

LANGUAGEQUEST DESIGN AND TELECOLLABORATION

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Abstract

This paper reports on the development, use and dissemination of the LanguageQuest Assessment Tool, one of the deliverables of the Dutch, state-funded 'LanguageQuest' Project. The instrument is meant to support teachers in assessing the potential effectiveness of a particular WebQuest in terms of second-language acquisition and to guide the design process for WebQuests for language learning. We present the background to the project and its results and describe the way wider dissemination in Europe is being promoted through workshops at the European Centre for Modern Languages and the EU project 'Moderating Intercultural Collaboration and Language Learning' (MICaLL).

1. Why a Dutch Project 'LanguageQuest'?

The Dutch National Bureau for Modern Languages is an initiative of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. Its mission, since 1996, has been to improve the quality of modern language learning and teaching in the Netherlands. The bureau's activities not only concern the school sector (primary, secondary and higher education), but also include foreign language teaching in trade and industry as well as some general language policy issues. One of the bureau's current concerns is the promotion of the use of ICT in modern language education: <http://www.nabmyt.nl/english/>.

Since the Internet itself provides a powerful digital learning environment for language learning, the members of the ICT Expertise Centre of the National Bureau on Modern Languages believe in presenting learners of modern languages with challenging tasks to be solved by exploring the Web. The WebQuest model (Dodge, 1995) is appealing in this respect because it is based on learning theory concepts that relate to developments in Dutch education emphasizing learner centeredness, and active on-site learning with a focus on learning strategies. Also, the WebQuest model relates well with modern Second Language Acquisition (SLA) views and approaches in modern foreign language (MFL) pedagogy.

The WebQuest concept is seen to have the potential to help MFL teachers to relate learning to the real world, enhance and replace textbook-based learning activities, and support transdisciplinary curriculum activities. Rüschoff and Ritter (2001), who, among others, point to

the relevance of constructivist or, in this case, constructionist approaches for foreign language learning, refer to 'template-based learning'. Another consideration for a dedicated project for MFL was the observation that modern languages were under-represented in the database of the WebQuest Page. A quick, impressionistic scan of other Anglo/American and European Web-based resources such as WebQuest repositories, professional e-zines and discussion lists showed that the language teaching community was still relatively unfamiliar with the concept and that MFL WebQuests were comparatively scarce at that time (for the results of this survey, see <http://www.koenraad.info/CALL/scan>). Accordingly, the potential of the WebQuest format was recognized but it was felt that to disseminate the concept nationally, discipline-specific theoretical underpinnings for this model were needed. Furthermore, it was expected that the provision of dedicated design tools and explanatory text materials would facilitate the production of MFL WebQuests and contribute to their instructional quality.

Inspired by the WebQuest Page (<http://webquest.sdsu.edu/>), the advisory board of CALL specialists of the National Bureau for Modern Languages consequently defined the LanguageQuest project and acquired funding from the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. Its main goal was to develop the concept 'LanguageQuest' as an innovative approach, targeted at adapting the WebQuest idea to the specific requirements of instructed SLA, based on theoretical insights from SLA research, resulting in:

- improved task design and methodology for realistic, content-oriented, functional, task-based foreign language learning
- a set of support instruments:
 - o quality criteria based on an SLA Model;
 - o clarification of task features that trigger useful and effective language learning activities;
 - o a template, customised for the production of TalenQuests;
 - o a rubric for the assessment of the pedagogical qualities of TalenQuests.

2. The LanguageQuest Project Results

2.1. Deliverables realised so far

During the two life cycles of the project a number of results have been achieved. The term 'TalenQuest' ('Talen' is Dutch for 'Languages') is defined as follows: 'A TalenQuest is a WebQuest with a focus on foreign language learning. It is a venture that leads to a product and, in the process, triggers, in a natural way, a variety of effective learning activities.' The project has developed a website (<http://www.talenquest.nl>) offering a database with quality-assured LanguageQuests serving a variety of age ranges and target groups, school types (n=5) and languages (n=6), plus a number of documents that provide design support for LanguageQuest authors. For further details see (Koenraad 2002, 2005a).

One of the challenges was to find out whether additional characteristics for tasks could be defined to optimise the WebQuest concept specifically for SLA. For the underpinning of these characteristics, certain insights were derived from SLA theory and from cognitive psychology; for example schema theory (Rumelhart, 1980), constructivism (e.g. Wolff, 2002 for implications for language teaching), and connectionism (Gasser, 1990; Bereiter, 1991). These insights have led to the formulation of a multi-feature hypothesis providing a basis for a set of additional criteria for WebQuests, especially at fostering SLA.

Central to this developmental work in the *TalenQuest* project are publications by Westhoff (2001, 2004) that aim to make relevant SLA research accessible for practitioners. Based on the so-called ‘penta-pie SLA model’ (see below) and the multi-feature hypothesis two additional sets of criteria have been developed (Koenraad & Westhoff, 2003) that the current WebQuest model, being a generic concept, does not offer for effective language learning, and it is important that these be taken into account. An example to illustrate this point follows.

In a WebQuest about planning a visit to [Disneyland](#), the sub-task “In which restaurant can you order a hamburger?” elicits a much poorer learning activity than “Decide what you would like to eat in which restaurant,” since in the second formulation, the menus will have to be studied more intensively and in more detail. Consequently, many more features of the input provided by the menus will be processed in various ways. The variety and depth of this processing can be further increased by adding a budget condition: “Choose a menu for three persons. You have got € 25 and you can keep what you don’t spend.” The current directives for designing and assessing WebQuests do not give guidelines in this respect.

2.2. The LanguageQuest Assessment Tool

2.2.1. The essential components of a WebQuest

For the reasons illustrated above, additional criteria for WebQuests designed for language learning were developed. The instrument consists of three sets of criteria: in addition to the essential components of a WebQuest as specified by Bernie Dodge (1995), two sections address language learning in particular. As presenting the complete tool is beyond the scope of this paper, we restrict ourselves to addressing these additional components.

2.2.2. Triggering activities that realize the SLA processes

Section 2 of the instrument is meant to show to what extent the task triggers activities in all the areas that are needed to realise SLA processes. Issues related to the five components identified as vital for ‘nutritious’ MFL education, represented schematically as the ‘penta-pie’ in Figure 1. below, are addressed.

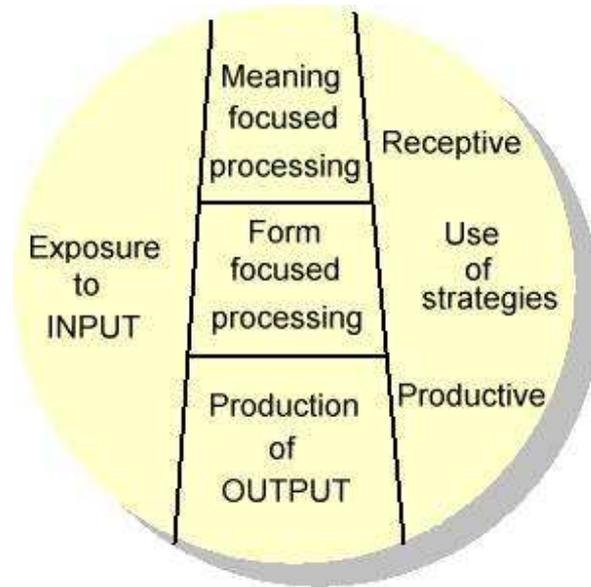


Figure 1. Westhoff's 'penta-pie' (Westhoff, 2004)

Exposure to input

Input is a precondition for language learning (Krashen, 1985). Criteria for input objects are that they are attractive, authentic, and functional (in relation to the task). In addition, the text level is preferably Interlanguage + 1 (= just above the competence of the learner) and there should be variety in the input materials, in terms of text types and modality.

Process for meaning

Tasks should be authentic and doable and based on a natural need for specific information. Furthermore, task-related progress and results cannot be realised without real understanding of the input materials. Types of effective activities include categorising, applying, repeating, elaborating, inducing, and structuring.

Form processing

The learner's attention must be naturally drawn to form aspects such as syntactic, morphosyntactic, lexical and collocational issues. Where necessary, information should also be available to help learners to reach desired insights.

Output production

Tasks should trigger L2 use. Activities should involve exchange of real information, knowledge, and expertise, and, consequently, trigger meaningful communication (e.g. involve negotiation of meaning).

Use of strategies

Activities naturally involve the use of compensatory strategies in the area of language reception and production. Explicit training of strategies is usually called for. Use of learning-strategy-based activities should promote reflection on language-strategy development and product and process (i.e. learning to learn: Did we tackle this task effectively? How did we cooperate?).

2.2.3. The ideal LanguageQuest

The third section of the assessment instrument is meant to help identify an ideal LanguageQuest. Two extreme positions describing features of a ‘traditional’ activity (a Web-based mini-course on the one hand and an ‘ideal’ LanguageQuest on the other) support the assessment activity. As this generally is not a black-and-white issue, a scale offering four positions is used. Aspects involved are design focus, task characteristics and activities, process and resources, results, and finally, presentation. We present two examples to illustrate the use of criteria for these dimensions when reviewing a WebQuest for language learning.

The extreme positions for the design focus are “Conceived with objectives like learning/practising language items (e.g. past tense) or functions (introducing oneself) in mind” vs. “Conceived with a product in mind (e.g. a report, menu, video, webpages, play, exhibition, holiday plan, project proposal)”. In other words, to meet LanguageQuest criteria, designers are invited to think of outcomes and products that are more lifelike and challenging than the standard artefacts and activities of the traditional language classroom.

Our second example deals with the contrasting criteria for the dimensions ‘task characteristics’ and ‘results’: “Task is closed with convergent solutions. Results consequently are either correct or incorrect” vs. “An open task with explicit criteria that allow a variety of feasible and acceptable solutions. Products are evaluated on the basis of criteria: various results are acceptable”. In this case, the LanguageQuest criteria aim to promote ownership and creativity, cf public competitions for architects where specifications for the deliverable (bridge, building, park) are given but varied solutions are expected.

In 2004, a user-friendly tool was produced to encourage and professionalize assessment activities among practitioners. The minimum quality requirements have also been defined and layout elements have been added to support scoring and ranking, thus making it suitable for self-assessment of personal products. The current version and future updates of the assessment tool can be downloaded at the project site or at <http://www.koenraad.info/CALL>.

The LanguageQuest Consortium

One of the objectives during the second phase of the project was to develop a sustainability strategy. This has led to the formation of a consortium dedicated to the maintenance and further development of the project’s results. The original partnership has been extended, with some key players and stakeholders in the MFL domain of the Dutch educational infrastructure. Results, products and expertise are shared. In addition, where feasible and practical, partners collaborate,

e.g. in the area of consultancy activities or the development and running of courses. Collaboration with *Kennisnet*, the Dutch national Schoolnet commissioned by the Ministry of Education to actively mediate in the distribution of quality- assured instructional materials for schools, has led to the integration of the LanguageQuest website in the *Kennisnet* content repository.

The consortium is open to additional parties interested in membership (including international ones). Also, in order to make more fundamental developments possible, the consortium defines follow-up projects. In this context, a state grant was acquired in May 2005 for a project targeted at the further validation of the assessment instrument. Results from field trials and feedback from focus groups have been collected and will lead to transformation of the instrument to a fully rubric-based tool in 2006. The production of an online version has also been planned.

3. Dissemination of the LanguageQuest project results

With the adoption of the project results by *Kennisnet*, the national educational network and content provider for Dutch schools, project targets at a national level have been realised and wider dissemination in Europe is being promoted through workshops at the European Centre for Modern Languages (<http://www.ecml.at>) and the EU project ‘Moderating Intercultural Communication and Language Learning’ (MICaLL - <http://www.micall.net>).

3.1. The ECML LQuest Workshop

The European Centre for Modern Languages is one of the instruments to realise the Council of Europe’s mission: "to achieve a greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and realising the ideals and principles which are their common heritage and facilitating their economic and social progress". To support the improvement of communication within the EU, the Centre offers workshops and conferences that address various aspects of language teaching and learning in general, plus the training of language teachers (<http://www.ecml.at/activities/intro.asp>). Individual EU member states and affiliate countries are invited to recruit and select one representative from their national professional communities such as materials developers, teacher trainers specialized in second language acquisition, teachers, and other multipliers to attend these workshops. The dissemination of ideas and best practices relating to foreign languages is given particular emphasis.

The LanguageQuest project was selected to coordinate the Workshop “Task-based second language acquisition with the help of Internet resources” in the strand “Innovative approaches and new technologies” of the current four-year projects programme the Centre runs. The 2006 LQuest workshop (http://www.ecml.at/mtp2/LQuest/html/LQuest_E_pdesc.htm)

aimed to familiarize the 23 participants from 21 countries with the LanguageQuest concept and the underlying SLA principles and raise competence and skills levels enabling them to:

- estimate the effect of a LanguageQuest on SLA
- improve existing LanguageQuests in terms of better SLA outcomes
- design and construct an effective LanguageQuest

LQuest Net

The participants of the LQuest Workshop committed themselves to disseminate their acquired insights in their home countries. To support them in their endeavours to jointly develop a European community of LanguageQuest professional assessors, developers, and practitioners the international project team will host a website in addition to the ECML services mentioned. In addition to an online tool for the assessment of future LanguageQuest products and the accompanying workflow for the publication of the results of the assessment procedure, it provides facilities for hosting and locating LanguageQuests (<http://www.lquest.net>).

3.2 LanguageQuest and the MICaLL Project

Another dissemination channel is the project “Moderating Intercultural Communication and Language Learning” (MICaLL). This EU project is supported by the Socrates grant programme (http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/socrates/socrates_en.html). The main goal of the MICaLL project (2004-2007) is to contribute to the innovation of teacher education in general and the training and professional development of (student) teachers of modern languages in particular. To this end, a Web portal and project course materials are being developed that offer both student teachers and experienced practitioners experiential learning opportunities to develop competencies relevant for network-based language teaching. The course materials production is based on experiences from experiments and intercultural school projects that the project partners run using the customised web portal at <http://www.micall.net/>. In the preparation and co-teaching of self-designed classroom projects, student teachers and teacher practitioners develop competencies such as choosing appropriate technologies for specific tasks and adapting existing instructional materials.

The project web portal to support the MICaLL community of teachers is based on 'Plone', a Content Management System (CMS). This role-based, Open Source platform is supported by a global community of users and developers (in business and academia). The use of open standards and its modular structure make this platform highly customisable. On registration, members get individual workspaces with homepages that currently provide options to activate and use content objects such as an online WebQuest editor, and personalised communication and publication tools such as weblogs, forums, wiki, and chat. Trainers and

(student) teachers can create virtual class and project rooms for starting and managing telecollaborative projects. Members can choose to keep the content they develop in their workspaces private (e.g. a concept version of a LanguageQuest or a personal blog) or make items accessible or even editable for other portal members. In addition, a publication option is available to present personal content to the Internet public at large. In this way, with the help of the related URL, a finished LanguageQuest can also be reached by non-members.

All published weblogs are presented to the general public in a 'portlet' on the front page of the portal. Next to standard functionality for communication and collaboration, the system has a number of features that make it very suitable for computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL). The availability of a large collection of so-called add-on products makes the portal software highly flexible and allows plug-and-play experimentation. Even more importantly, this provides the user with a consistent interface across the various web editors; e.g. for WebQuests, blogs and wikis. Another crucial feature is the language-versioning facility. All this, plus the fact that the system is scalable and affordable, makes its use attractive in education, in EU projects, and particularly in countries or regions with less widely used languages.

In the MICaLL project, the LanguageQuest project results are being used and expanded in a number of ways. Intercultural collaboration is organised by setting tasks for distributed teams involving formats such as blogging and WebQuests, both at the school and teacher-education levels. Furthermore, in teacher-education methodology courses, students are trained to apply the LQuest design criteria when developing WebQuests for the language classroom. They learn how to create tasks for distributed learners' teams and try out materials and practise moderating with their classes during school practice.

Where feasible, project partners also align curriculum tasks with a view to organising this design process as a transnational activity for student teachers. Deeper learning and opportunities for development of intercultural communicative competence is targeted through having student teachers co-design a LanguageQuest for a specific target pupil group, as they will be using the target language and discussing design choices and the application of SLA principles in the process of completing this type of task. Where whole-class or student-cohort experiments are not convenient due to scheduling or curriculum constraints, small-scale intercultural projects between organisations and individual arrangements at the student and teacher levels are offered. Finally, the project partners use the LanguageQuest design criteria as a basis to develop additional criteria specifically for project work with distributed learners.

For technical support of portal-based LanguageQuest use and production, a dedicated WebQuest editor (see Fig. 2, below) has been developed in line with the MICaLL standard interface and portal workflow specifications.

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Editor's notes:

This presentation was made as a regular session at the Webheads in Action Online Convergence on November 19, 2005. The session took place in the Alado Webheads presentation room.

Recordings were made and can be heard at <http://www.digibridge.net/webheads/ton.htm> and <http://www.micall.net/Members/TonK/News/wiaocreport>. The presentation materials are located here: EU project 'MICaLL' - <http://www.micall.net/publications/> and LanguageQuest Project - <http://www.koenraad.info/CALL/> .