PowerQuest: Scaffolding the Lebanese EFL University Students' Writing in a Public Speaking Class

Dr. Liza DerKhachadourian
Department of Languages and Humanities, Université libano-française - Metn (ULF) Rafik Hariri University (RHU), Lebanon
Corresponding Author: Dr. Liza DerKhachadourian, E-mail: khachadourianlj@rhu.edu.lb

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Many university undergraduates consider writing assignments an overwhelming requirement. Traditional instructions rarely provide students with clear directions of how to use the Internet to search for authentic material and complete a task. The aim of this study was to scaffold the competence of EFL university students in writing an informative speech assignment through a Web Inquiry tool, the PowerQuest, in a Public Speaking class. An experimental study was carried at a Lebanese English medium private university. The participants (N=62), Lebanese undergraduates, were assigned into experimental and control groups randomly. The experimental group performed informative speech writing assignments through PowerQuest, whereas the control group followed the traditional way. The theoretical framework for using PowerQuest was the cognitive and constructivist theories. Data collection instruments were scores of pre/post-intervention essays, Likert scale, open-ended questions, and thematic analysis of the post-intervention essays. Data were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. Integration of PowerQuest tool made the experimental group engage into higher order thinking skills in a self-instructional, collaborative, motivating, technology-rich environment; they made use of up-to-date and authentic material through reliable domains and met deadlines. They outperformed the control group significantly and reflected a positive perception of the experience. Suggestions and recommendations for further research were shared.

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing assignments are an overwhelming task to some EFL undergraduates. Traditional instructions rarely provide students with clear directions of how to use the Internet to search for authentic material to complete a task. However, Web inquiry, which is the current interest of educators (Coffman, 2009), helps learners: to explore a variety of sources, have access to authentic materials, collaborate, share new knowledge, exert more effort and feel motivated to fulfill an assignment (Wankel & Blessinger, 2013). Nevertheless, tools alone will not result in successful learning, unless tasks are theoretically grounded. The theoretical framework for Web inquiry in an academic setting is the cognitive learning theory and the social constructivism, to construct new knowledge and meaning. First, upon inquiring the Web, students explore a variety of sources and pursue a systematic investigation of a problem or an issue. When they observe, infer, formulate hypotheses, predict, communicate and interact with the world around them (Kellow, 2006), they engage into higher

order thinking skills (Coffman, 2009). Second, this student-centered approach scaffolds the learners; it makes them follow directions step by step to complete a demanding task to develop new skills, and to build on their prior knowledge (Kellow, 2006). Finally, authentic and timely material help students confront or solve real world issues, unlike knowledge constructed in classrooms or dated textbooks, especially, when the answers or results developed by the students are posted, presented or shared with real audience for feedback (Wankel & Blessinger, 2013). The purpose of this study was to scaffold the competence of EFL university students in writing an informative speech assignment through a Web inquiry tool, the PowerQuest (PQ), in a Public Speaking class, and build a self-instructional learning environment for them. **An experimental study was carried** at a Lebanese English medium private university, throughout two semesters, where the undergraduates (N=62) were assigned into experimental and control groups randomly. The significance of this study lies in the fact that it is in

line with timely studies involving Web inquiry; and to my knowledge, it is the first time a PQ tool is used in Lebanon in Public Speaking classes to scaffold the students' writing assignments.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1 Public speaking
Public speaking is the process of sharing ideas and influencing people formally. Despite the growth of the Internet, Aristotle's Rhetoric (3rd century B.C.) has been part of our academic discipline, and the need for acquiring public speaking skills has never been reduced (Lucas, 2009). Nowadays, university graduates are asked to deliver impressive presentations as a requirement for job interviews (Lucas, 2009, Larkin, 2019). One of public speaking types is informative speech; the general purpose of which is sharing information with listeners. The different types of this speech are expository, descriptive, and demonstrative that deal with describing a thing, a person, place, concept, a process, or function. It highly relies on researched data about a comprehensive view of the chosen subject that relates to the interest of the audience (Beebe, 2012). However, an effective speech should be written in a very well and clearly structured manner, and driven from a variety of authentic material sources. So, the weight of this study was mainly on the "speech preparation" rather than the "delivery", to scaffold the students' skills in writing an informative speech, through the Web Inquiry tool, the PQ.

2.2 Web inquiry
Web inquiry oriented approach goes beyond acquiring content knowledge in the traditional four walls classroom (Coffman, 2009, p.17). Technology provides an effective and engaging way for students to become investigators of knowledge and to tie real-world elements into content. Furthermore, technology tools not only facilitate communication among students, teachers, classmates, other students, and experts outside the classroom in a global context, but also allow student-collected data to be stored, shared and then presented in new and meaningful ways (p.18). The significance of Web inquiry activity is that educators can use it in any context and at any grade level (p.79). At last, one of the Web inquiry-based learning activities is the WebQuest template.

2.3 WebQuest
The WebQuest model is developed by Dodge back in 1995, where learners are required to do tasks, work in groups, take roles and do presentations (https://www.webquest.org/index.php). Its most important part is a well-designed task, which provides a concrete goal, and elicits thinking in learners that goes beyond rote comprehension (Dodge, 2002). Similar to Web inquiry learning, the group activities designed on WebQuest tool promotes critical thinking. The learners analyze, synthesize and evaluate the researched information (Coffman, 2009; Mills, 2006). Moreover, this guided inquiry activates higher order thinking processes in an authentic, technology-rich environment; as well as, it helps learners solve problems, process new information, use time effectively, collaborate and get motivated (Torres, 2007; Wankel & Blessinger, 2013). In addition, a WebQuest can solve the problem of surfing the Internet without a clear purpose in any content area; and it can serve writing a traditional research paper or developing a multimedia project from Internet resources (Urquhart, 2005). An authentic WebQuest assignment scaffolds and motivates students to investigate a "big idea" question, and participate in a group to transform newly obtained information into a refined understanding. Well-prepared WebQuests help learners find "richer thematic relationships, to contribute to the real world of learning, and to reflect on their own metacognitive processes" (March, 2003, p. 43), which is directly related to developing higher order skills. Furthermore, Web inquiry studies are numerous and ongoing. For example, Datt and Aspden (2011) used Webquest assignments to their pharmacy students, to create e-posters, and store them for later use as web resources (c.i. Wankel & Blessinger, 2013). Recently, Awada, Burston and Ghannage (2019) studied the effect of WebQuest on EFL students' argumentative writing skills. At last, WebQuest assignments can be administered at the introductory phase, concluding phase, or as an entire unit of study (Coffman, 2009).

2.4 PowerQuest
PQ was developed by Annette Lamb based on the WebQuest template, which uses PowerPoint as a tool but it is not a presentation; however, it is a stage for building a self-instructional learning environment for students. PQ is constituted of the following sections: Introduction, Start, Task, Process, Links, Advice, Assess, End (see the details in the Methodology section) (http://eduscapes.com). Moreover, Hamilton and Sasso (2008) considered PQ as "training wheels", which activates the use of the Internet as an instructional source. Consequently, they advised teachers to tie PQ technology-based activities to classroom activities and assignments on the curriculum, instead of employing PQ as an isolated entity. As such, the learners will get motivated to seek knowledge. **Thus,** this study employed PQ **to** scaffold the competence of EFL university students in writing an informative speech assignment, in a Public Speaking class, keeping in mind t**he**

theoretical framework of this tool, the cognitive and constructivist theories.

2.5 Scaffolding

Scaffolding occurs in peer–peer collaborative dialogue (Swain 2000), where learners can perform beyond their actual developmental level, which is known as the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (c.i. Gonzales, 2014). ZPD is defined as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (c.i. Gonzales, 2014). When EFL learners collaborate to perform tasks, they "produce a joint written product, they co-construct knowledge and push each other to identify L2 gaps and to test new hypotheses" (Swain 2000, c.i. Gonzales, 2014, p.119), which is so true. This study grouped the students into teams and adopted procedural scaffolding that involves, modeling, practicing and applying to build their skills and increase independence.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Design

An experimental study was carried out in an English medium private university in Lebanon. The participants (N=62) were undergraduate EFL learners in the English Public Speaking course (ENGL 212), a 3 credits course over 12 weeks. Their L1 was Arabic, their age ranged between 20 and 25, and they were pursuing a B.A. degree in various majors. This study was conducted throughout the fall and spring semesters. The participants were assigned into the experimental and control groups randomly.

The experimental group (EG) performed informative speech writing assignments following the PQ tool, whereas the control group (CG) followed the traditional way.

3.2 Instruments

Data collection instruments were scores of pre/post-intervention essays, Likert scale, open-ended questions, and thematic analysis of the post-intervention essays. First, pre-intervention assignment samples, namely, a five-paragraph informative essay written by the learners (CG and EG), in the traditional way, were collected and graded. Similarly, post-intervention assignment samples (written by the CG and the EG) were collected and graded. An informative speech rubric (see Appendix A) was adopted to grade the essays according to their content, support, unity, organization, coherence, word choice, and

mechanics. Then, two-sample t-test was used to get the mean grades of the two groups, which were displayed in tables and bar graphs. Later, these were compared to show the development at the post-intervention stage. Two English instructors assessed the results; a 3rd instructor was ascribed in case of discrepancy was revealed in the results. Afterwards, a 5 point Likert scale of 6 questions (see Appendix C) targeting the EG was developed to elicit their perception about the PQ tool and analyze them quantitatively. Next, open ended questions targeting the EG were designed to check a previous exposure to a similar experience, to elicit the EG's perception related to the effectiveness of using PQ in writing assignments, to check their willingness in extending this experience to other fields of study, and to analyze them qualitatively. Finally, twenty-five essays written by the EG (who employed the PQ) and by the CG (who followed the traditional way), at the post-intervention phase, were randomly chosen for thematic analysis. At the end, all the mentioned instruments served the quantitative and the qualitative and analysis.

3.3 The Intervention

The EG learners were assigned to 8 groups of 4. The researcher designed a task through a PQ tool, and posted it on the WhatsApp group of the EG (created to serve the purpose of this study). She asked the EG learners to inquire the Web about their favorite renowned personality to find the most important characteristics and prominent achievements of this personality, and to unfold untold stories. The learners were instructed to use critical thinking, to analyze, synthesize and evaluate the researched information.

The design of the PowerQuest. To create the PQ assignment, a template was downloaded following this link, (eduscapes.com/sessions/travel/powerquest1.ppt); then, the following PQ structures were realized:

- *The introduction* comprised of the title of the assignment (Informative Essay Assignment), the name of course (Public Speaking 212, 3 credits), the term (Fall/Spring, 2019) and the PQ designer's name (the Instructor/researcher).
- *The task* clearly stated the research topic, related questions, and assigned the students to groups of 3/4 and limited the due time (2 weeks).
- *The process* section provided them with steps and resource links on to conduct effective online research, to cite online

information following the APA style, to know the skills of writing a successful five-paragraph essay. To keep them motivated and to scaffold them, the researcher shared with them samples of informative five-paragraph essays, and many links to assist the students complete the task.

- *The assessment* section provided the students a link to an Informative Speech Rubric that described the anticipated performance criteria: purpose, audience, topic, word choice, introduction, body and transitions, conclusion (emphasis on the main point(s), where the speech is drawn to an effective memorable statement).

The conclusion section comprised of a platform, where the students were asked to give their feedback and offer any suggestions to enhance the quest. The 5point Likert scale of 6 questions and the open-ended questions (discussed in the Instruments section) were administered in this phase. On this same platform, the researcher hoped that the learners enjoyed this activity that engaged them in writing an informative essay, and she asked them to suggest the topic of their next assignment.

3.4 The CG

At the same time of this study, the CG learners attended the regular lectures. They were given the freedom to surf the Web to come up with exactly the same assignment (to write an informative 5paragraph essay about their favorite renowned personality). So, they worked individually, did not collaborate in group work, and got no access to links that lead to model samples and constructive information. They did not have a WhatsApp group like the EG learners; they used the researcher's email to ask questions. It is worth to mention that this assignment was administered at a stage where the two groups were exposed to the following units: *Speaking in public, ethics in public speaking and research, selecting reliable sources, referencing and in-text citation, writing a five-paragraph essay, analysis of sample speeches, quoting, paraphrasing and summarizing,* and *informative speech.*

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
4.1 Pre/Post-intervention scores

Pre-post intervention assignment samples were graded based on the informative speech rubric. The results of the two-sample t-test revealed that the mean of the pre-intervention writing assignment grade of the 2 groups (see Appendix B) was 68/100 ($p > 0.05$), an insignificant difference. However, in the post-intervention phase scores had remarkably shifted. The EG shifted from 68.0 to 81, whereas, the CG shifted from 68.0 to 74. This means that the EG,

who followed the PQ instructions, outperformed the CG significantly by 7 points ($p < 0.001$). This validates the hypothesis that the Web Inquiry tool, PQ, scaffolded the informative speech writing assignment in the Public Speaking class.

4.2 Likert scale questionnaire

The findings of the Likert scale questionnaire posted on the Whatssap group of the EG learners (see Appendix C) revealed the following results: 90% said that this activity was enjoyable, and 80% found that it teaches how to research online, surprisingly! 100% totally agreed that it helps to learn more about reliable link domains, 85% found that it teaches how to cite online information, 79% thought that it leads to writing a successful five-paragraph informative essay, and 75% considered that it makes one meet the submission deadline successfully. In other words, they were highly motivated, following the steps and the links on the PQ they acquired the skills on how to research and write an essay, and submit it by the due date. In a nutshell, they strongly agreed to the use of the PQ tool.

4.3 Open-ended questions

The researcher palpated the EG learners' perception related to the PQ tool in open-ended questions (see Appendix D). Three aspects of interest were suggested: a previous experience exposure, the effectiveness of using PQ, and extending the experience to other fields of study. The aim of using this instrument was to verify the results obtained through the aforementioned Likert-scale questionnaire and achieve triangulation.

The 1st question that asked, "Were you exposed to a similar PQ experience? Where?" and all of them said that they were not exposed to a similar PQ experience, so it was their first time experience.

The 2nd question that asked, "What did you learn from this experience?" and they gave a variety of answers, but the majority are seen next. They learned how to write an organized informative essay, following the different steps on the PQ. They were enlightened about visiting reliable link domains to pick information from. They considered guided research an important aspect to develop in writing; however, they faced difficulty in paraphrasing.

Their answers to the 3rd question, "Do you recommend PQ in other courses? In which course could this experience be helpful?" and all of them recommended PQ in other courses such as marketing, business management, and chemistry. Most of them found it helpful every time they were asked to write an assignment.

Finally, the answers to the open-ended questions are discussed by order of the aspects of interest. First, one can say that PQ was their first time experience, which validated the significance of this study. Second, based on their answers, the EG learners reflected a positive perception of using the PQ tool in writing their assignments. They learned how to write an organized informative essay through higher order thinking processes. PQ helped them overcome difficulties in writing, except paraphrasing, that needed more practice. But being a first time experience, they benefitted from the procedural scaffolding, sharing/modeling the samples of authentic informative essays and useful links shared with the learners, practicing and applying the newly gained knowledge that built their skills and increased their independence. Third, their desire to extend the newly gained knowledge to other fields of study suggested the practical and motivational effects of employing the PQ tool. In a nutshell, their answers verified the results obtained through the Likert-scale questionnaire and thereby triangulation was achieved.

4.4 Thematic analysis of post-intervention essays
The analysis of the post-intervention essays of the EG (who employed the PQ) and the CG (who followed the traditional lectures related to instructing five-paragraph essay writing skills way) was based on the "compare and contrast" of some main themes.
Visiting reliable links. The EG visited the reliable Links, (e.g. the domains ending in *.edu/.gov/ .org/ .mil*) and referenced the collected data appropriately, including images, music, and YouTube movies; unlike the CG, who failed to cite some of the sources in the draft 1 and visited and cited ".com" domains.

Organizing a five-paragraph essay. The assessment of organizing a five-paragraph informative essay, the informative speech writing rubric was employed, and the following was revealed.

a) *Introduction:* The EG and the CG researched up-to-date authentic material and picked up a "favorite personality" in response to the one "big idea" question. They chose the personality that intrinsically motivated them; for example, *Charley Chaplain, Coco Chanel, Sigmund Freud, Pablo Escobar, Bob Marley, Angelina Jolie* and others, and presented it in the "Introduction" in a clear purpose statement.

b) *The purpose, topic and word choice*: the EG and the CG were clear and relevant in the purpose, topic and word choice.

c) *The organizational pattern:* the EG learners organized the sub-questions (e.g. find the most important characteristics, prominent achievements, and untold stories) in a chronological order

appropriately and made the essay easy to follow. On the other hand, the CG lacked structure and crammed the information in an unorganized manner. For example, the prominent achievements and untold stories of the personality in question did not follow the chronological order. The beginning and the end were difficult to follow. The EG analyzed, synthesized and evaluated the researched information, and revealed a deeper understanding of the structure and the content of the assignment, following the instructions and links on the PQ, more than the CG. The CG added unnecessary side information and extended the essay to more than 5paragraphs.

d) *The conclusion:* The EG restated the thesis statement, emphasized the main points, opened up a personal opinion, and closed the essay in an effective memorable statement. Some of the CG did not provide a concluding statement, others dropped floating quotations used by the personality they had chosen without any justification; for example, "You live but once; you might as well be amusing", "In order to be irreplaceable one must be different" Coco Chanel quotes. Others even missed the conclusion part.

Motivation. The EG reflected high motivation, they put more effort into the assignment, interacted on the WhatsApp group, were inquisitive with respect to the task and were able to meet the 2 weeks deadline successfully, in contrast to the CG, who were working individually and passively and took 5 weeks to complete the same assignment.

In a nutshell, the thematic analysis of the post-intervention essays of the EG and the CG revealed that the EG performed better in employing reliable links, organizing a five-paragraph essay and exerting more effort to fulfill the required task.

5. CONCLUSION
In conclusion, in the light of the positive results discussed here above, implementation of PQ led the EG to higher order thinking processes; they analyzed, synthesized and evaluated the researched information, the process and the product (cognitive theory). As well as through PQ assistance, students got scaffolded, collaborated and shared new knowledge, constructed knowledge and got motivated, (constructivist theory). So, as Wankel and Blessinger (2013) discussed the theoretical framework of Web inquiry, the cognitive and the constructivist theories proved to be fruitful. The perception of the majority of the EG learners related to the PQ tool was positive; writing through PQ had guided and scaffolded them. So, Torres (2007) and

Wankel and Blessinger (2013) were right when they said that, Web inquiry learning delivers an authentic, technology-rich environment to solve problems, promotes higher order thinking processes, as well as motivation, effort, and effective use of time. The significance of this study is in line with timely studies involving Web inquiry. At last, the Quantitative and the Qualitative results contributed to the field of integration of technology in EFL learning and validated the hypothesis that employment of the Web Inquiry tool, PQ scaffolded the informative speech writing assignment in the Public Speaking class.

As for further research recommendation, scholars in the field can design other Web Inquiry tools in the future, which can be experimented on a larger scope. I suggest that educational authorities integrate Web inquiry tools to teaching methods at various educational levels.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Liza Der Khachadourian is a Lecturer at RHU and ULF universities in Lebanon. She earned her PhD in English Literature and Language, Applied Linguistics (USEK) in 2017, Master's Degree in English Literature and Language (USEK) in 2013, Bachelor of Arts and Teaching Diploma in English Literature and Language (Lebanese University) in 1989, Nursing A. Degree (American University of Beirut) in 1982. Since 1992 she is a Legal & Sworn Translator at the Lebanese courts. Her professional interests include integration of technology into language learning.

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Appendix A: Scoring Rubric for Informative Speech

Appendix B: Public Speaking Assignment Grades of the EG and the CG
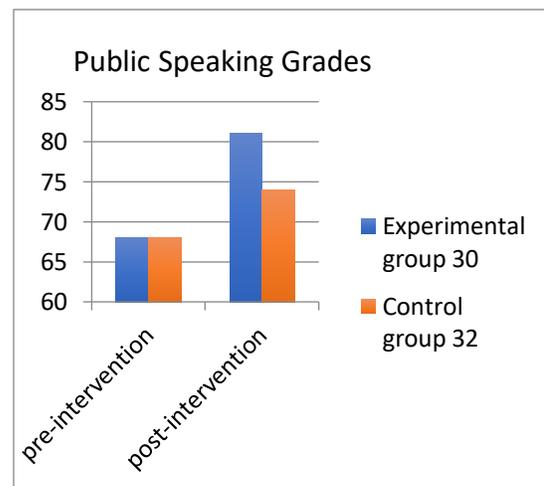
Appendix C: Slide 11/13 A 5point Likert Scale

Your feedback is valued

Copy the following table on the tail of your word document, and there tick the answer of your choice.

Indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.

		Strongly disagree	Somehow disagree	Neutral	Somehow agree	Strongly agree
1	This activity was enjoyable.					
2	This activity teaches how to research online.					
3	This activity helps to learn more about reliable link domains.					
4	This activity teaches how to cite online information.					
5	This activity leads on how to write a successful five-paragraph informative essay.					
6	One can meet the submission deadline successfully.					

Start > Task > Process > Links > Advice > Assess > End

Appendix D: Slide 12/13 Open-ended Questions

Feedback cont'd

Copy the following questions on the tail of your word document and then write your answers honestly.

1-Were you exposed to a similar experience? Where?

2-What did you learn from this experience?

3-Do you recommend WQ in other courses? In which course could this experience be helpful?

Start > Task > Process > Links > Advice > Assess > End