, and outreach activities.

In general, the public library serves two different ESL groups. The first group consists of ESL class-attending learners, who join

ESL classes with a great sense of urgency. Their priority is to find work immediately. This group covers a wide range of ages and educational backgrounds. Its members may be participants of the LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) program or other government-sponsored programs, which prepare learners for employment that they are required to actively seek. This alone means that the amount of time these people have for study outside these classes is very limited. Due to such constraints, library staff must work hard and demonstrate flexibility in order to accommodate these learners.

The other major group consists of independent learners, who are often students pursuing higher education, or foreign-trained professionals improving their skills and their knowledge of job-related English. According to our survey, such library users often know exactly what they want and are quite confident about asking for it. Other independent learners who may also attend community-based ESL classes, such as members of families staying home or outside the work force, although they know what they want to achieve, need a lot of help in using the library collections and identifying the titles best suited to their needs.

Staff who responded to the questionnaire indicated satisfaction with the use of their ESL collections stemming primarily from students pursuing higher education (TOEFL, Testing of English as a Foreign Language) and by others who are required to take special tests such as TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication). However, responses to the question of how well public libraries assist newcomers who do not belong to these categories were not as clear-cut or consistent.

ESL Service Requirements

The delivery of ESL resources and services requires policies that not only guide operations but also provide the basis for assessment, evaluation, and further development.

Although libraries that deliver ESL services are involved with varying degrees in ESL activities that could have been formulated into policies, goals, and objectives, none of the libraries participating in this informal survey had specific and detailed ESL policies, goals, or objectives. Of particular importance, though not formulated in a policy document, was the response from the Calgary Public Library: "ESL collections work as bridge collections allowing new Canadians to borrow library materials at an adult interest level to improve ESL skills, until they are able to use the library's regular collections."

In the absence of specific and clear policies and goals, conflicts and confusion can occur. For instance, the Vancouver Public Library seemed to be unclear as to whether they were primarily serving landed immigrants, citizens, or international students. The same library replied that its "2004 Management team on goals and objectives had included specific initiatives for these collections and their users," demonstrating an understanding and a need for clear goals in this area of service.

A required policy for any public library offering ESL services recognizes the need to cooperate actively with ESL teachers and other language educators who are specialists in this field, establish links to organizations and community ESL providers, and build coalitions and partnerships with those who serve newcomers. Al-

though implementation of such a policy takes considerable time and human resources, in the long run it is beneficial because it adds the perspective of specialists in the field to the provision of ESL services. The strategic plans of public libraries refer to creating partnerships with stakeholders, but a strong, systematic, and continuous collaboration with the ESL teaching profession has not been specifically identified, nor does it exist in most libraries. Community-based ESL classes are regularly brought into the library, and a general awareness of the ESL collections is achieved, but collaborative initiatives have not been established.

Some participants indicated that they consult occasionally with ESL instructors for titles, but not as a built-in requirement for the service. The Edmonton Public Library reported a close relationship with ESL teachers mainly because of the ESL coordinator's educational background and teaching experience. Calgary Public Library also indicated consultations with the ESL instructors of a nearby ESL center.

Another service requirement is the development of a collection plan. A good plan assesses the strengths and appropriateness of existing collections and prioritizes the areas that need to be developed. On the question of whether they had a collection development plan, the majority of responses did not refer to any written plan, but they all identified the areas for which they purchase materials, focusing primarily on self-study, covering skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing as well as materials for students taking tests such as TOEFL. The Calgary Public Library responded: "Our collection development happens when ESL materials have been on their shelves for a couple of years. We then examine the circulation of individual items and reorder multiple copies of popular items."

A policy that goes beyond creating good collections to connecting better with ESL learners is also necessary. This means training staff not only in the delivery of effective ESL services, but also in having the right service attitude and user focus. Surveyed libraries reported that a general staff training for all employees includes an ESL component. However, systematic training of staff at all locations on ESL resources and services was not part of any ongoing training. According to some libraries surveyed, it was felt that staff trained in good public service is well equipped to deliver ESL service as well. Staff working with the public at Toronto Public Library and the author's own experience also indicates that, in general, staff throughout the system is not well trained to provide good ESL advisory services.

ESL training educates the staff on, among other things, type, format, appropriateness of resource vis-à-vis individual learners, how to approach and offer assistance, and how to reduce barriers to accessing the right materials. This type of training should be as distinct as other service training programs.

In relation to financial support, all libraries indicated that they have funds for ESL resources, either separate or taken from other accounts. Large libraries reported a separate ESL budget and indicated that they were satisfied with the amounts allocated to this subject area. Overall it was evident that ESL is an area that is well funded in large urban libraries.

It is difficult to draw conclusions on whether the financial support received is sufficient at medium or smaller libraries, based on the response of one medium-size public library. London does not have a separate budget, and the purchase of ESL materials

is funded through other budgets, such as languages, online electronic resources, or literacy.

In summary, service requirements recognize that flexible but clear policies are needed, stating whom they primarily intend to serve as well as their secondary target groups. Development of a collection plan is also needed to assess the strengths, weaknesses, and appropriateness of existing collections and to prioritize the areas that need to be developed. As well, effective coalitions with ESL practitioners need to be established, not only for purposes of creating awareness, but also for developing appropriate collections. Appropriate staff training is also important, focusing on knowledge of resources and knowledge of the local ESL learning community.

Uniqueness of ESL Resources in Collection Development

The most prominent and unique characteristics of ESL collections relate to collection development, collection management, and service delivery requirements. What makes ESL collections unique, thus requiring special attention and a distinctive approach, is the simple principle: "Offer the best book, not the latest title." The ESL learner comes to the library to find the best book for her needs. Let's say she needs a grammar book. There are dozens of such books published each year, but these are not necessarily the best. The value of the collection lies in having the best titles for ESL, not necessarily the newest materials. Responses to the questionnaire indicate that in general librarians rely heavily on standard publisher catalogues, such as Oxford ESL, Cambridge, and Longman/Pearson, and on sample items that are viewed at local ESL conferences. Some respondents also mentioned that they do not find enough new materials to spend their assigned annual budget satisfactorily. This is a further indication that libraries concentrate on new titles rather on increasing the number of copies of the best titles available.

A look at the publishers' catalogs on adult ESL learning shows that there are a lot of titles based on experimental methods of teaching the language. These are suitable more for research than use by the immigrants. ESL instructors have expressed difficulty in finding good materials, and they are critical of commercially produced titles (Fleming, 1998, 28).

Complementing the "best book, not the latest title" approach is the "availability of multiple copies of the best titles" practice, which requires a change in acquisitions policy to allow high numbers of copies per title. Learners greatly benefit from such a policy, since it reduces long waits for the best titles. Newcomers learning or improving their English language who are either employed and want to improve their employment circumstances or are looking for employment operate under time constraints. Unlike leisure reading of public library materials, learning a language follows a process that requires time, a structured schedule, and continuity. Long waitlists hinder such a process. None of the libraries indicated that they have adopted the approach of purchasing high numbers of copies per popular title, with the exception of TOEFL titles.

Selection of materials requires the special expertise and assistance of trained staff or outside specialists in adult ESL learning to avoid materials that experiment with language-learning meth-

ods. The learners cannot afford to waste time trying one book after another. As was mentioned before, few libraries have a systematic and close collaboration with teachers of ESL in place for purposes of developing their collections. Instead, the selection is done either by a committee at various staff levels, who (according to one of the libraries surveyed) have achieved their level of expertise by “doing it over a number of years” or by staff having overall responsibility for multicultural services. It is difficult to ascertain the expertise that is brought into the selection of these materials, especially when these libraries have not been involved in the evaluation of their collections, as indicated by the question regarding the need for a comprehensive evaluation. The need to rely on expertise and knowledge of the subject becomes even greater when we refer to web-based ESL resources, which is a very distinct service and outside the scope of this article.

For these resources to be used effectively, learners’ advisory services from staff members who know the collection is of great importance. As well, staff needs to be assisted by the collections department with recommended lists on a variety of subjects and levels. It is interesting to note that there are well-established staff training programs on readers’ advisory services geared to fiction reading and other pleasure-reading subject areas, and a number of tools to help the staff, such as pathways and booklists. However, neither learners’ advisory services nor systematic staff training is being developed specifically for ESL, according to questionnaire responses. The fact that ESL has a significant place in any service training program in all public libraries has not been recognized even by large public libraries. The general feeling among the libraries surveyed was that staff is not well trained on the contents of their ESL collections, including ESL-learning resources on the Internet, thus limiting the libraries’ ability to provide an effective service. The Edmonton Public Library stated that there is a need for training in this area and that they provide training for all new employees to let them know that learners can be referred to the ESL coordinator for advice and consultation.

The need for better staff training was echoed in the opinions of students of an ESL class in Toronto² who, according to their teacher, expressed their frustration in seeking ESL services from their nearby branch of the Toronto Public Library. Students indicated that “they wasted the librarian’s time as well their own.”

A look at the shelves of any ESL collection will demonstrate that it is not a collection that lends itself to easy browsing and decision making as to what title to borrow, especially in the eyes of a newcomer. Many titles look similar, differing only in minute Dewey classification. To facilitate access to the collections and help the user, the library can employ a shelf arrangement with subject categories representing the main language learning areas such as grammar, vocabulary building, reading, and so on. Such an arrangement can greatly improve self-browsing for independent learners as well as for staff.

Some libraries, such as the Calgary Public Library, indicated that they have a shelf arrangement of titles by categories at some locations. It was not evident, however, that this was a practice followed by most libraries.

All libraries catalog their ESL materials by assigning Dewey numbers and appropriate subject headings. A look at these subject headings reveals that in order to find a good selection of ESL titles, one has to use more than one subject heading, and some of

them are better than others. On the question of whether or not any of the libraries had thought of developing a subcatalog of ESL titles with instructions on how to use it and recommendations of appropriate subject headings, none of them responded positively.

Closely related to collection accessibility is the deployment of web-based information on the ESL collections of the library system as well as web-based English learning resources. This is an area that can assist both staff and users. Most public libraries surveyed have included on their web sites information on their ESL resources and services, and a few of them have recommended ESL titles for learners, but it was not found to be a widespread practice. Moreover, many newcomers find it difficult to navigate these sites without instruction and orientation. They lack the skills and the literacy needed to make use of information transmitted in this way (Lavery and Livingston, 1999). Some libraries, such as the Toronto Public Library, provide user education training sessions on how to use the library’s web site for ESL learners, primarily for those attending ESL and orientation classes in employment and career planning. Discussions with staff at other nonparticipating libraries and an examination of the library literature also indicated that this is an area that is greatly improving with the introduction of additional programs offered to newcomers (Basi, 2004).

The allocation and availability of collections is another area that needs consideration. All libraries surveyed indicated that they have multiple ESL collections, with bigger collections at district or central libraries. We all know that small collections in small branches compete for space, and given the special nature of the ESL collections and the requirements for an effective delivery of service, it becomes highly questionable whether their users receive satisfactory service at the small branch level.

Local branches, provided that they have trained staff, may act as access points to information on ESL resources in the library system, guiding users on how to find ESL materials in the catalog and place holds, or suggesting web-based ESL resources. However, large collections strategically placed at libraries with appropriate space to house multiple copies and well-trained staff result in more benefits for the ESL public, as long as those libraries are themselves accessible to the target audience.

Service Delivery and Assessment of ESL Resources and Services

Service delivery models address the level and extent of learners’ advisory services, collection accessibility, and ongoing training of staff. From the responses it was not clear whether ESL collections, large or small, are serviced by trained staff to locate the most appropriate materials for each user or whether web-based users’ advisory services (recommended titles) were extensively and systematically developed. The Toronto Public Library has established such an ESL learning center at its reference library with trained, knowledgeable staff, and the Surrey Public Library, near Vancouver, has established an ESL center.

Newcomers’ language limitations require more than a service delivery that targets primarily self-reliant, independent users. On the contrary, a delivery of service based on staff guiding and facilitating the use of resources should be recognized and supported by

²Toronto Star, January 15, 2004, page B1: “Literacy as a link forges strong ties.”

the written goals of the service and program initiatives.

As discussed earlier, in regards to the allocation of resources and access facilitation, many large libraries have adopted a “tier of service” system, with large collections found at the central and district libraries and smaller collections, if any, found in selected libraries designated as ESL learning sites throughout the system. Tiers of service have to fulfill the requirements associated with each tier. For instance, a comprehensive collection accommodated in a district or central location requires a knowledgeable and trained staff to be able to maximize its use.

Another issue concerning ESL service delivery is whether libraries saw a need to depend on specialists for collection development—with skills and knowledge of the subject matter—or whether they were satisfied with generalist librarians. With one exception, all libraries developed their ESL collections and other services using a generalist approach. In our estimation, ESL resources development covering print, audio/visual, and electronically available materials requires a good knowledge of the field as well as experience in serving a community with such diverse needs as the ESL one. The majority of libraries that were surveyed had given consideration to these service delivery issues, but not in a way that demonstrated a system-wide approach and recognition of their importance.

Assessment of ESL services is another area that merits consideration. A comprehensive examination and assessment of ESL services as a whole includes an analysis of the functioning of existing ESL services in areas such as allocation of human resources, resources development and collection evaluation, accessibility, bibliographic control, availability/allocation of collections, training of staff, and user advisory services.

In our experience, the assessment of ESL resources, if it is done at all, is limited in scope and is based on identifying and reordering the items with the highest circulation. The assessment needs to include a survey of users, both learners and teachers, that focuses on how well the library serves them, the scope and depth of resources, staff expertise, and accessibility of electronic resources. Libraries must establish performance indicators to measure the extent to which the goals of the service have been met (Evans, 1992). None of the libraries surveyed indicated any systematic examination and assessment of their ESL collections and services, with the exception of the Edmonton Public Library, whose collection was evaluated by a University of Alberta student specializing in education.

Since none of these libraries have had any specific policies or goals and objectives covering the areas mentioned above, it is quite understandable why they had not evaluated their ESL services as a whole. Another reason for this may be that the ESL service is perceived to do well if it has a satisfactory overall circulation. However, a comprehensive assessment and evaluation of the service will provide the grounds for improvement and further development.

Recommended Method for Developing an ESL Collection

As mentioned already, language learning is an area that lends itself to experimentation regarding teaching methods and approaches. The ESL publishing industry promotes these titles in ways that maximize sales, often making it difficult for the non-

specialist to decide on their usefulness. On the other hand, given that this is an old and established subject area, one can find an adequate number of ESL titles that are known and used by instructors to address the learning needs of adult learners effectively.

On this basis, we recommend creating annotated core lists of titles on identified categories of language learning that are made available to the learners in ample quantities. The core lists of titles for each category should include titles that are most representative, well received, and well tested for their effectiveness and usability. The process for developing these lists should be collaborative, including input from ESL instructors, use of reviewing material such as ESL journals, recommended lists by ESL providers, and more. Certainly the approach of examining circulation of existing titles, identifying items that circulate well and reordering them in ample quantities, is very useful and should be followed for the reordering of titles. Duplication of titles from one list to the other is unavoidable and many times necessary.

These lists can be distributed to librarians responsible for ESL collections at the central, district, or local libraries (according to the administrative structure of each system), who can then identify, based on their community of users, the titles they need for their constituency. But the most important recommendation is making multiple copies of the titles available on demand.

A look at public library web sites on ESL, at responses by the public libraries that participated in the survey, articles on learning ESL (Jensen, 2002, 53–56), librarians working in the field, and discussions with ESL teachers help us identify and reaffirm the main ESL subject categories:

- dictionaries
- grammar
- vocabulary-building and spelling
- writing
- listening
- reading comprehension
- job-related English

Another area that covers a wide spectrum of requirements for learning a language is courses—usually multivolume publications—for the independent learner who does not attend classes and has the educational background to pursue learning of a new language on his own. Electronic and/or web-based ESL resources and the criteria used for selecting them are well established in the literature and should also be adopted for ESL.

For each category, we need to keep in mind for whom we are buying the materials, such as:

- Core collection of titles for the independent, well-motivated learner at a beginner/intermediate/advanced level. These people may or may not attend classes, may have been referred to the library by agencies assisting immigrants and newcomers, or may approach the library on their own. Materials with an emphasis on self-study with an answer key are included in these lists. So are multivolume courses, as well as job-related titles for independent professional learners, which provide the vocabulary needed for a variety of professions.
- Core collection of supplementary readings to enhance learning for those who attend community ESL classes at schools

and libraries selected in consultation with ESL teachers. This list takes into consideration students' literacy level and other possible difficulties.

- Core collection of titles and different material types addressing the needs of students entering postsecondary institutions—such as TOEFL—as well as tests required by other professions such as TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication). This is a special area with specific well-known titles in the market that are used extensively by many.

Conclusions

The constant influx of immigrants from all immigration categories, such as independent economic immigrants, foreign-trained professionals, refugees, sponsored family newcomers, and students aspiring to higher education who arrive with limited English language skills has created a need to which public libraries have responded with their ESL resources and services. These resources are being recognized as a distinct and important component of the public library resources for newcomers, and a lot of good work has been done in terms of allocating financial resources and building collections.

ESL service is generally perceived as successful, though no significant examination and evaluation of this service has taken place in the library systems that responded to the questionnaire. A contributing factor for this perception has been the overwhelming use by newcomer students of a significant part of these collections, among them the resources that prepare them for English language tests required by higher institutions, and the high circulation figures that are generated by the constant use of various ESL resources. The extent to which the general newcomer immigrant community with limited English language skills and familiarity with the library is satisfactorily served is not clear, since none of the libraries participating in the questionnaire had undertaken any community survey to establish this.

The questionnaire revealed that there is a lack of clear written policies, goals, and objectives so that successes or failures can be measured. Public libraries have extended significant financial support and have committed resources to address the language needs of their immigrant public, but they need to establish clear goals and annual objectives in order to evaluate the services in which they have invested.

In addition, libraries need to develop a comprehensive service plan ensuring a quality of service that can be achieved and maintained. This comprehensive service plan includes, on the one hand, coordination of all ESL service delivery components such as collection development methods, selection, accessibility, and availability (including increasing the number of copies of key materials), learners' advisory services, development of comprehensive web-based services (such as web-based information on the ESL library collections), the deployment of "help" capabilities for users, and an overall evaluation and assessment. At the same time, the comprehensive service plan includes approaches and practices that have the potential for maximizing the use of ESL resources in the library, such as strong, consistent communication and cooperation with the ESL teaching community and introduction of specialists in the field who can be involved in selection and

collection building. Many of these service delivery components, though present in some library systems, have not been adequately and systematically implemented.

Given the language limitations of adult ESL learners and the nature of the ESL publications and electronic resources, it is clear that their access to ESL materials requires proper guidance. Regular library orientation programs for learners of English as well as the availability of trained and knowledgeable public service staff can facilitate access to relevant resources in a timely and effective manner. Specific training programs on ESL that enable staff to deliver quality service should be developed and provided on an ongoing basis. Libraries can also employ a shelf arrangement with a subject categories approach, representing the main language learning areas, to improve self-browsing for independent learners and easy location of resources for all.

The sustainability and growth of ESL resources and services in libraries requires a systematic process of planning, implementation, and evaluation that reflects not only the changing needs of the ESL community but also the changing environment within libraries. Technological advances and tools available for the effective delivery of ESL services already exist. It is up to libraries to use them wisely.

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