

The WebQuest Learning Approach and Reflective Practice in Instruction: Does It Work?

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Abstract

This study investigated the effectiveness of an instructional model integrating the WebQuest Learning Approach (WQLA) and Reflective Practice (RP) in enhancing the critical reading ability of university students. The participants were 11 second-year undergraduate students who were purposefully selected from one private university located in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. This study was a one-group pretest and posttest design. The instruments used in this study were 1) the instructional model integrating WQLA and RP, and 2) an English critical reading ability test. The instructional model was developed by integrating two learning approaches, WQLA and RP. The English critical reading ability test was developed on the basis of the critical reading abilities, namely, making inferences, evaluating information, and drawing conclusions. A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test was used to analyze the effectiveness of the instructional model in enhancing the students' critical reading ability. The findings showed that the students' critical reading ability was significantly improved ($p < .00$). This study also sheds new light on the current knowledge, theory, and practice with respect to the effectiveness of the instructional model integrating WQLA and RP in enhancing students' critical reading ability, in terms of making inferences, evaluating information, and drawing conclusions.

Keywords: WebQuest Learning Approach, Reflective Practice, EFL, Critical Reading

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Introduction

Critical reading is one of the most important skills, and the most difficult skill to master (Sultan, Rofiuddin, Nurhadi, & Priyatni, 2017). In education, critical reading makes learning possible for all learners, from the primary to the tertiary level. At the primary level, reading critically enables young students to understand visual and print-based materials. In addition, critical reading helps children learn and participate in a rapidly moving, information-based world (Reutzler & Cooter Jr, 2015). At the tertiary level, furthermore, critical reading functions as a necessary tool in conveying the hidden layer of academic materials, including essays, literature, and research papers (Wallace & Wray, 2016). Therefore, critical reading ability becomes, in effect, the main learning outcome, and the major purpose of instruction at most levels of education (Wilson, 2016).

The term critical reading, which literally means to read something critically, holds various connotations. In the early decades, Sochor (1959) was probably the first author who proposed the premise that critical reading was closely related to critical thinking. According to this premise, critical reading is a process of using critical thinking in the reading context. Later, Combs (1992) defined critical reading as an interactive process, in which several levels of thought and the reader's previous experiences are applied simultaneously for making observations and judgments about a reading text. Crawley and Mountain (1995) redefined critical reading as creative reading, since reading involves the individual creating ideas by relating an author's ideas in written form with the reader's own unique schema. In recent years, critical reading has been defined as the highest level of comprehension, in which the reader interprets and evaluates, rather than asks questions about, the facts mentioned in the text (Pirozzi, Starks-Martin, & Dziewisz, 2007; Wallace & Wray, 2016).

Likewise, the components of critical reading ability are defined differently. Garrigus (1999) categorized critical reading ability into two levels, namely, basic and high-level critical reading. In the basic level, critical reading is related only to merely distinguishing the main idea, identifying patterns of organization, and recognizing transitional signals; while the higher level is involved with making inferences, distinguishing between fact and opinion, and evaluating evidence within the text. To simplify the complex skills needed for critical reading, Pirozzi

et al. (2007) defined the key features of the critical reading ability as 1) making inferences beyond what is stated explicitly in the printed text, 2) distinguishing between fact and opinion, 3) determining the writer's purpose, and 4) drawing logical conclusions. Therefore, the ability to read something critically refers to one's proficiency in making inferences from a reading text, evaluating information in the text (including an author's purpose, tone, or point of view), and drawing conclusions from the text with a new logical statement of one's own.

In recent years, a number of instructional models, learning theories, and learning approaches have been developed to improve students' critical reading and thinking abilities (Ahmed, 2016; Dodge, 1995, 2001; Mohammed, 2014), especially at the undergraduate level (Canniford & Fox-Young, 2015). One of the most contemporary learning programs is the WebQuest (Dodge, 1995, 2001), which is defined as an inquiry-oriented approach to providing opportunities for students to construct their learning experiences through online resources (Dodge, 1995). The grounded theories of the WebQuest model are constructivism, inquiry learning, scaffolding, and collaborative learning (Dodge, 1995), which are called the WebQuest Learning Approach (WQLA) in the present study. WQLA plays an important role in improving students' learning outcomes. First, the constructivism under WQLA provides opportunities for students to construct their knowledge and participate in higher-order thinking skills. Students learn, organize, explore, evaluate, analyze, and synthesize information on their own (Lamb & Tectlehaimanot, 2005). The second grounded theory, inquiry learning, helps students in taking reasoning and general principles and applying both the reasoning and principles to a new situation (Schunk, 2012). The third theory, scaffolding, minimizes new learning gaps and makes connections between goals and learning (Aydin, 2015). The fourth theory, collaborative learning, focuses on students' learning interactions. This means that students work independently in groups to search for answers, find solutions, and share their ideas (Orvis & Lassiter, 2007).

Studies have been conducted to investigate the effectiveness of WebQuest with regard to several aspects of learning. For instance, a study on using WebQuest for foreign language learning within the scope of the task-based and constructivism approach, Sole and Mardomingo (2004), concluded that

WebQuest helps students get involved in learning and deepens their understanding about what they learn. Years later, in a study of how eight WebQuest sessions contributed to content area knowledge development at the secondary level and supported the linguistic needs of English language learners, Sox and Rubinstein-Ávila (2009) found that WebQuest fell failed to provide strategies for enhancing comprehensible input. They recommended that WebQuest, in this regard the WQLA, should include other approaches to instruction which correspond to the idea of Cronbach and Snow (1981) that instruction should have many approaches, since no instruction is optimal on its own. Therefore, Reflective Practice (RP) comes into play.

Reflective Practice, which originated from the work of Dewey (1938), is viewed as a means of developing a high level of self-awareness about the nature and impact of the learner's performance, which provides for further professional development in related fields (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). Reflection and experiential learning theory are the key foundations of RP (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). The reflection shows how the processes involved in drawing on a professional knowledge-base are, in practice, far more complex than the basic notion might, at first, suggest. Schon (1983) coined two forms of reflection, reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, and introduced them into the field of professional development, including teacher education and research. The second grounded theory of RP, experiential learning, is, according to experiential learning theorists, located within the old tradition of experiential learning, and also within the more recently defined perspective of situated cognition (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). This means that learning is the most effective, and is most likely to lead to behavioral change, when it begins with experience, and, specifically, with problematic experience. Learning, furthermore, is effective when learners personally engage with the learning process, and engagement takes place when there is a need to learn.

Critical reading is very beneficial for education at the university level. Above and beyond this, the instruction as well as the curriculum content helps to enhance the critical reading ability of the students. Accordingly, the two contemporary learning approaches, WQLA and RP, lead to the assumption that the integration of the two approaches would be positively significant. Hence, the

present study aims to investigate the effectiveness of an instructional model that integrates WQLA and RP in enhancing students' critical reading ability.

Methodology

Study Design

The present study utilized a one-group pretest and posttest design, in which a single group was measured before and after exposure to a newly developed instructional model integrating WQLA and RP.

Participants

The newly developed instructional model integrating WQLA and RP was implemented among 11 second-year undergraduate students majoring in the English language. The students were enrolled in a course titled *Literature Studies 202* at a selected university in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The researchers purposively selected the second-year undergraduate students in the Faculty of Language, Arts, and Humanities, due to the availability of a fully equipped classroom, and the sufficiency of the English language background of the participants. In addition, the second-year students majoring in English were required to take Literature Studies 202 as a compulsory course. The students were at the intermediate level of English proficiency, and had experience with English-medium instruction.

Instruments

The instruments used in this study were: 1) the instructional model integrating WQLA and RP, and 2) the English critical reading ability test.

Instructional Model Integrating WQLA and RP

The research instrument referred to the instructional model integrating WQLA and RP. To develop the instructional model, the researchers first studied and synthesized the grounded theories of the two learning approaches, WQLA and RP, in order to generate learning principles. Then, the learning principles from both approaches were integrated for the core learning principles of the instructional model, as follows:

1. Meaningful learning occurs when students have skepticism, and apply their skepticism as their learning stimuli to search for the answer, using authentic information from authentic online resources.
2. Students gain more awareness by reflecting back on their learning process in an information and communication technology environment (ICT), and by sharing criticism of their learning experiences with peers.
3. Learning will be more effective when the students work collaboratively to construct knowledge, and are being scaffolded by peers or a teacher.
4. Students' self-reflection toward learning activities and previous learning experiences helps them to develop their higher order thinking skills.

After identifying the core learning principles of the model, the researchers developed the pedagogical guidelines of the model. Next, the pedagogical guidelines were used to develop the learning steps of the instructional model. The newly developed instructional model consisted of five steps, as follows:

Step 1: Generating skepticism — introducing a new topic, and using students' previous experiences to generate learning stimuli;

Step 2: Assigning the quest — linking students' skepticism to their tasks, and preparing students' learning readiness for their explorations;

Step 3: Exploring the quest — allowing students to work collaboratively in acquiring learning experiences through searching out authentic information, and drawing conclusions therefrom;

Step 4: Reflecting on the quest — presenting and reflecting on students' experiences during their explorations for further learning improvement;

Step 5: Concluding the quest — wrapping up the entire learning process.

Lesson plans (*see* Appendix) in this study were developed using all five learning steps of the instructional model, and each lesson plan was a complete loop of the learning process. Each lesson consisted of two sessions, with 90 minutes per session. The scope of the experimental teaching content included two pieces of English literature: *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Man and the Sea*, which are required for the Literature Studies 202 course. Each work was used in

the four lesson plans. The instructional model integrating WQLA and RP, and lesson plans based on the model, were validated by five experts for the index of item-objective congruence (IOC). The IOC results were at 1.00, which can be interpreted to mean that the instructional model was applicable for classroom implementation.

English Critical Reading Ability Test

An English critical reading ability test was developed on the basis of the components of critical reading, namely making inferences, evaluating information, and drawing conclusions. The test was comprised of 15 multiple-choice questions and 15 opened-ended questions, and was divided into three parts: situations, short reading, and long reading. Situations, the first part, was purposively designed to reflect any possible reading situation in daily life, including newspapers, advertisements, product labels, etc. The second part, short reading, was designed using short texts and articles, including email and short passages. The third part, long reading, consisted of an academic reading passage, which was modified in accordance with the theme of the English critical reading ability test.

Three-mark rubric scores which distinguished between the criteria were developed to evaluate the open-ended questions on the English critical reading ability test. The test and scoring rubric were reviewed and validated by five experts in the related field of study, namely English language teaching. The English critical reading ability test was piloted among 60 undergraduate students to establish its difficulty index, discrimination index and reliability coefficient. The pilot participants shared the same characteristics, but were not the identical group, as the participants in this study. The pilot participants had 60 minutes to complete the test. The results of the item analysis showed that the difficulty index was between 0.20 to 0.72, the discrimination index was between 0.40 to 0.50, and the reliability coefficient was 0.88. The results showed that the English critical reading ability test was appropriate for data collection in the study.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The data in this study were collected from among the experimental group for the 10 weeks of instruction between May and August 2017, over eight lesson plans of 180 minutes each. The experimental group underwent the implementation of the instructional model integrating WQLA and RP. One week prior to the start of the study, the English critical reading ability test was administered as the pretest, before the implementation of the instruction, and as the posttest, after completing the implementation. A Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test was used to analyze the data obtained from the English critical reading ability test.

Findings

Table 1. Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Results of the English Critical Reading Ability Test

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Z	P
Pretest—Posttest	Negative Ranks	10	6.50	65.00	2.85	.00
	Positive Ranks	1	1.00	1.00		
	Ties	0				
	Total	11				

From Table 1, the Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test indicated that the pretest scores of the English critical reading ability test (mean rank = 1.00) were lower than the posttest (mean rank = 6.50), $Z = 2.85$, $p = .00$. The statistical analysis using the Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test showed that the posttest results of the English critical reading ability test of the experimental group were significantly higher, at the level of .05.

Table 2. Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Results of the English Critical Reading Ability Test, by Component

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Z	P
Pretest—Posttest Making inference	Negative Ranks	10	5.50	55.00	2.82	.00
	Positive Ranks	1	.00	.00		
	Ties	0				
	Total	11				
Pretest—Posttest Evaluating information	Negative Ranks	10	6.45	64.50	2.81	.00
	Positive Ranks	1	1.50	1.50		
	Ties	0				
	Total	11				
Pretest—Posttest Drawing conclusion	Negative Ranks	10	6.40	64.00	2.78	.00
	Positive Ranks	1	2.00	2.00		
	Ties	0				
	Total	11				

From Table 2, the Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test indicated that the pretest score for making inferences in the English critical reading ability test (mean rank = 5.50) was lower than the posttest (mean rank = .00), $Z = 2.82$, $p = .00$. For evaluating information, the Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test indicated that the pretest score (mean rank = 6.40) was lower than the posttest (mean rank = 2.00), $Z = 2.81$, $p = .00$. For drawing conclusions, the Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test indicated that the pretest score (mean rank = 6.45) was lower than the posttest (mean rank = 1.50), $Z = 2.78$, $p = .00$. The results of the statistical analysis using the Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test showed that the posttest scores of all the components of English critical reading ability of the experimental group were significantly higher, at the level .05.

Discussion

As presented in the findings, the students' critical reading ability was statistically significant as an indicator of the effectiveness of the newly developed instructional model integrating WQLA and RP. Discussions of the findings on the theoretical aspects, the design of the learning activities, and the results of the implications of the model were presented.

As for the theoretical aspects, the effective learning of the instructional model integrating WQLA and RP was the result of scaffolded learning between peers or the teacher. This aspect of scaffolded learning corresponds to the study by Zheng, Stucky, McAlack, Menchana, and Stoddart (2005), where scaffolding functioned in facilitating subject content comprehension, clarifying learning, connecting between learning and activities and goals, providing better understanding how to achieve learning goals, and focusing on the problem. In addition, inquiry learning, which provides students opportunities to be exposed to various resources and to use critical thinking as a filter, plays a key role in the students' critical reading. According to Khodary and AbdAllah (2014), the results of the implementation of inquiry learning in developing critical reading achievement at a college of education showed that participants achieved a significant improvement in their critical reading through their inquiry learning, as it provided them with all the resources and guidance they needed to collect, analyze, and synthesize information sourced from websites to develop their critical reading achievement. Likewise, Ahmed (2016) also reported on students' significant results with critical reading through the inquiry into authentic information that was useful for the performance of critical reading.

The design of the learning activities of the instructional model appeared in the lesson plans. According to the lesson plans, students reflected on their task in the fourth and the fifth steps of the model. At these steps, the students mainly focused on their past learning activities, especially during their exploration in the previous step, which helped them to gain insights into their self-awareness when using a critical filter for their critical reading, applying problem solving for their task, and improving group work skills. Osterman and Kottkamp (1993) emphasized that students can develop a greater level of self-awareness with regard to their performance, and an awareness that provides opportunities for

future development. Moreover, the reflection in this model also corresponds with the explanation of McGregor and Cartwright (2011) of the reflection-on-action, which involves considering an experience, and thinking about how to improve it the next time, and which helps to inform the route the students need to take next time.

As for the implications of the model, the results from the data analysis showed significant improvement between the pretest and posttest in the students' overall critical reading ability (Table 1), and the individual component of critical reading ability, as well (Table 2). The results reflect the fact that the instructional model integrating WQLA and RP was effective in enhancing the students' critical reading ability. In this case, the instructional model integrating WQLA and RP to enhance English critical reading ability of the undergraduate students was concerned with inquiry learning. The same result was obtained in a study "using a WebQuest model to develop critical reading achievement among language and translation department at students in college of education and arts", conducted by Khodary and AbdAllah (2014), where students engaged with inquiry learning, as it provided them all the learning resources and guidance needed to get involved with a critical reading lesson. In addition to these results, the participants of Khodary and AbdAllah's study worked in small groups to collect, analyze, and synthesize information sourced explicitly for the purpose of developing their critical reading achievement.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to investigate the effectiveness of an instructional model integrating WQLA and RP to enhance students' critical reading ability. The results of the study, as obtained from the pretest and posttest scores, indicated that the students' critical reading ability was improved after undergoing the instructional model. The effective dimensions of the instructional model were derived from combining the grounded theories of both learning approaches, the careful and effective design of the learning steps of the model, and the rigorous implementation of the model in an actual classroom. This, however, does not imply that the instructional model integrating WQLA and RP is the best solution in enhancing critical reading ability in all conceivable learning situations.

Nevertheless, for optimal results, teachers play an important role in planning, designing, and implementing this instructional model in an actual classroom.

Limitations

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of an instructional model integrating WQLA and RP to enhance students' critical reading ability. However, there were some weaknesses in the study, which may have influenced the outcome.

First of all, the design of the present study employed only a single-group pretest posttest design. Thus, the major weakness of this study lies in confirming whether the significance of the improvement in the students' critical reading ability was truly from the implementation of the instructional model, or from any extraneous factors.

Secondly, this study was conducted with a limited number of students (less than 30 persons), which is considered a small-scale experimental study. The greatest challenge of having a small scale came when students dropped out during the data collection.

Thirdly, before participating with the newly developed instructional model, the experiment group was regularly exposed to conventional learning methods, which counted heavily on printed materials, and involved much less use of technology. A preliminary test on the students' ability in using technology was not administered prior to the implementation of the instructional model integrating WQLA and RP, which can be considered as another limitation of this study.

Fourthly, the current study focused merely on the quantitative aspect of the proposed teaching model. The study would have been more comprehensive if its design had included the qualitative element to describe the students' critical reading ability development.

Recommendations for Further Research

Since the present study is subject to some limitations, the following recommendations are proposed, as follows:

1. With regard to the major weakness of the significance of the results and the design of this study, it is advisable to re-conduct future experimental studies using the instructional model integrating WQLA and RP with a pretest posttest control group design.
2. The small scale of this study requires great caution in generalizing the results, and student drop-out during the data collection posed a major challenge. Thus, the sampling design of a future study should be done with caution, and the number of samples should be greater than 30.
3. To eliminate the extraneous factor of discrepancies between students' individual abilities in using technology, and to confirm that the students' abilities in using technology are at an appropriate level, a preliminary study to investigate the learning differences among students' basic skills in using technology should be administered, prior to the implementation of the model proper. This will help isolate the effectiveness of this instructional model.
4. While this study focused exclusively on reading ability, further research may equally be carried out to explore the extent to which this instructional model improves students' listening, speaking, or writing competence.

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Appendix. Sample lesson plan

UNIT—1

Title	The Old Man and the Sea (Introduction)
Student's Level	Year 2, Semester 2 (EFL)
Duration	180 minutes (2 Sessions)
Objective	At the end of the lesson, Ss will be able to: Identify characters in the story Simplify the general theme of the story
Learning Contents	The Old Man and the Sea
Materials	Whiteboard or blackboard / Short passage of the <i>Old Man and the Sea</i> / Internet access / Visualizer

STEP 1. GENERATING SKEPTICISM (30 mins)

1.1. Introducing a new topic T starts the lesson by asking some questions related to various literature stories, folk tales, etc.

Do you know any Khmer literatures or folk tales?

Have you ever read any Khmer literatures or folk tales?

Could you name any Khmer literatures?

Students (Ss) try thinking about any name of Khmer literature or folk talk that they have read before. Then, T randomly pick one or two Ss or or ask for any volunteer to answer.

After getting some answers from Ss, T asks the same questions about English literatures. As before, T allows Ss to think about their previous experiences with English literature.

Does anyone know any name of English literature?

Could you name any English literature?

Have you ever read / heard about "the Old Man and the Sea?"

T introduces the main objectives of the lesson.

Today, we are going to learn about the introduction of the Old Man and the Sea...

1.2. Creating Skepticism

By telling the title of the story, T asks Ss questions related to the story including the author, the theme of the story, etc.

Do you know who wrote the story the Old Man and the Sea?"

Do you know what the Old Man and the Sea is about?

What could you infer from the story, the Old Man and the Sea?

STEP 2. ASSIGNING THE QUEST (30 mins)

2.1. Introducing the Quest

T introduces the Quest to Ss.

Your task is: 1) to conduct a search for the summary and identify characters in the story "the Old Man and the Sea" and characters 2) to choose an online source and explain the research to choose the source, and 3) to present about your group discussion to the rest of the class.

T provides related sources for Ss to do research including the individual task (handout 1.1) and list of Website (handout 1.2). T also provides an evaluation sheet for Ss to evaluate their task (handout 1.3) and resources evaluation form (handout 1.4).

2.2. Stimulating schema

T asks Ss to form a small group in order to stimulate Ss' understanding about what they are going to do. Ss share to each other about their previous experiences. S takes note about their discussion.

T provides helps and supports by generating questions as follows:

In the title word "the Old Man and the Sea", what kind of clue that help you to guess what the story is about?

Is it possible if the author of the story provides the literal meaning of the story as the title?

Are there any stories which has the same title as this story but in other language, or in Khmer?

2.3. Reflecting for solutions

In the same group, T asks Ss to help each other to think and draft their plan about some possible ways to answer (solve) the Quest. T provides help to Ss during Ss' discussion.

T might ask:

What should be the possible way to seek for the answer?

Where can you find the plot summary?

Do you believe in what they (the online sources) write?

How does evaluation sheet help with your exploration?

Ss help each other to briefly write down their plans, process in inquiring information, related skills, etc.

STEP 3. EXPLORING THE QUEST (85 mins)

3.1. The exploration Ss work in small group to complete the Quest. Ss help group member to divide the Quest into small tasks (e.g. searching for the plots summary and the complete summary of the story from many sources, Ss might use other additional sources of their own, Ss use the evaluation sheet for their website, comparing and evaluating the sources of information, etc.). Ss manage their own group task and take role in complete each task.

While searching each task, Ss conduct an evaluation of about the reading materials, website, etc. using evaluation sheet given. (handout 1.4)

T controls the entire class during Ss' learning. T provides supports to Ss by asking some critical questions.

What do you think about your information?

How do you know that the author in this passage has no any bias about his/her writing?

Do you have any proof for this fact?

Are any evidences of what you are searching?

Do you use evaluation sheets to help with your evaluation?

3.2. Showtime

In each group, Ss conclude and finalize their tasks for the complete Quest. Ss help each other to create PowerPoint.

T limits time for Ss creating presentation. Then, Ss present about their Quest to the rest of the class. T observes and evaluates Ss' presentations.

STEP 4. REFLECTING THE QUEST (20 mins)

After all the groups are done, T and Ss point out some common mistakes (e.g. weakness, strength, learning process, etc.) often found in their exploration of the tasks. T and Ss have interactional feedback. Ss share expected better learning outcome from their reflection on their previous Exploration step.

STEP 5. CONCLUDING THE QUEST (20 mins)

Wrap-up

Ss take turn in sharing what they have learnt about the general theme of the story “the Old Man and the Sea” and the characters in the story.

T concludes what Ss have learned according to the learning objective. T assigns Ss to write reflective journal (handout 1.5) as next session homework.