

Webquests and Blogs: Web-based Tool for EFL Teaching

Biodata

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ABSTRACT

Webquests and weblogs are learner motivational web-based teaching methodologies that are still to be fully implemented in foreign language classroom instruction in Spain. There are different types of webquests, taking the form of mystery tasks, retelling of a situation, problem solving, judgement decisions, etc. The process of designing a webquest is a thoughtful endeavour that does not require much computing skills as numerous templates are provided. Weblogs are online journals that may take many forms and be useful for either students, teachers or general communication intra or inter departmental. Several examples of each are presented.

1. Introduction

The educational system establishes, in a legal and curricular framework, a teaching model that intends to adapt teaching to the social needs, in other words, a teaching pattern that caters for a diversity of learners. To this end, different measures have been taken so far mainly involving the distribution of the contents and learners. The curriculum proposes some didactic guidelines as regards EFL teaching. In a student-centred teaching context, tasks should enhance progressive learning autonomy of students while fostering cooperative work.

During the last centuries teaching has not changed as much as our lives have. Would a 19th century citizen attend a lesson at school nowadays, he would see no much difference from the way they were taught: a teacher in a classroom making use of a blackboard, some chalk, a book and, in the best of cases, a TV. It is true that computers are somehow a recent technological device that teachers are still reluctant to take advantage of. Many teachers think of internet as too vast a resource for them to be able to cope with. Indeed, it is understandable that a teacher questions the educational benefit of such a chaotic instrument that only seems to offer useless and irrelevant resources to a set of aimless students surfing on the net.

ICT are part of our daily activities in more or less extent. The technological revolution has implanted a new battery of educational tools –CD-Roms, new software and the most valuable, the World Wide Web- that yet have to be exploited by many educators, who need to be continuously trained to keep up with the latest technological advances. The speed of these advances is increasing so rapidly that some adjustments will need to be made in education so that teachers, as part of society, be able to work fearlessly with these tools. Both webquests and blogs resort to using the web for educational purposes. When appropriately used, the web will surely transform the notion of teaching-learning: long-life education, change of settings and roles in the teaching-learning processes, etc. The web, indeed, reinforces the reading and writing skills as well as promotes the skills of information searching and problem solving.

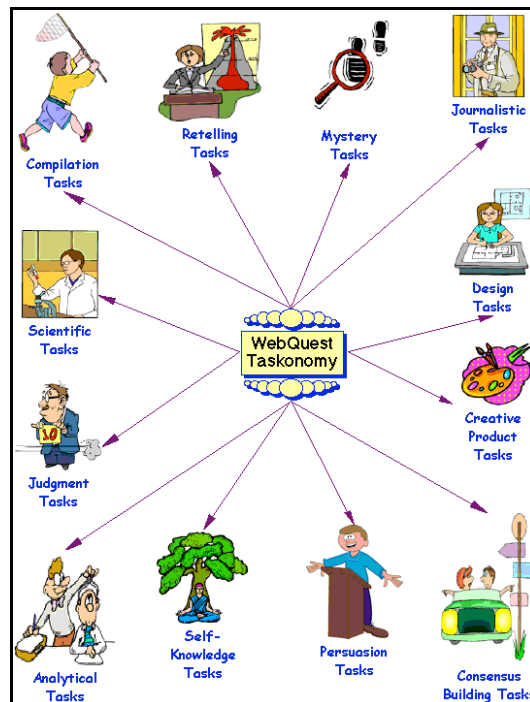
2. Webquests

2.1. What is a webquest?

According to Bernie Dodge, first and main developer of the Webquest Strategy, a webquest is an inquiry-oriented task in which most or part of the information which students deal with comes from the web and tends to be pre-selected by the teacher. Some of the tasks a webquest may involve include: searching on the net (as a means, not as a finality), choosing relevant information and processing it, retrieving it when necessary, analyzing the information, creating and presenting a final product. Webquests should be distinguished from other web-based learning activities such as Treasure Hunts or Subject Samplers, which may be engaging but in which the goal is not a task that requires synthesis or any of the thinking skills that webquests target. Rather they pose a kind of working methodology, in which each learner works on its own for the group's sake, thus leading to a cognitive transformation. Webquests are not advisable for solving learning gaps in knowledge of basic concepts. To this end, other web-based learning activities that do not require thinking transformation are more suitable such as concept-builders, subject samplers, etc.

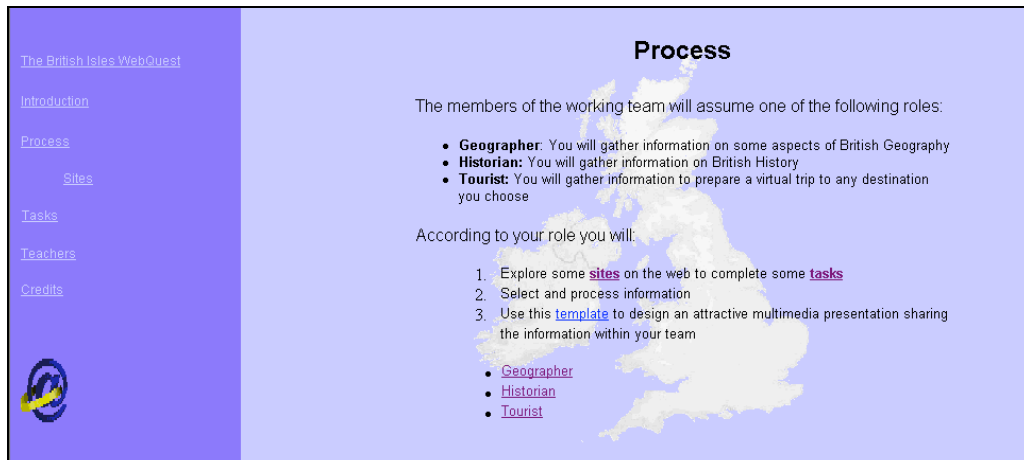
2.2. Levels and typology of webquests

Depending on the educational goal, webquests are characterised by different time spans: short term webquests aim at students to learn a relevant amount of information whereas long term webquests imply not only knowledge manipulation but also the ability of students to create a product with which others can interact. During the last 10 years, professionals have been working on the development of webquests and adapting them to their own needs so that a certain typology can be defined. However, the borderline between webquest categories may sometimes not be so clear cut/ may overlap since different elements of diverse categories may combine in the very same webquest.



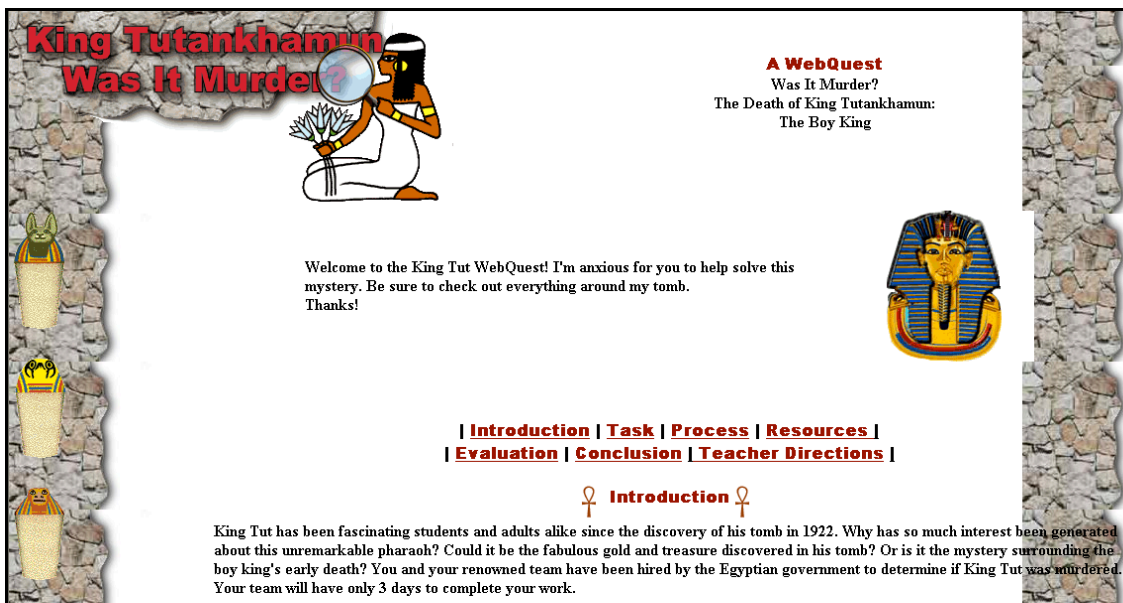
1. **Compilation tasks:** this is the most rudimentary type of quest in the sense that there is little cognitive skill development since students surf through different resources and select information in order to make a compilation (e.g. a cookbook, a collection of plants, etc.). This quest rather implies students' familiarization with some content and its organization and, later on, they gave birth to the so-called Wikis, that is, an online database of open publishing.
2. **Judgement tasks:** after gathering enough data about a special event or fact, students reach a decision and present it.
3. **Retelling tasks:** after a search, students reformulate what they have learnt. In the following example, *The British Isles Webquest*, students practise English while they learn about the culture of an English-speaking country and use Information Technology Resources. Here students are asked to organize and summarize the collected information in order to make a final product: a PowerPoint presentation of the country. Learners, in a guided process and working in small teams, adopt different roles so that each of them performs different tasks that will provide them with the information required for the final product: the geographer is in charge of gathering data on the geographical features of The British Isles, the historian has to

surf through historical events and outstanding figures of the country and the tourist needs to find travelling information in order to create a virtual trip to a city.



The British Isles Webquest by Amalia López i Purificación Camacho

4. Persuasion tasks: unlike retelling tasks, students are presented with a mock real situation and asked to use what they have learned so as to develop a convincing strategy to persuade their audience.
5. Mystery tasks: students are trapped in a problem or mystery story to be solved. In *King Tutankhamun: Was it Murder?*, learners are presented with a fascinating webquest that deals with the mysterious death of the Egyptian king. In order to determine the real truth, students work in teams playing different roles and undertaking a thorough investigation. Although mystery is the main feature that characterises the quest, students are also asked to develop several skills including those of synthesizing and analyzing information from different points of view for them to be able, at the end, to write a persuasive essay defending their position.



6. Creative tasks: the aim is to create a final product in a specific area and a specific format (e.g. a painting, a radio performance, etc.). Unlike design tasks, they are

much more open and volatile and the final product tends to be ascribed to a particular artistic style.

7. Journalistic tasks: adopting the role of journalists, students gather information, organize it and report it according to the journalistic genre. In *Today's News* webquest, students learn about the press in Britain and how information is structured and presented so that at the end of the workshop they are able to write two front pages for two different papers.

Today's News

Introduction | Task | Process | Evaluation | Conclusion

Which newspaper would Tony Blair or Margaret Thatcher read?
What is in page three in The Sun newspaper?
What is the difference between a news story and a feature story?

After taking part in this WebQuest, you will be able to answer these and many more questions about British newspapers.

Introduction

British newspapers are a good source of information about British culture and people. But students often find newspapers difficult to understand. By learning the conventions, structures and language features of British newspapers you will be able to enlarge your knowledge of English autonomously through reading authentic texts in printed or online newspapers.

For this reason the English Department has organised a seminar about the press in Britain and the students have applied to participate in various activities.

We congratulate you because, among more than one hundred applicants, you have been selected for taking part in these activities concerning newspapers and therefore, it will be expected that by the end of the seminar, you will be familiarised with this literary genre.

A webquest by Isabel Pérez

8. Design tasks: students are prompted to create a product that accomplishes some predefined goal. In *The Sky's the Limit*, students have just founded a new company that creates travel brochures *à la carte*, thus helping tourists with no time and resources to design their holidays.
9. Analytical tasks: students are asked to look closely at certain things (physical or abstract) and examine them carefully in order to establish different relationships (cause-effect, similarities-differences, etc.).
10. Self-knowledge tasks: this is the least common type of webquest since it attempts to develop oneself and articulate a personal insight through an exploration of the on-and-off line resources.
11. Consensus tasks: there are topics that, because of their nature, are intrinsically controversial. This type of tasks requires presenting differing points of view on the same topic, analysing them in order to reach a conclusion.
12. Scientific tasks: in order to see how science works, these tasks, sometimes with a mysterious question, propose true experience by practicing with real science. A scientific task includes skills such as making hypothesis, testing them and, at the end, contrasting the result with the initial prediction.

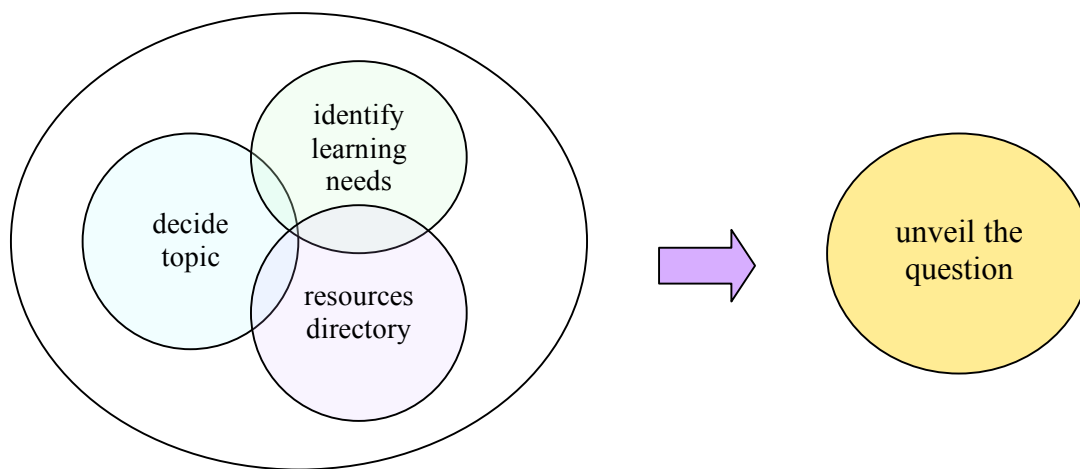
2.3. Structure and design of webquests

As mentioned above, webquests should be designed with a purpose in mind for students to perform when surfing the net. For this reason, webquests usually follow a structural pattern. To begin with, webquests are presented with an introduction that describes the

lesson, sets the stage, and identifies the level it is aimed at and the prior knowledge that is required to undertake the task. A brief description of the expected outcome and the skills used may be provided. Most webquests include the information resources needed, either by supplying the links to the World Wide Web or through bibliographical references or just attaching documents in the very same site. The processes the learners need to successfully accomplish the task are described in detail. In this sense, learners are guided, step by step, in organizing their information as well as in evaluating their performance. Finally, the quest concludes in a way that shows students the importance of the lesson learned.

From this brief description of the content of a webquest, the basic steps in webquest creation are presented.

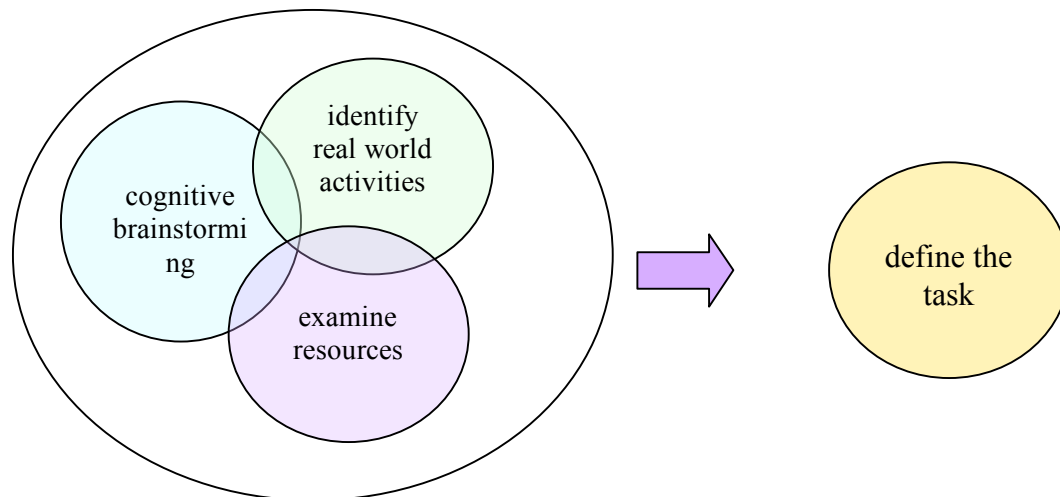
1. Planning beforehand: to the neophyte webquest designer, it may be of great value to visit some already made pages. Webquest creation should start with the decision of a topic according to your students interests, their specific needs or just because it fits in with their curriculum (e.g. a journey to the British Isles, a story read in class, a box office film, etc.). Before identifying the learning gaps for students to fill, teachers should be aware of the consistency of the online resources, indiscriminately gathering and organizing this raw material in a kind of inventory. Lastly, before beginning the webquest design process, the main question –the quest in itself- that lies behind the webquest must be posed. To ensure the success of the design it is worth valuing and taking into account the richness in resources and in relevance, as well as evaluating the enhancement in cognitive and thinking skills that the webquest will represent.



2. In the second phase of the design process, the webquest is given a shape and the first draft may already be produced. At this stage all the possible cognitive transformation tasks¹ that could be involved in the quest are brainstormed even though the first step in the quest be simple “information gathering”. It may be highly useful to sort out the web resources by means of a definite criterion (*i.e.* information classification into topics, job-roles, perspectives, levels, etc.) and rigorously examine them for educational purposes. Should the sites collection be poor or irrelevant, it would be useful at this stage to revisit the web for better resources or to change the webquest topic in itself. Special attention should be paid to establish a basic knowledge of the subject so that students can engage

¹ Dodge’s Webquest Strategy is based on the constructivist idea of transformation of raw data into knowledge, into meaningful learning. In this sense, the proposed tasks should bridge the learning gap, that is, they should take into account the transformation of input into a significant outcome for students.

in the task with similar background positions. Finally, the learning tasks are to be thought in terms of a final and physical, if possible, product that will be representative of the learning outcome. The product is going to define the tasks the different roles are going to perform. Although slightly different in content and procedure, tasks go hand-in-hand to form a unique final result (e.g. write an e-mail, design a poster, make a presentation, perform a play, etc.) and this should mirror a real world activity that involves true learning.



3. The last step consists in designing and actually writing the webquest. Difficult as it may seem to use an HTML editor like FrontPage or Dreamweaver, creating a web page may be much easier when using a template that guides the teacher into the creation of the webquest. The most challenging aspect of this part is to ensure a really engaging introduction that catches students' attention and drives them naturally into the task/question. A general introduction should be clearly stated at the very beginning so that later on it may derive into more specific roles for students to develop. Transformative thinking tasks are better introduced after students have completed their assigned roles, that is, when students are prepared to share different knowledge. The conclusion also needs to pose a semantic sense that returns to the initial reasoning and engages learners into critical thinking of the skills developed through the activities they undertook. Finally, once the webquest has been implemented and revised, a server needs to be found to deliver the final version of the quest. Alternatively, some web pages offer free space where the quest can be published or even saved in the hard disk of a central computer as a kind of intranet, when access to the net is inadequate or inexistent.

2.4. Why webquests?

Motivation is the main factor in determining success in language learning (Gardner): if motivation is present, success in language learning is guaranteed. The so-called Dotcom or Click generation has been altered by a technological revolution, which still has to make a deep impact in our educational system. Using different types of tasks increases student motivation in the use of language. Webquests, thus, were developed with learner motivation in mind even though the resulting effects have been beneficial to both teaching-learning processes. On the one hand, they offer opportunities for teachers to explore content resources on the net in order to integrate them in classroom instruction at low cost. Teachers with few skills in IT can make use of web-based activities

available on the web or adapt existing ones to their purposes, thus encouraging teachers' creation and initiating a circle of opinion sharing between professionals. On the other hand, webquests have a pedagogical value in the sense that they foster opportunities for richer interdisciplinary content learning and allow the development of skills to deal appropriately with information: webquests help students think and reason and use information and resources to solve problems. Integration of IT in the classroom allows for student's understanding of concepts through collaborative work and also teaches them how to translate theory into practice.

3. Weblogs

3.1. What is a weblog?

Another recent web-based application for knowledge acquisition is the creation and subsequent use of weblogs, also referred as blogs. Edublogs or schoolblogs, as they are known in the educational field, can be defined as personal interactive e-diaries/journals. These sites are open to public in general as they allow reader's interaction through responses to a given entry or by exposing their opinions on a topic. They tend to be a free of charge writing space on the net and, unlike traditional web pages, content publishing is dynamic and immediate from any remote system with web connection, since typing is direct into the browser and publication on the web just requires the click of a button. Most of the time, blogs take the form of a digital diary in which each contribution is timely registered and continuously updated so that readers can follow the discussion chronologically, according to the owner's preferences.

Blogs are specially useful because they do not require high IT skills and because they are great repositories for storing data generated in the classroom. Part of the simplicity of using blogs stems from the fact that no specific software is required so that difficulty in creating a blog depends on the level of complexity the owner desires. In order to avoid the use of a programming language, there exist on the net different tools (*e.g.* Blogger (www.blogger.com), Pitas (<http://www.pitas.com>), Movable Type (<http://www.movabletype.org>), Greymatter (<http://www.noahgrey.com/greysoft/>), diary Land (<http://usuario.diaryland.com>) amongst others) which offer the registered owner a series of templates that will help them to design, delete, rewrite, control comments, etc. Because of their quickness and relative ease of publishing, blogs are increasingly starting to grow for several purposes since the beginning of the World Wide Web and specially after the Edublog Awards in 2004.

Like webquests, edublogs offer several advantages to both the teaching-learning practice. A reflective journal may be created with different purposes in mind. When using blogs, not only are educators including IT resources in their teaching practice, but they are also voicing their inner ideas about blog applications in the classroom (The English BLOG, at <http://jeffreyhill.typepad.com/english/>). In this sense, weblogs represent a space for reflection, sharing and recording teaching practices. In language learning, blogs are suitable to invite student comments and, thus, implement reading and writing skills both individually or in group. Apart from the intrinsic motivational aspects mentioned above, blogs empower learners with a sense of ownership, when they are the blog creators, and endows them with a personal space to express themselves and publish online. The fact that their contributions can instantly be read by a real audience

-classmates, friends, teachers, parents, etc.- enhances the real meaning of the writing task.

3.2. Why edublogs?

Because of different levels of IT skills among teachers, blogs represent a great advantage in the sense that there is neither a need to learn HTML, nor of acquiring any kind of specific software as the very same weblogs provide with free templates to design and administer the page. Blogs are a means of communication more structured than a simple list of e-mails or a group of newsletters. Their structure creates a framework where students can socially interact and are incited to communicate. Being the net worldwide accessible, work is not subjugated to school limits and it can be developed at home, at the library, etc. Furthermore, teachers may add a blogroll, that is, a list of recommended external links, so that students may be guided into new information resources for learning.



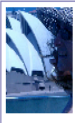
3.3. Using blogs in EFL teaching

Although in Spain there has not been as much support for the development of blogs – only a few experimentations at university level- as in Anglo-Saxon countries, secondary teachers are, bit by bit, introducing this web-resource as part of their classroom instruction and, what is more, as work students will be assessed on. Blogging in EFL class –which may include literary criticism, artistic interpretations of passages, film reviews, etc.- may seem to be restricted to give writing practice to advanced students who, with a higher command of language, can express themselves more fluently. As opposed to this, *Feel the Season*, a blog for Japanese beginner students of English, in which learners post seasonal pictures with a brief comment on their feelings and inspirations, shows how with imagination and basic language, blogs are useful even at the earliest stages of learning.

<p style="text-align: center;">Red pink</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">Red and pink are so friendly Pink and green are good company So it is a lovely earth</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Posted by saki at 10:15 AM Comments (2)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">My friends</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">We are friends. We are partner. We are swimming comfortably.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Posted by kurumi at 10:13 AM Comments (1)</p>
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In the blog Elizabeth Fullerton designed, the author uses the web space as a guiding blog in the sense that it gives regularly instruction to the learners as regards homework, syllabus information and resources for self-study. This site, however, does not

encourage online student verbal exchange. A similar example is provided in the blog Our Class 2005, a blog for EFL students in Australia.

<p>Welcome to English IVa Advanced!</p>  <p>Welcome to English IVa - Advanced! As we have discussed in class, we will be using this site for announcements, blog assignments, supplemental material, etc.</p> <p>Make sure that you check this site each week on Mondays and Thursdays to see what we are covering for the week. You never know, I may give you some test answers from time to time to reward those of you who are checking in.</p> <p>Sometimes you'll have to download notes and bring them with you to class. Make sure that you do it on time! If your printer isn't working or your computer has died, you can always stop by the library in the morning or afternoon and print them out. It shouldn't take long at all.</p> <p>This week you will have two assignments:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Sign up to be a member of our class blog. 2) Download notes from the following link and bring them to class on Wednesday, August 3rd. 	<p>our class 2005</p> <p>03</p> <p>Wednesday, August 10, 2005</p>  <p>Today's Work</p> <p>Last weekend was beautifully sunny, perfect for a day out at sea...It looks as if we may be going back to winter this weekend, though. It's been snowing in the Blue Mountains, parts of Victoria (even in coastal towns where it hadn't snowed for 50 years at least!) and many areas of NSW.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Go to the forum and take part in this week's discussion: <i>My son is 26 and still at home!</i> 2. We shouldn't complain, though. Read THIS WEEK'S STORY in Time4English. It relates to natural phenomena (discussed previously) and to your classmate Nenti's work with the Tsunami Appeal. 3. Go to Lower Intermediate: 7 It just happened! and do all the exercises (7A-7E) <p>About Me</p>  <p>Name: Rosa Location: Sydney, New South Wales, Australia View my complete profile</p> <p>Useful Links</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adult Study Centre Google TAFE Study Links English Language TAFE Learning Gateway Forum Topics Our Class ESL/EFL Resources Oz ESL Online <p>A blog for an English class of adult migrants in Sydney, Australia. There are quizzes, competitions, students' own texts, students' recipes, photos and a lot more.</p>
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4. Conclusion

As mentioned above teachers may have good reasons to work with web-based approaches, mainly for relevant and richer learning encouragement through higher levels of motivation. The form of expression may vary as technological resources evolve yet the underlying motivation remains. Nevertheless, they are not the answer for language knowledge. Webquests need to be designed following a logical order so as not to lose the sense of the original goal. Occasionally, tasks may be too complex and they might take too much time to be carried out. At times it is difficult to propose tasks that are really effective without assaulting the very pedagogical value that they aim at. Newspapers in schools remain, most of the time, dusted in lockers and they rarely work to stimulate students into writing, and using them results somehow artificial, not welcoming and meaningless. Should teachers think the same about blogs just because they, being a new means of communication, have an intrinsic power that implies a new referential framework for students to write?

In any case, working with IT should not be seen as an isolated activity devoid of curricular significance and pedagogical justification and, for this reason, educators may wonder how to exploit and integrate the possibilities of technological advances for further learning goals. Parental permission and server space are also other minor barriers teachers should take into account. However, these difficulties may be easily overcome with such simple solutions as obtaining a signed form from parents.

All in all, these new teaching methods cannot be implemented until schools are not equipped with the right technology, time and comfort level to support classroom tutoring.

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Suggestions for further reading

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