Giving lessons a talking point

Schools in Britain harness interactive technology to engage English-language learners

Imagine a primary school where children from 30 different races speak 28 different languages. The melting pot of a playground is filled with the excited chatter and colour of Zulu, Tagalog, Svetsi, Punjabi, Polish, Turkish, Somali, Ukranian and myriad other tongues, with English threading through and starting to tie them together.

Drove primary school is in a severely deprived area of Swindon, in the southwest of England. Pupils come and go as their families move to Britain, then in and out of the area as they get established in the country. That equates to 54% of the school population changing every 23 months.

"Because we have so many different languages being spoken, some children may be the sole speakers of their language," says headteacher Nick Capstick. "About 80% of my children are from black or ethnic minority communities and 80% have no English at all when they arrive."

This is where technology comes into its own, not only allowing young students access to the curriculum but also simultaneously teaching them the English language. Using interactive whiteboards as the lodestone, teachers share the curriculum with students.

"The arts are important at Drove, as they allow pupils to express themselves without language," says Capstick. "The one thing that transcends all language is creativity, so we do a lot of dance and drama that enables the children to communicate in other ways. We bring that into the classroom and as a result they are more willing to communicate in language."

In a dance class a teacher will show the children a film on the whiteboard of the dance they are to learn, slowing down the images on the screen to break up the movements into minute detail. Students are then split into groups to learn the dance in the hall and take it in turns to film their peers using digital video cameras. That is then brought back into the classroom and put on to the whiteboard, where students start by analysing what they have done and comparing it with the original dance footage.

"This is really good literacy work for five to 11-year-olds," says Capstick. "If the point of video is to communicate something, then through editing, drafting and redrafting the video to create a piece, they improve that communication. This means that when they acquire language, they already have these skills."

The year six students, aged 11, have a roleplay area designed to look like a TV quiz show studio. Over five or six lessons they work in groups of mixed language ability to create storyboards for filming a show and a set of questions based on a topic they are working on. The show is filmed by the students, then edited. Occasionally tickets and cinema hotdog- menus are printed off, and classrooms are transformed into cinemas for the big-screen premiere.

A group of 10-year-olds working on a film project about universality across cultures supported by a grant from the Barclays New Futures fund used "consumer groups" of classmates to watch partially edited versions of the film. The team used a split screen on the whiteboard to make notes during the screening on what needed to be changed.

Drove also uses a voting system from Research Machines that enables teachers to understand children's level of understanding of language. "If every child has a handset and votes, you know which kids have answered which questions, so you can see who isn't answering and individually assess each child," says Capstick. "Or if a child understands maths but doesn't have the English to answer verbally, the teacher can use voting as a brilliant form of assessment."

Specialist maths software designed for use with whiteboards gives teachers at Audley infant school in Blackburn, in the north of England, the ability to communicate easily with classes of maths students with poor or few English language skills. Emma Taylor, a reception class teacher at Audley, says the students do well in maths, as its logic transcends language barriers. With one software package, Activprimary, the class can look at a screen covered in objects with price tags. At the bottom are numbers one to 20 to help the children count. The pupils work in pairs to add together two objects, such as the doll and the car, then one lucky pair are asked to come up to the board to take the correct coins out of the on-screen purse.

Audley is in an Asian community and has 99% Asian pupils. English is a second language for most of them. Using the whiteboard with children with English as a second language builds confidence and self-esteem, Taylor says. She feels the technology excites and focuses them, so it is easier for them to develop the language skills they need. For her, ICT is about engaging children and then giving them something to start talking about, so they want to learn to communicate.

In learning English, Taylor says whiteboards enable students to develop a sense of achievement, no matter where they are in their language attainment. For children who are unable to write on paper or are not good at it, the ability to un-jumble a sentence on the whiteboard using Activpimary software allows them to do something that they otherwise could not have done. "They also learn sentence structure and how to speak in grammatically correct sentences. Teaching English as a language is all about getting the children talking, and ICT lets the teacher build an exciting, enthusiastic atmosphere in the classroom."