Using WebQuests as idea banks for fostering autonomy in online language courses

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Abstract. The concept of language learner autonomy has influenced ComputerAssisted Language Learning (CALL) to the extent that Schwienhorst (2012) informs us of a paradigm change in CALL design in the light of learner autonomy. CALL is not considered a tool anymore, but a learner environment available to language learners anywhere in the world. Based on a work-cycle as a practical framework for implementing autonomy in online courses (Legenhausen, 2003), the current study introduces WebQuest to be used as ideas and an activity bank. Work cycle design takes several principles of learner autonomy such as goal setting, content and format choice, self-evaluation and reflection in action and is defined as a learner-based approach that emphasises metacognitive knowledge that raises students' awareness to become more conscious of their own language learning process, strengths and weaknesses (Ter Haseborg, 2012). The idea and activity bank at the top of a work cycle provides learners with the opportunity to plan and negotiate, make decisions, do project work and evaluate their learning in a cyclic mode. Thus, the current article argues that because of its flexibility and accessibility, WebQuests lend themselves to the work cycle approach in online courses aimed at fostering autonomy. Moreover, the findings of the current study indicate that WebQuests contribute to the development of learner autonomy by encouraging critical thinking among learners.

Keywords: CALL, language learner autonomy, WebQuest, online language courses.

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1. Introduction

Technology offers many opportunities for language learners to learn independently from teachers and interdependently with peers. By providing learners with collaborative authentic contexts, technology helps the improvement of learners' autonomy through developing a "capacity for reflection and analysis, which is central to the development of learner autonomy" (Little, 1996, p. 210). Recently, the spread of the concept of autonomy in the field of CALL has resulted in a paradigm change (Schwienhorst, 2012), defining CALL as an environment or virtual community of learners influenced by pedagogy instead of a tool.

Learner autonomy is defined as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1979, p. 3). Holec (1979) believes that autonomy is not inborn but must be acquired either by 'natural' means or formal learning. Based on Holec's (1979) definition, the autonomous learner is able to set goals, select tools and methods to follow and evaluate his/her own progress. Schwienhorst (2008) claims that technology is capable of assisting a learner autonomy-based pedagogy that supports reflection, interaction, experimentation, and participation of learners.

The current study used the concept of work-cycle approach (Legenhausen, 2003) to introduce language learner autonomy in online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses. The study was part of a larger autonomous language learning programme conducted in a virtual language institute in Iran and the principles of language learner autonomy were applied using work-cycle approach. The cycle started with planning and negotiation on the learning goals and moved to decision making for the learners' projects. Two important features of the decision making stage were *responsibility* and *accountability.* Learners then moved to the working stage in which they researched, documented and published their project. Finally, the evaluation stage, included learners and teacher's evaluation of the project.

However, the focus of the present study was on using WebQuests as the idea and activity bank in a work-cycle aimed at fostering autonomous language learning. According to Godwin-Jones (2004), "Webquests tend to be student-oriented and collaborative, with students engaged in constructivist activities resulting in shared learning experiences and new knowledge based on enquiry-oriented language use and Web research skills" (p. 9). WebQuests cater for different student learning style needs and are appropriate for collaborative learning (Hopkins-Moore & Fowler, 2002). A WebQuest is comprised of six components, namely introduction, task, process, evaluation and conclusion.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 18 Iranian EFL language learners (both male and female), enrolled in virtual language courses. The course was a synchronous online course held twice a week and delivered through a Moodle-based course management system with additional features of Adobe Acrobat Connect and synchronous video and voice interaction. The learners were totally familiar with the features of online classes as they were enrolled in the online English courses and E-zaban virtual university for almost two years and were completing their intermediate-level at the time of the study. However, learners didn't have the experience of learning English through work-cycles and using other online tools such as WebQuest beside the facilities of their virtual university.

2.2. Instrumentation

The WebQuest for the current study was created in zunal.com. Each work-cycle had a WebQuest[3] that included the sources from the web for the completion of the work-cycle. All students were interviewed about the possible effects of using the WebQuest as the idea and activity bank in an online autonomous language course. All the interviews were done in a virtual classroom by the teacher-researcher in English language.

2.3. Procedure

The present study was carried out during three months. Learners had completed six work-cycles during this period, and each work-cycle started with a WebQuest as its idea bank. At the beginning of each work-cycle, learners chose their favorite subject and the subject was chosen in a collaborative whole-class decision making process. The suggested sources were then collected in the work-cycle by the course instructor.

3. Discussion

Based on the data from learners' interviews, WebQuests were reported as a very useful online tool for providing learners with ideas and activities available online.

3. http://zunal.com/webquest.php?w=311179

The WebQuest also fit work-cycle approach in that it was open for change during the whole cycle. Moreover, the sections of a WebQuest, namely introduction, task, process and evaluation provided learners with clear guidelines for the rest of the work-cycle.

Learners reported many advantages of using a WebQuest. The codes extracted from learners' interviews regarding the advantages and disadvantages of using the WebQuest as an idea and activity bank are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Learners' perceptions about using WebQuest

Theme	Code	Example
Positive perceptions	Fast	It was faster than searching on my own.
	Easy to find learning material	Everything is ready but we can add too.
	Variety of material	I could choose to read, or listen to the chosen topic.
	Related parts	There is no irrelevant material like the internet.
	Cooperation	I liked it when the teacher added my choice to the WebQuest.
Negative perceptions	Not fixed like a syllabus	I was worried about missing the recently added materials. Pdf files are fixed.

Our results suggest that the positive features of using the WebQuest as an idea and activity bank outperformed its negative points. The interview results revealed that WebQuest was found useful as it helped learners save the time of their inquiries from the web. It also helped the development of critical thinking abilities as learners reported on the possibility of having variety of related material and synthesising the available information for optimal learning. However, some learners still preferred a pre-planned structured syllabus presented at the beginning of the course to avoid the dynamicity of using the WebQuest as an idea and activity bank. The findings of the current study were in line with the study of Torres (2007), who found WebQuest useful in learning because of its ability to promote the effective use of time and structuring learners' search for information. Moreover, as students were engaged with reading, thinking, synthesising, and evaluating the existing information in the WebQuest to manage their work-cycles, they could gain critical thinking abilities (Halat & Peker, 2011). In line with the findings of the current study, Cai (2005) asserts that using WebQuest helps students become better learners by increasing their autonomy level and providing a sense of fulfilment.

4. Conclusions

The results of the present study showed the potential of WebQuest to be used as the idea and activity bank in online autonomous language courses. As flexible and dynamic idea banks, WebQuests be adapted according to the need of learner throughout a cycle.

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