

The use of interactive whiteboards: enhancing the nature of teaching young language learners

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Abstract. Language teaching can be enhanced by effective uses of technology; nonetheless, there are teachers who are reluctant to integrate technology in their practice. The debated issue has resulted in a number of Ministries of Education worldwide, including the Greek Ministry, to support a transition through the introduction of Interactive Whiteboards (IWBs). This initiative was not well-received in either the public or private sector, due to the fact that teachers were not provided with any training in how to use IWBs and include them in their teaching. IWBs became intimidating to the language teacher and did not serve their intended purpose in most cases. Nonetheless, there were teachers who were intrigued by IWBs and made an effort to apply them. The present paper focuses on the development of interactive language learning and the effect the teachers' risk-taking has on pedagogy from the teachers' and students' perspectives. The outcomes of the study were that language teachers have taken charge of their own professional growth and take risks in order to help learners benefit from IWBs. However, due to lack of training, teachers and students have not reached the zenith of using IWBs.

Keywords: interactive whiteboards, young learners, teaching practices, teachers' risk-taking.

1. Introduction

Language teaching can be enhanced by effective uses of educational technology; nonetheless, there are language teachers around the globe who are reluctant to integrate technology in their practice (Papadima-Sophocleous, Kakouli-Constantinou, & Giannikas, 2015).

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The issue has been highly debated in the field and measures have been employed to support the integration of technology in education, including financial support (DfES, 2003, 2005). Such a transition was supported by the Greek Ministry of Education through the introduction of IWBs. The Ministry of Education, with the support of MLS, a Greek leading company in educational technology, supplied and installed 3,300 IWBs in public schools across the country (<http://www.skai.gr/news/technology/article/169271/diadrastikoi-pinakes-sta-ellinika-sholeia/>). This initiative inspired private language school owners to supply their teachers with IWBs as well. Due to a lack of training, this innovative and powerful technological tool was intimidating in the eye of the language teacher, and did not serve the purpose it was meant to in most cases. However, there were teachers who were intrigued by IWBs and made an effort to apply its use in their classes. These teachers were self-taught and their motivation led them into making an effort to train their peers in the process.

The present paper focuses on the self-taught language educators in question, specifically on teachers of young language learners. The effect and development of interactive language learning in a context where no training was undertaken will be discussed; additionally, the effect the teachers' risk-taking has on pedagogy are presented. The paper introduces a small-scale study with a focus on young learners.

2. Method

2.1. Research methods and data analysis

The current exploratory study aimed to record the use of IWBs in the young learners' classroom. The study took place in South Western Greece and focused on private language schools. For the needs of the present small-scale study, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with five language teachers, and through questionnaires completed by 50 students. ATLAS.ti 7©2013 was used to analyse and code the interview recordings. The procedure was carried out as follows (inspired by Giannikas, 2013):

- An initial reading of the transcribed interviews was conducted. This process allowed themes to emerge.
- The texts were re-read and thoughts were annotated in the margin. The text was examined closely to facilitate a micro-analysis of data.

The data from all the questionnaires were transferred onto a spreadsheet and calculated on Excel.

2.2. Research participants and context

The study focused on young learners, aged nine to 16, who attended private language lessons after mainstream school. The teachers who participated were from the same language school and had been teaching languages for six to 25 years and four out of five held an MA in English Literature and Languages. According to the interviews conducted, four out of five teachers had been using IWBs for three to four years and one had been using it for one year. None of the teachers had official training on how to apply IWBs. They were self-taught and exchanged information regarding the use of IWBs and their features with colleagues.

3. Discussion

Although using a PC and the Internet are a daily occurrence, integrating and mastering Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in language teaching is not a simple task, especially when no training is involved. According to interview data, all teachers claimed that IWBs had the potential to add benefits to their teaching and prompt them into becoming better pedagogists. The following figures (Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3) indicate the teachers’ efforts in using IWBs frequently.

Language teachers in this context have been experiencing radical transformations in their classroom environments and have been willing to take risks and expose their lack of training in the use of IWBs in order to offer as much as possible to their students. Teachers of the Greek context have been deprived of essential technical and practical guidance that would make the use of IWBs more effective.

Figure 1. For how many years have you been using IWBs?

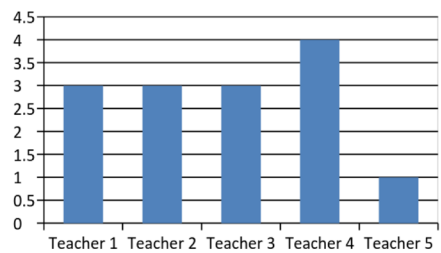


Figure 2. How many times a week do you use IWBs?

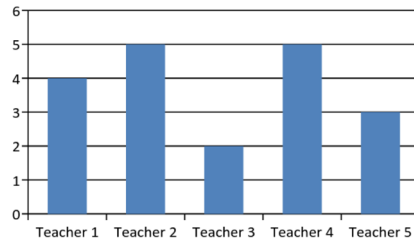
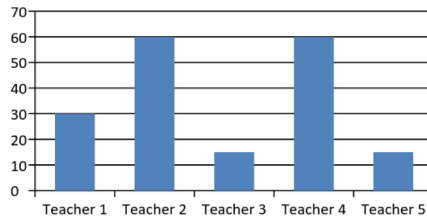


Figure 3. How long do you use IWBs in each lesson (in minutes)?



One point that was made during interviews was that three out of five teachers used the IWB more than their students did in class. More specifically, sample statements of what teachers liked least about IWBs are as follows:

“I dislike the fact that the children cannot use the IWB as much as I do” (Teacher 1).

“It requires more teaching time” (Teacher 4).

An interesting outcome of the research was that the younger teachers, who have been more exposed to technology and software, were of the impression that the IWB was mainly a tool used by the teacher rather than the students. This means that even though the IWB encourages student-centred learning, there are teachers who apply it in a teacher-centred environment due to their lack of training and/or reluctance to step out of their teacher-fronted comfort zone. The older teachers stepped back and gave students the opportunity to use IWBs more and become independent users. The teachers who embraced the student-centred environment with the help of IWBs were recorded to play more interactive games on the IWB than the younger teachers, whilst the teachers who supported a more teacher-fronted environment embraced more grammar and vocabulary tasks and avoided interactive activities.

These findings are in agreement with the outcomes from students’ questionnaires as indicated in [Figure 4](#).

Figure 4. How often do you play games on the IWB?



The open-ended question of what the students’ favourite task on the IWB was retrieved the following sample quotes (translated from students’ L1):

- “Games where we learn grammar” (Student 22).
- “My favourite activities are crosswords” (Students 13).
- “I like playing Hangman” (Student 34).
- “I like listening activities on the IWB because I can concentrate better having pictures to look at” (Student 44).
- “I like fill-in the gaps activities” (Student 12).
- “I like multiple-choice activities” (Student 4).

The students’ responses show that students appreciate the interactive nature of the IWB and the variety it offers. The IWB has a lot to offer and the questionnaires indicate that the features of an IWB triggers all kinds of language learners. The tasks the students completed on the IWB enhance their involvement, and the hands-on tasks can give them autonomy and facilitate multisensory learning, which is evident in the students’ selection of preferable tasks.

4. Conclusions

Students' increased engagement is the main benefit of using IWBs, and this has been realised by the participant teachers who have integrated IWBs, despite the fact that they have not been officially trained to do so. They make an effort to include IWBs as often as possible in a context they can control and function. Although this may deprive them and their students of some of the interesting features IWBs have to offer, they apply the tool as much as they can. Nonetheless, teachers chose to adopt a teacher-centred environment with the use of IWBs. Had teachers been offered official technical and practical training when IWBs were introduced to the Greek education system, their approach would be different, given their openness to learning new features to language teaching and to taking risks in the classroom.

The study conducted supports that instruction with the use of IWBs can be well-received by young learners. Learners become involved and can adapt to the technological tool presented to them. It gives them many opportunities to evolve as learners and users of technology. Since IWBs already exist in most educational contexts, whether in the private or public sector, training ought to be offered to all teachers in order to enhance professional development, which will have an immediate effect on young language learners. Additionally, teachers can become more comfortable with IWB technology, being more exposed to effective pedagogical practices and teaching strategies.

The present study shows that there is potential in language learning for children with the use of IWBs, due to the teachers' willingness to integrate new technology and take risks when applying it. This attitude is a positive first step and if the correct measures are taken from policy makers and stakeholders, language teaching may advance in extraordinary ways, in the region and beyond.

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