



Webquest in the Context of the Russian Language Learning

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Abstract

The main aim of an article is to provide a reflection on an application of WebQuest method in the Russian language classroom. WebQuest is seen as a convenient method of activating the creative potential of the students, of increasing their involvement, and making students a part of the teaching and learning processes and through that increase their motivation. While maintaining control over the structure, resources and the contents such methodology allows certain flexibility particularly in terms of adjusting the material to the students' needs and abilities as well as the nature of the content. That helps to create a dialogue between an instructor and the audience, them and the content and, so, brings it closer to a student and turns it to a something real and alive. While WebQuests are quite well studied in the context of the English language learning, they are still not well explored in the context of Russian language teaching and learning (RLTL).

1. Introduction

Trying to increase students' motivation as well as effectiveness of the second/foreign language learning, specialists in language education look for different didactic technics. Modern Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) became an important instrument and an integral part of the foreign language education both contact and distant.

The courses that I teach at the university level aims at training communicative and sociocultural skills and competences of the learners. My students are adults with different background education. The level of their language knowledge varies between A1 and B2 from. Besides improving students' grammar and pronunciation, the main problems I face include encouraging students to communicate – to speak and write - more actively both inside and outside the classroom. In search for a method, I decided to take a look at WebQuests.

A WebQuest is a didactic method that rationally involves Internet into the learning process. The method reflects ideas of a constructivist philosophy, learner-centred, project-based and cooperative approach to teaching [1]. First developed by researchers Bernie Dodge and Tom March in 1995 it has been tested by teachers of different disciplines all over the world for almost 20 years. The area of second/foreign language teaching and learning was not an exception.

2. Definition of a Web Quest

The WebQuest is defined as “an inquiry-oriented activity” [2]. It means an adventure: a research that students have to do. The entire process is well organized and thought and includes all the necessary training and resources.

According to the existing literature, the central task of the WebQuest should be meaningful for the learners and have an obvious connection with their everyday lives. A good WebQuest should “inspire students to see richer thematic relationships, facilitate a contribution to the real world of learning and reflect on their own metacognitive processes” [3]. Learners should get skills that they need in their real live, including working with information, doing a research or a project, a group work, presentation and computer skills. Raúl A. Mora states that “WebQuests become a very beneficial activity because, when well designed, they involve students in more active learning styles... they help them learn what good information and quality sources look like and enable the teacher to find other creative ways to use his/her expertise” [4]. The method teaches responsibility and so prevents plagiarism.

It also requires from the teacher to have a certain level of computer skills, and a familiarity with essential online resources, as well as more active involvement of the teacher in the teaching process, often in the form of learning itself.

3. Language WebQuests

The above mentioned advantages of the WebQuest method made it popular in the language teaching and learning process. Even a special term was coined for language WebQuests: LanguageQuest [5] or TalenQuest (a Dutch term - quoted from [4], [5]). Because of interactive nature of the Internet, its resources provide the “authentic language material” [5] including the changes the language may suffer



through the years. Godwin-Jones mentions that “using the Web as a source of real-world information is in line with another important component of contemporary language learning methodology, the use of authentic language materials” [5]. Learners can see that the language they learn is real and alive, and not an abstract grammar rule from a textbook. This becomes important in the context of Russian language learning in Czech Republic, because Russian is not a language you deal with every day unlike English, for example.

WebQuests give an opportunity to use language as an instrument of communication as it naturally is. In a well designed Language WebQuest learners have to use a target language doing a task, answering a question, gathering information, doing a research, exchanging information, communicating to each other and to a teacher. Grammar rules and vocabulary, as a result, stop being an object of the language learning and become a tool.

WebQuests facilitate acquisition of various communicative competences and skills through the variety of the resources available. Intensity of the usage of the target language on different stages of the WebQuest may depend on the level of the students’ language proficiency and their general learning skills. Mora, for example, suggests that “additional language support resources are both necessary and important, it is up to the teacher to place these resources within the process page or have them in a separate page” [4, 2094]. WebQuest task may be also accompanied by supporting lexical and grammar exercises based on its materials [6].

A teacher can refresh training materials at any time by uploading or adding resources if they were removed and became out of date or as a response to students’ requests and needs and a situation in and outside the classroom. If a teacher wants to use a WebQuest several semesters the materials have to be updated regularly.

4. Tasks of Language WebQuests.

A task is a key part of a WebQuest. It should be authentic, interesting, doable and well formulated. Dodge suggested and described tasks appropriate for the WebQuest method: retelling, compilation, mystery, journalistic, design, creative product, consensus building, persuasion, self-knowledge, analytical, judgment, scientific tasks [7]. However, in the end, it is the question of the teacher’s goals and skills (see Foreign Language WebQuest examples at www.zunal.com).

In the case of the language WebQuest, the goal of development of communicative linguistic skills should be incorporated into other kinds of tasks, otherwise the WebQuest will become just another textbook (or an online course). Mora et al. makes a good comparison of building a WebQuest with baking a cake: “You know that ingredients such as eggs, flour, butter, or sugar are there; yet you cannot see them” [8]. Giving an example, they mention a WebQuest where a problem of correction of English vowel articulation for Spanish speaking learners was hidden behind a task of acting a role for a new Dr. House (House, M.D. TV show) [8]. Golovatina-Mora suggested teaching realities of Russian culture with a help of a task to prepare a survival guide for traveling in time after reading a sci-fi novel [9].

5. Runet in the context of RLTL

Runet, or Russian Internet, is quite rich with resources that could be used in the Russian Language WebQuests. They include different educational and linguistic resources such as dictionaries and books of reference (www.gramota.ru, <http://slovari.yandex.ru>, www.rubricon.ru, etc.), the Russian National Corpus (www.ruscorpora.ru), free online courses of Russian language, other e-learning materials (http://speak-russian.cie.ru/time_new/, www.russianclub.pro, www.everydayrussianlanguage.com, www.dist-learn.ru, etc.), tests (<http://testhost.cie.ru/moodle/>), teaching videos and games for language learning (<http://rusprof.oc3.ru/>, <http://www.udarenie.info/game/>, etc.), Russian movies and literature (<http://cinema.mosfilm.ru>, <https://www.youtube.com/user/ClassicCartoonsMedia>, www.lib.ru, www.feb-web.ru), even a virtual journey by the Trans-Siberian Railway (<http://rzd.ru/vtour/index.html>), where one can visit several points in the train and see reaction of fellow travellers. Such resources could become a great source of inspiration for a classroom. In addition, the Wikipedia counts a significant number of articles in Russian language (1 142 895).

6. WebQuest in the RLTL context

In this section I want to discuss two WebQuests I found in the section of foreign languages of the WebQuest database www.zunal.com: Russian Alphabet for Beginners [10] and Windows to Siberia [11]. Russian Alphabet for Beginners aims at introducing to the learners Russian letters and training their basic writing skills by writing simple, basic Russian phrases in a postcard to actual Russian schoolchildren. Windows to Siberia was an activity for participants of the Fulbright-Hays Group

Projects Abroad Program in 2013, who went to Siberia, with an overall goal of learning some basic information about Siberian cities, Russian language and peculiarities of the local cultures. The database has interesting projects that could serve as examples of WebQuests even though not exactly for the purposes of the RLTL.

Applying the WebQuest evaluation system developed by Dodge and colleagues [12] and Zunal [13], I reviewed the above mentioned two WebQuests as examples of their application in RLTL. Russian Alphabet for Beginners is designed specifically for the purposes of RLTL, while Windows to Siberia has broader goals. Both WebQuests are designed for a non-Russian speaking audience, therefore the materials and instructions are predominantly in English. English is even an expected language to complete the tasks in the Windows to Siberia. The overall design of the WebQuests is clear and encourages further independent learning. Both WebQuests in general include different types of activities that require synthesis of multiple sources of information and support training different communicative skills and competences. For example, Windows to Siberia's tasks include making a presentation, sharing ideas and designing a guidebook using the resources provided. The resources of some sections of this WebQuest, however, present rather a list of references. Most of the tasks require quite a mechanic reproduction (as retelling or repetition activities).

The significant part of the teaching materials of the WebQuest Russian Alphabet for Beginners are illustrations as references to the texts (a map, picture of metro). Learners can combine different types of resources: web resources with traditional textbooks or worksheets if they want to. The WebQuest is written in a simple and clear language. It provides basic information on the Cyrillic alphabet, with the tasks designed to help learners to initiate and sustain a very basic correspondence with a Russian speaker of the same age. Both the task and resources provided are meaningful and demonstrate connection to the learners' everyday life. Conclusion provides information about what have students learned and how they can apply this knowledge.

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