

Impact of Using the WebQuest Technological Model on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Writing Achievement and Apprehension

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Abstract

This article reports the results of an experimental study that examined the relative effectiveness of the WebQuest technological model in improving the English as a foreign language (EFL) writing proficiency of grade eight students in Lebanon and decreasing their levels of writing apprehension. The study also looked into the perceptions of the participants of the relevance and efficacy of using WebQuest as an instructional model. The study is based on the assumption that the WebQuest model provides an excellent opportunity for teachers to provide supplementary activities and materials that enrich the content and exercises of the regular EFL textbooks. The study employed an experimental pretest- posttest control group design whereby two intact classes were randomly assigned to control and experimental conditions. Descriptive statistics were calculated and a series of independent sample t-tests were conducted in order to address the questions raised in the study. Finally, a content analysis of the qualitative data was carried out to describe and concretize the respondents' perceptions of the WebQuest experience in the experimental group. The results of the study indicated that the WebQuest model proved to be more effective than regular process writing instruction in enhancing achievement and decreasing writing apprehension. In addition, the participants in the experimental group underscored both the importance and usefulness of using the WebQuest model in teaching EFL. Further research is recommended in order to determine the extent of the generalizability of the findings of the present study into other school contexts and across different grade and proficiency levels.

Key words: EFL, process writing, WebQuest, writing achievement, writing apprehension.

Introduction

The positive role of the Internet in facilitating learners' acquisition of a language other than their own has been acknowledged for quite some time now (Hill et al, 2005; Lewis, 1999; and Macdonald et al, 2001). These researchers, among others, maintain that the Internet provides value for ESL/EFL teaching and learning given that English is considered as a "global language" as described by Crystal (2003). Along similar lines, Liou (1997) predicted that the Internet with its ease of use and accessibility will continue to play a growing significant role of increasing importance in English language teaching. According to these researchers, Internet resources constitute a gateway to teaching English in all its forms. Along similar lines, (Zamorshchikova, L., Egorova, O. & Popova, M. (2011) maintained that the Internet can be successfully employed to facilitate learners' English proficiency and communicative competence.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the relative effectiveness of using the WebQuest model in increasing the writing achievement of middle school EFL learners in Lebanon and decreasing their feelings of writing apprehension. In addition, the study looked into learners' perceptions of their experience of using WebQuest in their writing classes. Specifically, the study addressed the following questions:

What is the relative effect of using the WebQuest in comparison with regular process writing instruction in improving the writing achievement of grade 8 learners of EFL in Lebanon?

What is the relative effect of using the WebQuest in comparison with regular process writing instruction in decreasing the writing apprehension level of grade 8 learners of EFL in Lebanon?

What are the learners' perceptions of the experience of using WebQuest in EFL writing instruction?

Literature Review

Since the early 1980's, several Internet and computer-based applications have been proposed as potentially useful models in promoting learners' language skills in general and the writing skill in particular. Serving mainly as a publishing, communication, and informational venue, the Internet made it possible to develop many relevant applications for language teaching and learning such as Wikis, Blogs, and WebQuest (Cunningham, 2000). Furthermore, searching for Internet resources to gather information seems to be a frequent classroom practice in teaching and learning the English language skills particularly reading and writing as suggested by (Grabe & Grabe, 2001). Specifically, the WebQuest application, developed by Dodge and March (1995), includes inquiry-oriented activities in which most, or all of the information used by learners, is drawn from the Internet as suggested by Dodge (1998). As such, it is now well-established that the Internet, in general, and the WebQuest model in particular, may play a vital role in the development English language skills such as reading and writing and in enhancing students' motivation and interest in language practice, which may increase their proficiency and decrease their apprehension. The WebQuest model may, in particular, serve as a facilitator for reading and writing as learners may enjoy reading and discussing the uploaded authentic materials from a variety of sources and text types such as descriptive, narrative, argumentative, and expository texts. As an internet-based educational model, the WebQuest could also be considered a multi-faceted model employed to motivate and teach all ESL/EFL learners. For instance, according to Dudeney (2003) the WebQuest provides, as a potential pedagogical model, a relatively easy way to incorporate the Internet into the language classroom, encouraging critical thinking, leading to

more communication and interaction through group activities, and eliciting greater learner motivation through interdisciplinary studies as well as "real-life" tasks. Similarly, Ge Stoks (2002) maintains that the WebQuest provides learners with the opportunity of being exposed to the target language by surfing on the Internet.

As indicated earlier, Dodge (1997), defined the WebQuest as an "inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all of the information that learners interact with comes from resources on the Internet" (p. 1). As Dodge developed activities for teachers, he launched the WebQuest and posited that this model could arguably become the most popular approach for integrating the Internet in classroom learning. According to Dodge (1997), whether long term or short term, quality WebQuests have certain critical attributes that include an introduction, a task, information sources, processes, guidance, and conclusion. As such, a WebQuest activity may begin with an introduction which provides learners with background information on the topic and sets the stage for subsequent investigation. It should also be noted that one critical aspect of WebQuests involves giving learners an open-ended and essential question in order to encourage more advanced performances. The task section includes an activity that is doable and is of interest to the students. Yet, the task students complete should go beyond simple reading and comprehension questions based on what is read. Peterson et al (2003) also state that "to nudge students beyond introductory knowledge acquisition into the messy world of multiple texts and primary resources, the WebQuest should require critical thinking, rather than a scavenger hunt for answers" (p. 39). Likewise, a WebQuest activity should be designed to use learners' time well, to focus on using information rather than looking for it. Dodge (1997) also suggests that the thinking skills required in a quality WebQuest may include comparing, classifying, inducing, deducing, analyzing errors, constructing support, making abstractions, and analyzing perspectives. The task also often identifies roles for cooperative group members. Each student is assigned a role to play as the group completes the assigned activity.

The resource section of the WebQuest provides links to high-quality Internet-based resources that students will use to complete the activity. Some WebQuests have a separate section for information sources, where some other designs embed their resources in the WebQuest as anchors pointing to information on the Internet. What is most important for this section is that the resources should be of high quality and be developmentally-appropriate for the targeted age group.

The process section provides a step-by-step guide for the completion of the activity. The WebQuest should provide a clear description of exactly what students should do in order to complete the task. Again, the resources may or may not be embedded here as anchors to Internet sites. Most quality WebQuests may also include an evaluation model or assessment instrument as the next to last section. The evaluation may be in the form of a rubric or checklist. Because the task involves some type of inquiry learning, paper-pencil types of assessment will not work. The evaluation model should illustrate to students exactly what they should do to be successful. This is important in order to clarify teacher's expectations for learners and thereby motivate them and encourage them to monitor and regulate their own learning.

The last section of the WebQuest is the conclusion. The conclusion brings closure to the activity and summarizes what the teacher hopes the students have learned as a result of completing the activity. The conclusion may also encourage students to extend their recently gained knowledge to other domains (Dodge, 1997). According to Watson (1999) the integrated sections of the WebQuest make it a reflective, fluid, and dynamic teaching experience. Students are motivated to engage in inquiry learning and are provided all the resources and guidance to do

so. Students are aware of what they need to do to be successful. In addition, they are encouraged to use their newly acquired knowledge in different contexts. Through these explorations, learners can aim to answer questions and solve relevant and real-world problems. This is important in EFL teaching and learning in Lebanon as well as in other contexts in order to motivate learners through demonstrating the importance of the language skills of reading and writing in real life applications and to enable them to see and appreciate the relevance of their work.

The preceding description of the procedures and dynamics of the WebQuest educational model suggests that its application would lead to the realization of gains both in the cognitive and non-cognitive domains of the schooling of language learners. Yet, review of previous research on the subject suggests some inconclusive and inconsistent results in the use of Internet in teaching and learning English. For instance, Braine (1997), Ghaleb (1993), and Liou, (1997) and Sullivan and Pratt (1996) reported that Internet-based language instruction produced better writing quality and more writing quantity than traditional classroom instruction. Conversely, a number of other studies have found that Internet-based language instruction had non-significant or even negative effects on the development of writing proficiency (i.e., Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2001; and, Leh, 1999).

It also should be noted that teachers' evaluation of Internet-based language activities, including those using Internet resources, has shown that students perceived more advantages than disadvantages (i.e., Aida, 1995; Mak & Mak, 1995; Shetzer, 1995; and St. John, 1995). The advantages are related to the provision of rich, authentic, and current information, exposure to colorful visual elements, enhanced flexibility of individual learning pace, reinforced learning of the subject matter, heightened motivation, and increased interest in learning. A number of empirical studies have also indicated that students had an overall positive attitude towards learning in a computer-assisted language learning environment (Felix, 2001; Liou, 1997; Osuna & Meskill, 1998; and Shen, 1999). This underscores the role of using technology in language learning. In addition, previous research has revealed that students perceived Internet -based instruction as effective for their language skills in general (Osuna & Meskill, 1998) and for the development of specific language skills related to reading and speaking (Stepp-Greany, 2002), and writing (Frizler, 1995). However, these researchers also highlight the disadvantages of Internet-based instruction which includes going over some shallow or confusing information, frustration from slow or failed access, and lack of mastery of technology use on the part of the teacher or students.

Methodology

The study employed a quasi-experimental pretest posttest control design. Two intact classes were randomly assigned to control and experimental conditions and the treatment lasted for 5 weeks of instruction at the rate of 6 class periods per week to teach the language skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking along with language rules and mechanics, cultural awareness, and critical thinking in an integrated manner. The study was conducted in a public school in Beirut, the capital of Lebanon. A total of 42 grade eight EFL students participated in the study. However, the number of the participants was reduced when we applied the list deletion of missing cases to the statistical analysis on the writing apprehension scores as shown in the subsequent sections below.

Participants

The participants were randomly assigned to control and experimental conditions and the sample included a total of 27 males (64.3%) and 15 females (35.7%). All the participants were native speakers of Arabic and came from similar socio-economic backgrounds. They were studying EFL at a rate of 6 hours per week in accordance with the curriculum requirements proclaimed by the National Ministry of Education. A total of 27 students had completed their grade 7 schooling at the same school and the remaining 15 at other public schools which follow the same curriculum. Finally, there were 22 students in the control group and 20 in the experimental group and the age of the participants ranged from 13- 16 years.

Instruments

Two instruments were used to collect data and measure the variables of writing achievement and apprehension under investigation. Specifically, a teacher-made writing assessment was used as a pre-test and post-test measure of writing achievement. Participants were asked to perform a writing task which required writing a composition in response to a prompt which asked them to describe the characteristic of a true friend focusing on an incident or experience which manifested these characteristics. The essays were scored holistically according to the quality of ideas, focus, organization, word choice, and language mechanics. Three experienced teachers of English each with more than ten years of in-service teaching of EFL writing were selected to evaluate the written essays of the participants and unanimously agreed on reporting a score for each essay on a scale of 1-10.

In addition, the participants completed the writing apprehension scale (See Appendix I) which consists of a total of 26 Likert-type items. Scores on the negatively worded items (Items 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 13, 16, 18, 21, 24, 25, 26) were reversed to ensure that high scores mean higher apprehension.

Treatment

The treatment lasted for five weeks at the rate of six contact hours of integrated instruction per week. The writing instructional component of the control group consisted of regular process writing practices, which included instruction in pre-drafting, drafting, and revision strategies. Specifically, the pre-drafting stage focused on enabling learners to explore their topics in order to generate ideas and conceptualizing their written product, in addition to learning how to write up their ideas and revise their written products. Meanwhile, the experimental group learners practiced process writing through the WebQuest procedures and sections described in above in this article.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (Means and Standard Deviations) were calculated on the pre-test and post-test performance scores of learners in the control and experimental groups, following which four independent sample t-tests were conducted to investigate the differences in writing achievement and apprehension prior to and subsequent to the intervention between the groups of learners in the control and experimental groups. The treatment conditions (control vs experimental) were used as an independent variable given that these conditions represent the regular process writing teaching and the procedures of the WebQuest model under investigation.

Likewise, the scores of the participants on writing achievement and writing apprehension were used as dependent variables in order to address the questions raised in the study.

In addition, content analysis was used as the method of data analysis of the qualitative data gathered from learners' written comments about their perceptions of the WebQuest experience. The inductive category development method proposed by Mayring (2000) was used to analyze perception data where unitizing and categorizing of idea units occurs as given by data without any predetermined categories, following which data were organized into related clusters and themes as suggested by Patton (2002). These clusters and themes were used to write up the study results regarding learners' perceptions.

Results

Findings on writing achievement

We found that prior to intervention, as shown in Table 1 below, there was no statistically significant difference in the writing achievement of the participants in the control group ($M = 6.38$, $SD = 2.39$) and the experimental group ($M = 6.95$, $SD = 3.06$), $t(40) = .66$, $P = .50$.

Table 1. *t*-test Results of Control and Experimental Group Participants on Writing Achievement Prior to Intervention.

Treatment	n	Mean	SD	t	df	p	d
Control	22	6.38	2.39	.66	40	.50	
Experimental	20	6.95	3.06				

Conversely, after the intervention (See Table 2 below), the experimental group ($M = 9.72$, $SD = 1.77$) outperformed the control group in writing achievement ($M = 8.09$, $SD = 2.34$), $t(40) = 2.52$, $P = 0.16$. The effect size of improvement $d = 0.92$ suggests a highly significant gain in achievement from an educational point of view.

Table 2. *t*-test Results of Control and Experimental Group Participants on Writing Achievement Prior to Intervention.

Treatment	n	Mean	SD	t	df	p	d
Control	22	8.09	2.34	2.52	40	.16	0.92
Experimental	20	9.72	1.77				

Findings on writing apprehension

Prior to intervention, there was no statistically significant difference in the writing apprehension of the participants in the control group ($M = 94.86$, $SD = 10.68$) and the experimental group ($M = 99.25$, $SD = 44.02$), $t(29) = .37$, $P = .71$ as shown in Table 3:

Table 3. *t*-test Results of Control and Experimental Group Participants on Writing Apprehension Prior to Intervention.

Treatment	n	Mean	SD	t	df	p	d
Control	22	94.86	10.68	.37	29	.71	
Experimental	20	99.25	44.02				

Meanwhile, the post-test intervention difference in writing apprehension between the two groups was statistically significant: Control group ($M = 90.71$, $SD = 11.06$) and the experimental group ($M = 69.4$, $SD = 33.82$), $t(25) = -2.22$, $P = .03$. The effect size of improvement was $d = 1.92$, which also suggests a highly significant gain in decreasing writing apprehension in favor of the experimental group as shown in Table 4:

Table 4. *t*-test Results of Control and Experimental Group Participants on Writing Apprehension Prior to Intervention.

Treatment	n	Mean	SD	t	df	p	d
Control	22	90.71	11.06	-2.22	25	.03	1.92
Experimental	20	69.4	33.82				

Findings on perceptions of WebQuest Experience

The results of the content analysis of qualitative data from reflective logs about learners' experience with the WebQuest suggest two aspects of interest: 1) the importance of using WebQuests in the teaching and learning process and 2) the usefulness of this educational model in teaching EFL skills is general and writing in particular. Specifically, the theme of the importance of the WebQuest emerged from the data as many learners in the experimental group expressed their positive perception of this experience. For instance, while one learner reported that "when I want to make a project for the school without thinking I choose the webquest" another student added the "webquest is very important for we (our) life, we use it for many things like explore about another country or if we want to know about something." Along similar lines, another learner remarked that the webquest is very important to us because if anything we don't understand we go to the webquest and watch it." These comments and remarks suggest that the WebQuest is perceived as an important learning resource by learners.

The WebQuest model was also perceived to be as very useful and helpful in teaching EFL skills and grammar, particularly writing. For example, one learner wrote in the reflection log that the "webquest Actually (actually) helped us alot (a lot) the webquest help (helps) us to be good in the writing and riding (reading) and speking (speaking)." This positive perception was also echoed in the comments of other learners who wrote that "the webquest is help (helps) me for anything for project and maps and I use the internet for my project." These remarks show that the learners in the study have perceived the WebQuest experience as very useful in helping them complete assigned tasks and not necessarily invoke learning a language other their own.

Discussion

The present study set to examine the relative effectiveness of the WebQuest technological model in improving EFL writing achievement and decreasing feelings of writing apprehension. As discussed earlier, the results proved to be positive given that the learners who studied EFL writing using the WebQuest outperformed their counterparts in writing achievement who studied the same content and skills according to the dynamics of regular process writing. These findings were also corroborated by qualitative data from reflection logs which showed that learners in the experimental group perceived the WebQuest experience as both important and useful. The findings are also in line with those of Braine (1997), Ghaleb (1993), Liou, (1997), and Sullivan and Pratt (1996) who maintained that the Internet is beneficial in the language classroom as well as those of Felix, (2001; Liou, (1997; Osuna & Meskill, (1998) and Shen (1999) who documented learners' positive attitudes toward technology-based language instruction.

A possible explanation of the efficacy and positive attitudes towards web-based language instruction could be attributed to the provision of opportunities for students to read and write a variety of authentic text types and on various topics. Yet, future research should be conducted involving representative samples of different EFL populations and grade levels in order to determine to what extent the findings of the present study are generalizable as well as determine the effect of context-specific factors such as gender, linguistic composition, and levels of first and foreign language proficiency on the interface of technology and language achievement and dispositions.

Conclusion

It is likely in the future, that computer technology will remain a key component of almost everything we do. As such, language teachers should keep themselves fully abreast of how computer technology can benefit language teaching and educational outcomes, more generally.

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Appendix A

Writing Apprehension

Please circle the number of the alternative below the statement that best indicates your feelings about that statement.

1. I avoid writing.

Strongly
disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 agree Strongly

2. I have no fear of my writing being evaluated.

Strongly
disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 agree Strongly

3. I look forward to writing down my ideas.

Strongly
disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 agree Strongly

4. I am afraid of writing essays when I know they will be evaluated.

Strongly
disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 agree Strongly

5. Taking a composition course is a very frightening experience.

Strongly
disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 agree Strongly

6. Handing in a composition is a very frightening experience.

Strongly
disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 agree Strongly

7. My mind seems to go blank when I start to work on a composition.

Strongly
disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 agree Strongly

8. Expressing ideas through writing seems to be a waste of time.

Strongly
Strongly

Strongly
disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 Strongly
agree

19. I like seeing my thoughts written down

Strongly
disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 agree Strongly

20. Discussing my writing with others is an enjoyable experience.

Strongly
disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 Strongly
agree

21. I have a terrible time organizing my ideas for submission in a composition course.

Strongly
disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 agree Strongly

22. When I hand in a composition when participating in a composition course, I know I'm going to do poorly.

Strongly
disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 Strongly
agree

23. it's easy for me to write good compositions to submit in a composition course

Strongly
disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 Strongly
agree

24. I don't think I write as well as most other people.

Strongly
disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 agree Strongly

25. I don't like my compositions to be evaluated.

Strongly
disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 Strongly
agree

26. I'm no good at writing.

Strongly
disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 Strongly
agree