# WebQuest-based College English Network Teaching

## Siyang Liu

Foreign Language Department, Jilin Institute of Chemical Technology, Jilin City, 132022, China

Email: liu990205@163.com

**Keywords:** WebQuest; College English; network teaching

**Abstract.** With the rapid development of information technology nowadays, more and more innovative teaching models are being applied to College English teaching practice so as to improve the teaching quality, among which WebQuest-based network teaching is the one. This paper firstly explains the connotation of WebQuest. Then it argues that constructivism is the theoretical foundation of this new teaching model. In addition, the paper makes an exploration of the design of WebQuest-based College English network teaching from five aspects, followed by some advice on how to apply WebQuest. It finally concludes that WebQuest-based College English network teaching is the essential way to accomplish the ultimate goal of developing English learning in the direction of individualized and autonomous learning beyond the limit of time and space.

## Introduction

In order to meet the needs of the rapidly developing cross-cultural communication, it is generally agreed that reform in the model of College English teaching in China is necessary and inevitable. And early in 2007, College English Curriculum Requirements for Non-English Majors was issued by the Ministry of Education, which proposed to adopt new teaching models to improve the conventional teacher-centred classroom teaching. [1] And with the rapid development of information technology nowadays, some teachers are exploring a new, innovative teaching model of applying the Internet to their teaching practice, hoping that abundant online resources can be effectively used to enhance foreign language teaching. However, it is uneasy for many English teachers to assess, to choose and to synthesize these resources. Consequently, it is a great challenge for them to apply the online resources to their in-class activities to achieve their teaching goals. But the situation can be greatly improved with the aid of WebQuest. It is believed that the combination of WebQuest and network learning can bring about drastic changes in College English classroom teaching.

## The Connotation of WebQuest

WebQuest is a newly-invented teaching model which was established by Professor Bernie Dodge of the Department of Instructional Technology in San Diego State University in 1995. In WebQuest, the Internet as a part of teaching is used in any stage of any course. According to Bernie (1997), WebQuest is an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all information that learners interact with comes from the Internet resources, optionally supplemented with videoconferencing. A WebQuest should necessarily contain such critical parts as an introduction, a task, a description of the process, a set of information sources, an evaluation and a conclusion. There are also some other non-critical attributes, including group activities, motivational elements and interdisciplinary instruction, etc. [2]

Since Bernie put his ideas on the Internet, hundreds of teachers have participated in the online discussion and studied this unique form of teaching model. They tried designing WebQuests to build a favourable learning atmosphere for students, intending to stimulate students' interest and to define learning objectives. As a matter of fact, this is a kind of inquiry learning through which students' understanding of the problems rises from the perceptual stage to the rational level, and meanwhile new knowledge is constructed. This conforms to the ideas of constructivism.

**The Theoretical Foundation of WebQuest-based Inquiry Learning**

Although "WebQuest-based Inquiry Learning" (WQBIL) is a relatively new term in the education field, the ideology has been constructed for many years. The theoretical foundation of WQBIL is constructivism, which focuses on four elements of "environment, cooperation, conversation and meaning construction". Jonassen (1999) has ever pointed out that learning from constructivist environments is about meaning making, which is about what learners come to know. [3] Although constructivism is rich in content, its core can be summarized as "learner-centred", which emphasizes the learners' active exploration of knowledge, discovery of knowledge and the active construction of knowledge meaning. Constructivist theory holds that learning is an active process for learners to construct meaning and that learners' ability to construct meaning plays an important role in the acquisition of knowledge.

The network technology provides an opportunity to promote the constructivist teaching model which can be used to create some difficult tasks for learners, to implement targeted language teaching to learners, and to develop knowledge construction, interpretation and social communication ability of learners in effective co-operations. Network teaching pays attention to the design of learning environment, embodies students' cognitive subjectivity and teachers' leading position, and reflects students' autonomy and collaboration. WebQuest-based inquiry learning combines the teaching methods of "introduction" and "task-driven", stresses "learning by using" and "learning by solving problems", which embodies the thought of constructivism. WebQuest provides a new idea for designing College English network teaching.

**The Design of WebQuest-based College English Network Teaching**

In order to improve students' cognitive ability and highlight "learner-centred" teaching idea, WebQuest-based College English network teaching should be designed and implemented. Here the network information technology should play fully its supporting role to create autonomous learning atmosphere for students, so that College English learners' communication, cooperation and competition can be truly reflected in the network environment. In the specific design of College English teaching contents, not only should the advanced teaching and learning theory be used to guide the design, but also should the design platform of WebQuest be applied effectively in creating a new model for English network teaching practice so that the objective of developing students' ability can be achieved eventually.

A. Determining a relevant subject

It is necessary for English teachers to analyse the teaching objectives of the entire course and each teaching unit to determine the subject of the current learning. When the teachers are designing a WebQuest, they should describe tasks clearly based on a careful analysis of the students' current cognitive structures and levels, their individuality, hobbies and interest. The WebQuest should be corresponding with the students' psychological complexion and age characteristics so as to stimulate their motivation to solve the problem of cognitive imbalances. Specifically, the subject in College English network teaching should be determined in agreement with the English language and cultural knowledge, so that the teaching can not only undertake the task of passing on linguistic knowledge, but also realize the function of cultural exchange between China and the west.

B. Selecting Internet resources

English teachers should select carefully the Internet information resources related to the subject, and provide the links to the specific Internet sites which should be investigated in advance for content, relevance and even availability from school in order to avoid leaving students to wander through web-space completely adrift. The Internet resources should effectively provide English learners with as much learning related audio, video and text resources as possible on the one hand, and have a reasonable external resources link function on the other. [4] They are not only the teachers' management platform, but also the students' treasure where they can exchange, upload and search for other English learning resources.

C. Designing the task with open questions

The question is the starting point of implementing inquiry learning, is the beginning of knowledge. Centring on the particular problems of curriculum, or the questions raised in the course of creating situation, inquiry learning prompts the learners to analyse and to solve problems. In this process, learners can realize their internalization of knowledge, learn to use, and learn to create. Among the most opinions, the learning of English language and cultural knowledge is just the skills training of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating. But in fact, it consists of many deep-rooted problems, such as semantics, pragmatics, literature, culture and so on. In particular, the use and translation of English vocabulary in specific contexts is confused by the Chinese students, and the comparison of Chinese and Western culture is a major difficulty in learning. Students can overcome these problems through inquiry learning of different levels, so as to understand the use of language and the essence of culture.

D. Organizing teaching activities

With a series of questions designed ready, the teacher will organize some activities through a WebQuest, and lead students to think actively and purposefully. The process of carrying activities can be broken out into clearly described steps which the students have to go through to accomplish the task. The process of learning and teaching methods is open. [5] Since the English language and cultural knowledge involves a wide range of content and different students' needs to the language knowledge differ in various ways, their problems cannot be totally solved in the time-limited classroom teaching. Therefore, teaching activities should be extended from the classroom teaching to the network extracurricular self-study, changing the students' learning concept and model from the passive "want me to learn" to the initiative "I want to learn". Network English teaching can also solve the contradiction between "less hours" and "much demand" to a certain extent.

E. Presenting and evaluating results

The final results of activities can be presented in the form of PowerPoint or oral reports etc. It is of great importance to evaluate the results, which, as feedback information can make the activity designers know the learning of learners in time. College English network teaching should especially pay attention to students' actual study effect and put emphasis on learning evaluation. Because the language learning we are seeking here is at a higher level in Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, [6] it's difficult to use multiple-choice tests to evaluate the results. Therefore, in each WebQuest, a set of diversified formative evaluation system containing the rubric with which students will be evaluated is used. Evaluation is given by the teacher and the students both. From the perspective of an organizer and guider, the teacher's overall evaluation is mainly a check for the quality of the quests, while the student's self-evaluation is reflective and the classmates' evaluation are much easier to be accepted. All the students should be demanded to sum up the process of the quests so as to know what they have acquired and be encouraged to extend the knowledge and experience obtained into other fields.


**Some Advice**

No matter how innovative and advantageous WebQuest is, there will be inevitably some problems when we apply it. Therefore, in order to create an appropriate learning environment which enables learners to carry out their learning through experiments, independent inquiry, co-operation and other ways, it is critical that teachers know how to tackle those potential problems. Here is some advice on how to apply WebQuest to College English teaching.

A. Define the purpose of applying WebQuest clearly

The teacher should be clear that the purpose of applying WebQuest is to attain certain teaching objectives that conform to the student's own target in certain learning environment. The questions given by the teacher should leave students an impression that the questions are their own problems. Any aimless activity or the activity with deviation will produce a result that is just the opposite of the teacher's wish.

B. Design the tasks carefully

The teacher should design the tasks with open questions that are not too difficult for the students. That is to say, the tasks must not go beyond too much the students' knowledge and ability, and should match their characteristics, since the purpose of answering questions is to encourage students' engagement so as to understand this academic field rather than to expect their perfect answers.

C. Change the teacher's role

Harmer (1983) has ever stated that the teacher plays multiple roles in communicative activities—as controller, as assessor, as organizer, as promoter, as participant and as resource. [7] In WebQuest-based English network teaching, the teacher's role must be converted from a traditional authority of imparting knowledge into a learning counsellor, senior partner and co-operator of the students. It is important for the teachers and the students to explore problems together and it is critical for them to exchange and even challenge different ideas.

D. Understand the process of a WebQuest truly

Before applying WebQuest to College English teaching, teachers should exert great efforts to study it carefully so as to achieve a good understanding of it. Only by a true understanding of the connotation and technology of WebQuest, can teachers avoid taking its basic modules as executive commands, and provide necessary guidance to students in accordance with the learning process.

**Conclusion**

In short, WebQuest creates a real and natural "learner-centred" language learning environment which can improve students' involvement and cross-cultural understanding, help students to absorb new knowledge constantly and to reflect about and comment on their own language activities and others'. Their interest and imagination are stimulated. The resultant personal commitment forms the foundation of success. Therefore, we should take full advantage of WebQuest in the cultivation of students' autonomous capability and the enhancement of teachers' reflective consciousness. It is believed that WebQuest-based College English network teaching is the essential way to accomplish the ultimate goal of developing English learning in the direction of individualized and autonomous learning beyond the limit of time and space.

**References**

[1] Higher Educational Department of the Ministry of Education, College English Curriculum Requirements for Non-English Majors. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2007.

[2] B. Dodge. Some thoughts about WebQuests. http://webquest.sdsu.edu/about_webquests.html.

[3] D. H. Jonassen. Learning with Technology: A Constructive Perspective. NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1999.

[4] A. Garry, P. Graham. How to succeed with WebQuests. http://www.techlearning.com/db_area/archives/WCE/archives/adampary.html.

[5] Shan Chen. WebQuest: a new kind of internet-aided activity for language teaching and learning [J]. Computer-assisted Foreign Language Education, vol. 85, Jun. 2002, pp. 43–46.

[6] A. Churches. Bloom's digital taxonomy. http://edorigami.wikispaces.com.

[7] J. Harmer. The Practice of English Language Teaching. London: Longman Publishing, 1991.