

## **Case Study 3 – Riga-Durham webinar on using Smartboard technology in VOLL**

*Steve Mulgrew (Durham, UK)*

*Natalja Cigankova (University of Latvia)*

### **About the project**

A webinar/workshop on the use of Smartboard technology in professional language education was organised by two E-VOLLution 2009 project participants, Steve Mulgrew, Durham, UK, and Natalja Cigankova, Latvia. The event, which took place on 3 December 2009, linked the presenter in the UK to Latvian students completing a Master's programme in English Language Teaching Methodology at the University of Latvia. The event was arranged as a Skype videoconference with live video presentations on Smartboard applications in foreign language education, followed by a live question-and-answer session with accompanying discussion.

### **Background to the technology**

The Smartboard – or SMART Board interactive whiteboard to give it its full title – was first introduced into the UK in 1991 and has since become very popular in primary and secondary schools, universities and other training establishments. It consists of a touch-sensitive surface using resistive technology – in other words, the board detects the point of contact of a pen, eraser, or finger on its surface. This makes it easy to use for teachers who are accustomed to using a traditional dry-erase whiteboard, and for learners who enjoy being able to touch the display with their fingers. From a teaching perspective, it allows direct interaction with the material being presented, bridging the gap between the mouse and the monitor of a traditional computer system.

The popularity of interactive whiteboards in the foreign language classroom can be attributed to a number of factors. At its most basic level, the equipment provides an opportunity for authentic video, text and photographs to be shown in large format, enhancing the learner's experience and familiarity with the culture of the target language country. Slightly more advanced users will use the interactive whiteboard as a record of lesson activities, saving a digital flipchart which can be instantly shared via e-mail or uploaded in PDF format to a virtual learning environment, serving as a reminder of the lesson or a reference for absent students.

However, it is when combined with specialist software that the whiteboard becomes truly interactive. The ability to move objects around the screen – on SMART models with just the human hand – encourages participation and can motivate less confident learners to match, for example, words to pictures when learning new vocabulary. A favourite of language teachers is the information-gap exercise (or cloze text), where the student is asked to fill gaps left in a sentence or paragraph. Traditionally, a paper exercise, the interactive whiteboard software transforms this task to a hands-on collaborative activity where students can physically choose words from the word bank and drag them into the chosen position in the text, before moving or erasing some “digital ink” which reveals the correct answers. On some whiteboards, the software can recognise the word or phrase which has been selected and either accept or reject it, providing immediate feedback to the student. Because this whole task is carried out at the front of the classroom, everybody can be involved and group participation is encouraged.

The Smartboard software is ideal for teachers of languages other than their own, as recordings of native speakers can be attached to words or pictures in the SMART Notebook pages. Simply clicking on an object (or pressing with the finger) plays the sound clip. Objects can also be linked to external websites, PDF documents and video files.

The presentation in our online webinar made use of the lesson activity tool kit, a part of the SMART Notebook software which allows quick and easy creation of interactive resources, including anagrams, sentence ordering, spelling tests, true/false activities and matching games (the SMART website hosts a quick reference guide to these activities – see the link at the end of this chapter).

There are countless examples of video clips which give a more detailed impression of the capabilities of the Smartboard. Two can be found by following the links below. The first is a walk-through of a unit of work for primary school French, and the second a clever animation which shows how interactive whiteboards can really capture the imagination of the learner: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=db8y7zj8Zc4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=db8y7zj8Zc4) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLdHbtuCIyY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLdHbtuCIyY).

## **Communication**

Our webinar used the free Skype service as a means of communication, with a simple webcam pointing at the Smartboard in Steve’s office in Durham. Through this arrangement, the students in Latvia were able to watch the presentation, listen to the description of the technology, and ask questions about what they had seen.

The students in Riga participated in the organisation and the event at each stage:

## 1. Organisational stage

Natalja and her MA students in Riga established the connection between the facilities in the two countries via Skype. All the necessary equipment had been prepared and piloted a week before the event. Students read the available information on the methodology of using interactive whiteboards in language teaching and prepared their questions for the presenter.

## 2. Webinar presentation stage (web seminar/workshop)

During the 40-minute event, Steve demonstrated numerous fascinating features of an interactive whiteboard from his office in Durham. Answering the students' questions, he showed how easy it is to improvise and creatively use the facilities of the Smartboard with students of different ages and levels of language competence.



*Figure 1: Establishing contact – collaboration between the tutors during the webinar*



*Figure 2: Presentation in progress*

## 3. Post-presentation stage

Steve forwarded the links to the online methodological materials on the use of Smartboards in language teaching for further reading. During the week following the event, the students in Riga read the materials and tried out the techniques demonstrated by Steve in the Smartboard-equipped classroom. Natalja guided them in preparing lesson plans and language learning activities with an interactive whiteboard.

#### **4. Reconnection stage**

A week after the webinar, a video connection via Skype was established again for a short time during the next lesson, so that the students could share their experience on using interactive whiteboards and express their views on further applications of Smartboard technology in language teaching. Steve answered their questions and gave his recommendations.



*Figure 3: The students enjoying Steve's presentation*

#### **5. Evaluation stage**

The students in Riga discussed the techniques developed and created their own teaching materials in an online discussion forum in their Moodle course and reflected on their experience of working with the Smartboard in their electronic teaching portfolios.

After the webinar, the Riga students posted messages in the Moodle course forum. They discussed the potential of the technology presented at the webinar for teaching languages and other school subjects.

This is what one of the students wrote about the advantages of using a Smartboard:

I think we are going to use Smartboards soon. Some decades ago we did not use computers, but now we do. First, it is a great useful resource for teachers because everything we do can be saved and used in the future. Teachers do not have to write the material again but simply correct and add something. And, of course, our lessons become more interesting and diverse.

(Marina)

The students, however, also mentioned that, for many Latvian schools, the Smartboard is still not an affordable piece of technology at the moment. Moreover, those schools that have bought it often cannot afford to finance teacher training for its implementation. Students

wrote in their forum messages that they had either only very little or no experience of working with an interactive board. Therefore, they found the webinar very useful and interesting for them.

As the Riga students report, walking over the “Internet bridge” between the two universities was exciting and extremely useful:

I enjoyed the webinar a lot. It was a fantastic and unforgettable experience. I think the Smartboard is a great tool to make lessons more interactive among students, especially children.

(Kitija)

I agree that children would enjoy it a lot, and it will be something they are not used to. And, of course, the teacher will need some time to get used to it as well.

(Nadja)

The webinar demonstrated that, at a time of severe shortages in funding for higher education in Latvia, it is possible to organise effective webinars and consulting via the Internet and thus promote cutting edge technology among language teachers who otherwise would not have the opportunity to attend such an informative, first-hand presentation as the one given by Steve. This mode of training can be very effective and makes for great savings in cost, and is, therefore, ideal for establishments that already possess a Smartboard but are in need of some support in order to unlock its full potential.