

Using WebQuests to improve oral English performance in university courses with non-linguistic programmes

Simona SCANNI
Università di Bari Aldo Moro
scanni.simona@uniba.it

Abstract

Students in non-language programmes may struggle with oral English exams. The present study aims at exploring strategies to facilitate the acquisition of a foreign language (FL), particularly English as an FL, in university and higher education courses that require the passing of an oral exam. The study focuses on how students at non-linguistic university specialties and varying English proficiency levels, can perform well on an oral exam through WebQuests, a web-based learning methodology which provides students with a controlled and well-structured context to practice authentic tasks using the language and grammar information provided throughout the course and relevant to the exam. By creating a WebQuest with clear steps to follow and material provided by the teacher, students can produce domain-specific language and practical apply technical vocabulary in a controlled environment for the academic purposes of the final exam. A case study was carried out on a cohort of students enrolled in a master's degree programme in sports science. Class observations, final exam grades, and an optional student questionnaire were used to assess the effectiveness of the WebQuests. The findings suggest that WebQuests can enhance students' oral performance by engaging them in authentic tasks that facilitate the topic-related vocabulary use and can improve students' motivation and satisfaction within the academic experience. This research suggests that WebQuests can be a valuable tool for educators looking to improve their students' oral English skills in university settings, especially for non-linguistic disciplines.

Keywords: English as a foreign language; digital tools; oral skills; evaluation; WebQuest

1. Introducing the context: oral exams of English as an FL in Non-Language Programmes

University curriculums in technical and non-language programs often require an oral English as a Foreign Language (EFL) exam, despite it not being a main discipline. This can lead students to struggle with preparation, particularly those who lack a strong foundation in spoken English. This paper aims to address this gap by examining how WebQuests can empower students from non-linguistic backgrounds, with varying English proficiency levels, to develop the necessary skills and confidence to excel in EFL oral exams. This approach offers a solution to help students learn and acquire the language meaningfully and experientially (Krashen 1982). Several studies have explored the effectiveness of WebQuests in improving English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' oral skills (Amalia and Jeti 2019; Arciniegas and Vásquez 2017; Salem, Qoura, and Alhadidy 2017; Laborda, 2009) suggesting that WebQuests can be a valuable tool for promoting oral English proficiency in non-linguistic programmes at the university level. For instance, Amalia and Jati (2019) examined how WebQuests can be implemented in blended EFL learning to enhance speaking skills. Similarly, Arciniegas and Vásquez (2017) investigated the use of a WebQuest with A2-level

undergraduate EFL learners demonstrating their potential to develop communicative competence, as well as motivation, critical thinking, and to promote autonomous and differentiated learning. However, past research here mentioned solely referred to EFL.

Only a handful of studies have explored the use of WebQuests in FL education within technical universities. While Shvaikina (2020) investigated WebQuest effectiveness in English learning among future engineers, and Medvedeva (2023) examined its role in enhancing soft skills, these studies did not specifically address oral exam preparation. Lasheen (2022) focused on improving ESP oral communication skills through WebQuests among mass communication students, a field with a stronger language focus compared to technical disciplines. Crucially, no existing research has examined the impact of WebQuests on oral exam performance for students from diverse non-linguistic university backgrounds with varying English proficiency levels.

Drawing on this research gap in the literature, this study aims to fill this significant research gap by investigating the effectiveness of WebQuests in improving the oral English proficiency of non-linguistic university students preparing for mandatory oral exams. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How can students at non-linguistic university specialties and varying English proficiency levels perform well on an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) oral exam through the use of WebQuests?
2. What are the perceptions of students regarding the WebQuest methodology in terms of its helpfulness for learning, skill development, and exam preparation?

These research questions will guide the exploration of WebQuests as a structured approach to enhance students' communicative competence and overall exam success.

This paper provides valuable insights for educators looking to tailor their teaching methods to a wider range of learners. The following pages will present a definition of WebQuests, potential challenges and considerations regarding this type of digital teaching method. The methodology applied in the present study will also be described, followed by the analysis of data and conclusions based on the findings.

2. WebQuests: a structured approach for building domain-specific language and exam success

2.1. What is a WebQuest?

WebQuest is a computer-based, teaching and learning model (Halat 2008: 109) that was initially developed by Bernie Dodge (1997: 1) of San Diego State University, as "an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all of the information that learners interact with comes from resources on the Internet, optionally supplemented with videoconferencing". The definition was later expanded by Dodge's collaborator, Tom March (2004: 2), 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".

In terms of its structure, WebQuest is presented as a lesson plan in the form of a simple webpage (Kelly 2000) with 6 components: an introduction, a task, the process, resources, evaluation and conclusion. Thanks to its clear structure, and its well-guided and controlled format, WebQuest can feature in all education curricula, from a younger age to Higher Education (HE). Moreover, as Kelly (2000) points out, such a lesson can be modified and

individualised to meet students' needs, so it can also be applied with students with special needs or disabilities. The teacher provides all information through the six steps and can personalise each component. For instance, the teacher page provides instructors with the opportunity to introduce themselves.

WebQuests also engage students in authentic tasks through activities that enhance some employability skills. Such “authentic, applicable, relevant, real-world tasks” (Levin-Goldberg 2014: 81) can be greatly motivating (Dudeney 2003) and can increase student engagement (Kobylnski 2014). Moreover, the use of domain-specific language to perform an authentic task helps students tailor their study material for the purpose of an exam.

The following is an example of an authentic task for a sport science programme and used for the present case study:

I am the Principal of a Secondary School, and I recruited you as (an) expert(s), for an important task. Your job is to find a sport to add to our school. You will research the sports rules, history, and its popularity, and explain the motivation behind your decision.

By creating such “a direct link to the students' field of specialisation” (Laborda 2010: 263), learners in EFL courses are provided with opportunities to actively learn new vocabulary and knowledge in context, which means not only to study the material given by the teacher, but also to develop it and construct meaning in order to perform the task (Salem, Qoura, and Alhadidy 2017). Moreover, the real-world task and clear instructions help students enhance their oral presentation skills (Ha 2013). In conclusion, as Irzawati (2021: 153) suggests, a Webquest can be “an ideal alternative learning tool” to facilitate students' English skills as well as other components such critical thinking, communication, motivation, autonomous learning ability, grammar and vocabulary mastery (ivi: 160).

2.2. Considerations for Non-Linguistic Programmes when using WebQuests to improve oral English

Potential challenges or considerations when using WebQuests to improve oral English in non-linguistic programme include student access to technology and technical infrastructures, teachers' lack of digital literacy skills, and the need for adaptation of a WebQuest, usually designed for language learning, which might need to be changed to be more effective in a programme where students possess different levels of English proficiency.

To avoid issues related to device accessibility, lack of a strong IT infrastructure, or a stable internet connection, a WebQuest can be a valuable ally. This is because a WebQuest can be completed in a classroom with proper technology, remotely, or even offline. In fact, accessibility and availability of ITC structures can also be overcome, as WebQuests can be displayed on any kind of digital device, including informal education ones such as mobile phones and iPads. Therefore, the switch from face-to-face to online delivery, or even the coexistence of both provisions during a lesson (e.g. through hybrid learning), is well-supported by WebQuests. In essence, during a WebQuest lesson the type of learning delivery mode becomes less important. This means that, in a scenario of unexpected shift to online learning and vice versa, the continuity of teaching is guaranteed by simply switching from one provision to the other. Consequently, students who are unable to attend one or more classes, can still perform the task, ensuring their preparedness for the oral exam.

WebQuests can also provide an opportunity to socialise, by engaging the students in small-group activities or pair work, promoting a Sense of Community (SoC) and social interaction. Building and promoting an SoC is recognised as a good strategy to enhance students' satisfaction with their learning experience (Rovai 2002). Students possessing a strong

SoC commit to and persist in learning more than those who feel isolated and alone (Tinto 1993). As Tinto (1993: 5) notes, when members of the community share a common learning purpose and “feel that their educational needs are being satisfied through active participation in the community”, their motivation and engagement increase. The Sense of (classroom) Community was defined by McMillan and Chavis (1986: 9) as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together”. The social dimension (Trentin 2008) or social presence (Benigno and Chifari 2007; Garrison et al. 2000) of members who built an SoC is a crucial characteristic to create a community of learning (*comunità di apprendimento*). Educational technologies can help create communities of learning and practice more easily and in more effective ways than traditional learning, (La Grassa and Troncarelli 2016) through certain strategies and activities. During the course, for example, interaction correlated with SoC can be promoted through synchronous small-group activities such as collaborative group projects and peer teaching works (Shackelford and Maxwell 2012). WebQuest methodology falls under this category.

Lastly, because of the standardised format of WebQuests, teachers can design and plan lessons using technology even with limited digital competence, just as students can easily perform a given task.

2.3. Benefits and limitations of Performing Authentic Tasks in Structured Learning Environments

For students with diverse English language backgrounds and proficiency levels, I recommend using WebQuests or other inquiry-based learning tools to perform authentic tasks with specific study materials selected by the instructor in order to focus on the specific learning objectives (Dodge 1997). In this way, we can talk about a “structured learning environment” that allows instructors to tailor authentic tasks to specific learning objectives and provide students with focused study materials within a structured environment (Tomlinson 2001). This ensures students develop the skills and knowledge most relevant to the topic at hand. Students who are not exposed to everyday language can still learn and master specialised vocabulary and grammar used in their academic fields thanks to controlled environments. The limitation of such environments is that the process of learning may not guarantee students can effectively use their English skills in a less controlled academic setting (Littlewood 1994).

3. Evaluating the Effectiveness of WebQuests to improve oral English performance: A Master's Case Study

To investigate the effectiveness of WebQuests on final exam performance in a master's degree sport science, and answer the research questions presented in paragraph 1, I implemented a WebQuest¹ with a cohort of approximately 30 students. Since course attendance was optional, the exact number of participants couldn't be determined. However, the students who attended were consistent. The participants in this study were a group of undergraduate students enrolled in a master's degree programme. Given the focus of the study on the effectiveness of WebQuests in enhancing oral English proficiency among non-linguistic university students preparing for mandatory oral exams, demographic data such as gender, age, and previous experiences were not collected. However, participants' English language

¹ The WebQuest is retrievable at <https://sites.google.com/view/lm-68-english-course/home?authuser=0>.

proficiency was assessed using an online language level test². At the first lesson, students completed the test and shared the results through a poll I created on Padlet. Based on the results, 68.8% of students were graded Intermediate or Upper Intermediate, 18.8% Advanced, 6.3% Lower Intermediate and 6.3% Beginner. This case study employed a mixed-methods approach, utilising three data collection methods: class observation, final exam grades, and an optional online questionnaire administered through a survey software called Qualtrics.

The study material was shared through a Padlet, as well as the link to WebQuest, developed through Google Sites, and the final questionnaire.

During the initial phase of the study, I conducted a classroom observation to assess several aspects: classroom interactions (including student behaviour and peer and teacher interactions), students' level of English and ease with the language, participation in discussions and students' understanding of the provided materials and the WebQuest. Students who attended the course were able to use the material and the WebQuest in the correct way apart from their level of the language. Subsequently, during the exam sessions, I collected additional data through student grades based on an evaluation grid embedded within the WebQuest. The rubric included the following descriptors:

- “task fulfilment” (the examinee completed the assigned task);
- “coherence and cohesion” (the examinee included a visual with their presentation with no grammar mistakes;
- “accuracy” (the examinee spoke clearly and fluently and was easy to hear);
- “content” (the examinee properly used materials shared during lessons);
- “fluency” (the examinee was able to answer questions).

Each descriptor was evaluated on a three-point scale: *never* (0 to 3 points), *sometimes* (4 or 5 points) and *always* (6 points). This resulted in a maximum possible score of 30 points.

Finally, after the passing of the exam I asked students to optionally complete an online questionnaire in Italian with 3 closed-ended questions and 1 open-ended question on their perception and personal experience using a WebQuest to perform the exam. The specific questions included:

(Q1) Considering the WebQuest methodology used for the exam, how much do you agree with the following statements?

The respondents were asked to provide a response on a Likert scale ranging from "not at all" (1) to "very" (5). The six statements were:

- Helpful for the learning process and exam preparation
- Beneficial for the development of skills (linguistic, digital, critical thinking)
- The employed format promotes active engagement in the learning process.
- Clear and effective
- Helpful for applying theoretical knowledge in a simple yet effective way.
- Overall, I found this approach _____ helpful.

(Q2) Overall, how would you rate your experience using the WebQuest?

The respondents were asked to choose among “positive”, “negative”, “neutral”, “prefer not to answer”.

(Q3) Would you like this method to be applied in other courses you take in the future?

The three options were: “yes”, “no” and “not applicable”.

² <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/test-your-english/general-english/>

By combining these methods and analysing the data from class observations, exam grades, and survey responses, I was able to get a more comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of the WebQuest. The next paragraph will show the findings of the three methods.

3.1. Findings: Classroom Observation and Exam Performance

In the first lesson and throughout the course, students who attended were regularly introduced to and updated on the correct use of the WebQuest, its structure, and how to perform the final task/exam. All materials shared through a Padlet were easily accessible and displayed well on laptops and mobile phones, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility. At the end of each lesson, I explained how to apply the study material to the final WebQuest task. These students were actively engaged in class discussions, asked clarifying questions, and appeared confident in their ability to complete the WebQuest tasks. The students were attentive and focused throughout. In fact, classroom observations revealed that students who regularly attended classes demonstrated a strong understanding of the WebQuest methodology, which contributed to their success in the final exam. Even students with lower English proficiency were able to perform well in the oral exam. Exam results corroborate these findings. Students who consistently attended classes achieved high scores on the WebQuest-based exam, with most obtaining scores between 27 and 30 points out of a possible 30. This indicates a strong performance across all evaluation criteria, including task fulfilment, coherence, accuracy, content, and fluency. Conversely, students with irregular attendance exhibited difficulties in understanding and implementing the WebQuest requirements. Their exam performance was notably lower, often characterized by incomplete tasks or a superficial approach to the assignment, such as creating simple PowerPoint presentations rather than engaging with the interactive elements of the WebQuest.

These findings highlight the importance of consistent class attendance and active participation in mastering the WebQuest methodology for successful exam performance.

3.2. Findings: Student Perceptions of WebQuest-Based Learning through the questionnaire

The low response rate to the online questionnaire at the end of the exam limited the ability to gather comprehensive student feedback. Only nine students completed the questionnaire, which represents a participation rate of approximately 20%. This limited the generalisability of the findings from the questionnaire. This could be attributed to the fact that I asked to complete the survey at the end of the exam session, and some students were not present. However, results could be analysed as follows:

(Q1) Considering the WebQuest methodology used for the exam, how much do you agree with the following statements?

	not at all	slightly	so and so	enough	very
Helpful for the learning process and exam preparation				3	6
Beneficial for the development of skills (linguistic, digital, critical thinking)				6	3

The employed format promotes active engagement in the learning process.				4	5
Clear and effective			1	3	5
Helpful for applying theoretical knowledge in a simple yet effective way.				2	7
Overall, I found this approach helpful.				3	6

Tab. 1. Results for Q1

The data in Table 1 indicates that all participants found the WebQuest methodology to be helpful for the learning process and exam preparation. The methodology was also perceived to be useful for developing skills (linguistic, digital, critical thinking). with all respondents indicating that they strongly agree or agree with the statement. The format used was seen as making participants more involved in the learning process, with 5 out of 9 respondents indicating that they strongly agree with the statement. The methodology was also considered clear and effective, with 5 respondents indicating that they strongly agree with the statement. Finally, participants found the methodology to be useful for putting the theoretical part into practice in a simple but effective way, with 7 out of 9 respondents indicating that they strongly agree with the statement.

Overall, the participants had a positive experience with the WebQuest methodology and found it to be a valuable tool for learning and development. Students found the approach to be helpful for learning, skill development, and promoting active engagement. However, there is some room for improvement particularly regarding its effectiveness in developing skills like linguistics, digital literacy, and critical thinking.

(Q2) Overall, how would you rate your experience using the WebQuest?

Based on the data provided, it appears that the overall experience with using the WebQuest (reality assignment) was positive. All 9 (100%) rated their experience as positive. There were no negative ratings, and no respondents indicated that their experience was neither positive nor negative. Additionally, no respondents selected the "prefer not to answer" (Non so) option.

This suggests that the WebQuest was well-received by the participants and that they found it to be a valuable learning experience. It is important to note that this is a small sample size, and further research would be needed to draw more definitive conclusions about the effectiveness of the WebQuest. However, the preliminary results are encouraging.

(Q3) Would you like this method to be applied in other courses you take in the future?

The survey data indicates that a majority of the 9 respondents (100%) would like this modality to be applied in other courses they will follow in the future. No respondents indicated that they would not like this method to be applied, and there were no responses indicating uncertainty. This suggests that the modality was well-received by the participants and that there is a strong demand for its use in future courses.

3.3. *Intersection of findings and discussion on the results*

The findings from classroom observations and exam performance align with the positive perceptions expressed in the student questionnaire. Students who were actively engaged in class, as observed, tended to perform better on the exam. Their positive perceptions of the WebQuest as a learning tool likely contributed to their motivation and engagement, further enhancing their performance. The results of this study indicate that WebQuests can be an effective tool for enhancing oral English proficiency among non-linguistic university students. Consistent class attendance, active participation, and a clear understanding of the WebQuest methodology are crucial factors in achieving success. Students reported positive experiences with the WebQuest, valuing its contribution to learning and skill development.

The results presented in this section converge to support the overall conclusion that WebQuests can be a valuable tool for developing oral English skills in non-linguistic university students. The following conclusion will delve deeper into the implications of these findings.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides encouraging evidence for the potential of WebQuests as a valuable tool for educators looking to improve their students' oral English skills and help them succeed their final exam in university settings, especially for non-linguistic disciplines. The findings suggest that WebQuests can enhance students' oral English skills and exam performance by providing a structured learning environment with authentic tasks focused on domain-specific language. Students reported a positive experience using WebQuests, finding them helpful for learning, skill development, and active engagement. These results corroborate recent research demonstrating WebQuests' significant contributions to improving students' communicative competence (Martins 2023), soft skills (Medvedeva 2023), and critical thinking abilities, indicating potential benefits for non-linguistic university disciplines (Lasheen 2022; Shvaikina 2020). Unlike previous research, this study delves into how students in non-linguistic university specialties can perform well on English as an FL oral exams through WebQuests, offering a practical solution to the challenges faced by students in such programmes. As a matter of fact, the positive student perceptions and the correlation between WebQuest use and exam performance underscore the value of this approach. Moreover, WebQuests can be a valuable resource for educators addressing the challenge of improving students' oral English skills and exam performance. By implementing WebQuests, educators can provide students with structured, engaging, and authentic learning experiences that directly align with oral exam requirements. Furthermore, the domain-specific focus of WebQuests enables educators to tailor study materials to specific course requirements, enhancing students' ability to apply their knowledge effectively. This study extends previous research conducted on Students of Engineering (Medvedeva 2023), Mass Communication (Lasheen 2022), and Industrial and Civil Engineering (Shvaikina 2020) in English as an FL, by demonstrating the potential of WebQuests as a practical and effective pedagogical tool for improving student outcomes and reducing educator burdens. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The relatively small sample size means the results may not be generalisable to a larger population. Further research is needed on a larger-scale study to gather more data on the effectiveness of WebQuests in different educational settings. This would help to confirm the findings of this study and provide a more comprehensive picture of the impact of WebQuests on student learning. However, this study opens a promising avenue for integrating WebQuests into non-linguistic curricula. By empowering educators to create engaging and effective

learning experiences, WebQuests have the potential to significantly enhance student outcomes and prepare them for oral assessments.

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List of online materials provided in the WebQuest

<https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/test-your-english/general-english/>

<https://www.engvid.com/vocabulary-sports-winter-olympics/>

<https://www.engvid.com/vocabulary-olympics/>

<https://www.infona.pl/resource/bwmeta1.element.desklight-fb6a23d3-fc17-43c4-a2f1-b0b77f20e787/content/partDownload/6917ef84-8c3b-3844-97ff-1cbb751ffe1>

<https://efsupit.ro/images/stories/october2019/Art%20265.pdf>

https://www.pedocs.de/volltexte/2019/17108/pdf/cepsj_2019_1_Tul_et_al_The_professional_competences_of_Physical_Education_teachers.pdf

<https://www.slideshare.net/IPHIreland/key-features-of-the-education-system-in-italy>

<https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/education-in-italy-194320530/194320530>

<http://web.ftvs.cuni.cz/eknihy/jazyky/sportstudiesfundamentalterminologyinenglish/Texts/0a-Content.html>

<https://www.allhallows.lancs.sch.uk/our-curriculum/physical-education/>

<https://kshsonline.uk/curriculum/curriculum-maps/physical-education/>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3778693/>