**Blended Learning: Using Technology in and beyond the Language Classroom**

Pete Sharma and Barney Barrett

**Update 7: December 2009**

This seventh update focuses firstly on creating teacher-produced materials for the interactive whiteboard, secondly on creating ‘word clouds’ using websites such as Wordle, and finally on *Teaching Entertainment and Design*, a website of interest to English learners wishing to practise their listening skills.

**Creating material for the interactive whiteboard**

In chapter eight of Blended Learning, we looked at using interactive whiteboards, and mentioned that it offered opportunities for creating materials. Of course, not all teachers wish to create their own materials. However, if you do have the creative urge, there are five basic features you need to master on the interactive whiteboard software in order to get started.

These are:

- using the writing tool (pen) and the drawing tools, creating shapes such as squares, circles, and rectangles, speech bubbles, arrows etc. See Figure 1.
- changing the colours of objects, text and the background.
- locking objects in place, so that they cannot be dragged anywhere.
- grouping objects, so that they can be manipulated together.
- ordering objects, by sending them ‘to the back’, or bringing them ‘to the front’.

![Figure 1: Drawing tools](image)

With these five functions – draw, colour, lock, group, layer – teachers are able to create an amazing range of fun exercises. In Figure 2 below, the teacher has, first of all, imported a picture. Then, rectangles have been drawn and locked in place. The teacher has created a ‘magic magnifying glass’ by grouping together an oval and a rectangle. When the student moves the magnifying glass across the picture, the object’s name (*shower*) appears as if by magic! This effect is achieved by changing the colour of the word *shower* to white, so it is ‘invisible’ on the white background but the oval of the magnifying glass moves behind it.
making the white text stand out on the purple. So this magical effect of revealing the text is achieved by setting which layer the text and images are on.

Figure 2: ‘Magic’ magnifying glass – labelling objects

With a little practice, it is fairly easy to get up and running creating materials for the IWB.

**Word clouds**

There are a number of tools online that enable you to create word clouds. The most famous one at the moment is Wordle ([http://www.wordle.net](http://www.wordle.net)). Click on *Create* then type or cut and paste the text you want to use to make your word cloud into the text box and click on *GO*. First of all, the program hiding behind the website removes the small, common words such as articles, prepositions, pronouns etc (a feature you can turn off if you wish). Then it produces a cloud in which the size of each word depends on how often it appears in the text. You can then manipulate the cloud by choosing from a range of fonts, colour schemes and whether you want the words to be arranged horizontally, vertically or a combination of the two. It usually takes a little time and experimentation but, once you are satisfied, you can print your word cloud or save it on the website. If you decide to save it, give yourself a memorable username otherwise you’ll never be able to track it down again.

As a tool that represents language visually, Wordle word clouds are an obvious candidate for use in the language learning classroom.

**Scrambled questions and sentences**

This is a visual way of doing a very common exercise. You create a series of word clouds using individual questions or sentences. Do not forget to include the common words. These word clouds can then be printed or displayed directly from the website using a computer screen, projector or IWB. The learners simply have to unscramble the words. Younger learners enjoy the opportunity to create scrambled sentences for their classmates to solve. Figures 3 and 4 show examples of scrambled questions and sentences.
Usually Wordle splits up the words but you can force it to keep them together by linking them with the tilde character (~). The word cloud in Figure 5 was created from a sentence written like this:

my~next-door~neighbour has~worked as~a~teacher at~the~local~high~school since~1967

Vocabulary

On the simplest level, word clouds are a fun, visual way of recording and storing vocabulary. They can be created quickly and easily and while learners are adjusting the appearance of the cloud they are exposed to the vocabulary items they have chosen. There can also be a kinaesthetic element. Word clouds contain vertical and horizontal items so the page needs to be rotated to in order for the words to be read.

Another use of word clouds is as simple vocabulary exercises. One idea is to use words that have to be joined together to form collocations. The example in Figure 7 is based around a set of business English collocations. The relative size of the words *make* and *do* indicate how many of the surrounding words collocate with them.
Reading activities

Word clouds can also be used as part of a reading exercise. First of all, you can create a word cloud using the headline of a newspaper article for the learners to unscramble, as in Figure 8.

Once they have done this you can ask them to predict the story and content of the article. You can then ask them to predict the sorts of words they think might be used in such an article. Once you have completed brainstorming this, present them with a word cloud created from the entire text of the article (this time with the common words removed) to see how close they were, see Figure 9. Before they look at the unscrambled text, you could ask them a final time to predict the content based on the largest words in the word cloud.

Other ideas

Word clouds can be incorporated into activities on an interactive whiteboard. One idea involves a word cloud with a small number of words, for example, a set of vocabulary from a
previous lesson. Each word is then concealed behind a box which is set to disappear when clicked. One by one learners come to the board to choose a box then they have to give a definition of or create an example sentence with the word that is uncovered. Another predicting exercise involves combining a word cloud and the tools that whiteboard software provides for hiding and revealing part of the screen.

**Alternatives to Wordle**

The word clouds created using Wordle are static. This is suitable for printing off some of the activities proposed above. However, there are websites coming online which offer interactive word clouds. One of these is Tagul ([http://tagul.com/](http://tagul.com/)). At the time of writing it is still in development but you can set up an account which allows you to create five word clouds. These differ from Wordle word clouds in that each word is tagged to a Google search for that word. The resulting word cloud with this extra level of interactivity can be saved to a web page. At the moment, the process is more complicated than Wordle’s but it looks promising. See Figure 10 for an example of a Tagul word cloud.

![Figure 10: a Tagul word cloud made from the same BBC report as Figure 9](image-url)
Technology Entertainment and Design

The website of the Technology Entertainment and Design organisation (TED) (http://www.ted.com) also offers opportunities for English language teachers and their learners. The organisation holds regular invitation-only conferences during which the participants present to each other. These participants include the leading thinkers and practitioners in the fields of technology, design, science, politics, business and social and cultural areas. They all have to follow the TED rules of presenting which include enforced brevity and a disregard for many of the traditional rules of structuring a presentation. One of Pete’s recent e-lessons on this subject is available to download for a short period from: http://www.businessenglishonline.net/e-lessons/archive.htm

Where this becomes interesting for language learning is that the TED website is an archive of videos of these presentations. The streamed videos have high-quality sound and images and are accompanied by a complete transcript of the presentation. These transcripts are increasingly available in a variety of languages. These are the product of an ongoing open translation project in which volunteers translate the transcripts into their own languages which are then also available as running subtitles during the videos. The subtitles mean that the TED presentations are now available to a wider audience of English language learners many of whom would previously have struggled with the speed of the speakers and the level of the language used. Although most teachers would recommend using the English subtitles to support listening and understanding, learners may have the opportunity to follow a presentation using subtitles in their own language.

The website is a rich source of listening material, which can also be used as a lead-in to a discussion. One way of keeping track of the regularly up-dated catalogue is to subscribe to the website’s RSS feed (see p. 20 of Blended Learning).

Acknowledgement

Thanks to Francis Jones for his input on IWBs.