Transforming the ESL Experience: Assessing First-year International Students in the Instruction Classroom

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Research Question
What are the most effective methods to introduce first-year international students to the academic library and what strategies will support their engagement and success in the research process?

Study Design
Two assignments in first-year ESL (English as a Second Language) courses were assessed:
1) Concept Maps
2) Annotated Bibliographies
All students participated in a library instruction session during their scheduled class time and librarians provided feedback to students through their course management system.

Participants
Sixty-nine students from four sections of ESL 112 and four sections of ESL 115 participated in this study. ESL 112 and 115 courses fulfill the University’s Composition 1 requirement for international students.

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Concept Map Results
Concept Maps were assigned by classroom instructors and completed by each student prior to library instruction in order to prepare them for database searching. Upon completion each student deposited their Concept Map into a forum in their course management system. The librarians evaluated both the topic statements and keywords using a rubric. The criteria for each are reflected below.

Topic Statement:
Criteria
Ready: Fully developed. Topic statement is present and (mostly) ready to go.
Refine: In progress. Topic statement is present but requires a bit of focus and/or refinement.
Revise: Not developed or absent. Topic statement is either a) present but too loosely defined (e.g. "skin cancer") or b) not present.

Keywords:
Criteria
Ready: Database ready. All main concepts with clear relationship to topic identified and relevant alternative keywords provided for each concept as appropriate.
Refine: Almost database ready. All, or some, main concepts with clear relationship to topic identified and some relevant alternative keywords present, though refinement is necessary for a successful database search.
Revise: Not database ready. Main concepts with clear relationship to topic not identified and/or alternative terminology missing or irrelevant.

Annotated Bibliography Results
Following library instruction, students completed an Annotated Bibliography of five sources, of which three were required to be scholarly. The librarians assessed each source to determine article type, date, length, and source origin (database or web). In addition, they assessed the “Reliability Statement” of each Annotated Bibliography in order to better understand the criteria first-year international students used to determine if their sources were reliable.

Keywords: Annotated Bibliography Results
Criteria
Ready: Scholarly/Academic
Revise: Popular/Trade
Reliability Statement:
Criteria
Strong: Identified two or more evaluative criteria. For example: information about author credentials, journal focus/coverage, citations, or article content.
Weak: Identified only one of the above criteria examples.
Inaccurate: Information based on circumstantial, irrelevant, or incorrect information (the article title, the organization name, etc.).

Next Steps
1) Integrate a video explaining how to complete a Concept Map into the ESL classroom when Concept Map is assigned.
2) Focus on evaluation more during library instruction and create supporting materials to help students apply evaluative criteria to their sources.
3) Provide instructions and information in multiple formats to address the varied learning needs of international students.

Conclusions
1) Language is a major obstacle for international students as they complete the Concept Map, particularly the identification of keywords and alternatives.
2) Understanding the assignment most likely challenged a number of students who did not complete the Concept Map in its entirety.
3) Evaluation criteria was not carefully applied to all Annotated Bibliography sources in terms of content, date, and relationship to student topics.