

WEBQUEST FOR INTERCOMPREHENSION

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Abstract. *This paper intends to report on how the authors have responded to the challenges faced by their young adult and adult ESP learners when preparing (from a linguistic point of view) to work in a multinational, multicultural and multilingual professional environment such as that of merchant ships. Three main aspects have been considered when trying to tailor the language input (content and format wise) and the teaching approach to the specific profile of our learners: First, the need for learning specialized vocabulary, vital to the successful job post, and, more importantly, safe execution of professional tasks aboard ships. This paper aims to demonstrate that both student motivation and, consequently, specialized content intake and internalization can be successfully boosted by creating the framework for contextualized learning. This particular need has been catered for by opting for a learning activity, the webquest, which is based on the Internet, thus integrating the ICT capabilities into our language teaching approach. More precisely, this paper will show how the webquest learning activity helps students acquire specialized vocabulary and concepts and develop their communicative skills by providing the context for authentic, real life collaborative tasks based on a large spectrum of authentic input formats available online. The innovative feature of our proposed online learning activity is that it combines all the learning perks of ICT-inclusive language learning, i.e. the webquest, with the advantages of a multilingual approach to comprehending foreign languages, which is intercomprehension, especially useful to those who, by the nature of their profession, are confronted with having to communicate and cooperate with many nations at a time and need at least partial communication skills in several languages besides English. This paper will proceed from defining, clarifying and justifying the choice for the concepts it is operating with (the intercomprehension method and the webquest learning activity) to providing a concrete, existing example of such a successful merge, accompanied by clarifying comments which explain not only how it works but also highlight the teaching advantages of such an integrative learning activity.*

Key words: *intercomprehension, webquest, multilingualism, plurilingualism, language policy*

1. BACKGROUND: DEFINING THE CONCEPTS (INTERCOMPREHENSION AND WEBQUEST)

1.1. Intercomprehension: why do we need to be plurilingual?

The form of communication in which each person involved uses his or her own language and understands that of the other is known as intercomprehension (IC) and aims to develop the ability to understand several languages at once (DGLF 2005:3). Over the last fifty years the central purpose of the European language policy has been to promote plurilingualism which is perfectly legitimized by the multilingualism of Europe's

member states. By communicating in their own language, the Europeans are thus provided with the chance to preserve both language and cultural diversity. However, this does not necessarily mean that the languages in question should be spoken/understood at the same level; the notion of partial competences constitutes one of the pillars of the new approach in the teaching/learning of languages. Although natural, this process of mutual understanding among speakers of different languages can be facilitated and accelerated through guided teaching/learning. As far as language skills are concerned, IC exploits resemblances and transparencies among languages. In order to understand a text in a target-language, speakers (within the same language group) resort to several elements at lexical, phonological, morphological and syntactical levels, as well as to discursive, textual and cultural indications belonging to one language and cultural community, which are customarily ignored. The parallel study of several languages contributes to extremely stimulating language, cognitive, cultural and human developments.

In language teaching, Ch. Puren stated that we have been going through an “enlightened eclecticism” period (“*éclectisme éclairé*” in original) since each and every language teacher “tinkers” when it comes to organize their courses by picking here and there whatever interests them or seems pertinent. (Puren 2003:122)

We also need to point out that in language learning any methodological changes do not overshadow the previous methodologies and nowadays far from being in a purely action-oriented approach all methodologies (traditional, direct, active, audiovisual, communicative) do coexist. All evolutions in the history of methodology are in close relationship with the evolutions of social needs. In Europe at least, the main concern about language teaching in the 80s was to facilitate voyages to other countries: speaking one language actually meant getting and giving information in that particular language; however, as of mid-90s this communicative approach to languages has no longer been the norm, and nowadays with the acceleration of European integration and the indispensable need for people of different nationalities to work together or for students to attend their academic courses abroad, it is vital to be able to act and interact in a second language. In recent years, the policy at European level has explicitly recognized the value of all languages in use in Europe, not just the main ‘national’ languages, and the EU encourages all its citizens to be multilingual; specifically, it encourages them to be able to speak two languages in addition to their native language; not to mention the number of EU funding programmes that actively promote language learning and linguistic diversity.

The need for mobility and access to information, taken together with the importance of mutual understanding and tolerance, establish effective communication skills across language boundaries as an indispensable part of the equipment of tomorrow’s citizens facing the challenges and opportunities of a transformed European society.

Any European wishing to enlarge his language competence beyond the language of his home environment is confronted by a great diversity of languages – over fifty have a recognized status as national or regional languages in the member states of the Council for Cultural Co-operation, not to mention many more in the Russian Federation. A car driver may easily pass through five or six distinct language areas in the course of a single day’s journey. Therefore, this question arises: How will these barriers to communication be overcome? The best answer could be intercomprehension as receptive skills, which require recognition of language and can exploit intelligent deduction, may offer a more cost-effective return on learning effort than productive skills, which require both recall of

the language to be used and the shaping of utterance to express the intended meaning in conformity with the grammatical and pragmatic conventions of the language (CEFR: 9). “The term ‘intercomprehension’ has been used by the European Union in order to identify a broader approach to language education, particularly the use of underlying language proficiency to enable access to other languages.” (Burley & Pomphrey 2003) This notion is also extensively discussed within *Studies on Translation and Multilingualism: Intercomprehension*. (European Commission 2012:3) Among its most accurate and comprehensive definitions: Intercomprehension refers to a relationship between languages in which speakers of different but related languages can readily understand each other without intentional study or extraordinary effort. It is a form of communication in which each person uses his/her own language and understands that of the other(s), and also “the development of the capacity to co-build a meaning when different languages get in contact and pragmatically use it in a specific communicative situation. In other words, intercomprehension is also the capacity to understand a language (without necessarily having studied it before) in a given context by using the developed discursive competence.” (Capucho 2004) In an IC approach there is a systematic focus on receptive skills, as the development of comprehension is the most tangible way of using the knowledge of a related language to understand a new one. Of course, this does not exclude some added benefits for productive skills; or to put it in a nutshell, one uses his/her native language as a bridge in order to build receptive skills in other languages.

1.2. The Webquest learning model: Definition and Structure

The term webquest was coined by Professor Bernie Dodge in 1997 (Dodge 1999). Tom March defined the webquest as “a scaffolded learning structure that uses links to essential resources on the World Wide Web and an authentic task to motivate students’ investigation of a central, open-ended question, development of individual expertise and participation in a final group process that attempts to transform newly acquired information into a more sophisticated understanding” (March 2004:3).

This structured Internet research activity is favored as it allows students to comprise richer thematic relationships, reflect on their own metacognitive processes and resort to thinking skills for analysis, synthesis and evaluation. The whole range of task-based activities engages the students in a real life situation which is divided between or among partners and directs them to achieving the learning objectives that have been set. The main task is set in the form of a question or problem that is both authentic and relevant to their real-life or social needs in order to motivate them. In this particular IC webquest students apply pre-existing knowledge to build new one either individually, in pairs or groups. Generally, a webquest includes six parts. The first one is the Introduction where background information should be provided in an interesting, motivating, relevant and timely manner in order to create the right atmosphere for learning.

The second section – Task – is perhaps the most important of all since it contains the focus for all activities to be performed by the students. According to Dodge, the creator of webquests, the tasks may come in 12 possible formats; nevertheless, their importance lies in the fact that they encourage collaboration among partners who come up with a final multimedia product.

The Process stage presents the students with a set of activities and research tasks, using a set of predefined resources. These are usually predominately web-based, and presented in clickable form within the task document. These resources are pre-selected for the learner so attention can be focused on the topic. They are, however, not restricted only to the resources on the web. For example, a wide range of resources, such as videoconferencing, audio conferencing, textbooks, audiotapes, laser diskettes and face to face interaction with others could be used in addition to web resources. Very often, it makes sense to divide the list of resources so that some are examined by everyone in the class, while others are read by subsets of learners who are playing a specific role or taking a particular perspective. By giving separate data sources to learners, you ensure the interdependence of the group and give the learners an incentive to teach each other what they've learned. The Process stage is where the teacher suggests steps learners should go through in completing the task. It may include strategies for dividing the task into subtasks, descriptions of roles to be played or perspectives to be taken by each learner.

The teacher can also use this place to provide learning advice and interpersonal process advice, such as how to conduct a brainstorming session. In this stage the teacher might also provide some guidance on how to organize the information gathered. This advice could include suggestions to use flowcharts, summary tables, concept maps, or other organizing structures. The advice could also take the form of a checklist of questions to analyze the information with, or things to notice or think about. If guide documents on the Web that cover specific skills needed for the lesson (e.g. how to brainstorm, how to prepare to interview an expert) have been pre-identified or prepared, it is best to be linked to this section. In the case of a language based webquest, the Process stage of the webquest may introduce (or recycle) lexical areas or grammatical points which are essential to the Task. The Process stage of the webquest will usually have one or sometimes several 'products' which the learners are expected to present at the end.

These 'products' will often form the basis of the Evaluation stage. Describing this section well will help other teachers to see how your lesson flows and how they might adapt it for their own use, so the more detail and care are put into this, the better.

The Evaluation stage is meant to involve students in self-evaluation, comparing and contrasting what they have produced with other students and giving feedback on what they feel they have learnt, achieved, etc. It also involves teacher evaluation of the same, and good webquests will give guidance to the teacher for this particular part of the process. Teachers will need to describe to the students how their performance will be evaluated, to specify whether there will be a common grade for group work vs. individual grades and what format the assessment will be used, be that a checklist or a rubric. The rubric is an authentic assessment tool which is particularly useful in assessing criteria which are complex and subjective. Evaluation rubrics would take a different form depending on the kind of task given to the learner. For example, an oral presentation rubric could include timing, delivery and content, while a multimedia presentation rubric would include graphical design, interactivity for the user, and enhancements.

In the Conclusion section teachers should write some sentences that summarize what students will have accomplished or learned by completing the activity or lesson. The conclusion could also include some rhetorical questions or additional links to encourage students to extend their thinking into other content beyond this lesson. The conclusion section of a webquest provides an opportunity to summarize the experience, to encourage reflection about the process, to extend and generalize what was learned, or some

combination of these. It is not a critically important piece, but it rounds out the document and provides that reader with a sense of closure. One good use for the conclusion section is to suggest questions that a teacher might use in a whole class discussion to debrief a lesson.

2. EXAMPLE OF A REAL ESP WEBQUEST WHICH INCORPORATES IC PRINCIPLES

The webquest we created, entitled Piracy: A Multilingual Response, is intended for students to acquire, develop and practice their IC skills by exploring a hot maritime topic such as piracy. They will work in small groups, assume different roles on the webquest, form group opinions on the issue and present their decision to the class. The nature of this webquest allows students to investigate an issue, develop critical perspectives, and practice language skills at the same time. In terms of language learning, students can practice reading comprehension, summarizing, writing, and speaking skills. The webquest is available online at the following address:

<http://zunal.com/webquest.php?w=307696>

and is accessed by our students in our multimedia laboratories, during the English sessions. It usually takes about two face-to-face 100 sessions, but students need to access it outside the classroom too in order to perform their group tasks. Here is a screenshot of the first page of the webquest as it appears on its hosting site online.




Fig. 1 A screenshot of the webquest as it appears online

Let us look closely at this webquest to see how the above-mentioned principles have been integrated. We will proceed as follows. We first provide some explanatory commentary of each section of the webquest and then provide each actual section of the piracy webquest (embedded as figure in our text) as an example. The introduction section lays the backgrounds of the issue and activates students' prior knowledge by asking questions to motivate students' curiosity. Here is an image of our introduction:

INTRODUCTION

Look at the following two images. They are indicative of a major security issue for all seafarers today. Can you guess what the issue is?



Here are some current facts coming from a 2015 maritime risk forecast:

'The number of incidents of piracy and armed robbery at sea rose by 26% in 2014, according to Control Risks' data. (...) These latest figures represent the highest level of criminal activity since 2011.'

<https://www.controlrisks.com/en/services/security-risk/maritime-risk-forecast-2015>

So what exactly is maritime piracy? Let's see some definitions.

Piracy, according to article 101 of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), is defined as:

1. "any illegal acts of violence or detention, or any act of depredation, committed for private ends by the crew or the passengers of a private ship or a private aircraft, and directed: (i) on the high seas, against another ship or aircraft, or against persons or property on board such ship or aircraft; (ii) against a ship, aircraft, persons or property in a place outside the jurisdiction of any State;
2. any act of voluntary participation in the operation of a ship or of an aircraft with knowledge of facts making it a pirate ship or aircraft;
3. any act inciting or of intentionally facilitating an act described in sub-paragraph (a) or (b)."

The International Maritime Bureau (IMB) defines piracy as: "an act of boarding (or attempted boarding) with the intent to commit theft or any other crime and with the intent or capability to use force in furtherance of that act."

<http://www.maritimeterrorism.com/definitions/>

Fig. 2 Introduction

In the task section, students will have a specific idea of what they need to do in order to complete the task. With task assignment, each student has to develop their individual expertise on an aspect of the issue. Cooperation plays a vital role, every group member needs to work on his or her own to develop their different abilities and at the same time share knowledge with his or her group members. Through social interaction, constructive learning among group members can then occur. The web links to resources provided on the process page point to specific websites where students can find the information they

need. Templates are also given for students to organize the information they have collected. These online tools and templates can be seen as a kind of scaffolding that learners can use to learn new concepts and language that are just beyond their level of knowledge and competency. Here is the task section of our webquest:

<p>TASK</p> <p>This webquest will prove very useful to you when you go at sea. Upon completion of this webquest you will have learnt how to report piracy attacks in writing, using standard reporting forms and specialized vocabulary.</p> <p>Moreover, you will have an opportunity to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- identify and discuss security problems aboard merchant ships which have been attacked by pirates and thus,- gain a deeper understanding of the best management practices for protection against maritime piracy. <p>Since merchant ships are multinational, multicultural professional environments, it is essential to possess those linguistic receptive skills and strategies which will allow you to co-operate with your international shipmates without speaking each and everyone's respective mother language. Here is where intercomprehension comes into place. This webquest promises two-fold benefits: On the one hand, it gives you the specialized knowledge and skills in order to be prepared to deal with piracy attacks and, on the other hand, it gives you the communication strategies that will help you interact professionally with your multinational crew.</p>
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Fig. 3 Task

In the process section, our students receive the tasks they have to perform. Notice the multilingual component of the tasks as students access the same text in French, Italian and Spanish. Moreover, they are given the opportunity to reflect on the receptive strategies they have used to perform the tasks. In terms of the content formats students are exposed to, they range from newspaper articles, official IMB piracy report forms, piracy reports, and ship data, all located online. Here is the process section of our webquest:

PROCESS

Step 1.

You are going to read a news article in 3 Romance languages. Read the titles of the articles and try to brainstorm on what the article is going to be about.

FR.: UN NAVIRE ITALIEN CAPTURÉ AU LARGE D'OMAN

IT.: DIROTTATA FORSE IN SOMALA LA NAVE ITALIANA SEQUESTRATA DAI PIRATI

ESP.: OTRO BARCO ITALIANO SECUESTRADO POR PIRATAS SOMALIES

- Answer the question: What words/expressions are similar in the three titles?
- Try to imagine what could have happened? Present your ideas in plenary.

Fig. 4 Process Step 1

Step 2

- In your groups think of the essential information that should be reported in case of a piracy attack. Share your ideas in plenary.
- Now read the standard IMB piracy report form and discuss/clarify its contents. You can access it here:
<http://www.icc-ccs.org/piracy-reporting-centre/report-an-incident>
- In your groups read the news articles in French /Italian/Spanish and find the same details in all three languages in order to fill in the reporting form. There will be some fields you will not be able to fill in. Leave them blank.
- Answer the question: What strategies did you use in order to identify the common information? Make a list and discuss it in plenary.

Fig. 5 Process, Step 2

Step 3

a) Go online and access to the following sites in order to find out the missing details to fill out the reporting form.

<https://www.q88.com/viewship.aspx?id=5C911EBD28E56941F617A09AD3E01F4F&vessel=Enrico%20Ievoli>

<http://www.oceanuslive.org/main/viewnews.aspx?uid=00000387>

http://www.marnavi.it/en/fleet/chemical/6/enrico_ievoli/

b) In groups try to answer point 47 on your reporting form by producing a full written report of the incident. Read it in plenary and compare your version with your colleagues'.

Fig. 6 Process, Step 3

Step 4

Go online and access to the following site. You will find numerous brief descriptions of other piracy attacks. Choose one and fill out the reporting form, including a full description of the event. Bring your writings to the next class.

You can download the report form from here:

<http://www.icc-ccs.org/piracy-reporting-centre/report-an-incident>

Read the stories here:

<http://www.icc-ccs.org/piracy-reporting-centre/live-piracy-report>

Fig. 7 Process, Step 4

Step 5

- a) Work in groups of 3-5 and swap your writings with other groups. Read your colleagues report forms and narratives. Identify the problems that contributed to the attack. Make a list. For each problem discuss the possible measures that should have been taken to avoid the situation.
- b) Find the “Best Management Practices for Protection against Somalia Based Piracy” online at this address:
<http://www.icc-ccs.org/images/stories/pdfs/bmp4.pdf>
and read Section 8 “Ship protection measures”.
- c) Go back to the narratives read before and for each identified problem find the appropriate solutions in the indicated section.
- d) Each group will then present try their findings in plenary by briefly describing the situation and the problems and then the identified solutions.

Fig. 8 Process, Step 5

The evaluation page provides the framework for the evaluation of the students’ work.

EVALUATION

Congratulations for completing the webquest!

Let us look back and reflect on the strategies you have used to accomplish the task while working together as a team.

Let us consider the following questions:

1. How did you feel about accessing materials in three different Romance languages?
2. What strategies did you use in order to better understand the materials?
3. What other tools could you use in the future when you are confronted with multilingual materials?

Fig. 9 Evaluation

The conclusion section allows students to reflect on their work and arrive at class decision on the issue. This WebQuest also attempts to connect to students' real life problems in the maritime community. This authentic activity allows students to apply what they have learned in the class to real life situations. Here is the conclusion section of our webquest:

CONCLUSION

According to the Interpol:

“Maritime piracy affects major shipping lanes, and puts at risk the lives of seafarers and merchant seamen from all over the world, of whom hundreds are taken captive each year. Millions of dollars in ransom payments are paid to pirates. (...) In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of attacks on vessels by pirates, in particular in the Gulf of Aden, Somali Basin and the Indian Ocean. Vast areas of waters are affected making it a challenge to prevent maritime piracy incidents.”

<http://www.interpol.int/Crime-areas/Maritime-piracy/Maritime-piracy>

Answer the following questions:

1. What is the most important piece of information/ skill you have acquired upon completing this webquest?
2. How will you use it?

Fig. 10 Conclusion

3. CONCLUSION

The benefits of using webquests in any teaching situation are numerous. They range from helping students construct a deeper understanding of the subject matter while gaining more profound insights into their own learning processes. Students also contribute to the real world of learning by testing their newly acquired knowledge with real world feedback. By working in groups, assuming roles and sharing responsibility for the end product, students develop those interpersonal working skills that they will later greatly benefit from in their real world lives. Webquests are also a wonderful means for teachers to adapt materials to the specifics of their students while expressing their own creativity and craft. It is high time webquests became more and more visible on the teaching scene as an expression of our capacity to absorb and integrate the technological advancements into our educational system. The above-mentioned advantages definitely make this webquest an option for ESP teachers to engage students in authentic and meaningful activities while understanding languages at the same time.

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