Chapter 16

IWBs as Support for Technology–Related Projects in EFL Education in Brazil

Doris de Almeida Soares
Brazilian Naval Academy / Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the use of interactive whiteboards (IWBs) in two collaborative projects developed with 12 English as a Foreign Language students, aged 10-12, in a school in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Data were collected by asking the students to complete two questionnaires which assessed a) their views on the newly introduced technology and b) their opinion on the projects vis-à-vis the support the IWB offered. Critical reflection on the teacher’s practice was also considered. The data suggests that the students see the board as enhancing motivation for learning and that it can be useful in learner-centered contexts, provided that teachers revisit their practices and give their students more autonomy in class.

INTRODUCTION

The use of IWB technology has spread worldwide. Notwithstanding, some educators are still suspicious of its benefits either because they imagine this technology might dictate the design of the lesson at the expense of pedagogical principles (Goodison, 2003, p. 565) or for fear that the board, by ensuring that practitioners teach from the front of the class, may reinforce the role of the teacher as a lecturer to the detriment of the learner’s autonomy (Hall & Higgins, 2005, p.112). Upon recognizing the importance of critically assessing the value of the IWB, this case study contributes to the discussions in this book by offering a snapshot of what it was like for my 12 students, aged 10-12, to experiment with this technology as an aid for two collaborative projects carried out in a language school in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 2007.

This chapter begins with an overview of this institution, focusing on its long tradition of using computer technology in the curriculum. Next, it describes the shift to IWB technology in 2007. Having set the scene, the activities which make up this case study and the issues they gave rise to are described and analyzed. This is followed by a discussion of
the participants’ views on the impact of the IWB on the lessons and its potential for fostering collaborative projects. Finally, the learning outcomes for my students are presented.

THE INSTITUTION

Our school was founded in Rio de Janeiro in 1934 as a cultural integration centre between Brazil and the United Kingdom. Since then, the institution has opened branches in Rio de Janeiro, and more recently, in other states, and has a total of 45,000 students and 600 teachers distributed in 40 branches across the country.

The basic teaching procedures are standardized and the teachers are advised to follow the lesson plans provided by the institution. The main aim of instruction is to enable students to use the language for communication in meaningful tasks that mirror real life contexts. As the lessons are student-centered, we are encouraged to observe our students’ learning styles and to reflect upon what works best for each group. Therefore, there is room for the customization of the lesson plans. Ideally, we expect to find a relaxed classroom atmosphere where peer learning and teaching is fostered. Regarding resources and infrastructure, investment in information technology dates back to the mid-1990s, when the institution foresaw the potential of computers for educational purposes. Therefore, to understand how the participants in this study reacted to the integration of the IWBs in the curriculum in 2007, it is important to understand how computers became part of our teaching routine back in the 1990s.

FIRST WINDS OF CHANGE

Concerning education technology, this institution has been at the vanguard since the mid-90s when computer laboratories were installed in all branches to provide students with digital self-access language learning activities. Later on, in 1998, every classroom in every branch was equipped with a computer connected to a 33” television set. This provided teachers with instant access to a large number of in-house materials such as PowerPoint presentations to present, practice and recycle language, an image bank, and weekly newsflash presentations designed to bring the real world into the classroom and to stimulate discussion. Later on, Flash media games and animations were included and all computers gained Internet access.

The students welcomed the changes and enjoyed having less book-based activities since a lot of those were replaced by more attractive and dynamic PowerPoint slides which integrated text, audio and animation. Some traditional activities such as fill in the blanks, or match the columns for example, were adapted to be done orally or were turned into game-like activities. Consequently, students did not have to write much in class. Thus, one of the aims for introducing technology into the curriculum had been achieved: increasing the number of opportunities for spoken activities.

From the teachers’ point of view, adapting to this new reality was initially a major challenge. Such challenges existed, firstly, because we needed to develop new technical skills, and secondly because we needed to incorporate the new technology into our teaching routines. The former was tackled by means of providing teacher training, mainly to enable the staff to play audio CDs and to run PowerPoint presentations. The latter, however, was more of an individual enterprise as we received little instruction on how to conduct the presentations in a student-centered manner. Therefore, after some initial insecurity, we started experimenting with different techniques in order to utilize the digital resources so as to foster spoken interaction among students. We then shared the results with our peers. In addition, by observing the way in-house materials had been built, we learnt how to design our own.