

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 key-word 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.

Subject Headings

The screenshot shows a library database search interface. At the top, there is a search bar with the text "mental health implications of human attachment". Below the search bar, there are options for "AND" and "OR" search. The search results are displayed in a table format. The first result is titled "Mental Health Implications of Human Attachment to Companion Animals." and includes the following information:

- Authors: Peacock, Jasmin; Chur-Hansen, Anna; Winefield, Helen
- Source: Journal of Clinical Psychology; Mar2012, Vol. 68 Issue 3, p292-303, 12p
- Document Type: Case Study
- Subject Terms: *CASE studies; *HUMAN-animal relationships; *PETS; *MENTAL health; *WELL-being -- Psychological aspects; *DISTRESS (Psychology); *MENTAL health services

The subject terms are highlighted with a red box, and a red arrow points from the "Subject Headings" text in the left margin to this box. Below the subject terms, there are additional codes: "NATLCS/Industry: 621350 Offices of Mental Health Practitioners (except Physicians); Codes: 622210 Psychiatric and Substance Abuse Hospitals; 623270 Residential Mental Health and Substance Abuse Facilities".

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 domestic 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 the many of them 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.

References

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