

Blended Learning: using technology in and beyond the language classroom

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Update 6: May 2009

This sixth update focuses firstly on the mimio, a portable tool which replicates many of the key features of an interactive whiteboard (IWB); secondly on the latest ELT software for IWBs from Macmillan, New Inside Out Digital (NIOD) and finally on the latest developments in electronic dictionaries.

The mimio

The mimio is a portable device, small enough to fit in a briefcase or laptop bag. You can fix the mimio to any hard surface, such as a normal whiteboard or even a wall, either by small suction pads or more permanently with screws. It is positioned next to an image of a computer screen from the data projector, and it is this image which then becomes interactive. In other words, your ordinary whiteboard can be transformed to be touch-sensitive, like an IWB. Setting up the mimio is, on the whole, quite a simple and painless procedure.



Figure 1: a Mimio and e-pen

As with standard IWBs, the mimio come with flipchart software. The typical features of an IWB can be found in the floating toolbar – the spotlight tool, the hide and reveal tool, shapes and arrows, pen tools and the highlighter in different colours. Like all IWBs, the user can create any number of flipcharts which can be saved, before or during the lesson. Brendan Wightman, e-learning manager of CUP, reports in a

recent CALL Review that the drawing time is a little slower than that of the main IWBs, and you can get a slight lag when writing. Nevertheless, the mimio could be a great tool for freelance teachers travelling from place to place, and actually might even be used in a school more permanently. Brendan goes on to argue that standard IWBs are, at the end of the day, better overall, but that the mimio is a realistically priced alternative.

New Inside Out Digital

New Inside Out Digital is an excellent example of digital version of a course book, which can be displayed through an IWB from the front of the class. Using ELT software allows teachers to promote what is known as 'heads-up' learning. The class can be encouraged to look at a particular exercise on the whiteboard, perhaps during the marking stage. In terms of giving feedback on exercises, you can instantly select to show only the answers to the questions the students got wrong.

One popular feature is that the audio transcript can be displayed and specific sections of the script can be played at the touch of the e-pen. I have met few teachers who, once exposed to such a feature, prefer the days of finding the place on the cassette tape, or play the complete recording from the start on a CD-audio.

With tools such as the 'crop' zoom, the teacher can blow up a section of the screen without the graphic losing quality. The first time you see this in action is certainly a 'wow' moment.

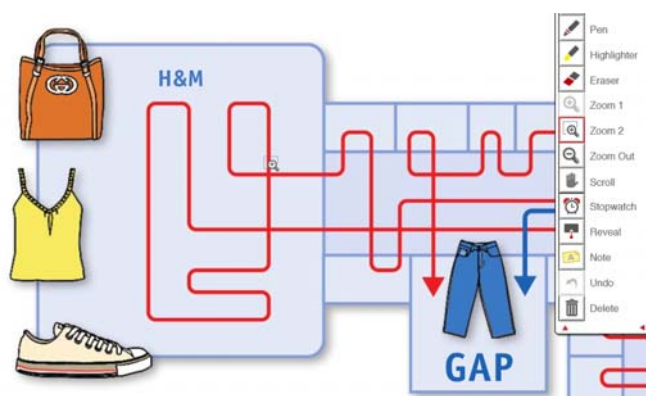


Figure 2: The Zoom tool – part of an exercise from New Inside Out Digital enlarged on-screen

The 'screen reveal' tool allows you to get students guessing what a picture is, or reveal a text line by line, and this can help teachers provide fun warmers or focus learner attention on specific areas of the whiteboard, or specific language.

One difference in the new generation of interactive exercises is that on a CD-ROM, feedback for the self study student shows if an answer is 'right' or 'wrong'. On some IWB exercises, the answer is not necessarily automatically shown. So, it is easier, arguably, to deal with greyer areas of language than have been traditionally addressed in digital materials. This is because the teacher is in the equation, and can ask students in turn to come out and show his or her answer, initiating classroom discussion. Students in class discussing the relative merits of one answer compared to another sounds like a good thing. So the software can be used for 'Awareness raising' activities.

Many teachers enjoy creating their own materials. Those who love the 'do-it-yourself' approach may already be putting together digital materials. A special teacher's area within Macmillan's NIOD provides a digital 'blank canvas' which can be accessed at any point and allows teachers to author relatively painlessly, building up a complete repository of teacher and student generated material to support each unit of the course book.

Teachers can use shapes and colours in imaginative ways, changing the background colour to hide and reveal text for instance; they can easily insert audio clips and web-links into their pages. This is the best of both worlds – quality material from a global publisher working seamlessly alongside a locally produced, personalised and re-usable materials bank.



Figure 3: A “digital blank canvas” – the Teacher’s area on New Inside Out Digital

Electronic dictionaries

In Blended Learning, there is a learner training activity in which students compare the pros and cons of paper dictionaries, CD-ROM Dictionaries and web-based dictionaries. (p143)

What is the future for electronic dictionaries? The latest Longman dictionary – the 2009 edition of the *Dictionary of Contemporary English* – comes with a DVD-ROM and includes a wealth of interesting tools such as the Vocabulary trainer. Taking a completely different direction, the MED Online’ (or MEDO) is now available for free on the web. Editor-in-chief Michael Rundell points out that this is “not a stripped-down or ‘basic’ version” but “has most of the content and functionality of the ‘paid-for’ dictionary “. MEDO includes a new area called mPulse which includes an ‘Open Dictionary’ (www.macmillandictionary.com/open-dictionary). Users across the world can contribute their own entries, which enables lexicographers to keep up to date with changes in the language. Recent additions include the words ‘trilemma’ and ‘webinar’. Rundell goes on to point out that this resource is in “a different class from the standard offerings you find at the numerous free dictionary sites on the Web”.



Figure 4: Macmillan English Dictionary Online www.macmillandictionary.com

It is possible to use the coding of a 'widget' to put the interface of the MEDO on your own website. See Figure 6 for an example of this – the authors' site. One idea if you are working with a group exploring new lexis is to ask your students to submit an entry. Of course, all entries are vetted by lexicographers, so there is no guarantee that it will go in, but on the other hand the task itself is motivating. A good example of global collaborative knowledge building!



Figure 5 Macmillan English Dictionary Online on the homepage of Pete and Barney's website www.te4be.com

Bibliography

Rundell, M (2009) The future has arrived: a new era in electronic dictionaries CALL Review (Spring 2009)

Wightman, B (2008) Exploring mobile whiteboard technologies: test driving the mimio Interactive CALL Review (Spring 2008)