

# ***WEBQUESTS: HOW DO STUDENTS APPROACH THEIR INTEGRATION IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM?***

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## **Abstract**

A good starting point for the foreign language teacher, bearing in mind the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), based on “learning” and “student focused”, would be to think of the possibility of redesigning his teaching/learning environment so as to include, besides face-to-face sessions, the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). This pilot study assesses the attitude of 22 tertiary students towards the integration of ICT, namely WebQuests, in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom.

## **1. Introduction**

Through the “hybrid/blended learning (B-learning)” or “blended e-learning” approach, teachers and students will combine online with face-to-face activities to reach the stated objectives. This approach does not exclude in any way the possibility of combining face-to-face practice with virtuality in the same physical space. The ideal situation is, according to our point of view, the one in which ICT teaching and teaching without ICT can be combined in the same physical space of the classroom (Hinkelman, 2004).

In those cases in which the EFL teacher has technology at his disposal, it is his personal decision (as for the time being) to integrate it or not into his teaching practice. In this article we will refer to a tertiary context in which students have access to a multimedia computer lab with Internet connection.

## **2. Literature review**

A WebQuest can be defined as an interactive learning exercise in which students have to use several Internet resources. According to Martin (1999, p.1), WebQuests are “the most structured, accessible, and promising application of constructivist thought in the field of online education”. The model was developed in early 1995 at San Diego State University by Bernie Dodge with Tom March.

Bernie Dodge, in the [WebQuest Page](#), defines a WebQuest as “an inquiry-oriented activity in which most or all of the information used by learners is drawn from the Web. WebQuests are designed to use learners' time well, to focus on using information rather than looking for it, and to support learners' thinking at the levels of analysis, synthesis and evaluation.” March (2003), on the other hand, defines a WebQuest as “a scaffolded learning structure that uses links to essential resources on the World Wide Web and an authentic task to motivate students' investigation of a central, open-ended question, development of individual expertise and participation in a final group process that attempts to transform newly acquired information into a more sophisticated understanding. The best WebQuests do this in a way that inspires students to see richer thematic relationships, facilitate a contribution to the real world of learning and reflect on their own metacognitive processes” (March, 2003, p.43).

To sum up, according to March (1998), the use of WebQuests:

- Increases student motivation. Students face an authentic task and work with real resources.
- Develops students' thinking skills.
- Fosters cooperative learning (see also Brucklacher and Gimbert, 1999).

The success of a WebQuest depends on five specific rules (Dodge, 2001):

1. *Find great sites*
2. *Orchestrate your learners and resources*
3. *Challenge your learners to think*
4. *Use the medium*
5. *Scaffold high expectations*

Though there is a growing interest in “language quests”, WebQuests for foreign language learning, showed by different research studies which approach this specific subject (see, for example, Koenraad, 2002; Koenraad & Westhoff, 2003; Pérez-Torres, 2006); few studies explore the students' attitudinal component (Tsai, 2006), which is so important if one wants to introduce a new pedagogical tool in the classroom.

According to [Dudeny & Hockly](#), there are many compelling reasons for using WebQuests in the language classroom, including:

- They are an easy way for teachers to begin to incorporate the Internet into the language classroom, on both a short-term and long-term basis - no specialist technical knowledge is needed either to produce or use them.

- More often than not, they are group activities and as a result tend to lend themselves to communication and the sharing of knowledge - two principal goals of language teaching itself.
- They can be used simply as a linguistic tool, but can also be interdisciplinary, allowing for crossover into other departments and subject areas.
- They encourage critical thinking skills, including: comparing, classifying, inducing, deducing, analysing errors, constructing support, abstraction, analysing perspectives, etc. Learners are not able to simply regurgitate information they find, but are guided towards a transformation of that information in order to achieve a given task.
- They can be both motivating and authentic tasks and encourage learners to view the activities they are doing as something 'real' or 'useful'. This inevitably leads to more effort, greater concentration and a real interest in task achievement.

However, even considering WebQuests as “the most promising application of constructivist thought in the field of online education” (Martin 1999, p.1), we should not overlook, in addition to the structural and economic requirements, the specific problems linked to using resources in the target language, the necessity of guiding tools, and the need for the integration of the WebQuest into a complete lesson plan (Benz, 2000, 2001).

### **3. Pilot study**

#### **3.1. Rationale of the study**

Nowadays it is a fact that most teachers see a challenge in shifting away from traditional pedagogical beliefs towards constructivist ones. Bearing this in mind, we thought it would be interesting to find out whether students are also reluctant to integrate ICT in their current learning practice.

This pilot study investigates the attitudes of 22 EFL students towards the integration of WebQuests in the classroom. The aim of this research is to elicit information about students' perceptions of the use of ICT, in particular WebQuests, in the language classroom, and thus work thoroughly on those specific aspects rated as less satisfactory.

#### **3.2. Subjects and setting**

This survey, which will serve as a model for a future wider research study, was carried out with students of EFL at the Universidade de Vigo (Spain), EFL being a non-compulsory subject for them.

The participants in the study had no previous knowledge of WebQuests. They were offered the opportunity to attend a three-session (60 minutes each) workshop on the use of WebQuests for language learning. Twenty-two students attended the working seminar at the language lab.

The title of the WebQuest chosen was “Scotland is for me”, a WebQuest designed for upper-intermediate to advanced students (English) by Sánchez Mallén. Students were supposed to “discover some basic facts about Scotland”, “explore Scotland’s main cities and most wonderful places” and “analyse some of the funniest and most incredible stereotypes”. The WebQuest was included in the “English for travel” lesson plan.

Students were randomly divided into groups of three or four people each and asked to complete the above mentioned WebQuest. There was only one computer with Internet access allowed per group.

### **3.3. The survey instrument**

To elicit answers to our main question (“How do students approach the use of WebQuests for language learning?”), a 20-item anonymous survey in Spanish was administered to students during class time after completing the third WebQuest session (see [appendix](#)). They were allowed 15 minutes to answer it. This survey was partly based on the results obtained in the project [WebQuests and Their Effectiveness in the Classroom](#) (questions 1-8) and partly on the WebQuest definitions by Dodge and March.

Included in the survey are questions relating to different aspects concerned with WebQuest use, such as collaborative learning, motivation, web-based environment, thinking skills, material or achievement.

### **3.4. Results and discussion**

Items were answered on a five-point Likert scale, with the high scores (4, 5) representing a positive response (agree, strongly agree) and the low scores (2, 1) representing a negative response (disagree, strongly disagree). The mid-point (3)

represented respondents who were neutral (and who were left out). Percentages were also calculated on this basis.

The highest rated items, in a hierarchical order, were:

Num.	Item	Agree
10	I like to work with authentic material	100%
9	I would like to finish the task next class period	86.36%
20	I would like to keep on doing WebQuests	86.36%
1	I prefer working with others than on my own	81.82%
11	I enjoy gathering information from the web	81.82%
6	Over time, the group dynamics did not seem to erode. One or two of the group members did not seem to carry the entire load.	77.27%
14	I enjoy working with search engines	77.27%
7	I prefer the web-based environment	72.73%
19	I learn the language doing WebQuests	72.73%

The lowest rated items, in a hierarchical order, were:

Num.	Item	Disagree
4	I collaborated outside my own group to obtain information	45.45%
8	My participation increased as I worked on the assignment at home.	36.36%

Basically, we could say that there is a very positive attitude towards the integration of WebQuests into the classroom. There were only two items which were answered in a negative way (items 4 and 8).

The highest rated item in this study was item number 10 (“I like to work with authentic material”). All subjects who were present in the workshop answered this question in a positive way. This fact gives us an idea of how influential the use of authentic material is on student motivation.

The answers to questions number 9 (“I would like to finish the task next class period”) and 20 (“I would like to keep on doing WebQuests”) contribute to reflect the motivational power of the use of WebQuests as a learning technique.

On the other hand, questions number 1 (“I prefer working with others than on my own”) and 6 (“Over time, the group dynamics did not seem to erode. One or two of the group members did not seem to carry the entire load”) show the willingness of the students to work effectively in a collaborative environment.

Questions number 11 (“I enjoy gathering information from the web”), 14 (“I enjoy working with search engines”) and 7 (“I prefer the web-based environment”) show that students enjoy working on the web, more so than working in the traditional classroom environment.

Finally, question number 19 (“I learn the language doing WebQuests”) confirms that students feel that they actually learn the language by doing WebQuests.

On the other hand, item number 4 (“I collaborated outside my own group to obtain information”), surprisingly enough, showed that students did not like, in general, consulting people from other groups. This might have had to do with the competitive side of the exercise, as every group wanted to present the best results themselves.

Lastly, question number 8 (“My participation increased as I worked on the assignment at home”), showed students’ preference to work in the classroom, and their (well-known) reluctance to be given homework.

#### **4. Conclusion**

As has been stated at the beginning of this paper, this is just a pilot study to gather information about the attitude of EFL students towards the integration of ICT in the classroom, and, as suggested by Martin (1999), we also consider the use of WebQuests as the most promising application of constructivist thought in the field of online education.

We view learning as a process in which students construct their own knowledge and are responsible for their own learning. The activity, inquiry-oriented, should develop students’ thinking skills and foster cooperative learning and, consequently, the role of the teacher will have to change from presenter of information or classroom authority to coach or facilitator to assist, direct, and guide the student (Miller, 2000).

The results of this pilot study corroborate other findings that students show a positive attitude towards the integration of ICT, namely WebQuests, into their classroom learning practice (see Zheng et al. 2005; Gaskill et al. 2006; Tsai, 2006). The obtained results support some of the hypotheses that follow from the theory, such as a greater interest of the students when engaged in authentic tasks and with authentic material, the importance of mutual help, a greater feeling of learning and the increase in knowledge.

#### **5. Implications for the future**

Our first objective will be to change some students' and teachers' perceptions on the use of technology in the classroom. Technology, which is a tool to enhance learning, can be perfectly integrated in the curriculum provided that this integration is based on best practice.

On the other hand, we should make students and teachers aware of the importance of being technologically literate, not only for educational purposes but also for their future world of work.

However, we consider that further research is needed in the area of how the use of ICT impacts on foreign language instruction and, consequently, on student achievement. There is an urgent need for both quantitative and qualitative analyses to assess the integration of different types of technology into the foreign language classroom.

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## Appendix

1. I prefer working with others than on my own.
2. I was excited to search and explore new ideas/information because of the relevance of the topic.
3. I split up the tasks in order to finish on time.
4. I collaborated outside of my own group to obtain information.
5. Students that were reluctant to do research on the Internet became more involved as they watched their peers and time passed.
6. Over time, the group dynamics seemed to erode. One or two of the group members seemed to carry the entire load.\* (reverse coded)
7. I prefer the web-based environment.
8. My participation increased as I worked on the assignment at home.
9. I would like to finish the task next class period.



10. I like to work with authentic material.
11. I enjoy gathering information from the web.
12. I enjoy summarising information.
13. I enjoy organising information.
14. I enjoy working with search engines.
15. I enjoy analysing information.
16. I enjoy taking decisions.
17. I enjoy comparing objects.
18. I like organising my time.
19. I learn the language doing WebQuests.
20. I would like to keep on doing WebQuests.