

Task-based Language Learning and WebQuest

WebQuest as a tool for introducing TBL in teacher education

L'autore presenta l'uso del WebQuest quale introduzione all'approccio basato sui compiti (Task-based language Learning) nell'ambito della formazione dei docenti presso il Dipartimento della Formazione e dell'Apprendimento (DFA) di Locarno, descrivendo l'esperienza degli ultimi nove anni e discutendo pregi e svantaggi di questo tipo di percorso didattico. Ideare un WQ è diventato sempre più facile dal punto di vista tecnico, anche grazie alle competenze informatiche degli studenti, ormai tutti in grado di caricare filmati, immagini e foto su un sito web. Per valutare le qualità di un WQ come esempio dell'approccio basato sui compiti si è fatto ricorso ad uno strumento basato sul modello Penta Pie di Westhoff, che contiene gli elementi chiave per un apprendimento efficace di una L2. Il WQ rimane uno strumento valido che dà la possibilità agli allievi di confrontarsi con situazioni realistiche e con un input linguistico autentico, anche se ci si può chiedere se il tempo richiesto dal suo sviluppo non sia sproporzionato al rendimento.

When Babylonia started its new website www.babylonia.ch in 2001, we decided to dedicate a special section of the new site to WebQuests for modern languages. The purpose of this section was to strengthen the ties with practical, but innovative, modern language teaching and give teachers and student teachers a platform where they could publish their products.

In the past nine years more than 100 WebQuests (WQ) have been published on this site, mainly for the languages German, English and French. Some of these WQs had to be removed after a period because the links were no longer correct. Most of them were developed by student teachers at the Department for Teaching and Learning of the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (DFA/SUPSI) in Locarno. Other WQs were developed within the context of in-service training courses in Ticino. A few examples were submitted by students and student teachers from abroad.

The idea behind the development of WQs was twofold: to familiarise student teachers with modern technologies and to create a project applying the principles of task-based language learning (Stoks, 2002). In this article I will look back at our experience of using WQs in our teacher training program and briefly mention some technical and organisational elements. I will then discuss which aspects of the task-based approach have been successfully addressed and which still need further development. In the final section I will make an attempt to strike a balance between the positive and the challenging aspects of using WQ for promoting TBL.

Technological developments and organisational aspects

Initially the WQs were created with an HTML-editor. We used either *Frontpage* or *Dreamweaver*. The WQ-template developed at San Diego State University by Bernie Dodge, who kindly gave us permission to use it, was translated and made available on the Babylonia website, from where various language versions can still be downloaded. This template was widely used not only in Ticino and Switzerland, but also in other countries. A few years ago the whole development process was hugely facilitated by the *wysiwyg* (what you see is what you get) approach on the *Questgarden* website <http://questgarden.com>. Student teachers in Locarno get a two-year subscription for \$20 and create their WQs in the online template. This is a lot easier than learning how to use *Dreamweaver* or *Frontpage*. Meanwhile other WQ development sites have been developed such as the *Zunal webquest maker* at www.zunal.com.

The WQ is developed by the students, who receive one ECTS credit for it. This is an important motivator. From experience with in-service courses I know that participants often start enthusiastically, but rarely finish the WQ to the standard we require on the Babylonia site. It is possible to export the WQ from *Questgarden* and modify some aspects with a HTML-editor. At DFA/SUPSI we emphasise the content aspects in the evaluation and the grading and provide help with respect to technical support.

In recent years student teachers have also developed WQs with additional

wikis that allow their secondary school students to publish their presentations and products digitally, often in a protected (closed) environment. We used *pbworks* (www.pbworks.com) for this purpose. WQs are developed as an example of task-based learning. However, for our upper-secondary teacher training courses we have also experimented with literary WQs, which can also be found at the Babylonia WebQuest site, but will not be further discussed in this article.

TBL

For the introduction to TBL we present Jane Willis's model (Willis, 1996). This model starts from a so-called pre-task phase in which the students' prior knowledge is mobilised. This pre-task phase is followed by the task cycle, which consists of a phase in which students complete the task in small groups, assisted by the teacher, and then present the outcome of their efforts to the class. After these presentations there is a focus-on-form phase. During our courses we contrast the Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP) approach with Willis's TBL model and address other issues regarding TBL, such as the role of grammar. The general principles (rich input; focus on content; realistic tasks and focus on form) are generally respected by the students. They have to think of a topic for the WQ and develop it either in pairs or individually. We first introduced WQs in our courses in 2001 and after nine years it is not easy for students to choose a topic that has not already been addressed. Students hope to develop a WQ that is related to the topic addressed in the textbook in use in their training schools. However, this topic tends to be the same each year, because the WQ module is dealt with in March each year when the schools are covering that same unit from the textbook. It is not always possible for students to actually try out the WQ, because it tends to take up too much

time and because computer labs are not always available. Some student teachers in upper secondary education have used the WQ in combination with a wiki as a form of blended learning. This was often born out of necessity, because the practice teacher was not willing to make so much class time available to carry out the whole project at school.

Language Quest Assessment tool

In our courses we use the Language Quest assessment tool developed in a WebQuest for modern languages project in the Netherlands (www.talenquest.nl) and Koenraad, 2001). This is a tool that helps students analyse a WQ and assess the elements related to TBL. The assessment tool is based on Westhoff's *pentapie* model (Westhoff, 2004). In this model five ingredients for effective second language learning are distinguished:

1. Comprehensible input (i+1)
2. Focus on content
3. Focus on form
4. Pushed output
5. Receptive and productive strategies

It is, however, rather frustrating that there is, as yet, no WQ on the Dutch WebQuest site or at the Babylonia site that meets all the criteria of the assessment tool and has been awarded three stars according to these criteria. Students first analyse other WQs with this tool, but tend to be too generous with their points.

In addition, student teachers are inclined to formulate tasks or activities that are not "rich" enough in terms of task involvement. They fear that the tasks are too difficult for some students in the *scuola media* (*secondary school*), which is not an unrealistic concern, since the students at the *scuola media* are usually taught in mixed ability classes. However, designing a WQ to ask students to visit a website of,

say, Euro Disney to find out the costs of a hamburger at the local McDonalds does not justify the time and energy that creating one requires.

TBL-aspects in WQ

Looking through the collection of WQs I have noticed the following points:

- WQs for French and English are more challenging than the ones for German. It is apparently easier to develop a WQ in French or English for beginning Italian-speaking learners than for German, this being the harder language to learn for predominantly Italian mother tongue learners. In French and English WQs, there is more authentic material, the input is richer, the tasks are more challenging and the resources and sources more varied. The opportunity to make the tasks richer and offer more authentic materials and resources obviously also depends on the target group: there is big difference between a second year and a fourth year class in terms of ability. Students in Ticino often do not even reach the A2 level for German at the end of the *scuola media*. It is often hard to find authentic materials suitable for students at the A1/A2 level in this language. The levels achieved in French and English are higher: B1 for French and A2 for most students of English.
- The tasks are usually real tasks, i.e. *activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to*



achieve an outcome (Willis, 1996: 23) and not simply exercises (see Littlewood, 2004 for a discussion on the distinction between task and exercise). This is also the result of student teachers receiving feedback at the developing stage, when non-tasks are criticised by the trainers and usually changed.

- There is a tendency to strongly guide the process and to allow little space for unexpected outcomes, especially for beginners.
- Most WQs have a class presentation as their final product. Attempts to make the tasks more realistic with a product that could be used outside the classroom or the school are rare. Some examples that have been developed are WQs related to travelling. One WQ was developed with a website in which upper secondary level students created a site for visiting students from other parts of Switzerland. The other is a WQ for the planning of a class trip to a city in the UK or in Germany.
- The focus on form aspect is seldom properly addressed. Students at school carry out the WQ, but once they have completed their task and have presented their findings, there is little motivation to focus on form. This is already a problem in Willis's TBL model, if applied in a regular classroom context, but even more so when the WQ is carried out in a digital environment. Student teachers have experimented with exercises at the end of the WQ or also in the pre-task stage to offer students support or to present them with necessary linguistic tools such as grammar or vocabulary, chunks or functional language ("Redemittel") in German. They have created links to exercises created in *Word* that can be downloaded by the students carrying out the WQ. Others have experimented with *Hot Potatoes*. This program is fairly popular among student teachers, but the exercises created with this software

seldom meet the criteria of effective language learning. It is probably the ease with which these exercises can be created that make them popular, but they hardly deserve to be termed effective. The rationale behind the focus on form activities is, of course, that they are closely connected to the communicative activities. If they are treated separately they lose much of their effectiveness.

WebQuests in the balance

Developing a WQ is not difficult once you have a clear idea of the topic you wish to address. The technical realisation has become relatively easy. Ever more students are familiar with the kind of interface found in *Questgarden*. They know how to upload pictures, photos and videos to *Facebook* or other social networking sites and this process does not differ much from that of *Questgarden*.

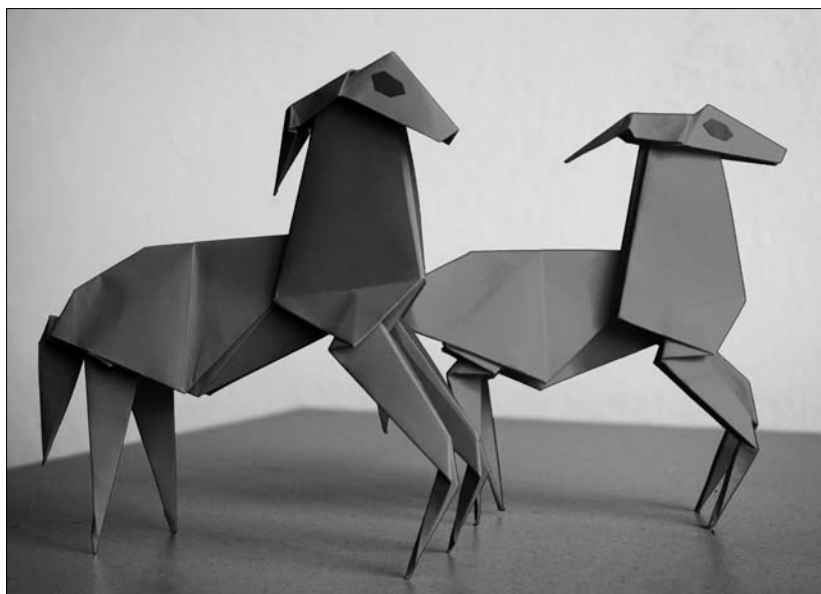
WQs have become a very popular design activity in educational institutions. There are literally thousands of WQs to be found on the Internet. Some of these are incomplete, have been published prematurely and few

have been through a quality filter. *Questgarden* claims to assess WQs and we have found WQs in their selection created by our students. The criteria, however, are not very transparent.

WQs are published on the Web and are meant to also be used by others. However, they are rarely suitable for contexts other than the one for which they were originally designed. Links may no longer be active after a while or unsuitable for another teacher's students. In *Questgarden* existing WQs can be downloaded and modified, but we have no experience with this facility.

Finding an original and suitable topic is not easy. Most topics have already been covered if you search the *Questgarden* database, although this mainly applies to English. There are far fewer WQs in French or German.

We publish the WQs developed by our students on our institute's website and on *Babylonia*, if we find them suitable. We reject very few, but this is also because we insist that the WQ meets some minimum standards in order to be published. The fact that the WQ is being published also encourages student teachers to finish it properly and to incorporate the trainer's feedback.



In spite of a number of difficulties and the considerable time and energy students have to invest in the creation of a WQ, they are largely satisfied with their final product. They often regret not having been able to use it with a class but intend to do so when they have graduated and can decide for themselves to use it. A few students, mainly in upper-secondary education, have continued developing WQs on other topics after they graduated.

What are the effects of WQ on language learning?

This is perhaps one of the most problematic aspects of WQ. There is a strong tradition of prescribed textbooks in schools in Ticino. Textbooks are useful in many ways and can give teachers, especially beginning ones, valuable support: they can expect that following the textbook, they will adhere to the cantonal curriculum. Publishers promise that the course is an A1 or A2 course and imply that if you follow the textbook, things will be ok. Most textbooks take a dual approach and present many communication tasks, but at the same time there is a clear, underlying development of grammar. Carrying out a WQ with a class takes a couple of hours and some teachers are afraid they won't be able to get through the prescribed syllabus (to reach Unit X of the textbook, as agreed by the team in the school). We have noticed that, in spite of the fact that in our training courses we emphasize the importance of tasks, teachers tend to discuss progress in terms of grammatical categories and would typically answer a question about where they are in the textbook with a reference to a grammar point (the past tense, adverbs of frequency). WQs depart from carefully graded materials and present students with different contents that can vary between the groups of students. Using a WQ takes away a sense of security.

If you deal with a chapter from the textbook, you can assume that all students have learnt the same things, and you can set them a test on topics and vocabulary addressed in class. WQs, where students may follow different learning paths and do not learn the same things, require a different kind of assessment.

Conclusion

Working with WQs is generally seen as a positive experience. Student teacher evaluations show that they appreciate the development of a WQ. There are, however, critical voices too. Why invest so much time in the technical realisation if you can present students with the task instructions, the procedure, the resources (links) and the evaluation criteria on a sheet of paper, ask them to find the materials on the Web and work with them to create a presentation?

The WQ has the advantage that it forces the student teacher to specify in a WQ the task, procedures and links and evaluation criteria, specify the objectives and describe the learner group and the link with the curriculum. Everything will be published on a website, so your product will be visible to others.

For the end-users of the WQ – the students in the schools – the most positive factor remains the chance to carry out real-life tasks, to access authentic materials, to work autonomously as well as having the opportunity to make their own choices and to work with the Internet and not with a textbook. If well-created, the WQ will give them a lot of exposure to authentic language, they can process language content and linguistic forms, apply strategies and produce an output in the target language. If these “pentapic criteria” (Westhoff, 2004) are met, the WQ should contribute to effective language learning.

A weak point remains the focus on

form. One can argue that not everything needs to be done or specified in the WQ itself, and that the teacher whose students carry out the WQ can decide to organise focus on form activities at the end of the WQ. Activities and exercises to address the focus on form issue have not been dealt with in a satisfactory way so far. That may be the challenge for the next few years.

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