Chapter 5
Meeting Teachers’ Real Needs: New Tools in the Secondary Modern Foreign Languages Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This chapter uses a narrow geographical and subject-specific focus to discuss factors affecting teachers’ preferred use of Interactive Whiteboards in situ. It highlights tensions between political rhetoric concerning the power of ICT to transform teaching and learning, subject-specific pedagogy, and the industrial realities of teaching in the compulsory secondary sector in the UK. Case studies are used to investigate ways in which individual teachers maneuver their way through these tensions, identifying and developing uses of the new technology to meet their own immediate concerns in the situated reality of their classrooms. The chapter concludes that the popularity of the IWB may stem from the fact that whereas previous ICT applications encouraged greater freedom on the part of the learner, the Whiteboard by contrast can be used to increase teacher control of both content and behaviour; thus better meeting teachers’ immediate needs within their context. Although very specific in its focus, the chapter highlights the need for sensitivity to the sociocultural environment when introducing new technology into teaching and learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

Discussion of UK government policy for education is complicated by degrees of devolution to Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland, whereas England has no independent governing body. Educational policy in England, therefore, is decided by the UK govern-
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(DfES) through to the most recent Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).

In recent decades the UK government has stated in numerous papers its faith in the power of ICT to contribute to its agenda of raising standards in schools, using the rhetoric of “transformation”. It has invested more than any other European government in equipping schools with hardware, software and Broadband access, and in training teachers to use new technologies in their classrooms. Only since the appearance of the Interactive Whiteboard, however, does there appear to have been widespread enthusiasm among the teaching profession in England for the integration of computers and digital technology into their pedagogy. In Modern Foreign Language teaching in particular, only the most ardent technophiles accepted the challenge of working in computer suites or with clusters of computers; IWBs, however, are becoming a departmental priority. This chapter discusses possible reasons for such popularity and uses a small number of case studies to demonstrate how individual teachers interact with technology to address their own priorities in the classroom.

BACKGROUND

The Raising Standards Agenda

Like governments around the world, the UK authorities have over recent decades taken increasing control of education and its agenda as major tools for developing and sustaining a robust economy – plus, perhaps, as “easy” areas to demonstrate determined and effective political intervention and win public sympathy and votes. Since the early 1980s regulation has increasingly reduced the autonomy of higher education institutions in teacher education, and this has been accompanied by tightening control over content of the school syllabus. In the late 1990s a number of both compulsory and recommended “strategies” were introduced to exercise detailed control over the very act of teaching, their implementation supported by an inspection regime which might be said to make nonsense of any non-compulsory status.

A key refrain in government educational policy and directives since 1998 has been that of harnessing the power of ICT to provide wider opportunities for pupils as well as to create virtual national and regional networks of and for teachers. Standards for new teachers entering the profession from 1998 included a stringent set of requirements for ICT skills (DfEE, 1998a, 1998b), which were to be expected of all practicing teachers by 2002. Resources were created for experienced teachers to identify and address their training needs (Teacher Training Agency, 1999) and a range of training initiatives developed. The era of compulsory technology in the school classroom had begun.

The Potential of Information and Communications Technology

The government’s faith in ICT to raise standards in education is reflected both in financial investment in the compulsory education sector and in the rhetoric of official publications. Since 1997 hundreds of millions of pounds per year have been spent equipping both primary and secondary schools with hardware, software and reliable Internet access and creating online resources and networking sites for teachers. According to Jones and Coffey (2006):

The UK is at the forefront of integrating ICT skills in schools. We are, for example, the only European country to have installed IWBs on a massive scale and to have made ICT a National Curriculum requirement at both primary and secondary levels. The government has invested millions of pounds in developing ICT for education (£700m for 2005-06 in England alone!). (p. 121)

This investment is accompanied by a determination that all teachers should “learn to use ICT
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