

Are IWBs Worth in EFL?

SEPEŠIOVÁ Michaela (1)

University of Prešov, Slovakia (1)

Abstract

An interactive whiteboard generates many challenges and opportunities for foreign language teaching and learning. It enriches learning environment; reduces learners' anxiety and increases their self-confidence; provides learners with more choice and stimulates learners' autonomy. On the other hand, we should be aware of some drawbacks, such as an inappropriate use; low school budgets or teachers' reluctance to accept new approaches. The purpose of this paper is to discuss and present the analysis of the use of IWBs in EFL teaching from in-service teachers' perspective, applying SWOT analysis in a specific Slovak socio-educational environment. The findings gathered via questionnaire and face to face interviews have indicated that the participants (n=46) value as the foremost strengths followings: a rise of interactions and class discussions, accepting various learning styles, an increase in creativity and motivation, sharing and re-using of materials and saving some work. Some of the weaknesses are that the respondents lacked the previous training and experience; no evidence of effectiveness of teaching and learning; teachers' unwillingness when using new technologies; overuse of IWBs; time consuming preparation; challenging problem solving and unexpected shutdowns.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language, Interactive Whiteboard, SWOT Analysis, In service teachers;

Introduction

For past few decades, information and communication technology (henceforth ICT) has become more common within all industries including education. Betcher and Lee (2009:13) [1] stated that technology accelerated students' thinking, supported discussions, activated thoughtful ideas and facilitated abstract concepts easier to understand. The introduction of interactive whiteboards (IWB) into education sector has been an object of research since the late 1990s and early 2000s (Orbaugh, 2013) [2]. Research findings of the two major studies in the UK into impact of IWBs on learning effectiveness have been contradictory. One study proved little impact on the pupils' performance (Moss et al., 2007) [3]. However, another study conducted in Manchester area has proved progress in the national testing scores of the pupils after they have been taught with IWBs (Somekh et al., 2013) [4]. The main aim of this article is to present the analysis of IWBs uses in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) from in-service teachers' perspective, applying SWOT analysis in a specific Slovakian socio-educational environment. The sub aim is to give an overall understanding of the topic and to be aware of some aspects that need to be taken into consideration when implementing and using IWBs in TEFL.

1. Literature Review

A considerable amount of literature has been published on using IWBs in education e.g. Ross, G., et al. (2009) [5]; Somekh et al. (2013) [4]; Al-Faki and Khamis (2014) [6]; Beauchamp and Parkinson (2005) [7]; and Schmid (2010) [8] etc. According to Miller and Glover (2002) [9], one of the problems that were highlighted by earlier researchers was that IWBs brought a problematic approach with restricted students' interaction driven by prepared materials. This means that students just passively listen to the teacher's talk without any of their own inputs. Miller and Glover's (ibid) [9] own study showed, however, that with the use of appropriate materials, which allowed students' interaction, the learning outcomes were more significant. These authors talk in detail about the benefits of using IWB in teaching-learning process as seen by a sample of teachers in five middle sized schools in the north of England. The detailed investigation into the IWBs use within Canadian environment presented by Karsenti (2016) [10] showed that the IWBs were more complicated and time-consuming to integrate than others talking about technical parts. Still, the results also confirmed real educational potential. Almost every paper that has been written on IWBs (e.g. Cimermanová (2011) [11]) includes a section relating to their functions. In the same vein, Pacurar and Clad (2015) [12] imply that language teachers frequently use the simple functions. On the other hand, teachers of Math and Science use the IWB in a more complex way. The study was conducted in the several middle size secondary schools in



France. More studies have been conducted in the United Kingdom as the schools there are all equipped by IWBs. These studies confirm that there is a need for a pedagogic shift to an interactive approach to teaching-learning process and from using IWBs as a visual aid to the integration of the technology into planning and delivery of the lessons (Schmid, 2010) [8].

2. Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to present the analysis of the use of IWBs in EFL teaching from in-service teachers' perspective, applying SWOT analysis in a specific Slovak socio-educational environment. It was decided that the best method to adopt for this investigation was to apply a questionnaire and face to face interviews applying SWOT matrix (Sarsby, 2016) [13]. Since the analysis considers both internal and external factors, we understood that as an opportunity to take a deeper look at what they can handle and which strategies or operations need to be changed. In our study we focused on the followings: a) strengths: advantages over other teaching methods; b) weaknesses: disadvantages; c) opportunities: factors in the surroundings that using IWB in teaching EFL can develop to its advantage and d) threats: factors that could cause problems when using IWB.

The anonymised questionnaire was used to obtain the information concerning the teachers' perception of IWBs. After delivered to 75 teachers of English (lower and upper secondary education) in the region of Prešov by e-mail, data (n=46) was collected and analysed to get a better picture of the teachers' approach towards IWBs. The total response rate was rather low, as only 64% of the teachers of English responded back. The questionnaire consisted of 20 closed-ended questions with a format of a agree-disagree item (10 per each internal part) and 2 open-ended questions for external components. Due to the low response rate, a face to face semi-structured interview was used to discover more detailed picture and obtain more relevant data. The author used a convenience sample of 17 teachers of English language.

3. Findings

The findings (both questionnaire and interviews) have indicated that the participants valued (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) as the foremost strengths followings: a rise of interactions and class discussions; involvement of various learning styles; an increase in creativity and motivation; sharing and re-using of materials; saving some work; reduction of printing; better visualisation due to the different outputs. As for the weaknesses: initial expenses; on-going expenses on training and servicing; no evidence of effectiveness; uncertainty exploiting technologies; external factors such as sunlight, shadow-blocking content, colours display and unexpected shutdowns. Opportunities resulted in: no replacement of a teacher; rich learning environment; lower pupils' anxiety; more risk-taking action; intrinsically motivate pupils; learning by doing approach; promotes self and peer assessment and evaluation and increases pupils' self-confidence. The most frequently expressed threat was inappropriate use of IWB without any concept or educational strategy; a lack of preparation for higher education or a future career followed by new technological upgrades; lack of the previous training and experience; no evidence of effectiveness of teaching and learning; teachers' unwillingness when using new technologies; overuse of IWBs; time consuming preparation and challenging problem solving.

4. Conclusion

The analysis revealed that the key strengths lie in offering more opportunities for interaction and class discussion, providing that IWB is used to its full potential, accommodating various learning styles, or catching pupils attention and encouraging their involvement in the subject. IWB also allows pupils to cope with more complex concepts and increases their creativity. But the main strength is in motivation. We have found that using IWB in teaching-learning process increases motivation in several ways. To start with, it allows high level of interaction by matching, dragging and dropping objects or manipulating text and image. Secondly, it increases enjoyment of lessons through an extensive use of resources. Finally, IWB is a colourful tool offering many customised features.

On the other hand, there are some weaknesses First of all, the initial expenses are considerable, especially when a school decides to equip every classroom with IWB. Another aspect to look at is a lack of effectiveness. There is limited evidence that using IWB increases performance of pupils. Many teachers find the process of training frustrating. With the lack of training, the IWB cannot be used to its full potential and lessons might become unnatural. The learning environment is an important opportunity of using IWB in teaching because there is a correlation with the learning outcomes. Another opportunity arises from the principles of learning a foreign language e.g. lowers pupils' anxiety; promotes risk-taking and cooperative learning. In this stage, the role of teachers is

irreplaceable as they act as mentors. The main findings dealing with threats we have to point out are that IWB itself does not replace a teacher. Teachers must become confident while using IWBs if they want to reach teaching objectives. The teacher training is especially important because the lack of it presents a threat of incorrect use of IWB. The main concern is that it may be used as a device filled with information, but without any concept or strategy of educational objectives. Another finding is that pupils might get bored if it becomes a routine. It is recommended therefore, not to overuse IWB and work with other relevant sources. The evidence presented in this study suggests that the implementation of new technologies allows teachers to use such tools for teaching which were not at their disposal in the past. To summarize, it is necessary to emphasize the essential role of teachers. The teacher strategy must be aimed at individual learning preferences and diverse educational needs, therefore IWBs should serve as a meaningful tool and not a dull device fulfilled with information.

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