



XV International Conference "Linguistic and Cultural Studies: Traditions and Innovations", LKTI
2015, 9-11 November 2015, Tomsk, Russia

Web Quest as a Tool for Increasing Students' Motivation and Critical Thinking Development

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Abstract

The highlights of this article are the problems of critical thinking development while teaching English to the students of technical studies. The main concern is the involvement of the students in the process of working under such project tasks as web quests. Specifically, student's participation in the studying of professional foreign language (ESP) is described. Particular attention is paid to the role of a web quest in increasing the students' motivation and stimulating their cognitive activity in professional foreign language (ESP) learning. The article also deals with the problem of critical thinking evaluation in the process of implementation of project activities, the basic conclusions on this issue are formulated and the parameters of evaluation system are presented.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Scientific Committee of LKTI 2015.

Keywords: Web-quest; critical thinking; cognitive skills; cognitive activity; scaffolding.

1. Introduction

Educational scope today is greatly influenced by the technological innovations and the widespread Internet technologies. Thus, modern teachers are forced to use the educational environment that integrates such technologies as on-line lectures, webinars and other educational activities based on the use of Internet technologies.

We believe that the formation of professional foreign language competence in students of technical universities may be considered in two aspects, namely from the technological and the optimization points of view.

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2. The two aspects of the formation of professional foreign language competence

The technological aspect is aimed at identifying by a teacher all the tools, that is, methods and techniques that help students to obtain the best result in the acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities, especially in the sphere of professional communication.

The optimization aspect is aimed at more efficient and consistent application of existing technologies depending on the specifics of the teaching and learning activities of each particular higher education institution. This is particularly topical for high schools with multi-level training system.

This article is going to consider the technological aspect of the foreign language learning and the most appropriate educational technology, such as interdisciplinary projects based on web quests for the formation of professional foreign language competence in students of technical universities, increase their motivation to learn foreign languages and enhance critical thinking.

Using Web quests combines and implements the best practices of education in one integrated activity. One of the major problems in the formation of foreign language communicative competence in the professional sphere is the development of students' cognitive skills, which contribute to the formation of mature thinking. Such mature thinking gives students the ability to receive, select, analyze, simulate information and make strategic decisions about their learning.

Dodge (1997) in his work 'Some Thoughts on Web Quests', describes the principles of using web quests and presents this teaching technology as a platform for the development of cognitive skills at higher levels.

March (1997) extended the functions of cognitive component of Web Quest, including such aspects as the principles of constructivism in teaching, authentic problems using, which requires non-standard solutions, stimulates students' cognition interest and raises their motivation for knowledge acquisition and team-work, which, in turn, raises deep awareness of the information received. According to March, Web Quest project work helps students to establish a deeper subjects links, feel themselves part of the educational space, and make a conscious effort to organize and optimize cognitive activity. This article is going to dwell on each of these aspects in more detail.

3. Elements of critical thinking development

The first element in the development of critical thinking is scaffolding, a concept borrowed from the educational philosophy of constructivism.

The key idea scaffolding is that knowledge cannot be imparted into students in the finished form. The educational process can only create for students the supportive environment for a successful self-construction and self-expansion of knowledge. Thus, scaffolding is a guidance process of students' cognitive activity from what they already know to acquiring of new knowledge and skills. Scaffolding allows students to carry out tasks which are, as a rule, slightly above their abilities and could be successfully performed with the recommendations from the teacher's side. The appropriate guidance from a teacher allows students to balance on the verge of their personal development (Murphy, 1997). March (1997) believes that the use of a web quest-based model as an aspect of cognitive psychology is based on the following principle: if we want students, for whom this kind of cognitive activity is a new one, to complete a task on a high, even on a professional level, we need to analyze the existing experience in this area, and then bring the novices through all the stages of project development.

Thus, a teacher should state a general problem for all students, and then step by step they are resolving this problem by sequentially performing a number of specific feasible tasks. At the same time, a teacher should provide the necessary assistance and help to focus students' attention on the key aspects of a project. This contributes to the achievement of the ultimate goals of the project and the development of the right mode of thinking. The teacher plays the role of an organizer and a coordinator in the students' self-teaching and self-learning processes as well as in their communicative and creative activities. The teacher also provides a continuous support of the mentioned above activities during the project, that is putting leading and elaborative questions, providing links to the Internet resources, hyperlinks and hypertexts, which contributes to the development of skills and abilities necessary for successful implementation of the project, such as presentation skills (the ability to present the results of their research in the oral form), use of the specific terminology, etc.

Having analyzed the above facts, it can be concluded that scaffolding is the foundation of the web quest project work.

The next criterion for the formation of critical thinking is students' motivation and authenticity of the set up

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