Chances and Challenges of Using WebQuest in Academic Reading

Min-Tun CHUANG* & Kuan-Yin CHEN
Department of Foreign Languages, National Chiayi University, Taiwan
*mtchuang@mail.ncyu.edu.tw

Abstract: WebQuest, embedded with task-based learning is a scaffold learning structure in which the instructors provide various online resources to help learners complete designed tasks and study the focus language at the same time. However, there are few empirical researches exploring the students' perceptions toward WebQuest, especially in higher education. Therefore, to fill in the gap, this qualitative research attempted to examine how English major college students feel about learning academic reading through a researcher-designed WebQuest. A total 86 sophomore English major students were involved in this study. The findings indicated that through the process of step- by- step guidance provided in the WebQuest, critical thinking could be elicited while some of the challenges were also found in the study. The major contribution of this study is to provide some insights on the application of integrating WebQuest into academic reading, and to understand students' voice toward the use of WebQuest.

Keywords: WebQuest, Academic Reading, Task-Based Learning

Introduction

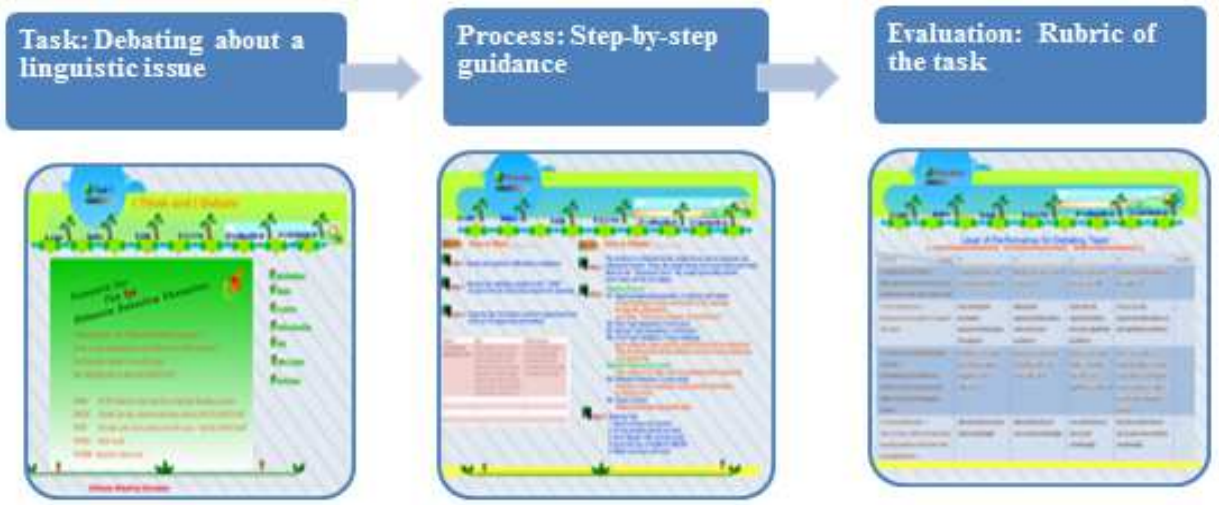
With the advantages and easy accesses to the Internet, the EFL or ESL teachers use computers and the Internet more and more frequently in the classroom to make the teaching-learning process more effective. Oliver (2000) indicated that exposure to information through Web sites can provide students with environments that support inquiry-based and constructivist learning. However, a large-scale study result indicated that there was no effectiveness of access to the Internet in school on students' achievement (Trotter, 2002). The finding of this study revealed the fact that merely expose to the Internet is not enough to improve students' learning. Therefore, WebQuest, an inquiry-oriented instructional template embedded with learning tasks is necessary for improving students' learning. WebQuest, through which students interact with resources on the Internet, can elicit students' higher-order thinking by analyzing the data for completing the task embedded in the WebQuest (Dodge, 1995). Bearing with these in mind, a researcher-designed WebQuest was planned and implemented in a college-level academic reading instruction. It is expected that through the step by step instruction of WebQuest, students would learn how to synthesize the data and to complete a task related to a linguistic issue.

1. Methodology and Research Procedure

Eighty-six sophomore English major students who were attending academic reading at National Chiayi University were invited to participate in this research-designed WebQuest

reading course. Students' novice status to WebQuest is useful to explore their voice toward Internet-based learning. Students completed the WebQuest task over a four week period of time. Firs, students were introduced to the WebQuest (see Figure 1). Addresses for topic-related Web sites were provided, but learners were not restricted to these sites. Then, after going through these data, students needed to organize the findings and then debated over the topic "Whether the earlier the better in language learning", and the rubric would be provided in the evaluation section of WebQuest. Third, learners ought to write down their reflection toward the whole process. Last, the researcher analyzed the written forms of reflection, and used it to describe the findings.

Figure1. The WebQuest Design (http://student.ncyu.edu.tw/~s0991015)



2. Results and Discussions

The spirit of WebQuest and task-based learning were the rubric used to examine students' voice and learning process. In terms of information providing in the WebQuest, most students found that WebQuest provided enough information to them. Student were not passively received from the teacher, they took over the learning process such as searching for extending information (Shiuan). Nowadays, the educators put more efforts on cultivating and reinforcing student's higher levels of cognition. In this study, students needed the ability to distinguish what kind of information (Yi) they needed and synthesize the data they found to debate. WebQuest is also embedded with the task-based learning. It met students' interest (Ling). Furthermore, students needed to use the target language to complete the task-debate. Most of all, students even evaluated their own learning process and result (Shiuan).

However, there were some challenges for the researchers to reflect. The WebQuest designer might create some space for learners to exchange their information and discuss. More explanation about the elements and function of WebQuest should be provided. Furthermore, due to the limitation of the task and time, not each one of the class had the chance to speak out his arguments (Chen-Hua).

To conclude, the results could response to previous researches. WebQuests have four constructs: Critical thinking, knowledge application, social skills, and scaffolded learning (Zheng, 2005). The results also received positive feedback from students toward the use of WebQuest in teaching reading (Tuan, 2011).

3. Conclusion

This study examines the nature of English major students' experiences with the process of learning through WebQuest. On the practical level, the researcher carefully designed a task-based WebQuest and combined it into academic reading. On the theoretical level, the spirit of WebQuest, namely, using learners' time well, supporting learners' thinking and levels of analysis, synthesis and evaluation, and task-based learning add more knowledge to this study.

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