

Blended Learning: using technology in and beyond the language classroom

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Update 2: September 2007

This second update focuses on a device to transform ordinary whiteboards into interactive whiteboards; the Second Life phenomenon; and offers some practical ideas for using digital recorders.

E-beam (Chapter 6: interactive whiteboards)

There is growing interest in a device known as an 'eBeam receiver'. This is quite small, just 6 inches across, as well as light – a mere 4.5 ounces. It is designed to fit into the corner of an existing whiteboard and activates as much as 8 feet of board space. As with any IWB, users need to have an electronic projector and a computer. You need to aim the projector at the board and then calibrate the eBeam device to recognize just that portion. After turning the projector off, the board simply reverts to a normal whiteboard. The device gives the activated area the same functionality as an IWB, but at a fraction of the cost. The e-beam is portable, and may be an attractive alternative for those many schools for which an IWB is still too expensive.

For more information on e-beams, see:

<http://www.e-beam.com/>

<http://www.rm.com/Secondary/Products/product.asp?cref=PD397402>

Second Life (Chapter 8: computer-mediated communication)

Second Life is a 3-dimensional virtual world built by its residents. It is perhaps the most famous of these worlds. It was created in 2003 by Linden Lab. The world contains its own economy, with residents using the Linden dollar, which can be converted to real US dollars. The fact that businesses hold virtual conferences and offer demos of real-world products make this development significant for business English students. It has great potential for educators, and many major colleges and universities are investigating the possibilities of setting up cutting-edge virtual classrooms. It can be argued that communication in a Virtual learning environment is still limited to voice and text, whereas in Second Life, participants create avatars of themselves which can interact with other users. In terms of Blended Learning, there are obvious opportunities for creating learning communities and providing learning opportunities away from the real-world classroom for students taking a distance learning course.

For more information on Second Life, see:

<http://secondlife.com/>

<http://secondlife.com/businesseducation/education.php>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Life

“Hybrids”

As technology continues to develop, teachers are experimenting with combining technologies in what is sometimes called a ‘hybrid’ approach. In Brazil, teachers are using the MEC (Macmillan English Campus) with an IWB (known there as an E-board), keying in information in a gap-fill with the electronic keyboard display. Teachers using a VLE are creating new materials with authorware such as Hot Potatoes. According to Levy and Stockwell, such ‘hybrid’ developments will be a key feature of technology-enhanced language learning the future.

Augmenting digital recording with verbal feedback

One of the benefits of digital audio is the ease with which it can be edited. After a fluency activity teachers regularly give written feedback to learners. This can be replaced or augmented with feedback delivered verbally. A digital recording such as an mp3 of a learner speaking, can be topped and tailed by a recording of the teacher.

The learner speaking is sandwiched between the teacher telling the learner to listen out for the mistakes in his or her use of grammatical structures, lexis or functional exponents. This could also include asking the learner to listen out for pronunciation errors. This opening segment should be as short as possible. There is a limit to the number of items anyone can hold in their head, especially if they are listening to the recording on an mp3 player while driving or commuting. After the central segment containing the learner’s voice the teacher returns to provide feedback on the areas highlighted at the beginning. This could be self-contained or could tie in with any written feedback the teacher has already given.

Joining these three elements together is a simple editing job which can be achieved using the freeware program Audacity. See p.118 of *Blended Learning* for brief instructions on how to use this application. The introduction and feedback segments are recorded and saved separately then pasted at the beginning and end of the recording of the learner made during the lesson. The augmented file can then be saved as an mp3 and shared with the learner.

Did you know . . ?

Mp3 files have something called ID tags. These contain information such as the name of the artist, album and track which is shown on the display of an mp3 or media player. When you create an mp3 file with Audacity, you can set this information. With an existing mp3 file, you can change or add to the tag information, by editing the file’s properties.

Bibliography:

Levy, M and Stockwell G. (2006) CALL Dimensions: options and issues in Computer-Assisted Language Learning Lawrence Erlbaum Associates