Going Beyond Google: ESL Students, Library Databases and Controlled Vocabularies

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Finding scholarly resources can be a challenge for ESL students, who may not be familiar with the particular words and phrases required to effectively research a topic. Controlled vocabularies (subject headings) are a rich source of synonyms for the construction of progressively more effective keyword searches.

This is often an iterative process, with an initial keyword search returning a small set of relevant articles and these articles' subject headings being mined for relevant vocabulary which is then used to construct a new and better keyword search, which in turn yields more articles with additional subject headings.

Controlled vocabularies can thus help ESL learners transform unknown vocabulary beyond their awareness into known vocabulary that can be systematically investigated. This knowledge can then be applied when using search tools (such as Google Scholar) that do not have controlled vocabularies.

Research Context

The literature on libraries and ESL students tends to focus on general cultural and linguistic adjustment at the reference desk (Hughes, 2010, Koenigstein, 2012) and in instructional contexts (Conteh Morgan, 2002; Amsberry, 2008). However, a small number of studies have focused specifically on ESL students' use of library databases.

Zoe and DiMarino (2000) studied graduate students searching Lexis/Nexis, and found that 71% of non-ESL students reported that they found the information they were seeking, compared to 51% of ESL students. Zoe and DiMarino tentatively attribute this to the necessity of using "vocabulary based strategies" in Lexis/Nexis.

Martin et al. (2009) found that that international students did as well as other students on a test of basic library skills. It should be noted however, that the questions asked of these students did not require sophisticated searches.

In contrast, Hughes (2005) studied ESL students researching open ended questions of their own choosing and found that for many their limited vocabulary resulted in "significant difficulties … in identifying valid search terms, especially synonyms."

Finally, Bordonaro (2010) studied 22 foreign graduate students in education and found that many of them made use of the subject headings in the ERIC database, and that most seemed aware that this was a language learning, as well as a research, activity.

Keyword Searches

Subject Headings

Tips

• For best results, set the "search" feature to "relevance."

• Different databases have different subject headings, so try searching them separately.

Question	Keyword Search	Subject Heading	Keyword Search	Subject Heading	Search
Does having animals benefit mental health?	Animals AND mental health benefits	human animal bond	human animal bond AND mental health	pets	pets AND mental health
Does advertising contribute to eating problems?	eating problems AND advertising	eating disorders	eating disorders AND advertising	mass media	eating disorders AND mass media
How much say should parents have over students' university majors?	parents AND choice of major	college major	parents AND college major	parental participation	parental participation AND college major
How much say should parents have over whom their children marry?	parents AND marriage choice	arranged marriage	parents AND arranged marriage	mate selection	parents AND mate selection
How does marijuana effect driving?	marijuana AND driving	cannabis	cannabis AND driving	traffic accidents	cannabis AND traffic accidents
How much does recycling actually reduce the amount of stuff that goes to garbage dumps?	recycling AND reduction AND garbage dump	solid waste landfill	recycling AND reduction AND sold waste landfill	waste minimization	recycling AND waste minimization