Consultant advice **Penny Ur**

Using the board

Interactive whiteboards are convenient, fun and attractive, with lots of clever things you can do with them. But not all of us have them, and it has still not been clearly established whether they are in fact more effective than ordinary white- or blackboards, which are what most of us use. The following tips are mostly based on the use of conventional boards, but many are relevant also for digital displays.

Clean it

Hopefully the teacher who used the classroom before you has left the board clean: but if not, the first thing you need to do on entering the classroom is to clean it. Learners should not be distracted by material used for another class, and you don't want to be held up during the lesson by having to get rid of irrelevant text or drawings before you write anything new. Similarly, erase anything which is no longer relevant to what you're going to teach next, unless you know you'll come back to it. And remember to clean the board at the end of the lesson as a courtesy to the next teacher!

Keep it tidy

Even if (like me) you are pretty untidy in general, make sure that you keep the board neat and wellspaced, so that the students can easily see and understand what you have there. Keep your writing neat, in a level line, and large enough to be visible from the back of the class. Also, try to keep space around the actual writing or drawing: don't take it right to the edge of the board. Don't use too many different colours: it's very tempting to do so, particularly if you have an interactive whiteboard, but this can be distracting and confusing to the eye. Use colour in order to draw attention to something you want students to focus on, not just for its own sake.

Write fast

Train yourself to write as fast as you can on the board without becoming untidy! Time spent writing on the board is time when you aren't directly in contact with the students, and they can lose interest if you spend a long time doing so. So writing up longer texts is obviously a problem. If you have an interactive whiteboard, or a projector linked to a laptop, write, or copy, and save the text in advance so you can just put it up at a click. With conventional boards, it's also sometimes possible to write things up in advance of the lesson. But in general, keep board-written texts as short as possible.

Have students use it more than one at a time

If you invite students up to the board to draw, write or mark anything, it's a good idea to have two or three doing so at the same time. It takes time for students to get up, come to the board, take the marker or chalk and start working; and in any case they normally write and draw much more slowly than you do. So if you have only one at a time, the process can get tedious and boring for the rest of the class. If you have three working at the same time, then as each student finishes, he or she hands over to another member of the class: the whole process thus moves more quickly, involves more members of the class, and achieves its goals earlier.

Use the edges for permanent displays

Use the edge of the board for things you want to keep visible the whole lesson: the date, for example, at a top corner; the plan of the lesson, if you want to display it (see *Lesson beginnings* earlier in this series) at the side, new vocabulary you've taught and intend to come back to later in the lesson – also at the side. (If you have an interactive whiteboard, it's easy to drag such things sideways, and make them smaller, after you've written them at the beginning in the centre.) *Frame* such sections with lines around them, so that it's clear they are separated and less likely to distract attention from whatever the main item is that you want students to focus on later.

Use the board as a worksheet

We sometimes want to provide paper or digital worksheets as supplements to course materials. An alternative is to provide the worksheet exercises on the board. This works best if the worksheet cues are relatively short – there is only limited display space on the board. The time it takes to write out the exercise (assuming you are using a conventional white- or blackboard) doesn't matter too much, as students can start working as soon as you've written the first item. If you're using an interactive whiteboard, then of course you can display the whole exercise at a click.

Use the board to stick things on

The advent of Blu-Tack has meant that it is very easy to attach cards, pictures or even objects to the board. Digital pictures projected on a screen or by means of on an interactive whiteboard are an alternative, but in some ways less effective. The advantage of real cards stuck to the board is that they can be handled, passed to students, exchanged, and used for a variety of interactive processes that you cannot do with the same material displayed as part of a digital display. And doing such activities, particularly with younger classes, that involve this kind of movement-based interaction adds variety and interest to the lesson.

Draw things

It's important to use drawings on the board with younger classes. Don't be discouraged from doing so if you feel you are not very good at it! Stick-men to represent people, basic rectangles, circles and triangles to represent houses, trees etc. work perfectly well. (Don't ask students too often to draw something instead of you: they may be more artistic, but they are likely to be a lot slower and the class may get bored waiting!) The actual process of drawing an image, however primitive, draws students' attention, and can be used as the basis for lots of types of interaction. For example, 'picture dictations': the students describe a scene, or person, or monster, and you draw as they dictate.

Scatter text

If you are getting students to brainstorm ideas or words – for example 'How many adjectives can you think of that describe a road?' – or to recall and call out – the new vocabulary we learned yesterday, for example – it's a good idea to scatter the items all over the board, rather than writing them in lines or columns. In a scatter each item has its own *space* and is more easily perceived as a separate item. It's also easier to do follow-up activities such as joining two or more items with a line (if students can suggest an association or a sentence contextualizing both).

Use erasing to stimulate responses

Erasing, as well as writing up, can be an important stimulus for language work, and saves you time later cleaning the board! For example, if you've created a scatter as suggested in the previous tip, ask students to create sentences or phrases with each item, and erase each one as it is successfully used in this way until they are all gone. Or delete them all and challenge students to recall them. Or write a long sentence and challenge students to suggest deleting one to three words while still keeping the sentence grammatical. Or gradually delete a text challenging students to recall the missing bits as you go.