

The Interactive whiteboard in language teaching

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Nothing symbolises the ‘digital divide’ quite as much as the interactive whiteboard, or IWB. The divide is not just a gulf between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’; it is an ideological divide. This article sets out how the two opposing camps - the pros and contras - square up in the fascinating debate playing out on ELT forums.

Supporters see the IWB as a powerful learning tool. It allows teachers to unleash the full power of multi-media in their language classrooms. Previously, much digital learning material was consigned to the self access centre, rather than being an integral part of a lesson. Now, the fact that the IWB is linked to a computer and electronic data projector means that the internet, video, animation, photographs, PowerPoint can all be used to create memorable presentations. The teacher can reveal a photograph bit by bit, for instance, to generate interest in a topic. Language practice can be fun and motivating, with students coming out to the front (at long last, joy for the kinaesthetic learner) to manipulate objects on the whiteboard and engage in awareness raising activities.

Publishers are now bringing out ‘whiteboardable’ versions of their course books, making it easy to mark exercises in class, or zoom into specific parts of the page. We all remember the days of looking for the exact place of a recording on the cassette. Now, a drop down menu reveals the transcript and with a touch of the pen (or finger, depending on which board you use) you can play exactly the part of the recording the students need to hear. Once the IWB is installed, teachers tend not to bother with CD audio and DVD players, as all the audio-visual components are simply run through the IWB.

A fluency lesson can be transformed into a ‘Who wants to be a millionaire?’ experience, with students using a ‘learner voting device’ to show how their opinions are changing at different stages during the lesson. Reviewing language has never been easier, with teachers able to skip back to the digital flip-charts they created earlier in the lesson. Most remarkable of all, the teacher can create a personalised course to seamlessly support their syllabus, complete with audio clips and digital photographs, and then save it, ready for the next group. Of course, moving beyond the ‘wow’ factor and developing innovative pedagogies takes time, but this is undeniably happening in schools where such technologies have been in place for a while. There is a lot to get excited about.

What about the other side? Detractors make the cogent point that the IWB can usher in a quick return to the teacher-dominated classroom, and contribute to the well-known ‘death by

PowerPoint' syndrome. Some practitioners point out the negative aspects of being enslaved to materials rather than following the student, so flooding classrooms with digital material (Promethean, a leading hardware and software manufacturer, have just made much of their material free) may merely re-enforce a materials dependent approach, rather than encourage a learner-centred one.

Most teachers are time-poor, so the headache of re-calibration, turning on and checking the technology, worrying about its failure and issues such as software compliancy are adding an unwanted burden to their working day.

Perhaps the single biggest argument levelled against the technology is the prohibitive cost. We are constantly warned not to use the technology 'just because it is there', but try telling that to a school manager whose bank balance is a few thousand pounds lighter having just made a substantial investment.

Those who do make the purchasing decisions are usually furthest from the chalk face. Which manufacturer should they go for? In the red corner, Promethean, with their e-pen and comprehensive range of peripherals. In the blue corner, Smart, with their latest exciting software release, Version 10. Perhaps there is a 'third way' – the use of a portable alternative. The 'mimio' can be fixed to a hard surface, such as a normal whiteboard. It is positioned next to an image of a computer screen from the data projector, and it is this image which then becomes interactive. This device could be a boon for those seeking a low-cost way to try out IWB functionality with small groups.

As the world of language teaching seems gripped in yet another heated debate, it is worth remembering that an IWB is, essentially, a tool. It can help create a rich learning environment, but it all depends on how you use it. Whichever side of the fence you come down on, the IWB certainly has a lot going for it.

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