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Introduction

One of the priority trends in higher education in Ukraine is to focus on enhancing students' learning activity, especially on developing students' creative autonomous learning skills, which requires integration of various teaching methods and learning styles. Accordingly, researchers in didactics and psychology are increasingly becoming involved into the finding new teaching methods, which can efficiently develop students' basic skills and improve students' autonomous learning motivation.

Integration of web-based technologies into teaching-learning process can, beyond all doubt, facilitate academic success of university students. Consequently, teacher can improve students' individual learning trajectories and foster critical thinking. The Internet is believed to be the most powerful tool in finding information, which in turn requires students' information literacy and information competency, the latter being one of the key competencies of a specialist.

With wide use of web-based technologies in higher education is the need for university teachers to be competent in introducing them systematically and methodologically correctly. Although nowadays few students and teachers fail to use up-to-date web-based technologies, little research has been carried out in the area of teaching foreign languages through Web Quests.

Objectives of the paper

Study the educational value of Web Quests in teaching foreign languages at higher educational institutions, describe the Web Quest created by first-year students of Vinnytsia Institute of Economics of Ternopil National Economic University, and evaluate the didactic efficiency of integration Web Quests with the traditional teaching methods Web Quests in developing students' autonomous learning skills.

Results of research

Web Quests in didactics are inquiry-oriented lesson formats with elements of role-play in which most of all information that learners work with come from the web [Кадемія, Євсюкова, Ткаченко 2011]. These can be created using various programs, including a simple word processing document that includes links to websites.

In using Web Quests, we can identify the three distinguishing features that make them differ from mere finding information on the Internet:

- they pose a problem to be solved;
- they can suggest both individual and group search tasks, the latter specifying roles for each group member;
- they involve students into group discussions which inevitably encourages critical reasoning.

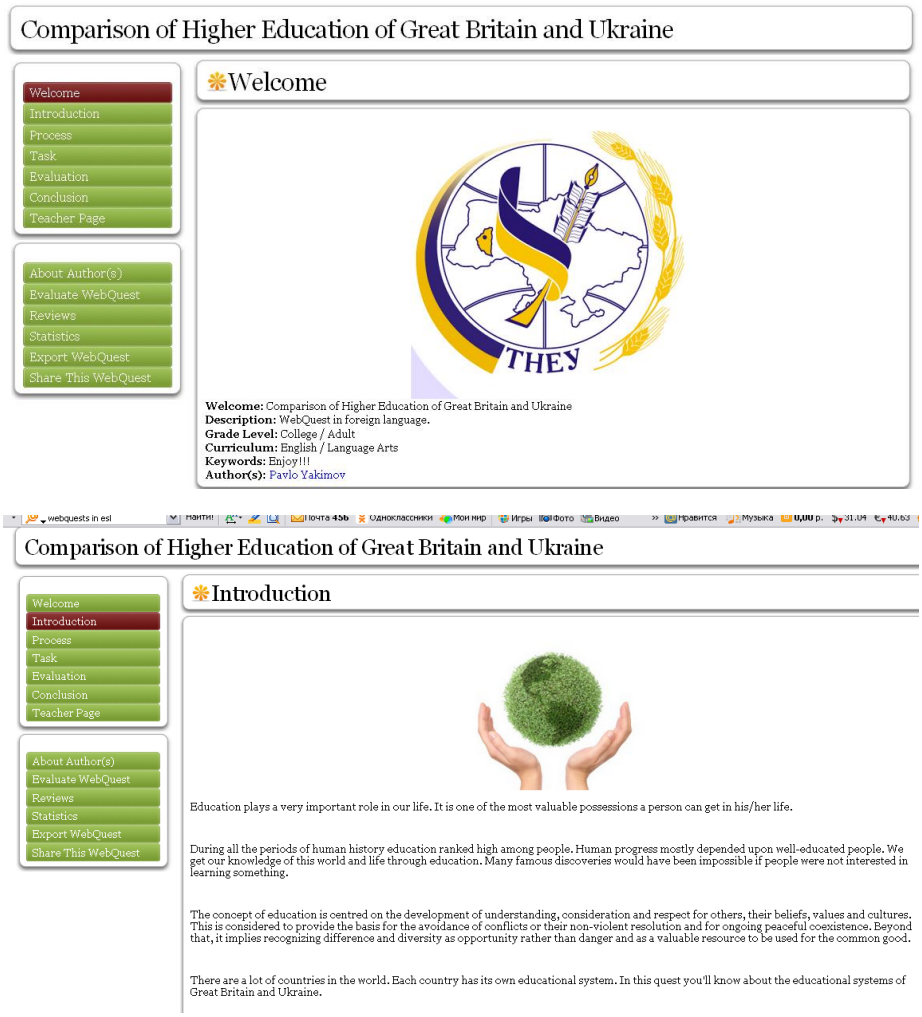
Being based on the project method, Web Quests enhance students' autonomous learning activity (either individual, or pair/group). Our previous research proved that project work is an utterly favourable learning environment which allows students to develop a number of the key competencies [Іщук 2009: 98]. These competencies embrace:

- *general learning capability*, which is the ability to acquire theoretical knowledge and develop practical skills through doing practical tasks;
- *foreign language proficiency* – the ability of an individual to speak or perform in an acquired language [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_ proficiency];
- *communication competency*, i.e. the system of internal resources needed for efficient communicative action in a certain situation of interpersonal communication;
- *social competency*, which implies the ability to take responsibility and make common decisions in a peaceful manner;
- *interpersonal competency*, which relates to efficient team-work for achieving common objectives;
- *information literacy*, i.e. the knowledge and ability to use computers and related technology efficiently, with a range of skills covering levels from elementary use to programming and advanced problem solving [*Computerized…* 1984: 234];
- *research competency*, i.e. the ability to analyze and synthesize information, to organize and plan their own research work, to apply the obtained knowledge in practice; it also embraces the ability to adapt to the new situations and educational requirements, and produce fresh ideas.

Using Web Quests adds improving *information competency* – the ability to recognize the need for information, acquire and evaluate information, organize and maintain information, and interpret and communicate information [http://www.chaffey...].

One of the main features of information competency is critical thinking, which is defined as a higher-order thinking that relies on information, a conscious perception of one's own intellectual activity and the activity of others [Тягло 2008]. If students learn how to distinguish the true from the false while looking through the abundant information in the Internet, they will become more aware of *information culture*, which:

– embraces optimal ways of dealing with any kind of information as well as retrieving it conveniently for further use in solving theoretical and practical tasks;
– improves training future specialists for efficient use of information technologies in their professional activity;
– implies ethics of using information technologies in the context of universal values.



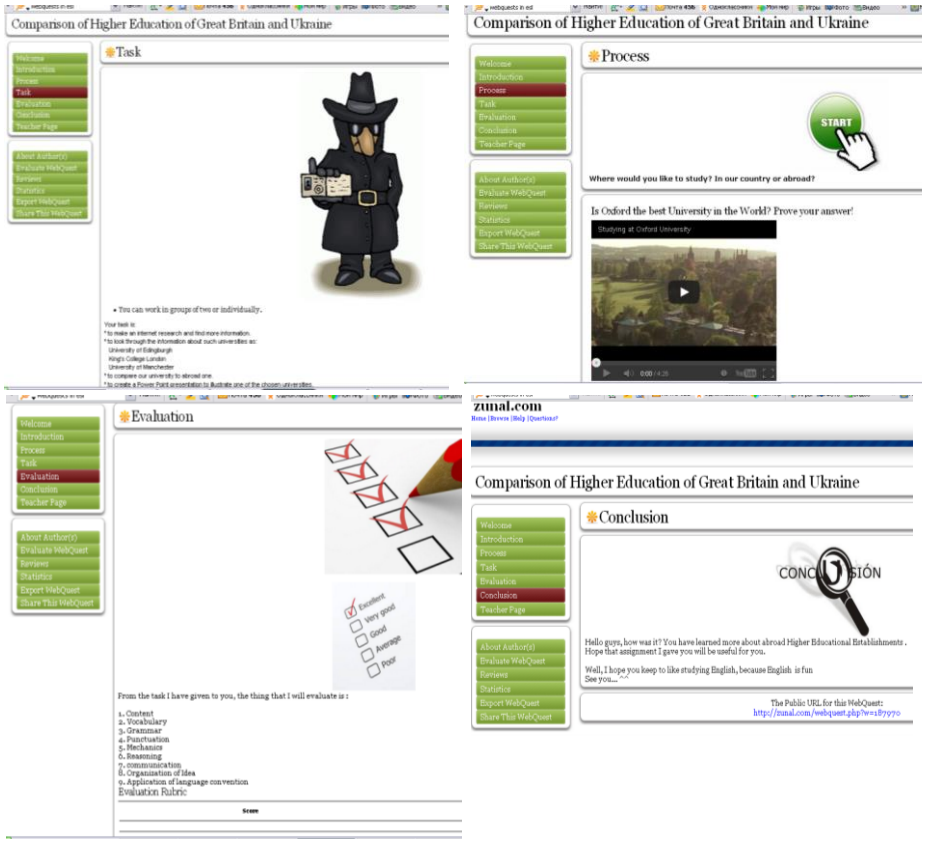


Fig. 1. Web Quest for topic „University Education in Ukraine and Abroad" [http://zunal.com/webquest.php?w=187970]

When learning foreign languages through Web Quests, students can enhance their vocabulary skills, extralinguistic knowledge in various fields of human activity, accompanying and background information more efficiently since they become more motivated in doing the tasks set in the Web Quest. A higher level of students' motivation intensifies students' self-study training and facilitates the entire learning process. The problem-based approach used in Web Quests makes students focus on the functional use of the language rather than simple learning certain grammar rules, doing certain vocabulary exercises, reproducing dialogues and topics or writing e-mails to imaginary friends from abroad. In discussions, they can directly apply the acquired skills and see how it works.

Teachers can use any free website service to create their own Web Quests. *Zunal, Questgarden,* and *Teacherweb* all allow teachers to create accounts, and these websites walk them through the process of creating a Web Quest. These

websites offer little control over design, but they make the creation process very simple and straightforward.

During their first year at Vinnytsia Institute of Economics, students created a Web Quest (see fig. 1) to involve other students into a deeper study of the topic „University Education in Ukraine and Abroad" according to the syllabus on the basis of the textbook *English for economists* [Іщук 2013: 11–68].

It is a kind of analytical Web Quests which aim at making students research how certain objects of the real world interacts within a specific theme. These Web Quests motivate students to acquire knowledge through careful study of the objects in question; to be able to find the similar and different points along with not obvious similar aspects; to establish cause-and-effect relationship (understand causality) and thus sharpen their critical thinking skills. The suggested tasks require students' ability to find the needed information, analyze and synthesize it, and solve the set objectives with little effort.

The developed Web Quest has 5 essential parts:

Introduction – briefly describes the role of education in the life of modern people, and informs the learner about the objective of the Web Quest – to learn about universities abroad and compare them with higher educational institutions in Ukraine.

Task is the format description of what the students will produce in the Web Quest. Students are offered to work in groups or individually and must:

- make an Internet search and find more information about leading universities abroad;
- look through the information about University of Edinburgh, King's College and London and the University of Manchester;
- compare our university to any of the above mentioned or any other at their discretion;
- create a PowerPoint presentation to illustrate the university they would like to study at, showing the advantages and disadvantages of studying in it.

Process. The steps the students should take to accomplish the task. It is frequently profitable to reinforce the written process with some demonstrations.

Evaluation. The way in which the students' performance will be evaluated: content; vocabulary; grammar; punctuation; mechanics (spelling, capitalization, and paragraphs); reasoning; effective written communication (great skills and competencies in language and vocabulary use); organization of the idea; language convention. The standards are fair, clear, consistent, and specific to the tasks set.

Conclusion – summarizes the students' skills they were supposed to acquire through the Web Quest.

When doing the tasks suggested in this Web Quest, students find authentic current information (texts or videos) which can be further used in doing vocabulary and grammar exercises as well as practicing speech patterns [Іщук 2013: 25–26]:

Task 1.

a) Study the word list for expressing similarity and difference

SIMILARITY	DIFFERENCE
In the same way …	… whereas …
the same as	different from
exactly/very the same as	slightly/very/completely different from
Both … and …	On the other hand
similar to/in	In contrast …

b) Underline the words and phrases in the sentences which show a similarity or difference

1. The school year in the UK runs from September to July. In Australia, on the other hand, students go to school from late January to December. 2. Both Sweden and France have a compulsory national curriculum. 3. Japanese schools are different from schools in many other countries in that they usually have an entrance exam. 4. Malaysian schools have two terms a year. In contrast, Australian schools have four terms. 5. School students all over the world are similar in that they have to take exams.

Task 2. Use the phrases from Task 1 to complete the sentences

1. _____ Wales ____ Ireland include their own language in the curriculum.
2. State and private schools _____ _____ _____ _____ all their students take school-leaving exams.
3. Northern Ireland and Wales have a similar education system to England. Scotland, _____ _____ _____ _____, has its own system.
4. Students in Japanese schools often eat school lunches. _____ _____ _____ _____, students in France also often eat in school.
5. _____ Norway _____ Japan have the highest ratio of researchers in the economy.

Task 3.

a) Tell your classmates about HE in Ukraine in comparison with other countries

1. Universities in Ukraine and Russia are similar in that _____. 2. Both Ukraine and UK _____. 3. In Ukraine, both Specialists and Masters can do aspirantura. In contrast, _____. 4. An English student goes to his tutor's room once a week. In contrast, _____.

b) Discuss in groups the similarities and differences you have discovered through doing Web Quest tasks

The ability to learn autonomously is regarded as one of the key competencies of university students, since they have to retrieve more than 60% of the

overall academic information by themselves. We identified three levels for qualitative comparison of autonomous learning skills between Web Quest-based learning (WQBL) and non-WQBL groups: *high, medium* and *low levels*.

To identify the level of autonomous learning skills we analyzed the students' performance when they were to autonomously find and analyze the material, solve the set tasks, make a presentation of the report etc. The obtained data are shown in fig. 2. Besides, through numerous observations we established that students in the WQBL group did not hesitate to join group discussions and were more confident in offering arguments than students in the non-WQBL group. In other words, they showed an increase in communication competency along with social and psychological adaptation. Furthermore, the improved general learning skills facilitated students' didactic adaptation to university academic requirements.

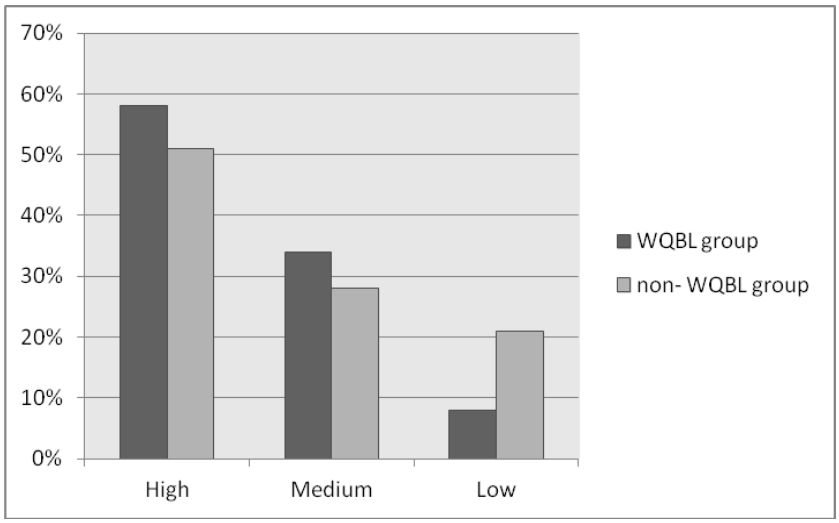


Fig. 2. Levels of autonomous learning skills in WQBL and non-WQBL groups

Conclusion

Our findings prove that university students benefit from learning a foreign language within the Web Quest learning environment. The technology they enjoy allows them to use the Internet for finding and applying information, fosters group problem solving, and hence encourages critical reasoning more than the traditional classroom instruction. Students may also learn to use presentation software, which allows them to impart their information in a creative way while educating others.

Once the Web Quests is developed, teacher can focus on students, helping those individuals or groups who need assistance. Teacher becomes a facilitator in the class rather than the expert, which consequently enhances students' re-

sponsibility for their own learning and improves autonomous learning skills in finding and retrieving information, making students' competency comply with the current standards set for university graduates.

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Abstract

Although one of the education's major goals is to find efficient ways to integrate web-based technologies with the traditional teaching methods applied in teaching-learning process, little research has been made in this area. The article provides the study of the educational value of Web Quests in teaching foreign languages at universities, their role in fostering students' basic competencies and enhancing their critical thinking. Presented is a Web Quest created by first-year students of Vinnytsia Institute of Economics of Ternopil National Economic University with its further detailed description. Provided are some results of the experiment, which prove the didactic efficiency of Web Quests, integrated with other teaching methods, for improving students' autonomous learning skills.

Key words: Web Quests, educational value, key competencies, information competency, critical thinking, students' autonomous learning skills, critical reasoning, project work.