

The 'TalenQuest' Project

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Abstract

This paper² reports on the objectives, (interim) results and future activities of the project 'TalenQuest'. This Dutch project (Talen = languages) aims to customize the WebQuest concept for foreign language teaching and learning. The motives for and the developmental history of this project are presented.

1. Why a Dutch Project 'LanguageQuest'?

Since the Internet itself provides a powerful digital learning environment for language learning, the members of the ICT Expertise Centre of the National Bureau on Modern Languages³ believe in presenting learners of modern languages with challenging tasks to be solved by exploring the Web. The WebQuest model (Dodge, 1995) is appealing in this respect because it is based on learning theory concepts that relate to current developments in Dutch education emphasizing learner centeredness, active and situated learning with a focus on learning strategies. Also, the WebQuest model relates well with modern Second Language Acquisition (SLA) views and approaches in modern foreign language (MFL) pedagogy.

The WebQuest concept is seen to have the potential to help MFL teachers to relate learning to the real world, enhance and replace textbook based learning activities and support transdiscipline curriculum activities. Rüschoff and Ritter (2001), who, among others, point to the relevance of constructivistic or, in this case rather, constructionist approaches for foreign language learning, refer to 'template-based learning'.

Another consideration for a dedicated project for MFL was the observation that modern languages were underrepresented in the database of the WebQuest Page, probably due to the fact that modern languages have a marginal position in American school curricula. A quick, impressionistic scan⁴ of other Anglo/American and European web based resources such as WebQuest repositories, professional E-zines and discussion lists showed that the language teaching community at the time was still relatively unfamiliar with the concept and that MFL WebQuests were comparatively scarce.

Additionally, with a view to the growing importance of the WWW for international information and communication processes, applying web based methodology also enables MFL teachers to make a discipline specific contribution to the training of Web related language skills.

So the potential of the WebQuest format was recognized but it was felt that, to disseminate the concept nationally, discipline specific, theoretical underpinnings for this model were needed. Furthermore it was expected that the provision of dedicated design tools and explanatory text materials would facilitate the production of MFL WebQuests and contribute to their instructional quality. So, inspired by the WebQuest Page the advisory board of CALL-specialists of the National Bureau on Modern Languages consequently defined the

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² This paper is an update of the information about the project published in (Koenraad, 2005a)

³ The National Bureau on Modern Languages is an initiative of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. Its mission, since 1996, is to improve the quality of modern language learning and teaching in the Netherlands. The bureau's activities not only concern the school sector (primary, secondary and higher education), but also include foreign language teaching in trade and industry as well as some general language policy issues. One of the bureau's current concerns is the promotion of the use of ICT in modern language education.

⁴ For the results of this survey, see: <http://test.feo.hvu.nl/koen2/talenquest/why-underrepscan.htm>

LanguageQuest project and acquired funding from the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in 2000.

A project group of grassroots teachers (n=10) and curriculum and methodology specialists, coordinated by the SLO, the Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development, decided on the following main objectives:

- Improved task design and methodology for realistic, content oriented, task-based foreign language learning
- Facilitation of implementation of innovative models for in-service training

One of the challenges was to find out whether additional characteristics for tasks could be defined to optimise the WebQuest concept for SLA specifically.

2. The LanguageQuest Project: results and future developments

2.1 Deliverables realised so far

As indicated the LanguageQuest project aims to contribute to the further replacement of fossilized content of textbooks with real-world, dynamic content designed for use at a variety of skill levels. The emphasis is placed on creative and flexible use of language in the accomplishment of an open-ended task of genuine interest to the students involved.

An aspect of this goal is to help students become autonomous (and motivated) learners through the development of study/research skills and critical analysis. Integration of multimedia and inclusion in student language portfolios are also desirable.

During the two lifecycles of the project (2000-2002 & 2002-2004) the following results have been achieved. The term 'TalenQuest' has been coined and defined as: A TalenQuest is a WebQuest with a focus on foreign language learning. ('Talen' is Dutch for 'Languages'). It is a venture that leads to a product and, in the process, triggers, in a natural way a variety of effective learning activities.

The project has developed a website⁵. The site offers a LanguageQuest template as a downloadable, self extracting file. The template is specifically designed to support the user when authoring the various components of the template: the template pages⁶ provide context specific instructions and explanations on the individual pages. By replacing these generic explanations with instances of what they describe the LanguageQuest author actually develops his or her personalised LanguageQuest product.

The site also holds a database with quality assured LanguageQuests. The collection gradually grows and currently holds some 45 model LanguageQuests. It serves a variety of age ranges and target groups, schooltypes (n=5) and languages (n=6), including Dutch as a first and second language. Furthermore a number of documents are available that provide a theoretical basis for the project work and design support for LanguageQuest authors.

Some of the conclusions drawn by Staatsen and Peeters (2002) in their evaluative report of the initial project period are particularly relevant with a view to the implications for strategies aimed at professional development:

- It has taken all those involved more time than expected to actually internalise the implications of the WebQuest approach for language teaching. To illustrate this we mention here just one of the issues involved: the locus of control⁷. Developers were reluctant to hand control over the learning process over to the learner(s) until they

⁵ Project Website: <http://www.talenquest.nl>

⁶ These, in fact, are summaries and instructional versions of the theoretical project papers and criteria studies.

The HTML template is also available in English, French and German versions.

⁷ Reluctance to let go of centralised control has been long known in the research literature on implementation of educational use of ICT (see a.o. Timmer 1993) to be an impeding factor for the integration of ICT in subject teaching

discovered that the opportunity of designing specifications for the final product and the (documentation of) planning activities puts the teacher back in the pedagogical driving seat.

- The strategy chosen (Westhoff et al., 2001) and working methods applied for the professional development of the inservice teachers have proven to be very productive. On the one hand because of the impact the role of developer had on the conceptual and attitudinal changes of the people involved⁸. On the other hand because of the practice based contribution they offered to the development of the theoretical underpinnings and supporting documents (theorising practice and particularising theory, Leinhardt et al., 1995).

2.2 The LanguageQuest Consortium

One of the objectives during the second phase of the project was to develop a sustainability strategy. This has led to the formation of a consortium⁹ dedicated to the maintenance and further development of the project's results.

The original partnership has been extended with some key players and stakeholders in the MFL domain of the Dutch educational infrastructure. Results, products and expertise are shared. Where feasible and practical partners collaborate e.g. in the area of consultancy activities or the development and running of courses. Key concepts and tools are being disseminated by individual members both nationally and internationally e.g. through participation in EU-projects such as the Comenius MICaLL project¹⁰.

Collaboration with 'Kennisset', the Dutch national Schoolnet commissioned by the Ministry of Education to actively mediate in the distribution of quality assured instructional materials for schools, has led to the integration of the LanguageQuest website in the Kennisset content repository. The consortium has used the opportunity this migration offered to update its website and to add functionality to support the development of a collaborative community of LanguageQuest developers and users offering practitioners opportunities to:

- be informed about developments in LanguageQuest methodology
- find and use LanguageQuests
- share experiences with other practitioners
- contribute or provide links to useful target language resources
- offer or suggest MFL WebQuest for evaluation and so ...
- help develop and refine quality assurance instruments

The consortium is open to additional (also international) parties interested in membership. Members are expected to cover staff costs needed for tasks such as:

- assessments of newly submitted Quest designs to further the growth of the database with model LanguageQuests
- the implementation of the project deliverables in schools and teacher education and inservice training¹¹

⁸ Some personal statements testify to this and it can also be induced from the development history of individual products.

⁹ Current Talenquest Projectpartners:

- National Bureau on Modern Languages (NaB-MVT) <http://www.nabmvt.nl/>
- Stichting Leerplan Ontwikkeling, Enschede <http://www.slo.nl/>
- IVLOS, University of Utrecht <http://www.ivlos.uu.nl>
- CPS, <http://www.cps.nl/>
- University of Professional Education, Faculty of Education <http://www.hu.nl/>
- Cinop <http://www.cinop.nl/public/profiel/index.htm>

¹⁰ Moderating Intercultural Collaboration and Language Learning MICaLL (2004-2007). For a description of the project design see (Koenraad, 2005b)

¹¹ An example in this context is the involvement of student teachers in the assessment and production of LanguageQuests by various Modern Language Depts of Dutch Education Faculties through formal curriculum tasks.

- attendance at the annual consortium meetings
- contribution to local and international dissemination of results (e.g. the ECML workshop 'LQuest')

In order to also make more fundamental developments possible the consortium defines follow-up projects. In this context a state grant was acquired (May 2005) for a project geared at the further validation of the LanguageQuest assessment instrument. Field trials and feedback from focus groups have led to the 2006 transformation of the instrument to a fully rubric based tool. The current version and future updates of the assessment tool can be downloaded at the project site and at www.koenraad.info/CALL.

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