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Sifting through the Chaos: Using WebQuests and Treasure Hunts in the EFL Classroom

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Introduction

The World Wide Web is a vast cyberspace taking us and leading us into directions that only curiosity can navigate. Its chaotic and limitless nature has advantages as well as disadvantages. The fact that it is limitless allows us to search endlessly, always finding new information from not only reputable sources but also from individuals as well. This has its clear share of benefits. Mainly, anyone can publish anything on the Internet, giving today's web generation the opportunity to share a bit of themselves to the world. Some of this information is valuable and insightful, whereas other information is best to be avoided. But then again, that is what makes the Internet unique. It is an open, super information highway for anyone to search or provide the Internet-connected world with information. Consequently, Internet information becomes convoluted and chaotic, leading us to both useful and useless information without differentiating the two. Therefore, we must sift through the tangled web in order to separate the valuable from the disposable.

One way to render the chaotic WWW more accessible in the classroom is through online WebQuests and Treasure hunts, which are also commonly referred to as Scavenger Hunts. These are motivating teaching tools that enhance learning through today's technology. In this article I will introduce and distinguish these two online tasks as well as talk about their advantages and limitations in the EFL classroom to teach and integrate culture, reading, technology, and critical thinking.

What is a Treasure Hunt? From simple Treasure Hunts to the more complex

Treasure hunts also sometimes referred to as scavenger hunts or Internet quests are ways for students to gain some specific knowledge about a subject by using the Web. It is a way to practice problem solving, improve reading and comprehension skills as well as learning how to search the Internet. There are thousands already on the web making this a ready-made activity for teachers who are too busy to create them themselves.

In its simplest form, the Treasure Hunt asks students to find answers to 10-15 questions. Next

to each question, there is a specific link where students can go to find the answer. This means a search engine is not required to carry out this task. The students task, therefore, is to go to the link already provided by the hunt and scan the specific web page for the answer. Once the answer is found, the student writes the answer on his or her Treasure Hunt page and proceeds to answer the following questions in a similar manner. In other words, this is fact finding at its best. Some examples that show the format of simple Treasure Hunts can be found at the following locations:

- <http://www.beaumont-publishing.com/student/treasurehunt/>
- <http://www.cyberbee.com/hunts.html>
- <http://www.angelfire.com/az2/webenglish/super.html>
- <http://www.innernet.net/bafile/page3.html>

If students need a more challenging task than simply searching for basic facts, there are other variations of Treasure Hunts available on the Web. This Treasure Hunt variation under the medium level category provides a set of 10-15 statements or clues. Instead of relying on one specific link to answer one specific question, now the student is provided with a scrambled set of links found at the bottom of the Hunt. Now he must figure out which link will answer the question, requiring him to read each web page carefully. The number of links equals the number of clues. This is a more challenging exercise than the previous in that students must now read for details as opposed to simply scanning for information as well as having the additional task of matching the link with its appropriate clue. An example of four Black History Treasure Hunts of this format can be found at http://www.education-world.com/a_lesson/lesson052.shtml

Another medium level Treasure Hunt variation exists. Like simple Treasure Hunts, this more difficult version also involves a series of usually 10-15 questions to answer. However, rather than simply offering the links to find the answers, it is now up to the students to find appropriate URLs to find the information, which will lead to successfully answering the question at hand. Therefore, this task becomes even more challenging by demanding students to not only use available search engines, but to also find valuable sources to answer the question. An example of this type of Treasure Hunt is below:

<http://www.beaumont-publishing.com/student/treasurehunt/> (refer to “medium”)

The most difficult Treasure Hunts are those that provide the student with only little guidance in the form of questions and/or a list of possible links to use. It is the student’s responsibility to explore not only the already provided links but perhaps look further and find associated links through search engines in the quest to answer each question regarding a central theme. This may at first resemble the medium level Treasure Hunts, but it differs by taking students one step further by asking a final culminating “BIG QUESTION”. This demands that students make connections of the already learned facts and synthesize the material to understand the big picture. For a good

example of this type of Treasure Hunt which asks to draw conclusions, see the example of Black history Past to Present and The Treasures of China below:

- http://www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/BHM/bh_hunt_quiz.html
- <http://www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/China/chinahunt.html>

Why use Treasure Hunts? (Reasons for Teachers and Students)

There are many reasons why Treasure Hunts are excellent tools in the classroom. In an article for Education World at http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr113.shtml, Linda Starr touches upon some of the reasons why Treasure Hunts (scavenger hunts) are valuable resources for teachers. She claims,

- Online scavenger hunts are easy to create and the resulting interactive searches are both fun and informative for students.
- The hunts can be geared to virtually any curriculum area, simultaneously providing students with technological and subject matter knowledge.
- Online scavenger hunts can be used as a whole class activity, as a team activity, or as a means of providing individual students with review or challenge activities.
- Scavenger hunts can be as simple or involved as circumstances dictate. Younger students may be provided with only a few questions, along with the links or URLs necessary for finding the answers, while older students may be give only a broad topic and asked to find their own sources for obtaining necessary information.

Ian Brown on <http://iteslj.org/Lessons/Brown-TreasureHunts.html> adds some reasons why Treasure hunts are good for students.

- Doing the hunt in pairs or small groups encourages cooperative learning. While working together he claims that students will benefit from the experience of working with other students to find the answers to the questions by agreeing, disagreeing or offering differing opinions. His thought is that despite the linguistic focus on reading, students will, in addition, have opportunities to utilize other skills such as speaking in the foreign language.
- Brown further explains that Treasure Hunts can provide technological objectives by familiarizing students with web browser and acquaint students with resources in English for future use.

Other benefits include using authentic material and integrating culture into the curriculum. With the Web, students of foreign language have the key to access any aspect of the target culture they wish. In the case of Treasure Hunts they can choose to simply have a peep by gathering simple facts, or really unlock the treasures hidden behind the English text and answer the “Big

Question”.

In addition, Treasure Hunts are fun for students. Like many adventure games, Treasure Hunts can contain mystery, excitement, suspense, wonder, and even competition. As a result, learner-motivation may increase, making the whole Treasure Hunt experience a worthwhile one.

Limitations and setbacks of Treasure Hunts

As mentioned earlier, there are thousands of Treasure Hunts floating around in cyberspace. The problem is, however, that most of these Treasure Hunts were created for native speakers of English for the K-12 curriculum. There are very few Treasure hunts designed especially for ESL or EFL classes. Some possible hunts for ESL/EFL classes are at the following:

<http://iteslj.org/th/> or http://iteslj.org/links/ESL/Treasure_Hunts/

Another limitation concerns the web sites themselves. Unfortunately technology is not yet 100% reliable as some sites may go under construction, others simply may disappear, or they may be difficult to access. When choosing Treasure Hunts, verify that sites are current, up-to-date, and accessible from your school computers. This also applies if you intend to create your own.

Last but not least is the concern about Web users. Most of generation dot com, as they are now being referred, is more web-savvy than the so-called Generation X, and far beyond the savoir-faire of previous generations. There are still, however, many who do not know Internet lingo such as search engine, click, double click, mouse, hyperlink, let alone how to go about using or accessing the Internet. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that teachers not assume that all students have this prior knowledge. Rather, teachers should verify students` Web background and provide help accordingly.

What is a WebQuest? Differentiating WebQuests from Treasure Hunts

Treasure Hunts, Scavenger Hunts, Internet Quests, WebQuests... These educational buzzwords have been around for almost a decade. Some use these terms interchangeably, whereas others differentiate them. One such person who would argue that Treasure Hunts and WebQuests are different tasks is Bernie Dodge, professor of educational technology at San Diego State University, who not only coined the term “WebQuest” in 1995 alongside Tom March, but has continued to develop the idea in classrooms around the world ever since. According to <http://edweb.sdsu.edu/webquest/overview.htm>, a WebQuest is

an inquiry-oriented activity in which most or all of the information used by learners is drawn from the Web. WebQuests are designed to use learners` time well, to focus on using information rather than looking for it, and to support learners` thinking at the levels of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Maureen Brown Yoder at <http://www.iste.org/L&L/26/7/features/yoder/index.html> adds that

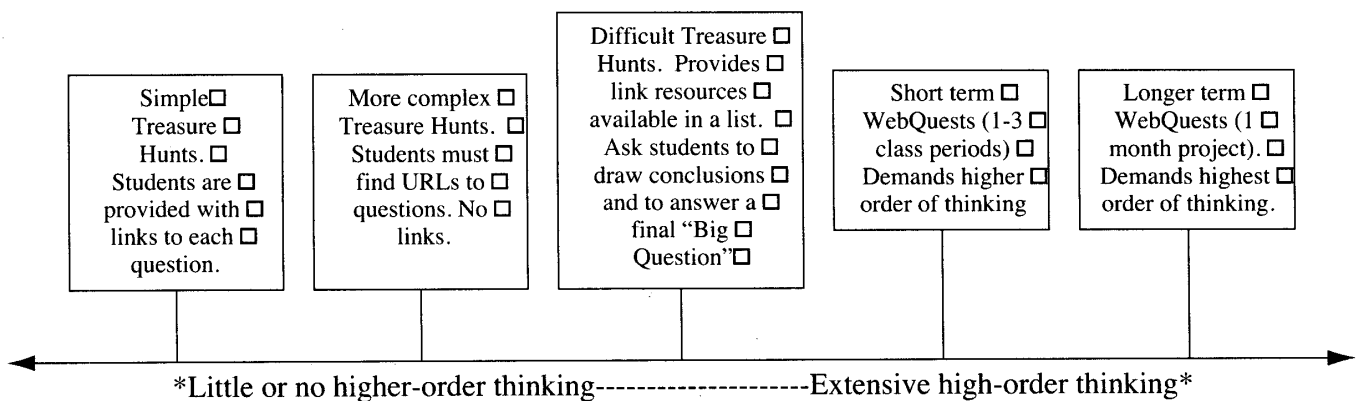
a well-written WebQuest demands that students go beyond fact-finding: It asks them to analyze a variety of resources and use their creativity and critical thinking skills to derive solutions to a problem. The problem is often “real world”-- that is one that needs a genuine and reasonable solution.

As one can see from these two descriptions, WebQuests are highly involved tasks which asks students to not only question the world in which they live but to find supporting information to resolve a problem via the Internet as well as other resource materials.

WebQuests, like Treasure Hunts, have a wide-range of levels as well as differing in type and format. Dodge describes in his article *Some Thoughts about WebQuests* the different types as being short term WebQuests and long term WebQuests. Short term WebQuests are termed this way not only for the duration of the project, but also in how deep they are tapping the levels of thinking. Generally speaking short term WebQuests, with a thinking dimension 2, are expected to be completed in about one to three class periods, whereas long term WebQuests, which demands a thinking dimension 3, can take up to a month to complete.

Both Treasure Hunts and WebQuests were born from similar objectives, but differ in how information is used and how much higher-order thinking is involved. On the one hand, simple Treasure Hunts demand little high-order thinking, for it is a task designed for gathering facts, unconnected facts for the most part. On the other hand, the more sophisticated Treasure Hunts do demand higher-order thinking when asking students to draw conclusions from gathered information to answer the “Big Question”. In contrast, WebQuests are more concerned with using information than finding it. Time is allotted to think about how to make sense of the information in order to raise questions and solve problems. If simple Treasure Hunts are viewed as simply brushing the surface of thinking, then WebQuests are digging into the core of it.

A summary of the relationship between Treasure Hunts and WebQuests is shown below.



Key components to a WebQuest

Unlike Treasure Hunts whose format is more or less malleable, true WebQuests have 6 clear components. Creator, Bernie Dodge describes this in his paper *Some Thoughts About WebQuests* online at

http://edweb.sdsu.edu/courses/edtec596/about_webquests.html,

- 1) **Introduction:** to set the stage and to provide background information.
- 2) **Task:** something that is doable and interesting for students.
- 3) **Information sources** needed to complete the task: (web documents, books, conferencing, experts available via e-mail, etc).
- 4) **Process:** a clear description explaining how the students should break down steps to accomplishing the task.
- 5) **Guidance:** how to organize the information acquired. (Guided questions, concept maps, timelines, etc.)
- 6) **Conclusion:** brings closure to the quest, reminding learners what they have learned and perhaps encourage them to extend the experience into other domains.

Many examples of WebQuests of this format can be found at the following Matrix of WebQuest Examples page located at: <http://webquest.sdsu.edu/matrix.html>. If you are not satisfied with the Matrix of examples, then type in “WebQuest” or “Webquest” in your favorite search engine to find thousands of examples.

Why use WebQuests? (CASES for WebQuests: Reasons for Teachers and students)

There has been a lot of positive feedback about WebQuests from educators around the world. The following CASES, which have been taken from varying sources, underlines some clear benefits to using WebQuests in the classroom.

- **Curriculum and culture:** Directly relevant to the curriculum and interesting and motivating to both teachers and students, they add spice to a lesson and direct a more responsible use of the Internet (Yoder).
- **Authenticity:** WebQuests use several strategies to increase student motivation. First, WebQuests use a central question that honestly needs answering. When students are asked to understand, hypothesize or problem-solve an issue that confronts the real world, they face an authentic task, not something that only carries meaning in a school classroom (March).
- **Structure:** WebQuests are appealing because they provide structure and guidance both for students and for teachers (Dodge).
- **Education:** Improvements in educational outcomes:
 - Δ Guided inquiry, project based collaboration and mentoring relationships have increased learner motivation.
 - Δ Technology-based instruction enables students to learn-how-to-learn and master advanced topics.
 - Δ Students in team environments are able to perform complex tasks and create intricate products by acting as experts do (Hanson).
- **Scaffolding:** WebQuests use scaffolding or prompting which has been shown to facilitate

more advanced thinking. In other words, by breaking the task into meaningful “chunks” and asking students to undertake specific sub-tasks, a WebQuest can step them through the kind of thinking process that more expert learners would typically use (March).

Limitations and setbacks of WebQuests

A very realistic obstacle facing EFL students and WebQuests is the task itself. WebQuests are by no means easy tasks. They are not merely fact finding, but rather, highly involved and demand that students use thinking skills they probably did not even know existed. Differing from other linguistic-based projects assigned in the EFL classroom, WebQuests are multi-dimensional in that they require EFL students to use reading, listening, speaking, culture, writing, and most importantly critical thinking skills. Teachers must factor not only linguistic level but also critical thinking and problem solving skills before asking students to tackle such a task. If students are able to understand English well and whose critical thinking level matches the expected thinking dimensions used in WebQuests, then they may find this project interesting and accessible. However, this is the minority of EFL classrooms around the globe.

A more realistic look takes into account Krashen’s input hypothesis where he explains that students might best acquire productive skills when they are encouraged to engage in tasks that are just beyond their current level of competence (Omaggio 85). But are WebQuests “just beyond” EFL learners’ current level of competence? Krashen believed that input, in whatever form, had to be comprehensible enough for learners to continue a given task. The idea was finding a compatibility with the input and the learner, a so-called optimal incongruity or what Krashen identified as “i+1” [i=input and 1 means one step beyond the level of comprehension] (Brown 38). Relating this idea back to the available WebQuests in cyberspace, the comprehensible input of native speaker WebQuests is probably at “i+65” (usual EFL activities are “i+1”). This does not mean that all WebQuests are out of reach for the EFL learner. Despite the fact that WebQuests were originally designed to compliment the K-12 curriculum for native English speakers, there exists a handful of accessible ESL/EFL WebQuests in cyberspace. Below are some WebQuests I have found. I encourage you to take a look.

- <http://aliceswebpage.homestead.com/everestwebquest1.html>
- <http://www.plainfield.k12.in.us/hschool/webq/webq26/world.htm>
- <http://members.aol.com/classweb/clta98/washington.html>
- <http://www.yarden.ac.il/chinuch/english/oldarchives/london/new-intro.htm>

http://scroggs.chccs.k12.nc.us/~leverton/Halloween/halloween_webquest.htm

Seeing how WebQuests are technology-based tasks, there is a constant concern over the web sites and web users. As mentioned earlier with Treasure Hunts, technology has imperfections.

This is more or less inevitable. Teachers can, however, limit the technological difficulties by verifying a site before using it. Is it working? Are the links up-to-date and current? Teachers are also responsible for checking to see if web users have enough computer knowledge to carry out the task. If not, it is the teacher's duty to help individuals and/or the class accordingly in addition to taking the proper steps to prepare students to accomplish the task.

Treasure Hunts or WebQuests? Final suggestions for the EFL classroom

If your students are like mine, they fall anywhere between false-beginner to pre-intermediate-level English learners. They are somewhat web-savvy. That is, they know what the Internet is, but have not yet had the pleasure of surfing the Net in English; their experience rests mainly in their native language, in this case, Japanese. As for their critical thinking skills, my students have primarily brushed the surface of their thinking potential due mainly to lack of opportunities in their previous educational experience. For these reasons, starting with simple Treasure Hunts suits my students profile better. Treasure Hunts will challenge the students, but do so in a progressive manner. Once students familiarize themselves with the idea of Treasure Hunts and the computer, the teacher can challenge students with a medium level Treasure Hunt, and then on to a more difficult one. Finally the teacher can ask students to take on a real challenge with an EFL WebQuest. Taking the time to explain and learn the process of the task helps not only student confidence levels but simultaneously increases motivation. Whichever online task you choose, student background is the key factor when searching for suitable Treasure Hunts or WebQuests for EFL classes.

If you simply dislike the available Treasure Hunts and WebQuests or find that none suit your students, the other option is to create your own. There are many sites giving instructions and suggestions on how to create and design your own successful Treasure Hunt and/or WebQuest. They also explain how to publish them on the Web, so other teachers can benefit from your hard labor. Or, as a class assignment why not ask your students to create their own Treasure Hunt and/or WebQuest for other students in the classroom. Talk about a skill-integrating, learner-centered activity! If this is of interest to you, take a look at these informative sites, which explain, give advice, and provide examples as well as templates: for Treasure Hunt:

<http://www.aitech.ac.jp/~iteslj/th/project.html> or

<http://edweb.sdsu.edu/people/bdodge/webquest/buildingblocks.html> for WebQuest.

Filamentality, a resource for generating WebQuests and Treasure Hunts:

<http://www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/fil/>.

Conclusion

As technology-based instruction increases and holds a more important role in the curriculum, the need for teacher-directed lessons decreases. In one respect, this is the real success of WebQuests and Treasure Hunts. Students are now responsible for their own learning. Teachers, on the other hand, must take a back seat to students and act as facilitator, technology consultant, and/or guidance counselor. In other words, teachers are becoming another resource in today's technologically equipped classroom. This is not to say that there is no longer a need for teachers. If it weren't for innovative educators, the concept of WebQuests and Treasure Hunts wouldn't exist today. Rather, as teachers in an ever-growing globalized world, teaching a global language such as English, have the responsibility to extend beyond the perimeters of their classroom and take part in the new technological advances. Simply stated, take a look at what is out there, try to create your own online tasks, share your ideas, become web-savvy, learn and make a difference, for the possibilities to enrich our students' lives is endless.

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