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## Teaching English Language Learners to Vet Their Sources in the Post-Truth Paradigm

Megan Hodge

*Virginia Commonwealth University*, [mlhodge@gmail.com](mailto:mlhodge@gmail.com)

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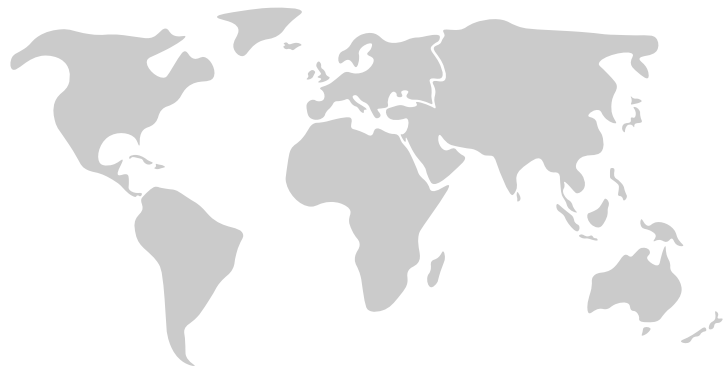
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## CHAPTER 7

# ***Teaching English Language Learners to Vet Their Sources in the Post-Truth Paradigm***

Megan Hodge

### ***Introduction***

Nearly 40,000 international students were enrolled in intensive English programs during the 2015–2016 academic year, according to the most recent *Open Doors Report*.<sup>1</sup> These students comprise approximately four percent of the international student population in the United States, a group which exceeded one million for the first time in 2016. These intensive English programs are designed to help students become sufficiently proficient speakers of English that they will be able to pass the TOEFL or IELTS examinations required for enrollment at US institutions of higher education.

Since American university life can differ in many respects from these students' secondary or undergraduate educational experiences, some of these programs also introduce Western academic norms, such as academic integrity, how to write an essay, and critical thinking. Without such preparation, some students may find themselves linguistically but not culturally prepared for the expectations American faculty have of their students' study habits and skills.

At Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), a public research university of 31,000 students in Richmond, Virginia, English Language Program (ELP) faculty

strive to ensure their students are equipped with skills beyond an understanding of English grammar and vocabulary. Many of the students who graduate from the ELP subsequently matriculate as undergraduates here, where they will enroll in the writing-intensive first-year experience (FYE) courses mandatory for most freshmen. Faculty, therefore, draw heavily on the learning outcomes outlined in the FYE curriculum and use backward design to develop curricula in ELP writing courses.

In my role as library liaison to the English Language Program, I provide building tours and online lessons, as well as course-integrated instruction to a dozen or so ELP classes each semester. The topics of these library sessions range from academic integrity to developing a search strategy to preparing for oral debates. One of my most frequent requests from ELP faculty is for a session on evaluating sources. As I am also one of several librarians who teach for the FYE, my familiarity with those courses' curricula and assignments informs my approach to the subject.

## Challenges

Source evaluation has become an increasingly fraught topic in recent years, even for domestic students. In addition to the difficulties posed by “fake news” and the language barrier, international students may also come from cultures where questioning of authority is frowned upon, especially if the questioner is female.

English-speaking nations have seen a rise in misinformation, decreases in news budgets resulting in reduced numbers of staff fact-checkers, and a blurring of the lines between sponsored and unsponsored content. A recent Stanford study found that middle schoolers were unable to identify which stories on websites were ads and which were real news, that high schoolers did not know what the blue check mark next to a famous person's Twitter handle signified, and that college students were likely to find questionable online content trustworthy if the website looked professional.<sup>2</sup> When the same news outlets publish both “real” news and biased stories, and government websites borrow from pop culture in a way that causes even the savvy information consumer to question the trustworthiness of sources such as news articles, this is not surprising.<sup>3</sup>

International students often face additional barriers when it comes to source evaluation and critical thinking. Cultures vary in terms of what is an acceptable level of opinion in professional writing and whether general consensus is equivalent to authority.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, critical thinking, including challenges to authority, is not promoted in some countries.<sup>5</sup> Some cultures may discourage critical thinking in women more than in men. All these factors increase the complexity of teaching source evaluation.

Criterion-based tests for evaluating sources, such as CRAAP (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, Purpose) and CARS (Credibility, Accuracy, Reasonableness, Support), are increasingly insufficient given the increasing proliferation of misinformation and the tests' inflexibility. For example, a fake news article may be written by someone with no expertise on the subject and with the intent to deceive, but this article would still be an ideal source for someone writing a paper on misinformation

in the 2016 election. Additionally, the concepts in these criterion-based tests, such as bias and purpose, may be unfamiliar to students from some cultures.<sup>6</sup> For these reasons, this lesson seeks to address two threshold concepts in particular from the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education: Information Creation as a Process and Authority Is Constructed and Contextual.

## **Lesson Plan<sup>7</sup>**

### **Audience**

This lesson plan was designed for the Undergraduate Skills course in VCU's English Language Program. Students enrolled in this course are in their last semester of intensive English study and are preparing applications for undergraduate study at American universities, often including VCU. As noted in the program's curricular documents, students in this course can "competently address everyday language functions" but are still "socio-linguistically awkward or unpolished."<sup>8</sup> There are usually eight to fifteen students in the class, which is taught over the course of seventy-five minutes.

### **ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education**

This lesson addresses two of the threshold concepts included in the Framework: Information Creation as a Process and Authority Is Constructed and Contextual. As a result of this lesson, students will display the dispositions of "valu[ing] the process of matching an information need with an appropriate product"<sup>9</sup> and "motiv[ing] themselves to find authoritative sources, recognizing that authority may be conferred or manifested in unexpected ways."<sup>10</sup>

### **Teaching Modalities**

- small group and class discussion
- individual, partner, and group work
- lecture (minimal)

### **Learning Outcomes**

There is only one learning outcome for this lesson: for students to be able to identify whether a source is relevant to their needs in order to select ones that are appropriate for their assignment. In the past, ELP faculty often asked me to cover additional topics, such as the difference between scholarly and non-scholarly sources, during this lesson. Given the time constraints and complexity of teaching students in a language they are not yet fluent in, however, I negotiated the learning outcomes down to the one deemed

most critical by ELP faculty, which reduced the students' cognitive load and, therefore, increased the likelihood of achieving that outcome. As these students will probably be asked to write research papers in their first year as undergraduates, VCU's ELP faculty prioritize source evaluation as the most critical skill to be taught during the library session integrated into this particular course.

## Materials and Equipment

- copies of an unreliable source that is very short (less than 250 words) and written at an accessible reading level (articles published in *Weekly World News* or *The Onion* are well-suited to the lesson)
- a slide deck which includes an individual slide for each activity (containing instructions) or main question you intend to ask
- the 5 Ws (who, what, when, where, and why) of source evaluation question lists (optional)
- computers for each student (optional)
- whiteboard (optional)

## Preparation

- If the classroom has computers, ask the professor to encourage their students to bring headphones/earbuds (optional).
- If the classroom space and furniture allow, it is helpful to arrange in a formation conducive to group work.
- If the classroom has a computer for each student, write "TTSreader.com" (the function of which is described below) and the URL of the article on the whiteboard, or include the two URLs on a slide.

## Procedure

### Introduction

Although the Undergraduate Skills course is taken in the students' last semester of their intensive English program, it is still the first time some will have met me as the ELP librarian. Thus, when class begins, I introduce myself and hand out my business cards. During this introduction, I encourage students to contact me to be connected with resources that they will need imminently, such as SAT, TOEFL, and IELTS exam preparation guides. I then share my game plan for the class so the students have an idea of what to expect over the next seventy minutes.

### Anticipatory set

To connect their background knowledge to the topic at hand, I remind students that their professors do not want them to trust Google for their assignments and ask

them to discuss in small groups why they think this is. After a few minutes, I ask the students to share some of their ideas and we discuss them as a class. This usually leads to the general consensus that when writing a paper, it is important to have trustworthy sources, and much of what is published on the internet and elsewhere is not trustworthy. “Trustworthy” is a word that students often have not yet learned, so an in-class dialogue between the librarian and professor about the word serves as a helpful introduction here and emphasizes the importance of the concept.

The benefits of using this anticipatory set are twofold: its active, collaborative nature prepares students for a lesson that requires participation throughout and activates knowledge on the topics of unreliable information sources and assignment requirements, which makes it easier to incorporate new knowledge on these subjects into their mental frameworks.

## Discovery: Identifying Characteristics of an Untrustworthy Source

Each student is given a copy of a short, unreliable article and told that it is not a trustworthy source. If the classroom has computers for the students to use, announce that the article can also be listened to by copying and pasting its text into TTSreader.com. Even with very short articles, be prepared for students’ reading to take longer than you would expect; allow at least five minutes.

After students have finished reading the article, remind them that it is untrustworthy. Ask students to work in pairs or groups of three to generate five reasons why their professor would not want them to use this article for an assignment.

After sufficient time to complete the task has passed, go around the room asking each group to share one of their reasons with the class; do this twice before allowing any group to provide a third reason. This will mitigate against the same few confident speakers dominating the discussion and ensure that opportunities to practice speaking in English are shared more equally. As students share their reasons, write them on the class whiteboard (or on a blank Word document, if there is no whiteboard), grouping by category: who, what, when, where, and why (also known as the “5 Ws”).

My favorite unreliable source to share with students is the *Weekly World News* article “Facebook to End on May 15, 2013.”<sup>11</sup> Some reasons I regularly hear from my students as to why this article should not be trusted include: “This was published years ago and Facebook’s still here” (When); “The article has a rating and votes” (Where); “There’s a typo” (“liwithout”); and “Mark Zuckerberg would never say ‘It’s no big deal’ about ending Facebook” (What).

Once students have finished sharing their reasons, write the appropriate heading above each of the categorized responses. Introduce the conceit of the 5 Ws, deconstruct each category, and explore the categories as a class. Students’ reasons for not trusting the article can be transformed into general questions that can be applied to other sources. For “Who,” for example, general questions might be “Is there an author listed?” and “Can we tell if they have expert knowledge of this topic?” Throughout the discussion,

emphasize that there will be different answers to these questions depending on the source and the information need. For example, a soldier who fought in a war will probably not have an advanced degree in military history but will have an expertise on that war that comes from lived experience. Similarly, a recently published article about that war may not be any more trustworthy than the memoir of that soldier published decades ago.

Interpret “Why” and introduce the concept of bias, which may be a new vocabulary word and possibly a new concept as well.<sup>12</sup> While international students readily understand why writers have different opinions on controversial issues such as abortion, it can be difficult for them to grasp that there could be biased sources on dryer topics such as pharmaceutical drug trials and historical figures’ lives. It helps to provide concrete, relatable, non-American-specific scenarios here: If you like horror movies, how useful would it be to ask a friend who scares easily whether she thinks a newly released horror film is any good? Is a restaurant’s website or Yelp more likely to provide accurate information about the tastiness of the food? “Why” dovetails with many of the other “W” questions. For example, after some digging around a website to find its author, it may be discovered that the corporate author, Stormfront, is a white supremacist group (“Who”).

## Application: Identifying What a Trustworthy Source Looks Like

Emphasize that these criteria, the 5 Ws, can be used to evaluate the usefulness and trustworthiness of any source. Students regularly need to find information outside the classroom, such as when deciding where to go out to eat or where to visit when planning a vacation. To the end of increasing the lesson’s transferability outside the classroom, I ask students to identify characteristics of a trustworthy source for a non-academic scenario. The scenario I use most frequently is “Should it be illegal to smoke marijuana?”

Divide students into no more than five groups and assign each group one (or more, as necessary) “W” question. For example, the first group will discuss what characteristics a trustworthy author on this subject would have (“Who”), the second group will discuss the content and organization of a trustworthy source on the subject (“What”), and so on. Depending on the language proficiency and the academic level of the students, it may be helpful to give each group a list of questions to work with. The “Who” list could include questions such as “What degrees, if any, would a trustworthy author on this subject have?” and “What job would a trustworthy author on this topic have?”

After groups have had sufficient time to think about their questions, ask each group to share their answers with the class. Follow up after each one: Why did the group choose that trait? Illustrate, with the assistance of the class, how each characteristic helps determine that a source on this topic would be trustworthy. If a group does not mention a trait you feel is important, take the opportunity to ask the class to think about how it would help.

## Assessment

The last activity, identifying characteristics of a trustworthy source on a given subject, is an authentic assessment of the extent of students' ability to apply what they have learned about source evaluation. It is considered an "authentic" assessment because the activity is a meaningful demonstration of students' learning that asks them to use skills which can be applied outside the classroom, as opposed to (for example) a multiple-choice standardized test, which cannot.

Additionally, at the end of the class, I pass out sticky notes to each student and ask them to write down either one thing they are still confused about or one thing they wished they had learned in the session but had not. Students hand me their sticky notes upon leaving the classroom.

This assessment is an adaptation of the popular "muddiest point" classroom assessment technique.<sup>13</sup> The metaphor of a "muddiest point" is likely to be unfamiliar to non-native English speakers, but reworded into non-idiomatic English and used as an exit ticket, it is an effective way of helping me improve my instruction without sacrificing valuable instruction time. Further, it enables me to identify areas of confusion that can be resolved after class by contacting the professor.

## ***Logistics of Lesson Planning for English Language Learners***

When designing lesson plans for English language learners (ELLs), it is important to keep certain cultural and pedagogical considerations in mind regardless of the lesson's content. There is not much information in the library literature about crafting activities appropriate for course-integrated library instruction for this particular demographic, but below are some practices I have found to be effective in my experience and from my research into pedagogy for adult language learners.

Plan for your activities to take longer than you anticipate. Have additional activities at the ready if the lesson does not take as long as expected, but bear in mind that it is more likely that you will not get through the entirety of your lesson plan. This lesson plan has, essentially, three main activities and is targeted at an audience of advanced English language learners. Allow for seventy-five minutes to teach this lesson and adapt your lesson plan accordingly when teaching students with less proficiency, checking the clock regularly throughout the class so you can modify your lesson as needed.

Create a slide with instructions for each activity and a separate slide for each of the main questions you intend to ask. There are multiple likely scenarios where having your activity instructions and main questions written down and clearly visible will be helpful, such as if students are distracted, do not fully understand the question, or forget the instructions partway through the activity. This preemptive step will save you much repeating of questions and instructions. Posting all instructions for an activity also mitigates against students assuming, for one of these reasons, that they have done



all they need to do when they have not. In my experience, ELLs are shy about asking questions that demonstrate their lack of comprehension, so students may stop working rather than ask clarifying questions or whether there is anything else they need to do.

Along those lines, while English language learners are often comfortable speaking with their classmates and their professors, they may be shy about speaking in front of a stranger (i.e., you, the librarian). There are several steps you can take to ease their discomfort. When possible, give students time to think about responses to a question before you require answers. Activities such as think-pair-share, or small group work as I have used it in this lesson, provide students with the opportunity to think through your question, translate their answer into English, and get feedback on their answers from someone they perceive as potentially less judgmental—a peer. Asking students to write their answers down while they are thinking also helps, as this eliminates the need to translate extemporaneously while speaking. Avoid calling on students directly and use open-ended rather than yes or no questions.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, if the classroom facilities permit, offer the option for students to listen to the assigned reading. Websites like TTSreader.com, which narrate text pasted into the site, are extraordinarily helpful for helping students learn how to pronounce words they may not have heard before and often reduces the amount of time it takes students to read an article. I recommend TTSreader.com because it highlights each paragraph as it is read aloud and offers six reading speeds and six narrator options (including three American ones).

## **Conclusion**

The ability to critically evaluate a source's trustworthiness and relevance is an important skill for international students to gain if they are to succeed in Western institutions of higher education. Regardless of whether English language learners intend to enroll in an undergraduate or graduate program upon their graduation from an intensive English program, it is likely that they will be required to find and use trustworthy sources during the course of their studies. Developing the dispositions of "valu[ing] the process of matching an information need with an appropriate product" and "motiv[ing] themselves to find authoritative sources, recognizing that authority may be conferred or manifested in unexpected ways" is therefore essential for these students' future success at American universities.<sup>15</sup>

While the number of international students studying in the United States has been increasing steadily for years, a recent report indicates that trend may be changing due to changed governmental policies in countries that had previously sent large numbers of students to study in the US, such as Saudi Arabia, and due to more aggressive immigration policies implemented recently by the US government.<sup>16</sup> It therefore behooves librarians, as professional experts on source evaluation, to prepare our international students as well as we can for the academic expectations of their professors in order to retain the students we do have.

## Endnotes

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13. Frederick Mosteller, "The 'Muddiest Point in the Lecture' as a Feedback Device," *On Teaching and Learning: The Journal of the Harvard-Danforth Center*, no. 3 (1989): 10–21.
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