

WEBQUESTS IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM AS A TOOL FOR ENHANCING LANGUAGE LEARNING AND CRITICAL THINKING FOR MILITARY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the effectiveness of integrating WebQuests into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) training, specifically focusing on military students. A WebQuest is defined as an inquiry-based online learning approach that is mainly used to integrate technology in language education. It has drawn interest as a promising tool for promoting authentic language use and active learning. Given the unique requirements of teaching foreign languages to military students, which includes the need for specialized terminology and an emphasis on critical thinking, WebQuests offer a promising pedagogical strategy. This paper discusses both the theoretical foundation of WebQuests, their advantages, and potential challenges in a military EFL context. Some practical implications and recommendations for future research are also covered in this paper.

KEYWORDS: critical thinking, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), inquiry-based learning, language learning, technology-enhanced learning, WebQuest

1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of technology has made it imperative for foreign language teachers to find the means to integrate digital resources into language teaching. One of the innovative approaches that offers an interactive learning environment is represented by WebQuests. These are inquiry-based teaching and learning approaches that can enhance language learning experiences. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), where learners often encounter limited opportunities for authentic language use, WebQuests hold promise for fostering meaningful language learning experiences.

WebQuests are inquiry-based activities

in which students complete a task based on information retrieved from various online sources. To complete a WebQuest, students must follow certain instructions and specific steps. WebQuests enable students to use technology to finish assignments while also helping them to develop their research skills and language abilities because they can be focused both on specialized and on multi-disciplinary subjects.

2. Theoretical Framework

It was the social constructivist principle that brought WebQuests to pass. According to these principles, in order to successfully solve a problem, students should collaborate and work together (Vygotsky, 1978) which means that

interaction among students is enhanced since they cooperate not only to solve a specific problem, but also to construct meaning. Additionally, WebQuests are grounded in inquiry-based learning theories, which place the student at the centre of the learning process (Jonassen, 1999), thus promoting a deeper understanding of the language.

The literature on WebQuests in EFL education highlights their potential to promote learner-centred and task-based language learning. WebQuests typically involve students in authentic tasks, such as conducting research, solving problems, or creating multimedia presentations, which require them to use English communicatively in real-world contexts. While completing a WebQuest, learners engage in meaningful language use, which means that they are able to facilitate the development of language skills and promote active learning. Furthermore, language acquisition is facilitated by the interactive nature of WebQuests which also encourage collaboration and the development of critical thinking skills.

Originally conceptualized in the late 1990s by Bernie Dodge, WebQuests have since evolved and been adapted across various subjects and at different levels, thus emerging as a prominent strategy that leverages the power of Internet to engage students in authentic learning experiences. According to Dodge, WebQuests are inquiry-oriented activities where students engage with information gathered from online sources.

Numerous studies (Stoks, 2002; Vidoni & Maddux, 2002; Simina & Hamel, 2005) have shown the effectiveness of WebQuests in improving language learning outcomes. Research has shown that WebQuests can enhance students' motivation, engagement, critical thinking skills, and language proficiency. To maximize the benefits of WebQuests, teachers should consider the following best practices:

- establish precise objectives to make sure that the students comprehend the purpose of the activity.

- employ a student-centred strategy to enable students to assume responsibility of their own learning, encouraging their active participation and independent inquiry.

- provide scaffolding to ensure appropriate guidance throughout the WebQuest.

- create authentic tasks to foster a sense of purpose and motivation for the students.

- deliver effective assessment to evaluate student work, providing timely feedback and opportunities for improvement.

A study conducted by Chuo in 2007 on Taiwanese EFL students concluded that, when involved in a WebQuest activity, the language learners experienced less anxiety while writing. The control group that had to complete traditional writing tasks showed more writing apprehension, which led the researcher to conclude that WebQuests can enhance students' communicative performance.

Dodge determined that there are six “building blocks” or steps that need to be followed to correctly complete a WebQuest. These include an (1) introduction, (2) task description, (3) resources to be used to complete the task, (4) the process, (5) project evaluation or assessment, (6) conclusion.

(1) The *introduction*, in addition to offering some background information about the WebQuest, also establishes the context for the activity, defining the goals and piquing students' interest.

(2) The *task description* represents the activity that the students need to complete. It outlines the specific goals of the WebQuest, clearly defining what the students need to accomplish.

(3) The *resources* are represented by lists of links to webpages, articles, videos, or any other online materials that can be used throughout the task completion process.

(4) The *process* offers step-by-step instructions for the students to follow, including specific resources and deadlines.

(5) The *evaluation* specifies the criteria and methods for assessing student work, promoting transparency and accountability; it can also contain feedback from the teacher on how the learners completed the task.

(6) The *conclusions* enable learners to reflect both on the process and the results.

According to Vidoni and Maddux (2002), WebQuests support critical thinking development because they allow the students not only to contextualize their learning, but also to interpret the material they have researched during the process stage. Because they provide a structured framework for online exploration, WebQuests can empower students to become active participants in their own process of learning; they can also enhance student motivation and language proficiency.

Other research on the effectiveness of WebQuests has had promising results across various subject areas and levels. According to March (2004), this method fosters high-order thinking abilities, including problem solving, critical thinking and information literacy, while also increasing student engagement, motivation and satisfaction with learning.

3. WebQuests in English Language Teaching

WebQuests are considered to be valuable language learning tools, especially since they combine a reading-to-writing approach through technology, also offering the possibility of developing students' collaborative skills. Stoks (2002) and Simina and Hamel (2005) claim that, from a linguistic perspective, WebQuests contribute to a real progress in terms of English language learning because they provide exposure to meaningful content that is comprised in authentic materials, at the same time engaging the students in real communication in the target language.

3.1. Practical applications in EFL classrooms

▪ *Developing reading comprehension-* WebQuests can be used to guide students through authentic texts, such as news articles, blog posts, or short stories, encouraging them to analyze the content, pinpoint important details, and draw inferences.

▪ *Enhancing writing skills-* WebQuests can provide a structured framework for writing assignments, such as essays, reports, or creative writing pieces. Students can research information online, organize their thoughts, and create drafts of their work.

▪ *Developing speaking and listening skills-* WebQuests can support group learning activities, such as discussions, debates and presentations. Students are able to collaborate to evaluate information, create arguments, and communicate their ideas clearly.

▪ *Cultivating cultural awareness-* WebQuests can expose students to different cultures and perspectives, thus developing their intercultural understanding and global citizenship. Students can browse through websites, watch videos, and read articles about various cultures and traditions.

When it comes to maximizing the effectiveness of WebQuests in the English language classroom in a military context, teachers should align their activities with military-specific scenarios, terminology, and communication tasks so that these activities would make learning relevant and practical. WebQuests should include problem-based activities that promote language use in decision-making contexts since they should also emphasize the development of critical thinking and decision-making skills. Group collaboration is likewise important for military students as it reflects the teamwork dynamic in military operations. Finally, WebQuests for military cadets should be implemented through secure, military-approved platforms to ensure data security and accessibility.

There are many **benefits** when it comes to implementing WebQuests in the language classroom. They promote *authentic language use* since students are immersed in real-world language tasks, such as analyzing information, researching topics, creating presentations, which contribute to the development of their communication skills.

When it comes to using WebQuests in the English language classroom for military students, they can always be designed around language content areas, such as military English or vocabulary related to the military field, thus promoting *content-based learning* and enhancing content knowledge. For military students, WebQuests offer *contextualized learning* because they can provide context-specific language learning, which increases engagement and relevance. *Collaborative learning* is another advantage of using WebQuests since they involve group work which requires students to communicate and to negotiate meaning in order to achieve a common goal.

WebQuests are a valuable tool for EFL teachers because they *support differentiated learning*. By providing flexibility in task selection, pacing, and group dynamics, they may be designed to accommodate diverse learner needs and preferences, thus promoting personalized and differentiated learning experiences.

Because WebQuests require students to analyse material, assess reliable sources and synthesize their findings to complete the task, they promote the development of *critical thinking and problem-solving skills*. WebQuests also promote *digital literacy skills* which have become essential for achieving success in today's digital world through the use of multimedia tools, online resource navigation, and the creation of digital products in the form of presentations, posters or videos.

3.2. A WebQuest example

The following is an illustration of a WebQuest that can be used with intermediate language learners of English. It provides the context, the objectives and forms of evaluating students' work at the end of the activity.

Title: Exploring the English-speaking World

Introduction: Given the many advantages of learning English, this WebQuest seeks to enhance students' language proficiency and cultural awareness by immersing them in an interactive journey across various English-speaking cultures.

Objectives:

By the end of this activity, students will be able to:

- explore different aspects of English-speaking countries, including traditions, food, daily life, etc.;
- practice all four English language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking);
- become familiar with the culture of various English-speaking countries.

Task:

1. Topic selection: Each student will choose an English-speaking country from a provided list. Alternatively, students can suggest one of their own interest.

2. Research: Students can work individually or in groups. The teacher can decide how the activity is going to be organized since with larger classes it is advisable to divide the students into smaller groups. Students will conduct research on their chosen country, focusing on language, customs, holidays, cuisine, and any other aspects that they might find relevant.

3. Creation: Using the results of their research, students will create a multimedia presentation (e.g., PowerPoint, video, poster) to showcase their findings.

4. Presentation: Students will present their projects to the class and answer questions from their colleagues, thus practising both speaking and listening skills.

Resources

- online articles, videos about different countries, eBooks, blogs, etc.
- language learning apps for practising vocabulary and phrases
- multimedia tools for creating presentations.

Evaluation

The assessment will be based on:

- the relevance and accuracy of the **content**

–**use of English** during the presentation (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation)

- originality** and **creativity/ impact on audience**

–the clarity and organization of the **oral presentation.**

Conclusion: With the help of this WebQuest, students will be able to understand and value the diverse cultures of English-speaking countries around the world, as well as increase their confidence when speaking the target language. Both language skills and intercultural competencies can be developed through this type of exercise, not only to improve students' English proficiency but also to help them become more confident while using the language, understand and appreciate the diverse cultures of English-speaking countries around the world.

There are several *factors that can potentially challenge* the effectiveness of a WebQuest. First, the *task design* significantly impacts both student engagement and the learning outcomes. Therefore, it has to be authentic and clearly formulated. Second, effective *technology integration* enhances the interactive nature of WebQuests, facilitating student exploration. Last, a crucial role in successful WebQuest implementation is played by *teacher support* which includes providing clear instructions, modelling inquiry skills, and offering timely feedback.

4. Conclusions

The use of WebQuests in English language learning improves vocabulary

acquisition and reading comprehension skills. It also helps students cope with the demands of technological developments. This teaching and learning approach offers a dynamic and engaging environment which can create a meaningful and authentic learning experience. Teachers can encourage students' motivation, critical thinking and language proficiency by using WebQuests. Students are encouraged to explore, analyze, and synthesize information through this inquiry-based type of activity, which enhances their comprehension of the target language.

WebQuests represent a valuable teaching tool for promoting student participation, critical thinking, and content mastery in educational settings. Grounded in constructivist and inquiry-based learning theories, WebQuests give students authentic, real-world tasks that promote in-depth comprehension and knowledge construction. They provide learners with the opportunity to engage in reflection and metacognition both to track their progress while completing the task and to evaluate their understanding.

While WebQuests have been shown to improve student language learning results, further study is needed to fully explore their potential across diverse educational contexts and subject areas. Even though there are a series of challenges when it comes to designing a WebQuest (such as students' language proficiency, motivation and engagement, or class time constraints), careful planning and targeted implementation can mitigate these issues.

Thus, teachers can design meaningful and authentic language learning experiences that have the potential to enable EFL students to become more proficient communicators by leveraging digital resources and encouraging active inquiries.

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