

Making the most of the board

In our rush to keep abreast of all the new technology that impacts upon our job, we sometimes overlook the fact that perhaps the most precious resource of all sits at the heart of most classrooms: the whiteboard (or blackboard, of course!). However, just as the board is important, so it is also chronically under-used. It is fair to say that many teachers use the board in a fairly unprincipled way, without ever really thinking about why they write up what they write, or how their board-use could be improved.

The board is crucial to teaching for several reasons. Firstly, it's where we can give students input that relates to their own experiences and needs in a far more direct way than any coursebook can ever hope to. This input provides a second, equally important, source of language for students to revise from, once they've gone over the language in their coursebooks. Secondly, no matter what kind of board you have in your classroom, it can be used interactively. As we shall see, what you write on the board and how you go about exploiting it can have a major impact on the relative dynamism of your classes. Thirdly, the board allows a space for you to actually do some teaching, particularly after students have been talking. It's where you can give feedback on performance, provide new language to fill holes that become apparent in students' vocabulary and stick up reminders of errors students may have been making. Let's look at how we can best use the board to round up students' speaking.

Imagine you're teaching an advanced-level class, and you ask them to discuss the following questions as a lead-in to a listening they're going to do.

1 ***Speaking***

Discuss these questions with a partner:

1. Do you ever read gossip magazines?
2. Do you ever get stories about celebrities' private lives in any of the serious papers?
3. Do you know any stories about celebrities in the news at the moment? Do you have an opinion about them?

As students discuss these questions in pairs, or threes, walk around amongst them, listening in to their conversations, trying to hear things they're having problems with. This means not just listening for grammar mistakes, but also, perhaps mainly, listening out for things students are trying to say, but don't quite know how to. This involves a fair degree of guesswork and interpretation on the teacher's part, and can be hard to do on the spur of the moment, under time pressure, especially if you're not used to it. One way round this problem is to spend a few minutes before class predicting exactly how YOU would answer the questions yourself, and maybe making a note of a few expressions you'd use that might be new for the class. You might also want to scan through the forthcoming listening and see if you can think of any way of introducing any potentially new vocabulary from the text during a round-up stage. These can then be fed into your boardwork.

As students chat, what I usually do is listen to each pair for twenty or thirty seconds and then go and write something on the board, before moving on to a different pair. After a few minutes of this, I usually have enough on the board to be able to conduct a fairly language-rich round-up. Personally, I like to divide the board up in three sections, by drawing two vertical lines about 25% of the way in on each side. This helps me organise

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my writing more clearly and provides some kind of system, should I wish to focus on pronunciation somewhere, grammar problems somewhere else and new language somewhere else. Even if I just write up new language, it's still nicely organised.

The last time I did this particular speaking exercise with a class, my board had the following on it by the time I stopped students talking:

If there's a gossip mag l..... around, I suppose I might have a quick f..... through - just to keep up with things - but I certainly don't read them from to

Call me s..... if you want, but I LOVE gossip!

The ob..... with celebrity culture is terrible. It's all leading to a d..... d..... of our media!

Did you see the thing about Kate Moss? She su..... went into rehab a few months ago to get off drugs, but they say she's back them again. It's a bit depressing when you think about it.

I'd take anything you read in those magazines with a p..... of s....., to be honest.

I stopped the class and said:

OK. Great. Let's have a look at a few things you were trying to say. I heard a couple of people say that they never buy gossip magazines: but if they find one, on the floor, on the train somewhere, or in a doctor's waiting room . . . if they find one just? Yes, OK. Just *lying around* (I then write in *lying*), then they might just quickly look through it, like this (act this out), so they might have a quick? Anyone? No? *Have a quick flick through* (again, write this up - and underline have a quick flick through). But, of course, you'd never read it all the way through, you'd never read it from to No, not start to finish. Not beginning to end. Often with magazines we say *read it from cover to cover* (write this up).

OK. I heard someone else saying how much they love gossip, and you don't care if people know it! You know that maybe some people will think you're not a deep, intelligent person. They'll think you're superficial. They'll think you're? Yeah, OK. Shallow (write this in), but you don't care! Hats off to you!

OK. Two or three of you - the deep, serious folk amongst you! - sounded a bit disturbed by the whole celebrity thing. You were saying there's this ob..... with celebrity culture, where everyone is completely mad about it, it's all they talk about or think about. Yeah, right. Obsession. Where's the stress? Right. Ob-SE-ssion. And you were saying that this obsession is making the media more stupid, Instead of serious documentaries and current affairs programmes, we're

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getting *Celebrity Fat Club* and *Big Brother 12!* It's making the media more stupid, so it's? No-one? It's *dumbing down* the media".

And so on I would continue, eliciting - or trying to elicit - *supposedly*, *on*, *pinch* and *salt*. The fact that the elicitation involves the teacher paraphrasing the meanings, explaining the gapped words to try and get them from the students, means the meanings are dealt with. The fact the new words are given as part of whole sentences - the kinds of things students themselves might have been trying to say, or else might want to say in the future - means the context and usage of the new language is also clear. Obviously, if some of the things on the board really were things I'd heard specific students trying to say, rather than simply things I'd decided it might be nice to feed in at this stage, I would use students' names when trying to elicit. For example; "I heard Natasha say she doesn't believe most of what she reads in gossip magazines and that you can't really be sure any of it's true, right, Natasha? Yeah, so you have to take what you read with? If you're going to read it skeptically? You *take it with a pinch of salt*, OK".

By adopting this kind of approach to feedback on speaking activities and using the class to complete the gapped sentences in this way, even the cheapest, oldest, ugliest board in the building can become an interactive whiteboard, and your classes can be more involved in looking at ways of saying what they want to say better.

Hugh Dellar – September 2006