Transition to School, Success and an Interactive Whiteboard

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What did we notice?
As a former classroom teacher, I was especially interested in understanding how to engage English language learners (ELLs), those children who were learning English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D). I wanted to consider the ways the IWB could support meaningful literacy activities that hold the children’s attention, inspire their desire to learn and rapidly grow their ability to use the English language at both a personal and scholastic level. The growing number of children in Australian classrooms who fall into the EAL/D group gives every teacher room to consider how they can best serve these children, while also supporting and challenging their English-first students. My current study project, which investigates the experience of transition to school for a small group of ELLs, led me to ask questions about how classroom teachers utilise all resources at their disposal to enhance educational outcomes for these particular students.

Overhead projector (or DVD player)
Although there is an IWB in the classroom no one knows how to use it and it was never turned on during the time I was there.

Cheline, 2011, p. 3
A student in the Graduate Diploma of Education (UOW) wrote this disconcerting observation having completed his first practicum as a pre-service teacher. His comment is given strength by recent research (Kervin, Jones & Verenikina, 2010), which highlights that ‘the purchase and installation of modern (and often costly) technology is not guarantee that teachers will use it to facilitate and improve learning’ (p. 1) (or at all). This student’s comment was an aside but I began to consider the many different ways teachers were using the IWB in the classrooms I was visiting. As Kennewell and Beauchamp suggest, ‘the proliferation of (IWB) technology in classrooms … suggests that teachers and educational policymakers see this as a very powerful teaching tool’ (2007, p. 227). They go on to note that the effect of ICT on learners depends on teachers’ own ‘pedagogical approach adopted, the ICT resources employed and the learning objectives intended’ (Kennewell & Beauchamp, 2007, p. 227). In their study, students were found to be more engaged and for longer periods, with greater focus, these same students were also found to be more highly motivated.

The comments of the teachers in my study made similar observations about their students’ engagement when using the IWB. They observed the children were more able to work in small groups with adult supervision and able to read and recall words and activities. This increased capacity to participate more fully in given (teacher centred) activities transferred to their ability to participate in unsupervised groups using the IWB. One teacher noted that she used the IWB to support the teaching she had already conducted with her students. Another noted that the IWB ‘kept the children on track’ throughout the selected activities. A third teacher stated that after the IWB was installed she altered her morning literacy session immediately to incorporate some features of the IWB. Several weeks later, she noted that role call and class talk about the day’s weather (a focus on literacy and numeracy) had become a real focus for the students. The students were observed to remain engaged for the whole mini-session. She explained this had not been her experience before the IWB had been introduced, even though her paper based charts were colourful and eye catching and her teaching style had not altered.

So what did these teachers use and how did they do it?

**Teaching, Modelling, Guiding**

**Two classroom scenarios …**

1. **Teaching, modelling and guiding**: Each morning Ms A begins the final activity before recess by singing a song (to the tune of ‘If you’re happy and you know it’) ‘If your name starts with / _/ show me now’. On the IWB is a slide, showing a very simple outline of a tree, inside the tree the names of each child is printed. In the first verse the teacher selects a letter sound and sings. The children sing along but listen for the sound the teacher selects. Then all the children with names beginning with that sound come to the front, taking turns they find and circle their name using the IWB markers. In subsequent verses a child leads the singing, choosing a sound not already circled.

   At the beginning of Term 1 Ms C scaffolded this activity carefully, first by leading the singing for the whole song and assisting children to find their own names. By the end of Term 1 the children were able to lead the singing and find the unsung sounds with ease.

   In this first scenario, the teacher has taught the letter names and sounds, and through daily practice the students in this class have been able begin to read letters and recognise the corresponding initial sounds so they can participate in this activity. The teacher has modelled the activity and by the end of Term 1 all students were able to take part as both participant and leader.

2. **Teaching and guiding**: Each morning, Ms B selects a helper to read aloud to the class. By the end of Term 1 the reading consists of two sentences, again these are simply printed on a PowerPoint slide. A child is selected. They come forward and look at the slide. There are two sentences, ‘Here is a ball. It is for Pammy.’ (A picture of a ball and a girl are next to the appropriate sentence. Pammy is the name of a child in the class and so a known name).

   The selected child is asked to circle each word she knows and then underline any letter s/he recognises in the unknown words. In one example, the child circled every word in both sentences. She was asked to read aloud the two sentences for the class. Ms B asks how the student recognised the words that were not from the sight word list. She responds that she recognised the ‘y’ in Pammy’s name. Ms B responds, ‘I think that [the student] is the first person to read all the sentences. That is because she is practising a lot at home. That is well done.’

   In the second scenario, the teacher has built this activity, again a regular activity, from recognition of single letters and sounds, to single words, to a single sentence and by the end of Term 1 her class can read much or all of two linked sentences. The students can underline letters or circle whole words they know and share these with their classmates. The emphasis is on sharing the known rather than having to achieve the whole. The praise given is heartfelt and encourages all the children to continue practising at home. This activity is extremely simple but it is part of their morning routine is valued by the members of the class.
Some sites used in the five classrooms:
The two scenarios show just how simple classroom activities can be using IWB and the teacher’s own ideas and creativity. This section contains resources easily accessible from the internet currently being used by teachers in Kindergarten classrooms in a small group of NSW schools. Some programmes are free, some are available only for teachers working for the Department of Education and Communities in NSW and some come at a cost. Many of these activities are designed for students’ independent use.

- **SMART exchange**: The resources are free, but the program requires Adobe Flash Player 10.3 to be installed before you can use them. There are many phonics and alphabet games.
- **Interactive Books**: This site sells eBooks that can be used on the IWB as ‘Big Books’. Once purchased, the books are kept in a virtual library for use at any time.
- **DET NSW**: This site has many resources for all curriculum areas that all the teachers interviewed used, however access is limited to DET schools.
- **ABC Reading Eggs**: This site has both teacher and parent sections. There is a two week free registration where children, parents and teachers can trial the resources. There are loads of activities and games with clear instructions.
- **Topmarks**: This is a UK based site with many games and activities for a broad range of subject areas. The site is free.
- **Youtube**: three teachers in this project stated they used Youtube to find songs to supplement their own music program. One teacher had a small repertoire of songs with an exercise component to give students a quick break when they had been concentrating hard (particularly for inclement weather).
- **Copacabana Public School**: This site gave greatest access to a range of others. From the school’s home page click on ‘Get Smart’ and there you will find dozens of links to other educational sites. It is a wonderful resource for teachers interested in accessing up-to-date information for their classrooms.

To Sum Up
Transition to school is a pivotal period for all children, and the classrooms they enter must be inviting, must generate enthusiasm for learning, must challenge learners wherever they begin learning on their journey to becoming active, literate and enquiring members in their school communities. Kennewell and Beauchamp (2007) heralded new technologies, like IWBs, for the many positive attributes they can bring to classrooms where pedagogy and practice are linked with well designed activities to enhance and support student learning. Kervin, Jones and Verenikina (2010) caution that the up-take of new technologies must be understood as more than simply taking up an extra tool but need to be balanced with connected alteration to teacher pedagogy. Both research groups caution that there needs to be further professional development to assist teachers to take up these new technologies across the curriculum. Not to act as babysitters nor to take the place of professional teaching but to aid and enhance best practice.

References

NOTE: All participants’ names used are pseudonyms.

Kathryn Harden-Thew, a former classroom teacher, is now a PhD student at the University of Wollongong, NSW and has worked on a number of research grants related to language and literacy over the last four years. Kathryn would like to acknowledge the support and generosity of the five Kindergarten teachers who are participating in her doctoral project.