◾2 Using the board

> *When I look at my board at the end of a lesson, it always seems such a mess. I have no idea whether the students managed to copy anything useful down, or if they even knew what some of the things I had written were meant to be.*

Aim
To make board use clearer, more organised and more useful.

Introduction
The board (whether black, white or interactive) is, in many classrooms, the crucial central teaching tool, yet it's also one that gets little thought. The board has been so omnipresent through our childhoods and working lives that we almost forget that it may be possible to get better at using it. Even a few minutes of quiet practice in an empty room, with a little self-checking (from the back of the room) and reflection on how we might be able to improve what we do, can make a big difference. Some very small changes can make your use of the board much clearer and more effective.

Techniques: Using the board

1 Divide the board into sections
At the start of the lesson, draw dividing lines to create distinct sections on the board. How many will depend on how large your board is, but many teachers typically use four: a column down the left and right sides of the board, and a horizontal division of the middle section. You will now be able to keep different kinds of board work organised into these separate areas, for example, the right-hand column for new vocabulary; the left-hand column for administrative information, student names, homework, etc. The top and bottom middle sections can be a 'working zone' for the teacher – perhaps with illustrations or texts in the top half, and explanations and examples for students to copy in the lower part. However you use them, simply having your work clearly divided up will make it easier to access and easier to keep organised. It also means that you can erase one section while leaving another part still visible.

2 Plan your board use
Before your lesson, make a sketch plan of your board usage. Draw a rectangle, divide it up into sections and number them. Use the numbers to make a list of exactly what will go in each board section. Of course, if you have an interactive board, then you can prepare some of the actual pages of the board. Beware of making fully complete pages in advance, as this can take away some of the 'live' lesson and risks turning the lesson into a slide show.

3 Use handwriting and sentence case

Avoid writing everything in separated block capital letters. Evidence suggests that rather than making things easier to read, it is actually harder. Using cursive handwriting, with normal usage of big and small letters, helps train your students to read handwriting in the real world.

4 Check out the clarity of your writing

Writing with chalk or a board pen on a vertical board is very different from normal handwriting. The thickness of the pen/chalk can make some letters hard to read as the lines merge into each other. It is also surprisingly easy to find yourself writing at a slant, with all your sentences rising to the sky or sinking to the floor.

Check yourself out when there are no learners present. Go to the back of the room, and take a good critical look at what you have done. Do you need to write everything bigger? Do your A's and O's look distinctly different? Could things be straighter? Might the writing look clearer with more spaces between the lines? Is punctuation clearly visible, and unambiguous? Can you easily work out what layout was intended? If in any doubt, try it all again, but bigger. You will be able to write less, but the gain in clarity and usefulness may be significant.

5 Use graphic organisers to help structure text

Wherever you can, use graphic organisers such as tables, flow charts, bullet points, mind maps, diagrams and so on to help give a shape and a structure to text. It makes it easier to see, read and copy.

6 Use colour to a purpose

Some whiteboard pen colours, for example, green or red, can be tiring or difficult to read from the back of the room or in poor lighting conditions. If you write a whole text in these colours, it can add to the difficulty and extend the time needed for reading or copying. Try to write all key items in strong colours such as black or dark blue. Use other colours for specific purposes such as underlining, adding a phonemic transcription or highlighting some problem letters when spelling a word. Colours are also useful for helping to structure the board – drawing those initial section dividers, drawing boxes round important elements, shaping tables, drawing lines and arrows to connect things on different parts of the board and so on. Of course, colours are also great for illustrations.

7 Stand back to check

It's amazing how easy it is to write up nonsense. Writing close up, you don't get a clear view of the whole text. Students interrupt with questions and clarifications. Quite often, the result of this is that some of your writing has simple errors (spelling, missing words), or sometimes there is a glaring piece of incoherence, such as missing out an entire line you intended to write. Students may spot this and alert you to it, but, as often as not, they won't recognise that there is a problem and will happily copy down whatever you wrote (because 'teacher is always right').

When you have written something, make sure that you take some time to stand back and quietly read it through again to check. Try to see it with your eyes, rather than your memory. By this, I mean try to see what you have actually put up, rather than filling in from what you know and think should be there.

8 Review post-lesson

At the end of a lesson, get out your phone and take a snap of the whole board. Have a look at it later on and see how readable it is: does it still make sense to you?

9 Ask learners before erasing

Don't just rub out content as soon as you need space. Make sure that everyone who needs to has finished reading, copying or whatever. Ask and double check that it isn't only the fastest students that you hear.

10 Use the board creatively

Don't just write *everything* up. Don't just get students to copy. Don't only put up the 'boring' stuff. You can use Blu-Tack® to put up pictures, students' work, notices, flowers and other objects.

Technique: writing 'game-show' style

Most teachers need to write on the board at various points through a lesson. However, when this is done with the teacher's back to the class, possibly for a period of some minutes, it can have quite a distancing effect. Students cannot clearly see what the teacher is doing, and the teacher cannot keep in eye contact with the learners. Even if the teacher asks questions or tries to involve students, they often have to give their answers to a back, rather than to a face.

1 Stand facing the class to the left or right of the board, with your back to the board at an angle of about 45 degrees (as in this figure, seen from above).
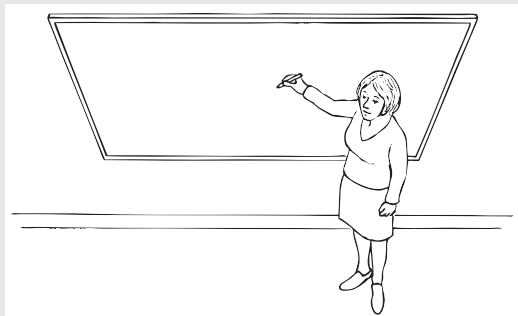
2 Keeping your body at the same angle, you can now turn your head to the board and either reach out to write with the arm closest to the board or bend the furthest arm across your body to write on the board.
3 Vary your eye contact between the board, where you are writing, and students in the class. Turn your head a little to look at the board, and write a few words; then turn back, and shift your eye contact to talk with students; ask a question; then shift your attention back to the board and so on.

The position will probably feel quite odd and contorted the first few times you try it, and it will take some practice to feel comfortable and be able to write easily. Practice in an empty classroom before doing it in front of students. Before long, it should become quite normal and natural. The value of staying in active communication with your class outweighs the slight effort involved.

(This technique gets its name from the fact that the position is reminiscent of a TV game-show hostess facing the audience and smiling at them while pointing out winning numbers or letters on a game board behind her.)

Techniques: Using an interactive whiteboard

Having an interactive whiteboard (IWB) in your classroom allows you to use many interesting and useful features beyond basic writing and drawing. For example, you can hide and reveal screens or items on the screen, project images or documents you have prepared earlier, save pages (and return to them later on in the lesson or another lesson), access interactive materials (perhaps prepared specifically for your coursebook), add notes on top of texts and view internet pages, video clips and so on.

Here are a few basic ideas for using an IWB:

1 Use it as an ordinary board
Just because it's an IWB doesn't mean that you have to do fancy digital magic all the time. It's most important use is still as a board to write on. Certainly, use any special features when they are useful and appropriate, but don't feel impelled to do so.

2 Show pictures
One of the best uses for an IWB is also its simplest: showing images. ELT teachers often want to show their class a picture, for example, as an introduction to a reading text or as a context for a grammar presentation. The IWB can project a large clear image that has far more impact than a traditional small flashcard does. You also have the option of hiding parts of the picture, revealing it slowly, zooming in on a section or writing over the top (e.g. to label vocabulary items). It's also easy to track down the images you want, using an image search on the Internet.

3 Don't assume that the board will do all the teaching
It's not enough to prepare a great set of screens and then simply read them aloud, one after the other to the class. This can make for a terribly dull lesson. Find ways to exploit the technology to inspire. You need to interact with the students as much as ever.

4 Project texts
When students have done some reading work on printed text, it's very useful to be able to project a copy of the text onto the board. Use it to point out which section of the text you are looking at, and for close-up work on sentences and details. Use the IWB's facility to zoom, underline, annotate and so on to help the students make sense of complex parts of the text.

5 Use the Internet together

If your IWB has a web connection, you can integrate planned or spontaneous use of the Internet right into the heart of your lessons. Do a Google search on an interesting person who featured in a coursebook text. Find out if there is a video on a current topic of interest. Check the synonyms of a word on a web thesaurus. Practise listening to the live news.

6 Prepare screens that are only partially filled in

When you prepare your lesson, it's possible to create screens that you can show on the board in class. Resist the temptation to write down everything that students need to see in class. This can lead to 'dead' feeling lessons. Instead, it's often better to prepare partially complete boards (e.g. with the framework of a table, but not the contents). This leaves you the opportunity to work with the students and fill in the missing information as part of your 'live' teaching in class.

7 Revise using boards from earlier lessons

It's great being able to save boards and return to them later. Use this as a great revision tool. Remind students of the content from a lesson a month ago. Try hiding part of a screen and seeing if learners can recall what was on the missing half. Do problems or tasks again quickly. If your board is full of answers, get students to think of the questions.

Techniques: Students using the board

In primary schools with traditional chalkboards, being 'board monitor' was often a prized responsibility role for children – though it didn't often call for much more than cleaning the board at the start or end of the lesson. In most schools, the board has remained essentially the teacher's property. As part of democratising our classrooms, we can help learners to become far more active users of the board.

At the very least, inviting students to use the board gets one or two up from their seats for a few minutes. Beyond this, students may start to feel that the board is a shared resource and not just the teacher's property. They could get used to writing on it, doing exercises together, coming up in a group to prepare an idea together, lead presentations using it and so on. Students may quickly start to initiate work themselves using the board, perhaps writing up a problem sentence or helping to explain something for another student. Try some of these techniques:

Suitable for all kinds of boards

1 With younger learners, appoint students to set up the board at the start of each lesson, making divisions into sections, writing up the date, copying headings or information from your notes.
2 When you need an illustration, invite a volunteer to do it for you.
3 When you have some simple text to write up from a book or document, invite a student to do this.
4 When students do a group task on paper (e.g. design a poster about a topic), get one or two of the groups to come up and use one half of the board as their 'paper'.

5 When students do a task (individually or in groups), monitor and ask some or all of them to write their text on the board when they have finished.

6 Write exercises on the board, and get students to come up and add the answers.

7 Teach interactively, getting students to come up frequently to add information, complete timelines, point out things in pictures and so on.

8 When you play a game on the board, ask students to do any writing up or score keeping.

9 Make the vocabulary column a student responsibility to maintain. For example, when there seem to be some useful words (for example, in a text you are working on), ask students to select the most useful ones to write up in that column. The word column can grow though the lesson, even when the rest of the board is cleaned.

10 Leave a column on the side of the board for students to add their comments, questions and thoughts. Encourage them to add things at different stages of the lesson.

11 When students prepare a report or presentation, encourage them to plan board use into what they do.

12 Completely hand over part of your teaching to your class. For example, if you have to teach 16 words in a word set, ask different groups to each prepare to teach the meaning of two of the words or phrases. When ready, invite each group in turn to do their teaching up front, using the board as appropriate.

13 With smaller classes, establish an environment in which everyone feels able to use the board at any point in the lesson – for working on, for putting up thoughts and so on. Frequently gather students round the board and work on it together, passing the chalk/pen from person to person as you solve problems.

14 Try an experiment in which you make the board a place that *only* learners use … (which means that you'll need to find an alternative!).

Suitable for the interactive whiteboard

1 Invite students to send texts to you (for example, by email or SMS mobile text message), as the lesson proceeds. Show some on screen, and let the students come up to talk the class through them. You may wish to check texts before displaying them to the whole class, in which case you will need to plan in some moments when you will get a chance to review them before putting them up on the display.

2 For certain parts of your lesson, use a window on your board to show Twitter, TodaysMeet or a similar messaging service, with a live stream of comments on screen. Your class, using netbooks or mobile phones, can react to the lesson as it unfolds, asking questions, adding comments, answering questions and so on. You can keep a check on understanding as you go.

Questions for reflection

- Is your board easily legible? And what about from the back of the room? What is the least clear, untidiest, least successful aspect of your board work? How can you immediately improve on that?
- How much do you feel 'ownership' of the board? How much do learners use the board in your lessons? A little? A lot? Never? Is getting students to write a few things on the board perhaps just a token nod towards democratisation – whereas you still keep all real control?
- Some teachers use writing on the board as a way to get a 'break', take a breath and briefly avoid the need to interact with students. When you maintain eye contact with students, do you find that you miss any of this 'time out'?