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## **Developing Information Literacy Skills in the Beginning Language Classroom: A Case for WebQuests**

*Ekaterina Nemtchinova*

### **Introduction**

To say that the Internet has had an enormous impact on the world of education is to state the obvious, and the world of foreign language education is no exception. The advancement of Internet technologies necessitates the development of a new set of abilities in conjunction with more traditional language competencies: in addition to being able to write compositions and read newspaper articles, foreign language students need to know how to compose e-mail messages, perform searches on the Internet, and use online information. In other words, students have to be information literate to adapt to today's increasingly complex multimedia environment.

This study addresses the issue of information literacy (IL) through the use of WebQuests in a beginning-level language classroom. While WebQuests are considered a "widely popular learning activity" (Abbit and Ophus 2008, 443), little research has analyzed their impact on teaching, learning, and information literacy in foreign language classrooms. Although several studies have examined IL curricula for promoting cultural or content goals (Giullian 2009; Reznowski 2008), this discussion has omitted foreign language learning objectives. In a recent article, Hock (2007) presented a thorough analysis of the integration of IL into a German class through texts and tools, but failed to access its effect on language learning.

This paper aims to add to the body of knowledge on WebQuests by exploring the topic of IL and language development in the context of a beginning Russian class. It surveys students' opinions on WebQuest assignments and their attitudes to information literacy in a target language.

### **Information literacy and language learning**

The concept of information literacy (IL) was introduced in 1974 to describe the process of accessing and using a variety of information tools to retrieve and synthesize information from diverse sources (Zurkowski 1974). More recently, IL has been defined in terms of “the set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze, evaluate, and use information” (Association of College and Research Libraries 2014). Other related terms describing the interaction of people with multimedia technology include media literacy (the ability to understand the organization, functioning, conventions, and usage of different forms of mass media), visual literacy (a set of skills necessary to appreciate, use, and create visual media), digital literacy (knowing how to effectively use the Internet and informational technologies), and information fluency (stressing the speed, accuracy, and dynamic nature of the process) (Lorenzo and Dziuban 2006). Notwithstanding the difference in concepts, terminology, and focus, this article will use the term information literacy to refer to the knowledge and skills necessary to detect, process, and effectively use information in a variety of formats.

The rapid growth of digital technologies and the immeasurable amount of information available today affects the very nature of teaching and learning. To be information literate in any discipline or learning environment, a person must be able to establish a need for information, determine what information is needed, find the necessary information, evaluate its relevance and reliability, and use it effectively for specific purposes while understanding the economic, legal, ethical and social implications of its use (ACRL 2014). As new technologies become increasingly present in everyday life, our understanding of the concept of IL must extend to these new uses. Thus, Shapiro and Hughes (1996, 33) argue that IL should be regarded as a “new liberal art that extends from knowing how to use computers and access information to critical reflection on the nature of information itself, its technical infrastructure and its social, cultural, and philosophical context and impact.” At the same time, the rapid proliferation and change of the digital world divests the concept of IL of a static or absolute value. Rather, IL is a moving target, a continuum of skills, strategies, and competencies that together promote lifelong independent learning and

ensure a high degree of control over one's learning processes (ACRL 2014).

How does the concept of IL apply to foreign language education? IL in language learning means accessing, selecting, evaluating, and using appropriate target language information in the most efficient way. IL enables a person to make an informed decision about the information needed for a specific purpose; understand the nature, type, and structure of that information; find information using a variety of tools (e.g. search engines, online databases, library); analyze and evaluate the information in regards to needs; use the information effectively to achieve a specific goal; and present the information using an appropriate media format. In this regard, IL is closely related to critical thinking processes that involve reasoning, analysis, synthesis, and interpretation of information. While analysis and synthesis may be more suitable for higher levels of language proficiency, Novice learners can successfully process authentic texts on familiar topics with visual support, ask simple questions, express judgment, and make inferences based on background knowledge (American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages 2012). In addition, IL implies a high degree of cultural competence, which is seen, for example, in one's familiarity with target language search tools, major sources of information in the target culture and their political bent, culturally-appropriate methods of citation, and culture-specific communication strategies (both interpersonal and online). Thus IL goals assist instructors and students in meeting the standards of communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities proposed by ACTFL.

IL in the target language can lead learners to a deeper appreciation of linguistic and cultural contexts by allowing access to information about a subject matter, language, and culture. As students step away from traditional texts toward authentic online materials, they "can have almost instantaneous access to a range of foreign experiences in their target language. The computer serves as a gateway to the virtual foreign world where real people are using real language in real contexts" (Osuna and Meskill 1998, 71). To handle the wealth of authentic materials, learners can rely on IL skills to find, evaluate and select the information they need. Hicks (2013, 56) deems IL as "being

instrumental in communicative language learning, in which language is used to convey information or mediate between people and the world.”

It seems safe to assume that today’s college students feel quite comfortable in the digital environment. They communicate, consume, and create information online by instant messaging, blogging, downloading texts and images, listening to podcasts, and visiting social networks, to name just a few options. And yet educators question their understanding of information quality and approaches to technology use, noting that access to and familiarity with new technologies does not often translate into sound, insightful, critical, or comprehensive skills and applications (Lorenzo and Dziuban 2006; Mellon 1999). Did the students perform an effective search or just click on the first link provided by Google? Are they aware of the ethical issues involved in the use of another’s intellectual property? Do they realize that posting certain personal information online might have negative consequences?

For foreign language students, the issues surrounding the development of IL are exacerbated by a certain degree of anxiety. Although it is most commonly associated with speaking performance, research shows that anxiety can cripple online work too. Thus, Aydin (2011) notes that Internet anxiety is caused by fear of danger and powerlessness when using the Internet. Moreover, high levels of anxiety associated with insufficient language ability and online communication skills, lack of Internet instruction and unfamiliarity with the Internet can have a negative impact on achievement in language learning. Similarly, Yang (2001, 155) reports that many foreign language learners approach Web resources with both anxiety and excitement, and that “a computer-mediated learning experience in language studies could not be achieved by itself simply by the introduction of the learner to Web technology.” Thus, in order to prepare students to function in a networked society, educators must explicitly teach technological literacy and integrate it into the curriculum in meaningful ways (Warschauer and Healey 1998; Lengel and Lengel 2006).

Another obstacle to the development of IL in foreign language classrooms is the dependence of certain skills on the target language itself. Although some IL reading and research skills are universal and could be expected to transfer to a new language environment (Rosell-Aguilar 2004), others are language-specific and need to be built anew.

Understanding Internet vocabulary (e.g. *link, search, click*); using a keyboard (in the case of a different writing system); performing a keyword search; navigating search engines and Web pages; identifying, selecting and retrieving specific information; documenting resources; communicating online have a strong linguistic and cultural aspect that needs to be addressed in the course of instruction.

### **WebQuests**

A WebQuest is an inquiry-oriented activity designed to maximize the students' time on the Internet while increasing exposure to authentic resources and promoting critical thinking skills in the target language. It represents a common and practical way of using Web resources to accumulate information on a topic in order to research an issue, solve a problem, or create a product.

The concept was first introduced in 1995 by B. Dodge, who distinguishes between short- and longer-term WebQuests. While the former can be accomplished in one to three class periods and is aimed at knowledge acquisition and integration, the latter can take between a week and a month and involves expanding and refining knowledge. Both types of WebQuests may result in written or oral products and may be completed individually or in groups. Group assignments often include a role-play element such as assigning different functions to participants (e.g. a secretary, a researcher, an investigator), inviting them to assume a certain personality or work within a scenario.

A typical WebQuest activity consists of an introduction that presents the context and background for the assignment; a task "that is doable and interesting" (Dodge 1995, 10); a process that describes how the task can be fulfilled in a number of clear sequential steps; a means of organizing the information such as questions, a chart, a diagram, a timeline etc; evaluation of the task which may or may not involve presenting the finished product to others; and a conclusion that provides closure to the activity as learners reflect on what has they have learned and how this experience can be extended to different contexts.

An important component of well-designed WebQuest activities is appropriate scaffolding, a process of supporting learning through context, simplified language, modeling, visuals, collaboration, and hands-on learning. Scaffolding is achieved by providing a structured

task, often accompanied by template, graph, or chart students have to complete, a group arrangement that requires collaborative work on parts or the whole assignment, a context, and a teacher's model showing a possible way of accomplishing the given task. March (2003, 42) notes that scaffolding allows students to try new ways of learning within a structured environment by creating a "temporary framework to support student performance beyond their capacities," thus "positively affecting student achievement" and encouraging them to take control of their learning by approaching and completing the task in their own way. This type of support is particularly beneficial for beginning students who need instructional assistance to enable effective language processing and production. An example of scaffolding is presented in Appendix 1: the task poses specific questions and provides a graphic organizer in the form of a chart; familiar vocabulary, true cognates and online images facilitate comprehension; simple yes-no questions and model verb forms facilitate production.

Theoretically, WebQuests are based on the implications of the constructivist perspective of second language acquisition and its instructional strategy of inquiry-based learning. Constructivism views the learning process as a transformation of raw input into knowledge, and learners as active participants who construct their own meaningful interpretation of knowledge based on their individual social and personal experiences. As they use their individually constructed knowledge, learners become responsible for the progress and outcomes of the learning process. This responsibility is shared by the teacher who, instead of directly imparting the knowledge to learners, acts as an organizer, coordinator and moderator of their academic and cognitive activity (Rosell-Aguilar 2004). In this view WebQuests allow learners to "activate...prior knowledge and create a personal curiosity that inspires investigation and brings about a more robust understanding of the material" (March 2003, 44).

The inquiry-based process of learning is characterized by students' engagement with a driving question, active research that involves collection, analysis, synthesis, and presentation of information, and reflection on the original problem and the process of reaching the solution. It accentuates learner-centered instruction, critical thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving practices. Rather than simply

memorizing established facts or giving right or wrong answers, students actively search for explanations based on contextualized, meaningful, real-life situations through observation, inquiry, reasoning, and reflection. Depending on the level of scaffolding provided, educators distinguish between structured inquiry (a problem and an outline for its solution are presented by the instructor), a guided inquiry (the instructor provides the question, but no guidelines as to how to approach it), and an open inquiry (students generate and investigate their own questions) (Spronken-Smith and Walker 2010). The implications of constructivism and inquiry-based learning provide WebQuests with the advantages of active learning, increased student motivation, and engagement of cognitive skills (Laborda 2009; Kanuka, Rourke and Laflamme 2007). As they proceed from collecting and interpreting information to taking action on it to work out a problem at hand, students learn to posit more questions, generate answers, and create new knowledge, thus developing into independent and creative thinkers.

The use of WebQuests has been well documented in the literature (Abbit and Ophus 2008). They have been described as useful, challenging, meaningful, entertaining, motivational, and leading to experiential learning (Warschauer 1996). Teachers find them appealing because they allow an easy integration of technology, content, and pedagogy into an existing curriculum while fostering academic language development, Internet inquiry, and student collaboration (Sox and Rubinstein-Avila 2009). Of particular interest to language educators is the ability of WebQuests to provide access to authentic target language materials and culture in a structured and organized way (Osuna and Meskill 1998; Laborda 2009). As students follow a specific set of steps to complete their task, they come in contact with up-to-date images, texts and cultural information that improve their language and cultural awareness.

A critical aspect of a WebQuest is the cognitive requirements it impresses on the learner. While Dodge (1995) asserted that WebQuests involve such cognitive skills as comparing, classifying, inducing, deducing, and analysis, several later studies have subjected these claims to empirical investigation. Popham and Wentworth (2003), for example, analyzed the cognitive requirements of WebQuests on pre-service and in-service teachers using a rubric that measured the amount of inquiry



learning and critical thinking involved, among other factors. They discovered a close connection between critical thinking proficiency and problem-solving activities: the more activities were focused on solving a problem, the more they demonstrated the characteristics of a critical thinking instructional activity. In another study, Kanuka, Rourke, and Laflamme (2007) observed that WebQuests resulted in the higher “cognitive presence” of their subjects. They compared the quality of online discussion posts by students involved in five communicative activities using four levels of cognitive presence (triggering event; exploration; integration; resolution). Their conclusion was that a highly structured activity with clearly defined roles such as WebQuests elicited more frequent posts resulting in higher scores on cognitive presence, particularly in the exploration category.

At the same time, some researchers question the assumption that WebQuests develop higher-order thinking skills. For example, Molebash et al. (2002) recommend caution in praising the potential of WebQuests to promote critical thinking. Their analysis of 75 WebQuests submitted to the WebQuest.org database indicates that 20% of the submissions were rated as having 0% of inquiry, (level 0) 4% as Confirmation/Verification, (level 1) 60% as Structured Inquiry, (level 2) 16% as Guided Inquiry, and (level 3) 0% as Open Inquiry. The results indicate that, although WebQuests claim to be inquiry-oriented activities, they mainly support low levels of inquiry. Two more studies have compared WebQuests with traditional classroom activities to conclude that, while both students and instructors enjoyed WebQuests, conventional instruction led to significantly greater student learning. Gaskill, McNulty and Brooks (2006) examined pre- and posttests of geology knowledge to discover no significant difference in student achievement between a control group that used conventional instruction and an experimental group that used WebQuests. Similarly, Strickland and Nazzal (2005) reported no evident advantage of WebQuests over traditional methods after analyzing the end-of-unit exam scores of 86 middle school students who completed a WebQuest or a poster on the Texas Revolution.

Mixed findings from different studies notwithstanding, WebQuests continue to draw educators’ attention because of their potential for effective technology integration, positive impact on

motivation, and inquiry level. It was these benefits of WebQuests that prompted me to include it in the first-year curriculum and motivated this study.

Several reasons prompted me to make WebQuests a regular part of the syllabus, including my desire for interesting and relevant teaching resources and the students' need for additional practice with the Cyrillic alphabet. WebQuest assignments provided much-needed exposure to authentic materials beyond the textbook as well as reading and writing (and often speaking) practice in a real-life context and a new format.

An additional impetus for including WebQuests in the syllabus was the opportunity to provide Web-enhanced language learning. Most foreign language textbooks are supplemented by online reading, listening, pronunciation, and vocabulary exercises that provide controlled practice in the mechanics of the language directly tied to a particular unit of the textbook. Although the widely adopted elementary-level Russian course books *Golosa* and *Nachalo* provide Internet links and WebQuest-like assignments, most of the web addresses are outdated. *Troika* invites students to find an apartment on <http://realty.rambler.ru/> but does not give any specific guidelines. The structure of WebQuests, along with clearly stated tasks, support novice students in searching the Web in an organized fashion and in achieving a feasible result.

Finally, given the degree to which the Internet is present in today's students' lives, it seemed natural to extend its usage to a new language. While it is common for Web-based activities to target Intermediate- levels of language proficiency and above (Laborda 2009; Osuna and Meskill 1998; Yang 2001), beginners can research information on the Web provided the task is carefully structured to be within their linguistic grasp. Just as it is customary to introduce and practice all four language skills simultaneously, IL can be integrated into regular class work from the very beginning. Not only do Web-based activities add variety and novelty to the syllabus, but they enhance reading and writing proficiency as well as promote independent learning and problem-solving in a new language. The ability to find target language information on the Web takes students outside of the traditional classroom and into a real-life world.

## Method

Beginning Russian at Seattle Pacific University is offered every other year. It is a five-credit, three-course sequence aimed at developing oral and written communication skills as well as introducing students to various aspects of Russian culture. WebQuests were first introduced in 2009 as a general course requirement and are now worth 10% of the final grade. They are assigned on a bi-weekly basis. Each WebQuest is based on the topic of the textbook chapter and involves finding information on the Internet to answer specific questions (see Appendix 1). Students are given a week to complete each WebQuest on their own. The two criteria for evaluating WebQuests are adequacy and completeness of the task and accuracy and fluency of the written response; fluency at Novice level is measured in terms of spontaneous, non-rehearsed sentences using memorized language related to familiar areas (American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages 2012). Depending on the nature of the assignment, the results of a WebQuest may be presented in class.

The data for the study were collected over the period of 2009-2013 by means of a self-report online questionnaire administered at the end of the year. Participants of the study were undergraduate students in the first-year Russian class. Sixty-eight questionnaires were completed; the average response rate was 94 %. After consulting several sources (Osuna and Meskill 1998; Yang 2001) the following dimensions were identified as critical for the development of the survey: *Demographics* (two questions dealing with participants' familiarity and comfort with Internet technology), *Information literacy in Russian* (five questions on various aspects of information literacy in a foreign language), *Assignment* (six questions surveying participants' attitudes to WebQuests), *Logistics* (four questions on the *how* of WebQuest assignments) and *Concluding remarks* (two questions on the importance of information literacy in a foreign language). A combination of multiple choice, rank order scaling, and open-ended questions was used. The qualitative data, including comments and responses to open-ended questions were used to corroborate the questionnaire-based quantitative data.

## Results and Discussion

### *Demographics*

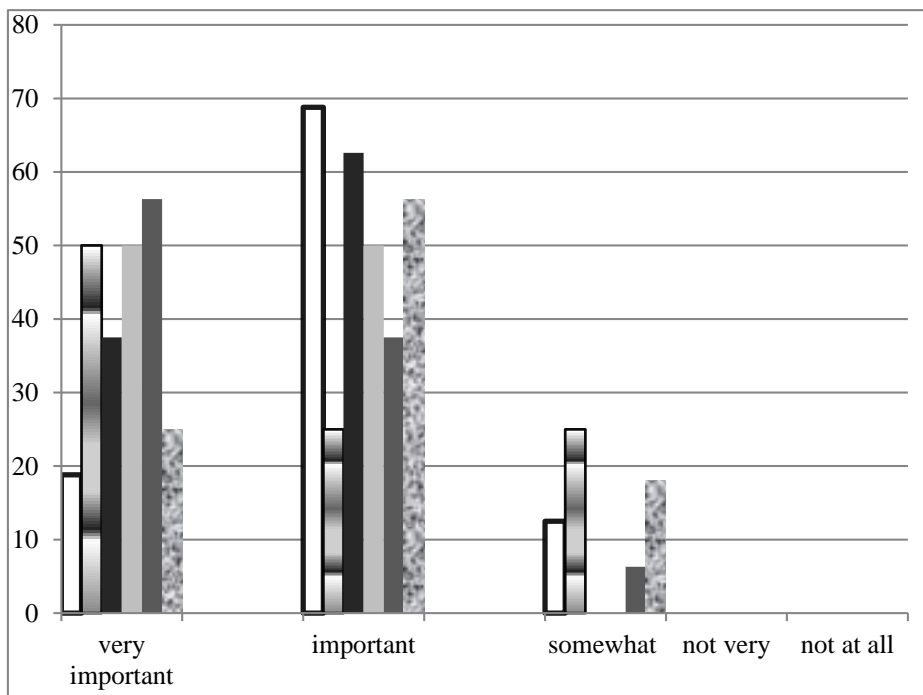
When asked to rate their Internet skills, 58.8% of the participants described themselves as intermediate and 41.2% as advanced users. The most commonly visited websites were those for e-mail (94%), course management systems (e.g. Blackboard) (88%), and social networks (82%). Somewhat less popular applications were YouTube (41%), WIKI (17%), blogs, discussion forums, and news portals (5% each). According to these responses, the students in the survey were frequent and experienced Internet users who regularly visited its various destinations for a variety of academic and social purposes. At the same time, they were novice users of the Russian Internet who experienced anxiety when approaching the familiar tool in a new language, as is seen from the following sample comments: "Once I got over the intimidation factor, the assignments became kind of fun" and "I was afraid I won't (*sic*) understand enough to learn something from it."

### *Information literacy in a foreign language*

Figure 1 summarizes the students' attitudes toward information literacy in the target language. The overwhelming majority believed that it is either very important (43%) or important (50%) for a foreign language student to be able to use electronic resources in the target language while 6% believes it to be somewhat important. Students explained that because they "would like to be able to read the Russian Internet" and "want to get hold of the information about Russia in Russian," they viewed IL as an "important addition to the class."

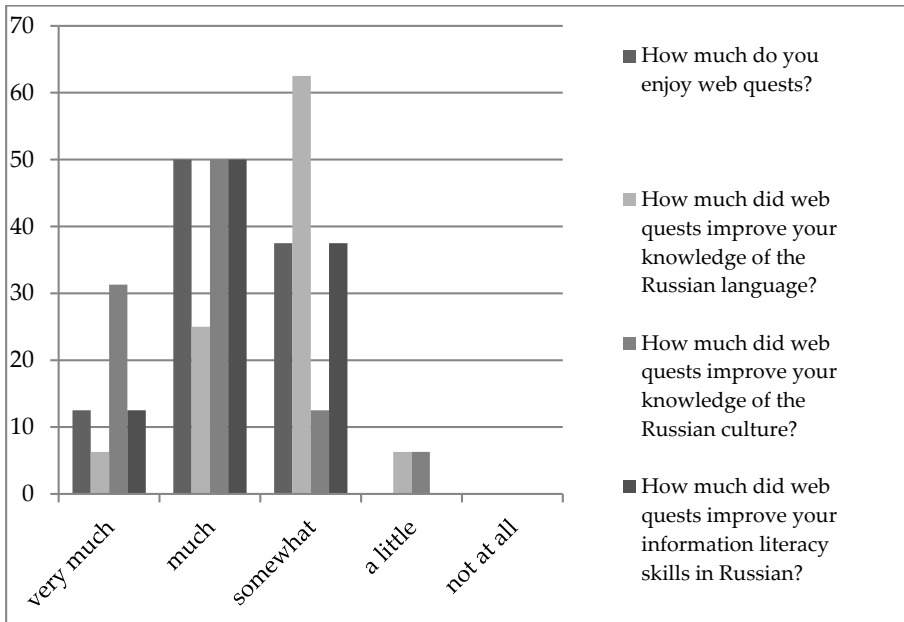
As indicated in Figure 2, students indicated that WebQuest assignments generally improved their IL skills (25% very much, 43.8% much, 31.3% somewhat) and made them more willing to explore and use Russian online resources in the future (18.8% very likely, 50% likely, 31.3% somewhat likely). A high percentage of positive ratings in this category suggests that WebQuests appeal to beginning-level students and can have a positive impact on the development of IL leading to an increased use of Internet resources in the target language.

**Figure 1**  
**Importance of information literacy skills in a foreign language**



- ▣ deciding on the extent of foreign language information needed
- ▣ understanding the nature, type and structure of information in the foreign language
- ▣ finding information in a foreign language using a variety of tools
- ▣ analyzing and evaluating the information in a foreign language in regards to ones' needs
- ▣ using the foreign language information effectively to achieve a specific goal
- ▣ presenting the foreign language information using an appropriate format

**Figure 2**  
**Students' attitudes toward WebQuests as a means of improving the language, culture, and IL skills**



When asked what specific skills would make Russian online resources more accessible, students responded that they would like to become “more proficient in typing with a Russian keyboard” to “use the keyboard faster,” “learn some of the common Internet vocabulary,” “technical vocabulary,” and “key navigational words like ‘search’, ‘forward’, ‘back.’” Many participants believed that “most of the skills will come naturally as we progress learning the language” because “the most beneficial way for me to use online resources to a greater extent would be to continue to improve my language skills.” Some students pointed out that “just reading it [information in Russian] and being able to navigate what it is saying on websites,” knowing “how Russian websites are laid out,” and “how to use general Russian search engines” would help them use the Russian Web more effectively. These comments imply that both increased exposure to the Web through teaching activities and specific exercises targeting such IL skills as using search engines to find information online as well as exercises to

promote comprehension and analysis of this information could be included along with more traditional language learning activities in the beginning classroom.

### *Assignment*

This part of the questionnaire reflects students' attitudes toward WebQuests as a means of improving their language, culture, and IL skills.

According to the survey, a majority of students find WebQuests enjoyable (12.5% very much, 50% much, 37.5% somewhat). While student evaluations of the linguistic value of WebQuests were somewhat tepid (63% very much, 25% much, 62.5% somewhat, 6.3% a little), many comments suggest an improvement in vocabulary development as a result of WebQuests: "I know that my word recognition seemed to improve as I progressed through the exercise;" "Initially looking at a sea of Cyrillic was overwhelming, but this exercise helped me to focus on specific words and then the process allows me to find out that I knew more than I realized;" "I am recognizing more and more Russian words. It makes me happy."

Along with general enjoyment of WebQuests students are particularly appreciative of the cultural and IL aspects of the assignments, as seen from predominantly positive rankings of these categories (31.3% and 12.5% very much, 50% much, 12.5% and 37.5% somewhat, respectively). As one participant related, "I like these because it puts you out into the culture more than the classroom." Another echoed, "Although it was often a pain to do the WebQuests it was very beneficial to be using Russian websites and getting more familiar with all things Russian." It appears that WebQuests can successfully support linguistic and cultural instruction by exposing students to a range of short contextualized authentic texts on familiar topics and up-to-date cultural information, at the same time providing exposure to and experience in using target language web sites.

What makes WebQuest assignments particularly enjoyable? Ranking their preferences, 81.3% of participants mentioned the practicality and realism of tasks, 75% chose the interest level of topic and content, 50% enjoyed instructions that were easy to understand and the challenge of coping with new vocabulary and grammar. Of the

respondents, 43.8% liked open-ended questions, while 25% selected easy to navigate websites, visual organizers (charts, graphs, pictures), and specific questions. Written responses to this question revealed that students enjoyed having “a lot of choices” of things to look for, “viewing the photos,” and “just reading Russian.” Thus WebQuests can benefit the beginning curriculum, provided the instructor designs motivating and realistic tasks based on an interesting topic. WebQuest assignments should also include a variety of questions and strike a balance between new and familiar language.

Nevertheless, not all responses to the WebQuests were positive. Students cited the following reasons for not liking the assignments: (1) “websites were difficult to navigate” (71.4%), (2) “challenges of coping with new vocabulary and grammar” (42.9%), (3) “Lack of visual organizers” and “Specific questions” (14.3%), and the difficulty of understanding instructions (7.1%). Several comments suggested an increased cognitive load associated with the assignments: “Sometimes I looked really hard for everything on the list and didn’t find much of it. And my brain hurt!” and “This is as far as I could get without my head exploding.” At the same time some students noted the benefit of mental exertion: “In my opinion it was difficult but very beneficial- I found everything I wanted. I like these assignments because they make me think.”

Occasional technical difficulties were another common reason for dissatisfaction with WebQuests. Students noted that on several occasions “the website was really slow... sometimes it would take up to 5 minutes to process after I clicked on something” which made certain assignments “really hard, maybe because the website was giving me trouble.” Interestingly, such reasons as “Tasks were impractical and unrealistic,” “Topic/content was unexciting,” and “Open-ended questions” were not selected by any of the 68 participants.

### *Logistics*

The survey shows that 62.5% of the participants spent 30-60 minutes on a WebQuest, while 25% took 15-30 minutes, and 12.5% more than an hour to complete an assignment. Of the respondents, 87.5% used an online dictionary and typed assignments rather than writing by hand. The ability to use a target language keyboard is critical for Internet



research and writing online. This last finding supports the intended benefit of WebQuests as an important IL tool: as students search for and process the information in the target language, they develop new technology skills and apply them to accomplish tasks.

#### *Concluding remarks*

In terms of the importance of IL in foreign language instruction, 43.8% of participants strongly agreed and 56.3% agreed that IL should be a necessary component in the curriculum. An overwhelming majority (93.8%) of respondents believed that WebQuests made them feel more comfortable using electronic resources in Russian, while only 6.3% (4 people) remained undecided. This is a convincing argument for the use of WebQuests in the beginning language classroom.

#### **Implications for teaching**

The results of the study show that developing IL skills in a beginning language class is possible and, in fact, desirable, and WebQuest assignments can be an effective means of doing so, provided the following considerations are taken into account.

#### *Objectives*

A very important aspect of WebQuest design is selecting linguistic and IL objectives. Instructors must consider such questions as (1) What will students accomplish as a result of this activity? (2) What language and IL skills will be developed? WebQuests are well suited for such linguistic objectives as vocabulary and grammar development, reading comprehension, speaking, writing, pragmatic competence, and culture appreciation, often combining several objectives in a single activity. In order to add purpose and clarity to WebQuest assignments, instructors should identify a set of objectives and design tasks to reach the outcomes.

In addition to language development, the survey respondents mentioned keyboarding, familiarity with Russian search engines, and basic Internet search vocabulary as the skills they needed most in dealing with the target language media. To develop keyboarding fluency, students should be encouraged to type, rather than handwrite, their responses. Many learners find a transliterated (phonetic) keyboard

an easier option than a traditional Russian layout, so they need to be provided with instructions on how to install one on their computer. Alternatively, an online phonemic keyboard available at [www.translit.ru](http://www.translit.ru) can be used. Mobile devices present yet another option for typing in Cyrillic by allowing an effortless switch between keyboards.

### *Assignment*

According to the survey, the success of any given WebQuest depends to a large extent on the assignment: students are motivated by the practicality and realism of the task, as well as by their interest in the topic. It takes some time and creativity to design an effective WebQuest, but the clearly defined topics of elementary-level textbooks and the abundance of Internet resources make it a less daunting task. Several portals on the Web ([www.BestWebQuests.com](http://www.BestWebQuests.com), [www.questgarden.com](http://www.questgarden.com), [webquest.org](http://webquest.org)) provide step-by-step assistance in creating WebQuest and offer research articles, guides, rubrics, and WebQuest databases. Because many of these ready-made activities were not created for elementary-level language learners, they require such modification as inclusion of visual organizers and links to online dictionaries, preteaching of vocabulary, and adaptation of instructions.

However, some instructors may prefer to design their own activities rather than adapt existing ones. A key word search on a particular topic will usually yield several content-rich websites. Once the appropriate website is identified, its text will help define the actual task. Farreny (n.d.) offers a useful typology of WebQuest tasks, most of which are suitable for an elementary-level classroom; the suggested sample assignments follow the topics of first-year textbooks (Table 1). The typology is not rigid, as different categories can overlap and combine in the same assignment to suit a particular classroom need. To facilitate linguistic production, direct factual comprehension questions should be supplemented by open-ended evaluative, interpretive, and inferential questions. For example, a WebQuest on Russian cities may ask, "Which city would you like to visit and why?" To add an interactive and authentic component, a dialogue or a role-play activity could follow. For example, a sample WebQuest (Appendix 1) invites students to assume the roles of a buyer and a seller discussing one of the items on the list.

**Table 1**  
**Typology of WebQuest tasks**

Type of task	Description	Example
compilation	the most elementary type of quest that requires students to search for information and make a compilation	Students search for the TV programs they would like to watch to create an ideal channel.
judgment	a decision is made on the basis of online information	Students choose a language school where they would like to study and justify their choice.
retelling	online information is presented in students' own words	Students describe a department at the Moscow State University that they would like to apply to.
journalistic	online information is collected, organized and presented according to a journalistic genre	After studying a travel website students create a travel commercial.
design	online information is used to create a specific product with a pre-established goal	After browsing a collection of recipes students create a menu for an ethnic restaurant.

creative	a more open-ended assignment with a more creative output than design tasks	Students create online postcards; a poster of a city they would like to visit.
analytical	online information is examined for different types of relationships, e.g. cause and effect, similarities and differences	Students compare two apartments for rent or an online daily schedule with their own.

In addition to short-term teacher-designed WebQuests, students may also create their own. Teachers may assign such student-created WebQuests as long-term individual or group projects; the resulting WebQuests could then be completed by other members of the class or filed away for use in other classes.

The success of a WebQuest activity depends to a large extent on the task itself. The need for clear directions and meaningful, understandable, and manageable tasks for students on a wide continuum of developing language proficiency has been stressed by the literature. According to the ACTFL Guidelines (American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages 2012), examples of elementary-level tasks include understanding information about familiar topics, searching for names, numbers and recognizable content words, creating lists and short messages, and answering simple questions. Visuals, a variety of highly contextualized texts, and a focus on key vocabulary also benefit low-level learners by making input more comprehensible and familiarizing learners with the target culture (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short 2000). Echoing the research, survey participants indicated that they enjoyed easy-to-understand tasks, working with images, and having plenty of choices in terms of texts, websites, and questions. Highlighting pertinent vocabulary, providing a graphic organizer to elicit specific information without excessive writing, formulating the task in unambiguous, concise and realistic language, and providing

step-by-step instructions ease the cognitive load, putting the WebQuest assignment within students' reach.

There are numerous rubrics for evaluating the quality and design of WebQuests, e.g. Dodge (2001) and March (2003) that both instructors and students can refer to as they develop their own activities.

### *Evaluation*

WebQuest evaluation criteria will be guided by objectives and include both language and IL aspects. For example, the linguistic assessment of a WebQuest could include vocabulary (the use of vocabulary and spelling), grammar (correctness of structures), content (understanding the topic and context while addressing the task), task completion (whether the information is present or missing; originality and creativity), organization (of ideas in a written task) or presentation (fluency of the spoken output). Some possible IL evaluation rubrics for elementary-level students may include effective navigation of the Web to find information, successful identification of required information, appropriate use of online information to complete the task, ability to quote online sources appropriately etc. The same criteria could be used for peer assessment of WebQuests, which can be utilized to add variety and increase student involvement in the learning process.

### **Potential pitfalls**

The most common complaint about WebQuest assignments, according to the survey, concerned the difficulty of navigating Russian websites. At the same time, survey participants noted that navigation became easier with time, underscoring the importance of practice and exposure. The more students browse the Web, the more familiar they become with the format, layout, and features and the more comfortable they become with reading and vocabulary. Another common source of dissatisfaction was the slowness of websites. Students need to be reminded that the nature of the Internet is such that they might experience technical difficulties. This could also be an opportunity to remind students of the numerous benefits of WebQuests which far outweigh the inconvenience. Allowing plenty of time for completion of the assignment and telling students to access websites at different times of day to avoid heavy

traffic hours are yet other ways of making the Internet experience less stressful.

To help students negotiate the online environment and overcome initial anxiety, an introductory Internet Search lesson could be added to the curriculum. It could include a demonstration of the main Russian search engines, several sample websites and their basic features, and an online dictionary. The instructor could also introduce vocabulary items (e.g. *poisk* [search], *vxod* [entrance], *najti* [find], *perejti* [to go to], *registracija* [registration]) and review useful reading skills such as skimming (reading to understand the main idea), scanning (reading to find specific information), chunking (breaking down a text into smaller comprehensible pieces), guessing from context, recognizing true and false cognates, and distinguishing facts from opinions. Even though students may be used to employing these skills in their daily academic life, they often need to be reminded to apply them to target language texts. During the introductory lesson, the instructor could demonstrate how to complete a sample WebQuest to familiarize students with the process, model the use of reading and vocabulary strategies in practice, discuss the copyright issues associated with online information use, and explain the evaluation criteria.

Instructors, in their turn, may be challenged by the fleeting nature of the Web. As websites change their content, layout, URL addresses, or even completely disappear, recycling the assignments becomes almost impossible; it also becomes difficult to plan a long-term WebQuest. Even in the case of short-term assignments, instructors would have to verify that a particular website is available prior to assigning the WebQuest and be ready to modify the existing task. It is also recommended that instructors carefully screen the sites for authenticity and appropriateness of the content, as well as reminding students about the basic Internet safety rules.

### **Limitations**

This study assessed the perceptions of Russian students about the effectiveness of WebQuests as a means of fostering IL in a first-year classroom. While students' opinions can provide important insights into the learning process, it may be useful to include a separate measure evaluating the learning outcomes of these activities. A list of "Can-Do

statements” based on National Council of State Supervisors for Language (NCSSFL) -ACTFL scale (2013) before and after exposure to each WebQuest might reveal what language and Internet skills were developed and to what extent, e.g. “I can express my likes and dislikes about online information,” “I can recognize words and phrases with the help of visuals,” and “I can perform an Internet search using familiar key words.”

To measure the learning potential of WebQuests even more accurately, a control group that would receive the same instruction but would not be assigned WebQuests should be included. Comparing the language and IL gain of the two groups would offer a better understanding of the specific benefits of WebQuests and might help promote their effectiveness.

## **Conclusion**

Two important conclusions emerge from the study. First, the study participants showed an overall highly positive attitude toward WebQuests as a means of increasing exposure to the Russian Web and developing IL skills, which they deemed a necessary component of the foreign language curriculum. Second, students saw the main value of WebQuests in their impact on the acquisition of target vocabulary, culture and technology skills. These results confirm earlier research citing the advantages of WebQuests in improving motivation, student engagement, technology integration, linguistic and cultural exposure (Gaskill et al. 2006; Sox and Rubinstein-Avila 2009; Tsai 2006). WebQuests prove to be a flexible activity that allows beginning-level students to gain experience in the target language Internet environment, develop fluency in searching and keyboarding, and learn to integrate online information into their own language production. Because of the WebQuests, students were also more willing to explore and use Russian online resources in the future. A careful consideration of objectives, resources, assessment, and evaluation rubrics could make WebQuests a welcome addition to an elementary-level curriculum and a vehicle for promoting IL in a foreign language classroom.

**Appendix 1****Web quest****А что у вас?**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. You have decided that your need to buy any three items from the following list:

<u>Item</u>	<u>Category</u>
Машина или мотоцикл	Авто и мото
Фотоаппарат	Фотография
Компьютер	Компьютерная техника
Книга, журнал, словарь	Книги, учебники, журналы
Телефон	Телефоны и связь
Собака, кошка, птица	Животные и растения

Go to <http://www.irr.ru> Click on the category, then on the item, and you will see the details and the price. Provide the following information about the three items of your choice. To convert rubles into dollars use <http://quote.rbc.ru/cur/converter/> or simply multiply the ruble amount by 0.03.

Что это?	Сколько стоит в рублях и в долларах?	Цвет? Новое или старое? Дорогое или дешевое?

2. Create your own ad about buying or selling something and type it below. Try to use as many Russian words as you can. Do not use Google Translate because it strips the assignment of its purpose—to practice manipulating new and familiar words to express the meaning.



The following vocabulary may be of help:

купить (я куплю) - to buy      продать (я продаю) - to sell

3. Prepare a dialogue based on your ad to be practiced with a partner in class. What questions could you ask? How can they be answered?

### Grading criteria

20 points each; 100 points total

vocabulary	Uses a variety of old and new vocabulary	
grammar	Errors do not interfere with the meaning	
content	Accomplishes the task; includes details; contextually correct	
fluency	Generally smooth flow; uses well-formed sentences	
technology	Correctly finds, identifies and selects information; types in Cyrillic	

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