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WebQuest – an effective online tool for language learning and development

Abstract: Computers and the Internet have opened up many possibilities for language teaching and learning. There are many websites and software programmes which enable learners to improve their language knowledge and skills by communicating with other English speakers and engaging in various activities that provide more authentic learning experiences. This paper describes one of the numerous online tools for language learning and development - the WebQuest, which is an inquiry-oriented activity that requires the use of authentic materials and provides opportunities for authentic language use.

Keywords: WebQuest, language learning, technology, authentic learning experience

> *No language instructor, professor, applied linguist, graduate student, or department chair would deny the importance of using new technologies to enhance the learning environment—and the subject area of foreign languages is no exception.*
>
> (Blake, 2008: xiii)

Introduction

Today, when technology has become an indispensable part of every aspect of our lives, it is inevitable for teachers to incorporate the use of technology in their teaching programmes. Language teachers in particular need to become aware of the benefits of using technology in the classroom. When the use of computers and the Internet in teaching was not an option, Nuttall stated that 'the best way to improve your knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to read extensively in it' (1982: 168). Nowadays, language learners have a third option – computer-mediated communication which offers opportunities for communication with other English speakers from all over the world (Chapelle, 2003: 35). As formal L2 teaching cannot provide sufficient input in the target language, which is one of the conditions for successful language learning, the use of technology 'could play a major role in enhancing L2 learners' contact with the target language, especially in the absence of study abroad' (Blake, 2008: 2). Apart from providing access to authentic materials and opportunities for online discussions and conversations with other English speakers, the Internet

also enables learners to engage in tasks and activities which provide comprehensible input and output, foster interaction, collaboration and negotiation of meaning as well as encourage learner autonomy and independence.

However, as Blake points out, "without a clear pedagogy for web-based language learning, the best applications of technology will be for naught…and abandons the student to nothing more than a series of navigable resources (URLs) accompanied by fill-in-the-blank exercises" (2008: 39). Even though computers can be used for grammar and vocabulary exercises which learners can do in the classroom or at home, their main advantage can be seen in the implementation of tasks and activities that require learners to communicate and interact, to collect and share information, to solve problems and to reach a desired goal. Vallance et al. (2009) state that the tasks which use technology should fulfil the following criteria:

• Encourage discussion, consultation and sharing

• Focus upon process and product of task and learning objectives

• Integrate multiple-media

• Allow access to a wide range of information

• Facilitate and/or negotiate students' periodic outcomes

• Provide a channel for feedback and assessment

• Be flexible in when and where learning occurs

• Question whether the activities required in the task process can be done "without" IT

WebQuests

A WebQuest is one of the many online tools available to learners that provide opportunities for authentic learning experiences. Dodge (1995) defines the WebQuest as 'an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all of the information that learners interact with comes from resources on the internet, optionally supplemented with videoconferencing'. He identifies two types of WebQuests: short-term and long-term. The aim of a short-term WebQuest is knowledge acquisition and integration and it can be completed in one to three class periods. A long-term WebQuest, on the other hand, can take between one week and a month and its aim is extending and refining knowledge. Some of the thinking skills that WebQuests require include: comparing, classifying, inducing, deducing and analysing. They can be created by both teachers and learners as they have a clear structure usually consisting of 5 steps: introduction, task, process, evaluation and conclusion. Optionally there is a *welcome* page which gives a short description of the project and information about the students and the teacher.

Figure 1. Welcome

The role of the *introduction* is to introduce the topic and to give some background information, and 'in the language learning context, often introduces key vocabulary and concepts which learners will need to understand in order to complete the tasks involved' (Dudeney and Hockly, 2007). The aim of this WebQuest created (by Judith Jackson) while the learners are reading the book "A Thousand Splendid Suns" by Khaled Hosseini is to explore several topics related to the book such as the roles of women in pre- and post- war Afghanistan as well as some other cultural and religious issues tackled in the book. One of the language tasks is identifying and interpreting Arabic terms commonly used in Afghan culture.
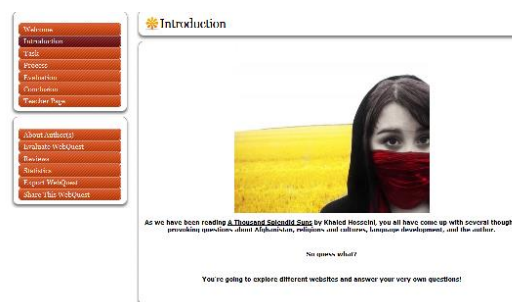

Figure 2. Introduction

The *task* section explains what the learners are expected to do and what their final goal is. As Dodge points out, it should be doable and interesting in order to motivate the learners so that besides helping them to gain new knowledge and skills it should also bring enjoyment and satisfaction. A final product of a WebQuest can be a searchable database, a microworld that represents a physical space, an interactive story, a case study, a document that presents a controversial situation, etc. The goal of this WebQuest is to create a tri-board which highlights the most important information the learners have collected during the WebQuest.

Figure 3. Task

The next stage is the *process* stage which includes the activities and the sources the learners will need in order to do the task such as "web documents, experts available via e-mail or realtime conferencing, searchable databases on the net, and books and other documents physically available in the learner's setting" (Dodge, 1995). Most of the sources are on the Internet and they are usually given as links to the required websites, so that learners have to follow the links and find the answers to the posed questions. In this WebQuest there are five tasks: a) expressing their feelings and reactions to photo essays referring to Taliban, Afghanistan, Afghanistan's Soviet Invasion, Kabul and Women in Afghanistan; b) reading two articles on the role of Afghan women and writing a response; c) finding information about one of the main ethnic groups in Afghanistan; d) finding information about the author, and e) interpreting several Arabic terms used in the book.
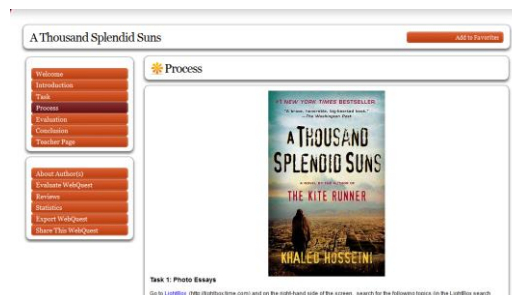

Figure 4. Process

The *evaluation* section contains questions or a rubric for self-evaluation and teacher-evaluation and feedback. Since learners can see all the sections before they start the WebQuest, knowing what is expected of them and how their work will be evaluated helps them understand what they need to do and what aspects of the tasks they need to focus on.

Figure 5. Evaluation

The last section is the *conclusion* where the teacher states what learners will have achieved by the end of the WebQuest. It brings closure to the tasks they have done and gives them a sense of satisfaction for reaching the goal.

Figure 6. Conclusion

This example of a WebQuest shows that in order to complete it, learners have to read and analyse a number of authentic texts and to relate that information to the book they are reading. After they have collected the information, they need to collaborate and decide what information to include in the final product and how to present it to the class. Not only are the sources authentic, but the task and the processes involved in completing the task are also authentic. Authenticity is considered an important factor for successful language acquisition. However, Rüschoff (2009: 44) states that authenticity cannot be limited to occasionally replacing the textbook with a sample of "real language," but that true authenticity necessitates the provision of learning experiences which include authenticity of language, authenticity of task, authenticity of learning situation, and authenticity of interaction in language learning.

Conclusion

Computers and the Internet offer numerous possibilities for language learners. They can communicate with other English speakers via email, chat programmes, discussion forums, social networks or videoconferencing. The can read and listen to authentic materials and engage in various activities that provide opportunities for expanding their knowledge, practicing the

language, developing their communicative competence and learning strategies that would help them become more competent users of the target language. Moreover, web-based tasks help in strengthening not only language awareness, but cultural awareness as well. Bearing in mind the fact that today's generations have grown up with technology, it is wise to take advantage of their love of technology to enhance their language learning and provide authentic learning experiences.

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