Chapter 14
Using Interactive Whiteboards to Teach Grammar in the MFL Classroom: A Learner’s Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine, from the pupil’s perspective, how effective the interactive whiteboard is in promoting understanding and retention of specific grammar points in the Modern Foreign Languages classroom within the secondary school sector. Fifty-eight pupils, in two parallel teaching groups, participated in the study over an eight-week period at a secondary school in the UK. The lessons were delivered entirely from the IWB, using a wide range of interactive features. Pupils completed a questionnaire designed to assess their perceptions of language learning before and after the study. In addition, six pupils from each of the groups were interviewed in more detail. The results of the questionnaires and interviews indicated a strong preference for IWB enhanced lessons, particularly where these related visual features of the IWB to elements of language. The results will inform future training within the languages department, and then within other teaching areas at the school.

THE CONTEXT OF THE PROJECT

Interacting with the IWB would appear to have considerable impact on learning in the classroom. Lopez (2006) talks of technology in the classroom as emphasizing “students constructing meaning based on a high degree of interactivity” (p. 1) and it is the process of this collective construction of meaning which is at the heart of this study. Many proponents advocate that students must be allowed to use IWBs (Kennewell, 2001), yet the issue, as always, is how such interaction is to be managed effectively by the teacher such that the whole class is involved in the action happening on the board. It is undoubtedly true that “pupils’ active involvement with the board during whole-class teaching reduces the pace of the lesson and can cause boredom” (Smith, 2001, cited in Smith et al., 2005), yet pupils want to interact physically with the board and it would appear that the class as a whole continues...
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to engage with the activity, even if vicariously. Kennewell and Beauchamp (2007) in their study of primary schools note, “One teacher saw the ‘hands-on’ interaction as very valuable for the selected student, but also thought that all the other students were cognitively engaged in the same task” (p. 230). Miller, Glover and Averis (2008) approach this issue in the context of the Mathematics classroom, describing the pedagogy as “at the board, on the desk, in the head” (p. 11). The triangular approach they highlight in the mathematics classroom also has significant implications for the language classroom. However, the dilemma for the language teacher is how to ensure that the work happening at a pupil’s desk level can generate meaningful communication in the target language. Miller, Glover, Averis and Door (2005) make specific reference to the use of the IWB in the modern languages classroom from the trainee teacher’s point of view, but there has been relatively little research into the pupils’ experiences. Pupils say they enjoy coming up to the board to use the pen and there would appear to be positive benefits in affording pupils this control over the lesson. Kennewell (2001) suggests that pupil involvement of this sort is a more effective use of the technology: “In this scenario, the IWB assumes the role of cognitive tool for the learner rather than communication aid for the teacher” (p. 5). At the beginning and the conclusion of this study, pupils’ perceptions of their personal involvement in the lesson and in the learning process were recorded and analysed.

THE TECHNOLOGY INFRASTRUCTURE

Lancaster Girls’ Grammar School in the UK is a selective state school with a specialist designation in languages and technology. There has been considerable investment in IWBS over the past five years such that every classroom is now equipped with a data projector, a teacher’s laptop and a Promethean Activboard running Activstudio Professional Edition V2 or V3. Usage of this equipment varies widely among teachers and the prevalent tendency is to use it as little more than a projection system for presentation software, an issue highlighted by Miller et al. (2005) when assessing the training needs of trainee teachers.

Issues of classroom management need further consideration so that trainees do not fall into the trap of using the IAW as just another form of illustration but consider all elements of group structure, classroom layout, exercise and textbook use, behaviour management and gender issues to maximise pupil involvement and learning. (Miller et al., 2005, p.4)

However, within the Modern Foreign Languages, the Mathematics and the History departments there has been a concerted effort to exploit the interactivity of the whiteboard and to adopt an experimental approach to this new technology. Teachers across all subjects are constantly seeking ways to enhance the learning experience in the classroom and the consensus is that IWBS may have a significant role to play in this. The pupils are highly receptive to innovative teaching and seem to respond particularly well to creative tasks where they have an element of freedom to explore beyond the prescribed content of the curriculum. The pupils are also at the top end of the ability spectrum and the level of motivation is particularly high.

THE RATIONALE

Within language lessons there often appears to be significant disparity between pupils’ understanding of grammar during the actual lesson and their subsequent incorporation of that grammar into their written work, whether tested specifically under exam-conditions or in work of a more creative nature where the grammar point happens to arise. Certain features of the IWB may address this issue. It is widely acknowledged that IWBS