

A Database By Any Other Name: Instructor Language Preferences for Library Resources

Abstract

This study explored the language preferences of instructors at Louisiana State University for library resources and whether library terminology influenced those choices. Participants were presented with both screen captures and definitions of electronic library resources and were asked to identify them in their own words. Faculty did not use library terminology consistently and performed better when presented with a definition than with a screen capture. No correlation was found between rank, teaching experience, college, or attendance in library instruction and preference for library terminology. A statistically significant relationship existed between frequent use of library resources and preference for library terminology. Confusion about this terminology could create difficulties for faculty in conducting their own research and may confuse their students when they hear conflicting language from their instructors and librarians. Librarians should use clear language, provide context on websites, and provide instruction on these resources specifically catered to instructors.

Word Count: 3993

Introduction

Academic librarians may find it difficult to communicate the meaning of library terminology when teaching students. It is often even more difficult to do the same for instructors (in the context of this study, we define *instructors* as those university employees with teaching assignments; in essence, most professors and other tenure- and non-tenure-track faculty, as well as many graduate students). Instruction sessions rarely, if ever, target this audience. In our experience, the focus of instruction rarely touches on what these words mean. However, instructors' understanding is vital both for their own research and in teaching their own students. If students do not have the right language for the resources they need for their research, it may hinder their ability to complete it.

Research on instructors' understanding of library terminology is virtually nonexistent. As such, this study adapts methods from a previous study of undergraduate students' natural language preferences for library resources by O'Neill (2021) to explore instructors' language choices for library resources when shown or defined. Data is presented from a survey of graduate students and faculty in teaching roles at Louisiana State University, a large research university with a full-time enrollment of over 30,000 students in the Southeastern United States.

This study aims to answer these research questions:

- Do instructors use the same language as their librarians to label library resources?
- Does their use of this language vary between verbal and visual representations of those resources?
- Does a correlation exist between their use of library terminology and any of the following factors?
 - Presence in library instruction sessions
 - Rank (e.g. associate professor, instructor)

- Length of teaching experience
- Frequency of library use

Literature Review

Faculty and the Library

While many studies have explored undergraduate students' ability to accomplish information literacy-based tasks (such as a 2015 study by Molteni & Chan), there exists little literature investigating those same skills in graduate students and faculty. We found one study from Cockrell and Jayne (2002) which asked undergraduate and graduate students and faculty to locate different types of articles (such as journal articles or newspaper articles) in a library database. They found no significant difference between groups, but faculty did perform better in finding a journal article than the other groups, and faculty and graduate students were somewhat better at finding newspaper articles than undergraduate students. Understanding of terminology was a factor in the participants' success, with several participants indicating that they did not understand the term *database*.

What literature does exist on faculty and information literacy-related concepts has explored how teaching faculty view the role of librarians and if they invite them to their classes for information literacy sessions (Saunders, 2012; Nilsen, 2012; Manuel, Beck & Molloy, 2005; Fravel Vandermeer, Perez-Stable & Sachs, 2012). Findings from these studies point to discrepancies in whether librarians or disciplinary faculty should be responsible for information literacy instruction in the classroom, but faculty view these skills as important for students to develop. Still, Saunders (2012) found some misunderstanding of terms relating to information literacy amongst faculty respondents. Participants in both Saunders' study and Manuel, Beck & Molloy's

(2005) study indicated the usefulness for their own participation in a librarian's instruction sessions in developing their research skills, and a respondent in Saunders' study suggested librarians should offer similar instruction directed at faculty.

Some research has been published on faculty use of library resources and services (Brown & Tucker, 2013), including for clarity of language (Gardner et. al., 2008; Zoellner et. al. 2015), but there is little research on faculty's language preferences or understanding of terminology for library resources.

Understanding of Library Terminology

Although research on language preferences is lacking in regard to faculty, there are relevant studies that explore this in students. Fitchett's dissertation explored what the range of natural use of language was for undergraduate students at New Zealand universities. Fitchett found that those resources that were "central to the library experience" had more consensus in the participants' use of terminology, and while jargon had an influence on their language, many used terms that differed from the library terminology (2006, 81). In particular, there was some variance in their language to describe a "help guide" (what we would call a *research guide*) and there was some confusion between a catalog and a database. Fitchett argued for the use of intuitive language to resolve this dilemma.

Given the potential confusion Fitchett suggests, it is valuable to discuss the studies that have explored how library terminology might be confusing in understanding library resources, but most of these explore only the understanding of undergraduate students and use multiple choice question methods. The most seminal of these works comes from Naismith & Stein (1989), who measured freshmen students' comprehension of library terms. This study found that the

students misunderstood terms around 50% of the time, with *database* and *catalog* toward the top of the most-understood list.

Two other studies employed similar methods to determine understanding of library terminology, but with somewhat contradictory findings: Chaudhry & Choo's (2000) study and used similar methods and a 2005 study by Caña et. al. While students in Chaudhry & Choo's study least understood terms that happened to some of the most frequently used terms, Caña et. al. found that students better understood terms ranked higher on a list librarians created of frequently used terms. Both studies drew from different theories relating to student understanding, with Chaudhry & Choo suggesting that some of the correct answers could be attributed to lucky guesses and exposure, while Caña et. al. found some correlation between correct answers and gender and type of catalog used (although the survey had a significant percentage of female participants). Interestingly, Caña et. al. found frequency and purpose of library visits had no correlation with understanding of terminology, which seems to counter Chaudhry & Choo's findings.

With several of these authors warning to avoid jargon, it is important to highlight the preponderance of jargon use within academic libraries. Kupersmith's (2012) meta-analysis of usability studies for jargon and understanding of library terminology found that the average user success rate for finding journal articles was 52%, which seems to mirror Naismith & Stein's (1989) findings. Kupersmith suggests avoiding the terms that users misunderstand and use natural language when possible. An essay by Pemberton & Fritzler (2004) similarly urges limiting jargon in librarianship, while drawing a connection between librarians' use of jargon and those used in the disciplines creating further confusion.

Schaub et. al. (2017) surveyed student understanding of library terminology with more than 700 students at one institution, using terms used in the library and pulled from syllabi. They found that students understood terms like *citation* and *bibliography*, but struggled more with terms like *scholarly*, *journal*, or *database*. Although faculty use those terms in their classrooms, the authors suggested they might use them in slightly different ways. They found no correlation between previous library instruction and understanding of terms, but there were some terms that more advanced students tended to understand more than lower-level students. They stress the need to work with faculty to help them articulate the right vocabulary and meanings to their students.

Orgeron's 2018 essay continues from Schaub et. al., arguing that the removal of jargon entirely may not be the best approach, encouraging the embrace of complex language. Of note is Orgeron's point that some of students' misunderstanding could be the varying use of those terms in other contexts prior to their introduction in a library context, urging librarians to collaborate with faculty on helping students understand the language of information literacy.

Aldridge & Carter's (2015) study is one of few that explore potential connections between faculty's use of jargon and students' understanding of library terminology in the classroom. Their study asked students to define terms used in library instruction sessions, but found that students were often confused by the terminology because that jargon was used by the composition instruction with a somewhat different meaning. They suggest that these terms should be clarified and used more consistently in the same way by instructors and librarians. Of most relevance to the present study is a study by Yesmin & Ahmed (2019). They explored early career academics' understanding of library language, surveying early career faculty at a university in Bangladesh using multiple choice questions. They argue that the many studies that

show students have difficulty understanding library terminology illuminate the possibility that faculty, particularly early career faculty, may not understand those terms themselves, and can pass this confusion on to their students as they teach. In their study, they found that a high percentage of correct answers were given for commonly used terms like *reference book* or *primary source*, and did better on analog-related terms than computer-based ones. Still, more than a quarter of responses were incorrect, and many respondents marked that they were unsure of the answer. Higher-level, older, and more experienced faculty performed better than other faculty. Interestingly, attendance in instruction sessions had no effect on their performance other than a positive correlation between attendance and understanding of the term *scholarly article*. Yesmin & Ahmed's observation that higher-level faculty performed better and instruction having no effect on that performance seem to mirror Schaub et. al.'s findings for students. The comparisons may not be so easy to make, however, in considering the vast differences in the higher education environment between the United States and Bangladesh.

The present study uses methods adapted from one of the present authors' (O'Neill) 2021 study of students' natural language preferences for library resources. That study used open-ended preference testing, allowing students to choose their own language when describing library resources based on definitions and screen captures of those resources. Students were given representations of a database, a catalog, and a research guide and asked to label those resources in their own words. The results showed little to no consensus on language for any of the terms, with few students using the same language as their librarians (13). Their responses also did not generally match between the verbal and visual exercises for the same resources and there was no correlation between using the correct terminology and having received prior library instruction (13). O'Neill argued that without prompting students with a multiple-choice list of library

terminology from which to choose, students did not self-select that language (17). O'Neill suggested that librarians should partner with teaching faculty to limit jargon or encourage adoption of consistent language in line with that of librarians' (18). It is crucial to gauge instructors' use of library terminology to identify any inconsistencies that could create some of the confusion that appeared in the student population previously studied. As such, the methods used mirror that study to draw the most accurate conclusions. The present study seeks to explore if the language they are using to describe library resources is consistent with that of their librarians and what might influence usage of the correct terminology.

Methods

Survey

The instrument was built in Qualtrics, an online survey platform. It comprised 3 sections, and contained 16 questions total (6 content questions and 10 demographic questions). Participants were first presented with three screen captures of the institution's instance of the Academic Search Complete database, SirsiDynix Enterprise catalog interface, and a LibGuide. Identifying text was not visible in the screen captures, but logos and brand names remained (e.g. EBSCOhost for Academic Search Complete). The following section presented participants with definitions of those same resources. Definitions were created by reviewing peer institutions' glossaries. Participants were asked to identify each resource via free response. By removing identifying information and soliciting responses via free response, we sought to identify participants' unfiltered, natural language choices used to identify library resources.

Distribution/Sample

This study was distributed to all faculty and graduate students via email by liaison librarians within LSU Libraries' Research & Instruction Services department. We sought responses from participants with instructional responsibilities, including graduate student teaching assistants, instructors (a non-tenure-line role for teachers), and professors. The survey opened March 1, 2021 and closed March 31, 2021.

Results

31 responses were collected, producing a statistically significant, though not representative, sample.

Coding

We coded data into categories generated by trends in the data. If there were common answers among the responses, we coded those responses and reported that data. If the data were too stratified, we coded those responses as "other." While the natural language of the respondents was important to this study, significant analysis will focus on if the participants' language matches that used by librarians. We were careful to note when participants' answers included contents rather than containers, such as *list of databases* as opposed to *database*, and coded those responses as separate categories. In choosing what responses to code as "correct," we reflected on the language we both use to describe those resources, as well as standardized language within Louisiana State University Libraries, such as labels on our website.

Trends

Participants largely use the same language as librarians when prompted by definition. 23 (74%) and 21 (67%) respondents answered correctly for both the *database* and *catalog*

questions, respectively, though there was more variation in responses for the *research guide* question, with only 10 (32%) using that language [see *Charts 1-3*]. Results were much less in favor of library terminology among the visual questions, however, with as few as 5 (16%) participants listing the correct answer. On average, participants used the correct terminology in 2 out of 3 definition prompts, but only used the correct terminology in roughly 1 out of 3 visual prompts.

Participants often did not use uniform language throughout their responses. We noted which responses used the same language between the definition and visual questions, and found that only 12 (39%), 10 (32%), and 7 (23%) respondents did so, for the *catalog*, *database*, and *research guide* questions, respectively [see *Table 1 and Charts 4-6*].

Discussion

Do they use library terminology?

In evaluating if instructors preferred the language their librarians use, the data shows that instructors mostly used library terminology when presented with a definition, but mostly did not when presented with a screen capture of a resource. These are slightly different results than those of the previous study, which found students did not use the same language with either type of cue. However, both studies show that instructors and students alike have not adopted the term *research guide*, which Fitchett has also shown is a confusing term for many users (Fitchett, 2006). Overall, correct use of language varied between just under a quarter and just over half of participants, depending on the resource and cue. This differs slightly from the previous findings, which found students used librarian's language much less, and found much more variation in the language used. However, this does mirror findings by Fitchett that jargon has influence on

language selection. This study also shows somewhat lower performance compared to other studies of students such as those by Naismith & Stein (1989) and Kupersmith (2012), but on par or better than Chaudhry & Choo (2000). Compared to Yesmin & Ahmed's study of faculty, participants in this study performed worse, which may be because of the methods used.

Does their use of this language vary between verbal and visual representations of those resources?

Participants' language varied greatly between verbal and visual representations for all questions. A significant minority of participants used the same language between visual and verbal questions, ranging between 22% for *research guide* and 38% for *catalog*. This finding could indicate that instructors are familiar with the function of library resources, but have trouble identifying them. In these instances, instructors might be conflating resources with one another, which may confuse students. These findings, along with those of other authors cited in this study, stress the need for consistency and simplicity when referencing library resources, both on the part of librarians and teaching faculty (Aldridge & Carter, 2015; Fitchett, 2006; Schaub et. al., 2017; Yesmin & Ahmed, 2019). Disparity between visual and verbal cues could also be attributed to ambiguous screen captures, which will be addressed in the limitations of this study.

Does a correlation exist between their use of library terminology and demographics?

The majority of participants (n=23 or 72%) indicated that they had invited a librarian to their class [see *Table 2*]. However, no correlation was found between presence of librarian instruction and preference for library terminology. Literature which compares previous library instruction

with understanding of library terminology likewise found little correlation (Schaub et. al., 2017; Yesmin & Ahmed, 2019) . Similar studies evaluating students' language preferences or understanding had similar findings, indicating that library instruction had little correlation (O'Neill, 2021; Schaub, 2017). Yesmin & Ahmed (2019) found a slight correlation, though only when recognizing the term *scholarly article*. In our study, we specifically asked whether or not the instructor had remained in the class during the instruction session. On occasion, instructors will invite librarians to teach an instruction session and not attend the class. In these cases, the instructor would not have been exposed to librarian language usage. However, results indicate that all of the respondents that invited a librarian to their class remained during the session.

Participant rank likewise had a statistically insignificant correlation, with graduate students and associate professors using the correct terminology most frequently (average scores of 3 and 2.86 correct, respectively) [*see Table 3*]. Instructors were the most represented group in this study and scored the lowest, averaging 2 correct answers. These results are similar to those found in evaluating the impact that length of teaching experience has on the use of correct terminology, with no notable correlation between them [*see Table 4*].

The results show no correlation between length of teaching experience and use of library terminology. This goes against findings from Schaub (2017) and Yesmin & Ahmed (2019); Schaub found that there was some library terminology that higher-level students understood better than lower-level students, which one might expect to see in instructors. Yesmin & Ahmed's study found higher average scores in faculty with more teaching experience. This may be due to the methods used in this study, which did not provide multiple-choice responses from which to choose that could lead them toward a correct answer, or merely reflect the small sample size.

Although not a majority, there was a statistically significant relationship between frequency of library resources use and preference for library terminology [*see Table 5*]. Those participants who reported using the library's resources very often performed best, averaging at least one more correct response compared to those of other groups. Although Caña et. al (2015). found no correlation between frequency or purpose of use for students in their study, these findings match suggestions from Chaudhry & Choo (2010), who guessed that their preponderance of heavy library users amongst their participants might have performed better due to greater exposure to that language. We believe this to be the case with the heavier library users in this instructor population as well.

Participants in this study generally performed well on both the definition for *database* and *catalog*, but less so for *research guide*. The previous study found students struggled overall with all of these terms, and Jayne & Cockrell found their participants did not understand the term *database*, but the instructors in this study may have had greater exposure to those resources in their own research and teaching experience. It is notable that most instructors did not supply the language *research guide*, especially so for the visual cue. Research guides - at least those at Louisiana State University - are primarily developed for and promoted to students, so it is perhaps unsurprising that these instructor participants would not recognize it when shown. Caña et. al. found that frequently used terms were better understood, so if these participants are using resources like the catalog and databases more, and research guides less, they might understand those better.

Other findings

For several of the questions, participants provided a variety of "other" responses. Although not specifically addressed in this study, we found variation in language preferences, especially for

the visual cues for resources. Notable were some uses of vendor labels; specific descriptions of the genre or material type of items within the interface; and vague language such as *list*, *resource*, *website*, or *page*, across all questions.

Limitations

We were unable to determine if the results of the study were representative of the population. Louisiana State University does not make available the total number of graduate students with teaching assignments, and not all graduate students hold those positions. Therefore, we cannot determine the exact population size of graduate students who teach. Likewise, this study only surveyed instructors at Louisiana State University, and therefore does not represent the profession as a whole. Further research would expand beyond this institution to generate a more representative sample.

The sample was small, and mostly self-selecting. Representation was heavily focused on Humanities & Social Sciences instructors, with 24 participants. The College of Humanities & Social Sciences houses the English Composition courses and several other general education courses that comprise the bulk of instruction at Louisiana State University Libraries because of information literacy skills built into their curriculum. Therefore, those respondents have a greater likelihood of inviting librarians to their classes and understanding information literacy-related concepts. Future studies should work to draw participants from other disciplines, yielding a more representative sample.

Because individual librarians vary in what content they cover in their instruction sessions, it is unclear if the particular library terminology used in this survey would have been used or explained in any prior sessions participants attended.

Screenshots and definitions used in the survey could have influenced participants' language choices. In particular, the selection of screenshots for *database* and *catalog* used search results pages, intended to give the participants clues about the contents of the resources to guide them to the correct answer. Unfortunately, this may also have caused some participants to focus on the contents themselves rather than the resource comprising them, but it proved challenging to represent a resource without including what it contains. Future studies should explore if other ways of defining and representing resources provoke different language responses from their participants. This survey also only included a small sample of library resources, so it is possible that participants may have been more familiar with other sources, such as a different database or a discovery system. More research is needed on language preferences for other library resources.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that library terminology does have some influence in instructors' language choices, but there is still some variation. In particular, they struggled to identify library resources visually. It can be inferred that participants understand the resources' functions, but have less of a grasp on what they look like, which could create problems in using these resources effectively and teaching their students the same. Electronic resources teams should take care to label these resources clearly and provide some description or context about their function and contents.

Although rank and years of experience had no effect on language, there was some positive relationship between frequency of use and adoption of library terminology, so greater exposure to these resources may be helpful. One approach may be targeted library instruction designed for instructors; although presence in library instruction for students did not have an

impact on their use of library terminology, instruction catered specifically to acclimating instructors to the resources and language of information literacy may be beneficial. Given the previous study's findings that students also were not using library terminology, instruction for instructors could aid in preventing this confusion from one of its potential sources.

Future research should seek out a larger, more representative sample of a faculty or graduate student population, including participants that may not already be heavy library users. More research should also investigate if there is a causal link between student adoption of library terminology and the language used by their instructors. Future studies should also explore if the ability to identify and recognize library resources by name has any bearing on faculty's ability to conduct their own research.

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Charts

Chart 1.

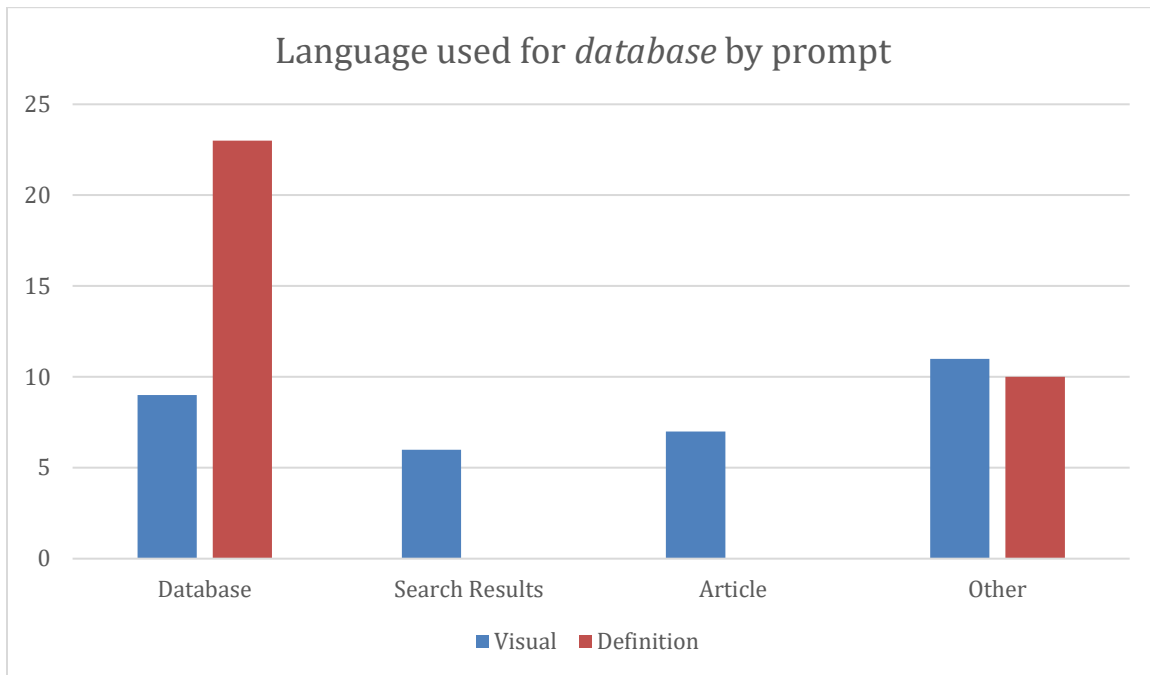


Chart 2.

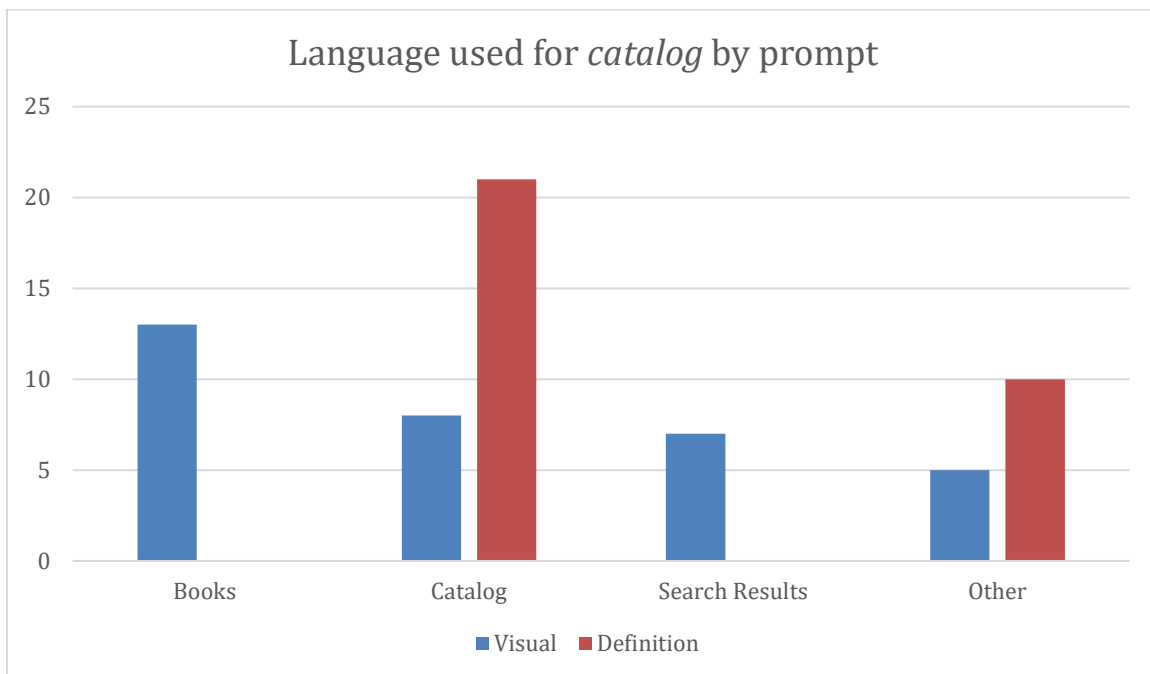


Chart 3.

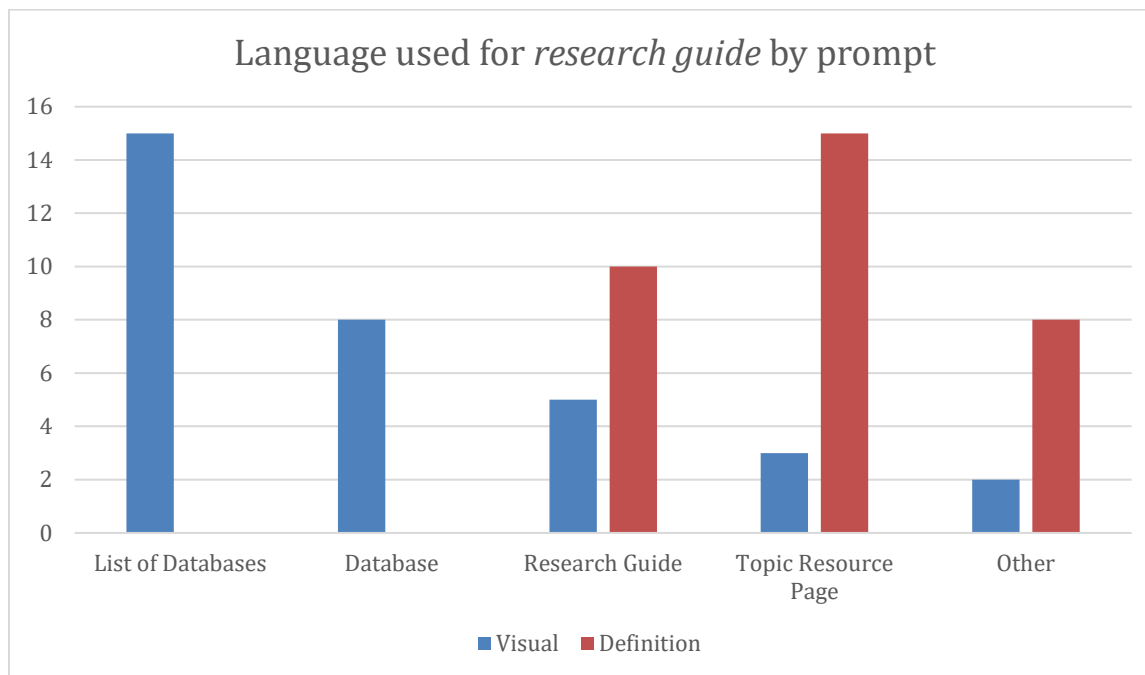


Chart 4.

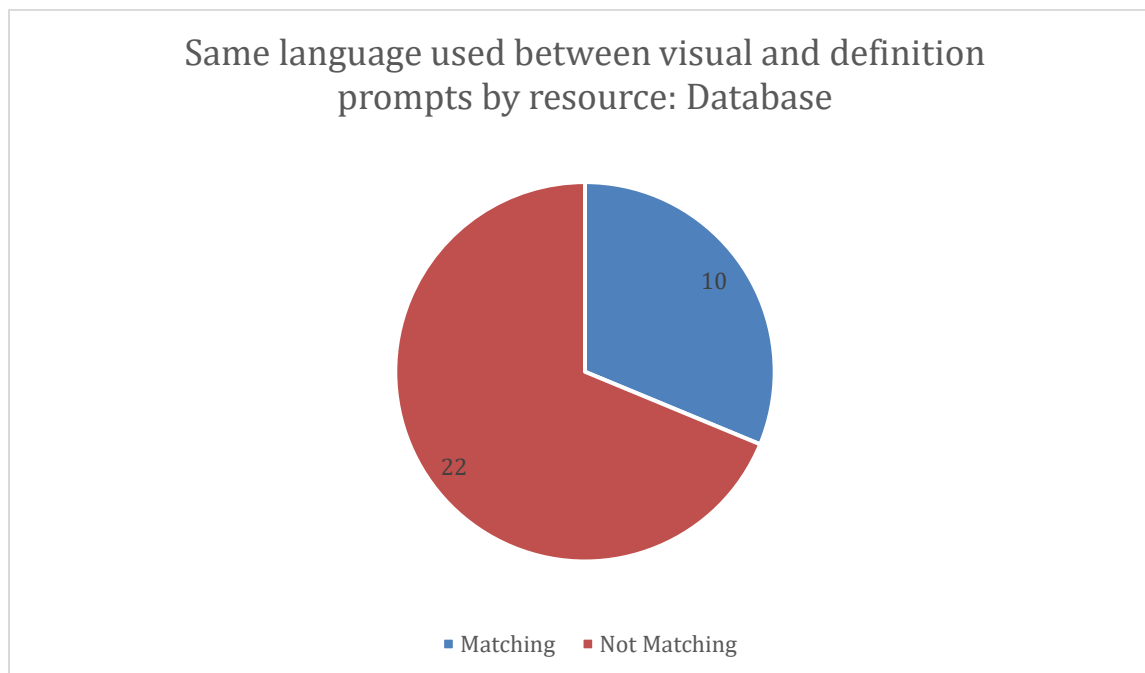


Chart 5.

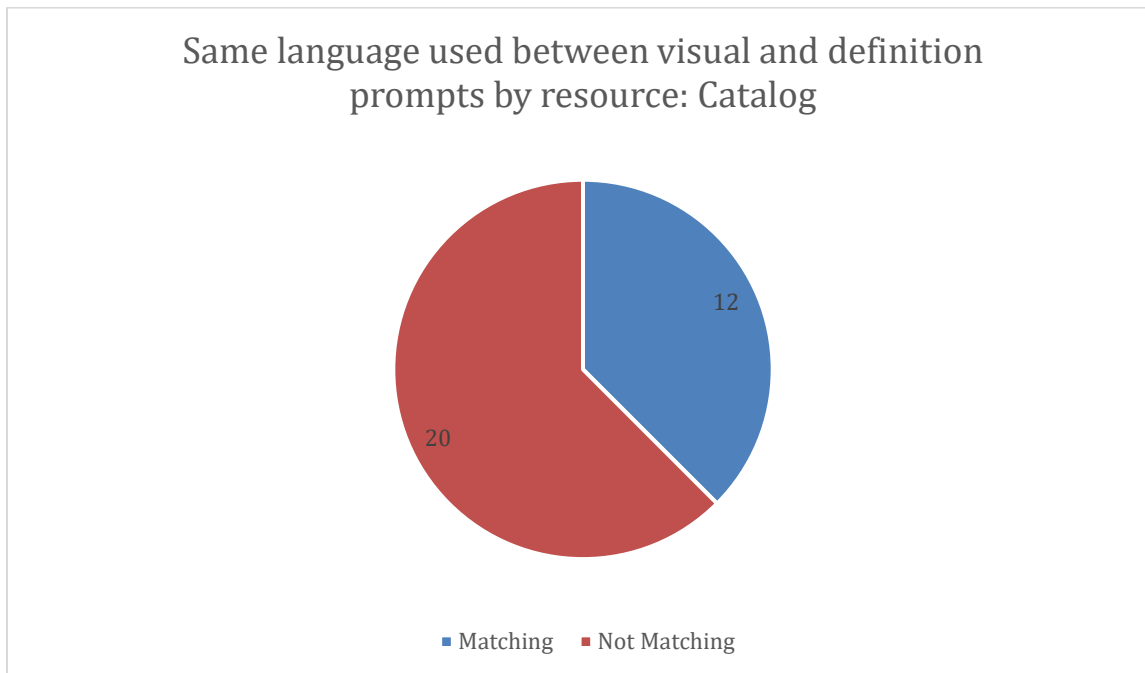
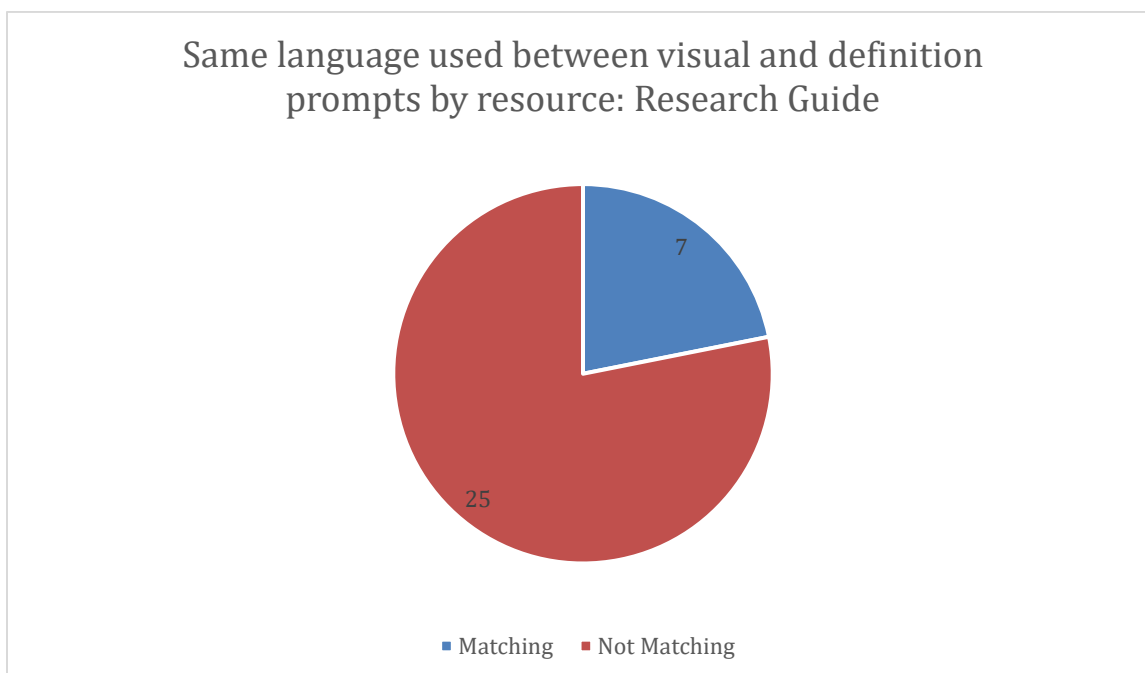


Chart 6.



Tables

Table 1.

Preference for library terminology by resource and prompt		
	Number Correct (Visual)	Number Correct (Definition)
Database	9 (28.3%)	23 (71.9%)
Catalog	8 (25%)	21 (65.6%)
Research Guide	5 (15.6%)	10 (31.3%)
Average	23.0%	56.7%

Table 2.

Presence in library instruction				
If you have invited a librarian to teach an information literacy session for your class, were you present for the class?	I have not invited a librarian to my class	Yes	No	N/A
	6	23	0	3
Average number correct	I have not invited a librarian to my class	Yes	No	N/A
	2.33	2.4 6	N/A	2.33

Table 3.

Rank						
Number Correct by Rank	Graduate Student/TA	Instructor	Assistant Professor	Associate Professor	Full Professor	N/A
0	0	0	1	0	0	0
1	0	4	0	1	0	0
2	2	7	0	1	3	0
3	0	0	3	4	2	1
4	0	2	0	0	1	0
5	1	0	0	1	0	0
6	0	0	0	0	0	0
Average number correct	3	2	2.25	2.86	2.17	3

Table 4.

Teaching Experience					
	1-3 years	4-6 years	7-10 years	11-20 years	More than 20 years
How long have you been teaching at the college level?					
	4	6	5	6	12
Average number correct	1-3 years	4-6 years	7-10 years	11-20 years	More than 20 years
	3	1.83	2.2	2.67	2.5

Table 5.

Frequency of library resources use					
How often would you say you use library resources?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
	1	0	5	14	11
Average number correct	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
	2	N/A	1.8	2.2	3.2