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The CATESOL Journal

Title

Sequencing Information Competency Skills in an ESL Program

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9j92c7qv>

Journal

The CATESOL Journal, 11(1)

ISSN

1535-0517

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Publication Date

1999

DOI

10.5070/B5.36487

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Sequencing Information Competency Skills in an ESL Program

- Researchers (Bowley & Meng, 1994; Cope & Black, 1985; Kamhi-Stein, 1996) have focused on the need for librarians and ESL faculty to collaborate on teaching library skills for academic purposes. These skills are needed to utilize resources that include print materials, computer databases, and Internet sources. Information literacy competency standards are currently being developed on the national, state, and local levels by library and educational organizations, but little is known about ESL instructors' perceptions of teaching library research skills, also known as information competency skills. This study surveyed full-time and part-time ESL faculty at an urban community college about the levels at which various information competency skills should be taught.

The results of this study reveal that most full-time ESL instructors favored introducing only the most basic library skills (such as how to check out books and information about how a library is organized) at the beginning ESL level. They favored teaching most other information competency skills (such as database retrieval and on-line resources) at more advanced ESL levels. It is evident from this study that ESL curriculum designers need to integrate all library and information research skills in a progressive manner with sufficient scaffolding and collaboration among librarians, teachers, and students.

ESL students often enter U.S. colleges and universities with little knowledge about using an academic library and with expectations of the services that a library, and librarians, can provide that are very different from U.S. educated students. Input from ESL instructors can help librarians, who understand library services but do not necessarily know the best sequence in which to teach information competency skills to ESL students. To gain more information on sequencing information competency skills, we conducted a literature review and developed and administered a questionnaire to full and part-time ESL instructors at a large, urban California community college.

Review of the Literature

Second language learners bring with them very different expectations of what constitutes a library from those of students educated in the U.S. Ball and Mahony (1987) describe academic information seeking differences around the globe. Open stacks do not exist in most non-American libraries, so students come to this country with no experience in browsing or retrieving materials on their own. A student's library experience may be limited to study hall use. "The absence of the conceptual awareness of the self-service systems of American libraries are major obstacles to comprehension of American information systems," wrote Liu (1995, p. 126).

Students come to the U.S. assuming that libraries have closed stacks and that access to materials is limited; they also have no experience with reference service as we know it. Helms (1995) suggests bridging this new information about libraries with old knowledge, explaining that libraries are not unlike other self-service entities: gas stations, grocery stores, and laundromats. The culture gap is large when it comes to libraries, and students come with their own assumptions, which have little to do with what they find here. Ball and Mahony (1987) therefore encourage staff to be very specific when informing students of library policies and services.

Library Anxiety and the Second Language Learner

Library staff members should be cognizant of the psychosocial factors that ESL students bring to their learning. Library anxiety, a condition of seemingly epidemic proportions, is addressed in a number of studies. Jiao and Onwuegbuzie (1995) define library anxiety as:

...an uncomfortable feeling or emotional disposition, experienced in a library setting, which has cognitive, affective, physiological, and behavioral ramifications. It is characterized by ruminations, tension, fear, feelings of uncertainty and helplessness, negative self-defeating thoughts, and mental disorganization, which debilitate information literacy. (p. 2)

In her well-known pioneering study of library anxiety, Mellon (1986) reports that 75% to 80% of American students in her sample describe their initial reactions in terms of fear or anxiety: "It was like being in a foreign country and unable to speak the language" (p. 162).

Library anxiety is compounded for nonnative speakers. In the Jiao and Onwuegbuzie study, being a non-English speaker was one of the highest predictors of library anxiety. The authors found that students are uncertain about what behaviors are appropriate, as well as what levels of service is available from libraries, concluding that nonnative English speaking students deserve special attention. Kflu and Loomba (1997) state: "Librarians must also become adept at cultural appraisal and cultural empathy. When this occurs, librarians are able to automatically and naturally choose the best methods for helping each student most effectively" (p. 527). Sequencing information competency skills according to levels of ESL proficiency makes it possible for learners to obtain a much deeper understanding of American academic libraries.

Pedagogical Implications

Moore and Yee (1982) discuss how to meet the needs of educationally disadvantaged students and ESL students, recognizing that both groups possess wide variations in educational background and ability level. Instructors are encouraged not to assume that these students have any prior knowledge of libraries. They suggest that the pace of library instruction be slowed and that scaffolding—i.e., "the provision of instructional supports when concepts and skills are first being introduced and [their] gradual removal...when students begin to develop greater proficiency..." (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994, p.10)—be utilized to build and reinforce knowledge.

Several researchers (Greenfield, Johnston, & Williams, 1986; Ormondroyd, 1989; Wayman, 1984) suggest teaching styles and strategies that have proven effective for second language students in library contexts. These include speaking slowly, enunciating clearly, minimizing complex sentence structures, avoiding jargon, defining major terms, and using synonyms to reiterate concepts. The researchers suggest that slang can be confusing to second language learners and humor should be used with caution. They further note that comprehension checks should be numerous (e.g., posing questions); handouts will allow students to focus on listening and liberate them from notetaking.

Wayman (1984) points out that the aural comprehension of second language learners, particularly international students, will probably be lower than their reading and writing comprehension. ESL students, "because of

their relatively poor communication skill in English,...very often suffer from communication apprehension, the fear of talking," reports Liu (1995, p. 125). Consequently, using library services will be very intimidating for them when so much interaction is dependent upon oral communication.

The TESOL training that ESL instructors bring to planning library instruction is very useful. Whereas librarians have expertise in information retrieval, ESL instructors are language specialists. A natural, seamless way to introduce information competency skills is to have ESL teachers work with librarians to integrate these skills into the ESL curriculum. Jacobson (1988) reports that second language students are reluctant to approach library staff and will often turn to their peers instead for assistance. ESL teachers can help bridge the gap by sharing their expertise in communicating with ESL students.

The author encourages librarians to teach by doing rather than relying solely on verbal instructions. "Observation and imitation is a common way of learning in many parts of the world," notes Wayman (1984, pp. 337-338). International students will be comfortable with this method, which should be incorporated in planning activities and assignments in the library.

Curriculum Development

Although the literature is filled with sources dealing with the differing expectations second language learners bring to American academic libraries, little has been written about librarians and ESL teachers jointly devising curriculum for second language learners. Cope and Black (1985) discuss how the role of an ESL teacher was greatly expanded when it was observed that students continued to have trouble with assignments even after formal library instruction. They advocate the role of the ESL instructor as liaison between librarian and student, noting that the ESL instructor can offer further clarification to students who are having difficulty using information resources.

A solid partnership among ESL teachers, librarians, and students can lead toward mutual understanding, increase librarians' knowledge of student abilities, and enable teachers and librarians to sequence activities appropriate to each level. Most importantly, the ESL instructor can provide "... unobtrusive emotional and psychological support during library sessions" (p. 161).

As an example of such a partnership, an instructional team consisting of content faculty of general education classes, a librarian, and an ESL instructor at California State University, Los Angeles implemented a multi-step approach to a library research assignment which proved effective and non-threatening to students (Kamhi-Stein, 1996; Kamhi-Stein, Krilowicz, Stein, & Snow, 1997). Bowley and Meng (1994) and Kamhi-Stein (1996)

cite the greatly increased levels of confidence experienced by ESL students after such a partnership was implemented.

The goals of the partnership included purchasing materials for the library collection that better reflected the reading levels of second language students and matched subject matter most likely needed by ESL students, increasing the collaboration between faculty and librarians, and ensuring that librarians knew the skill level of a class before presenting a group lesson.

Students are naturally exposed to advanced academic reading and writing by the nature of the work they pursue in the library:

At advanced levels within a second- or foreign-language program, students need to be exposed to the kinds of reading and writing (and listening/speaking) tasks that will be expected of them in later coursework: reading abstract materials, getting down the key ideas from lectures, writing critiques and summaries, and so forth. And once students are in a mainstream academic environment, they will need a place where they can go for assistance and support, perhaps in the form of an adjunct program or a learning center. (Richard-Amato, 1997, p. 229)

With curriculum planning and professional development, the library can be a place for such support. Wolfson (1989) argues that the

“acquisition of sociolinguistic rules can be greatly facilitated by teachers who have the necessary information at their command and who have the sensitivity to use their knowledge to guide students and help them to interpret values and patterns which they would otherwise have difficulty in interpreting.” (p. 31)

The goal of such teacher intervention is not to impose the value system or norms of behavior of dominant groups but to help learners to avoid being unintentionally misunderstood by native speakers. In the library, students can be introduced to pragmatic information competency skills that will serve them well throughout their academic careers and sustain them through life-long learning.

Research Study

Because we believe that the acquisition of information competency skills is critical to every student's academic success and because few studies have researched ESL instructors' perceptions of teaching library research skills, we developed and administered a questionnaire to full and part-time ESL instructors at a large, urban California community college in an effort to ascertain the level at which ESL teachers believe such information competency skills should be taught.

Method

Participants

Pasadena City College (PCC) is a two-year California community college that serves over 28,000 students, 36% of whom are Hispanic, 33% Asian or Pacific Islander, 21% White, 8% Black, and 1% American Indian. Students attending the five levels of ESL classes offered at PCC include approximately 900 international students on F-1 visas and also immigrant residents.

Data Collection

In Fall 1998, a questionnaire was distributed to 44 full time (F/T) and part time (P/T) ESL faculty at PCC. Some of the P/T faculty are F/T English teachers in the English and Foreign Languages or Communications Division. These instructors may teach ESL courses part time to constitute a full-time teaching position or as an overload for additional pay. Fifty-nine percent (26) of the questionnaires were returned. Ninety-two percent (11 out of 12) F/T instructors responded while forty-seven percent (15 out of 32) P/T instructors responded.

Table 1
ESL Instructors' Years of Experience and Types of Teaching Positions

	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
N (F/T)=11					
N (P/T)=15					
How long have you been teaching ESL?	0-12 mos.	1-2 yrs	3-5 yrs	6-10 yrs	11+ yrs
Full-time	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (9)	1 (9)	9 (82)
Part-time	1 (7)	0 (0)	2 (13)	2 (13)	10 (67)
If you teach ESL part-time at PCC, you also teach:	F/T in Eng. or Comm. Dept	F/T at other CC	F/T in K-12	ESL at other CC	P/T at PCC only
	7 (47)	0 (0)	2 (13)	4 (27)	2 (13)

Results

As summarized in Table 1 above, the F/T ESL teachers reported substantial experience in teaching ESL. Nine percent had 3-5 years experience, nine percent reported 6-10 years experience, and eighty-two percent had spent 11 or more years teaching ESL. Not surprisingly, P/T teachers had

less overall experience than their F/T counterparts. Seven percent of P/T faculty reported 1-12 months of experience, thirteen percent had 3-5 years experience, thirteen percent had 6-10 years experience, and sixty-seven percent had 11 or more years experience in ESL teaching.

As shown in Table 2 on the next page, most F/T faculty believed that only introductory library competencies such as knowing how to check out materials and how the library is organized should be introduced at Level 2. They identified nine skills to be taught at Level 3: asking questions of a reference librarian, using a computer catalog, using encyclopedias, recognizing types of reference books, introducing the Internet, understanding expectations and standards of U.S. libraries, knowing the difference between keyword and subject searching, narrowing or broadening a topic, and downloading to a disk. They identified an additional seven skills at Level 4: using periodical indexes, knowing the differences among electronic databases, using newspapers and newspaper indices, recognizing the differences between magazines and journals, e-mailing oneself data, locating a periodical article, and knowing when books are more useful than periodicals. The two skills identified for level 5 were critically evaluating sources and citing a source using Modern Language Association (MLA) or American Psychological Association (APA) formats.

The F/T ESL instructors as a whole are active library users. Three have jointly authored a library workbook that has been commercially published by McGraw-Hill and that includes Internet exercises (Klein, Hunt, & Lee, 1999). Many of the instructors bring their classes to the library and work closely with the PCC librarians in multi-step research activities, that they use as a foundation for writing assignments.

P/T instructors distributed the competencies more equally over the five levels of the ESL curriculum and tended to show more deviation in their responses. They named two competencies for Level 2, matching the F/T instructors' responses. At Level 3, they named nine competencies, one of which (recognizing the differences between magazines and journals) had been placed by F/T instructors at Level 4. P/T instructors designated only one competency at the highest level, i.e., citing a source using MLA or APA format, whereas full-timers also thought that critically evaluating resources was appropriately taught at this level.

When asked to add skills that were not named in the questionnaire, instructors' comments included: (1) what to do when a search does not yield results; (2) how to evaluate a source for usefulness—especially currency of information; (3) evaluating the truth claims of sources; (4) avoiding plagiarism and paraphrasing and summary skills; (5) finding information and then using it appropriately; and (6) training librarians to simplify instructions for ESL students.

Table 2
Results of the Questionnaire on Library Competency Skills

N (F/T)=11

N (P/T)=13

<i>Information Competency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Level</i>
Checking out books & other material	2.27	1.01	2	2.15	1.34	2
Knowing the organization of the library	2.27	1.01	2	2.17	.94	2
Asking questions of a reference librarian	2.91	.70	3	2.86	1.35	3
Using a computer catalog	3.18	1.17	3	2.71	1.14	3
Using encyclopedias	3.27	.79	3	3.31	1.03	3
Recognizing types of reference books	3.36	.92	3	3.15	1.07	3
Introducing the Internet	3.55	1.13	3	3.67	1.23	3
Understanding expectations & standards of U.S. libraries	3.55	1.29	3	3.63	1.69	3
Knowing the difference between keyword & subject searching	3.55	1.04	3	3.42	1.08	3
Narrowing or broadening a topic	3.73	1.01	3	3.36	1.15	3
Downloading to disk	3.73	1.10	3	3.89	1.05	4
Using periodical indexes	4.00	.63	4	4.17	.83	4
Knowing the differences among electronic databases	4.10	.74	4	4.10	.99	4
Using newspapers & newspaper indexes	4.18	.75	4	3.91	1.04	4
Recognizing the differences between magazines & journals	4.18	.98	4	3.62	1.12	3
E-mailing oneself data	4.18	.75	4	4.00	1.26	4
Locating a periodical article	4.22	.67	4	4.09	1.22	4
Knowing when books are more useful than periodicals	4.27	1.01	4	4.25	.75	4
Critically evaluating sources	4.64	.67	5	3.77	1.17	4
Citing sources using MLA or APA format	5.00	.00	5	4.71	.47	5

Discussion

F/T instructors' perceptions of when information competencies should be taught were somewhat different from the perceptions of P/T faculty. Several reasons can account for these differences. F/T instructors (who on this survey had more overall ESL teaching experience) are more likely to have experience teaching the full range of classes in the ESL curriculum and are hence more likely to know the student ability at each level. They may have had limited success when they introduced some competencies at lower levels in their classes and may have more successfully integrated information searching skills with academic writing in the upper levels of the curriculum, where advanced students have more competence in writing and understanding English.

The results of the present study suggest that at the beginning ESL levels, students should be taught introductory library skills such as checking out books, using the computer catalog, and knowing the organization of the library. These findings support prior research (Ball & Mahoney, 1987; Jacobson, 1988; Wayman, 1984) that suggests that ESL students entering a college setting need to be given an orientation to the library. The findings show that students at the more advanced levels should learn the use of periodical indexes, know the differences among electronic databases, and recognize the differences between magazines and journals. The results show that at the advanced ESL level, students should learn the most difficult information competency skills involving higher thinking such as citing resources and critically evaluating sources.

The direct input of ESL instructors in the planning of a curriculum to introduce ESL students to information retrieval competencies is not the norm. Librarians largely teach skills as instructors request them, and their coverage tends to be hit or miss, reflecting the interests of the individual instructor. However, specific assistance from library staff can be incorporated into an instructional program for information competency that will have a strong impact on student learning when the cooperation of ESL teachers is elicited. When a multi-step approach is taken to teach these skills, established partnerships have produced student mastery, learner confidence, and satisfying results.

The second language learner will be greatly helped in mastering these basic skills of information retrieval when there is: (1) a recognition that second language students have unique needs and come to American libraries with very different expectations of libraries from our own; (2) a commitment between ESL teachers and librarians to fill in the gaps in these students' learning about libraries; and (3) a systematic curriculum so all instructors will be informed about which information competencies should be taught at specific levels of ESL classes.

Conclusion

An important goal for any collegiate ESL program is to prepare exiting students to succeed in mainstream content area courses. The ESL classroom is the logical place to begin teaching information competency skills. The introduction of these concepts is most effective when tied to classroom assignments. Library instruction can then have a strong element of classroom accountability that promotes retention. Instruction is best in authentic setting with a grade or course credit of some sort tied to the assignment. Student learners will have every opportunity to succeed with such learning strategies.

ESL students, like other inexperienced library users, require instruction that will fill in the gaps in their knowledge about American academic libraries and need to be introduced to information seeking behaviors. The scaffolding that takes place with a multi-part writing assignment (as discussed by Kamhi-Stein, 1996) is not only useful but will be remembered and retained for the future. ESL students are very receptive and quickly recognize the importance of library skills, but most library professionals are unaware of the specific instructional methods suggested by Greenfield, et al. (1986), Ormondroyd (1989), and Wayman (1984), as previously discussed.

More importantly, both librarians and ESL instructors need to know how foreign libraries differ from those in this country (Ball & Mahoney, 1987; Helms, 1995; Liu, 1995). Those of us who grew up in the U.S. know little of foreign libraries and take for granted our own democratic and free access to public school and college libraries. Preparing library staff and instructors for what to teach students before they start to study in our libraries will greatly benefit second language students, providing meaningful input and decreasing their library anxiety. A commitment of time and energy on the part of librarians and ESL teachers can ensure that ESL students get a good start in their academic future with successful experiences in the library.

Currently, a flurry of activity is taking place in the library community to draft standards on local, state, and national levels for information competency skills (a Web site where such standards can be viewed online is: <http://www.fiu.edu/~library/ili/iliweb>).

The Association of College and Research Libraries is working on a draft of *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* and the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges adopted Information Competency Plan Recommendations at its May 11, 1999 meeting. (These recommendations similarly can be viewed online at <http://www.cccco.edu>).

Our study demonstrates that ESL faculties recognize the importance of integrating information competency skills into their programs. Based on the perceptions of those surveyed, ESL faculty seem to favor a logical progression of teaching introductory skills at the beginning levels and critically evaluative skills at more advanced levels. Librarians, ESL instructors, and curriculum designers need to work together to integrate information competency skills into an ESL curriculum. Further research needs to be carried out to determine how this can best be done.

Authors

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Appendix

ESL Instructor Information Competency Skills Questionnaire

At what level do you think ESL students should be introduced to the following information competency skills in the ESL curriculum at PCC?

Please mark your scantron with the level you think each skill should be introduced:

- [A] ESL 420, 460, 421 [B] ESL 422, 432, 442 [C] ESL 122
 [D] ESL 33A, ENG 415, ESL 142 [E] ESL 33B, ENG 130, ESL 152
 [No Mark] Not important to teach

1. Using periodical indexes (paper and on-line).
2. Using a computer catalog to find a book then locating it on the shelf by call number and location.
3. Recognizing the difference between a popular magazine and a scholarly journal.
4. Knowing how their library is organized: layout, hours, etc.
5. Locating a periodical article by paper edition, microform or on-line on a computer database.
6. Citing a source using MLA, APA or a named format.
7. Downloading computer information onto a disk.
8. E-mailing oneself database information.
9. Critically evaluating sources which includes distinguishing fact from opinion.
10. Knowing the difference between keyword and subject searching.
11. Narrowing or broadening a topic.
12. Using newspapers and newspaper indices.
13. Understanding expectations and standards of American academic libraries.
14. Asking questions of a reference librarian.

15. Using general and special subject encyclopedias.
16. Introducing the Internet.
17. Checking out books and other material from the library.
18. Recognizing types of reference books, their location and appropriate use.
19. Knowing when books are more useful sources than periodicals and vice versa.
20. Knowing the differences among electronic databases in the library.

If there is a skill you think is important, but has not been identified, please add it here:

Please tell us something about yourself:

21. How long have you been teaching ESL?

- [A] 0-12 months [B] 1-2 years [C] 3-5 years
[D] 6-10 years [E] 11 + years

22. Do you teach ESL full-time at PCC?

- [A] Yes [B] No

23. If you teach ESL part-time at PCC:

- [A] You teach full-time in the English or Communications Department at PCC
[B] You teach full-time at another community college
[C] You teach full-time in a K-12 school district
[D] You teach ESL at other community colleges
[E] You teach only at PCC part-time

Thank you very, very much for your input in this survey. We will be happy to share the results with you when it is compiled.