

INTERACTIVE WHITEBOARDS – AID AND THREAT IN ONE

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Abstract: Interactive whiteboards have become reality in our classrooms, or better said at our schools. Teachers are divided into two (main) groups – the phobic ones (traditionalists – chalk and blackboard people) and technology geeks (those willing to experiment and try everything that might show higher effectiveness and learners motivation. There is still a high number of users who simply do not feel confident to use IWB and/or those who use IWB as a display panel for presentations prepared for computer and LCD display. The article brings some basic information about using IWB in teaching English.

Key words: interactive whiteboard, interaction, motivation, activity, learner-centred teaching

Introduction

Interactive whiteboards (IWB) are the white boards with added value. The board is connected to e.g. computer and projector and allows modern use of material visualisations. Simply we can say that IWB is an extension to a computer. There are various types of IWBs and we should carefully decide how it will be used before buying one. We also have to consider a space where it should be used.

One can work easily with the IWB – it is very similar to using computer and clicking the mouse – however, using IWB you can either tap the board with your finger (depending on the type of IWB you have - resistant (finger touch), electromagnetic (special pen needed) or integral (finger touch + pen – all-in-one).

There is usually software loaded directly onto the PC which varies according to the producers. Generally we can say they share some types of possibilities in common:

- a set of tools for text editing (similar to text processor tools available in computer – possibility to write, change colour, font, insert the shapes and pictures, etc.). What is important is that you can edit on the board what you have on the screen of your computer and thus students can follow you easily.
- screen shade (hide and reveal) – efficient and practical for the types of activities when you need to cover part of the text or picture and successively to uncover it – it is good for presentation and guessing activities (e.g. what comes next – based on context)
- spotlighting – similar to the one mentioned above; the black screen with a small point visible on the board – the point can be moved but also increased and decreased – this kind of activity is good e.g. to practise guessing skills; to practise and challenge learners to think linguistically (in case of small space visible students have to think about the rules for sounds and letters combination, word combinations, etc.).
- drag and drop – activities that are frequently used in both, printed and electronic forms.

Thus the teachers have a possibility to create and use their own activities but they also can use “ready-made” i-tools materials. The sets published nowadays usually include not only a textbook, workbook, teacher’s book and CDrom but also - IWB support.

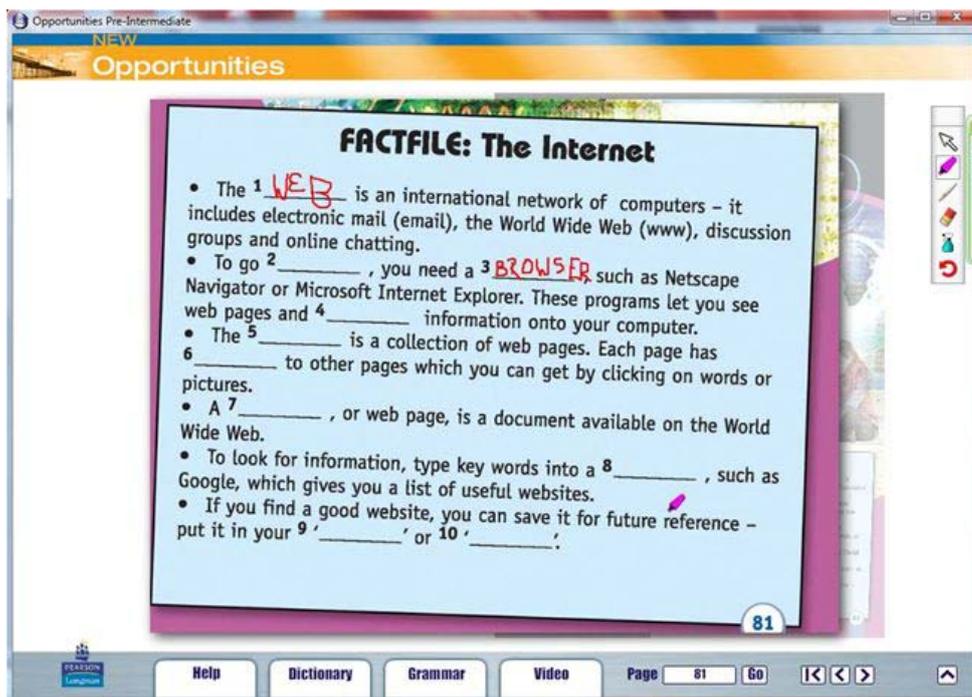
Why should we use IWB?

This is an important question, why should I as a teacher spend my time planning work with IWB – how is it different compared to a “traditional” whiteboard. Teachers can plan how to use space of the board to develop a logical layout for presented information. What they cannot plan are the reactions and questions of the students. Sometimes we have a board full of important information that we need to keep for later use and suddenly we need to add some information or we need more space to “visualise” the answer to the questions students ask. With traditional board we can either add the information on a board or make it messy or we can clean the board, explain the stuff, clean the board and write the original stuff again.

With IWB we can add new object, drag and drop it to the necessary position (this can be done with all objects) or we can save the board, erase it, explain new stuff and consequently come back to the “saved board”. The size of objects can be also easily increased and decreased what makes the work with the objects even easier and more interesting at the same time.

All documents can be opened directly on a board and we can work with it, zoom it, circle information, underline it, highlight important part and then simply erase it and use it again and again. We can use the activities that are in the student’s textbooks or workbooks as well as our own activities.

Fig.1 The sample from the Opportunities, OUP



Classroom organisation

It might seem not to be important but we should know what kind of projection we use – front projection or rear projection. In case of front projection the video projector is placed in front of the screen. The teacher or presenter as well as students have to be careful as they might cast a shadow as they might be in a beam’s path. In case of rear projection we have to realise that the board must not be mounted to the wall and that there has to be certain space between the projector and the back of the screen. The presenters do not cast shadows, they do

not face the beam (what might be not very comfortable on case of front projection), on the other hand, they are usually more expensive.

When installing an IWB and creating activities we need to think carefully of the height of users and make sure the users can reach the top of the board.

Concerning seating arrangement it is expected that all students can read well (not sitting with their backs to the board) and what more pupils should not be squeezed and moving around the desks and toward the board should be smooth and easy.

IWB and young learners

Young learners in the classroom face the problems - they have to obey, follow the rules, sit still; what is quite difficult for them and different compared to their natural behaviour when they are not formally educated. Naturally, they speak when they want to, they move when they want to, they like running, playing the games, they love asking questions and need immediate answers, they want to present themselves, they do not want to do the same activity for a long time, they like changes in activities etc.

Using IWB allows learners to move, to get immediate feedback, simply – using IWB creates more “nature-like” environment and thus pupils might be more interested in doing activities and they are also motivated as the reward is doubled, they are not only good at English but what more they are technically skilled.

Publisher software is written for young learners as a support usually to the textbooks (we can mention different software as well, e.g. Busy Board, Macmillan) and it usually also respects age and level of the users.

The pictures below are the examples – screens from the software Fairyland (Express Publishing).

Fig. 2 One of the activities - Listen and look



We can decide (based on the aim) to practice listening comprehension or reading and pronunciation. To make the text visible we can click on the pentagon under the pictures. To listen to the recording we have to click on the headphones. The tool bar at the bottom of the screen prides a set of tool to cover/uncover the board/part of part, to write in various colour, to clean the board, save the boards.

Fig. 4 Example of one type of activities – listen and click. After listening to the part of text and correct clicking on the pictures the colours come vivid (at the beginning they are monochromous).



IWB and older learners

Older learners in the classroom are able of abstract thinking, they have better concentration span, and usually they are computer-skilled. They want to be active and they need to be employed all the time, we need to attract their attention and keep them motivated.

Again, there are a lot of textbooks that come along with IWB support that might be used. It might be not so challenging as in a group of young learners but it saves time and teacher's time. The ready-made material is helpful and enables students to move and visualise material.

Many times we do not realize how important it is to use a board – to visualize a language. We have noticed a decrease in spelling ability of learners that might have been caused by existence of workbooks where student just add missing information and they do not practise handwriting, writing, spelling enough and many times we do not use board a lot and at least the group of visual learners miss it.

Thus using IWB can force us, teachers, to write more, to visualise language. What more, we can ask learners (even at that age) to create their own activities that later can be used in teaching. Students thus practice not only language but computer skills as well. What more, in many cases language becomes the means and not the target and students use language immediately and intuitively rather than focussing on grammar, spelling etc.

Conclusion

The article is definitely positive about using the IWBs and we are sure it is not easy to persuade all teachers to use it. Definitely might be difficult in the initial stages but practise makes teacher more confident and skilled and in very short time we will find the benefits of using IWB.

On the other hand we have to make sure that we do not overuse the interactive whiteboard and that we try to make the lessons learner-centred as many times teachers are willing to present the possibilities IWB offers and the content and learners are pushed to the background. Lessons are then fascinating presentation rather than challenging and motivating environment for education.

Besides all the effects we want to highlight that using IWB enables to address various intelligence types as well as learner styles. It also challenges and supports both, individual and groupwork.

I did not mention competencies teacher must have but in this space I wanted to focus my attention not to the teacher and learner as the key factors in foreign language lesson but rather to the types of activities that can be used in language teaching and to bring some criteria or characteristics that a teacher should check before using or buying IWB software.

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